

AcPrac Case Study

# Children as Urban Researchers

Kitti Baracsi,

Atlantic Fellows for Social and Economic Equity

Atlantic *Fellows*

FOR SOCIAL AND  
ECONOMIC EQUITY

**Design:** Saaga Leppanen

**Copy-editing:** Yasmine Kherfi

**Special thanks to:** The projects featured in this article were done in collaboration with children (whose ideas and insights I am particularly grateful for), as well as adult researchers, educators, teachers, artists and others from whom I have gained much inspiration. The paper is significantly shaped by their genuine effort to collaborate and question our context and practices.

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[Kitti Baracsi](#) is a Senior Atlantic Fellow for Social and Economic Equity at the LSE International Inequalities Institute, and an educator, researcher and curator of collective learning-based community and cultural initiatives. She has been working on collaborative research and creative interventions with children and young people including her ongoing project 'periferias dibujadas', which aims to become an 'improbable international observatory' of urban transformations and conflicts, as well as a space to document and reflect on ways of creating spaces for and with children to research, narrate, and creatively intervene in their urban contexts.

## About AFSEE

[The Atlantic Fellows for Social and Economic Equity \(AFSEE\)](#) at the LSE International Inequalities Institute is an innovative fellowship programme that is funded through a landmark grant from Atlantic Philanthropies.

AFSEE aims to build a community of changemakers whose work addresses social and economic inequalities across the globe, while supporting them in developing imaginative approaches to their work. Adopting an ethos of collective action, the programme encourages collaborations between a range of stakeholders, including academics, activists, artists, development practitioners, and policymakers.

## About the AcPrac Project

This case study is published as part of the '[Exploring the Potential of Academic-Practitioner Collaborations for Social Change \(AcPrac\)](#)' project. The AcPrac project has two key objectives: 1) to contribute to AFSEE's theory of change by exploring the conditions that are conducive to developing generative processes of knowledge exchange between academics and practitioners; and 2) to examine the methodological and epistemological challenges of researching inequalities, and particularly how the latter might be reproduced through the research process itself.

The project also makes theoretical contributions by reflecting on the drivers behind the collaborations that different stakeholders pursue and it explores the potential of collaborative research, as a methodology, in challenging knowledge inequalities and in decolonising research.

## Children as Urban Researchers

### Abstract

After providing brief insight into three projects that address how children can conduct research on their urban context and its transformations, this paper discusses a series of ethical and methodological issues and reflections on knowledge production which have significance, not only for working with children, but for working with communities and in transdisciplinary collaborations more generally.

### Introduction: Why Children?



A drawing by a child participant, which shows a child conducting an interview in a local shop. Source: Little Laboratory of Anthropology, Lisbon (2022).

This drawing was created during a session in which elementary school students collectively reflected on the interviews they had previously conducted in their neighbourhood in Lisbon. But can children be researchers?

*'Children are rational beings, intimately familiar with the requirements, difficulties, and obstacles in their lives. What is called for is neither despotic command, nor imposed discipline, nor untrusting control, but tactful understanding, trust in experience, cooperation, and coexistence'* (Korczak, 2017, 30)

Reflecting on Korczak's words, we might be able to question the deeply rooted adult-centrism that is prevalent in research and our society at large. Children are still largely excluded from academic and practice-based settings that produce knowledge on the social issues affecting them. Even when they are included, the research process often happens in extractive ways. To research and creatively intervene on urban issues, the radical pedagogy of the

collaborative projects I bring to your attention in this piece are drawn from broad collaborations between people with diverse experiences, ages, and professional backgrounds.

The article raises ethical and methodological questions that have significance, not only for working with children, but for working in any community and any kind of transdisciplinary collaboration. It demonstrates this by focusing on showing ways of subverting the dynamics of collaboration with children, while acknowledging the challenges they imply, and showing pathways towards change. The paper does so partly by going beyond dichotomies like research vs. practice, academic vs practitioner, researcher vs researched. Indeed, collaborating with children in research makes us reflect on the forms and sources of knowledge and expression that are implicitly considered the 'standard.' By reflecting on how adults interact with, and the extent to which they consider, children's knowledge as legitimate, one can understand some ways in which different subjects can remain excluded from knowledge production. As such, reflections around the inherent adult-centrism are important. Our efforts to deconstruct this can contribute to decolonising our collaborations and to reflecting on the various forms of inequalities that are at play throughout them.

After providing brief insight into the three projects, this paper discusses a series of ethical and methodological issues more generally. Following this, it draws attention to concrete examples to rethink knowledge production and address some tensions concerning them.

### **Multimodal Collaborative Neighbourhood Ethnographies**

The projects presented here were carried out as transdisciplinary and multi-actor collaborations, with the aim of implementing research interventions conducted by children. These initiatives involved researchers working in the areas of anthropology, geography, pedagogy, among others, in collaboration with artists, students of anthropology, pedagogy, architecture, design and other areas, as well as the children's educational communities (those who are connected to them through education, such as teachers, school staff, and families). Some of those listed had multiple roles and disciplinary backgrounds. For example, I held the role of projects coordinator, workshop facilitator, and conceptualised the methodological design. The projects I describe were born out of the effort of various actors who have an demonstrated record of looking for ways to create horizontal collaborations with children and young people: meaning that the latter are involved in defining, executing, and disseminating research, through a process that is dialogic and respectful. In the projects described, children had a central role in the decision-making and the tasks carried out, while the adults' role was foremost to support and collaborate with them, while attempting to minimize their influence as much as possible.

