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Baby steps to a child-to-child network: A path to empower children for exercising their participation rights

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Abstract

This study focuses on an adult-initiated and child-led research journey that aimed to explore the path to empower children towards exercising their participation rights in different environments of their lives. To this end, a series of multi-stage participation empowerment activities were carried out with 60 children in Istanbul, as guided by the child participation model and ecological systems theory. Findings are narrated through children's voices and illustrate their multifaceted opinions, challenges and demands with respect to how they participate in life. Children's experiences in this research journey suggest that grassroots of a child-to-child participation network is possible via empowerment and capacity building activities.

KEYWORDS
children's participation, children's rights, children's voices, participatory research, qualitative research

INTRODUCTION

Children's voice and agency have a history of more than 50 years now. It was around the 1970s that children's lack of empowerment was first recognized and children themselves drew attention to the issue within several legal cases. Then in the early 1980s, with the emergence of New Sociology of Childhood in Britain, Scandinavia and Northern Europe, and finally in 1989 with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), children's rights were steered into a novel and currently well-known path: Children's participation rights and agency in society. The

concept of children's agency entails accepting children as people 'in their own right and not just as receptacles of adult teaching' (Hardman, 1973, p. 87). They need to be recognized as individuals who can act upon a decision within a relationship and contribute to a set of social assumptions or constraints as social agents (Mayall, 2002, 2013). In this regard, acknowledging children's agency refers to accepting children's role and influence in the lives of people around them, in the societies they live, and in forming independent social relationships and cultures (James, 2013). Yet, acknowledging agency of children necessitates recognizing and valuing their voices. Even though 'children participating in research is not a new concept' (Kellett, 2010, p. 201), new methodologies can bring new understandings to access insider perceptions of children about social and political issues (Bucknall, 2012).

Informed by these understandings, this study reports on an adult-initiated and child-led research journey that aimed to explore the path to empower children towards exercising their participation rights in different environments of their lives. First, we provide an overview of relevant concepts for child participation and summarize the nature of the study. Next, we present the conceptual frameworks and pertinent literature that guided the research journey. Then, we describe the methodological processes and report our findings in conjunction with the steps undertaken in methodological processes. Finally, we discuss our findings in light of the broader literature and conclude with implications.

Children's voice is a problematic concept. Even though it has received increasing public attention since the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and more specifically Article 12 of the convention, children's voice is addressed narrowly or superficially when it comes to practice. Article 12 of the UNCRC has critical importance for children's voice and agency 'not only for what it says, but because it recognizes the child as a full human being with integrity and personality and the ability to participate freely in society' (Freeman, 1996, p. 37). Every child has the right to express his or her views. None of the matters affecting him or her can be disregarded, and giving due weight to the child's views in accordance with his or her age and maturity (i.e. assessing the capacity of the child to form an autonomous opinion to the greatest extent possible) is the obligation for the state's parties (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). Moreover, state parties 'cannot begin with the assumption that a child is incapable of expressing her or his own views' (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009, p. 5). Therefore, as stated in the Convention, acknowledging the child as a right holder 'requires recognition of, and respect for, non-verbal forms of communication including play, body language, facial expressions, and drawing and painting, through which very young children demonstrate understanding, choices and preferences' (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009, p. 7). However, this does not mean that children's capability to express their autonomous views and active participation should be restricted to their age and maturity. While the UNCRC sets the minimum standards for each child right, as Kellett (2011) argues, children's competency for participation could be encouraged through novel and alternative means of capacity building and empowerment. More importantly, beyond participation, she suggests that child-led research will be the main catalyst for preoccupation of childhood agenda.

As Lundy (2007) states, the main problem is the incomprehensibility and misapprehension of Article 12. The Convention holds adults, who are the essential authorities in families and the participating states, accountable for practicing children's rights. How adults comprehend and interpret the article is critical, let alone the fact that adults are the ones in power. Therefore, giving room for children's voices can easily turn into a tokenistic act. Even though they both aim

for the same goal, the 'child's right to be heard', and 'adults' obligation to ask and listen' can have different implications due to the power asymmetries between adults and children.

We, as researchers from the fields of early childhood education and sociology of childhood, initiated the current project in Istanbul in order to find ways to empower children to participate in the discussion of issues that directly concern their lives and strengthen their agency in making their voices heard. We intended to listen to them with the aim of understanding whether they demonstrate agency in their everyday lives and raise their voices with regard to various proximal and distal environments in which they spend their lives, such as home, school, neighbourhood, city and the internet. At the end, together with the children, we found ourselves asking the over-arching project question 'How can children participate and express their voices in aspects of their lives that directly concern them, and how can they empower other children to become agents of social and community change in those aspects?' The article presents this exploration journey undertaken by three adult researchers between 30 and 45 years and a group of 60 children between the ages of 8 and 16 years.

With an aim to explore and suggest ways to empower children for exercising their participation rights, we drew upon a blend of frameworks that included the participation model of Lundy and Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory. In the section below, these frameworks and pertinent literature that guided the current study are explained. Subsequently, principles of participatory research with children are addressed to indicate how the study took its form from hearing children's voices to empowering them to develop strategies towards their progress of becoming active citizens. To this end, we present the study's findings under an inclusive title as 'methodological processes and findings' that portrays the progressive methodological steps of the research journey along with their respective findings. We then follow with a discussion of findings and a conclusion with implications.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RELEVANT LITERATURE

