

“At last, Someone Asked Us Foreigners What We Think!” Speaking Up As An Exercise Of Active Citizenship: An Italian Case Study*

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“Finalmente è stato chiesto a noi stranieri che cosa ne pensiamo!”. Prendere parola come esercizio di cittadinanza attiva: un caso di studio italiano

While the current debate highlights an increasing deficit of civic engagement, new — and often less visible — forms of “participation” are beginning to be detected, such as those implemented by citizens with migratory background living at the physical and symbolic margins of Western towns. Our study, part of the project “Abitare insieme” (Living together) in Milan’s multicultural suburbs (Italy), was developed with a dual purpose: to analyze the relationship between citizens with a migratory background, active citizenship, and their place representations/belongings; to experiment the co-construction of innovative spaces of speech for citizens, through their dialogical involvement in the research. In a framework of participatory research to enhance reflexivity and transformative practices, a survey was designed and administered. In this paper we will discuss the survey results, along with some methodological implication. The aim is to contribute to reinvent the “active citizenship” construct from a transformative, pedagogical, and intercultural perspective.

Se da una parte il dibattito contemporaneo evidenzia un crescente deficit civico nelle società contemporanee, dall'altra si iniziano a rilevare nuove forme di “partecipazione” spesso meno visibili, come quelle messe in campo da cittadini con background migratorio, ai margini fisici e simbolici delle città occidentali. Il nostro studio, all'interno del progetto “Abitare insieme”, nella periferia multiculturale milanese, in Italia, ha avuto il duplice scopo di analizzare pratiche e significati di cittadinanza attiva nell'intreccio con rappresentazioni/sensi di appartenenza connessi ai luoghi da parte di cittadini con background migratorio e di sperimentare la co-costruzione di innovativi spazi di parola per i cittadini a partire dal loro coinvolgimento dialogico nella ricerca. Metodologicamente, un questionario è stato ideato e somministrato all'interno di una prospettiva di ricerca di tipo partecipativo con la finalità di stimolare la riflessività e pratiche trasformative. In questo articolo, discuteremo i risultati del questionario, insieme ad alcune indicazioni di metodo emerse dalla ricerca, con l'obiettivo di contribuire a una rilettura del costruito di “cittadinanza attiva” in chiave trasformativa, pedagogica e interculturale.

Keywords: Participation; Active citizenship education; Questionnaire; Multicultural urban suburbs; Right to speak.

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1. Introduction

During the last twenty years, research on civic participation among young people has focused on two opposing scenarios. On the one hand, several studies have highlighted the widespread devaluation of local activism and protagonism among citizens as one of the main contemporary trends (Missira, 2019). This disaffection has been found to affect young people and migrants in particular, both among Europeans in general (Blais & Dobrzynska, 1998; Putnam, 2000), and Italians in particular (Santerini, 2020). Conversely, other scholars have argued that we are currently witnessing a change in the way active citizens conceive of and practice their civic participation (Forbrig, 2005; Kymlicka, 2011), as new forms of participation have emerged, so far characterized by weaker visibility both on a local and on a broader scale. Some research has also suggested that those very same political and social institutions that aim to promote civic participation tend to struggle to understand and empower those participants.

At least if we address this issue from the standpoint of macrosystemic policies, both perspectives appear to be confronted with the challenge of an era in which "participation" has never been considered so important, where European and global institutions strongly emphasize how active citizenship is fundamental for social cohesion in contemporary societies, being "the glue that holds society together" (European Economic and Social Committee, 2012, p. 4). Moreover, nowadays, active citizenship is extensively seen as a critical factor in mitigating social conflicts and increasing the community's awareness that it is responsible for taking care of its proximal environment (Bove & Mussi, 2022; Rocca, 2010).

According to this framework, particular interest should be dedicated to city suburbs, which, in the European scenario, are frequently characterized by population heterogeneity (Zoletto, 2012) and by the concentration of communities with migratory backgrounds, that are living in conditions of economic precariousness and socio-cultural disadvantage (Tramma, 2009). Such contexts are frequently seen as critical cases, wherein, given their marginality in comparison to the rest of the local community and a widespread perception of environmental and social decay, the possibilities of their inhabitants to develop a shared sense of community belonging and place attachment are challenged (Rainisio, Boffi, & Riva, 2015). Furthermore, these peripheral areas also directly call into question these citizens' desire to participate, since they are perceived as mostly "invisible" in public and media spheres except when negative stereotypes linked to "public safety" and "urban decorum" are evoked (Bauman, 2001). In psychological terms, these socio-spatial contexts do not appear to be adequately supportive in triggering optimal experiences using community artefacts (whether material or immaterial) (Boffi, Riva, Rainisio, & Inghilleri, 2016), which, on the other hand contributes to the generation of widespread forms of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1972) and displacement.