The projects reflected here were all planned and executed at the margins of academia. They were either built on previous academic research or born as an educational and community-driven project, which was in turn incorporated into a broader academic project. These projects reflect the desire of facilitators to go beyond what research in academia usually allows for.

### **‘Making Neighbourhood, Making School’<sup>1</sup>**

How can students learn with local communities and make use of their extracurricular knowledge? What are ways in which schools can contribute to their neighbourhoods and become places of exchange for diverse forms of knowledge? These were the founding questions of the project ‘Fare rione, fare scuola’ - in English ‘Making Neighbourhood, Making School’ (Kollektiv Oranotango, 2018). It was dedicated to fostering collaboration between the neighbourhood and school, with 5th grade students and teachers of the Stefano Barbato Elementary School in Barra. This area is a periphery of Naples, with a significant presence of Roma people from a community in Romania. The aim on this occasion was to put together a collaborative project that allowed children to assume the role of researcher. The workshops were held in 2018 January and February, during three entire school weeks.

Within the general theme of concern, the children defined the scope and changed the topic during the process. This is how we ended up working, in one class, on the different forms of *knowledge* present within the neighbourhood. Meanwhile, in the other one, we focused on the legends of Barra, i.e. scary popular stories that children tell each other. Children were invited to leave the classroom to directly observe and learn about their neighbourhood through exploratory walks and interviews. The 5th-graders explored the local resources in their immediate environment, based on their collective decisions: conducting interviews mostly with shop owners and family members. The students explored how schools can become sites for the exchange of diverse forms of knowledge, demonstrating their ideas using collective maps and audiovisual works. Through plenary sessions and smaller working groups, they collectively created multimodal narratives as maps, theatre scenes and cartoons. These were in turn shared with the community in an exhibition at the end of the process.

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<sup>1</sup> Project realised by Kollektiv Oranotango and funded by the Schools of Tomorrow Programme of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin. In collaboration with the students and teachers of the 69th didactic circle’s Stefano Barbato Elementary School, coordinated by Kitti Baracsi and Paul Schweizer and facilitated also by Geandra Nobre, Paola Piscitelli, Roberto Carro and Marta Ruffa. The partnership with the school originated from previous research done for my PhD studies in Education.



'Knowledge of Barra': collective map as part of a final exhibition organised by the participating students for the rest of the school and the visiting families. Source: Making Neighbourhood, Making School, Barra, Naples, 2018.

### Albayzín, Human Heritage<sup>2</sup>

This methodological approach was replicated in the Albayzín, Human Heritage project, developed in the school C.E.I.P. Gómez Moreno, in the Albayzín neighbourhood in Granada, between 2018 and 2020 with classes of 4 to 6th grade students. The project carried out in a broad collaboration with numerous volunteers, especially the students' parents, which was welcomed by the school and its teachers.<sup>3</sup> My idea of working on the neighbourhood's conflicts converged with ideas of working on its 'heritage,' proposed by Dario Ranocchiarri and Gloria Calabresi. It was an ethnographic process that rapidly led to a search for 'human heritage' in this 'UNESCO world heritage' neighbourhood. The latter is also strongly impacted by gentrification and 'touristification.'

<sup>2</sup>The project 'Albayzín, patrimonio humano' was born and carried out through a broad collaboration, including: the learning community of the Gómez Moreno Elementary School, namely myself, Dario Ranocchiarri and Gloria Calabresi, as well as volunteers who took part as facilitators. Families, neighbourhood residents, university students were also involved throughout the process. The audiovisual workshops were facilitated by Francesca Cogni.

In 2019-20 the project ADD - Digital Dialogic Archive for Participatory Ethnography, supported by MediaLab Granada, and led by Dario Ranocchiarri as PI, built on the previous experiences of the initiative to work towards a dialogic ethnographic platform. It continued the ethnographic research with children, focusing on the topic of play. We developed games related to selected places in the neighbourhood.

In the same year, we also collaborated with La Ampliadora - School of Photography, looking for synergies with their project, carried out to mark the 25th anniversary of the UNESCO heritage site title. Our project idea and collective work with the children was featured in their documentary. For more on how the project was seen as a curricular innovation for university students in anthropology, see: Ranocchiarri, Calabresi, Gómez, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> I was part of the 'learning community', since my daughter attended this school, however, a class that did not participate in this project.

Students of 6 different classes (ranging from 4 to 6th grade) participated in collective mapping, through which they identified interesting issues, problems and concerns based on their experiences of the neighbourhood. Following this, they went out to interview a diverse range of people walking through the neighbourhood -neighbours, shopkeepers, and tourists- asking them the questions that they prepared in advance. In the discussions which followed, they identified the most interesting questions on different subjects: from attention to the music in the streets to different experiences of living in the neighbourhood. In one of the six classes, the students prepared a rap text about their demands. In another, they drafted a story that tells the past, present and future of the neighbourhood, as they imagined it based on interviews that they previously conducted. In the other classes, they compiled their experiences throughout the project on maps that not only include drawings and photos but also, through QR codes, videos recorded during the sessions. These interviews, group discussions, debates and theatre exercises demonstrate how the entire process was carried out. There was also a video clip based on the rap song and an animated short film of the journey through the past, present and future.

