

Participation in out-of-school activities and its subjective value: an exploratory study with children and adolescents

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Abstract

Introduction. In the “new ecology of learning” it is becoming crucial to trace the paths of learning experiences that students develop both in school and outside it. Few research studies have focused on out-of-school activities. In this paper, we explore differences between children and adolescents in their participation through 26 out-of-school activities, and their subjective perception of the learning thus derived.

Method. We designed a questionnaire to explore participation in out-of-school activities and the subjective value that students attribute to their learning experiences. The list of activities was determined through thematic analysis of 17 previous focus groups. Participants are 946 children, aged either 10 or 16, from public schools in Catalonia. Participation is analysed according to age, gender, SES, and students’ area of residence. Data analysis is performed with SPSS software.

Results. Trends in participation in out-of-school activities appear to differ according to participants’ age and gender, whereas factors such as SES and area of residence have a very limited influence. Engagement in out-of-school activities shows a developmental pattern according to participants’ age, as well as important gender-related differences (males are overrepresented in “sports” and “playing video games”, while females show a greater preference for social- or academic-oriented activities). The whole sample rate academic-related activities as more important than other informal kinds of activities from which they also learn.

Conclusions and Discussion. Schools need to be aware of the influence that gender stereotypes and social discourses about formal learning can have on the decision making of students. New ways of validating non-formal and informal learning experiences should be implemented to recognise and increase the social visibility of other formative experiences developed outside formal contexts.

Keywords: learning activities, out-of-school activities, sociodemographic features, learning experiences.

Resumen

Introducción. En el marco de la “nueva ecología del aprendizaje” ha empezado a ser fundamental trazar puentes entre las experiencias de aprendizaje que los estudiantes desarrollan dentro y fuera de la escuela. Hasta el momento, pocas investigaciones se han enfocado en el estudio de actividades que tienen lugar fuera de la escuela. En este trabajo exploramos las diferencias en la participación de niños y adolescentes en 26 actividades fuera de la escuela, y la percepción subjetiva de los aprendizajes derivados de su participación en ellas.

Método. Diseñamos un cuestionario para explorar la participación de estudiantes en actividades fuera de la escuela y el valor subjetivo que atribuyen a sus experiencias de aprendizaje. La lista de actividades se obtuvo a través del análisis temático de 17 grupos focales. La muestra son 946 niños de entre 10 y 16 años de escuelas públicas de Cataluña. La participación se analiza en función de la edad, el sexo, el nivel socioeconómico y la localización geográfica de la escuela. El análisis de los datos se realiza con el software SPSS.

Resultados. Se evidencian diferentes tendencias en la participación en actividades fuera de la escuela según la edad y el sexo de los participantes, mientras que factores como el nivel socioeconómico y la localización geográfica tienen una influencia muy limitada. La participación en actividades fuera de la escuela muestra un patrón de desarrollo en función de la edad, así como diferencias importantes relacionadas con el género (los chicos están sobrerrepresentados en "deportes" y "videojuegos", mientras que las chicas muestran una mayor preferencia por actividades sociales o académicas). Los participantes califican las actividades relacionadas con lo académico como las más importantes a nivel de aprendizaje en contraste con otros tipos de actividades informales en las que dicen que también aprenden.

Discusión y Conclusiones. Consideramos necesario que las escuelas sean conscientes del riesgo que pueden tener los estereotipos de género y los discursos sociales sobre el aprendizaje formal en la toma de decisiones de los estudiantes. Se deben implementar nuevas formas de validar las experiencias de aprendizaje no-formales e informales para reconocer y aumentar la visibilidad social de otras experiencias formativas fuera de la escuela.

Palabras clave: actividades de aprendizaje, actividades fuera de la escuela, características sociodemográficas, experiencias de aprendizaje

Introduction

The New Ecology of Learning

The information society poses many challenges for educational systems due to the emergence of new and multiple forms of participation in educational, professional and leisure activities. Now, much more than before, students' competencies related to the information society depend on the different contexts in which each person moves, and what opportunities they have to continue learning beyond school. Some of these non-formal and informal contexts offer rich learning opportunities for students, while in other cases the learning experiences available are inadequate to fulfil their further personal, educational and professional needs. Therefore, the risk that economic and cultural inequalities will be transformed into educational inequalities becomes more acute (Holland & Lave, 2009).

Barron (2006) introduced the concept of "ecology of learning" as an explanatory framework for understanding the interconnected set of contexts, whether physical or virtual, that provide people with learning opportunities and resources to continue learning across their lifespan. Recognition of the role of lifelong and lifewide learning is critical for educators' understanding of the dynamic character of educational needs in contemporary society and to guarantee the realisability of students' future personal goals (Banks et al., 2007).

Coll (2018) states that we are in a "new ecology of learning" in which learning is understood as an individual pathway that includes different subjective learning experiences in specific contexts which in many instances can be expanded to other contexts and moments. People learn by participating in activities that have a clear educational goal, but also in others that do not have that intentionality. In this sense, there is an increasing number of students for whom the activities carried out within the school context have very limited sense for them (despite the intended educational value) and that are therefore far from providing meaningful learning (Coll, 2016). Many of these students recognise that there are more relevant and meaningful activities and learning opportunities outside school, that better correspond to their personal interests and learning needs.

