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School Citizenship Education Through YPAR: What Works? A Mixed-Methods Study in Italy

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(Article begins on next page)

SCHOOL CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION THROUGH YPAR: WHAT WORKS? A  
MIXED METHOD STUDY IN ITALY

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School Citizenship Education through YPAR: What Works? A Mixed Methods Study in  
Italy

Abstract

The aim of this study was to assess the quality of the processes of a YPAR citizenship education project by examining a two-year intervention that involved 43 Italian high school students. We collected qualitative data (focus groups with students and interviews with teachers) to capture participants' perspectives, as well as longitudinal quantitative data to monitor the process over time (assessing school climate, perceived quality of participation, and group participation norms). The results revealed that YPAR was successful in reducing hierarchy, facilitating group activities and recognizing youth voice, thus changing students' perception of their school environment and views on participation and active citizenship. The intervention also changed teachers' perceptions of students. YPAR proved to be a suitable option for citizenship education in school.

*Keywords:* school, YPAR, citizenship education, students, school climate

## School Citizenship Education Through YPAR: What Works? A Mixed Methods Study in Italy

In this paper we focus on Youth-led Participatory Action Research (YPAR) and its capacity to offer young people a significant, engaging, power-sharing experience, becoming a suitable methodological approach for citizenship education in school. In particular, we will focus on the key processes generated through the implementation of a successful YPAR intervention aimed to promote students' active citizenship (see also Prati et al., 2020).

### **Youth-led Participatory Action Research (YPAR)**

Youth-led Participatory Action Research (YPAR, Ozer, 2016; Ozer et al., 2010) is a form of community-based participatory research aimed to engage young people in an active role addressing issues of concern in their school or community. In this approach, participants are trained to identify and analyze problems relevant to their lives and to advocate for solutions. YPAR promotes new, systemic, ecological views of a problem and practices skills in research inquiry, considering evidence, communication, teamwork, and advocacy. YPAR is informed by a critical pedagogy epistemology (Freire, 1970) and typically starts with young people identifying a problem or question they want to address, and then cycling through research and action processes with the guidance of adult facilitators. Subsequent reflection is considered a key component of YPAR: by sharing, discussing and reflecting on ideas coming from the actions, participants can learn from their experience (Kagan, 2012). Moreover, YPAR involves “an emphasis on enhancing youth’s sense of ownership and control over the process, and promoting the social and political engagement of youth and their allies to help address problems identified in the research” (Ozer et al., p. 153).

The YPAR process typically requires some degree of "scaffolding" and alliance-building with adults (Ozer et al., 2010). Indeed, YPAR often involves young people and adults (teachers, researchers, etc.) working as a collective or in small groups, respecting each other, valuing the unique expertise/contribution brought by each group member, and making decisions together.

### **YPAR as an approach to citizenship education at school**

Recommendations regarding citizenship education in public schools (cf. European Commission EACEA/Eurydice, 2017; Unesco, 2014) emphasize the importance of supporting students to become active, informed and responsible citizens who are willing and able to take responsibility for themselves and for their communities. Furthermore, citizenship education should nurture the ability of students to engage effectively with others in the public domain, in order to display solidarity and interest in solving problems affecting the local and global community (Faison & Flanagan, 2001; Sullivan & Larson, 2010; Kohfeldt et al., 2011; Christens & Peterson, 2012). Recommendations also suggest the use of active or experiential learning (Barrett et al., 2018) to engage students cognitively (by reflecting on concepts, issues and problems) and socially (through supporting collaborative work and assuming mutual responsibilities among peers). Niemi (2002) also suggests a shift in the teachers' role, moving from leading the learning process to facilitating it, thus giving more responsibility to students and engaging them in discussions and collaborative problem-solving. In sum, YPAR seems to embody many features that are suitable for the implementation of citizenship education programs (creating opportunities for meaningful youth participation, supportive relationships, and strengthening societal awareness in youth; Ballonoff Suleiman et al., 2019). In the US, curricular programs aimed at civic learning that include these features and are informed by empowerment

and critical consciousness theory are commonly known as “action civics” (Gingold, 2013). YPAR and action civics share a similar emphasis on the role of experience and active participation of young people in shaping their political engagement. Regardless of the specific programs offered, the school is recognized as a key setting for promoting civic and political engagement. The literature documents the critical role of a democratic school climate in shaping future civic and political attitudes (Nieuwelink et al., 2016), conceptualized as a set of opportunities for open discussions in the classroom, fair treatment, and participation in the school-making process (Lenzi et al., 2014). The forms of these opportunities may vary (student councils and representatives, extracurricular activities (Flanagan et al., 2007), but to support civic learning and the development of civic and political competences, it is also essential to consider their quality and their capacity to effectively foster meaningful action and reflection; Tzankova and colleagues (2021) found that opportunities for involvement in student activities and for reflecting critically at school promoted participatory engagement. Engaging in a process of reflection about social reality and complex problems can also challenge societal views. Kennedy and colleagues (2019), in their empirical review, showed that change in peer group norms is a common outcome of PAR with youth.

Although YPAR is not a regular part of school curricula, evidence on the effectiveness of YPAR on academic and social outcomes, at least when implemented in educational settings within the United States, is promising (Shamrova & Cummings, 2017; Anyon et al., 2018). It should be noted, however, that YPAR’s implementation in school contexts has several challenges that must be addressed. For example, Ozer et al. (2010) identified the need to shift the typically-hierarchical relationships between teachers and students toward greater collaboration in order to enhance and support young people’s agency and skills building. Other issues include adapting

intervention activities to existing (and often rigid) curricular structures, timing, and competing demands of the school curriculum, as well as addressing differences in capability of schools to network with external stakeholders and establish partnerships between adult and youth researchers. Brion-Meisels and Alter (2018) found similar challenges, warning about the risks of “schoolification” of YPAR, or “the transformation of the inquiry and action process from internally motivated and holistic to a series of graded assignments" (Rubin et al., 2017, p. 183). They suggest paying attention to the kind of youth participation that exists and is allowed within YPAR school projects. Kohfeldt et al. (2011) showed that schools as institutions are far from being an empowering setting; their practices usually offer limited participation, reinforcing students' invisibility and teachers' commanding role. However, they also acknowledge that the tensions that arise when implementing YPAR in school are structural to the system and should not be interpreted as interpersonal, suggesting the need to adopt an ecological multilevel analytic approach to understand YPAR processes in the school context (see also Kennedy et al., 2019)

In her recent systematic review, Anderson (2019) listed many of the structural school constraints that contribute to generating these tensions, such as the use of official instructional time instead of extracurricular time, the pedagogy of the intervention, students' opportunities to exercise agency and share power, and the pressure that both adult and youth researchers may experience. Ozer and Douglas (2015) clarified that the key processes in YPAR are expected to unfold differently in different school systems. They also claim that the analysis of YPAR processes and their impact on participants is critical to understanding how interventions work and accounting for their success. Although the developmental benefits of YPAR projects for young people have been documented (e.g., Anyon et al., 2018; Jacquez et al., 2013; Ozer, 2017; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017), little is known about how the key processes in YPAR display in



the Italian school system where YPAR for citizenship education is seldom implemented, even less frequently evaluated.

### **Citizenship education in the Italian school system**

In Italy, the educational system in principle has always recognized the importance of citizenship education, encouraging critical knowledge and the development of social and democratic competence in order to prevent fanaticism and to promote a sense of legality and responsibility (Bombardelli & Codato, 2017). In practical terms, however, civic education was only established as a separate subject in primary and secondary school in 2019 with the most recent educational reform (Law 92/2019). For a decade, it has been treated as a cross-curricular topic based on national policy that established “citizenship and constitution” as part of teaching several common subjects only in secondary school (e.g., history, law, geography, etc.); schools had a high degree of autonomy in implementing civic education, with the only requirement being to devote “some hours per year” to this transversal task. In other words, “citizenship and constitution” was not subject to any formal evaluation (Albanesi, 2018), and class credit may be awarded for participation in non-mandatory community-oriented activities (e.g., volunteering). The fact that teaching civics was subject to high levels of autonomy (which changed only in 2019) and that teachers did not receive initial training on teaching civics (which has not yet changed) raised many doubts about the effectiveness of the Italian approach to teaching civics. It is difficult to discuss this approach in detail, as implementation of civic education relies mostly on the willingness of teachers to engage in it; teachers often feel they have no time to allocate to the subject and are quite reluctant to deal with teaching political and controversial issues (Bombardelli & Codato, 2017).