### **Little Laboratory of Anthropology - Diving in the Neighbourhood<sup>4</sup>**

The project Little Laboratory of Anthropology was carried out with the students of two 4th grade classes of an elementary school in the Anjos neighbourhood (Lisbon) between December 2021 and June 2022. It is an area that has a significant presence of immigrant communities and that is also enduring gentrification. They attempted to answer the initial question: what makes a neighbourhood? The project, built on the principles and knowledge of anthropology, also integrated the methodological proposal of the projects in Naples and Granada: a collaborative investigation with the children as key actors and narrators of the neighbourhood they live in. This creative process culminated in an exhibition in the square located in front of the school which brought a map, photographic records, drawings, comics, and a digital map with audiovisual materials focused on the theme of local commerce (including stop motion, performance, interviews) through a QR code.

### **Critical Pedagogies and Collaborative Research**

These projects' approach was formed by the confluence of critical pedagogies, collaborative educational and urban ethnographies, as well as critical geographies and artistic interventions.

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<sup>4</sup> The project was realised in a partnership between the Nuno Gonçalves School Grouping (Sampaio Garrido Elementary School) and CRIA - Centre for Research in Anthropology, supported by the Fazer Acontecer 2019 Programme - Lisbon City Hall. The original project proposal about bringing Anthropology to elementary school through afternoon activities, was written and submitted for funding by Giulia Cavallo and Micol Brazzabeni. However, the execution was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The initial proposal was then modified and moved to the curricular lessons. When I joined the project in 2021, we decided to readapt it. Inspired by the previous projects described, we implemented collective ethnographic research on the neighbourhood (Mergulhar no bairro com as crianças, 2021).



Having degrees in Aesthetics, Communication and Pedagogy, I have been doing educational - mostly ethnographic research - for around 17 years. From early on, at the beginning of my PhD studies in Education, I started to think about the possibilities of collaborative research within my research project. My interest and conviction in the possibility to implement horizontal research collaborations came from my parallel involvement with pedagogical practice and more specifically a democratic educational project - Collegium Martineum - with Roma adolescents in Hungary. It was strongly inspired by Korczak's work<sup>5</sup> (1992) and shared several characteristics with the Summerhill school's democratic pedagogy (Neil, 1995).

Throughout the years, I inhabited both academic and activist spaces, and from early on, I have identified mostly as an activist-researcher and educator. I understand my role as the one who designs processes and holds spaces in which different actors can learn and implement research together, as well as ideate interventions based on this knowledge.

This approach was enriched and changed through encounters with other radical or critical pedagogical experiences over the years. These made an explicit effort to deconstruct adult-centrism and/or rethink knowledge production. I was inspired by, and learnt from, several collectives and organisations. These include Collegium Martineum, GRIDAS, Chi rom... e chi no, Kollektiv Orangotango, as well as from collaborations with numerous educators, researchers and artists from Eastern and Southern Europe and Latin-America. Many of them were involved in the projects described as well. These activists and groups took as reference the works of Janusz Korczak, Paulo Freire, Francesco Tonucci, Gianni Rodari, bell hooks and many more. My experience with cooperative learning, counter-cartographies (kollektiv orangotango+, 2018), and art interventions have also shaped my practice. Additionally, I am greatly inspired by the work of educational ethnographers from around the world,<sup>6</sup> and particularly ways in which they think about, and conduct, collaborative ethnographies (Spindler, Hammond, L., Hammond, L. A., 2006, Walford, 2008, Milstein, 2010a).

### **Ethical Research Involving Children - Towards an Extended Concept**

It is an important and often difficult task to safeguard minors in research. Many are discouraged by the difficulties concerning this practice, namely obstacles that an ethical review might present. As a result, they often end up avoiding working with children altogether. Many have raised that this outcome can ultimately result in silencing children's voices within research.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Korczak's thinking was fundamental to the UN Convention on Children's Rights.

<sup>6</sup> Including the Oxford Educational Ethnography conferences as spaces of exchange.

<sup>7</sup>The childetics.com website, for instance, has a significant number of resources, and gives space for a variety of topics to discuss ethical research involving children (Shier, 2023). See also: Stalford, Lundy, 2022 and Beazley, Bessell, Ennew, Waterson, 2009.

There are several topics, in which leaving out children's experiences is highly problematic. It is obvious that when looking at problems that affect children at a scale that is accessible to them, their experiences should be considered. However, this article does not simply raise the question of including children as participants but also approaches them as researchers -as a matter of epistemic justice. In the featured projects, adults were not doing research on children's experiences, but instead sharing tools with them, so that they could lead their own research. These projects had to also respond to the standards set by transdisciplinary frameworks within the school and academia. These include principles of ethnographic research and critical pedagogy, while also incorporating artistic practice. This multiplicity presented further difficulties in terms of interpreting and harmonising the research protocols. Standards and considerations are also different across multiple local contexts when safeguarding children. There are many aspects that could be considered. In the following, I list a few contested aspects to think about and extend the concept of ethical research involving children, especially when it comes to consent, privacy and authorship.

