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Child Citizenship, Public Space and Photo-stories

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Introduction

In contemporary cities, children's everyday experiences in public space are shaped by a complex interplay of social, cultural, political, and spatial factors. Urban environments are not neutral backdrops to children's lives; rather, they actively structure opportunities for play, mobility, social interaction, and participation. Public space-streets, squares, parks, schoolyards, and neighbourhood pathways-constitutes a key arena in which children encounter others, negotiate autonomy, and construct meanings about belonging and citizenship. As Christensen and O'Brien argue, children are not merely passive recipients of urban design but active interpreters and producers of space. Understanding how children experience public space therefore requires attention to their everyday practices, emotions, and interpretations [1].

However, children's access to and use of public space have been increasingly constrained in many contemporary cities. Concerns about safety, traffic, surveillance, and social control have contributed to the shrinking of children's independent mobility and outdoor play [2]. highlights that while international frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child recognize children's right to participation, their involvement in planning and decision-making processes remains limited. Public space is often designed for children rather than with them, reflecting adult-centric assumptions about needs, risks, and appropriate behaviors. This gap raises critical questions: How do children themselves experience public space? How do they interpret safety, freedom, exclusion, or belonging? And how can urban research and planning processes meaningfully include their voices?

Malone emphasizes the importance of recognizing children as social actors and environmental citizens whose knowledge of place is grounded in everyday lived experience [3]. From this perspective, child participation is not simply a methodological add-on but a democratic imperative. It involves creating processes that enable children to articulate their perspectives, negotiate meanings, and influence decisions affecting their lives. Participatory and child-centered research methods thus become crucial tools for accessing children's spatial experiences beyond adult interpretations.

This article explores how visual storytelling-specifically through the method of photostories-can support child citizenship and active participation in urban environments. Photo-stories invite children to document, narrate, and reflect on their experiences of public space using photographs combined with their own narratives. As a participatory and multimodal approach, this method acknowledges children's communicative competencies and offers an alternative to purely verbal or adult-mediated forms of data collection. By foregrounding children's visual and narrative accounts, photostories can reveal how urban spaces are experienced emotionally, socially, and symbolically.

Drawing on the theoretical contributions of Christensen and O'Brien, Hart, and Malone, this paper positions children as competent social actors and examines the methodological and ethical implications of engaging them through visual storytelling [1-3]. It argues that photo-stories not only generate rich insights into children's everyday geographies but also function as a practice of citizenship, enabling children to claim visibility and agency within urban public space.

Through this lens, public space becomes not merely a physical setting but a relational and political terrain-one in which children's voices can be amplified, negotiated, and potentially integrated into more inclusive urban futures.

Building upon the conceptualization of children as active social actors within urban public space, the notion of child citizenship extends beyond presence and participation to encompass agency,

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responsibility, and critical engagement. Citizenship, in this sense, is not understood as a future status that children will eventually attain, but as a lived and enacted practice in the present. It involves the development of competencies that enable children to interpret, question, and transform their social environments.

A citizenship-oriented approach to children's participation in public space presupposes that children are capable of recognizing and interpreting the challenges embedded in their everyday surroundings. As -Karakatsani argues, democratic education involves cultivating awareness of social issues and inequalities that shape lived experience [4]. In urban contexts, such awareness may relate to issues of safety, exclusion, accessibility, environmental degradation, lack of play opportunities, or unequal access to common goods. When children articulate concerns about dangerous crossings, poorly maintained parks, or the absence of inclusive spaces, they demonstrate not only experiential knowledge but also social awareness.

Beyond awareness, active citizenship entails the capacity to seek information and construct knowledge in order to address perceived challenges. Dimopoulos and Koulaidis emphasize that critical engagement with social reality requires inquiry, dialogue, and reflection [5]. In participatory research contexts, such as those employing photostories, children do not simply document their environments; they investigate them. Through photographing, discussing, and narrating their experiences, they generate situated knowledge about their neighborhoods. This process transforms observation into inquiry and personal experience into shared understanding.

Active citizenship further involves initiative and engagement in action, whether individually or collectively. Geynor highlights that democratic participation is grounded in opportunities to act upon identified concerns [6]. Within urban environments, this may take the form of proposing improvements to local authorities, organizing peer discussions, creating visual exhibitions of their photostories, or collaborating with community stakeholders. Importantly, such initiatives challenge the dominant perception of children as passive beneficiaries of adult decision-making and reposition them as contributors to urban dialogue.

Collaboration constitutes another central dimension of child citizenship. Public space is inherently relational; it is shaped through interaction, negotiation, and shared use. When children work together to design interventions or propose solutions-such as reimagining a playground, mapping safe routes, or suggesting environmental improvements-they engage in collective problem-solving that mirrors democratic practice. This collaborative dimension reinforces the understanding of citizenship as a social process rather than an individual attribute.

Equally significant is the capacity for critical reflection. Citizenship education, as Karakatsani notes, involves the ability to evaluate one's own choices and consider their broader social and ethical implications [4]. Within participatory methodologies like photostories, reflection is embedded in the act of narration. Children are invited not only to show what they see but also to explain why it matters, how it affects others, and what alternatives might exist. This reflexive process fosters ethical awareness and supports the development of socially responsible perspectives.

