

# The Young Mayor project in Portugal

## The effect of the Quality of Participation Experiences on perceptions of the project's impact

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- Participants more involved in Young Mayor project assign higher scores when assessing the impact of the project.

- Participants who had participation experiences with higher developmental quality have more positive perceptions about the Young Mayor project and report more civic and political participation experiences in their communities.

**Purpose:** To investigate the effect of Quality of Participation Experiences (QPE) on young people's perceptions about the Young Mayor project's impact.

**Design/methodology/approach:** This study explores statistical analyses (i.e., cluster analysis and linear regression analysis) of a survey sample (N = 961) involving young people aged between 12 and 18 years to assess differences between groups reporting different levels of QPE (i.e., low, medium and high).

**Findings:** Participants who had participation experiences with higher developmental quality (i.e., with effective and meaningful opportunities for action and reflection) are more involved in the Young Mayor project, have more positive perceptions about it, and report more civic and political participation experiences in their communities.

**Research limitations/implications:** The cross-sectional design of this study does not allow to make causal inferences. Therefore, a longitudinal study should be conducted to clarify the relationship between the dimensions under analysis, promoting a better understanding of the impacts of the Young Mayor project on young people's attitudes and perceptions.

**Practical implications:** Local projects should promote participation experiences with higher developmental quality to foster their impacts on young people.

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### 1 INTRODUCTION

Literature on civic and political participation of young people has grown very significantly over the last decades, producing multiple and diverse theoretical perspectives on the phenomenon (cf. Ribeiro, Neves & Menezes, 2007). On the one hand, we can verify the presence of studies highlighting the political apathy of young people as a result of their disaffection from conventional forms of political participation, promoting analyses concerned with the consequences that this phenomenon can have on social cohesion and in the normal

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functioning of institutionalised democracies (e.g., Putnam, 2000; Commission of the European Communities, 2001; Benedicto & Morán, 2002; Perliger, Canetti-Nisim & Pedahzur, 2006). On the other hand, we can identify studies that prefer to emphasise that young people are increasingly opting for more fluid and horizontal forms of participation (e.g., Bauman, 2000; Beck, 2000; Norris, 2002; Harris, Wyn & Younes, 2010; Juris & Pleyers, 2009), facing down the common assertion that they do not participate and are not politically concerned. The latter theoretical perspective departs from the 'orthodox view' that relates participation exclusively to conventional contexts of civic and political action, proposing rather a multidimensional conceptualisation that does not only consider the more conventional structures and dimensions of participation (Ribeiro, Neves & Menezes, 2017; Ekman & Amnå, 2012).

The identification of these two opposing views on the phenomenon of civic and political participation of young people suggests the presence of a 'paradoxical movement' in which the enlargement of forms and contexts of participation coincide "with the disbelief and devaluation of politics, which has justified the proliferation of both research and intervention in "active citizenship"" (Menezes, Ribeiro, Fernandes-Jesus, Malafaia & Ferreira, 2012, p. 9). It is at the intersection of these theoretical perspectives on the participation of young people that the local project emerges and sustains this present study. It is assumed that, despite significant civic involvement of young people – especially in sports and cultural and artistic organisations (cf. Menezes, 2003; Menezes, Afonso, Gião & Amaro, 2005; Magalhães & Moral, 2008) –, this involvement occurs away from local government, a situation that seems to result from a feeling of distrust of young people over conventional mechanisms of political participation (cf. Beck, 2000; Norris, 2002; Juris & Pleyers, 2009; Farthing, 2010; Menezes, Ribeiro, Fernandes-Jesus, Malafaia & Ferreira, 2012). It was precisely to address the challenge of bringing young people closer to the more conventional contexts of political participation that the Portuguese Municipality of Santa Maria da Feira implemented the "Jovem Autarca" project (henceforth 'Young Mayor' – YM) aimed at young people, aged between 11 and 17 years, whose main objective is to promote behaviours of active citizenship, valuing participation on a Structured Dialogue (SD) basis between the peers and the different agents with responsibility in the youth field. In line with the guidelines of the Council of Europe (2015), considering the European political priority of promoting a mode of participation that goes beyond the mere voting or standing for election, the local authority of Santa Maria da Feira intended to "ensure that young people not only hear and learn about democracy and citizenship, but rather have the opportunity to practice it" (Council of Europe, 2015, p. 11). Recognising the increasing demands on Municipalities to create and expand effective opportunities for young people's political participation (e.g., Timmerman, 2009; Andersson, 2012, 2015, 2017a, 2017b), this Municipality considered that it would be important to carry out an external evaluation of the impact of the YM project on the young participants and the surrounding educational and social community to understand if it would be necessary to introduce changes in the project to promote an effective culture of youth participation in the democratic process. This study aims to present some of the results obtained in this impact evaluation, which was inspired by the evaluation conducted by the Lewisham Young Mayor programme (UK) (cf. Shukra, 2012, 2017).