We understand learning pathways as a set of interrelated learning experiences that people draw from their participation in activities situated in different contexts throughout their

lives. In our approach, the study of individual learning pathways and the factors that influence their configuration is essential to ensure that the same educational opportunities are accessible to all students, regardless of their social class, age, culture or gender, as well as to rethink systems of formal education in the context of today's diverse and interconnected world (Coll, 2013). In line with other studies about context in learning (e.g., Erstad et al., 2016), our framework shifts from the learning context to the learning experience that takes place in other contexts of activity, and how all these experiences can be interrelated or linked (Engel et al., 2019).

Pursuing this idea, one of the major challenges currently facing educational institutions is to establish how and on what basis schools can connect with different environments and encourage students to interrelate their learning experiences in school and outside, and thereby promote greater sense of school learning and ensure equity (Bronkhorst & Akkerman, 2016; Coll, 2013; Leander, Philips & Taylor, 2010; Sefton-Green, 2012). Faced with this complex challenge, it is important to understand in depth the most influential factors affecting people's learning pathways, and the role these play in determining their learning experiences (DiGiacomo et al., 2018).

Sociodemographic features affecting participation in out-of-school activities

A considerable body of research is now available that shows that the out-of-school activities in which young people participate significantly affect their social, educational, civic and physical development (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005; Shulruf, 2010). In general, the studies reviewed focus on the participation of children and young people in extracurricular activities, that is, their participation in structured activities that follow a similar format to schooling but are carried out in contexts outside the school. For some authors such as Baber et al. (2009) interest in these kinds of activities is driven by the role they can play in preventing risky behaviour and school disengagement, and in encouraging positive academic performance. In this paper we use the label "out-of-school activities" to encompass not only extracurricular activities but also any activity being developed outside the formal educational context, regardless of its degree of learning intentionality and institutionalisation. Therefore, we consider a large range and variety of activities that children and adolescents access beyond school and through which they can learn things (Trilla et al., 2003). From our point of view, any out-of-school activity has the potential to generate rich and diverse experiences to promote lifelong and lifewide learning.

The critical point is that while some adolescents will have a considerable scope of opportunities, resources and social support available to foster their participation in diverse out-of-school activities, multiple and coeffective constraints will restrict the prospective out-of-school activities available to other young people (Lareau, 2011). As Philip & Azevedo (2017) point out, what and how people learn today is far from neutral, so it is crucial to consider the socioeconomic and sociopolitical dimensions of learning (e.g., asymmetrical power relations, the positioning of some after school programmes in relation to others, or the industrial conceptions of productivity in a market-driven educational era). From this perspective, selection of out-of-school activities is influenced by a combination of personal and contextual factors (Bouffard et al., 2006), and demographic characteristics are among the most common predictors of out-of-school activity participation to have been studied in recent decades. According to Mahoney et al. (2009), aspects such as age, socioeconomic status (SES), gender and race/ethnicity can affect the availability, affordability and types of activities available to young people. Similarly, individual competencies, interests and motivations are key determinants of participation (Sefton-Green, 2012). Finally, these demographic and personal factors are reinforced by the immediate contexts in which individuals develop, including peer groups, families, schools, neighbourhoods, and the activities themselves. All these variables are potential generators of inequalities as they have an impact on the selection of activities and contexts young people engage in, and therefore, on the amount and quality of the learning experiences available.

In relation to the age variable, studies point out that children's participation in school-based activities generally increases through elementary school and peaks in adolescence (Simpkins et al., 2005). The timing of the peak depends, in part, on the type of activity. For instance, participation in athletic and performing arts activities has been found to peak in secondary school whereas participation in students' representative bodies or other school clubs seems to peak in late secondary school (Darling, 2005). These age-related shifts emerge for several reasons. First, in comparison to children, adolescents need to spend a substantial amount of time doing homework or performing household chores that contribute to the family. Second, adolescents are likely to spend their time with friends or alone and unsupervised due, in part, to their increasing autonomy. And third, adolescents have more activity options than children because communal activities for adolescents are available at schools in addition to community facilities (Mahoney et al., 2009).

Another consistent finding is that children and adolescents from high SES families are more likely to participate in organised activities than low-SES adolescents (e.g., Kadar-Satat, 2014; Simpkins et al., 2005). The barriers to participation for adolescents from low-income families are significant.

The sex variable has been analysed in relation to both extracurricular activities (Eccles et al., 2003; Feldman & Matjasko, 2005) and leisure activities (Bruyn & Cillessen, 2008), indicating inequality between male and female levels of access to certain fields of knowledge, professional environments and leisure activities, especially those related to science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) (Davaki, 2016; Engel et al., 2018; Miller, Eagly & Linn, 2015). Bruyn and Cillessen (2008) examined the degree to which young people participated in some seventy activities outside school. Four factors were highlighted: Factor I dealt with social activities; Factor II with creative activities; Factor III with activities dedicated to sports and cars; and Factor IV with activities which involved computer use. Females scored higher in Factors I and II, while males scored higher in Factors III and IV.