Finally, active citizenship implies responsibility and the willingness to reconsider actions when necessary. Participation is not merely expressive but accountable. When children evaluate the consequences of their proposals, revise their ideas after dialogue, or acknowledge diverse viewpoints within their peer group, they practice forms of democratic responsibility. Such processes contribute to the cultivation of agency grounded in mutual respect and ethical consideration.

Integrating these dimensions-awareness, inquiry, initiative, collaboration, reflection, and responsibility-within research and urban planning practices reframes children's participation as a substantive democratic practice rather than symbolic inclusion. Visual storytelling through photo-stories provides a concrete methodological framework through which these competencies can be nurtured and observed. By enabling children to identify challenges, construct meanings, propose interventions, and critically reflect on their urban experiences, photostories function not only as a research tool but also as a pedagogical and civic practice. In this way, child citizenship emerges as a dynamic process situated within everyday urban life-one that connects lived experience to collective action and positions children as legitimate participants in the ongoing production and transformation of public space.

Extending the previous discussion on the competencies that underpin active participation, the concept of child citizenship provides the normative and theoretical framework within which such competencies acquire political and social meaning. Child citizenship refers to the recognition of children as active and capable social actors in the present, rather than as "citizens in preparation" for adulthood. It foregrounds their right to participate, to express views freely, and to influence decisions that affect their everyday lives. Hart's influential model of the "Ladder of Participation" remains central to this discussion [2]. By distinguishing between tokenistic forms of involvement and genuine shared decision-making, Hart highlights that participation is not a binary condition but a continuum. At its higher levels, participation involves children initiating ideas, collaborating with adults, and sharing responsibility in decision-making processes. Within urban contexts, this framework challenges superficial consultation practices and calls for meaningful structures through which children can shape the design and transformation of public space.

Similarly, Karakatsani argues that children's participation must be understood as embedded in the spatial and relational dimensions of their everyday lives. Children develop sophisticated, place-based knowledge through daily routines, play, movement, and social interaction. Their understandings of safety, belonging, exclusion, and opportunity are grounded in lived experience. Recognizing child citizenship therefore requires acknowledging this experiential expertise as legitimate knowledge-knowledge that can inform community life, planning processes, and urban governance.

Children's everyday geographies-how they navigate streets, appropriate corners for play, avoid certain areas, or redefine marginal spaces-reveal subtle negotiations with the built and social environment. These practices demonstrate agency, even when they occur within constraints imposed by adult

regulations or urban infrastructures. When children articulate these experiences through participatory methods such as photo-stories, they render visible dimensions of public space that often remain unnoticed by adult planners and policymakers.

Moreover, child citizenship emphasizes not only voice but influence. The right to be heard, as articulated in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, implies that children's views should be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity. In practice, this moves beyond symbolic expression toward dialogical processes in which children's perspectives inform concrete outcomes. Participation thus becomes relational and negotiated, requiring adults to reconsider established power hierarchies and to cultivate spaces of intergenerational dialogue.

Importantly, recognizing children as citizens also reframes public space as a democratic arena. If citizenship is practiced through engagement with shared environments, then parks, squares, and streets become sites where rights are enacted and contested. Through creative contributions-such as proposing alternative playground designs, mapping safe mobility routes, or identifying neglected areas-children contribute to reimagining the social and spatial fabric of their communities.

In this sense, child citizenship aligns closely with the participatory and reflective dimensions outlined earlier: awareness of social challenges, inquiry, initiative, collaboration, critical reflection, and responsibility. Visual storytelling methodologies provide a concrete means of operationalizing these principles. By documenting their environments and narrating their interpretations, children move from being objects of study to subjects of civic expression. Their images and stories become acts of spatial claim-making-assertions that their perspectives matter within the collective shaping of urban life.

Thus, child citizenship is not merely a theoretical construct but a lived and practiced condition. It requires institutional openness, methodological innovation, and ethical commitment to intergenerational equity. When children's everyday experiences, local knowledge, and creative ideas are recognized as valuable contributions, public space can evolve into a more inclusive and dialogical environment-one that reflects not only adult priorities but the diverse voices of its youngest inhabitants.

Public Space and Children: A Theoretical Reframing

Public space constitutes a critical arena in the social construction of childhood. It is not simply a physical environment, but a socio-spatial field where power relations, generational hierarchies, and cultural norms are negotiated and reproduced. From the perspective of the sociology of childhood, children are not passive recipients of spatial arrangements; rather, they are active social actors who interpret, appropriate, and transform space through everyday practices. Public spaces offer significant developmental and social opportunities. Play, for instance, is widely recognized not only as a developmental necessity but also as a socially situated practice embedded within spatial contexts. Drawing on relational understandings of space, play can be understood as an embodied interaction between children and their material environments. Parks, streets, and squares function as arenas where children experiment with risk, negotiate rules, and construct peer cultures.

Beyond play, public space enables forms of social interaction that are essential to children's participation in civic life. Informal encounters in neighborhoods contribute to the development of social capital and a sense of belonging. Through these interactions, children engage in processes of identity formation and learn to navigate diversity, difference, and social norms.