Thus, based on research showing that the Quality of Participation Experiences (QPE) impacts on young people's civic and political development, arguing that experiences with lower developmental quality (i.e., experiences that do not promote real opportunities for action and reflection within pluralistic and open contexts) may have detrimental effects on young people (e.g., Ferreira, Azevedo & Menezes, 2012; Ribeiro, Neves & Menezes, 2017; *inter alia*), this study explores the effect of QPE on young people's perceptions about the project's impact. Grounded on classical educational theory (e.g., Freire, 1979; Dewey, 2001) and developmental psychology (e.g., Mead, 1934; Piaget, 1977; Sprinthall & Scott, 1989; Pascarella, 2001) concerning experiences that could promote deep learning and developmental change, QPE considers the "relationship between individuals' evaluations of the developmental quality of their civic and political experiences and dimensions of political development, such as political cognition and attitudes" (Ferreira, Azevedo & Menezes 2012, p. 601), assuming that "participation does not necessarily lead to development and its benefits" (*ibidem*, p. 608). In fact, as the literature has been showing, participation experiences could involve social risks and may promote negative attitudes, such as stereotypes, conformism, scepticism and distrust (e.g., Menezes 2003; De Piccoli, Colombo & Mosso, 2004; Theiss-Morse & Hibbing, 2005; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006), as well as social fragmentation as a result

of private interests (e.g., Dear, 1992; Santos, 1998; Lima, 2004). As Menezes (2003) well emphasises, “in some cases, more is not necessarily better, and participation might even generate negative effects” (p. 441). In other words, this means that participation experiences can be differentiated in terms of their developmental quality, that is: “depending on their quality, participation experiences can generate (or not) the development of positive and/or negative dimensions of psychological functioning” (Ribeiro, Neves & Menezes, 2017).

In this paper, the results of a survey involving 961 young people aged between 12 and 18 years will be discussed through the lenses of the research conducted on ‘young people’s participation in public decision-making’ (e.g., Ødegård, 2007; Simovska & Jensen, 2009; Timmerman, 2009; Andersson, 2015, 2017a, 2017b; Zeldin et al., 2017). Before the presentation and discussion of the results, this paper will present a brief characterisation of the YM project at the Municipality of Santa Maria da Feira, namely its implementation process.

## 2 ‘YOUNG MAYOR’ (YM) PROJECT AT THE MUNICIPALITY OF SANTA MARIA DA FEIRA

This project was inspired by the Young Mayor of Lewisham initiative launched in 2004 in the London Borough of Lewisham, in south east London (for more details, see: <https://lewisham.gov.uk/mayorandcouncil/youngmayor>). In the context of an international seminar on sharing educational experiences, the Municipal Council of Santa Maria da Feira expressed interest in the Lewisham YM, since this project – in line with what had been decided as important to implement in the Municipality in terms of youth policies – was an educational initiative that aimed to promote behaviours of active citizenship and shared governance, valuing the opinions of young people and their perspectives for the future. The YM project at the Municipality of Santa Maria da Feira started in 2014. The first elected candidates and councillors initiated and accomplished their mandate in 2015. Through this project, it was intended that young people play the role of spokespersons of their peers and were co-responsible for the management of a budget allocated to them, seeking to realize the projects they designed, in a logic of dialogue and sustainability (cf. Shukra, 2012, 2017). Thus, like the constituent principles of the project developed in Lewisham, the YM project at the Municipality of Santa Maria da Feira seeks to empower young people in terms of communication skills, interpersonal relationships, decision making, negotiation and leadership. The development of the project takes place in a context of non-formal education. This is understood by the project as complementary and in permanent articulation with the formal education system. Non-formal education is understood to be, fundamentally, a process of social learning, of learning to learn among peers, centred on the learner, through activities that take place outside the formal education system.

In short, the main objectives of this educational project are the following: a) to promote communication, social, interpersonal, and leadership skills that empower young people with regard to an effective community intervention; b) to promote team management skills, negotiation and consensus in the scope of decision-making processes; c) to bring young people closer to the reality of their territory and to share creative and innovative solutions to the challenges identified; d) to bring young people closer to the local political structures, transmitting to the political agents the needs and expectations of the young people of their territory; e) to promote the acquisition, consolidation and realization of human values such as social justice, gender equality, and equal opportunities; f) to promote structured dialogue and shared governance among young people, local government and their respective technicians; g) to raise the awareness of all processes and steps related to legislative processes; h) and to promote active participation behaviours through the right to vote.

