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## Promoting participation at a time of social and political turmoil: what is the impact of children's and young people's city councils?

Edda Sant & Ian Davies

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## Promoting participation at a time of social and political turmoil: what is the impact of children's and young people's city councils?

Edda Sant<sup>a</sup>  and Ian Davies<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Childhood, Youth and Education Studies, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK; <sup>b</sup>Department of Education, University of York, York, UK

### ABSTRACT

Youth councils are examined as spaces of citizenship education where young people are educated as political subjects. At a time of political and economic instability data were collected in a Catalan city through tests and focus groups involving 112 students, three teachers and two youth council managers during one academic year. Students' political trust decreased and their cynicism towards politics increased; there were no changes in students' anticipated future participation. The article avoids drawing simplistic causal links between students' involvement in a council and the expression of their views. The participants also discuss the councils as performance sites. It is speculated whether, in students' views, this metaphor of performance applies not only to the councils but to the wider political context in which they live. It is argued that youth councils are, in some ways, potentially valuable for promoting participation and recommendations are made in light of the findings.

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## Introduction

We aim to contribute to discussions concerning the education of young people as political subjects. In our research project we asked: 'What do students learn through their participation in a city youth council?' The research discussed in this article is relevant to citizenship education and, more specifically, to political education, in Spain. We focus on evaluation of an educational project – referred to in this article as EPS – in one city in Spain. As part of our research we compared students' views on politics and their anticipated political participation before and after their participation in a youth council. We deepened our understanding of all data by considering the perceptions of teachers and project managers as well as students. Our research was conducted in a Catalan city in Spain in 2011–2012 in a context of economic and social and political crisis. A phase of intensive nationalistic-separatist mobilisation had begun in 2010 and probably reached its climax in 2014. It can probably be best understood

**CONTACT** Edda Sant  e.sant@mmu.ac.uk

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as a coming together of popular movements and political and cultural elites (Cramer, 2014; Gillespie, 2015; Prado, 2014) in which various methods are used (Muñoz & Guinjoan, 2013). A general election was held in autumn 2011 with highly charged contributions to debate. Spain was (and is) deeply affected by economic crisis. Whilst we were collecting data, the unemployment rate in Spain was 25% (the level of youth unemployment was approximately 45%). EPS began a few months after the beginning of the *indignados* movement (*occupy the square*) and throughout our research there were strongly worded debates in the Spanish media. A large number of teachers and students were involved in demonstrations against the reduction of €5000 million from the education budget.

It is likely that our findings are not representative of what might have been revealed at other less turbulent times but nevertheless we may be able to throw into sharp relief certain key issues concerning democratic engagement and we may perhaps provide a sounding board, or lens, on or through which to generate reflections on other similar contexts.

Political education is an essential component of citizenship education and recognised as such by policy-makers. Recommendation 2002(12) of the European Council of Ministers encourages member states to promote teaching methods that are student-centred and which allow learners to identify and try to accomplish an objective that has been generated by a class, a school, the local, regional, national, European or international community. Perhaps influenced by this Recommendation and other initiatives (e.g. article 12 of the Children's Rights, Deseco, 2005), some local and regional authorities have promoted children and young people's city councils. According to Manuetti (1997), youth councils are based on the idea that boys and girls have the ability to take part in the process of decision-making in local authorities; that, practically, there will be a students' assembly that represents a class or a school; and a budget to facilitate the achievement of students' proposals. At least 30 countries have some sort of national, regional or local council (Wall, 2011). In France there are 1600 children's city councils (Casas et al., 2008) and about 740 in each of a range of other countries including Portugal, Belgium, Italy, Germany and Poland (Hart, 2013). In 2004, it was estimated that there were 255 such councils in Spain (Ruiz, Ramirez, Sanchez, & Espinosa, 2004). In the area surrounding the city where our research took place, 26 local authorities have promoted these councils.

We discuss EPS as a critical case (García, Gil, & Rodríguez, 1999) that can help us to understand better how children and young people learn politics during their participation in children and young people's city councils. We recognise the complex nature of teaching and learning but do not aim to provide a fully developed philosophically based consideration of relevant matters regarding what could be characterised as 'teaching' or 'learning' in the context of a council. We provide some background about youth councils clarifying their main features, connecting them to key ideas regarding political participation and to their potential to provide a form of political education. We describe and discuss our methods and then present findings and discuss key issues, acknowledging the limitations and highlighting the implications of our work.