This study, which discusses a marginal area that has many of the characteristics described above, accepts these challenges in an attempt to make a contribution within the scientific debate on citizenship, by encouraging a critical and pedagogical reinterpretation of this construct starting from the point of view of the inhabitants of the neighborhood with migratory backgrounds. The study was part of a wider project, Project "Abitare insieme" (Living together),¹ which had as its main objective the empowerment of the Municipal Administration of Pioltello (Milan, Italy) in taking care of citizens with migratory backgrounds residing in a multi-problematic and multicultural district (Quartiere Satellite). The Project was articulated around three main axes: living, working, and active citizenship,² which represent particularly sensitive areas in connection with this population. It envisaged numerous research actions, followed by innovative pilot-interventions in the three areas. In the Project's first phase, a survey was launched to conduct a participatory exploration of citizens' experiences and desires concerning "citizenship" and its relationship with "living" and "working." The aims were to give voice to citizens in order that they might elicit their needs and expectations related to the three areas of the research, to

1. The project was funded by Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund 2014–2020 (Project num. AMIF 3477) and coordinated by Prefecture of Milan (Coordinator: Tripodi, manager: Manzo). It was carried out from June 2020 to June 2022, with the scientific committee composed by: Polytechnic University of Milan (P.I. Prof. Pavesi), University of Milan (P.I.: Prof. Inghilleri) and University of Milano-Bicocca (P.I. Prof. Bove); and the partnership with the following NGOs: Consorzio Comunità Brianza, Cooperativa Pop, Cooperativa FuoriLuoghi, CS&L, Libera Compagnia di Arti & Mestieri Sociali and Progetto Integrazione.

2. Each one under the scientific responsibility of a specific University: Living: Polytechnic University of Milan; Working: University of Milan; Active citizenship: University of Milano-Bicocca.

then co-design interventions coherently with these data so that operators and citizens could be involved as co-researchers, providing them with a formative experience. Specifically, this paper focuses on two aspects of the process. Firstly, we concentrate on the results of the questionnaire by analyzing some selected items. Secondly, we offer some thoughts about the methodological process at the base of the survey.

For the first point, the research questions that drove the analysis were:

- What are the causes of the lower civic engagement that characterizes citizens with migrant backgrounds living in urban suburbs?
- How do senses of belonging on multiple levels (micro, meso, macro) and spaces of participation offered at the local level interact with active citizenship?
- What “barriers” and “levers” (Schulz *et al.*, 2018) have emerged for active citizenship education processes?

For the second point, it is noteworthy how the survey was developed within a framework of educational research as a way to enhance reflexivity and transformative practices (Bove, 2009). Accordingly, all the research steps (design, validation, and survey administration) became an opportunity to start a fruitful process of citizen training and engagement about active citizenship and participation. Reflectively reviewing this process, it should be possible to outline some methodological starting points for the development of innovative participation strategies. So, the paper will present the theoretical framework, to then highlight the survey results and, lastly, it will analyze the research methodology and how it was able to trigger a process of *active citizenship*.

2. Participation of citizens with migratory backgrounds: a theoretical review

As its primary theoretical reference our research adopted Arnstein's *ladder of citizen participation* (1969), in the version adapted by World Health Organization (2002), which conceived it as a sort of continuum between different roles and interactive modalities among the social actors. More in detail, we referred to the levels of participation suggested by the European Commission (2003): 1) information; 2) consultation; 3) active participation, conceiving the third as inclusive of the previous two. From a pedagogical perspective, “information,” “expression” and “participation” were conceived as competence areas (Nussbaum, 2009), as they are not only items for assessing the participation levels, but are in and of themselves formative and transformative dimensions (Banks, 2017).