Public space also operates as a site of informal and experiential learning. Learning here is not limited to cognitive acquisition but includes spatial literacy, environmental awareness, and the development of autonomy. Independent mobility, in particular, has been linked to children's agency and well-being. The capacity to move freely within one's neighborhood reflects broader issues of trust, safety, and intergenerational relations.

However, children's access to and use of public space are structured by significant constraints. Contemporary urban environments are often shaped by risk-averse discourses that position children as vulnerable subjects in need of protection. Safety concerns-whether grounded in traffic density, crime narratives, or moral panics-contribute to the privatization and domestication of childhood. As a result, children's independent presence in public space is increasingly restricted.

Infrastructural limitations further exacerbate exclusion. The decline of accessible green spaces, pedestrian-friendly areas, and child-oriented facilities reflects broader urban priorities centered on economic productivity and adult mobility. Public space is frequently designed according to adult-centered norms, marginalizing children's spatial practices and sensory experiences. Christensen and O'Brien emphasize that children's everyday geographies are often overlooked in planning processes, despite their intimate knowledge of local environments [1]. Similarly, Spyrou problematizes simplistic notions of "giving voice" to children, arguing instead for a critical examination of how children's perspectives are mediated, interpreted, and positioned within research and policy discourses [7]. Together, these scholars invite us to reconsider children not merely as users of space, but as co-constructors of socio-spatial realities.

Theoretically, this discussion aligns with relational and socio-material approaches to space, which conceptualize space as produced through interactions among bodies, materialities, and power structures. It also resonates with rights-based frameworks, particularly the recognition of children's right to participate in decisions affecting their environments. Rethinking public space through a child-centered and relational lens requires moving beyond protectionist paradigms toward participatory and justice-oriented urban design. Such an approach demands structural transformation: incorporating children's lived experiences into planning processes, challenging adult-centric assumptions, and recognizing children's spatial agency as fundamental to democratic urban life.

The Power of Visual Storytelling and Photostories as a Participatory Method

Visual methodologies have gained increasing prominence within childhood studies as researchers seek approaches that move beyond adult-centric, language-dominated forms of knowledge production. Photography, in particular, offers a powerful medium through which children can articulate their

lived experiences. Rather than positioning children solely as respondents within adult-designed research frameworks, visual storytelling enables them to become meaning-makers and co-producers of knowledge. Photography allows children to capture everyday experiences from their own spatial and emotional perspectives. The act of photographing transforms the child from an observed subject into an observing agent. Through the lens, children frame what they consider meaningful, significant, or problematic in their daily environments. This process challenges hierarchical research relations and redistributes representational power. Moreover, photography enables children to express emotions that may be difficult to articulate verbally. Visual images can convey atmospheres, attachments, fears, and aspirations that resist linear linguistic explanation. In this sense, photography functions not merely as documentation, but as an affective and embodied mode of communication. Children also use photography to communicate ideas visually, constructing narratives through composition, focus, and perspective. These visual choices reflect interpretive acts. The image becomes a site of negotiation between the material environment and the child's subjective experience. As Thomson argues, visual data should not be treated as transparent representations of reality, but as situated productions shaped by context, intention, and relational dynamics [8]. Importantly, photography creates opportunities for children to reflect on their environment. The process of selecting, discussing, and interpreting images encourages reflexivity. Through this reflective practice, children critically engage with issues such as safety, belonging, exclusion, and spatial justice.

Building on these principles, photo-stories-structured sequences of images accompanied by children's narratives-constitute a significant participatory method. Photo-stories combine visual representation with personal storytelling, generating multi-layered accounts of children's lived worlds. They move beyond single images toward narrative coherence, allowing children to articulate temporal, spatial, and emotional dimensions of their experiences. As Clark and Moss demonstrate in the Mosaic Approach, participatory visual tools can create spaces for dialogue where children's perspectives are taken seriously in decision-making processes [9]. However, Spyrou cautions against romanticizing "voice [10]." He emphasizes that children's narratives are always mediated-by research settings, adult interpretations, and broader discursive frameworks. Therefore, photo-stories should be understood not as pure expressions of authentic voice, but as relational constructions that emerge within specific power dynamics.

Photo-stories also facilitate collective discussion. When shared in group settings, images become catalysts for dialogue, comparison, and shared meaning-making. This collective dimension supports forms of social participation, as children move from individual expression to collaborative reflection. Through such processes, visual storytelling can contribute to more democratic and inclusive research practices.

Photo-stories align with socio-material and relational understandings of childhood. They recognize children as active agents embedded in networks of space, objects, relationships, and institutional structures. By integrating visual representation, personal narrative, and collective interpretation, photo-stories function not only as research tools but also as practices of empowerment and civic engagement.

Public Space, Children, and Visual Storytelling: A Spatial Justice Perspective

Public space is not a neutral backdrop to social life but a socially produced arena shaped by power, ideology, and everyday practice. Drawing on Lefebvre's theory of the production of space, space can be understood as simultaneously perceived (spatial practices), conceived (representations of space), and lived (representational spaces). Within this triadic framework, children's experiences of public space are often confined to the level of the "lived," while urban planning and policy operate primarily at the level of the "conceived," dominated by adult logics of order, productivity, and control. This structural imbalance renders children's spatial practices visible yet politically marginalized.