## **Children and young people's councils, citizenship education and the education of political subjects**

Youth councils can be understood as one (among others) context where young people are educated as political subjects (Adu-Gyamfi, 2013; Masschelein & Quaghebeur, 2005;

Raby, 2012). 'Subjection', Butler defines, 'signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject' (1997, p. 2). The notion of 'subject' here encompasses two different meanings: 'subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge' (Foucault, 1982, p. 781). Spaces of subjection, such as the youth councils we discuss here, are open to opposing interpretations depending on the meaning given to the notion of 'subject'. For some, spaces of subjection are essentially associated to the construction of a controlled and dependent subject. For Althusser (1971), the individuals are transformed into political subjects through an ideological act of recruitment or interpellation. By accepting the interpellation call, the individual obtains recognition of his/her place in the political order. Political power, in this respect, constitutes the political subject. To be constituted as such, the individual needs to internalise the norms associated with the power. Political power is embodied in the subject's 'own' actions through the reproduction of social skills in educational contexts. In Althusser's account, these embodied rituals – that some have compared with Bourdieu's habitus (Butler, 1997; Eagleton, 1991) – materialise and perpetuate the power. Others, instead, understand subjection as a more ambivalent process in which the subject can become self-aware and agentic through his/her engagement with power. For Butler (1997), subjection is simultaneously a source of domination and agency. 'At the very heart of the power relationship and constantly provoking it', Foucault argues, 'are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom' (1982, p. 790). There is also a possibility of individuals demonstrating their freedom once facing the interpellation call. If individuals do not desire the recognition of the political order (Butler, 1997) or are simultaneously 'interpellated' by another order (Eagleton, 1991), they may not answer the interpellation call. For Bhabha (2004), spaces of subjection offer possibilities to the empowerment of the individual. Subjects might rearticulate political rituals and destabilise the original power in the process that Butler (1997) defines as performative politics (see Youdell, 2006).

Political participation has been discussed as an embodied practice through which individuals become subjects (O'Loughlin, 2006). By participating in politics, individuals accept, and therefore reinforce, the power of the political order and they become participants in this power. In this understanding, political participation is essential for the preservation of the political order. If we understand the subject as someone engaged with power, however, political participation might be understood as being empowering, offering possibilities to challenge, if necessary, the political order. Not all forms of political participation, nevertheless, will reinforce the same political order. Whereas formal electoral political participation (formal political participation) might contribute to the maintenance of the existing political order, activism, social movements and anti-political and apolitical forms of participation might destabilise this order (Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Sloam, 2012). There is also a question of whether non-participation might cover radical forms of politics that might also challenge the political status quo (Farthing, 2010).

For some, citizenship education has been fostered by the low involvement of young people with formal modes of political participation and the threat to the dominant political order that some associate with this (Biesta & Lawy, 2006). Under the umbrella of citizenship education, nevertheless, there is a wide range of school and non-school based educational practices. Some of these citizenship education programmes attempt to reinforce formal practices of participation and compliance with the dominant political order. Others instead aim to provide young people with spaces to participate and to challenge, if necessary, this

political order (see e.g. Shultz, 2007; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). In this latter case, citizenship education can be understood as educational situated spaces where student-citizens might negotiate their practices of citizenship (Biesta & Lawy, 2006; Tully, 2014).

The situation of citizenship education, including the links between young people and contemporary politics, is complex and often problematised in Spain. For several years, research has highlighted that young Spaniards tend to refuse formal political participation and are more accepting of activism and social movements (Anduiza, 2001; García & Martín, 2010; González Balletbò, 2007) than their European-peer counterparts. This tendency has probably been fostered by the economic, political and social crisis (Pares, 2014; Soler, 2013). At the time of this research, a survey conducted among young Spaniards aged 15–29 showed that while trust in the Spanish Government was calculated to be 3.55 (in a scale from 0, not trustful and 10, very trustful), more than 61% of the participants supported the ‘indignados’ movement (INJUVE, 2012). Simultaneously, discussions about citizenship education were taking place with its introduction into the National Curriculum in 2006 and (although it is still present in schools in some of the devolved regions and in its alignment with the OECD’s social and citizenship competences) its withdrawal in 2012 following opposition from the Catholic Church and others. In contemporary Spain, citizenship education as educational setting where the individual is constituted as a political subject is relegated outside the boundaries of the national curricula. Young people’s councils can be considered as one of these spaces of citizenship education (Hall, Coffey, & Williamson, 1999; Masschelein & Quaghebeur, 2005). There is a relatively wide range of previous work that gives particular indications of the nature of councils relevant to our study. Kendall (2010) argues that students learn a range of skills connected with democratic awareness. Halsey, Murfield, Harland, and Lord (2006) emphasise the connection with social, personal and emotional as well as civic competence. Shier, Méndez, Centeno, Arróliga, and González (2014) suggest that students learn to work together, plan and organise. The work of Fleming (2013) is also relevant in that he suggests that councillors do not in practice always encourage young people’s participation in local authority structures despite official rhetoric to the contrary.