According to this framework, citizenship competences appear to be closely connected with the abilities — and the subjective concrete possibilities — to be informed, speak up and, finally, actively, and constructively participate in public life (Audigier, 2007; Meirieu, 2015). Citizenship ought to be considered dynamically, focusing on citizens' agency in participatory processes (Banks, 2017), and it becomes crucial to the activation of “empowering pedagogies” (Akar, 2020, p. 520) able to grasp the subjective/community potential and make it the center of educational work. Such an articulation of “active citizenship” is even more suitable when the focus is placed on urban marginalization, as the demands of plurality, globality and social justice can hardly be evaded in these contexts (Mortari, 2008; Santerini, 2010; Tarozzi, 2015). It is here more than elsewhere, that barriers and levers of participation (Schulz *et al.*, 2018) must be questioned, especially for citizens with migratory backgrounds and in particular for the youth.

As suggested by Ambrosini (2007, 2011), these citizens frequently experience a state of “downward assimilation,” characterized by a possibility of bottom-up integration limited to the lowest social strata of the host society. Furthermore, their chances of social integration are top-down restricted by the political institutions and legal framework of the host country (Zani & Barrett, 2012, p. 276). These two phenomena often lead to high levels of discrimination and a low sense of belonging to the local community, hindering even the existing desire for civic participation (Penninx, Kraal, Martinello, & Vertovec, 2017). This negative spiral has also been observed in the Italian context, in which young people with migratory

backgrounds are not permitted to access citizenship rights in their entirety,³ while at the same time, they must deal with being involved in multiple social affiliations (Maalouf, 1998). Therefore, apparently, citizenship rights require a theoretical rethinking, starting from global and intercultural perspectives, and at the same time a concrete commitment so that they can be activated, experimented with, and, in this way, renewed, starting from the spaces offered by everyday life. This experimentation requires new forms of action, wherein more "migrant-friendly" social arenas are designed (Zani & Barrett, 2012, p. 276), within which the question of citizenship is not limited to the right to be included and recognized, but where participants can get involved by redefining the meanings and practices of their sense of belonging (Khan, 2021, p. 5) and, consequently, of their own daily participation.

3. Methodology

3.1. Case study

The research was carried out in Pioltello, a town of 36,437 inhabitants belonging to the metropolitan area of Milan. It ranks second in that area for incidence of non-Italian residents (24.8% of the total population) and in Italy among cities with more than thirty-thousand inhabitants.⁴ Its population is characterized by a significant ethnic mix: there are more than one hundred different nationalities, with 53% of the population with a migratory background coming from five countries, belonging to four different continents: Romania, Egypt, Pakistan, Ecuador, Peru. Pioltello, and even to a greater extent, its "Satellite" district, are characterized by extensive phenomena of spatial segregation (Cassiers & Kesteloot, 2012), severe housing problems and high levels of social conflict. Nevertheless, the area has also recently been at the center of numerous urban regeneration projects (Di Giovanni & Leveratto, 2022).

3.2. Procedures and measures

In accordance with the theoretical premises mentioned above, a survey was designed both to be used as an exploratory tool and to activate a participatory process for citizens. It was planned and administered through a joint action of the three partner universities, with the coordination of University of Milano-Bicocca. Moreover, a group of operators from the Municipality and local NGOs were also involved in the process, contributing to the development of the questionnaire both in its pilot and final versions. The survey, originally drafted in Italian, was also translated into English, French and Spanish. Some open-ended questions were provided, to give the respondents a wider space for subjective reflection. Furthermore, a "guided" mode of administration was made available at some local public offices, namely at the municipal library, the Foreign Helpdesk, the Municipal Housing Office, the high school, and at the CPIA (Provincial Center for adult education).⁵ In these locations, a field-researcher was available — online or in person — to support administration to groups or individuals. The guided administration process mainly involved schools, since they took part in "citizenship education workshops" conducted in cooperation with the teachers and the educators of the Project's NGO partner.⁶ Field-researchers provided support for classes so that all students could answer simultaneously. Through a maieutic, non-directive approach based on active listening, staff encouraged students to express their points of view when filling out the questionnaire, but also to orally share any doubts they might have had about the questions or any further reflections that may have arisen from their administration. The survey was also conveyed through the social networks of the Municipality and local associations, recruiting the subjects

3. In Italy, the acquisition of citizenship is regulated by a system based on *ius sanguinis*, and young people with migratory backgrounds, even if born on Italian soil or who arrived during childhood, still have limited access to citizenship rights.