From a relational perspective, Massey conceptualizes space as the product of interrelations, constituted through ongoing negotiations among multiple trajectories [11]. Space is therefore always under construction, open, and dynamic. Applying this to childhood studies shifts the analytical lens from viewing children as passive occupants of pre-existing environments to recognizing them as participants in the continual making of space. Children's everyday mobilities, play practices, and social interactions are not peripheral activities; they are constitutive of public space itself. However, contemporary urban environments frequently restrict children's capacity to shape spatial relations. Risk discourses, surveillance cultures, and neoliberal planning priorities produce what might be described as generational spatial injustice. The concept of spatial justice, developed by scholars such as Soja, emphasizes the uneven distribution of spatial resources and the political nature of spatial organization [12]. When safe play areas diminish, pedestrian infrastructures are inadequate, or public squares are commercialized, children experience not merely inconvenience but structural exclusion from the urban commons. Christensen and O'Brien argue that children's everyday geographies are rarely central to planning agendas, despite their intimate knowledge of neighborhood environments [1]. Such marginalization reflects what Lefebvre terms the dominance of "abstract space" - space organized around economic rationality and bureaucratic control. Within this configuration, children's embodied and affective experiences are subordinated. It is precisely here that visual storytelling and photo-stories acquire theoretical and political significance.

Photography can be understood as a practice through which children engage in the representational production of space. By selecting what to frame, what to exclude, and how to compose an image, children intervene in dominant spatial narratives. They render visible aspects of public space that may otherwise remain unnoticed: hidden play corners, unsafe crossings, informal gathering spots, or spaces of emotional attachment. Following Thomson, visual data should not be treated as transparent evidence but as situated, relational productions [8]. Images emerge within networks of power, interpretation, and mediation. Spyrou further complicates the notion of "voice," reminding us that children's narratives are always constructed within discursive contexts [10]. Thus, photo-stories do not provide unfiltered access to authentic childhood experience; rather,

they reveal how children negotiate meaning within structural constraints.

Clark and Moss's Mosaic Approach offers a methodological framework aligned with Massey's relational spatiality [9]. By combining visual, verbal, and participatory tools, it acknowledges that children's knowledge of space is multi-layered and embodied. Photo-stories, in particular, extend this approach by sequencing images into narrative forms that express temporal and spatial continuity. They allow children not only to document space but to theorize it implicitly through storytelling. When shared collectively, photo-stories become dialogical spaces in which children compare interpretations and articulate shared concerns. In this sense, visual storytelling can function as a micro-practice of spatial justice: it redistributes representational authority and challenges adult monopolies over spatial meaning-making. Integrating Lefebvre, Massey, and spatial justice theory thus reframes children's photography not merely as a research technique but as a spatial intervention. It situates children within the political production of urban space and positions their visual narratives as contributions to more democratic spatial imaginaries.

A child-centered approach to public space requires moving beyond protectionist paradigms toward a justice-oriented spatial politics. Recognizing children as co-producers of space demands institutional shifts in planning, research, and governance. Participatory visual methodologies do not automatically resolve structural inequalities, but they open critical spaces where children's lived geographies can contest, reinterpret, and potentially transform dominant spatial orders.

The Lundy Model of Child Participation through a Spatial Justice Lens

The Lundy Model of Child Participation (Lundy) provides a conceptual framework for operationalizing Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child [13]. It identifies four interrelated dimensions necessary for meaningful participation: Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence. While widely used in policy and educational contexts, the model can also be productively interpreted through critical spatial theory, particularly the work of Henri Lefebvre, Doreen Massey, and spatial justice scholarship.

Space: The Right to Express Views

In the Lundy framework, space refers not merely to a physical setting, but to the provision of safe and inclusive opportunities for children to form and express their views. From a Lefebvrian perspective, this dimension corresponds to the politics of the production of space. Public and institutional environments are socially produced through power relations, planning logics, and ideological assumptions (Lefebvre, 1991).

When children are excluded from decision-making arenas-whether urban planning meetings, school governance processes, or community consultations-this exclusion reflects the dominance of what Lefebvre terms "abstract space": space organized around bureaucratic and economic rationalities rather than lived experience. Creating participatory "space" for children, therefore, becomes a political act that disrupts adult monopolies over spatial meaning and authority.

Voice: Expression as Spatial Practice

The element of voice emphasizes that children must be supported to express their perspectives in ways that are meaningful to them. Lundy (2007) stresses that voice is not limited to verbal articulation but includes diverse communicative modes.

Here, Massey's (2005) relational understanding of space becomes particularly relevant. If space is constituted through interactions and multiple trajectories, then children's expressions—whether verbal, visual, embodied, or affective-are spatial practices that actively shape social environments. Visual methodologies such as photo-stories can be interpreted as spatial interventions: children do not simply describe space; they participate in its symbolic and material reconfiguration.

However, as Spyrou (2018) cautions, "voice" must not be romanticized as a transparent expression of authenticity. Children's narratives are produced within discursive and institutional contexts that shape what can be said, heard, and recognized. Thus, the concept of voice must be critically situated within broader power structures.

Audience: Power and Recognition

The dimension of audience raises the question of who listens to children and whether those listeners possess decision-making authority. Participation without recognition risks becoming tokenistic.