The Lundy model of child participation

In recent decades, the vast majority of research engages children in research as co-researchers. This strand of research focuses on listening to children's perspectives on issues concerning their lives as a reflection of valuing their participation in society and social research (e.g. Alderson, 2001; Casas et al., 2013; Corsaro, 2005; Erdemir, 2022; Kellett et al., 2004; Mason & Urquhart, 2001) As adults, we enjoy and take pride in expressing our opinions on issues that affect our lives. However, we also expect to make an impact on people or the environment in accordance with our opinions and expressions. Listening to what a person says also requires responding to his/her suggestions, complaints and feelings. When it comes to children, listening to their perspectives rarely leads adults to respond to their demands and feelings, or the changes take place gradually in ways that the children who make those claims cannot witness the ends and means during their childhood years. In other words, child-focused and voice-oriented research rarely makes a difference to the lives of children (Bucknall, 2014) and many of them continue to be silenced, marginalized and face challenges for participation (see Cooper et al., 2019). As Lundy (2007) asserts in her model of Child Participation, 'voice is not enough', and we need a whole new understanding to make children's participation count (p. 927). She argues that children need (1) space, (2) voice, (3) influence and (4) audience that would strengthen them to express their ideas freely and that their views would be given due weight in designing or altering practices

and policies. Likewise, the current study aimed to transfer this concept to practice by providing children with the 'space' and 'audience' to make their 'voices' heard that could ideally result in concrete 'influences' on matters concerning their lives. In this regard, the current child-focused and voice-oriented research builds on previous studies by aiming to make difference to the lives of children through empowering them to exercise their participation rights.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory

As children are full human beings who are in constant interaction with each human and every social and structural mechanism in society, their lives are either directly or indirectly influenced or even shaped by the ecological systems that exist within society. As the child grows old by age, the number of ecological systems that she or he interacts with expands and becomes more complex. Therefore, every practice and policy that occurs within and influences the ecological systems of humans should be considered 'as matters affecting the child' (Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). In this regard, ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) provides the conceptual guidance necessary to address and foreground children's voice on matters that affect them in each environment that surround their lives. Guided by this understanding, the current study aimed to hear children's subjective voices with regard to matters that are of value to them from their proximal to distal environments including home, school, neighbourhood, city and the internet, with the ideal that their voices make an influence of actions for active participation in these environments.

Participatory research to hear Children's voices

A diversity of child-focused research techniques such as Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Participatory Rural Appraisal approaches (Kirby, 2002; Punch, 2002) afford the venues for an authentic engagement of children in research by leading them to become active agents in field studies. While underlining the value of children becoming researchers themselves, Kellett (2005) suggests a new paradigm for research in the 21st century and indicates that child-led research is the key to investigating power relations and considering children's emancipation. On the other hand, Punch's question (2002) 'if children are competent social actors, why are special 'child-friendly' methods needed to communicate with them?' points out the dichotomy that currently exists in this area. As children are already competent human beings in the face of adults, only with differences; they can learn themselves, contribute to research and develop solutions to problems they encounter. Whereas competency is an elusive concept, children's competency for participation and the impact of their voice can be enhanced by capitalizing on child-led research initiatives based on child-friendly methodologies (Kellett, 2011). Perceiving children as competent researchers can help adults understand 'what it is to be a child today' (Bucknall, 2012, p. 119) and overcome so-called competency barriers. Therefore, researchers such as Mary Kellett, Sue Bucknall and Victoria Cooper acknowledge a few general principles with respect to children's agency and participation and signify the distinct ways of methodologies to be employed while interacting with them.

At the same time, when it comes to children's ability to fully and rationally articulate their feelings, authenticity of their voice can be questionable as well (Mayes, 2019; Spencer et al., 2020). Authenticity of children's voices is interrelated with the extent to which they demonstrate authentic

engagement in the process. Thus, authentic engagement, hence voice, can be attained in 'emergent interaction with other agents in the agentic assemblage' (Mazzei & Jackson, 2017, p. 1095). Compared to adults, children by nature are more likely to express their authentic feelings and opinions as long as they feel safe and confident in the environment and are in interaction with peers in agentic assemblage. The question of what makes a rational authentic voice and how it could be elicited is a questioned notion among scholars (see Cooper, 2017; Thrift, 2008). Thus, developing methodologies that can support attaining more authentic voice among children is a valuable endeavour. In this regard, to assure authenticity, pursuing child-friendly methodologies have critical importance, as children have a 'hundred languages' to express themselves (Edwards et al., 1993).

Additionally, the ladder of participation (Arnstein, 1969) appears to be a significant concept to discuss the techniques used in research of/with/by children. Hart (1992) takes the ladder that Arnstein suggested for whole citizens to adjust and redefine children's participation. The first three stages, 'manipulation, decoration and tokenism', cannot be included in participation. Rather they constitute the transition of children into active agents. Thus, participation can take a start through children's being 'consulted and informed'. After that step, the last three stages of the participation ladder have levels according to children's engagement as (1) 'adult-initiated: shared decisions with children', (2) 'child-initiated and directed' and (3) 'child-initiated: shared decisions with adults' (Hart, 1992). However, participation still begins at an 'adult-led' level, and Hartung (2017) indicates that participants are allowed to be empowered and take control, which reminds us of the responsibilities of adult researchers during the field process. The methods of research with children on trajectories of participatory appraisal should ideally focus on their involvement in purposes, benefits and costs of the study, as well as planning and processes (Alderson, 2000b), with an eventual possible impact on children themselves. Hence, the fundamental level of children's participation is to inform them about the stages, aims and possible results of the research. To fully benefit from participation and see its impact on the future society that children would constitute, participation needs to spread over a long term, using 'conferences, council, forum, newsletter and focus groups' (Freeman et al., 1999, p. 62).

METHODOLOGICAL PROCESSES AND FINDINGS

We saw this study as a means to an end, to the long-haul journeys children have to endure to become full and active participants in society. While echoing children's voices to alter how children's participation is handled by adults, we also search for new pathways to encourage and empower children in order to help them to be less dependent on adults for practicing their agency for participation.

The current study has evolved around the following questions, some of which we had in mind and some of which children brought along themselves to our collaborative research process. The first question was 'Do children have agency in their everyday lives to have a voice at home, school, neighborhood, city and on the internet?' This question was situated within the ecology of microsystems of children they had direct interaction with. In addition to our suggestions of environments of home, school, neighbourhood and city, children themselves added the internet as a significant environment for their everyday lives and one of the fundamental settings for their identity construction and assertion. Thus, children participated in refining the first research question. While we aimed to examine in which ways children could raise their voices for their sake, they also expressed the necessity of understanding the intentions of adults as a prerequisite

to making their voices heard. Therefore, the second question that children formulated and further guided the study was the following: 'How much do children make their voices heard and how much do grown-ups listen to them?' In light of these two questions co-constructed with children, we aimed to understand whether children could have the power to face difficulties themselves as agents on matters that concerned their lives and what possible ways could emerge for strengthening their agency for participation. To this end, the study overall aimed to find the trajectories of empowering children to become agents and participate in the issues of their own lives that they would like to discuss.