4. UrbiStat, 2019. <https://ugeo.urbistat.com/adminstat/it/it/demografia/dati-sintesi/pioltello>.

5. The authors would thank the "ITS Machiavelli" and the "CPIA 2 Milano," as well as teachers, students, operators and all those who contributed to the research.

6. Libera Compagnia di Arti & Mestieri Sociali.

through a "snowball" technique. Data was collected both through an online questionnaire and a pencil-and-paper version,⁷ between February and April 2021.⁸

Addressing its contents, the survey was structured in four sections, considering the following variables:

1. Socio-demographic variables (age, gender...).
2. Social representations and daily uses of the neighborhood and its spaces/services.
3. Sense of belonging and forms of civic engagement.
4. Work attitudes and behaviors.

For the purposes of this article, the analyses presented here were focused on civic engagement and the citizens' relationship with their neighborhood (points 2 and 3).

3.3. Participants

The sample consisted of 291 participants, residing in Pioltello. It was composed of 35.2% men and 64% women. The average age was 40, with 45% of respondents aged between 40 and 55. Moreover, 37% were between 24 and 39 years old, and 17% were under 23. Finally, only 1% was older than these ranges. 72% of the participants were born in Italy, and 28% in other countries. The foreign-born citizens, came from a total of 25 different nations, with the most represented countries being Egypt (18%), Peru (15%), Pakistan (10%), Romania (5%), and Ecuador (5%). On average they arrived in Italy at the age of 20. 20% of the respondents held Italian or dual citizenship. On the other hand, 80% declared that they had foreign citizenship. Sample data were in line with Pioltello's general demographic statistics as regards average age (42.3 years) and percentage of foreign-born participants (24.8%).⁹

4. Results

4.1. Engagement experiences

The percentage of Italian citizens who have participated in and/or who continue to be involved in voluntary, solidarity, social or political activities in the past is notably higher than that of citizens with migratory backgrounds (53.20% against 22.73%).¹⁰ The reasons given by those who were not active show clear differences between the responses from the Italian population and those from respondents with migratory backgrounds (see Table 1).

7. Data collection was conducted in compliance with ethical standards.

8. This period was characterized by the Covid-19 pandemic, with severe social distancing and service closure norms. Due to the lockdown, the administration of the questionnaire was more complex, partly reducing the number of respondents. However, the pandemic gave greater urgency to discussions about participation and finding new ways to be involved.

9. UrbiStat, 2019. <https://ugeo.urbistat.com/adminstat/it/it/demografia/dati-sintesi/pioltello>.

10. This way, we included both the respondents who did not have Italian citizenship and those who did but were born abroad.

Table 1. Reasons of the lack of civic participation

	Italians	With migratory backgrounds
I do not know who organizes the activities	19.17%	26.96%
I do not know how to participate	16.67%	26.09%
I am not interested	10.83%	6.96%
I have better things to do	0.83%	5.22%
I do not believe that it is possible to make my reality better	2.50%	4.35%
There are no people of my age	2.50%	0.87%
There are no people from my country of origin or of my religion	0.00%	0.87%
I do not speak Italian well	0.00%	8.70%
I do not have time	41.67%	18.26%
I tried before, but it was not useful	5.83%	1.74%

Among the Italians, the clearly predominant reason was the lack of time (41.67%), followed by “I do not know who organizes the activities” (19.17%) and “I do not know how to participate” (16.67%). Among the respondents with migratory backgrounds, the most widespread reason was “I do not know who organizes the activities” (26.96%), while the number of those who “do not know how to participate” (26.09%) was almost equal. With the lack of time dropping to the third place (18.28%), while linguistic barriers followed as another widespread reason among citizens with migratory backgrounds, with the motivation “I do not speak Italian well” indicated by 8.70% of them.

4.2. Participation

Pearson’s correlations show how the sense of belonging — stated in terms of feeling like a citizen on several levels — was positively correlated with the participation of citizens with migratory backgrounds on all the three dimensions of participation: not only acting, but also being informed and speaking up (see Table 2).

Table 2. Correlations between sense of belonging and participation (citizens with migratory backgrounds)
* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$.