### 2.1 A brief characterisation of the implementation process of the YM project

This project seeks to involve all young people between 11 and 17 years of age, residents and/or students in the Municipality of Santa Maria da Feira. As a pedagogical project, the entire process is carried out with the aim of empowering young people in different areas, ensuring that their opinions, worldviews, and interests are effectively valued, especially by the political officials. The work team elected (i.e.,

young mayor, councillors, and advisers) holds bi-monthly meetings, defining which proposals presented during the electoral campaign are to be implemented, as well as the management strategy of the €10,000 budget allocated by the Municipal Council of Santa Maria da Feira.

The impact evaluation presented in this paper is focused on the third edition of YM project, which took place between 2016 and 2017. The work team elected involved 14 participants (5 female): the young mayor (female), 2 councillors, and 11 advisers.

The main constituent phases of the YM project are summarized below:

*Project dissemination.* At the beginning of the school year, the Youth Office organises and disseminates clarification sessions with the class delegates and students interested in each of the schools that are part of the project, announcing the application period. Every year a Young Mayor Candidate Guide is prepared where all dates, as well as next steps and documents necessary for the application, can be consulted. This document is available throughout the school community and can also be consulted on the website of the Youth Office of the Municipality Council of Santa Maria da Feira.

*Electoral campaign.* Once the candidates are selected (maximum 21), the electoral campaign preparation period begins. In this phase, the candidates benefit from a training session organised by the Youth Office. In preparation for the election campaign, candidates also receive advertising material. With a view to the elaboration of advertising material, video production and publicity leaflets, the Municipality Council organises sessions for the collection of images and photographs – the training session, as well as sessions for the collection of images and photographs take place after school hours, thus not interfering with the academic activities of relevance for the development of the candidate. Young people who are students from the schools participating in YM project do not need to register since the electoral rolls are organised from the lists of each of the schools. Nevertheless, the ones who live in the Municipality of Santa Maria da Feira, but do not study in the participant schools, can vote in the election of the YM, carrying out their registration during the established period of “Young Mayor Candidate Guide”.

*Election Day.* The electoral act takes place in each of the acceding schools to the YM project in the Municipality of Santa Maria da Feira. Young people who live in the Municipality, but do not study in any acceding schools can vote as well, when duly registered, using early-voting. The ballot paper illustrates each of the candidates, listed by an order that results from a previous draw. Each ballot paper should include two voting options. The first option must be indicated to be considered valid; the second option is used as a resource in case of a tie situation. On the election day, ballot boxes are placed in each of the polling places, as well as voting booths in a way that all conditions of confidentiality are assured. Members of the Municipality of Santa Maria da Feira and school, and a young person aged between 11 and 17, are involved in each polling station.

*Elected candidates and councillors.* The candidate with the highest number of votes is elected as young mayor. The 1st councillor is the candidate who presents the second best result and the 2nd councillor is the candidate who presents the third best result. The following candidates constitute, if they so wish, the work team of the young mayor and the elected councillors, being appointed by advisers. The annual budget of this project is assigned to the young elected mayor by the Municipality Council of Santa Maria da Feira so that the program and proposals defined by the young mayor and work team in exercise can be accomplished.

*Term of office.* The term of office is approximately one year. The elected young mayor begins his/her duties at the time of his/her inauguration and ceases to hold office upon his/her successor's inauguration. The elected young mayor may only hold office for the period of time for which he was elected and may not reapply.

*Rights of elected candidates and Councillors.* Throughout the mandate, the elected candidates and councillors benefit from training and capacity building activities, as well as study visits of interest for the development of their activities, inside or outside the Municipality of Santa Maria da Feira, defined by the Youth Office in each school year.

*Meetings.* The meetings of the YM executive and its councillors take place in the facilities of the Municipality Council of Santa Maria da Feira; the Youth Office is responsible for the management and organisation of the space. They take place after-school, thus not interfering with academic activities. In the exam periods, as well as in the case of a school interruption, the scheduling of the meetings is redefined between the executive of the YM and its councillors and the Youth Office, fulfilling the principle of conciliation and minimisation of interference with curricular and academic activities.