For some, youth councils offer spaces where young people might practise their citizenship. In relation to the 13th article of the Children’s Rights Declaration, some have highlighted youth councils as spaces where children and young people should have their voices heard (Wall, 2011). Tonucci has suggested that ‘a city which is appropriated for the children is a higher quality city’ (2009, p. 155). Quite often, youth councils have been considered settings where practices of citizenship encompass the learning of political knowledge, skills and attitudes (Cano, 2011). There are some existing analyses of students’ data concerning their learning of political and participatory knowledge and skills. Corsi (2002) suggests on the basis of work in Italy that children were able to demonstrate autonomous decision-making skills. Novella (2010) noted that children in Spain learned about communication and participation developing their knowledge of children’s rights. Trilla and Novella (2011) argue that students in Spain learned communication and deliberative skills, commitment, responsibility and teamwork. Crowley (2012), based on work in Wales, argues that children become more self-confident. There is a question, however, about whether these councils contribute to the empowerment of young people or to the preservation of the political status quo. Hart’s ladder of participation (1992) has been used by some to analyse the influence of youth participants in policy-making from forms of manipulation and tokenism to forms of consultation and decision-making (e.g. Crowley, 2012; Garcia & De Alba, 2012; Kay &

Tisdall, 2013; Wall, 2011; Wyness, 2009). Foucauldian analyses of power have also been used to discuss to what extent such councils contribute to encouraging children to become uncritical compliant subjects who self-regulate in accordance with dominant forms of participation (Adu-Gyamfi, 2013; Raby, 2012). Research findings seem to be contradictory in relation to whether or not council participants become more sceptical of or more complacent with the dominant political order (Corsi, 2002; Le Gal, 1998; Wyness, 2002).

In this paper, we aim to explore how a group of students experience their formation as political subjects through their participation in youth councils. We examine whether these students' involvement in the council encompasses their subordination to the political order and an embodiment of a dominant form of participation. We discuss the political and citizenship education of our participants as situated practices involving students' participation in the councils but we also consider their experiences in the wider cultural, social, political and economic order in which they live. There is as yet no research as far as we are aware that explores the influence of the youth councils on students' views on the political order and on their expectations of future participation in a context of economic, political and social crisis. We wish to contribute to that space. If, as Masschelein and Quaghebeur (2005) suggest, youth councils might be considered interpellation calls to students, the question is: do the students answer this call? And if so, in which ways?

We seek to accomplish two research objectives:

- Analyse possible continuities and discontinuities in the ways a sample of students become more sceptical or more content with the dominant political order through their participation in a city youth council.
- Analyse possible continuities and discontinuities in the ways these students expect to participate politically (or not to participate) before and after their participation in the council.

## Methods

EPS is based on Tonucci's work (1997) and consists of several strands. Each year the city council decides to work with one specific topic (for example, cityscape, culture or participation) and teaching materials, written by university professors, are explained and sent to the schools that want to take part in the project. The topic chosen for the point at which we gathered data was 'youth participation'. After the induction activity in which students are welcomed by some council members, students (aged between 11 and 17) and teachers completed work in class for approximately 15 h (usually in social studies lessons but at times other subjects were involved) to develop proposals for action. Student representatives from each class met three times to discuss the work done in class and then presented their ideas to the City Mayor and to the City Council who had already committed to accept at least some of the proposals. The student representatives formed approximately 50% of the class and were usually elected by their classmates.

## Design

We aim to discuss how political participation can be learnt and can be taught (Sant, 2013). The flexibility and complementarity of mixed methods was considered appropriate to understand

the complexity of the specific initiative we were exploring (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007). These methods helped us to work with our central aim cautiously, allowing us to some extent to think more carefully than we would have otherwise about how to avoid making simple assumptions concerning the relationships between teaching and learning, and teachers and learners (Biesta, 2013). As such we are not merely seeking to avoid inappropriate causal linkages between councils and learning but also recognising the fundamental issues in the characterisation of the educational process. While our discussion cannot reflect all issues associated with such matters we do wish to acknowledge these complexities.

Quantitative methods were used to identify the views towards formal politics and expected political participation students displayed before and following their participation in the youth city council. It was assumed that it would be impossible to consider all potentially relevant explanatory factors. A longitudinal design by case study was developed focusing on key issues and a limited range of potential explanatory factors. Following piloting with 47 students similar to those in the final sample, a test was used in two waves: in November and in the following April of the academic year when EPS occurred. The test included closed questions that aimed to evaluate: (1) students' views on the political order, including perceptions regarding the extent to which government and systems are responsive to demands<sup>1</sup> and political cynicism with the political system; and (2) students' expected participation in relation to different forms of formal political participation, social-movement related and activist participation. Following the example of other researchers (e.g. Euyopart, 2005) we used questions from the IEA Civic Education Study (Schulz & Sibberns, 2004). The questions were translated from Spanish to Catalan by two bilingual speakers and piloted with a group of 60 14-year-old students.