Spatial justice theory, particularly as articulated by Soja (2010), emphasizes that justice has a geographical dimension: inequalities are embedded in spatial arrangements and institutional structures. In this light, ensuring an "audience" is not merely about listening; it is about redistributing spatial power. When children's perspectives reach actors who control urban planning, school policy, or community resources, participation moves from symbolic inclusion toward structural engagement.

Without an audience capable of acting, participatory processes risk reproducing spatial injustice by inviting expression while maintaining existing hierarchies.

Influence: From Expression to Structural Change

The final dimension, influence, demands that children's views are taken seriously and have the potential to shape outcomes. Influence transforms participation from consultation into co-production.

From a Lefebvrian standpoint, influence relates to the "right to the city" - the right not only to access urban space but to participate in its transformation. Applied to children, this implies recognition of their right to contribute to the shaping of schools, neighborhoods, and public spaces. Influence thus becomes a mechanism for challenging generational inequities embedded within spatial governance.

Moreover, within a spatial justice framework, influence requires transparency and feedback. Children must understand how their input has been considered and why decisions have been made. Without feedback loops, participation remains incomplete and risks reinforcing disempowerment.

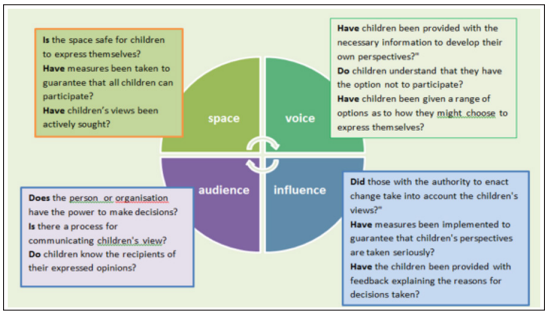

Figure 1: Landry's Model: Our Own Schematic Representation

Integrating the Lundy Model with Critical Spatial Theory

Reading the Lundy Model through Lefebvre, Massey, and spatial justice theory reveals participation as inherently spatial and political. "Space" is socially produced; "voice" is a spatial practice; "audience" involves the redistribution of power; and "influence" concerns the transformation of spatial structures.

This theoretical synthesis reframes child participation not as a procedural requirement but as a justice-oriented intervention in the socio-spatial order. It positions children not merely as beneficiaries of adult-designed environments but as co-producers of lived space. In doing so, it aligns participation with broader struggles for democratic urbanism and intergenerational equity.

49th Elementary School / 6th Grade: Intercultural Practices and Autoethnography in a Public School

The 49th Elementary School is a public school located in the center of Athens. The student population of Greek origin is only 10%, while the 90% comes from Albania, China, Bangladesh, and there are also refugee children from Afghanistan, Syria, Iran, and African countries, such as Congo. Students from Albania come from families of second or third-generation immigrants. They were born in Greece, have attended Greek school from a young age and form a stable student body in the school. They speak and write Greek very well. The children understand and speak Albanian, and some have knowledge of reading and writing in their native language. Similarly, students from China and Bangladesh form a significant portion of the school's stable student population, as their families are engaged in professional activities in the broader area of central Athens. Refugee students, mostly unable to speak Greek, are capable of reading and writing in their mother tongue, primarily Arabic and Farsi. In the afternoons, they attend intensive classes in their native language, participating in Arabic or Chinese schools, which are private educational structures supervised by the Chinese and Arab communities, respectively. A characteristic element of school's culture is the inclusion of linguistic and cultural diversity. Specific inclusive practices are implemented, such as: morning greetings in all the languages of the students, the use of alternative teaching materials. Written work in the students' mother tongues is prominently displayed in areas such as school's classrooms, corridors, and courtyard, as well as in group projects covering topics from daily life, such as the body, animals, etc. Students feel joy and pride in reading their work in their mother tongue, visible to their fellow students, educators, and visitors (Kibler, 2010; García, 2009).

The case of the 49th Elementary School (6th Grade) illustrates how intercultural everyday practices and mother tongue literacy initiatives can emerge through sustained teacher collaboration and institutional commitment. Rather than being implemented as externally imposed innovations, these practices developed organically within the school community as responses to linguistic diversity, shifting demographics, and policy constraints. The process can be theoretically framed through autoethnography, understood as a methodological and epistemological approach that connects personal experience to broader cultural, political, and institutional contexts (Ellis et al., 2011; Chang, 2008). In this case, teachers' reflective engagement with their own professional biographies, pedagogical beliefs, and classroom experiences functioned as a form of situated knowledge production. Their reflections were not merely introspective; they were relational and embedded within educational policy frameworks, curricular expectations, and intercultural tensions.

Autoethnography challenges traditional separations between researcher and practitioner by recognizing educators as knowledge producers. As Ellis et al. (2011) argue, autoethnographic inquiry situates the self within structures of power, enabling critical examination of institutional norms. Similarly, Chang (2008) emphasizes the analytical dimension of autoethnography, highlighting its potential to bridge personal narrative and sociocultural critique. Within the school context, teachers' reflective narratives enabled them to interrogate dominant monolingual ideologies and deficit-oriented discourses surrounding multilingual students.