### 3 YOUNG PEOPLE'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC DECISION-MAKING

Participation has been, in recent decades, profoundly debated in academic, political, and educational realms (Ribeiro, Neves & Menezes, 2017). However, as Simovska and Jensen (2009) draw attention, "it would be fair to say that consequential participation, which implies young people engaging in meaningful dialogue with adults and institutions and influencing decision-making processes in matters that concern them, *is still in its infancy*" (p. 2 – our emphasis). One of the reasons most advanced by the literature to explain this has to do with the depoliticising effect that the functionalist, socialising, and conformist tendencies of the current educational models have on the democratic quality of our societies by neglecting the political agency of young people (e.g., Lawy & Biesta 2006; Biesta, 2009; Biesta, Lawy & Kelly 2009; Hedtke, 2013; Ribeiro, Neves & Menezes, 2017). Acknowledging this explanation, Andersson (2015) argues for a *situational political socialization* in which young people are seen as "key actors, as active co-creators in the political, in their own political socialization and in the creation of society – a phenomenon dependent on power and political action" (p. 980). Furthermore, proposing an alternative approach in researching young people's political socialisation and participation, the same author considers that the historical developmental approach to young people's political participation is "often adult-biased with a perspective on youth, where adult interests are projected onto young people who are then expected to learn from them" (Andersson, 2017a, p. 1347), arguing, in that sense, that it "has to be based more on mutuality and trust, communication and interaction than authority, domination and instruction" (*ibidem*, pp. 1347-1348).

Criticising established participation models (e.g., Arnstein, 1969; Hart, 1992; Shier, 2001; Wong, Zimmerman & Parker, 2010), the author states that they are "mainly socially oriented and relatively idealistic and insensitive to context, power and the pedagogical relations between participants" (Andersson, 2017a, p. 1349). For instance, despite Wong and colleagues (Wong, Zimmerman & Parker, 2010) propose a conceptual typology including three basic types of participation – i.e., *adult-driven* (vessel and symbolic), *shared-control* (pluralistic), and *youth-driven* (independent and autonomous) –, Andersson (2017a) claims that, like other participation models, the TYPE Pyramid assumes "that norms, knowledge, political culture and so on should ideally be transmitted from adults to youth and that children and young people develop in given phases [...] it is based on a quantitative concept of power and has an adult and developmental oriented bias and social idealistic inbuilt positions" (p. 1350). Highlighting the important role of decision-makers in the promotion of *public pedagogy* – understood as "various practices, processes and situations and spaces of learning and socialisation that occur both within and beyond the realm of formal educational institutions" (Andersson & Olson, 2014, p. 115) –, Andersson (2017a), in order to overcome the limitations of established participation models, proposes a pedagogical political model (3P-M) that builds on three observations: "(1) that young people (as a category) are always presented as dependent on and subordinate to adults (decision-makers) in public decision-making, (2) that participation cannot be quantitatively measured without being normative and insensitive to context and (3) that different types of pedagogical leadership determine what kind of political participation is possible" (p. 1347). Based on this model, the author offers five different kinds of socialisation environments and their pedagogical consequences that could be identified in the

interaction between decision-makers (A) and young people (B): *Informed* "B is informed about what will happen or has happened. Communication is characterized by transmissions from A to B, treating B as a 'tabula rasa'" (p. 1355); *Voiced* "B is given the opportunity to make his/her voice heard while A controls the decision-making and democratic forms" (*ibidem*); *Concerted* "B and A govern together and create strong structures for decision-making and democracy through reciprocal communication (dialogue as practice and ideal) and shared responsibility" (p. 1356); *Supportive* "B controls the decision-making in the group and shapes and maintains the democratic forms, whereas A is reserved and only offers support when asked to do so" (p. 1357); and *Independent* "B controls the decision-making in the group and shapes and maintains the democratic forms. A is absent. Co-learning and communication take place between peers within the group and decision-makers are kept out" (*ibidem*).