### **Consent, Privacy, and Authorship in Transdisciplinary Collaborations**

Ethical reviews are important to set standards, especially when working with children. However, complying with requirements is often not enough to reach an ethical collaboration. It is a continuous process; listening to what children would like to do or not, which often clashes with the research plans. There is a huge burden on these endeavours, especially in strongly hierarchical settings. They often must respond to productivity, time pressure and other standards that in many ways favour adult-centric thinking. Moreover, none of us are free from the latter. When it comes to collaborating within institutional contexts, adults - even those who have a background in democratic or radical pedagogies, can unconsciously 'take advantage' of children, as they are subject to their authority. There are significant difficulties to change this, as we are part of systems built on hierarchies of knowledge. While there is no way to fully escape this asymmetrical power relation, they can and should be addressed - beyond their mere acknowledgment.

The projects' activities were included in the school curriculum, and as such, children could not opt out during class time. However, they could decide not to contribute and in cases where it was logistically possible, they could also decide whether they wanted to come along for the outside activities. Indeed, sometimes they decided not to share their thoughts, or not take part in the neighbourhood visit. These decisions often clashed with the pedagogical intentions of the school to make children participate in the activities.

Such tensions are part of the work: whenever we collaborate with schools, we are inevitably questioning and transforming an institution through implemented micro-practices. A with-within-against position, that highlights both proximity and distance to the institutions (Athanasίου, 2016), could guide us throughout the process.

Audiovisual recording and privacy are a complex issue that we often risk oversimplifying.<sup>8</sup> This article presents possible ways to work with children in research in a respectful way, not making audiovisuals about them, but giving them the tools to create their narratives. In each project, there were moments recorded by adults – whether by the facilitators or the families involved. I do not think recordings made by adults should be avoided. Rather, we need to diversify and create more transparency in these dynamics throughout the projects. Listening to children when recording can be as respectful, as much as children can be manipulated to do something in seemingly active roles.

The three projects were implemented in public schools as educational projects and were approved by the school direction. Teachers informed us that they had a generic agreement with parents<sup>9</sup> on similar curricular activities coming from external partners. They also had agreements related to audiovisual recording. At the same time, descriptions of projects to be approved as a guardian of a child usually give a very limited understanding of what will exactly happen or what the outputs imply in the long run. A genuinely ethical approach therefore would be to involve families in the projects much more actively, since this is the only way that they can be really informed. Bureaucratic and time constraints often do not allow for this. Defining roles and collaborating with actors who are internal or external to the school depends also on the extent to which the school, in each context, previously worked to open itself to the territory. This defines the quality of collaborations with teachers, and the possible involvement of families and different local initiatives. In the case of the described projects, the three schools counted on some level of involvement of families in the schools' everyday life. In Granada, family members volunteered already at open lessons as part of an ongoing programme called 'Learning Community'.<sup>10</sup> In Barra, children's families were interviewed by the children and invited to participate at the final exhibition. In Lisbon, some families were also interviewed and all of them invited to the final exhibition.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For a piece on how audiovisual anonymity can unintentionally lead to silencing children, see: Korkiamäki, Kauko, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Adult informants also often need to be safeguarded with special attention in these projects, since they tend to easily share information with children, especially if they know them, which can make them lose sight of giving away sensitive information.

<sup>10</sup> Learning Communities is a project based on a set of successful educational actions aimed at social and educational transformation. This educational model is in line with international scientific theories that highlight two key factors for learning: interactions and community participation. See: Comunidades de Aprendizaje.

<sup>11</sup> Mergulhar no bairro com as crianças, exhibition and guided visit, Bairro em Festa, 2022.



Stop motion, created by the students. The children organised and realized the shooting based on a story previously written by them. Source: Little Laboratory of Anthropology, Lisbon, 2022.

While there are examples of ethnographic writing with children (see: Milstein, 2010b), academics face several ethical concerns regarding the protection of children and their safeguarding whenever they would like to cite them as co-authors. There are similar concerns regarding the use of audiovisual materials.<sup>12</sup> Widely applying contributor role taxonomies is a way to give individuals credit for their specific contributions in collective projects. Yet the dilemma is how to pay attention to research ethics when working with children, while still giving them credit for their work.<sup>13</sup> The children, who are co-authors usually are referred to as the 'students of the 4th grade,' for safeguarding purposes. There is a real concern that due to anonymity, the recognition for the projects goes to the adults who coordinated them, unless they implement a practice of collective dissemination.<sup>14</sup> It is important to be as transparent and specific as possible on what was done by whom and how. This allows for diverse levels and strategies, instead of hiding our practice behind conventional terms of co-creation.

<sup>12</sup> This paper has to anonymise and avoid sharing audiovisual materials that were already shared in community events or in some cases published online.

<sup>13</sup> In Granada, we participated with children at a forum where the two coordinators of the project - Dario Ranocchiaro and me - were supposed to talk, but we decided to attend together with the students who participated in the project. After some initial surprise, they were welcomed by the organisers and the public to talk about their research. However, their intervention could not become part of the final video recording that was published about the event due to privacy concerns. (I Encuentro del Foro Albaicín y Sacromonte, 13 December, 2018, Granada)

<sup>14</sup> It is something that we have been working on with Micol Brazzabeni in the last two years through the 'Diving in the neighbourhood' project, which was born out of the Little Laboratory of Anthropology. It promotes a series of artistic creations and cultural interventions that are based on ethnographic data conducted together alongside children, with the aim to share them with various audiences.