### **Aims of the present study**

To our knowledge, research using a mixed methods longitudinal (pre-post) approach to evaluate how YPAR for promoting active citizenship/citizenship education works in school is limited; this is especially true in the Italian school system, where YPAR for citizenship education is rarely employed. Our research sought to address this major gap in the literature. Based on these premises, the aim of this study was to assess the effects of a two-year citizenship education intervention in a secondary school in Italy (see also, Prati et al., 2020) on relational and reflective processes. We set a concurrent triangulation design evaluation plan, collecting qualitative and quantitative data simultaneously at designated stages of the YPAR process in two classes. We adopted a paradigm of pragmatism (Bryman, 2007), assuming that quantitative and qualitative assessment of different types of change could contribute to a better understanding of the YPAR process. We assessed changes of students' perception of school climate, quality of participatory experience and norms about participation, using quantitative measures; we relied on a qualitative method to evaluate change of students' perspectives on active citizenship. Qualitative methods were also used to capture students and teachers' perspectives on the participatory experience and its main features.

More specifically, the current research employed a mixed method approach that aimed to:

1. Assess the change (improvement) on process indicators involved in a YPAR, which we operationalized in terms of *school climate* (an indicator of power-sharing in the everyday class activities), *quality of participation experience* (capturing aspects of strategic thinking, such as openness to difference and dissent, or considering alternative points of view), and *peer group norms about participation* (an indicator connected with a specific aspect of strategic thinking, which is especially relevant in

citizenship education, its change considered an expected outcome of YPAR; Kennedy et al., 2019). To this effect, we used a longitudinal questionnaire that was administered four times during the course of the intervention.

2. Examine the perspectives of teachers involved in the YPAR intervention; in particular, participants' views about what worked and their perceptions of changes in development through the YPAR project, with a focus on students' autonomy, transferable/soft skills, and cooperation in small groups. To address this goal, we conducted individual interviews with teachers at the end of the first and the second year.

3. Understand what students appreciated most from the intervention, and whether involvement in the project strengthened youth critical understanding of active citizenship. For this aim, we used a longitudinal qualitative design to assess focus groups of students at the beginning and at the end of the process, exploring their perspectives on active citizenship and participation.

We believe that a mixed method design is tailored to best meet these three research aims because combining the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative research methods can enhance accuracy and understanding. Specifically, the integration of qualitative and quantitative research findings can corroborate or establish convergence of the results of the study (e.g., participants' perceptions of changes in development through the YPAR project) and lead to additional insights not gleaned from one approach alone (Creswell, 2015; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

## **Method**

### **The Intervention**

#### *Context*

A high school located in northern Italy agreed to take part in the YPAR intervention aimed to promote youth active citizenship. The school self-describes pursuing a mission to fulfill the potential of each student in a safe and caring environment that aims for the highest international standards. The school hopes to develop the individual talents of young people and teach youth to relate experiences of the classroom to the realities of the outside world. The school places a strong emphasis on the goal of international interaction and understanding as well as responsible citizenship. They aim to offer students the opportunity to become critical thinkers, lifelong learners, and informed participants in local and world affairs, who are conscious of the shared humanity that binds all people together while respecting the variety of cultures and attitudes that creates the richness of diversity in life. With these premises at the forefront, this school appeared to be a suitable context for the implementation of the YPAR intervention. Our project coordinator contacted the school principal and illustrated the aims of the project, its general structure, the foreseen opportunities and some challenges they could expect. With this information, the school principal seemed enthusiastic about the proposal and planned a meeting for all of the teachers. He asked if it was possible to offer the intervention within the curricular schedule of *alternanza scuola-lavoro*<sup>1</sup> (school-work training system), a specific mandatory time (in Lycée 100 hrs. per year) in which students must learn job-related skills. This school-work training requires establishing a formal partnership between the school and an external organization offering students training under the supervision of an internal and an external tutor, (in our case, the internal tutors were two teachers of English and Italian literature, both of whom were teachers

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<sup>1</sup> Alternanza scuola-lavoro has been renamed PCTO (“Projects for the development of transferable/soft skills and school guidance/career counselling”).

with at least ten years of experience in the school, and the external tutors were two members of our research team). This decision allowed at least 100 hours of dedicated time per year to the curriculum, which gave flexibility in allocating time (both in terms of the distribution over the year and over the week, as well as the possibility to use this time for activities in class during regular school hours or outside of school). The agreement that established the partnership between the school and the University Department was signed by the two institutions, and the university transferred an agreed budget to the school, partially covering the cost for various project activities (e.g., travel costs). The principal selected the participating classes on the basis of our requirements. Specifically, we asked that participating classes should be comparable in terms of age, gender and number of students, and overall performance to other classes. The teachers were selected among those who were teaching in the participating classes according to our criteria (i.e., not being involved in Erasmus+ mobility program with their classes and having sufficient fluency in English). Only two teachers matched the criteria for selection, and they agreed to participate in the project.

The research team included four researchers: two senior members with permanent positions at the university, and two junior members, one with a temporary position on the YPAR project and the other working on the project as part of her PhD. The junior members of the research team led the support of students and teachers on YPAR methodologies, along with monitoring and evaluating YPAR process and outcomes. The two had prior experience in schools and in various community youth organizations and were prepared to engage across cultural differences. They were also trained in YPAR and had a solid theoretical background on the topic. In addition, we felt that their age facilitated the process of building a trustful relationship with the students as they were the younger members of the team. They were in class an average of one day per month,

interacting mostly with students and to a lesser extent with teachers. They also interacted with students through web platforms and instant messaging. The senior members maintained regular contacts with teachers and junior members of the team in order to monitor activity regularly, as well as to discuss the data collection and reporting process.

### ***Structure***

The intervention lasted two complete school years (covering, in Italy, the period from September to May, i.e., the academic years 2016-2017 and 2017-2018), with some additional preparatory activities (e.g., teachers' training, addressing organizational issues and establishing formal agreements with the school) occurring prior to the onset of the intervention (early 2016). We adopted a two-step participatory approach, in which participants were involved in the cycle of research (analysis of social issues) and intervention (elaborating proposals to address the social issues) twice: initially at the local level (first year) and subsequently at the European level (second year). At both levels, activities were structured into different phases based on the action-reflection process of YPAR (Prati et al., 2020). Table 1 provides an overview of the mixed-methods design. We obtained ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of our institution. Informed consent was obtained from all participants (teachers, students, and their parents).

Insert Table 1 here

### **Qualitative Evaluation**

#### ***Procedure***

Students who gave consent to be involved in the intervention were asked to participate in a focus group before it began and were informed that the focus group would be repeated at the end of the intervention (no one refused to participate). One focus group was conducted in each class, and we introduced the first focus group with a brief presentation of the aims, roles, and phases of

the group to give the students some indication of the technique of focus groups, in order to provide it as an example of an instrument that could be used in their research. Teachers involved in the intervention were also pulled aside and asked to be interviewed at the end of the first year of activities, as well as at the very end of the intervention (all invited teachers participated). Interviews and focus groups were facilitated by the junior members of the research team, who were also in charge of the verbatim transcription and taking field notes to observe non-verbal interactions.