In fact, recent studies on young people's political participation in public decision-making present findings that reinforce these criticisms. For instance, the study conducted by Ødegård (2007), in Norway, emphasises that "the local participation projects do not have an effect on young people's political awareness in general" (p. 273), mentioning, specifically, that the participation in youth councils "occupy an unclear position in the democratic process, which leaves the young people's possibilities to attain political influence at the mercy of politicians" (*ibidem*), a situation that does not seem to contribute to an effective political participation of young people in political decisions. In the same line, the evaluation study developed by Timmerman (2009) in 25 municipalities, in Netherland and UK, concludes that the youth policy shows discrepancies between democratic ideals and youth's participation in practice, considering that most of the municipal authorities "only pay lip service to the idea of engaging young people in the democratic process" (p. 572), seeing youth participation "primarily as a technical tool for shaping local youth policy. This means that the participation model is an instrumental (youth as a means to an end, that is democratic society) rather than a pedagogical model for youth policy (youth as an end in itself)" (*ibidem*, p. 576). Pointing out other similar results, the case study developed by Andersson (2017b) in Sweden also remarks that "young people are used as objects to fulfil the interests of decision-makers, together with an emphasis on preparation and 'real' political participation in the future, voting and learning the right behaviour" (p. 13). In sum, it shows "that the political culture of the municipality does not yet constitute young people's political participation as a norm and democratic intrinsic value" (*ibidem*). To overcome this mismatch, the author suggests that municipalities have to face the following two major challenges to promote an effective young people's political participation in decision-making: "to open up for and use a pluralism of democratic forms and logics for young people's political participation in decision-making" (Andersson, 2017b, p. 14) and to adopt a more balanced approach, "by allowing young people to practise their democratic citizenship as political subjects, perform political acts and become actors who have the desire, ability and possibility to participate in political life" (p. 15). Finally, analysing data from the United States, Portugal, and Malaysia to explore associations between youth-adult partnership (i.e., youth voice in decision-making and supportive adult relationships) and youth empowerment and community connections, the study conducted by Zeldin and colleagues (2017) reinforces the previous studies, stressing "that youth are most likely to achieve positive outcomes when they experience the freedom to make decisions, while experiencing trust and power sharing from adults. The results were consistent across the three national samples, suggesting that the influence of partnership may transcend cultures and contexts" (Zeldin, et al., p. 851).

All in all, these criticisms led us to the idea that discrepancies may exist between political ideals and young people's opportunities for political participation and involvement. In other words, the educational and political contexts still constraint an effective young people's participation in public decision-making, being imperative, paraphrasing Simovska and Jensen (2009), a 'consequential' participation in the domains that affect young people's everyday lives, providing "meaningful possibilities for young people to make a difference to their own lives" (p. 2). Following the line of research that argues that the quality of participation experiences (QPE) matters in what concerns the developmental change of young people (e.g., Ferreira, Azevedo & Menezes, 2012; Ribeiro, Neves & Menezes, 2017; inter alia), this means that participation *per se* is not enough: it is necessary to ensure the necessary developmental quality for effective young people's political participation.

## 4 METHOD

### 4.1 Participants and procedure

Participants were 961 (52.7% female,  $M_{age}=14,10$  years,  $SD=1.22$ ,  $range_{age}=12-18$  years) students of 11 public schools of the municipality of Santa Maria da Feira, located in the North of Portugal. Since there is an uneven distribution of the number of students along the schools, a stratified probability sampling approach was adopted. Thus, each school was considered an extract and, within each school, was randomly selected some classes depending on its relative weighting.

After informed written consent was obtained from each participant, each one answered a self-reported questionnaire. Standardised instructions for completing, as well as the confidential and anonymous character of the individual contributions, were written on the front page of the questionnaire. The survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete.

Unlike the work team elected (14 elements), which was involved permanently in the YM project throughout the year, these participants were mostly involved only in some specific momentums, namely the presentation of the project by schools (especially attended by the classes delegates), the election campaigns of candidates (mainly held in schools and social networks), and the election day. In fact, one of the most prominent complaints raised by the participants in the open questions of the questionnaire (e.g., *Do you think the YM project was well or poorly publicised?*) was the sporadic contact with the YM project (Ferreira et al., 2018).

### 4.2 Measures

*Sociodemographic variables.* The questionnaire collects sociodemographic information including sex (0 = male, 1 = female), age group (0 = 12-14 years, 1 = 15-18 years), school performance, and socioeconomic status (a composite variable that comprises the parents' schooling level and professional status, and the number of physical and digital books).

All the scales used in this study were submitted to confirmatory factor analyses (CFA). The goodness-of-fit indices used in these analyses were Chi<sup>2</sup> statistic, Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). The Chi<sup>2</sup>/df value < 5.0 is considered a measure of good fit (Arbuckle, 2008). The CFI values between [0.9; 0.95[ indicate a good fit and values ≥ 0.95 indicate a very good fit (Bentler, 1990). The RMSEA values between [0.5; 0.8[ are considered good and values < 0.5 are very good (Arbuckle, 2008).