In conducting the field study, we utilized a few functional methodologies to capitalize on children's creativity regarding their different needs and issues based on their ages and life conditions that they would like to discuss about. In selecting or constructing our methodologies to work with children, we drew from the literature of research where children actively engaged in fieldwork as co-researchers. To illustrate, our methods were inspired by Alderson (2000a) who interviewed a group of children from 8 to 12 years, and the ones younger than eight shot videos with cameras. Although the techniques in our fieldwork were slightly different, the methodology maintained its participatory approach: While we developed child-friendly games and activities during the research for the purpose of interview, the conversations that emerged became opportunities for children to enjoy and share mutual interests in a positive and reassuring atmosphere. We also pursued an approach similar to Kellett (2005) who asked children about their hobbies, interests, how they felt about the happenings around them, and what they felt curious about, and who finally wanted children to write down 'what would they like to change if they could…'. Thus, our research with children transformed into doing politics with them, and all these practices served as child-centred methodologies through which they were able to develop diverse opinions about circumstances of value to them in their own worlds.

We conducted our research following three sequential interconnected stages that resembled and were informed by the steps of the participation model of Lundy (2007). To start communicating with children for the project, we consulted three different child civil society institutions to collaborate. Two of the institutions were independent associations and the other one was a division of a municipality. Each association was active in different districts of Istanbul, including Tarlabaşı (Beyoğlu), Şişli, Sarıyer, and worked in areas of child participation, children's rights and overall child services. All three institutions were composed of children from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds in terms of middle-to-low income, ethnicity, language and life conditions, and served children up to 16 years old, all of whom had awareness and experience with regard to children's rights. Therefore, we had a chance to observe distinctions among childhood experiences within this array of child profiles from three institutions. In the following section, the findings of the study reveal themselves through the elaboration of the stages of the fieldwork process and methodologies we used with children.

The stages of our study with children in Istanbul

In this section, we explain our field experiences with children to clarify the methodology of PAR practices we used along with the respective study findings. Throughout the study, we benefited from various methodologies such as focus group interactions, creative drama activities and art workshops with children, culminating in a wide-scale children's forum. The use of such methodologies cohered with Alderson (2001) who underlines the stages of study with children as significant levels, since listening to children and helping them to make their voices heard is

only possible through levels of participation within different methods. Aligned with this idea, when we informed children about what we intended to engage with and collaborate with them during fieldwork, they commenced taking control of themselves to develop their own dynamic design of fieldwork, which finally evolved into becoming a child-led process of a research journey. Besides, in participatory studies where children act as co-researchers, ensuring the concept of child-to-child trust is crucial for an effective fieldwork (Punch, 2002). Trust is the essential prerequisite to conducting any qualitative exploration in that while researchers are supposed to build a trustworthy relationship with children, children themselves need to trust each other during the study, as they would become the actors of it and feel co-ownership of the process. Guided by these methodological principles, we tried to proceed step by step to establish a trust base and develop rapport with children, which they all needed to be able to wilfully engage in the field process.

The first stage: Focus group activities and interviews

In the first stage of this study, we engaged children with research by conducting focus group 'actions' which included activities and interviews. In total, 60 children from the three different institutions attended our fieldwork. They were between 8 and 16 years old and came from middle-to-low socioeconomic backgrounds. Our gatherings with children in groups expanded into focused conversations and art activities regarding the interests of children based on their ages and life experiences. We used methodologies inspired from the examples of research *with* children who employ a variety of techniques. For instance, Punch (2002) indicates that drawings, photographs, diaries, worksheets and posters might be useful for children to express themselves. Likewise, younger children made posters during our first encounter with them, while relatively older children preferred preparing sticky-note papers to share their opinions about their daily issues at home, school, neighbourhood and city. We asked them to indicate both the pleasurable aspects of their experiences in family lives, friendships and other relationships as well as the challenges they faced in the environments they spent time. Drawing upon ecological systems theory, we considered microsystems of children as their proximal environments, such as home, school, neighbourhood and city. Their suggestion of the internet as the fifth environment was the first step of their contribution to the structure of the study. Thus, children genuinely shared about their experiences in the five particular environments of their lives throughout focus group activities and interviews.

O'Kane (2000) proposes focus group as the essential technique for the development of participatory action with children. Additionally, concomitant with focus groups, individual interview is a suggested technique to understand how each child perceives the matters at hand. Then, finally, children might reclaim their views about decisions that affect them during an 'Activity Day' (p. 141). In our study, we also asked each child about his/her ideas and feelings both in focus groups and in person. While some of them preferred drawing and painting to express their voices in these regards, some wrote down their comments about the proximal environments they wished to raise.