### *Instruments*

Routine focus groups were conducted with students. The first focus group examined students' expectations about the project, as well as their views about active citizenship and civic and political participation. Some stimulating images depicting forms and contexts of engagement and participation in different European countries were presented<sup>2</sup>. The discussion began by asking students what image best represents their idea of active citizenship. Students were then asked questions like, "Thinking about your experience, would you say that you are [acted as/were] an active citizen?" and "How would you define an active citizen?" This first focus group session lasted two hours. The final focus group explored whether these initial expectations of students about the project were met, what they appreciated about the intervention, what was the most challenging and most rewarding part of the experience, and whether their experience with the intervention affected their views of active citizenship and civic and political participation.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The program was done in multiple European countries; the same stimulus images were used across countries

<sup>3</sup> For reasons of space, the analysis of initial and final expectations was excluded from the paper.

During the second focus group we offered students the opportunity to reflect and account for change compared to their usual way of doing school. However, we did not ask for direct comparison, this was something that came from students' accounts. The final focus group sessions lasted an average of one hour and a half. At the end of each focus group, a summary of the main discussion was shared with participants in a brief "visual" instant report, allowing students to see if their perspectives were included and if their points of view were accurately reported. They were free to revise and correct our reports, thereby increasing the credibility and accuracy of our analysis. The final focus group was also used to evaluate the YPAR process according to the students' experience. In this case we asked explicit questions regarding what worked and what did not (and also what they liked most) offering them the opportunity to reflect and account for change compared to their usual way of doing school. However, we did not ask for direct comparison, this was something that came from students' accounts.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers, the first of which took place at the end of the first year of activities (before the intervention began). The aim of this initial interview was to collect teachers' personal views about student activities and involvement in the project. The second interviews with teachers took place at the very end of the intervention and asked for an evaluation of the entire process, focusing on any change or improvement they observed in students. Teachers were asked questions such as, "Did you observe variations in the way students worked according to the different tasks?" and "How was the collaboration between students? Do you think that your role as teachers has changed during (or thanks to) these activities?" This final interview lasted an average of 45 minutes.

Interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. They were anonymized and stored in a secure location accessible to research team members only.



### *Participants*

All the students involved in the intervention ( $N = 43$ , 53.3 % females and 46.7% males) participated in both focus groups. The two teachers directly involved in the project were interviewed twice. It was not possible to use a saturation data principle for sample size, as we could not collect more participants that we did (we included all of them).

### *Analysis*

Thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was performed on focus groups and interview transcripts. A codebook was constructed by the authors of the paper by outlining and operationalizing the key processes in YPAR described by Ozer and Douglas (2015) and Ozer et al. (2010). The codebook that was used to analyze both focus group and interviews included the following: youth agency, doing research, engaging with stakeholders, collaboration and group work. To code views on active citizenship and assess change after the intervention on this issue, we used Ekman and Amna's (2012) typology of political participation. Focus groups were analyzed first, and the interviews were analyzed at a later time.

The analysis was conducted with a sequential procedure: first a junior member of the research team started working on the data. Then initial codes were discussed with the senior researchers, who gave feedback on the initial themes, and suggested identifying core themes across the different categories to avoid excessive fragmentation. To "reduce" the risks of data over-interpretation, it was decided that each category, even when related to a theme, should always keep track of the words of participants. Finally, a consensus was reached.

The codebook categories were organized into three main sections: a) youth gaining voice (mostly referring to youth agency and engaging with stakeholders); b) new roles and activities for a new learning environment (primarily referring to doing research, engaging with stakeholders,

collaboration, and group work); c) expanding youth views on citizenship (views on active citizenship and civic and political participation). In the results section “verbatim” quotations were used to elucidate participants’ perspectives and to illustrate the analysis process and/or the findings, bringing the text to life (Eldh, Årestedt, & Berterö, 2020).

## **Quantitative Evaluation**

### ***Procedure***

We used a quasi-experimental design to evaluate YPAR processes for this study. The school principal and the teachers who volunteered for the project identified two classes to be involved in the intervention ( $N = 43$ ) and two classes as the control group ( $N = 44$ ). We sampled students in 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade, whose average age was 16 years old at the beginning of the two-year intervention and who were still at school at the end of the intervention.

To evaluate change (improvement) on process indicators, an online longitudinal questionnaire was administered to students who belonged to both the intervention and control group, at the beginning and at the end of each school year (a total of four administration times).

### ***Instruments***

The questionnaire measured the following constructs: peer group norms about participation, school climate, and quality of participation.

Peer group norms were measured using three items based on the PIDOP study (Barrett & Zani, 2015). Items such as, “My friends would approve if I became politically active” had possible answers ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Reliability (Cronbach’s alpha) of the scale was .53 at T1, .82 at T2, .67 at T3, and .75 at T4.

School climate was measured by adapting six items from the ICCS study (see Schulz et al., 2010). Sample items such as, “Teachers respect our opinions and encourage us to express our

opinions during the class” and “Students are encouraged (by school) to make up their own minds” had possible answers ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Reliability (Cronbach’s alpha) of the scale was .81 at T1, .83 at T2, .83 at T3, and .83 at T4.

Quality of participation was measured through an adaptation of the reflection subscale of the Quality of Participation Experiences (Ferreira et al., 2012). Four items were selected, an example being, “During your participation in this project, you felt that there were a variety of points of view being discussed.” Possible answers ranged from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*). The scale proved to have good reliability (.74 at T1, .78 at T2, .70 at T3, and .85 at T4). For control students quality of participation measure was adapted referring to class activities (“During your participation in class in the last school year you feel that there were...”)

### ***Participants***

For this analysis, there were 69 eligible students (those who completed all four waves of assessments<sup>4</sup>) (35 students from the intervention group, 34 in the control group). The overall sample included in this analysis was 49% female and 51% male with an average age at pre-test of 15.74 years ( $SD = 0.50$ ) and a range from 15 to 17 years old. Thirteen percent of the sample belonged to a national/ethnic minority. The students who completed all the assessments did not differ from the ones who completed one questionnaire in sex [ $\chi^2 (1, N = 89) = 4.15, p >.05$ ], age [ $F(1, 88) = 0.08, p >.05$ ], socioeconomic status [ $F(1, 87) = 1.10, p >.05$ ], or ethnicity [ $\chi^2 (1, N = 89) = 4.15, p >.05$ ].

### ***Statistical Analysis***

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<sup>4</sup> Students who were absent in at least one quantitative survey at school were excluded from the analysis.

Mixed ANOVA was used on questionnaire data to test whether there were differences in the measures at the four waves between the control and the intervention groups. To break down a significant interaction between the repeated measures and the group, we used contrasts that compared measures at each of the four waves between the control and the intervention groups.

The results section will present the key processes in YPAR as they developed in the different phases of the YPAR implementation, using quotes of teachers or students collected during interviews and focus groups. We will explain how the process of participation developed through the implementation phases; how students' and adults' roles changed in the action research process, modifying the learning environment, and how views on active citizenship and civic and political participation changed.

## **Results**

### **Qualitative Findings**

#### ***Youth gaining voice in the public arena***

In the first two months of activities, after a general introduction, brainstorming and small group discussion were used by researchers to help students in the process of detecting significant social issues in their local community. Using brainstorming in small groups of three, they listed the social issues that came to mind and they explored them with some guiding questions:

- Where does this social problem happen?
- When did they experience the social problem?
- Who is involved in the problem?

Students identified four social issues (migration, environment, drug abuse, and poverty) to work on based on personal interest and social relevance. They self-organized into four thematic groups, exploring one issue each. Teachers helped students to meet some relevant stakeholders

that could facilitate students with the community profiling activity, helping them to dig into the local approaches and relevance of the social issue. Even if most students seemed happy with the topic and did not complain about the process, a few expected more autonomy and less pressure from the very beginning:

*The choice of the themes that would have accompanied us for these two years was made a bit hastily and was pushed a bit by the teachers, and not always with respect to our real interests [Student, end of the second year] (M, 4D, FG2).*

*We organized some meetings with the teacher of the information technology course and some of the organizations that could be interesting for the students' topics [Teacher 1, end of first year].*

The preceding quotes suggest that teachers at the beginning were not fully ready to “hand over” the control to students. However, [thanks to informal conversations with the research team] after providing some guidance, they realized they had to let students self-direct the research in autonomy (e.g., making choices about topic, method to collect data, participants to be interviewed).