### **Respectful, Dialogic Knowledge Production for Safeguarding Children and Communities**

This article advocates for thinking of safeguarding as an extended concept. Adult-centrism is deeply rooted in our thinking and permeates our everyday practices as researchers, educators, community workers, parents or any kind of citizen who is in contact with children. This article therefore shows some examples of how we can deconstruct it, by considering children as fully capable to learn and think with, and by extension as researchers in their own contexts. This way, they are not researched but can be approached as urban ethnographers who reflect on their own and others' experiences in their neighbourhoods, their inequalities and conflicts. How to do so? First, we need to create tools accessible for children to observe, understand, analyse and express their thoughts. We also need to learn together, share information, and facilitate learning. The afterlife of these projects is important to consider too, including postproduction and dissemination.

### **Knowledge Creation Otherwise**

#### **Neighbourhood Ethnographies Between the Particular and the General**

The three projects were based on neighbourhood ethnographies implemented in school settings and their surroundings. They also built on the approach of situated pedagogies that understand wider societal issues through the particularity of a place, i.e. by analysing structures of oppression in a specific context (Gruenewald 2003, Kitchens 2009). Neighbourhood ethnographies implemented by school communities have a proximity to the concepts of educational communities or learning communities, as well to the educating cities concept, initiatives that promote education as embedded in their community and in their urban context. Indeed, the school partners all had some sort of already existing actions in terms of involving the families and the local community in the school's life and the pedagogical processes as already mentioned above.

Through the action of learning about the experiences of neighbourhood inhabitants, these ethnographies resignify what school, community, learning and knowledge mean. By being at the centre of such ethnographies, children have the potential to radically change the quality of knowledge production. What do children know about their neighbourhood? What would they like to learn? What would they like to say about it? These were the questions the children answered. Building on the experiences the children have in the neighbourhood, they decided what to focus on, who to interview and what kind of questions to ask with the support of facilitators. They were free to use different techniques, ranging from notes, voice recording, photos, videos, and drawings on site.



Fieldwork notes: A child participant opted for drawing while conducting an interview in a local shop. Source: Little Laboratory of Anthropology, Lisbon, 2022.

Neighbourhood ethnographies can be subversive in many ways in terms of questioning knowledge production. When putting in the centre those who experience the neighbourhood every day, it recognises that they have important knowledge. Sharing research tools is a way that enables children to collect, reflect and analyse the data collected in an accessible way. It reverts some of the extractive mechanisms of urban research. Interviewed adults become informants, and children become researchers. Without aiming to romanticise children as researchers, they are often much better ethnographers than adults: not only do they make incredible observations but draw unexpected associations and analysis in many cases. Also, adult informants react with more trust to them.

So, what can we learn from this? There is potential in recognising the importance of knowledge people have about their own context. Also, instead of extracting people's experience based on externally defined questions, they can formulate questions, study through adequate and accessible tools which generate knowledge otherwise not possible to create. Questioning and redrawing roles, sharing knowledge and tools, and trusting the process are key to achieving that.

### **Mapping Other Knowledges<sup>15</sup>**

'Student: They made the mapping to get to know our neighbourhood. Mother: Yes, because sometimes we live in a place, we know nothing about, we do not know its origins, its

<sup>15</sup> This section incorporates ideas from the following entry in the Homes of Commons toolkit (Homes of Commons, 2021), which is based on Kollektiv Orangotango's various publications (kollektiv orangotango +, 2018)



circumstances. Student: First, we did the interviews, and then we gathered all the information, and we drew it and put it on this map.<sup>16</sup>

The projects used the collective mapping method in various situations and for different purposes. Collective mapping can be as much a method for initial reflection and for setting the research agenda, or used for auto-/peer-ethnography, as a tool of narration to share the final research findings in a collective and accessible way.



Initial collective map of the neighbourhood. Source: Albayzín, Human Heritage project. Granada, 2018.

Counter-mapping is based on the idea that other worldviews are legitimate; it challenges dominant cartographic imaginations and is a tool used and abused in many ways both in community projects and research. However, if used in a reflexive way, counter-mapping is one of the simplest yet most subversive ways to question hegemonic representations. It is a way of situating knowledge and can contribute to decolonising knowledge production by breaking the power asymmetries within it. At the very heart of critical cartography lies the recognition that maps were, and continue to be, complicit in colonialism.

Collective mapping acknowledges that everyone knows something about their context and that their knowledge is valuable. It becomes a powerful tool of research in cases where historical oppression, inequalities and racism play out. This is because the process opens room for critical reflection, discussion, and the representation of alternative and suppressed *knowledges*. Cartography, however, does not exist outside of power structures, which reminds

<sup>16</sup> Interview with a student and her mother, *Making Neighbourhood, Making School*, Naples, 2018

us to be careful what becomes visible through mapping and how it might impact the communities we work with.

Mapping with children means breaking dominant adult-centric representation. Moreover, working with children who migrated and who face exclusion and discrimination, is a powerful statement: it recognises the legitimacy of their knowledge of their own neighbourhood.