This reflective process contributed to the development of innovative pedagogical approaches. As Alsup (2006) notes, reflective identity work allows educators to reconcile personal and professional identities, particularly in culturally diverse classrooms. Starr (2010) further demonstrates that autoethnographic practice can function as professional development, fostering transformative shifts in teaching philosophy and classroom practice.

In the 49th Elementary School, teachers' collaborative reflection led to the incorporation of students' linguistic repertoires as legitimate classroom resources rather than obstacles to learning. Mother tongue literacy initiatives became central to this transformation. By validating students' home languages, the school disrupted hegemonic language hierarchies and promoted inclusive pedagogies aligned with intercultural education principles. The production of identity texts, in which students represent their linguistic and cultural identities through written and multimodal forms, functioned both as pedagogical tools and as symbolic affirmations of belonging. Identity texts serve as an educational tool that allows children to express their experiences, thoughts, and emotions on subjects that are part of their personal history (Archakis, Tsakona, 2011) and enhance their sense of identity (Gavriilidou, 2012· Kompiadou, Tsoakalidou, 2014). These materials-alongside students' texts and collaboratively developed educational resources-document the school's trajectory of reflection and action. From a broader sociocultural perspective, this case exemplifies how local educational practices can negotiate tensions between policy mandates and lived classroom realities. The school's intercultural initiatives did not simply adapt to policy frameworks; they interpreted and recontextualized them through reflective practice. In this sense, autoethnography operated as both method and stance: a way of

critically inhabiting institutional space while simultaneously transforming it.

The Photo-Story Methodology

The photo-story methodology is a participatory and reflective research approach that enables participants to express their experiences, values, and identities through visual and narrative means. By combining photography with storytelling, this method encourages personal reflection, dialogue, and collective meaning-making. As Nolas, Arvanitakis and Arados (2023) point out the process unfolds in seven structured steps:

- Take photographs of things that are important to you.

Participants are invited to capture images that represent meaningful aspects of their lives, such as people, places, objects, memories, or experiences. This stage promotes self-reflection and personal engagement.

- Bring ten photographs to the workshop.

Each participant selects and brings ten images that they feel best represent their perspectives or stories. The selection process itself encourages critical thinking about meaning and significance.

- Discuss your photographs with the other research participants.

In small groups or plenary sessions, participants share their images and explain why they chose them. This dialogue fosters empathy, mutual understanding, and the exchange of diverse viewpoints.

- Choose one photograph and tell a story about it.

From the initial selection, participants identify one image that resonates most strongly with them and develop a personal narrative connected to it. This step deepens reflection and strengthens the link between visual and verbal expression.

- Create your photo-story.

Participants combine the chosen photograph with their written or oral narrative to produce a coherent photo-story. This creative process allows them to articulate meaning, identity, and lived experience in an integrated form.

- Discuss other participants' photo-stories.

The group engages in constructive dialogue about each photo-story, offering feedback, insights, and interpretations. This collaborative exchange enhances critical thinking and shared learning.

- Exhibit the photo-stories.
- Finally, the photo-stories are presented in a public or semi-public exhibition. This stage validates participants' voices, promotes community engagement, and highlights the collective outcomes of the research process. (Nolas, Varvantakis, Arolds: 2023). Overall, the photo-story methodology empowers participants by giving them an active role in knowledge production while fostering creativity, reflection, and a stronger sense of identity and belonging. In the present article, particular attention is given to the fourth step, which is examined in depth. It is noteworthy that the children who are literate in their mother tongue chose to write their names in their native languages: Ratz in Bengali, Fatma in Arabic, and Chouan in Farsi. Edison, who is of Albanian origin, did not use the Albanian language, as he only speaks Albanian but does not know how to write it.

This article focuses on the photograph the children chose to present, along with the sentence describing it in their photo story.

The final exhibition and presentation of the photo-stories(step 7th) took place at the end of the school year, during the school celebration, where the children presented their work to the school community (Figure 7,8).

The Children's Choices

Ratz shared a story about a sculpture called "Cosmogony", located in their neighborhood. He said: "I saw the sculpture every day, but I didn't know what it was." (Figure 2,3)

Edisson wrote: "With my wings, I want to fly all over the world." (Figure 4)

Fatma, a refugee girl from Syria living in a camp, wrote: "With my wings, I fly to Germany." She chooses to write in her mother tongue, Arabic, the verb "to fly" and her name. Her name expresses her identity and her desire, which is also her family's goal: permanent settlement in Germany (Figure 5).

Chuan, a refugee girl from Afghanistan, shared: "When we came to Greece, this was the first park we went to. I know it for three years" (Figure 6).

