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# Participation To Empower Children And Strengthen The Community

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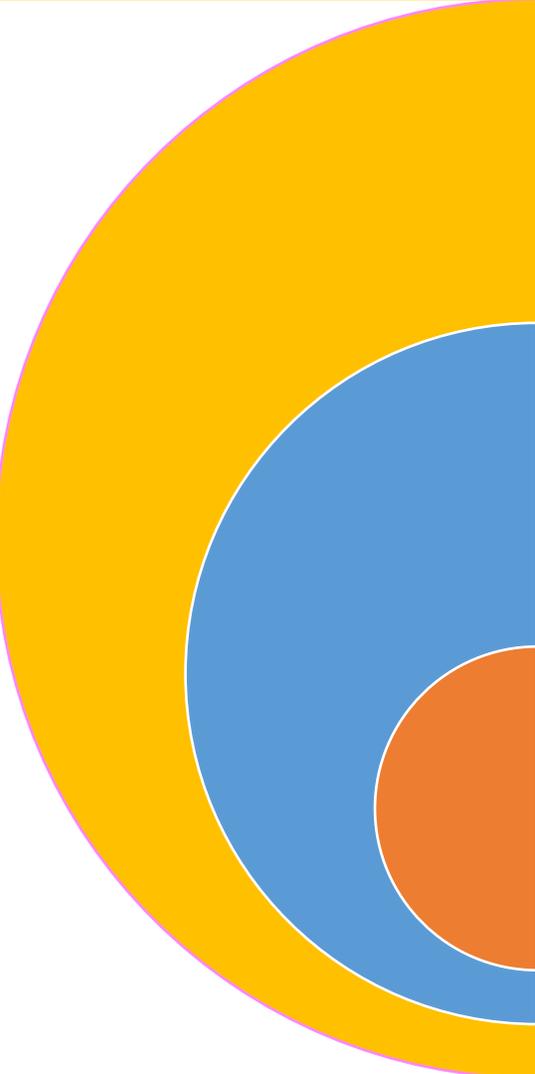


# Piazziamoci!

- **Participatory project**, in Milan, Italy, started in January 2021, and interrupted due to pandemic.
- **Aim of the project:** to reproject a square, in order to transform it into a welcoming space for the entire community.  
*Piazziamoci (Let's place ourselves here)* to signify the conscious act of taking a place together.
- **Participants:** 19 pupils of class 4B (primary school), the teachers and their parents.



# A pilot study



## QUESTIONS:

- (1) Are participants about to become aware of themselves as members of the community?
- (2) Are they about to perceive the square as a common good?

## DATA COLLECTION:

frequent planning-meetings with the teachers; participation in public actions; coding of the materials produced by pupils; relevant number of interviews; groups of discussion and questionnaires with the involved participants.

**THE MAIN IDEA** grounding the investigation relies on Appadurai's assumption:  
**Culture** = origins, past, identity + possible futures, desires, aspirations  
Therefore: The pupils of 4B who dream and reproject the square strengthen their "**capacity to aspire**" (Appadurai, 2004) = a cultural capacity and a measure of democratic evaluation.

# The context: the right to participate

- **Student Voice:**

- suggests to listen and involve students to change all those issues that affect them.
- highlights a better relational and learning environment where active participation is encouraged.

- **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child** (art.12, 1989): children have the right to express themselves freely in all matters affecting them.

- During the lockdown due to the Covid19, in spring 2020 in Italy, children were not mentioned in public discourses and could not leave their homes, identified as “**plague spreaders**”.
- This unusual situation fits in the Italian educational context, where **children’s participation is neither frequent nor encouraged**.

In *Piazziamoci*, children have space for **action and operational autonomy** (Lansdown, 2001) to become **radical agents of change** (Fielding, 2001). Children, their needs and imagination are put at the centre. Adults are supporters. The possibility of a new culture and of strengthening the **community** is build within the **generative dialog between generations**.



## Generative circumstances

Ms G., the main teacher, and more than half of the parents participated for three years to ED.UMA.NA training ([www.edumana.it](http://www.edumana.it)). ED.UMA.NA is a network for nonviolent practices and strategies.

The class has an “*agora*” every morning since years: the pupils sit in a circle and discuss some relevant issues among them and with their teachers.

Ms G. has been working for years to increase children’s participation. Responded to call of the City Council, which invited schools to develop projects involving pupils to take care of their surroundings.

# The first steps (Jan-Feb 2021)



**AGORA:**  
each child imagined the square.  
By sharing, they began the  
creative process.



**INTERVIEWS:**  
The pupils structured an  
interview, went in small groups  
to collect information from  
the inhabitants.



**COOPERATIVE GROUPS**  
to design and build models  
of the square.

# The first steps



## METACOGNITION AND DOCUMENTATION:

- In collective writing, children wrote an article for the newspaper.
- The representatives of the Girls and Boys Council presented the project at the City Council. The president reminded of the market!



**AGORA IN THE SQUARE.**  
Stimulated by maieutic questions from the ED.UMA.NA tutor, pupils developed a new plan.



At the beginning of March, a **NEW LOCKDOWN** interrupted the project. **But** for the children of class 4B something already changed: they use the huge grey square to play together.



# Imagination

- To Vygotsky the creative activity of imagination depends on the social environment, the richness and variety of the individual experience, that provide the material from which the constructions of the imagination are made.
- The collected data suggest that participants are aware of the importance of **imagination** and **imagining together**.
- These are important capacities in order to develop the ‘**capacity to aspire**’ (Appadurai, 2004).

**Boy:** “I really enjoyed making the model of the square because there was much space for imagination.”

**Mother:** “They learn to put ideas together to create spaces they have imagined themselves.”

**Teacher:** “Imagination was the engine that lit the fire and then the glue for everything. [...] I think it is important, especially for children, to imagine something beautiful for themselves and others, and I mean for everyone.”

# Active citizenship

The collected data suggest that the participation to this project with the City Council but especially the **interviews** with the inhabitants of the square were a big step of **citizenship** .

The children opened up to the world, left classroom's safety and saw themselves as citizens and members of a larger community.

Interviews activated curiosity for the unfamiliar, widened their thinking to include the needs of others.

- **Teacher:** "Children are aware that this will not be just their square but everyone's square and the fact that they thought about it [...], is a fundamental skill of citizenship."
- **Girl:** "I loved making the interviews, because it was interesting to hear the opinion of the others."



# Conviviality and interdependence

- A **square** and an **agora** are common spaces. When the Ancient Greeks founded a new city, they left an empty space in the middle of it: the *agora*, the square, where democracy started. Like the *agora* in the classroom, the square is a collective area, a place for relationships.
- Both are places of social aggregation, knowledge and exchange. The square can become a place of **conviviality** (Illich, 1973/1974). *Piazziamoci* may counteract the situation of isolation created by the pandemic, underlining the '**interdependence**' (Butler, 2020) that exists between each other.
- The collected data seem to confirm that participants are aware of it, even in this early stage of the project. They feel the opportunity to rediscover an **intentional common space** and enjoy common planning.

# Conclusions

- The interpretation I propose of *Piazziamoci* is **educational and political**.
- It concerns the building of meaningful experiences in a **common space** and allows the creation of something new: the **act of imagining together becomes a political act**.
- In times of pandemic, we need a new collective imaginary to **help children finding their place in the world**, starting by being agents of and for their education but also agents of and for the community.



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# PIAZZIAMOCI!

THANK YOU

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