*'We think together, and we look for a different perspective on territory, on space. In this way, the map is more than a mere representation of a 'real' space, let us say an objective space. I would say it is quite the opposite. This map goes beyond being based on a scale, on cardinal points, it becomes a representation of a space subjectively experienced.'*<sup>17</sup>

The creation of a collective map is a process that begins with moments of chaos and dispersion. The participating children draw, build, deconstruct, and create again, through negotiations and sharing about what the map will tell and what is significant for the group. A map is a tool that not only tells things but above all opens up the possibility of being together with glue, scissors, and colours in hand to discuss our views about the perception and experiences we have about the neighbourhood: Through the map, we can do collective ethnography and showcase and analyse issues that are important for the local context. This dialogical learning process offers a radically different way of constructing knowledge through research. It gives the opportunity to engage in a more corporal, more creative, more experiential way and creates a setting for collaboration, discussion, analysis that is much more collective than what we are used to. Mapping is a practice but also a statement on the importance of sitting, thinking, and creating together.





### **Dialogical Learning and Consensus-making**

There is no single method that will free us from adult centrism, or other forms of oppression, however reflexivity and creating spaces of consensus-making can move towards a change. There are many ways consensus-making can be practiced throughout the process and should be indeed part of each step of the work. Collective mapping as described above, is one of these dialogical processes that involve continuous discussions and an effort towards consensus. But there are many other ways:

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<sup>17</sup> interview with Paul Schweizer, Kollektiv Orangotango, conducted by Paola Piscitelli, for the Making Neighbourhood, Making School project, Barra, 2018.



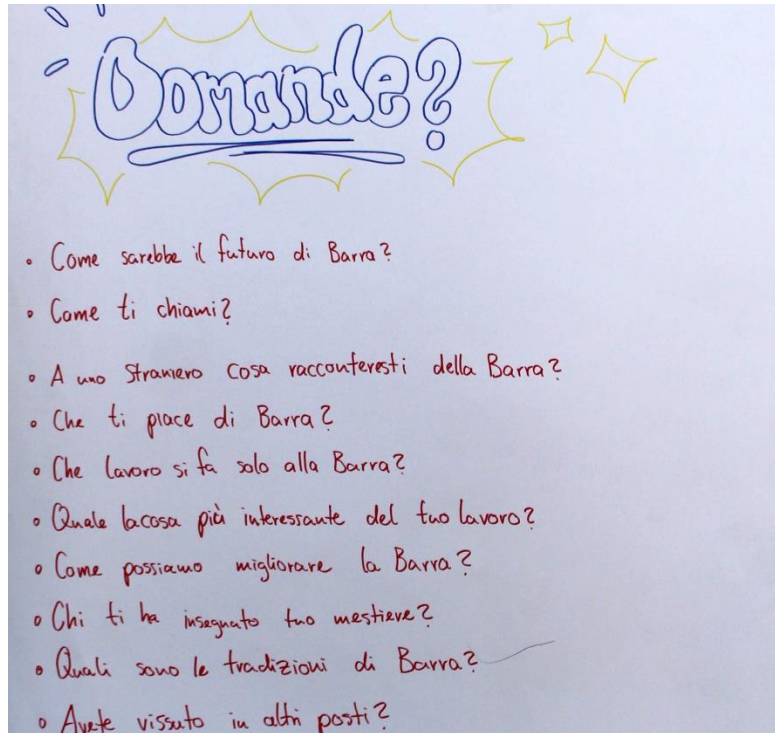
<p>De Jenera Inak Don Rua Antonio Pedro</p> 	<p>Alfaria R. Martin</p> 	<p>Popelaria - Rua do Regal R. Barros</p> 	<p>Empa Estelina R. Palmira</p> 
Quanto tempo tem este cafe?	Ha quanto vive no bairro?	Ha quanto tempo abriu a popelaria?	Ha quanto tempo tem este cafe?
Qual no bairro?	Ha muitas diferencas?	Por que se lembram de abrir a popelaria?	Quem sao os clientes?
Quem sao os clientes?	Profesor agora o profeci antes?	Que livros vendem mais?	Onde mora?
Que gosta no bairro?	Gostas de trabalhar no bairro?	Por que gostam do livro e que vendem mais?	Quem sao os seus colegas?
Acha que o bairro mudou?	Como se chama?	Por que gostam do livro de papel?	E' dificil?
Que e' que mudou aqui?		Que gostam mais livros?	Quem faz as bolas?
O cafe e' um bom negocio?		E tem bom negocio?	
Onde vende o nome?		Que mudou no bairro?	
		Por que mais vendeu no bairro?	
		Por que mais vendeu no bairro?	
			Que mudou no bairro?

Interview plan prepared by the children in a small group, that includes the list of people to be interviewed and the questions to ask. Source: Little Laboratory of Anthropology. Lisbon, 2022.

When deciding about people to be interviewed and the questions to be asked, each student proposed a list of people they wished to interview. Then they discussed in small working groups, and collectively selected a list of people and questions, assessing their availability, and other factors. Similarly, the interview questions were created and selected collectively, through small group discussions. They were later evaluated collectively with the facilitators' support, sharing their own experiences as interviewers. To develop a careful investigation, it is important not only to produce ideas but also to collectively reflect on the resources and possibilities to carry them out.

The interviews were prepared and conducted by the children: they organised their structure and determined the people responsible for the questions. Consensus-making is not only about taking decisions together when producing knowledge. It is an activity that creates trust or that can potentially make one lose trust.

Consensus-building around the research questions and other aspects of collective discussion are often slow and difficult. However, they are essential moments in which adults must learn to limit their power to create a meaningful experience of collaboration and ownership.