*Impact of the Young Mayor project.* To explore young people's perception of the YM impact, we used a scale consisted of four items ("in the family"; "in the school community"; "in the general community", and "in their opportunities for participation"). The respondents were asked to rate the items on a five-point Likert scale (1 = totally disagree to 5 = totally agree). The confirmatory factor analysis showed an acceptable fit of the measurement model [ $\chi^2(2) = 21.231$ ;  $p \leq 0.000$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 10.615$ ; CFI = 0.987; RMSEA = 0.100;  $P(\text{rmsea} \leq 0.05) = 0.012$ ]. The reliability of the whole scale was Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.834$ .

*Evaluation of the Young Mayor project.* To investigate how the young people evaluate YM, we asked them to express their opinions using a five-point Likert scale, upon the efficacy of the project dissemination (1 = insufficient to 5 = excellent), organisation of election day (1 = totally disagree to 5 = totally agree), and school's role in the project, which is a composite variable that results from the aggregation of the means of four indicators, namely the role of the school in the promotion of applications, in monitoring the campaign and the mandate, in the dissemination to students, and in the organisation of the election day (1 = nothing important to 5 = very important).

*Quality of Participation Experiences.* To assess the young people's perception of their quality of participation experiences in the context of the YM project, we used the Participation Experiences Questionnaire (Ferreira & Menezes, 2001), including two parts: i) a question about their personal level of

involvement in the YM project, rated in a five-point Likert scale (1 = not involved at all, 5 = very much involved), and ii) a scale to collect data on the developmental quality of participation experiences in this context. This bi-dimensional scale is based on the opportunities for action in interactional real-life contexts, and on the opportunities for reflection on the activities in a context valuing different points of view and allowing for conflict of opinions. Both subscales are composed of four items. Concerning the *action subscale*, respondents report how frequently they were actively engaged in particular activities, i.e.: “Look for information in books, in the media or by asking to other people with more experience”; “To participate in activities (such as petitions, protests, parties, meetings, assemblies, debates, etc.)”; “To organise activities (such as petitions, protests, parties, meetings, assemblies, debates, public statements, etc.)”; “Make decisions (alone or in a group)”. Regarding the *reflection subscale*, respondents evaluate how often they considered certain conditions were present, i.e.: “Different points of view were discussed”; “Conflicting opinions gave rise to new ways of seeing the issues”; “Real and everyday life issues were the focus of the discussions”; “Participation was very important to you”. For each item, respondents were asked to position themselves on a five-point scale (1 = never, 5 = very frequently). The factorial structure of the bi-dimensional QPE scale showed an acceptable fit in this sample [ $\chi^2/df = 313,568$ ; CFI = 0.939, GFI = 0.917; PGFI = 0.436; RMSEA = 0.127;  $P(\text{rmsea} \leq 0.05) = 0.000$ ].

For the analytic purpose of the present study, the QPE scale does not directly gives the quality of participation experiences variable. Actually, it was used a categorical variable, which results from clustering participants' quality of participation experiences into three different groups, articulating both the *action* and *reflection* dimensions. A combination of hierarchical and k-means cluster analysis was conducted to classify participants into groups based on their QPE, combining both *action* and *reflection* dimensions. In this analysis, Ward's method was used to calculate the cluster solution, and a three-cluster solution was revealed, explaining about 69% of the variance. The first cluster includes 285 young people who reported low QPE ( $M_{\text{action}} = 1.33$ ,  $M_{\text{reflection}} = 1.39$ ); the second cluster comprise 352 young people who reported medium QPE ( $M_{\text{action}} = 1.99$ ,  $M_{\text{reflection}} = 3.00$ ); and the third cluster contain 225 young people who reported high QPE ( $M_{\text{action}} = 3.35$ ,  $SD = .39$ ,  $M_{\text{reflection}} = 3.62$ ,  $SD = .41$ ). In further analyses, low and high QPE groups are used as the independent variables.

### 4.3 Data analysis procedures

To assess the predictive effect of the quality of participation experiences of young people in the context of YM project on their evaluation of the impact of the YM project, we conducted a linear regression with the following predictors organised in three blocks:

- a) Sex, age group, academic performance, and socioeconomic status;
- b) Evaluation of the project dissemination, election day organisation, and the school's role in the YM project;
- c) Level of involvement and quality of participation experiences in the YM project

## 5 RESULTS

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for the main variables under analysis. The data distributions were generally symmetrical.

Table 2 presents the model summary for linear regression predicting young people's evaluation of the impact of YM project on their family, school community, general community, and in their participation opportunities. The percentage of variance explained is 34,5% (Table 2). The sociodemographic variables, namely, the sex, age group, academic performance, and socioeconomic status explain 2,4% of the variance, a value that increases to 21,6% when considering young people's evaluation of the project dissemination, election day organisation, and school's role. The level of involvement and the quality of participation experiences of young people in the context of YM project are very important dimensions, increasing the explained variance by 13,5% (Table 2). The major significant predictor is the level of involvement in YM project reported by the young people, followed by the high quality of participation



experiences, and then the low quality of participation experiences, which presents a negative predictive value (Table 3).