As an example of a young child's painting, the commentaries seen in Figure 1 were about each proximal environment, except for the internet in particular. Nevertheless, the child mentioned the internet as a problem at home by indicating in her expressions: 'Let there be less internet, because then they [parents] can take care of us and play with us. Let there [home] be more play.' While she said, 'I want more course areas. Swimming pool' for the neighbourhood, for the city,
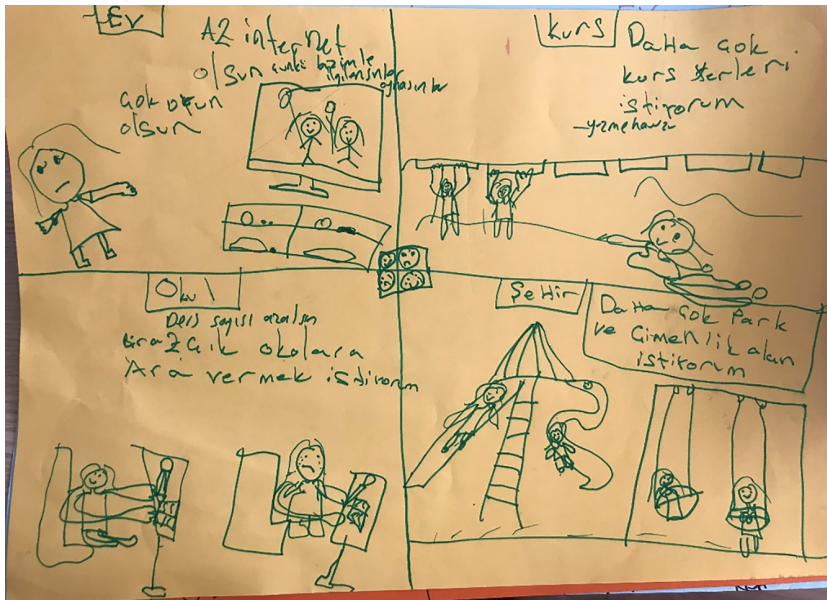
FIGURE 1   A drawing by a child, showing her demands about several issues in proximal environments of her life.

she declared that 'I want more parks and green areas'. Finally, we see her complain about the school 'The number of lessons [should] lessens. I want to have a break from school'. Even though those were subjective expectations, some demands have become common and recurrent in all other children's expressions. Especially, focus group activities identified shared problems and their solutions for them.

Besides written and visual statements of children, we had conversations together where they exchanged ideas, agreed, disagreed or negotiated collaboratively on issues that concerned their lives germane to proximal environments. We sometimes interviewed each child respectively, yet mostly, groups of children spoke to us by discussing first among themselves. While we were discussing together, they indicated the internet as another space where they spent most of their time. Giving an example of research with children, Mayall (2000) addresses that through conversation, children can control the direction of study by 'exploring topics' that are about other 'aspects of their social world' (p. 133).

During our first gatherings with different groups of children, we faced how they raised specific challenges or enjoyments deriving from the places they lived. Although most children were from middle-to-lower socioeconomic class, the neighbourhood seemed to have a significant influence in their experiences. We expected that the experiences of children could differ from each other (Kellett, 2011), and such distinctions might reflect not only personal or relational aspects but also they could be conclusions of institutional implications (Chamberlain et al., 2019; Cooper, 2017). For instance, in our study, children mentioned macro-scale problems on gender discrimination, drug dealers and responsibilities of the municipality in Tarlabaşı, where ethnic diversity and composition of migrant children is higher compared to other districts. Thus, they demonstrated heightened social and societal awareness with regard to proximal and distal concerns that influenced their lives. In a way, exposed to more inequalities or adversities within their neighbourhoods, low-SES children tended to express their voices on justice, social equity and micro-to-macro level actions in order to participate in actions of combatting those negativities.

FIGURE 2 Children's demands for their lives.

Despite differences among child groups from three different institutions, hence districts of Istanbul, the intersection point of their expectation for every environment in which they spent time was their demand 'to be respected'. For instance, the written notes in Figure 2 show a few pertinent commentaries with respect to different environments such as 'I want to be respected in the school', 'I want respect for my decisions on the internet' and 'I do not want people to mock each other about the things they do with their free will'. Other significant findings also included 'I do not want older [children] bully the younger in the school', 'I want JUSTICE in the school'. Those commentaries that reflected a pursuit of respect and justice paved the way for us to build the following steps of this project inclusively so that we could bring children from different institutions and neighbourhoods together in a shared place, and try to lead children to learn from each other's experiences in different environments.

Besides children's various experiences in different environments of their lives, their levels of participation experience were also different from each other. At first glance, the techniques they chose to practice such as drawing or writing seemed to be due to their age range. However, their language use and knowledge levels were the essential factors among children that led them to opt for particular participation techniques. Since some children from Sarıyer were already used to getting together with children of different ages, they were quite comfortable expressing their opinions in the large group composed of all ages. Alderson (2000a) mentions 'Children's Express' as a participatory example of children's newspaper production where the reporters were 8–13 years old while the editors were 14–18 (p. 250). The main reason for this distinction was

actually about the different levels of life experiences children had rather than a rigid age range categorization. Similarly, in our research, some children were more willing to talk, while the rest were capable of expressing their voices better through writing or drawing. In order to find the most functional and comfortable for each, we deliberately let children express themselves in the way they preferred. As reflexivity is the central part of participatory research methodology (Punch, 2002), it seemed more remarkable that children could build up communication with us and other groups of children through the methodologies they chose and controlled.

After our first meetings in three different districts and contexts of three groups of children that the civil society institutions provided, we became hosts at Boğaziçi University to bring these different groups of children together to collaboratively further explore the issues that emerged from their voices in the first stage.

The second stage: Workshops with children during a group activity day

In undertaking the second stage of the study, our fundamental purpose was to find a way that would empower children in order to claim and use their participation agencies in issues concerning their environments, which emerged as home, school, neighbourhood, city and internet during the first stage of study. What we had in mind was initiating a child-to-child network which would be led and controlled by children in the future through which they could express their voices for matters in these environments and collaboratively formulate solutions and take respective actions using their participation rights. However, we neither introduced our vision as an end point nor talked about it explicitly. Rather, we adopted an emergent approach where we aimed to strengthen children's capacity towards that end.

A year before this study, in 2018, during an event on child rights at Boğaziçi University, one of the children noticed that adults have ideas about children's participation more than children themselves and suggested gathering with other children he had not encountered yet and hearing each other. He made a striking statement by saying 'A child can best understand a child!' Besides differences with respect to their neighbourhood, socioeconomic conditions, family structure, ethnic and national background, children were willing to learn how 'the other' children experience being a child. They were also curious about whether they had similar difficulties in accessing their participation rights and whether or not they had faced the same challenges. Hearing their voice, we decided to make our best effort to respond to their demand and tried to make way for their influence. We planned to organize an event for these three groups of children to come together in order to provide themselves with the space, audience and voice necessary to hear each other and ideally make further influences (Lundy, 2007). To achieve a beneficial meeting for all children to share their experiences and ideas, we decided to use the settings in the university as an independent area and a free space to play games, create artworks and engage with a range of physical activities such as yoga, football and gymnastics.