The interview questions proposed by the children. Source: 'Making Neighbourhood, Making School,' Barra, 2018.

### Studying Complexity Through Art

In the described projects, art and creativity are not seen as additional elements, or as parallel processes. They are integral parts of the research approach and process, using creative methods as empirical tools for analysis and research outcomes.

Tourists kick us out<sup>18</sup>

Tourist: Nice, nice, how much does it cost?

Shop owner: Get out children, don't play here, otherwise, people can't enter! ... One hundred euros.

Tourist: And where is the Alhambra?

Touristic learning<sup>19</sup>

Interviewer child: (...) Do you speak English?

Shop owner: Yes, a bit, I learn a lot of languages with the people who come here. (...)

Interviewer child: So, the majority of those who buy here are tourists?

Shop owner: Well, yes, because Albayzín has a lot of history and is so beautiful, so a lot of people come here. (...)

These conversations were part of the performances written by two distinct groups of students who had the task of identifying both the positive and negative impacts of tourism on their neighbourhood, based on their previous interviews conducted for the Albayzín, Human Heritage project.

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<sup>18</sup> Title given by the students.

<sup>19</sup> Title given by the students.

While it is possible to study and discuss complex topics with elementary school students, their contributions often significantly change the focus of the analysis. There were many examples of this throughout these processes. They not only fundamentally influence where to conduct the interviews through their knowledge about places and persons, but they also identify the significant issues of their context, ones that adults might not see. There is indeed a learning opportunity for adults when working together with children as researchers, subverting the children's eternal role as 'learners'. (Milstein 2015).

As simple as a drawing can be part of the research process in many ways. Some children took notes during their observation not only by writing but making drawings. Also, in various cases, they reflected on what they observed and learned from the interviews using a drawing. This created the moment of individual or small group reflection but also sharing, when showing and discussing with others why they prepared that drawing. In this sense, it is not an end, but a medium through which one can relive the moment of the interview, organize thoughts, and collectively reflect and discuss their impressions. Moreover, part of these drawings was cut out and used for the final map, or in some cases the ideas became part of the collective narrative and turned into a cartoon.



Final map: This collective map was drawn by 4th-grade students about the neighbourhood of Anjos in Lisbon. There are homeless people on the map. The mapping moment was also a space for reflection not only about homelessness and about how children live and understand this situation but about wider problems of housing and inequalities. Source: Little Laboratory of Anthropology, Lisbon, 2022.

Of course, it is not only with children that art and creativity are used in research, but the experiences described show how far we can go with the outlined methods, not as complementary but as central elements of our collective data collection and analysis. Multimodal and creative interventions are often conducted as part of action research in community projects. There has been a growing trend in the last years among ethnographers to incorporate multimodality in their research.<sup>20</sup> A combination of creative tools can be used throughout the research process, however, it is not the tool that changes our collaboration: it facilitates the data collection and discussion, as well as frames the possible formats in which our findings are published, yet what makes the real difference is our capacity to go further. Instead of using these tools only for collecting experiences, we use the radical potential of turning these conversations into legitimate moments of theory-making. Visuals, for instance, cannot be only illustrative of what is then being written. We need to recognise their unique importance in not only explaining but generating new concepts. Indeed, creative exercises are tools for radical imagination, that support is in questioning and imagining the unimaginable.



The Albayzín through the past, present and future. The students imagined their neighbourhood with trees and without tourists and traffic. A pre-pandemic imagination of the unimaginable that later become reality for a while. This example also shows the importance of working with the imagination to reframe our ideas and create new narratives. Source: Albayzín, Human Heritage, Granada, 2018.

As hooks writes in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, merely using a term does not bring a process or practice into being, and it is possible to practice theorising without knowing the term as well (hooks, 1984). The division between those who offer experiences and those who theorise is at the core of knowledge hierarchies. Research with children (or other non-

<sup>20</sup> For instance the journal <https://entanglementsjournal.org> *entanglements: experiments in multimodal ethnography*.



conventional research collaborators) using non-academic, often non-verbal methods, is not limited to the practice of transferring, or translating data. The idea of going out and identifying questions through the neighbourhood ethnographies has an obvious connection to grounded theory (Glaser, B., Strauss, A.), in which multimodality could be seen as a mere instrument. However, what I am suggesting here is to go a step further; instead of translating from and to academic language, academics should give legitimacy to what is and how it is created. In this sense, knowledge is co-created in the narrative in-between spaces (Kinnunen, 2015).

However, we must be flexible with our expectations, since these can be quite different from the usual formats used to create and read theory. In addition to reflective group conversations, collective maps drawn by the children or cartoons should also be considered legitimate formats of conceptualisation, based on previously collected ethnographic data, however not in the form of scientific terms. This is a way to address hermeneutical injustice (Fricker, 2007); the more imaginative a creation is, the more potential it holds to go beyond existing concepts. What we can learn from these experiences is that there is a way to radically question knowledge hierarchies by understanding that the available tools of theorising could be much more diverse and might not need to remain the privilege of a few.