	I feel like a citizen:						
	of my school/of my workplace	of my neighborhood	of Italy	of another Country	of Europe	of the world	of the digital world
I am informed about what happens on a local level	.323**	.255*	.256*	.069	-.109	.168	.091
I am informed about what happens on a national level	.185	.007	.205	-.129	.019	.186	.198
I am informed about what happens on a global level	.149	-.024	.166	-.106	-.063	.308**	.289*
I express my opinion about the topics I am interested in	.085	.285*	.321*	-.263*	-.008	.179	.461**
I act in order to improve my reality	.078	.270*	.296*	-.185	.003	.020	.223

Feeling like a citizen of Italy was positively correlated ($p = .05$) with “being informed on a local level,” “expressing my opinion,” and “acting in order to improve my reality.” It was the same with “feeling like a citizen of my neighborhood,” while the sense of belonging to the micro-context of school or work was positively correlated only with “being informed on a local level” ($p = .01$). Conversely, a sense of belonging to another country did not necessarily preclude the dimension of being informed on all lev-

els — local, national, global — or of acting, while it was negatively correlated with the dimension of speaking up ($p = .05$). Predictably, feeling like a citizen “of the world” was positively correlated with being informed about what happens globally ($p = .05$), while this did not necessarily negatively influence either smaller-scale information, expression, or action. Feeling like a citizen “of the digital world” also contributed to being informed about what happens on a larger scale. In fact, it presented a positive correlation with this item ($p = .05$). There was also a positive correlation with “expressing my opinion” ($p = .01$), while no significant data emerged regarding action.

4.3. Spaces of participation

Analyzing the perception of spaces for participation offered in the neighborhood, it emerged that these are crucial in fostering sense of belonging for citizens with migratory backgrounds (see Table 3).

Table 3. Correlations between a sense of belonging and spaces offered by the neighborhood/city (citizens with migratory backgrounds)
* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$.

In my neighborhood...	I feel like a citizen: of my school/of my workplace	of my neighborhood	of Italy	of another Country	of Europe	of the world	of the digital world
there are spaces where my opinion is listened to	.118	.268*	.172	.024	.016	.104	.073
there are contexts where I can participate	.061	.357**	.166	.105	.155	.273*	.332**
there is enough information about volunteerism, solidarity, participation, and civic involvement	.184	.371**	.271*	.054	.155	.189	.293*

Indeed, it is notable how, taking up the tripartition of participation into information, expression, and action, there was a positive correlation between having the perception that in the neighborhood/city there are spaces for listening, opportunities for participation, information on volunteer initiatives, solidarity, active participation, and the sense of belonging to the neighborhood ($p = .05$). Moreover, the perception of having contexts in which one could be engaged was positively correlated with the sense of belonging not only at the local (neighborhood/city) level ($p = .01$), but also at the global ($p = .05$) and digital ($p = .01$) levels. Finally, the perception that there is sufficient information in the locality about volunteerism, solidarity, participation, and civic involvement, was positively correlated with feeling like a citizen of the neighborhood ($p = .01$), of Italy ($p = .05$), and of the digital world ($p = .05$).

4.4. Sense of belonging

While the sense of belonging is crucial for citizens’ participation and can be stimulated by the listening, information and participation spaces offered in the locality, Italian and non-Italian citizens living in Pioltello showed significant differences in the levels of their “sense of belonging” (see Table 4).

Table 4. Sense of belonging: comparing Italian citizens/citizens with migratory backgrounds

		M.	SD.	SE.
I feel like I am a citizen... of my school/of my workplace	Italians	3.53	1.272	.095
	With migratory backgrounds	3.91	1.265	.141
of my neighborhood	Italians	3.77	1.222	.087
	With migratory backgrounds	3.79	1.390	.157
of Italy	Italians	4.39	.970	.070
	With migratory backgrounds	3.69	1.459	.178
of another Country	Italians	1.42	.982	.076
	With migratory backgrounds	3.26	1.694	.209
of Europe	Italians	3.50	1.380	.100
	With migratory backgrounds	3.33	1.636	.193
of the world	Italians	3.43	1.521	.112
	With migratory backgrounds	3.69	1.561	.181
of the digital world	Italians	3.43	1.350	.098
	With migratory backgrounds	3.14	1.620	.185

Predictably, there was a difference in relation to feeling like a citizen of Italy between Italians ($M = 4.39$, $SD = .970$) and those with migratory backgrounds ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.459$), and, conversely, in relation to feeling like a citizen of another country, with $M = 1.42$, $SD = .982$ for Italians and $M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.694$ for those with migratory backgrounds. The difference in “feeling like a citizen of my school or workplace” was also notable, but in the opposite direction. The sense of belonging to these contexts was indeed more strongly felt by citizens with migratory backgrounds ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 1.265$) than by Italian citizens ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 1.272$). In contrast, there were no relevant differences in relation to feeling like a citizen of the neighborhood, the world, or the digital world.