*Then it became also clear that students from that moment had to work autonomously, and that was a transition moment [Teacher 1, end of first year].*

Indeed, each group worked on autonomy, planning interviews and ad-hoc visits. For example, the diaries of the group on environmental issues summarizes the visits and face-to face interviews outside the school they planned on their own:

- *On December 9, we (C., M., C.) conducted our first face-to-face interview. At 9:00 am we visited the XX company, in P. They work on recycling. We met the heads of the company and the farm, with its working machines. They explained to us how metals are selected, divided, and recycled.*

- *On December 12, at 18:00, we went to the G. company in P. The company works on paper sorting and plastic recycle. C. interviewed the head of the company.*

- *On December 21, at 14:30, E., C. and M. C. visited the Integrated environment (PAI) in the city. [Students, end of first year] (Group E).*

The research team helped students develop instruments that fit their needs. Students contacted representatives of local organizations and managed places and dates for interviews and on-site visits. This was a new experience for most students: the words of this student engaging with community stakeholders may be of note:

*At that meeting, I also felt that we were highly engaged, like he was speaking precisely for us. [...] He was speaking to each of us and we were allowed to ask questions. [Student, end of second year] (M, 4B, FG2).*

This quote reveals the novelty of the experience of being recognized as a credible part of the conversation, of standing in front of adults who were willing to be questioned by students and to listen to the perspectives of young people.

Teachers were impressed by the capacity of their students to engage with community stakeholders, who provided positive feedback to teachers about students' work. Teachers acknowledged students' maturity and the acquisition of specific skills.

*Students met adults and institutions. Thus, we found a way for different worlds to meet. Students learned how to send formal emails. They created this contact respectfully... stakeholders and people who were interviewed said that it [the students' work] was professional and quality work. (...). Local stakeholders found it useful that youth approached these realities. [Teacher 2, end of first year].*

These quotes shed some light on the importance of situating the project in the broader community context. Similar considerations also arose with regard to public events. Students appreciated the opportunity to present their work and conclusions to the local stakeholders (and their parents) in their city.

*In our city we had the opportunity to speak also in front of our parents and we had the opportunity to explain what we did during the previous year of 'alternanza'.*  
[Student, end of second year] (F, 4B, 2FG).

*The event at the auditorium was great because there was a high participation. Probably we don't care so much about this kind of event, but for the students, it was a really good experience because the event was prepared seriously. It is also a way for them to understand that if you work seriously, you will obtain good results: that is what we are always repeating to them during classes. [Teacher 1, end of second year].*

Students appreciated the opportunity to speak in public in front of their parents, suggesting the importance of having public recognition of their engagement efforts. Teachers resonated with the lessons that students learned, and the fact that adults may underestimate the importance for

young people of having a public voice. From the teacher's words, it was clear that students worked hard and they took their assignment seriously; it became clear that engaging in real tasks is powerful, as far as the learning experience that it produces. This reflection of a student echoes the teachers' perspectives:

*The part I liked the most is that we were personally involved in the activities we did. For example, concerning poverty we didn't just prepare a Powerpoint, we got in touch. So even the research was developed from the experiences [Student, end of second year] (M, 4B, 2FG).*

Students were active participants in a European conference, where they met the students from the other countries/schools involved in the project: each group had the opportunity to present its work in ad hoc sessions to a broader public audience composed of students, researchers, and politicians.<sup>5</sup> Travelling costs were partially covered by the project's budget and parts were covered with private and public funds, as the school wanted all students involved in the YPAR to be able to participate. The experience was challenging (as presentations and discussion were in English), and students invested a lot in it, but it was also very rewarding.

*The presentation in Athens represented a relief but also a confirmation of our job. All the compliments from the academics of the other countries...I was relieved and it was also a great satisfaction for me, because we spent a lot of energy on that. It was*

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<sup>5</sup>The first project conference Young People as Active EU Citizens? Challenges and Visions on a Renewed Project for Europe. First CATCH-EyoU conference took place in Athens in March 2017.



*interesting to see also the different approaches that were adopted by the different countries.* [Student, end of second year] (M, 4D, FG2).

*The afternoon was perceived as the key-moment that was the moment in which they had to show their work. They experienced it almost as adults, I would say. With a lot of consciousness and also with the capacity to face a public.* [Teacher, end of first year].

Again, while students emphasized their efforts and satisfaction, teachers pointed out their maturity. It is worth emphasizing the idea of “adulthood” in the teacher’s words: at the time when they were in Athens for the conference, most students were already 17 years old, therefore almost adults in many respects.

For some students, however, the experience was also frustrating due to parallel sessions and a smaller audience:

*Honestly, I was a bit disappointed with the conference, because I expected many more people and, anyway, a bigger room where everyone could expose themselves in front of everyone.* [Student, end of second year] (M, 4D, FG2).

The second year of the intervention aimed to extend the debate and the research on the EU level. The research team organized a meeting with a local representative of the European Parliament. This latter event was perceived as very significant, likely due to how uncommon it is to interact with policymakers, and how difficult it can be to feel the EU as a concrete entity affecting their everyday life, especially for youth.

*I believe that the most significant experience of our relationship with the EU consisted of our meeting with MEP. He told us something about the reasons why it is important, at this moment, to be part of the European Union and that we should also adopt a global and economic perspective [Student, end of first year] (M, 4D, 2FG).*

During the second year, students contacted the European students involved in the project, but they complained about cross-national interactions. Their interaction with their European colleagues was mostly online, using Etwinning (a collaborative platform for schools in Europe co-funded by the Erasmus+), but they were limited to exchanging (few) data, without debate and discussion.

*I believed that, at European level, we had to share more contents with students from other European countries: not only data, but also ideas and expectations. [Student, end of second year] (M, 4B, 2FG).*

Some students were not satisfied about data exchange across countries due to different levels of engagement:

*The fact that the other groups weren't cooperating as much in the other states didn't help. That's also what we found in Athens because we realized that the other groups weren't engaging in the same way as we did. [Student, end of second year] (M, 4D, 2FG).*

This phase was challenging for students and would have required stronger support from adults across countries; in some schools, due to the specific implementation constraints/choices

(i.e., as an elective extracurricular activity in one instance, as individual curricular tasks in another one; the residual role of the university in one school), cross-national interactions were left to the hands of a few students with limited time and resources to invest in the project.

The students acknowledged the impact of these differences, as we can see from this excerpt of a focus group at the end of the second year:

*M: But also, because there were only a few Germans. There are 40 of us: we involved two classes. If there were two of them and one teacher, things would have been different.*

*F: True. We really put many hours into the project [Students, end of second year] (4B, 2FG).*

Nevertheless, students agreed that through the activities of the project they increased their knowledge about Europe:

*I believe that the project was useful for learning more about Europe. [Student, end of second year] (F,4B, 2FG).*

*My expectations were met, like studying and facing the problems at the local and (more interestingly) at European level. [Student, end of second year] (F,4B, 2FG).*

The project also allowed the students to view problems that occurred at the European level; for the student quoted above, grounding her reflection at the EU level was an opportunity to realize her expectations more clearly.

Regarding other expectations, a doubtful attitude also emerged. Students had the chance to be on stage in the final conference of the project in Brussels where they shared their proposals

with representatives of the EU institutions. Students perceived the conference as a seminal moment, and it was very important for them. However, despite its importance, students admitted that they were not certain that their proposals would be taken into account by the European decision-makers, recognizing the difficulties to have an impact at the systemic level.