Figure 2: Space. Historic Center of Athens

Figure 3: 'Cosmogony 1978 by Sculptor: Giannis Parmakelis Location: Koumoundourou Square, Public

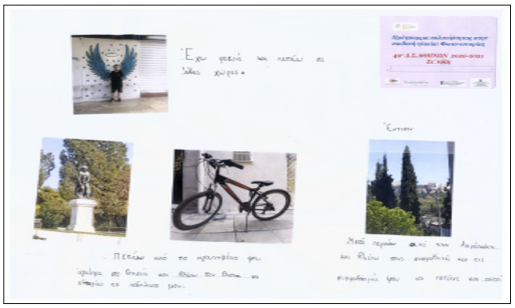

Figure 4

Figure 5

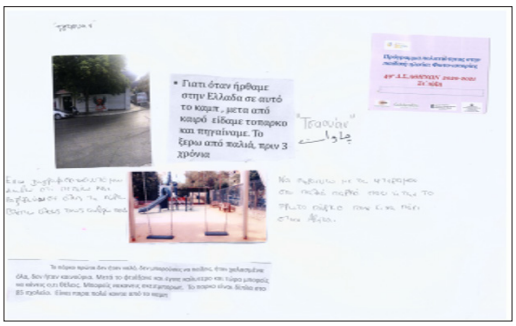

Figure 6

Interpreting Children's Narratives through Spatial and Lundy's (2007) model of participation and Intercultural Theory

The three excerpts-concerning the sculpture "Cosmogony", the metaphor of wings, and the park as a first site of arrival-constitute rich empirical material for examining how children narrate space, belonging, and aspiration. Interpreted through critical spatial theory, intercultural education, and participation frameworks, these narratives demonstrate that children do not merely inhabit socio-spatial structures but actively produce meaning within conditions shaped by inequality, displacement, and uneven distributions of power.

In the statement, "I saw the sculpture every day, but I didn't know what it was," the child articulates a distinction that resonates strongly with Lefebvre's triadic conception of space [14]. The sculpture exists as perceived space-embedded in everyday spatial practice-yet its symbolic and cultural significance remains inaccessible, situated within conceived space, where meanings are codified through institutional and cultural authority. The work, titled "Cosmogony", circulates within what Bourdieu would describe as the field of legitimate cultural capital [15]. Knowledge of public art, aesthetic discourse, and monumentality is unevenly distributed and often aligned with dominant socio-cultural norms. The child's remark thus signals a moment of symbolic exclusion: physical proximity does not guarantee interpretive access.

However, once the sculpture becomes an object of classroom inquiry, the pedagogical process intervenes in this asymmetrical distribution of symbolic capital. Through dialogical engagement, the child transitions from passive observer to interpretive agent. Within Lundy's model of participation, the dimensions of space and voice become activated: the classroom functions as a site in which children are afforded the opportunity to articulate meanings previously mediated by adult authority [13]. Education, in this sense, transforms lived space into meaningful space by redistributing interpretive power.

The recurring metaphor of wings-"With my wings, I want to fly all over the world"; "With my wings, I fly to Germany"-introduces a spatial imaginary structured by mobility, aspiration, and constraint. From Massey's relational perspective, space is constituted through intersecting trajectories across places, histories, and social relations [11]. For refugee children, space is neither static nor neutral; it is marked by displacement, borders, and uneven access to opportunity. The metaphor of flight signifies agency within structural limitation. Fatma's articulation of flying to Germany reflects the geopolitics of migration and the unequal distribution of mobility rights across Europe. Within Soja's framework of spatial justice, access to movement is structured by political and economic power, rendering borders both material and symbolic barriers [12].

Yet through narrative and visual expression, children symbolically transcend these constraints. Their imagined flight constitutes what Lefebvre conceptualizes as representational space: an imaginative reconfiguration of material conditions. When such aspirations are expressed within educational contexts-particularly in the child's home language-they become acts of identity affirmation. Cummins argues that linguistic recognition within schooling functions as empowerment, transforming marginalized experiences into legitimate knowledge [16]. The classroom thus emerges as a space where migration narratives are repositioned from policy objects to self-authored futures.

Chuan's reflection-"When we came to Greece, this was the first park we went to. I know it for three years."- situates the park as a mnemonic anchor within a trajectory of displacement and partial settlement. The park operates as a relational node in Massey's sense: a meeting point of migration history, everyday practice, and emergent belonging. Unlike the sculpture, who's meaning initially remained opaque, the park is saturated with affective significance. It is not merely recreational space but a spatial marker of transition from arrival toward stability.

From a spatial justice perspective, access to public green spaces signifies inclusion within the urban commons. For refugee families, such spaces may constitute among the few publicly accessible environments not defined by surveillance or bureaucratic regulation. Chuan's temporal framing-"I know it for three years"-signals duration as a claim to belonging. Stability, even within precarity, becomes narratively constructed through time. Within Banks's framework of multicultural education, such narratives contribute to a democratic project in which civic belonging is constituted not solely through legal status but through everyday participation in shared spaces [17].

Analyzed collectively, these narratives illuminate the interrelation of space, voice, audience, and influence. The children's accounts are not merely descriptive but constitutive: they generate spatial meaning and negotiate identity within unequal socio-political contexts. Voice, however, is relational and institutionally mediated. Recognition by teachers and peers is essential to meaningful participation. When educational institutions validate such narratives, they redistribute symbolic capital and challenge dominant linguistic and cultural hierarchies.

