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School, Democracy, and Space:
Co-Designing Educational Environments with Children
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Introduction

The school is the first place where democracy is experienced, or where its absence becomes visible.

This research stems from the desire to understand how school spaces can either enable or hinder a democratic culture of education.

Space, often overlooked in teaching practices, becomes a central actor here: an educational force that communicates values, shapes relationships, and influences the behaviours of those who inhabit it.

Drawing on authors such as Dewey, Bronfenbrenner, Freire, Montessori, Malaguzzi, Weyland and Tonucci, the school is reimagined as a living democratic community, where children are agents capable of voice, choice, and action.

From this perspective, co-design is not merely a design technique but a pedagogical and political practice, a way of building democracy by living it.

Co-shaping spaces means exercising agency, belonging, and responsibility, transforming the school into a place of well-being, nurturing, and shared participation.

The narrative review that grounds the project, together with the field experiment (in a primary school in Prato), aims to show how child-centred co-designed environments can become a point of convergence between education, rights, and democracy.

Research focus

The research investigates how the co-design of school spaces can promote agency, well-being, and democratic participation among children, framing space as an educational, relational, and political resource. Its aim is to explore the pedagogical and transformative potential of the school environment, analysing how co-design processes translate the principles of democratic education into everyday practices of citizenship and shared responsibility.

Key Words

Democratic Education · Childhood Rights · Participation · Co-Design · Well-Being · Learning Spaces · Student Agency

Method
Narrative Literature Review

Aim of the review
To explore how school space and co-design practices can embody the principles of democratic education, fostering participation, agency and well-being. All implications between democracy, childhood and space.

Selection criteria
Relevance to democracy, participation and educational space
Integration of classical and contemporary pedagogical perspectives; Focus on theoretical and interpretative contributions.

Corpus
Pedagogical, architectural and philosophical literature, with particular attention to the dialogue between educational theory, rights of children and spatial practices.

Analysis
Thematic synthesis and cross-reading of authors, aimed at identifying conceptual convergences and pedagogical implications between democracy, childhood and space.

4 QUALITY EDUCATION

- It promotes democratic and participatory education.
- It values agency, well-being, and participation as qualitative dimensions of learning.
- It develops innovative methods (co-design, hands-on activities, critical reflection) that enhance educational quality and teacher training.

📌 Relevant indicator: 4.7 – Education for global citizenship and sustainable development.

11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES

- It recognises the public school as an urban common good and a space of community life.
- It promotes participatory design practices and the reuse of underutilised spaces (the common hall in Prato).
- It fosters a sense of belonging and shared responsibility towards communal places.

📌 Relevant indicator: 11.4 – Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage.

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RESEARCH DESIGN - Preliminary Framework

PHASE 1 → **Narrative Literature Review**
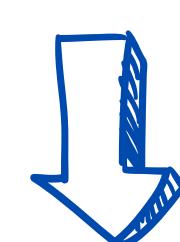
Aim: build a conceptual framework on democratic education and the pedagogy of space

Tools: thematic synthesis of pedagogical and architectural literature

Output: theoretical categories – agency · participation · well-being · co-design

PHASE 2 → **Co-Design Laboratories**

Aim: explore how children reinterpret and transform a school space through collaborative practices.

Tools: hands-on workshops, small group activities, democratic assemblies

Output: agency · collaboration · sense of belonging

PHASE 3 → **Data Collection & Interpretation**
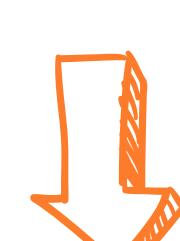
Aim: observe and understand how participation and well-being emerge in the co-design process.

Tools: field notes · audio recordings · group interviews · observation grids

Output: qualitative data on children's experiences of space and participation

**PHASE 4** → **Theoretical Integration**

Aim: connect empirical findings with theoretical insights from the review.

Tools: thematic coding and interpretative synthesis

Output: pedagogical model for democratic learning spaces

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