Following consideration of others' work (e.g. Schulz & Sibberns (2004; Amnå, Munck, & Zetterberg, 2004, April) data were validated and analysed by means of IBM SPSS® (v. 20.0) statistical software (IBM Corp, Armonk, NY, USA) with all interpretations related to a significance level of 0.05. Normality of the data was not assumed and in line with other research studies pre-test and post-test data were compared using the non-parametric Wilcoxon test. We did not have a random sample and we make comments about these statistical results cautiously and without claims of representativeness.

Qualitative methods were used to identify students', teachers' and EPS managers' interpretations of the students' experience during participation in the youth city council. In total five focus groups were held: three with students, and one each with teachers and the youth city council managers. During the five focus groups (three with students, one with teachers and one with the project managers) and the 12 individual interviews with students, participants discussed their perceptions concerning students' learning during their participation in the EPS. Participants received a summarised copy of the quantitative analyses to facilitate that discussion and they were encouraged to discuss their perceptions about students' learning through their participation in EPS. Online software (<http://www.dedoose.org>) was used to analyse qualitative data with codification, scheme creation, memorandum development to describe the codes, recodification in light of emerging interpretations, creation of matrix nets and schemes with consideration of frequency of codes across and within data sets (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The reliability of the study was considered by means of triangulating methods, collection methods and participants (Creswell, 1998).



## Participants

The participants were selected from the individuals who took part in the EPS project in order to achieve a multilevel mixed-methods sampling model (Teddle & Tashakkori, 2009). The sample was composed of three types of respondents: students, teachers and EPS managers. Six of the 70 teachers who were involved in EPS volunteered to take part (no specific criteria were employed so although this is deemed an acceptable approach [Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011] there is a need for caution and representativeness is not claimed). It was assumed that the volunteers would be those with clear views about EPS and were probably more likely to be in support rather than opposed to it. One class from each volunteer teacher was randomly selected. The students of these six classes were tested. The sample of students was 112 from a total population of 1148 EPS participants. The main characteristics of these students are presented in Table 2.

The aim of the second-stage sampling (individual interviews and focus groups) was to generate a group of students, teachers and EPS managers from whom data could be gathered regarding their interpretations of any possible learning during students' participation in the youth council (see Table 1). In this second stage, the two city council managers of EPS were selected, together with three teachers. The teachers were asked to take part due to their long experience in EPS and with variation in role (one from a primary school; two from secondary schools who taught citizenship and social science and philosophy). The students who were interviewed – individually and in three focus groups – were selected to obtain a dimensional sampling approach in which age, gender and views on citizenship (see Sant, 2014) were used as criteria. Twelve students were engaged in this second stage of the sampling: seven girls (58.3%) and five boys (41.7%) whose mean age was 13.8 years (11 years old, two students, 16.7%; 12 years old, two students, 16.7%; 14 years old, two students, 16.7%; 15 years old, four students, 33.3%; 16 years old, two students, 16.7%).

## Results

As shown in Table 3, there were some differences between the pre-test and the post-test results principally in relation to the statements 'The government cares a lot about what all of us think about new laws', 'The powerful leaders in government care very little about the opinions of people' and 'In this country a few individuals have a lot of political power while the rest of the people have very little power'. No significant difference was found in relation to the other statements, although the differences found in relation to 'The government is doing its best to find out what people want' and 'The politicians quickly forget the needs of the voters who elected them' were extremely close to our significance level of 0.05. In brief, these results suggest an increasing tendency in considering that political power is concentrated in the hands of a few who do not care about the views of the majority of the population.

**Table 1.** Data collection and participants.

| Strategies                            | Participants     | <i>n</i> |
|---------------------------------------|------------------|----------|
| Pre-test and post-test questionnaires | Students         | 112      |
| Individual interviews                 | Students         | 12       |
| Focus-group interviews                | Students         | 12 (3x4) |
| Focus group                           | Teachers         | 3 (1x3)  |
| Focus group                           | Project managers | 2 (1x2)  |