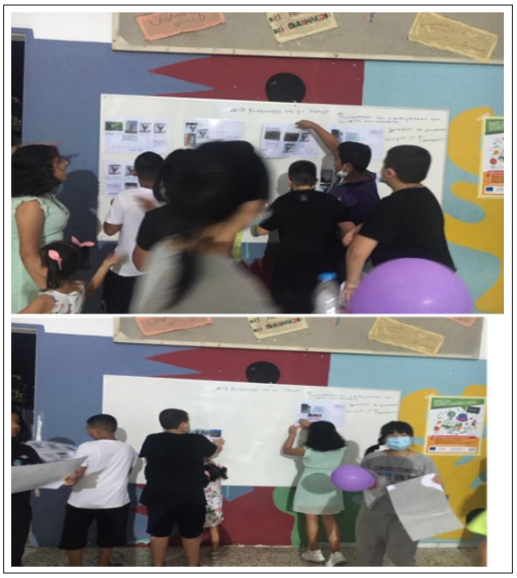

Figure 7: Preparing the Display Board with the Photo- stories

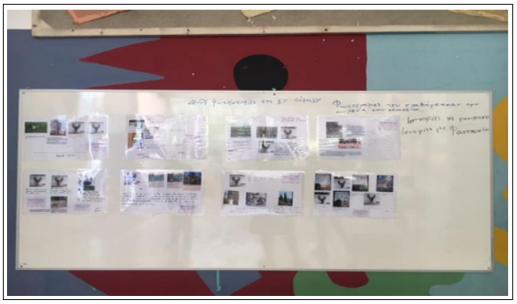

Figure 8: Exhibition in Our Schoolyard: "Our Photo- stories"

Participation becomes fully realized when children's narratives inform pedagogical design and curricular practice. The incorporation of mother-tongue literacy, dialogical inquiry, and identity-affirming texts exemplifies an educational commitment aligned with Lefebvre's notion of the right to the city and Soja's spatial justice framework. In this way, children are not positioned as passive recipients of integration policies but as co-producers of educational and social space. Through their narratives, they inscribe presence, articulate aspiration, and claim belonging within the socio-spatial landscapes they inhabit.

Conclusion

Photo-stories have emerged as a robust participatory methodology through which children engage critically with their environments, communicate lived experiences, and contribute to shaping both educational and urban spaces. By documenting and narrating their interactions with public spaces, children transition from passive users to co-creators of knowledge and meaning, embodying the principle of designing with children rather than for children (Christensen & O'Brien, UNICEF) [1, 18-21].

This participatory approach can be theoretically anchored across multiple frameworks. Lefebvre's production of space highlights that space is socially constructed through everyday practice, representations, and symbolic meaning [14]. In this sense, photostories transform mundane or overlooked environments-such as neighborhood parks or public sculptures-into representational spaces through which children negotiate identity, belonging, and agency. Similarly, Massey's relational conceptualization of space underscores that space emerges from intersecting trajectories and social relations [11]. Refugee children's narratives about parks, sculptures, and migratory journeys exemplify this relationality, demonstrating how personal histories, mobility, and collective experience converge to produce meaningful space.

The Lundy Model of Participation (Lundy) provides a practical framework for operationalizing children's agency within these contexts [13]. Photostories actively engage all four dimensions of the model:

- **Space:** Safe, structured environments are provided for children to capture and discuss their experiences.
- **Voice:** Children articulate perspectives through multimodal narrative and visual media, expressing interpretations of space and social relations.
- **Audience:** Teachers, peers, and community members serve as responsive interlocutors, validating children's contributions and facilitating dialogue.
- **Influence:** Children's insights inform pedagogical strategies, curricular content, and occasionally local interventions, ensuring that participation extends beyond mere expression into concrete impact.

Empirical examples illustrate this dynamic interplay of space, voice, and influence. One child reflected on a local sculpture, "Cosmogony", stating, "I saw the sculpture every day, but I didn't know what it was," highlighting the gap between physical proximity and symbolic access-a reflection of Bourdieu's symbolic capital [15]. Fatma, a refugee girl from Syria, wrote, "With my wings, I fly to Germany," using metaphor to navigate mobility constraints and assert aspiration, aligning with Massey's relational trajectories and Cummins' emphasis on additive bilingualism and identity affirmation [16]. Chuan, a refugee girl from Afghanistan, described a neighborhood park as the first space visited after arrival: "I know it for three years," emphasizing the affective and temporal dimensions of space, and illustrating the cultivation of belonging and social integration Banks [17].

Photo-stories also serve as a vehicle for intercultural education, challenging deficit-oriented perspectives and promoting recognition of linguistic, cultural, and social diversity. By validating children's narratives and home languages, the methodology operationalizes transformative pedagogical principles, enabling children to engage critically with both their immediate environments and broader sociocultural structures [7, 16,17].

From a spatial justice perspective Soja, photo-stories enact practices that redistribute power over space [12]. Children-especially those from marginalized or refugee backgrounds-intervene in the symbolic and material production of urban and educational spaces, asserting their rights to be seen, heard, and influential. These practices are further reinforced by adherence to the principles of inclusivity, safety, participation, and creativity that engagement is both meaningful and equitable [2, 18-21].

Photo-stories integrate visual, narrative, and reflective processes to amplify children's voices, foster active citizenship, and support creative participation. By connecting the Lundy model of participation with spatial theory and intercultural educational frameworks, this approach positions children as agents capable

of shaping more inclusive and just spaces. The method exemplifies how participatory, theoretically informed practices can transform everyday environments into arenas of critical reflection, civic engagement, and social empowerment [22-33].

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