**Table 1: Descriptive statistics for the main variables**

Variables	M	SD	Sk	Ku
Impact of the Young Mayor project	2.78	.92	-.18	-.54
Efficacy of the project dissemination	4.04	.91	-1.04	1.44
Organisation of election day	3.79	1.03	-.74	.24
School's role in the project	3.50	.86	-.69	.68
Quality of participation experiences - action	2.12	.93	.60	-.32
Quality of participation experiences - reflection	2.63	.07	-.04	.86

**Table 2: Model summary for linear regression on the impact of the YM project**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	,155 <sup>a</sup>	,024	,019	,89921	,024	5,345	4	872	,000
2	,465 <sup>b</sup>	,216	,210	,80728	,192	70,968	3	869	,000
3	,594 <sup>c</sup>	,352	,345	,73498	,136	60,795	3	866	,000
a. Predictors: (Constant) + sex, age group, socioeconomic status, school performance									
b. Predictors: (Constant), a + project dissemination, election day organisation, school's role									
c. Predictors: (Constant), a + b + level of involvement, low quality experiences, high quality experiences									
d. Dependent variable: YM project impact									

**Table 3: Regression coefficients on the impact of the YM project**

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			95,0% Confidence Interval for B		Collinearity Statistics
		Std. Error		t	Sig.	Lower bound	Upper bound	Tolerance
(Constant)	,896	,223		4,010	,000	,457	1,334	
Sexfemale	,134	,050	,074	2,676	,008	,036	,233	,982
Age group15-18	-,050	,053	-,026	-,936	,349	-,155	,055	,941
Academic performance	-,067	,038	-,053	-1,754	,080	-,142	,008	,814
Socioeconomic status	-,057	,043	-,039	-1,326	,185	-,143	,028	,849
Election day organisation	,011	,030	,012	,365	,716	-,049	,071	,653
Project dissemination	,144	,031	,141	4,685	,000	,084	,205	,822
School's role	,279	,038	,262	7,387	,000	,205	,354	,594
Level of involvement	,249	,026	,306	9,541	,000	,197	,300	,982
Low QPE	-,134	,061	-,069	-2,198	,028	-,253	-,014	,941
High QPE	,174	,066	,084	2,618	,009	,043	,304	,814

Regarding to the sociodemographic variables, only sex (female) had a significant predictor effect on how young people evaluate the impact of the YM project on their family, school community, general community, and in their participation opportunities. Interestingly, the perception of young people concerning their involvement in YM project has a more important predictive role than their opinions about how both processes of dissemination and organisation of election day were conducted, as well as the school's role along YM project. Finally, the tolerance values are always high ( $> 0.10$ ), which means that multicollinearity among predictors does not appear to be a problem.

## 6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The analyses conducted clearly indicate a significant effect of quality of participation experience (QPE) on young people's perceptions about YM project's impact, highlighting two main results: 1) participants more involved in YM project assign higher scores when assessing the impact of the project; and 2) participants who had participation experiences with higher developmental quality have more positive perceptions about the YM project and report more civic and political participation experiences in their communities.

From these results, having in mind that young people's political participation should be 'consequential' in order to promote meaningful experiences to make a difference in their own lives (Simovska & Jensen, 2009), we have been able to compile some conclusions that can help the Municipal Council to increase YM project's impact on young people and on the surrounding community. The conclusions presented herein are supported by qualitative data (not consider in this paper), obtained from open questions also placed in the questionnaire; and also by other studies (i.e., interviews with the young mayors elected in the first three editions, and focus group discussions with the young people who constituted the work teams of the first three editions of the YM project) conducted within the same impact evaluation process (Ferreira et al., 2018).

The *first* conclusion focuses on the need to promote closer and continuous contact between young people and the educational and social community surrounding Santa Maria da Feira, seeking not to limit the action of the project to specific situations of operationalization (i.e., training session, dissemination session, electoral campaign, election day, etc.), nor to involve in a more permanent way in the project only the young candidates to the YM. This conclusion draw attention that young people, especially those who are not involved continuously in the project like candidates, cannot be used only to fulfil the interests of the project; they have to be real political subjects (cf. Andersson, 2015; Andersson, 2017b). One recommendation that can emerge from this conclusion is the need to create project implementation mechanisms that promote a wider interaction between the project and the community. More active participation of the community in the process can contribute to a greater legitimisation and consolidation of the educational and social purposes of the project, especially among young students from Santa Maria da Feira.