*The project would be even more efficacious if our proposals will be seriously taken into account.* [Student, end of second year] (M, 4B, 2FG).

### ***New roles and activities for a new learning environment***

Students emphasized the importance of teamwork and of managing and organizing the tasks when a group is composed by different people who don't know each other.

*For me, I think that this job helped us to learn how to work in groups. The group work does not mean that we are good at working in a group, it means that we also know the obstacles we can meet in this and they are a lot. So, I think that this helped us.* [Student, end of second year] (F, 4D, FG2).

Students could also reflect on the activities of the project and the differences with typical activities of the school curriculum. In fact, they noticed that the project gave them the opportunity to experiment using other methodologies that enhanced their autonomy in thinking and acting, in managing difficulties, and in trying to find solutions.

*In class, usually we do not deal with the search for original sources. Everything is already written, and we have just to study it. We don't conduct any research. Also, the relationship with*

*teachers was different. We worked with our heads! Then, ok, we asked for approval, but we worked alone.* [Student, end of second year] (F, 4B, FG2).

Students underlined the novelty of YPAR, emphasizing their agency in doing research, the quality of the information uncovered, and the shifts in usual roles of students (being the leaders) and teachers (offering less guidance, rather providing facilitation).

*During usual school hours, the teacher-student relationship is based on the fact that we listen and are quite passive. In this project, instead, we are active and we have to be the ones that activate ourselves...* [Student, end of second year] (F, 4B, FG2).

A teacher commented on this point, as well:

*They understood that another way of working is possible and that should be possible. I think that this experience was very important for them.* [Teacher end of second year].

Students recognized that autonomy was challenging, because they were not used to working without strict guidance.

*According to me, it was difficult at the beginning when it was not clear what we had to do, when we were unsure on how to proceed, but, when we began, it was laborious but, at the end, it was rewarded at the conference because it seemed that we went well, we did a good job.* [Student, end of second year] (M, 4B, FG2).

*I definitely didn't expect to have so much responsibility, working as a team and trusting the work of others* [Student, end of second year] (F, 4B, FG2).

Teachers agreed that difficulties at the beginning of the intervention were related to student/teacher differences. Even if it wasn't obvious to them, teachers were reluctant to loosen their control over what the students did:

*It was difficult to make them work independently.* [Teacher 1, end of first year].

Teachers observed that students had the chance to learn in new ways:

*They learned things that aren't taught at school normally: new ways of working and to analyze data with scientific methods. They learned how to use the language in a certain way as to speak in public, to express their thoughts with self-confidence. They learned to work in a group and to respect deadlines, things that go beyond normal school activities* [Teacher 2, end of first year].

Even if collaborative problem solving is considered a 21st century skill, according to the teacher working in a group is beyond what schools usually teach. Regardless, according to the teachers, the experience contributed to a new way of learning that this school did not otherwise provide.

*Certainly, they had acquired skills they didn't have before. They learned to manage data and a scientific approach. They refined the quality of their work, undoubtedly.*  
[Teacher 2, end of second year].

The fundamental role of the two junior research team members for this learning was not acknowledged during the interviews (likely because they conducted the interview). However, teachers noted the importance of the junior researchers during informal conversations with the

senior team members. Plus, it was clear from the interactions we observed in Athens and Brussels that the relationship developed between the junior researchers and the students was friendly and built on a peer basis. As one of the senior research members noted during the conference: “Students wanted to have the junior research team members in their outdoor informal group photos [they wanted them right in their midst], they embraced each other festively and noisily. The same did not happen with the senior member of the research team, nor with their teachers”.

Teachers began seeing their students in a new way and learned to value youth agency:

*I am delighted because I am pleased to see them active, I am pleased to see them involved, enthusiastic and eager to do things. I never had to compel them.... They have indeed done many mistakes, but have begun to develop their projects, and we were surprised. Even the number of people contacted, the capacity they had to disseminate these questionnaires, not only in the school, so I was really astonished.*

[Teacher 1, end of second year].

### ***Expanding youth views on citizenship***

During the first focus group, students identified different ways to exercise citizenship that were classified according to the typology of Ekman & Amna (2012) and the taxonomy of Barrett & Zani (2015): they mentioned manifest civic participation (e.g., volunteering) and political participation (i.e., voting). They also identified latent forms of political participation (political interest) and civic participation (see Table 2). Sense of community falls in the latter category:

*When our attention goes beyond our house door, when it is wide and involves others, then we are active citizens. There is a sense of belonging to something more... For me, a thing that summarizes all, is the sense of belonging.* [Student, beginning of year 1] (M, 3B FG1).

**Insert table 2 here**

Representations of active citizenship changed after the intervention. In the post intervention focus group students did not just refer to specific forms of participation, as they did in pre-intervention (see table 2) but added skills and competencies as “conditions” to become active citizens. Reference to community mobilization and critical thinking were totally absent in pre intervention focus group, but students brought them up in the post intervention focus groups.

*When we started to be involved, we began to delve and “stopped playing.” This is for me was being active [...] to be involved and to let the others know is playing an active part.* [Student, end of second year] (F, 3B FG2).

This quote shows that through their experience with the project, students moved from private awareness to public concern; having a public voice (letting others know about the views) seems to be a direct consequence of their serious engagement. They claim they have “stopped playing” with regards to engagement and participation, developing more mature attitudes. Also, teachers, observing how serious the students engaged with the YPAR tasks reported many times the feeling that their students were maturing.

The role of critical thinking for active citizenship was reiterated in the following excerpts.

*I meant it is OK to be informed, however, a fundamental thing from my point of view to be*



*an active citizen is to also analyze the data using a critical approach* [Student, end of second year] (M,4D, FG2).

*I believe that for becoming an active citizen, you must develop critical thinking. And for developing critical thinking you must get informed, be interested, and do research. I believe that everything we wrote can be summarized with critical thinking. That is not a belief you already have, but something you learn to build. I think this means being active.* [Student, end of second year] (M, 4D, FG2).

Engaging in research is seen as a powerful opportunity to develop critical thinking because its essence relies on the active generation of knowledge and understanding. In a similar vein, critical understanding requires looking beyond the surface and having a wider perspective:

*When we collected money for the organization Emporio we did something useful. But with this project we had the opportunity to better understand this point and to know where the money was put!* [Student, end of second year] (M, 4B, FG2).

At the beginning of the project, students' views of active citizenship were concrete and factual (e.g., demonstrating, volunteering, voting). Some made reference to latent forms of citizenship, in particular expressing interest in political issues or toward their own community. With their active engagement in research, they moved toward a more complex view of citizenship where critical awareness was identified as a key competence, both at the individual level (being able to process information about the community in which they live and its social issues) and at the community level (sharing knowledge to make other people aware and mobilize the community).

### **Quantitative Findings**

An analysis of variance for multiple dependent variables revealed no significant differences between participants in the intervention group and those in the control group at baseline (T1) in perceived school climate [ $F(1, 53) = 3.68, p > .05$ ], friends' engagement norms [ $F(1, 53) = 0.10, p > .05$ ], and quality of participation experience [ $F(1, 53) = 0.08, p > .05$ ].

We found a significant interaction effect between scores of perceived school climate at the four waves and the group of the participant,  $F(3, 48) = 5.14, p = .002, \eta^2 = .10$ . This effect suggests that the perception of the school at the four waves differed in the intervention and control groups. Contrasts revealed significant interactions when comparing the control and intervention group scores on perception of climate school at T1 compared to T2,  $F(1, 48) = 10.46, p = .002, \eta^2 = .18$ , to T3,  $F(1, 48) = 5.27, p = .026, \eta^2 = .10$ , and to T4,  $F(1, 48) = 8.36, p = .006, \eta^2 = .15$ . Figure 1 shows that, in the intervention group, school climate scores increased at T2 and T4 (e.g., from the beginning to the end of each school year), while the control group either remained stable or decreased.