### **Multimodality and Accessibility**

Children often already have basic knowledge on how to make a stop motion on a smartphone, sometimes even better than some adult facilitators. However, the moments of co-creation were simultaneously moments of ‘training.’ In the described projects, some team members were experts in filming,<sup>21</sup> theatre,<sup>22</sup> illustration/comics,<sup>23</sup> animation and various formats of collaborative audiovisual work with children.<sup>24</sup> It is extremely important that children acquire the technical knowledge to tell their own stories. These creations can be deemed beautiful but can also be ‘ugly.’ We had to be careful not to focus too much on the aesthetics of the final creations. While children and adults alike can learn to improve their technical skills together, there is value in keeping it ‘messy.’ The latter can express discontent, problems, and tensions, as well as simply show how the process is prioritised over the product.

The effort to deliver visual ethnographic products on time can shift our focus away from the process. We therefore must ensure that our multi-modal work prioritises our engagement in the process, rather than merely producing ‘nice outcomes.’ Indeed, such creative interventions can turn into critical tools for studying the local context in collaborative research, only when they are reflected and applied throughout the process in a meaningful way.

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<sup>21</sup> Paola Piscitelli in Naples, Dario Ranocchiaro in Granada.

<sup>22</sup> Geandra Nobre in Naples.

<sup>23</sup> Giulia Cavallo in Lisbon, Roberto Carro in Naples.

<sup>24</sup> Francesca Cogni in Granada.



Digital map, 'diving in the neighbourhood'. Source: Little Laboratory of Anthropology, Lisbon, 2022.

Collective maps can be a way to share our research findings in their physical, digital or hybrid form. They allow the audience to discover their path and interpretation through various ethnographic data and creations they integrate. Cartoons, video clips, comics or performances can summarise the research findings through story. These multimodal narrations amplify the possibilities of how a story can be told beyond words, therefore, we not only ensuring that more people, with varied experiences, can participate in the process of knowledge co-creation, but we can also address a wider public that might have different accessibility needs as well. While many visual symbols' interpretation is tied to their contexts, still, we can improve and extend accessibility across geographical contexts and languages, through images, sounds and other sensorial experiences. Also, the effort of framing ideas in simple ways, in line with children's questions concerning the concepts we use, reminds us how important it is to create a common ground and vocabulary whenever we address a complex topic.

These ideas around accessibility might represent an enormous challenge when we think of inserting them in the academic publishing industry, far from being inclusive in terms of geographical or linguistic differences, as well as the paywalls that separate our audience from access to knowledge. Collective authorship is also discouraged in competitive university settings. However, these questions are being increasingly addressed by the open science movement. We need to break the knowledge hierarchies through the diversification of 'languages,' amplifying authorship and recognition for collaborative projects, and recognising the researchers' efforts to create open science. Often, those who dedicate their time to looking for multimodal ways of co-creating knowledge tend to produce less and less academically-

recognised work. To avoid taking authorship over collective and complex narrations by turning them into academic papers, we need to first question what counts as an academic publication.

### **Final Remarks: Collaborative Research as Prefigurative Politics**

These projects, beyond creating knowledge through critical, multimodal, and collective formats, make the case for meaningful collaborations -even when the background and knowledge of the actors are substantially different. Collaboration is important, but not only as a duty to 'ensure participation' or to 'address power asymmetries,' since it is not that direct or immediate. Rather, collaboration as a practice is fundamental in a more profound sense: each act of meaningful collaboration holds the potential to dismantle a system that is built on individualism and fragmentation. Indeed, we need to build radically horizontal and caring relations: looking for what connects us; engaging in conflict in a generative way; making room for uncertainty and mistakes in the process.

Doing collaborative research and producing knowledge can change oppressive mechanisms of knowledge production. It means incorporating already-existing, alternative, and horizontal ways of producing knowledge, which are put forth by children, teachers, researchers, and artists, among others. Indeed, the described experiments created actual spaces and practices that aim at changing hierarchies of knowledge production. As small as these interventions are, and as much as challenges constantly emerge throughout the process, they nonetheless demonstrate that it is possible to change, and to collectively learn how to do so. Bringing valuable insights about oppression and inequalities in knowledge production can make us more reflexive in other contexts as well. In these terms, such projects create critical collective spaces (Wallin-Ruschman, Patka, 2016), where we practice the change that we want to see in society and academia.

### **An Improbable Observatory on Urban Conflicts**

To come back to the specific examples of urban research projects, I argue that we should consider children as collaborators in research and in planning local interventions or policy changes to address the inequalities that are prevalent in their context. This goes far beyond inserting consultative elements in urban planning processes. What I suggest here is not unique nor new. Indeed, researchers - especially ethnographers - and critical educators around the world try to question their practices and adult-centrism through experiences that bring them out of their comfort zones. They attempt to build more horizontal and accessible spaces of knowledge production<sup>25</sup>. In this paper, I have suggested centering children's views and voices in collaboration with and support by adults, to understand urban transformations.

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<sup>25</sup> Including Marta Martínez Muñoz, Riikka Hohti, Sevasti-Melissa Nolas or the members of the International Network of Protagonist childhoods: migration, art and education, coordinated by Luciana Hartmann.

This initiative foregrounds empirical data on urban conflicts and how children see and live them. It is also a platform to share practices and reflection; not only for those who would like to collaborate with children, but also for those who would like to question and change the modalities of knowledge production in transdisciplinary collaborations.

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*The already published multimodal sources of the three described projects cited in this article hold Attribution-Non-Commercial-No Derivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) licence.*

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