**Table 2.** Main characteristics of the participant students.

| School |         | Students                 |                          |      |       | Suburban area (Idescat, n.d.) |  |   |
|--------|---------|--------------------------|--------------------------|------|-------|-------------------------------|--|---|
| ID     | Type    | Level                    | Age (mean <sup>a</sup> ) | Boys | Girls | Total                         | % of declared unemployment (2012) <sup>b</sup> | % of children in compulsory education of non-Spanish nationality (2012) |
| 1      | State   | Primary                  | 10.94                    | 6    | 13    | 19                            | 10.7   | 18.4  |
| 2      | State   | Secondary                | 12.67                    | 7    | 5     | 12                            | 11.4   | 12.3  |
| 3      | State   | Secondary                | 12.79                    | 11   | 14    | 25                            | 11.4   | 12.3  |
| 4      | State   | Secondary                | 14.04                    | 13   | 14    | 27                            | 11.3   | 10.9  |
| 5      | State   | Secondary                | 15.89                    | 7    | 12    | 19                            | 9.1  | 9.8   |
| 6      | Private | Special educational need | 17.40                    | 5    | 5     | 10                            | 9.5  | 7.6   |
| Total  |         |                          | 13.71                    | 49   | 63    | 112                           |  |   |

<sup>a</sup>Age when students answered the pre-test.

<sup>b</sup>In Spain, Self-declared unemployment is usually lower than estimated unemployment. In 2012, the Spanish self-declared unemployment was 21.15% of the population whereas the estimated level of unemployment was 26.02% (INE, n.d.).

**Table 3.** Question: 'How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about you and politics?' Comparison of pre-test and post- test results by means of the non-parametric Wilcoxon test.

|   | Valid | Pre-test – Post-test (mean and typical deviation) | Max–Min | Sig            |
|---|-------|---|---------|----------------|
| The government cares a lot about what all of us think about new laws  | 103   | 2.69 (1.204) – 2.25 (1.091)                       | 1–5     | 0.003          |
| The government is doing its best to find out what people want   | 102   | 2.57 (1.173) – 2.34 (1.094)                       | 1–5     | 0.081          |
| When people get together to demand change, the leaders in government listen   | 102   | 2.64 (1.151) – 2.65 (1.021)                       | 1–5     | 0.864          |
| The powerful leaders in government care very little about the opinions of people                                    | 103   | 2.69 (1.204) – 2.25 (1.091)                       | 1–5     | 0.001          |
| In this country a few individuals have a lot of political power while the rest of the people have very little power | 101   | 2.38(1.120) – 2.16 (1.093)                        | 1–5     |                |
| The politicians quickly forget the needs of the voters who elected them   | 102   | 2.38 (1.130) – 2.18 (1.085)                       | 1–5     | 0.039<br>0.056 |

Table 4 shows that there are no significant differences in relation to the expected participation of students in the specified forms of action. We observe a considerable increase in the statements 'collect signatures for a petition' and 'block traffic as a form of protest' but these differences are not significant at the level of 0.05.

### **Students' views on the political order**

The participants in the interviews agreed that during their participation in EPS, students' trust in the political order decreased and their cynicism increased. They connected these changes to the political, social and economic context:

Sometimes you steal 30 euros and you go straightaway to prison and then you steal 30 millions of euros and nothing happens.... They act as if you have done nothing! And I feel that people are distrustful because it is so unfair that this sort of things happen.... (Focus Group, Year 6)

I think that the decrease of trust is not linked to students' participation in the EPS but to a general feeling all the population seems to have.... (Focus Group, Managers)

**Table 4.** Question: 'In the future, what do you think you will do?' Comparison of pre-test and post-test results by means of the non-parametric Wilcoxon test.

|   | Valid | Pre-test – Post-test (mean and typical deviation) | Max–Min | Sig   |
|---|-------|---|---------|-------|
| Vote in national elections                                      | 103   | 3.65 (1.278) – 3.75 (1.169)                       | 1–5     | 0.547 |
| Get information about candidates before voting in an election   | 102   | 4.18 (1.022) – 4.32 (0.924)                       | 1–5     | 0.255 |
| Join a political party  | 102   | 2.13 (1.177) – 2.18 (1.066)                       | 1–5     | 0.274 |
| Write letters to a newspaper about social or political concerns | 103   | 2.08 (1.112) – 2.19 (1.103)                       | 1–5     | 0.274 |
| Be a candidate for a local or city office                       | 103   | 1.94 (1.089) – 1.82 (1.027)                       | 1–5     | 0.304 |
| Volunteer time to help poor or elderly people in the community  | 103   | 3.31 (0.999) – 3.26 (1.204)                       | 1–5     | 0.201 |
| Collect money for a social cause                                | 102   | 3.19 (1.009) – 3.26 (1.024)                       | 1–5     | 0.774 |
| Collect signatures for a petition                               | 102   | 3.29 (1.347) – 3.32 (1.045)                       | 1–5     | 0.063 |
| Spray-paint protest slogans on walls                            | 102   | 2.19 (1.195) – 2.20 (1.034)                       | 1–5     | 0.661 |
| Block traffic as a form of protest                              | 102   | 2.07 (1.150) – 2.24 (1.170)                       | 1–5     | 0.066 |
| Occupy public buildings as a form of protest                    | 102   | 1.91 (1.145) – 1.89 (1.052)                       | 1–5     | 0.663 |