After accessing the information of 60 children that we had worked in the first stage, we analysed the data by classifying them according to the environments, at first. Then, we separated children's interpretations into their needs, expectations, problems and solution offers. The first stage that involved constructing these data with children was essentially 'adult-initiated', because as adults we needed to develop rapport with them and help them build trust among themselves. The second stage where different groups of children gathered under an 'activity day', we adopted a 'child-led' approach and worked with two creative drama educators to build rapport among groups of children who met each other for the first time.

Twenty-seven children came together on the activity day, with approximately 10 children from each of the three institutions we collaborated with. The educators conducted drama workshops as an icebreaker for children to introduce themselves to each other. Plays and games were used to connect through a warm relationship and establish a basis for better communication among children. According to their written comments where they evaluated their experiences of the activity day, children could get along with each other very well, and in the end, most of them were happy to have new friends and indicated that they furthered their awareness and felt more strengthened with what they discussed and engaged with during the activity day.

In workshops with children, it is necessary to build up equal relationships that are free of hierarchies and power asymmetries. This is important to create an atmosphere of a comfortable space where children can express their views. Because we intended to achieve the next step of participation, the rest of the workshop, after the ice breakers with creative art drama activities, was 'child-initiated and directed' (Hart, 1992). Furthermore, child-led parts of the workshop emerged as significant attempts to transform power relations. Accordingly, Shier (2001) divides participation influences as (1) 'children's views are taken into account', (2) involving their suggestion 'in decision-making processes' and (3) the final step to 'share power and responsibility' with children. While we acknowledged that it might not be realistic to achieve all those consequences in this given workshop, we strived to experience power-sharing and consider decision-making from children's perspectives as the result of their participation process at this stage.

The principle of 3P that classifies child rights as Protection, Providing and Participation rights is the broad approach to understanding the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In addition, John (2003) recommends the big P as the fourth principle: the Power rights of the child. To practice the big P, adults need to get beyond existing power relations to empower children. Since the notion of 'empowerment' itself recalls the powerlessness of the child, grown-ups should support and guide children to empower themselves, which necessitates for adult beings to share the power they already have. For this reason, John (2003) also indicates that it is necessary to develop a 'school council' to make power become 'divested' (p. 251). In our study, it did not seem possible to constitute councils for children, as we only came together through several institutions. On the other hand, those institutions, especially the ones hosted by municipalities might become a transformative level for children's participation in decision-making where they can exercise their power. Our small-sized project, and especially the second stage as the activity day, probably showed children how much they could become creative and inventive to construct solutions and how they had already been aware of all circumstances around their lives, at least.

To give an illustration, it was highly illuminating to witness their experiences in school and city environments. For instance, our conversations about the city showed us how interested they were in childhood movements about ecology and climate crisis. As adult researchers, we learned about their awareness of public issues and contemporary politics. Those were essential indicators of their participation competency in policy-making processes. Furthermore, children created posters together about specific environments, such as school, as seen in Figure 3 above. From the physical well-being of school areas to the insufficiencies of the school council, children made up bullet-point lists for raising their voices of criticism. Additionally, they also pointed out what they desired to experience in public schools. For example, it was apparent that children needed access to exercise and sports opportunities and art activities much better. The activity day itself was a free space for them to express their ideas and emotions. However, their demands and criticisms also indicated the limitations of the schedule at public schools, which requires further studies focusing on school areas as a livelihood in particular.
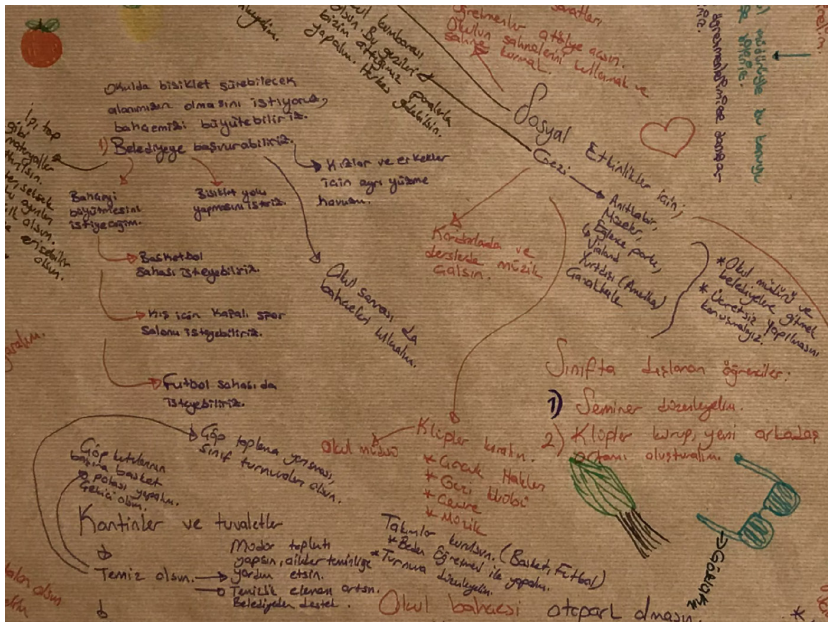
FIGURE 3 A group poster from the activity day illustrating opinions, challenges and demands with respect to school environment.

During the activity day, we only mentored children's activities, especially in the second half of the day when they engaged in small group workshops for each environment they experienced: home, school, neighbourhood, city and internet. They chose which one to get involved in by themselves. Then, through brainstorming on each subject, children experienced a problem-solving process together with respect to exercising their participation rights in each of these environments. Except for us, the researchers and drama educators, there were university student assistants as young people to interact with children comfortably. Therefore, people of different ages and experiences became parts of a larger conversation around a circle, where everyone had the right to have a word. Although it could not be an exact council, all relationships were horizontal without any hierarchy, and it served as a democracy lesson for us, which the children led.