5. Discussion

In relation to our first research question (about the causes of lower levels of civic engagement that characterized citizens with migrant backgrounds living in city suburbs), though the fact that there was a greater gap in civic engagement was confirmed among citizens with migratory backgrounds, our data suggested this was linked to specific dimensions. First, there was the informational level: the lack of knowledge of how to participate and of the “gatekeepers” that would allow access to volunteerism, activation, and participation. Then there was the linguistic dimension: a low proficiency in Italian that hindered full involvement. Finally, there was the sense of belonging to Italy, which was to a lesser degree than among native Italians.

In relation to our second research question (about the interaction among senses of belonging on multiple levels and spaces of participation offered at the local level and active citizenship), the data that emerged was more innovative from three points of view. First, the interaction of different senses of belonging with active citizenship was particularly interesting and could not be simplified by a “cause-effect” linear-relationship. As our study showed, the sense of belonging to Italy influenced active citizenship positively in all three dimensions: information (at a local level), expression, and action. At the same time, the sense of belonging to another country did not necessarily affect the dimension of information, or action at a local, national, or global level. Indeed, the sense of belonging to the world positively influenced the dimension of information at a global level, but did not necessarily affect the dimension of information, expression, or action at more restricted levels.

Second, the interaction of different senses of belonging with the perception of spaces for participation offered locally deserved specific attention. The perception that spaces for information, expression, and action were available locally, positively influenced the sense of belonging to the neighborhood. Moreover, the perception that spaces for action existed in the neighborhood positively influenced the sense of belonging at the global and digital level as well. Finally, the perception that spaces of information were available locally, positively influenced the sense of belonging to Italy and to the digital world.

Third, another interesting piece of information that emerged from our study was that citizens with migratory backgrounds show a stronger sense of belonging to the micro-contexts, such as schools or the workplace, compared to what emerged from native Italian citizens.

All these findings contributed toward answering our third research question (about the barriers and the levers), highlighting both the obstacles and the potential, in the perspective of supporting active citizenship education processes. On the one hand, the scarcity of information, the lack of gatekeepers' knowledge, linguistic barriers, and the low sense of belonging to Italy hindered the development of active citizenship. On the other hand, multiple senses of belonging could be interpreted as a lever for active citizenship in a formative and educational perspective. Along these lines, it would be important to work in order to create a full sense of belonging to the community and the country of residence, at the same time based on a new sense of citizenship, where the different feelings of belonging can find space "until the point of becoming citizens of the world" (Santerini, 2020, p. 353).¹¹ In addition to this, the reinforcement and diffusion of contexts for information, expression and action could favor the activation of citizens with migratory backgrounds, as long as they make space for the coexistence and intertwining of multiple senses of belonging. Specifically, in relation to taking care of information spaces, attention given to the development of competencies that allow citizens to "process, deepen, compare, analyze, and describe information" (Santerini, 2020, p. 349)¹² could be combined with multiscale (local, national, and global) training processes. In this way, the media could become a useful tool for cultural and intercultural learning (Portera, 2013).

In relation to creating spaces of expression, it became clear that it would be crucial to ensure that the right to speak is respected and exercised by everyone, regardless of their background or language abilities. Giving a voice to those who are normally "voiceless" would have important implications both on an educational and political level (Spivak, 1988). Expression is indeed a form of "education" and at the same time a "practice" of active citizenship, since it enables "the expression and production of critical and reflective thinking that takes on a transformative role in the community" (Nigris, & Balconi, 2020, p. 908).¹³

In relation to designing spaces for participatory action, the pragmatic dimension of participation would be valued, allowing us to conceive citizenship from the pedagogical and transformative perspectives (Banks, 2017) initially advocated. Accordingly, citizenship could be better learned by experiencing it, being involved in practices of reflexivity, dialogical arenas, and participatory actions. From this standpoint, the community could become a space in which both different cultural practices and collective intercultural actions find meaning, within which citizenship would be learned together and at the same time renewed by incorporating a more global outlook.