I would say that at least in my case immigration is also a relevant issue.... My students' parents do not have political representation.... And in addition, politicians do not have credibility. And then.... We do this simulation of participation [EPS] and students are actually participating.... But this is not the world around them.... (Focus Group, Teachers)

In this quotation, the teacher compares a 'problematic' social and political context with what seems to be described as a more 'ideal' form of participation within the EPS. However, it is worth noting that she also describes the EPS as a 'simulation.' The comparison between the two forms, rather than contributing to generate confidence, seems to make the students more sceptical:

I was there and he [City Councillor for Education] was saying that the EPS was very important.... That we were the future.... And then there are elections and they make laws.... And it doesn't look like we are important.... Look what is happening with the nurseries<sup>2</sup>! Younger children are also the future, aren't they? (Focus Group, Year 6)

Some of the participants highlighted that perhaps the EPS in itself had had an impact on this decline in trust. Teachers and managers suggested the promotion of critical thinking during EPS could have led to greater dissatisfaction with the political system:

When you go to discuss the things in more detail.... Perhaps initially you were more neutral.... But I don't know.... Because if you start talking about certain issues in class.... Well, one might finally take a clear position whether this is good or bad.... (Focus Group, Teachers)

I think that by participating in the EPS, students acquire a more critical understanding of politics and this help them to understand the situation they are living in. (Focus Group, Managers)

In addition, students described their feeling of scepticism in their contacts with politicians, suggesting that they felt that answers were not being given to their questions and requests:

There were some of them (politicians) who were there [in the presentation of students' ideas to the City Mayor and the City Council] ... like they did not care! They didn't pay attention to it.... And it was long.... And the Mayor was there and was quite.... And he seemed to be listening but without having the interest of doing anything.... And some children asked him whether our opinion was important and he said 'yes' but he was not convincing.... (Focus Group, Year 6)

Taking part in EPS was very interesting.... On one hand, the methods they taught us, the fact that we learned how to present a claim to the city council.... But from my point of view, I think that it is impossible that anybody is going to read this.... Or even if someone read it, they will think 'this is not a good idea'.... And then the councillor will never receive the information and nothing will change.... (Focus Group, Year 10)

The EPS.... The day I went to the EPS meeting ... I went and I spoke and then I thought, now the Mayor will look at this and will think 'This is nice...!' But he won't do anything with this! Because he is not interested, he is not in the mood.... or because he does not care about this! (Focus Group, Year 9)

In contrast, students also argued that their participation in the EPS increased their self-confidence to participate:

I believe that the EPS has shown us that we have power.... I mean, that we have some options to make our voice be heard.... You know? And it has taught us that there are ways of being empowered and give our opinions.... And it has made us stronger.... (Focus Group, Year 9)

Being involved in the EPS has helped me to gain knowledge about politics and I can now give my opinion.... And I did give my opinion in EPS.... So EPS gave me the chance of giving it.... (Focus Group, Year 9)

Considering the quotation shown immediately above, it seems likely that by learning about politics and by actually participating, the students might gain the confidence to participate in future.

### ***Expected political participation***

Our data analyses did not reveal strong or direct connections between students' anticipated future political participation and their experiences in the EPS. This absence of impact shown in our quantitative analyses in relation to all forms of participation is disappointing for those who intend to make a positive impact on actual and future participation. However, there are some indications in the interview data that young people's ideas about politics and politicians have been affected or at least have been able to find an outlet in the context of their EPS experiences. Some students linked their future conventional political participation to their scepticism with the system:

Each year we vote.... And they promise and they never keep their promises.... And we only vote for them because of promises that we know they won't keep.... And they you wonder.... Why vote any more? They will do what they *bloody* want... (Focus Group, Year 9)

It is worth noting that this student had not reached the age at which he has the right to vote in local, regional, national or European elections. Interestingly, however, he was already thinking about not voting 'any more'. Indeed there were more explicit statements about what sort of activity might be undertaken in future that are linked to some of our non-statistically significant quantitative results:

There are certain decisions ... in particular nowadays.... Certain political and economic decisions that I won't respect.... And I would find a good democratic and civic activity to fight against them! (Focus Group, Managers)

It is the only way [protest participation] they [the politicians] listen! We have tried different ways and they did not listen to our demands! And finally you say.... Well, if we are not heard, we will use another way! (Interview, Year 9)

It is not possible to develop any firm conclusions about expected political participation on the basis of such indications from the qualitative data. However, it is perhaps reasonable to suggest that attempts to promote engagement in particular contexts may encourage – or allow for the expression of – forms of participation that extend beyond formalised conventional and institutionalised practices.