The third stage: A children's forum to establish the grassroots of a child-to-child network

For the final stage of this study, we organized our latest event for children as a wide-scale forum where the participant children could share the outcomes of their work from stage 1 and stage 2 with a large audience of children and adults from various places. With this forum, we aimed to climb up to the final step of the participation ladder, which is suggested to be fully 'child-initiated' (Hart, 1992). Children direct the whole process at this level and the outcomes are 'shared decisions with adults'. Besides, the forum served as the climax of implementing the child participation model (Lundy, 2007) in the study by providing the participant children with the (1) 'space' (i.e. a wide-scale forum) and (2) 'audience' (i.e. invited children and adults from tens of institutions) where they could share their (3) 'voices' (i.e. outcomes of their work regarding issues that concerned their experiences in home, school, neighbourhood, city and internet) to make an

(4) 'influence' (i.e. opinions, demands and solution offers that could be considered by parents, school administrators, city mayors or policy-makers).

To recap our study regarding these stages, we conducted child-friendly focus groups and interviews with children for the first stage in the summer months of 2019. Then, for the second stage, three different child groups gathered at the university at an activity day to hear each other's voices in October 2019. Finally, for the third stage, 31 participant children from three different institutions and regions of Istanbul led a children's forum event in February 2020 to a larger and broader group of children and adults. Additionally, 15 children from a public school in Izmir, the third biggest city in Turkey, were also included in the event who heard the announcement about forum via social media. Their teacher had contacted us to attend the event as active participants. Thus, the number of children we reached began to expand. The entire forum event was led completely by children who had previously negotiated on how to arrange and conduct it. In total, 46 participant children shared outcomes of their work with regard to each proximal environment they had focused on at stage 1 and 2. Almost 150 invited audience of other children in the conference hall took the floor to indicate their opinions in response to and conjunction with voices of the participant children. Sometimes they tried to collaboratively discover solutions and arrive at consensus or negotiations. There were around 200 children (with 46 active agents at this stage) between 8 and 16 years old in the entire conference hall, and we as adult researchers were there only to manage the time and give them the floor. The forum took a half-day and children came to the scene for hours where they discussed and defended their statements with respect to their participation in those environments, thereby making their voices heard.

Following up on our plan and staying committed to the conceptual frameworks of the research journey, children worked with drama educators during the first half of the day of the forum about specific issues that concerned them or appeared as challenge to them in their home, school, neighbourhood, city and internet environments. After the group discussions and the workshop progressed, all children were free to use different tools in order to prepare slogans, posters, banners and written and visual means of expression to spread their words at the forum. The only limitation was the scope of the subjects at hand, but as children had done before, they did not hesitate to relate the topics to each other. For instance, the discussion of neighbourhood as one of the proximal environments led children to address environmental troubles while arguing for 'indulgence' for everyone. As seen below in Figure 4, a few children listed their requests accordingly: (1) 'Save the environment, save yourself', (2) 'the day of indulgence is for everyone', (3) 'sports in the neighborhood!' and (4) 'do not spoil your life, do not ruin your future, do not harm the neighborhood!'. The significant finding here was the fourth demand that indicated a signboard on the right saying 'no alcoholic allowed'. As emphasized in the first stage, the different childhood experiences depending on where children led their lives were also reflected in the voices of children at this stage of the study.

The forum process was not actually a new brainstorming stage. Yet, it was the first opportunity for children to gather and speak up to defend their participation rights. After the subject-based workshop in five different groups and the inclusion of other children from Izmir, six groups of children took the stage of the forum and illustrated to the audience their opinions by holding banners and opening discussions as seen in Figure 5 below. Several remarkable statements as a revolt against the family were: 'A child cannot take care of a child', 'did you ask my opinion before painting the house?', 'child rights do not stop at home', 'protect me, but do not interfere with my privacy'. Environmental concerns emerged as another crucial issue in the discussions about the neighbourhood and the city as well. Here, the prominent slogans included 'Do not make buildings do not destroy nature!', 'Plastic has many spaces in our lives. Not in nature!'
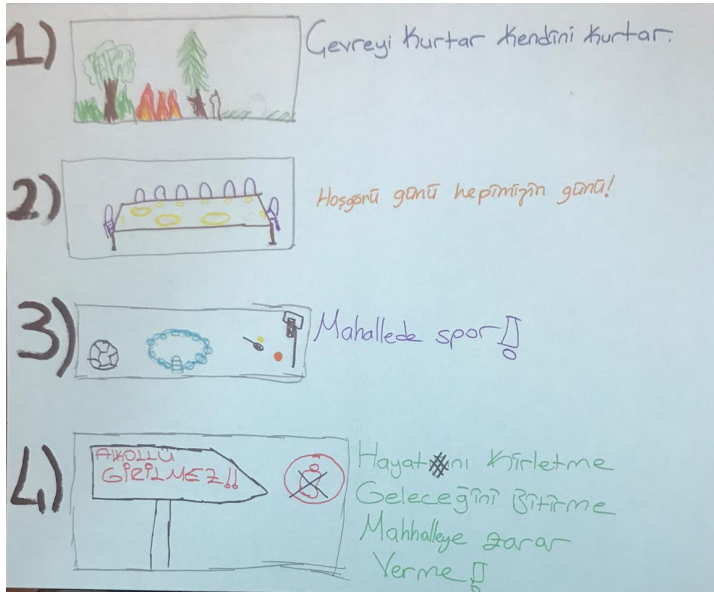
FIGURE 4   A poster by a child group, prepared together for the Forum.
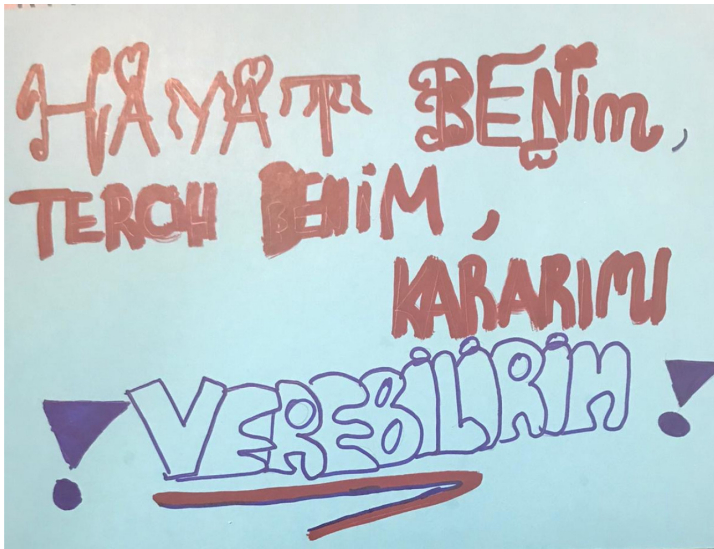