**Insert Figure 1 here**

**Insert Figure 2 here**

The analysis revealed a significant interaction effect between scores of friends' engagement norms across the four waves and the group,  $F(3, 47) = 2.96, p = .034, \eta^2 = .06$ , indicating that the scores on friends' engagement norms at the four waves varied between the intervention and control groups. Contrasts showed significant interactions when comparing the control and the intervention group scores to perception of school climate at T1 compared to T2,  $F(1, 47) = 5.72, p = .021, \eta^2 = .11$ , to T4,  $F(1, 47) = 4.97, p = .031, \eta^2 = .10$ , but not compared to T3,  $F(1, 47) = 0.47, p > .05, \eta^2 = .00$ . Figure 3 displays higher scores of peer group norms about participation at

T2 and T4 (e.g., from the beginning to the end of each school year) in the intervention group, while the control group remained rather stable across the four waves.

There was a significant interaction between scores on quality of participation experience and group,  $F(3, 47) = 2.81, p = .041, \eta^2 = .06$ , indicating that the patterns of quality of participation across the four waves differed according to the group. Contrasts were performed comparing the scores on school quality of participation in the control and in the intervention group at T1 and at the subsequent waves. The first contrast revealed a significant interaction when comparing T1 to T2 scores between the intervention and control groups,  $F(3, 47) = 7.76, p = .008, \eta^2 = .14$ , as well as T1 to T3 scores,  $F(3, 47) = 6.14, p = .017, \eta^2 = .12$ , and T1 to T4 scores,  $F(3, 47) = 4.18, p = .047, \eta^2 = .08$ . Figure 3 shows that, in the intervention group, perception of the quality of participation experience increased at T2 and T4, while a decreasing trend was found in the control group.

**Insert figure 3 here**

### **Integrated Findings**

Both students and teachers enjoyed the opportunity provided by YPAR to establish different ways to be in relation with each other, introducing new ways to handle the learning process in school, with more space for relying on young people's resources and ideas. The latter was a challenge for both students and teachers, who were not used to this format. But teachers resisted the temptation to regain control, and students increased their ownership over the intervention; direct involvement in the research on locally experienced social issues, creating

space and time for critical analysis of information sources (including direct access to the sources of information: e.g., stakeholders), understanding the nature and the root causes of their chosen social issues, reflecting on measures that can be adopted to address social issues, and through engaging in public arenas were the ways these youth took the lead on this project. These activities were recognized by both students and teachers as meaningful components of their YPAR experience, challenging the usual way they learned at school. Numbers confirmed this shift: the longitudinal quantitative evaluation showed that the intervention changed participants' perception of school climate, with students' perceiving class environment as more open to diversity and dissent, and that teachers held more respectful attitudes toward students. Qualitative accounts revealed that students learned through their experience with YPAR that engaging in critical reflection is a key dimension of active citizenship. The longitudinal data also revealed that students recognized more opportunities to engage in reflective and strategic thinking in class. Qualitative accounts did not provide evidence about students' mobilizing their community, but quantitative data revealed that students perceived their environment to be more supportive regarding participation (and that peer norms on this issue changed). These data are encouraging but do not allow us to claim with certainty that students' YPAR had an impact on their immediate community, as we did not ask peers and the community directly. More should be understood about YPAR supporting the development of young people's capacity to mobilize the local community, as this was recognized by students as a dimension of active citizenship that fits with the importance of engaging with stakeholders in different ways (e.g., listening, presenting/offering solutions, etc.).

## **Discussion**

YPAR holds promise in promoting positive outcomes such as well-being and health, academic achievement, and social-emotional and cognitive development (e.g., Anyon et al., 2018; Ozer, 2017; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009), however there has been a lack of mixed methods longitudinal research on how participation in YPAR can promote active citizenship in schools. In view of this gap in the literature, the aim of the present study was to investigate the perception of changes in process indicators stimulated by the participation in a two-year citizenship education intervention that used a YPAR approach in Italy. Specifically, we assessed the capacity of a YPAR intervention to offer students a significant participatory, collaborative experience, expanding their views on active citizenship. To this end, we examined the perspective of students and teachers on what changed during the intervention, collecting both qualitative and quantitative data.

Overall, we found that significant changes took place during the duration of the project: school climate and quality of participation improved in the intervention group over time, and peer group norms about participation were perceived as more supportive. The literature has suggested that a more democratic school climate supports civic learning (Nieuwelink et al., 2016), and our results build on that evidence, suggesting that YPAR can contribute to civic learning through its capacity to impact the school climate becoming more open to diversity.

Another process of utmost importance in YPAR and citizenship education is meaningful and critical reflection (Kagan, 2012; Tzankova et al., 2021). Both quantitative and qualitative evidence suggest that this is a feasible process when YPAR is implemented in school. Students recognized the importance of critical thinking for active citizenship, and appreciated the opportunities to engage in this type of activity in YPAR.

When we asked teachers what was peculiar from the experience, they responded that the student's autonomy, which they had not experienced before, was unique; they also recognized that students learned a lot from the experience, acted responsibly, and were collaborative and engaged with the research and its tasks, developing different social competences. They started recognizing young people as capable civic actors (Kohfeldt et al., 2011). Other studies documented similar effects on the different adults who engage with youth in YPAR (e.g., teachers but also practitioners, and community members). (Kennedy et al., 2019).

Students found powerful (and uncommon) the opportunity of engaging for a sustained amount of time in research on social issues and in collaborative group activities: both experiences cannot be considered part of the school routine. The most valuable part of the YPAR experience for students, however, were the opportunities to be visible and to share ideas with the public. Kohfeldt et al. (2011) claimed that students' invisibility is a consequence of traditional school practices, which prevents empowerment; gaining visibility was most likely the process of YPAR that impacted students most and which they deemed to be most significant in this two-years project.

Students had many opportunities to act in the public arena. They made their research publicly available and communicated and disseminated their findings to a wide audience of community stakeholders and policy makers (at the local and at the European level): this represents a significant outcome of YPAR at the meso-system level, as it touches community organizations, schools, and the interactions between these institutions (Kennedy et al., 2019). With respect to research benefits, however, students failed to involve their European peers, as it was difficult for them to build a real collaborative rapport across countries. The easy involvement

of peers in the research is a popular outcome of YPAR, however most YPAR does not entail a cross-national dimension the way our intervention did.

The YPAR experience changed perceived norms about participation; civic and political participation, according to students, became more popular among their peers. This result suggests that practicing the skills required to engage in the civic and political realms may lead students to see civic and political activity more accessible, with significant implications for sustained engagement in the future. Kennedy et al.'s (2019) review of 63 studies documented change in peer norms at the local level in four of these studies. Students' views on civic and political participation also expanded, as they developed a more nuanced and sophisticated representations of active citizenship that identified critical thinking and community mobilization, as two competencies for active citizenship that were not mentioned before the intervention.

Taken as a whole, our results show that YPAR in school can be an effective tool for citizenship education, as long as it offers concrete opportunities to develop a critical understanding of societal issues and supports the notion that youth participation can change the way of approaching the teaching and learning process. Instead of a process of "schoolification" of YPAR, we observed the capacity of YPAR to transform the learning experience through processes that were psychologically empowering (Ozer, 2017) as they were situated in the community context, where students tried to accomplish change on the societal issues that were relevant to them (collecting information and informing, mobilizing the community, offering ideas and solutions).