The changes we are talking about are significant and would require both educational and political responses. However, a first step can be taken starting from the micro level, which would include the contexts of migrants' everyday lives, first and foremost the context of their work and school activities. Indeed, we highlighted how these places elicited a sense of belonging among citizens with migratory backgrounds more than among Italians. Schools, in particular, significantly intercept their life trajectories when families are formed or rebuilt, or when children and adults enter Italian educational paths that will support them in the integration processes (Floreancig, Fusco, Virgilio, Zanon, & Zoletto, 2018; Moro, 2002; Mussi, 2022; Rainisio *et al.*, 2015; Silva, 2012).

Therefore, schools can be viewed as crucial contexts to support a wider stability of the individual/family migration project, also acting as mediators between the family and external society, foster-

11. Our translation.

12. Our translation.

13. Our translation.

ing a greater sense of belonging to their local contexts — smaller and closer — than to the general Italian context — larger and more distant. Therefore, school can act as a trigger of active citizenship, as has been clearly recognized by Italian and European guidelines (Council of Europe, 2018; Eurydice, 2005; Ministero dell'Istruzione, 2018, 2020), which attribute the crucial role that schools play in the development of citizenship competencies, also in the perspective of reinterpreting them from an intercultural and global point of view. To do so, however, significant cooperation between schools and communities is needed, as reflective and participatory processes within the classrooms would gain real meaning only once they have been properly connected with life outside. That is to say, a life made up on the one hand of local references to the "lived spaces" (Iori, 1996; Mortari, 2008) of the inhabited city and on the other of belonging to imagined communities that transcend national boundaries (Anderson, 1983). Both require being stitched back to one another through "glocal" dynamics (Appadurai, 1996).

6. Reflections on methodology

During the research, we considered the process of administering the questionnaire as a way not only to collect data, but also as a way to provide citizenship education (Bove & Mussi, 2022; Mussi & Chinazzi, 2023), with regard to the exercise and the training of reflective and communicative skills (Santerini, 2020, pp. 351–352) related to the right to speech. The exercise of the right to speech, within this research, was viewed as "a means and, at the same time, an objective" (Nigris & Balconi, 2020, p. 911).¹⁴ In relation to this idea, we would like mention some conclusions linked with the research methodology conceived as a point of departure for the implementation of innovative approaches to active citizenship education.

First, the survey was administered at school, yet in connection with the surrounding area. Even though the questionnaires were provided specifically within the school walls during class time, the reflections touched the services and places "experienced" by the students outside school. Compilation involved individual speech and dialogue with others at the same time. Actually, the students were encouraged to express themselves on two levels. The first individual level was in writing, within the questionnaire, where they expressed their opinions and described their meanings. The second level was collective, in which they orally shared, compared, and put forth any reflections they had in dialogues with their peers.

In addition to this, the approaches applied by the field-researchers were inspired by a maieutic, non-directive modality, aimed at creating a protected space where students would feel free to speak up, and where critical thinking, reflexivity, and intercultural dialogue would be stimulated. To neutralize any language barriers, the questionnaire was translated into several languages, and the researchers acted as facilitators and cultural/linguistic mediators, making themselves available to help if questions were difficult to understand or problematic from a cultural perspective.

Finally, the questionnaire was co-designed with staff from local institutions who collaborated on writing and revising the questions together. They then contributed to the dissemination of the surveys, through their social channels and spaces. In the end, the results were shared with them through the application of a research-training perspective. Here the learning, by the operators involved, was not purely about the content, but also treated the methodology. Not only were the opinions of citizens, especially those with migratory backgrounds — often on the margins of the consultations promoted by the municipality — taken into consideration, but also rigorous approaches and methods for giving voice were applied, thus producing processes of active, participatory and intercultural citizenship education.

Furthermore, the survey results and the described methodology informed the co-design of the innovative pilot-intervention in the field of active citizenship inside the project. Groups of young and young-adult students at the schools involved in the project were the protagonists of real-life active citizenship initiatives, while staff took on the role of listeners and facilitators of their ideas and aspirations. The initiatives were started in the schools and then were developed in the neighborhoods, which were

14. Our translation.

seen as *superdiverse* arenas (Vertovec, 2007) where the participants' different origins and feelings of belonging could find space and interact together constructively.¹⁵

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15. For a more detailed discussion, see Bove, & Mussi, 2022.

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