FIGURE 5   A slogan by a child group, 'life is mine, the choice is mine, I can give my own decision!' prepared together for the Forum.

Children usually made bridges between the environments in the context of troubles they encountered, which suggested that they could conclude extensive comprehension. For instance, they expressed bullying, primarily for the internet environment, as cyberbullying by saying, 'do not break my confidence by cyberbullying'. At that point, it also become a significant question to whom those children called out. From their effort to explain themselves as agents and their quest for respect, it was as if they generally spoke to adults. However, this statement about cyberbullying

signified that children also conveyed to their peers. Another expression for the internet environment was 'we would like to access true knowledge', which manifested the 'we' pronoun to refer to children in general. In addition to the expressions that sounded as if manifestations, such as 'Woman and man are equal. This rule never changes', there were self-declarations such as 'Life is mine, the choice is mine, I can give my own decision!' Through close reading, diverse childhood experiences could be revealed by scrutinizing age differences. However, here we only focused on children as agents in their collective participation process.

At the end of the forum day, we handed out papers to ask participant and audience children about 'what can we do to increase child participation?' and asked them to share their feelings about the day and what the forum contributed to themselves. They generally declared they felt happy because of being heard, and most children stated they could find a space to express themselves. For the question posed, children suggested that 'we can support the development of child councils', and 'we can use the internet to spread child rights'. There were also such individual comments as 'I recorded my friends' talk that I will make my family watch', 'I will mention our rights to my family and request them to carry out' and 'I will raise my friends' awareness too'. Overall, beside participant children in the study, the invited audience of children in the forum audience seemed to have developed heightened awareness regarding their participation rights in each environment of their lives and for matters that concerned themselves. Moreover, audience children even formulated microscale subjective action plans for their families and friends upon what they learned from the forum. Thus, our ideal of establishing the grassroots of a child-to-child network by which children strengthen each other to defend and exercise their participation rights turned out to be effective in these baby steps of the current study (Figure 5).

Overall, we could clearly see the space, voice, audience and influence stages of the child participation model from Lundy (2007) emerging throughout the three stages of the study. In all these three stages of our collaborative fieldwork, the participant children had a *space* to call out their *voice*. Besides, during the third stage when they organized the forum, they also had the *audience*, consisting of both other children and adults, some of whom were young university students. We made room for the children and left the floor to them, while the rest of the grown-ups, parents and teachers were only supposed to listen. Children sometimes wanted to call their parents when they had the chance during the event. To achieve the last stage of participation as *influence*, we utilized social media accounts and newspapers throughout the municipality and co-operated with them to share the outcomes of children's work in order to inform stakeholders to take necessary actions. Irrespective of the success of such attempts turning into concrete actions, at least, it seemed apparent that the participant children there at the forum had a profound *influence* on all grown-ups who were in that hall.

DISCUSSION

Children's silence and reservation is not about the children themselves. They have been historically mute in expressing their voices and exercising their participation rights in all environments and matters of their lives that concern themselves (Mayall, 2018). However, novel approaches and guidelines such as participatory methods with children and ladder of child participation provide the impetus necessary to challenge perception barriers and adult–child power asymmetries that perpetuate the practice of silencing children (Malone & Hartung, 2009). Guided primarily by the child participation model (Lundy, 2007), the current study was conducted as a modest response to the need to provide children with voice, space, audience and influence in order to empower them

to defend and exercise their participation rights towards the ideal of a child-to-child participation network. To this end, we worked with 60 children from three institutions of Istanbul with an array SES backgrounds and childhood experiences in order to strengthen them towards using their participation rights in proximal environments of their lives (i.e. home, school, neighbourhood, city and internet), as informed by the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Using participatory research techniques with children, we as three adults undertook an adult-initiated and child-led research journey pursuing three sequential stages through which children progressively explored and expressed their opinions, challenges, desires and demands with respect to what was of value to them in their lives. This article aimed to explore and portray the process of this research journey with children on helping them exercise their participation rights, while at the same time identifying their experiences and voices that emerged throughout this process.

During our discussions with children, two major feelings were helplessness and lack of respect. When they encountered a problem at their home or in their neighbourhood, they tended to keep it to themselves or talked to their friends about it at best. However, when they were asked, they could and would offer sound solutions. Christensen (2004) argues in her ethnographic study on children's participation and agency that her interviews were short and about a specific topic. However, as they got to know her, she realized that their 'openness and engagement had been restricted by their shyness and occasional mild disapproval of the subjects they talked about' (p. 168). As adults we tend to ask questions to children about the topics which are of interest to us, and expect serious, sound and well-thought answers regardless of children's interest and feelings at the time. Thus, us going to their own environment, where they felt secure and in power, with nothing in mind and no present agenda, was a good start to maintain openness and engagement. As we began talking and children led the discussion according to their interests and concerns, it was consolidating to witness that we would discuss the same issues in such detail and complexity if it were with adults. Moreover, it was astonishing to hear the multifaced solutions they offered to each and every issue and the variety of ways they referred to willingly express themselves.