School- university partnership was a key ingredient for the success of the process. We have probably been "lucky" to some extent, because we found a school principal who did not ask us to minimize the intervention to limit its interference with other curricular activities, and who

saw its potential to contribute to the school mission and “new-age” educational demands (i.e., equipping students with key competences for life, see European Parliament and the Council, 2006). Teachers also accepted the risk of collaboration to the end and were not too afraid to lose their traditional authoritative role with students. On our side, we offered a substantive school-university partnership based on reciprocity with clear mutual benefits (e.g., having a robust continuous project, a dedicated budget, a structured but flexible long-term plan, a strong methodology that emphasizes active engagement and is empowering and transformative for students and the community). Indeed, having young citizens equipped with critical awareness, capable of interacting respectfully with other people, and to independently value sources of contrasting information is part of what (citizenship) education is about, and what is recommended at the European (European Commission, 2017) and at the Italian level (Bombardelli & Codato, 2017). We believe that the results of this project can offer some suggestions about the directions that civic education could take, offering the opportunity to students to learn civics by engaging as competent actors in the community for social change.

### **Limitations**

The study has several limitations. Comments of the teachers were widely used to account for students learning and meaning-making, and this may even appear to contradict the fundamental theoretical framework of YPAR. However, their recognition of the tensions arising from letting the students working autonomously provided a clear picture of the educational tradition that prevails in the school, and sheds some light on the way the intervention can impact social relations at the systemic level (e.g., changing role relationships and teaching practices in school). To have a clearer picture of the full YPAR impact at the systemic level, we could have also collected the voices of the class teachers that were not directly involved in the project.



Students' voices were collected by different means and in multiple timepoints of the project. We used both individual (questionnaire) and group approaches to data collection to shed light on young people's experiences. We are well aware about the risks of using focus groups, (e.g., difficulty of balancing deep probing questions with hearing from everyone, worries of group conformity), but this approach seemed coherent with YPAR, that it is a group process first and foremost. Focus groups were facilitated by the junior research team members, who were deeply involved with students. They were skilled in conducting group discussion and working with groups and had also established a trusting relationship with students; this, in our opinion, facilitated open communication (as shown by the results of the questionnaire) and freedom of expression to dissent, which was present in students' narratives. However, it is also plausible that some students preferred to be silent instead of openly criticizing the tremendous work they did together with their external tutors.

Another limitation is that the perspective of other stakeholders, who played a crucial role in the process, was not included, missing an important point of view to understand the transformative potential of this YPAR project on the community life and policymaking. However, both students and teachers' accounts revealed an appreciation of the students' work from many stakeholders that is promising with respect to YPAR, through the engagement of young people as powerful means to catalyze local community organization and revitalization (London, 2007). An additional limitation has to do with the small sample of participants involved in the intervention; however, keeping the intervention small was an intentional choice, related to the need to ensure a high quality of the process of collaboration between the students and adults involved.

Finally, we acknowledge that teachers and the participating classes were not randomly selected. Notwithstanding, the selected classes were not different from other classes in terms of age, gender and number of students, and overall performance. Although we cannot exclude that selected teachers who participated could be different from other colleagues, to our knowledge, there is no evidence that the preexisting teachers' characteristics may have an influence when using the YPAR approach. It should be noted that the principles of YPAR and the factors influencing its efficacy do not list teachers' characteristics (e.g., Anyon et al., 2018; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Ozer, 2017; Ozer & Douglas, 2015; Ozer et al., 2010).

### **Conclusions**

Despite these limitations, the analysis of this citizenship education intervention demonstrates that the quality of YPAR interventions in school relies on the way processes are implemented and managed. This way can be understood and assessed, triangulating different methods of data collection and different stakeholders that can offer a better understanding of what works in YPAR from their unique perspective. Plus, our results support the positive impact of participatory approaches in transforming the learning environment, coherently with the call for their adoption to deliver citizenship education programs. Therefore, they add to the body of empirical findings that sustain the effectiveness of YPAR across countries, which is more focused on individual (developmental) outcomes. Future implementations of this kind of intervention, with a larger sample of students and in different contexts, would be fruitful in understanding if the findings obtained in this study can be generalized in different implementation conditions, which may be less flexible and more demanding than the ones we experienced. It would be interesting also to understand how implementation conditions can be negotiated, and how they affect specific processes and outcomes.

We believe that some key features of the intervention (e.g., phases and related activities that engaged the students) may be adapted, while others are needed and cannot be bypassed, as they constitute the keys for a quality implementation of YPAR. The list includes:

- students self - directing the research process based on their priorities,
- visibility of young people in the community,
- real opportunity for students to engage in the public arena
- openness to think about adult and youth roles differently,
- honest and solid partnership between university and school, based on reciprocity

Investing resources could also be included in the list, because systematic monitoring and accompaniment in the process have to be granted for sake of quality implementation.

Despite some methodological limitations, the study also has some methodological strengths; we adopted a mixed-methods design, using quasi-experimental research and longitudinal qualitative research, which allowed us to systematically monitor the process over the course of the project. Most importantly, this study demonstrated that YPAR is able to offer a significant citizenship educational experience, as it contributes to expand students' knowledge and awareness of social issues, to recognize their agency in their role, as well as their capacity to take responsibility in their communities, and to engage with others in the public domain. With this study, we hope to add to the growing body of evidence that YPAR in schools can be a catalyst for change in terms of facilitating group activities and mobilizing youth voices, changing school environment, its social norms, and overall participation. In this way, YPAR can transform the educational context, contributing to make school a real context for active citizenship. Our results may encourage teachers and educators to consider YPAR as a viable alternative to other ways of implementing citizenship education programs more consistent with international

recommendations, having what it takes to equip students with skills and competencies to deal with the individual and societal challenges they will encounter in their developmental journey.

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Table 1. *Overview of the Mixed-Method Design*

Phase	Quantitative	Qualitative
Beginning of the intervention T1	Survey	Focus group
End of the first school year T2	Survey	Focus group Individual interview
Beginning of the second school year T3	Survey	/
End of the intervention T4	Survey	Focus group Individual interview



Table 2. *Forms of civic and political participation/active citizenship (categories and students' quotes)*

<b>Macro themes</b>	<b>Micro theme (form) and definition</b>	<b>Inclusion criteria</b>	<b>Exclusion criteria</b>	<b>Example</b>
Latent Political Participation	Political interest: Feeling or awareness of being a member of society, to be a part of a political context without taking an action.	Individual interest in politics and societal issues  Attentiveness to political issues	Collective interest in politics and societal issues	<i>According to me, it is enough to be interested in what is happening in your city and, even if you don't make something concrete, if you experiment yourself and you are interested in and involve people, it is enough. [Student, beginning of year 1] (F, 3D FG1)</i>  <i>One who tries to get informed on what is happening. A lot of people don't know the subject of referendum. Maybe there is a lot of ignorance, while being would be enough to to be part of a community. [Student, beginning of year 1] (M,3B FG1).</i>

<p>Latent political participation</p>	<p>Volunteering: Associational involvement and voluntary work</p>	<p>Individual and collective forms of civic engagement</p>	<p>Formal participation</p>	<p><i>People as volunteers are most needed, because they dedicate their time to people in difficult situations, such as earthquake and this is very important. [Student, beginning of year 1] (M, 3D FG1)</i></p>
<p>Latent political participation</p>	<p>Sense of community: Feeling of belonging to a community, share experiences and emotions.</p>	<p>Collective forms of involvement</p>	<p>Individual forms of involvement and civic engagement</p>	<p><i>Be part of the community and help people, be part of a group. [Student, beginning of year 1] (F, 3B FG1)</i></p>
<p>Manifest political participation</p>	<p>Vote: Formal expression of agreement or disagreement to political decisions.</p>	<p>Individual and formal participation</p>	<p>Collective forms of involvement and civic participation</p>	<p><i>You can vote or not, but it is a free choice of the person. The most important thing is the possibility to choose to vote or not.” [Student, beginning of year 1] (M, 3B FG1)</i></p>