In the same vein with the previous one, the *second* conclusion relates to the importance of promoting a stronger contact and proximity between the elected youth team and the local policymakers. However, this close contact should be based more on mutuality rather on instruction. In fact, considering the theoretical contributions of the pedagogical political model proposed by Andersson (2017a), the YM project should promote the necessary conditions for a political socialisation experience where young people are not merely *informed* or *voiced*, having real opportunities to share political responsibilities, but also to conduct more *independently* the decision-making processes in the contexts in which they are involved. In that sense, the young people's responsibility and independence should be always considered in political pedagogy because, as Andersson (2017a) argues, "[t]he 'good' or 'bad' political of youth cannot be decided in advance (p. 1350). In sum, young people must be seen as a real "active co-creators" (Andersson, 2015) in the political realm and, consequently, in the creation of the community where they live. Based on this conclusion, it is recommended the creation of more effective communication channels between young people and the contexts of political decision-making to promote greater recognition and legitimacy of young citizens by the City Council. This change in the level of recognition and legitimacy can increase a feeling of greater political efficacy in YM participants, by

making them feel more competent about their individual abilities to influence and produce changes in their personal and socio-political contexts, as well as their sense of community. Thus, preventing the emergence of negative perceptions regarding a position that can be considered as being merely symbolic and not of effective and desirable citizen participation.

The *third* conclusion concerns the promotion of a more active role of schools, either by creating a physical space for the YM project to be more accessible to the entire youth community; or through actions and/or (formal and informal) spaces that foster greater political awareness among young students. This conclusion acquires even more relevance if we realise, as Beaumont (2011) highlights, that education often exacerbates political inequalities “planted early in life through linked disparities in individual background and sense of political agency and efficacy” (p. 216). Projects like YM, in light of the findings presented in the study, could be an opportunity to overcome social inequalities in terms of political participation that cannot be wasted. As Beaumont (2011) concludes, political learning aspects such as experiences in a politically active community, acquiring skills for political action, engaging in political discourse, and inclusion in collaborative pluralist contexts, “can enhance efficacy and reduce the influence of largely unchosen political advantages, creating an alternative pathway to political empowerment” (ibidem). Being critical, in that sense, to provide “robust political learning experiences, especially to young adults that tend to gain fewer political assets from families and neighborhoods, [...] for helping them gain a sense of political agency” (p. 229). Furthermore, as another study points out, confining youth participation exclusively to the electoral act, can “reinforce existing inequalities between groups of young people and are less likely to incorporate the voices of disadvantaged and socially excluded groups of young people. Formal structures of democratic representation may need to be revised in exploring more fruitful ways of articulating the voices of diverse groups of children and young people” (Wyness, 2009, p. 535).

Lastly, the *fourth* conclusion refers to the importance of promoting participation experiences with higher developmental quality that occur in contexts where participants have effective and meaningful opportunities for action and reflection, and where there are dialogue and diversity of opinions and visions of the world (cf. Ferreira, Azevedo & Menezes, 2012) to improve more positive perceptions about the project and future young people civic and political participation in a democratic political context.

We believe that for these experiences to constitute empowering opportunities for democratic learning, political reflexivity and governance, a structural change is needed to initiate “real power sharing through new participatory policies, increasing citizens’ rights and institutionalised forms of participation” (Hedtke, 2013, p. 54). It is crucial to include and value young people’s participation at all levels of the decision-making processes. Strengthening the ways in which their opinions and decisions are taken into account would improve active citizenship and shared governance practices, as well as the overall quality of the democratic system.

## 7 LIMITATION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The cross-sectional design of this study does not allow to make causal inferences. Therefore, a longitudinal study should be conducted to clarify the relationship between the dimensions under analysis, promoting a better understanding of the impacts of the Young Mayor project on young people’s attitudes and perceptions. Additionally, this study also focuses exclusively on the self-reports of the participants (i.e., on the analysis of the participants’ perceptions), not taking any approach to their concrete practices and its specific effects on young people. This implies that these practices are a dimension that is not met in this study, but which is important to take into account to allow a deeper and more complete knowledge about the YM project’s impact. Thus, we consider that studies based on self-reports, like YM project, would also benefit from an ethnographic study, by allowing continuous observation of the individuals within the context of participation to apprehend, in real-time, their practices and, consequently, its effects on young people political development.

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#### ENDNOTE

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