Following the first stage of the study, we asked children to guide us as to the ways in which children could be empowered to become active participants and agents of change in society. As stated before, even though we had a vision of a child-to-child participation network, it was neither outspoken nor implied. The workshop groups included children from all ages, and we did not group them according to age or any other category. Instead, they volunteered and assigned themselves to the groups based on their interests and concerns. In line with research on children being advisers of researchers (Casas et al., 2013), participant children in our study were enthusiastic, co-operative and highly motivated all along. They guided and assisted younger ones so that they would have enough time and resources to express themselves. Older children were more experienced in terms of voice and participation compared to the younger ones. Yet, how they handled the situation provided us with the hope that a child-to-child network was indeed achievable. As we engaged with in-depth discussion about the challenges they faced in society, the power struggles between adults and children came up with the statement 'A child understands the child best!'. From there, one of the older children suggested that it should be children themselves who should reach out other children and encourage them to speak up and exercise their participation rights.

Aligned with the relevant literature, children's commentaries and visuals show that the study helped most children raise their knowledge and awareness of defending and exercising their participation rights (Carroll et al., 2021; Kirby, 2002; Manouchehri & Burns, 2021). This was evident from their statements, as one child said, 'Actually, we knew more than half, but there are

many things I have learned about home, school and neighborhood'. It seemed that the spatial segregation for participation rights in domains of proximal environments was functional for children to ponder over their particular experiences within the given domain of environment as a bounded unit. Instead of measuring children's overall knowledge about their rights, we allowed them to share their opinions, challenges and demands with respect to different environments of their lives from participation viewpoint, and they could collectively create solution offers through progressive stages of the study. While encountering others, they could also make friendships and even develop solidarity on issues of mutual concern.

As mentioned in the General Comment 12 (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009) a child's capacity to form his/her views cannot be bound to his/her biological age, but is closely related with information, experiences, social and cultural expectations and levels of support. In line with this, Lundy et al. (2011) proposes a rationale for capacity building with children for engaging in research as co-researchers. Our main intention in working with children from the three specific institutions was based on a similar perspective: To make sure that the children who could guide us in the process would have information, experience and awareness about their pioneer role in child rights advocacy and to engage in capacity building with the help of those children. Looking back our journey and reflecting on the emergence of child-to-child network idea, as well as children's agency and participation throughout the process, we now acknowledge that capacity building should be the initial step for children to claim agentic and participatory identities in society. Importantly, children need information, experience and support in this regard, despite the lack of encouraging social and cultural expectations from child-hearing and authority-sharing adults, and from their more experienced peers.

Our overall findings cohere with recent studies that document the value of hearing children's voices on matters that directly concern their lives (e.g. Hajisoteriou et al., 2021; Pascal & Bertram, 2021). Based on findings, we can claim that children are generally aware of their participation rights. Yet their knowledge stays in a vague state and may not be acknowledged by grown-ups. In order to capitalize on children's agency in diverse environments of their lives, empowerment seems crucial (Almqvist & Almqvist, 2015). Accordingly, we aimed to strengthen children's awareness and build solidarity among different child groups towards the ideal of a child-to-child participation network where they can actively defend and exercise their participation rights as agents of change and actors of influence. We perceive our exploration for this study as 'baby steps', because it only serves preliminary research in order to take a step forward to larger and extensive practice of child participation among diverse groups. Moreover, we used the term 'baby steps' because to us this effort was inevitable, as one cannot 'unhear' children's voices. The overarching finding of the study clearly shows that child-to-child network is not impossible and could help children empower each other to participate in the issues of their lives as competent agents whose voices do matter.

CONCLUSION

This study has important implications that may guide theory and practice in future studies germane to children's rights, participation and empowerment. In terms of theory, the study builds on and extends the existing conceptual literature that underscores the merit of listening to children's voices. Hearing their voices sheds light on their agency in claiming their participation rights in aspects of their lives that directly concern them. When researchers and practitioners enable the 'space' and 'audience' for children to express their 'voices', children not only can

discuss their opinions, demands and challenges on proximal environments of their lives, but also competently offer constructive solutions and make 'influences' that can ideally guide the actions of parents, teachers, administrators, mayors, and/or policy-makers. Thus, encouraging children to claim and exercise their participation rights paves the way for their empowerment and active citizen identities. It is important that their empowerment in this sense may challenge adults' conventional perceptions of children which tend to regard them incompetent and subordinate, hence silenced. Empowerment of children to use their participation rights may conceptually redefine the values ascribed to children in participating in the society as active, vocal and expressive citizens.

In terms of practice, this study provides compelling evidence that participatory research can indeed strengthen children to discover their opinions, challenges and demands with respect to participation and decision-making in their own lives and express those through their subjective voices. This type of research where children take the lead with minimal adult guidance also enables adult researchers to understand children better and attain a more nuanced understanding of their lives. When children take the lead of a research journey, as assuming the role of co-owners of the process, both adults and children attain multifaceted insights. Therefore, participatory studies that put children in the centre as co-owners can challenge the traditional long-held practice of 'collecting data *on* children' through their parents or teachers by demonstrating the feasibility and fruitfulness of 'constructing data *with* children' through seeking their collaboration and co-operation, thereby simply enabling them to use their participation rights.

If we, as grown-ups, researchers and child-right activists, let children express their voices and exercise their right of participation in and having a say for matters concerning their lives, children can make active part of the world's circumstances and become agents of problem-solvers in their own lives. In order to improve children's access to decision-making and provide a real achievement towards the 'influence' step of child participation model, more co-operation and collaboration as in this study are needed. 'Every child is special and great!' according to a child participant in this study, and they have an audience to express their voices, since they are capable to do so. In the following steps, we aim to continue this project at an expanded level in collaboration with institutions at larger scales in order to make it more inclusive and create room for children to transgress the 'influence' level of participation.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no potential conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

ETHICS STATEMENT

All procedures performed in this study were in accordance with ethical standards and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed parental consent was obtained from parents of the children and the verbal assent of each child was ensured.

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