## Discussion

The results of this study suggest that students who participate in youth city councils might become more sceptical about politicians and political institutions. During their participation in EPS, students' trust in the government has decreased whereas their cynicism regarding the political order has increased. By looking at the tendency that previous research describes (e.g. Soler, 2013), we understand that there is a possibility that young people in Spain, whether or not they have participated in the EPS or similar projects, might have experienced a similar evolution. Considering this, several hypotheses could explain our results. It is possible that participation in EPS did not have any impact on students' attitudes towards politics and instead any changes were caused by wider contextual matters. The changes found in this study could simply be due to an improved linguistic framing of existing, underlying frustration the youths were already feeling (but perhaps not expressed well at the start of the research), and not a shift in their disposition (or a response to any interpellation) per se as a result of participation in the council.

Perhaps, although EPS did have a positive impact on political trust, it was weak relative to the effects of the wider context. Or, perhaps participation in EPS contributed to the diminution of students' levels of political trust and to an increase in cynicism, together with the influence of the context. Previous research would support this third possibility (Corsi, 2002; Le Gal, 1998). When students are directly in contact with politicians and with the political system, they tend to consider that their voices are not heard and this contributes to a decline in their trust in the political system. We offer this discussion tentatively and with recognition that further particularisation will be needed to take account of the situation in Catalonia. However, it is worth acknowledging that our data did not suggest that students' views were driven entirely or perhaps even in part by nationalistic fervour: students did not mention the nationalistic debate.

According to our data, EPS did not seem to influence students' future participation. We want to be particularly cautious about this claim. We understand participation as an extremely complex behaviour that may not be predictable. Following previous research (Schulz, Ainley, & Fraillon, 2011), we asked students to state whether they thought that they would take certain political actions. However, we must highlight that our questions did not include all those political activities that exist or might exist in the future. For instance, social media participation has not been included. We understand that our results might be affected by these or other limitations. However, there is the possibility that, as our data suggest, EPS does not have any impact on students' involvement in formal politics. Instead, our results suggest that throughout the time they participated in the EPS, some students might have considered their engagement in other forms of politics such as social movements or activism. Even if this is the case, the possibilities discussed earlier about the links between the EPS and the wider context might also need to be taken into consideration here.

On a more theoretical level, our results suggest that EPS does not contribute to the constitution of students as political subjects of the dominant orders. If, as Masschelein and Quaghebeur (2005) suggest, youth councils might be considered interpellation calls to students, our participants do not seem to be willing to answer this call. This rejection could be a consequence of the nature of the call itself; this is the nature of the youth council. Our participants seem to understand EPS as a performance in which they play the role of the citizen. Similarly to previous research studies (Garcia & de Alba, 2012), the students do not believe that their participation can make a difference. Although this can represent a challenge to the existence of the councils, we feel that perhaps the value of these councils is not in the result but in the process. In line with the discussion of Biesta and Lawy (2006), we feel that the councils offer spaces for situated formal practices of citizenship. Regardless of its performative nature, perhaps the councils might be empowering young people by giving them a space where they can play the game of power and learn its rules (Raby, 2012). We feel that without projects such as the EPS, young people might not be able to begin – or experiment with – formal participation in society. We feel that these safe spaces in educational contexts allow for critical discussions and reflections on their own participation. This is not necessarily likely to lead to increased conventional political participation. It will at times lead to negative comments. But perhaps this suggests the need for more – and not less – engagement in such activities with the support of professional educators.

We may also consider the rejection of the interpellation call in relation to the wider society in which our participants live. For Butler (1997), individuals might reject the interpellation call if they do not attempt to be recognised by the political order. In this respect, the rejection of the call can potentially be attributed to the source of this call rather than – or in addition to – the nature of the call itself. Our results, and the results of other research studies (INJUVE, 2012), suggest that young Spaniards are extremely sceptical about politicians. Students explicitly discuss the contradictions between their experiences with politicians in the EPS and in their daily life. According to some of our participants, in the EPS, politicians performed the role of someone caring about young people whereas in daily politics their actions suggested the opposite. Indeed, these students seem to understand the professional life of the politicians – within and outside the EPS – as a constant performance in which politicians constantly contradict their words with their actions. In this respect, we wonder whether the rejection by these students of the interpellation call is a consequence of the involvement of politicians in the councils.