<p>Manifest political participation</p>	<p>Demonstrations: Events or organized activities in communities for collective purposes.</p>	<p>Collective, semi-organized and extra parliamentary form of participation</p>	<p>Individual forms of involvement and civic engagement</p>	<p><i>I think that it is important to demonstrate, to express your own discontent towards some choices of the political class and that can be expressed also through vote. [Student, beginning of year 1] (F, 3D FG1)</i></p>
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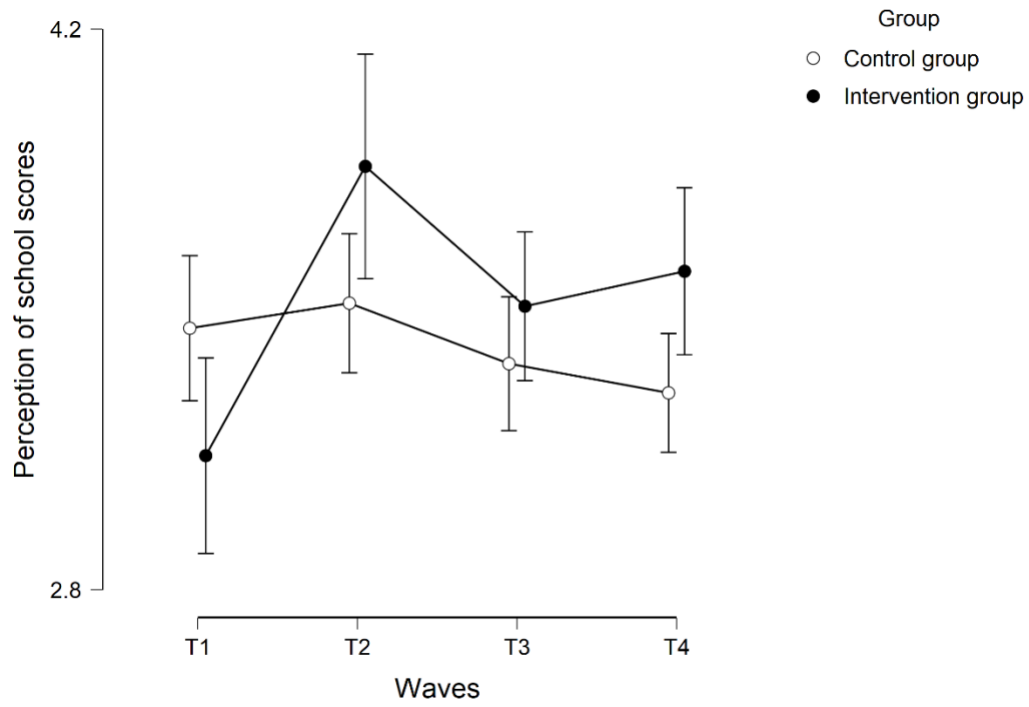


Figure 1. Means and 95% confidence interval for perception of school climate scores collected during the four waves and across the two conditions.

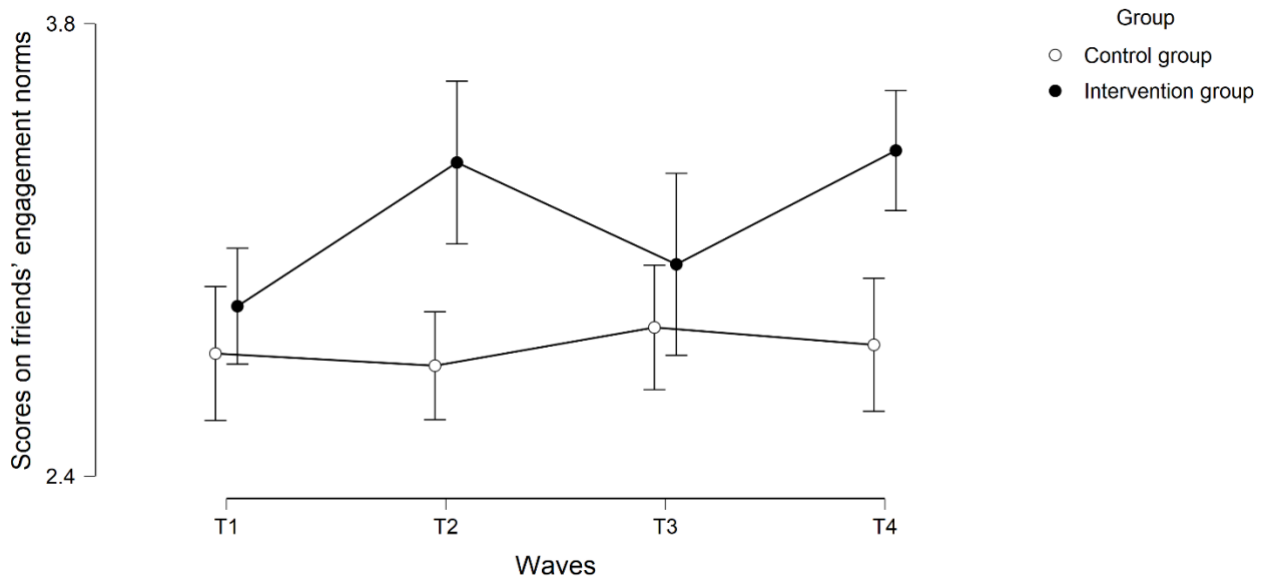


Figure 2. Means and 95% confidence interval for scores on friends' engagement norms collected during the four waves and across the two conditions.

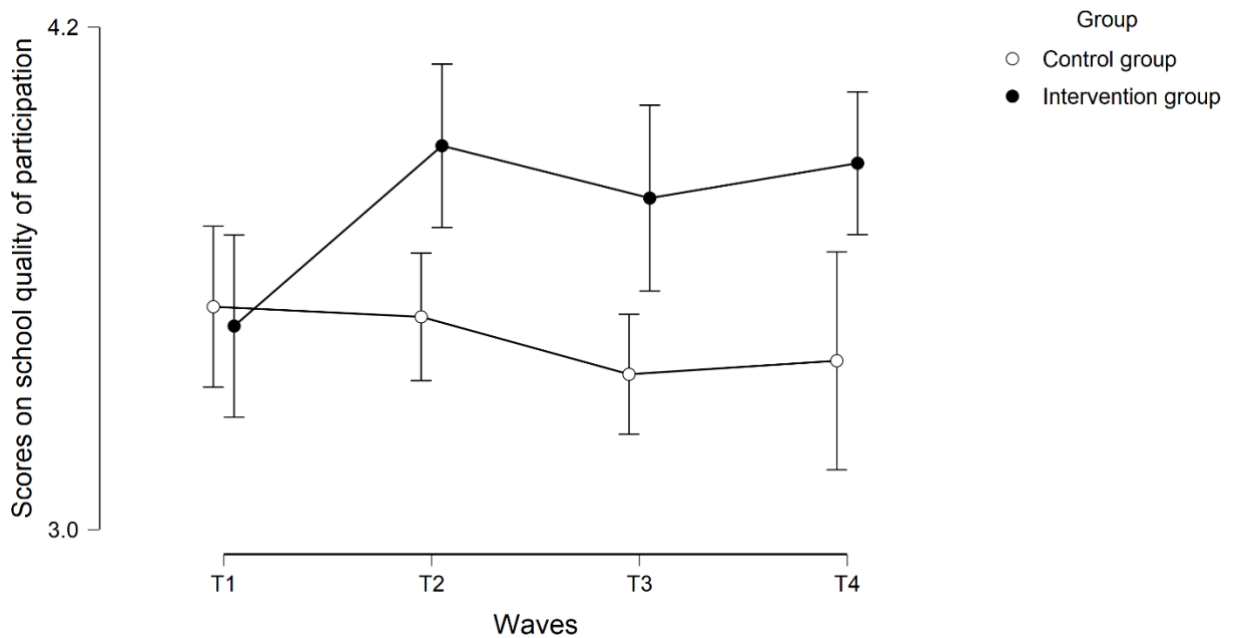


Figure 3. Means and 95% confidence interval for scores on quality of participation experience collected during the four waves and across the two conditions.