There is also a possibility of our participants having been interpellated by another call. If several contradictory interpellation calls coexist, the individual might be required to ‘choose’ (Eagleton, 1991). Similarly to other studies (Anduiza, 2001; García & Martín, 2010; González Balletbò, 2007; INJUVE, 2012), some of our participants, whilst rejecting dominant forms of participation, seem to be more supportive of activism and social movements. They seem to have answered oppositional interpellation calls such as those represented by some popular movements associated with nationalistic demands or with the ‘indignados’ movement. At the heart of these demands there is a critique of the dominant political order. In this respect, the ‘popular’ interpellation call could be considered a replacement of the dominant call. We wonder, however, whether these movements, by challenging the dominant political order and dominant forms of participation, is actually offering spaces of participation to young people who would otherwise be disengaged.

We feel these results might have two different interpretations. They might raise the concerns of those who understand youth councils as contexts of citizenship education where students learn dominant political skills and practices. Nothing in our results suggests that students have embodied formal forms of participation. In addition, the diminution of trust in politics and the increase of cynicism might have a negative impact on students' political participation (Hahn, 1998; Schulz et al., 2011) and might represent a challenge to the dominant political order. On the other hand, for those who are concerned about the tokenistic character of the EPS, our results might offer a more optimistic outlook. If we assume that the participation in EPS might decrease students' trust and increase their cynicism, then it could be argued that the youth councils would not encourage children to become (or remain) uncritical compliant subjects (Adu-Gyamfi, 2013; Raby, 2012). Instead, if we, like Kahne and Westheimer (2002) and like some of our participants, understand that low levels of trust in politics can be explained by a critical analysis of politics, we could wonder whether the councils actually encourage critical analysis of how politics is currently conducted. Similar analyses can be applied to our data looking at anticipated participation. Perhaps, by having situated spaces where young people might provisionally embody formal forms of participation, opportunities are offered to reinforce but also to critically challenge the political order. In other words, if young citizens, although experiencing idealised forms of formal participation, 'prefer' to embody alternatives forms, perhaps the question that is raised is not about the performative nature of the councils but the political order the councils emulate. For teachers, perhaps this is further encouragement not to try to teach students uncritical political trust but to discuss critically representative democracy and its alternatives. In this sense, we share Golay and Malatesta's (2014) opinions concerning the importance of maintaining links between the councils and the schools.

## Conclusions and recommendations

EPS seemed to make some positive impact on students and even when results were achieved which could be interpreted as generating a loss of trust and increase of cynicism we feel that our research helps us to reflect on processes of political learning. Garcia and de Alba (2012) have considered whether youth city councils offer reality or simulation, and whether students are defined as young citizens or as 'future citizens' (Trilla & Novella, 2011, p. 25). We feel that although youth city councils could not involve complete decision-making participation by young people, EPS has had an educational impact. Youth city councils might contribute to reducing the gap between young people and politics and they might help to develop understanding and criticality regarding political systems, institutions and representatives.

We suggest that teachers may consider the potential value of these initiatives and strive in particular to encourage further reflection around issues of representation. Perhaps other projects should be developed including those that focus more precisely on participatory rather than representative politics through discussion with a more varied and dynamic approach to the provision of leadership opportunities. For researchers, there are many issues that we feel should be pursued. We understand there is a possibility of students experiencing the EPS in different ways depending on their personal lives or on different degrees of involvement with the EPS. This is an area, in our understanding, that requires further research. In our research, we explored the differences between students who performed a

representative role in the EPS and students who were represented. We attempt to discuss these results elsewhere in the near future. Our methods, which involve pre- and post-tests, have obvious weaknesses. We cannot be complacent about the impact of our sampling procedures. Although our results are consistent with other similar studies we suggest that more is needed to explore the means by which political learning can be promoted and how it can be researched. Ethnographic work similar to that undertaken by Wyness (2009) but with a clear focus on teaching and learning may be particularly suitable to gain deeper understandings of what can be done. Policy-makers who promote and manage youth city councils have a fundamental role to play in the continuation of such work and we would encourage them to be bold in the development of links between schools and other aspects of civil society. Crossing the barrier between schools and communities carries many risks but we feel this should be explored if we are serious about the individual and collective, the public and private nature of citizenship. Finally, there is a need to consider matters in the very broadest of terms. Many of our respondents referred to the influence of the wider political context on our participants. It seems uncontroversial to assert that society is educative. If we are to avoid leaving to chance the education of young citizens we need a democratic society, a democratically engaged citizenry and a professional educational force of teachers and researchers to make the most of the political issues that surround us all on a daily basis.

## Notes

1. External political efficacy (see Hahn, 1998; Kahne & Westheimer, 2002).
2. The participant is referring to a decrease in the number of state nurseries.

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## ORCID

Edda Sant  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7907-5907>

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