We assume that children and adolescents construct meanings around gender stereotypes during their involvement in learning activities within their specific contexts of socialisation since it is in these contexts that specific ways of conceiving, interpreting and acting on reality are formed. Gender stereotyping, defined as the cultural representation of the differentiated attributes and roles of women and men in diverse social scenarios (Colás & Villaciervos, 2007), underpins certain activity choices made by children and teenagers, alongside other previously reported factors such as socioeconomic status, family background and ethnic/racial origin (Eccles, 2014; Leaper & Bigler, 2011).

In Spain, some studies have reported differences between young females and males in terms of their involvement in particular areas of activity. Looking at sports, Nuviola et al. (2009) note that females aged between 12 and 16 years engage less in physical activities than males of the same age group. Mosquera and Puig (2002) suggest that values and norms acquired during the socialisation process are important in explaining this difference since sports are associated with values that are traditionally considered male (i.e., competing to be the best, strength and power, success, etc.). For this reason, many females, brought up without playing sports, do not find them an attractive proposition.

As for the participation of children in extracurricular activities, Molinuevo (2009) assesses differences in participation among 273 second-, fourth- and sixth-grade students in Catalonia, according to their gender and school year. The study found that males play video games much more frequently than females (78% vs. 36%), while females engage in reading significantly more often than males (89% vs. 83%). Molinuevo (2009) notes that, in general, males spend more time watching television, engaging in extracurricular activities such as sports, and playing video games, while females spend longer doing homework, reading, and studying languages, music and dance.

In summary, over recent decades, interest has increased in studying the participation of children and adolescents in activities outside school. However, many of the studies are limited to organised activities (excluding informal activities and activities that can be carried out across different contexts) and none of them focus on the subjective motives underpinning young people's selections. Similarly, there is a lack of analysis of children's and adolescents' personal reasons for participating in certain out-of-school activities to the detriment of others, and of the importance they attribute to their participation in those activities and the learning experiences thus derived.

Driven by a desire to both build upon and extend this research in the field of learning and development, while incorporating the new ecology of learning (Barron, 2006; Coll, 2013), we have designed an exploratory study that seeks to investigate the differences in the participation of children and adolescents in out-of-school activities based on four sociodemographic variables that previous studies have related to greater or lesser opportunity for access to those learning activities. The election of these criteria is premised on the conjecture that the four variables have an impact on the variety and features of the activity contexts in which children and adolescents participate, on the opportunities and resources for learning that they find in those contexts, on the learning experiences that they can obtain and, ultimately, on the configuration of their individual learning trajectories.

Objectives

The present study is part of a broader research project whose aim is to study the subjective learning experiences that constitute the individual learning trajectories of school-age children and adolescents. Within that framework, this study has two objectives:

- To describe the differences in the participation of children and adolescents in out-of-

school activities, according to their age, gender, socioeconomic status and the geographical location of the school.

- To analyse students' subjective value of their learning when participating in out-of-school activities, regarding to the importance they attach to that learning and their motives for participating in those activities.

Method

This exploratory study is part of the second phase of a larger research project that has a multi-method approach, combining different instruments and procedures for the collection of quantitative and qualitative data. The project has been developed in three phases and the results from each phase form the starting point of the next. In the first phase, the most frequent activities in which children and adolescents usually participate outside school were identified through focus groups. The second phase aimed to explore the participation of children and adolescents in the activities identified in phase 1, and the characteristics of the socio-institutional contexts in which they carry out those activities, via a questionnaire. The purpose of the third phase was to explore in depth the subjective learning experiences reported by a reduced sample of the children and adolescents from phase 2, using semi-structured interviews.

Participants

The study was conducted with a sample of 946 students from 22 publicly funded schools and high schools from different municipalities within the four provinces of Catalonia, Spain. The sampling units were the schools, which were intentionally selected to ensure the presence of different combinations of three criteria in the most balanced way possible: educational stage (primary schools and high schools); geographical location of schools (urban areas: towns with more than 10,000 inhabitants, and rural: towns with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants), and socioeconomic status of students' families (high or medium-high SES, and low or medium-low SES). In each school, the participants were selected according to age and school year: 10-year-old children (plus/minus 6 months), that is to say students in the fourth-grade of primary school, and 16-year-old youngsters (plus/minus 6 months), who are in the fourth-grade of high school.

Table 1 shows the spread of participants according to geographical location of the school, SES, gender and age.

Table 1. *Sample features*

		N	%
Geographical location of schools	Rural	434	45.9
	Urban	512	54.1
SES	Low	592	62.6
	High	354	37.4
Gender	Females	498	52.6
	Males	448	47.4
Age	10 years	411	43.4
	16 years	535	56.6

Instruments

We designed a questionnaire that inquired about 26 out-of-school activities in which children and adolescents regularly participated and that offered learning opportunities for them. The list of activities was obtained through deductive thematic analysis of 17 previous focus groups carried out with students of 10 and 16 years old, and their parents.

The main goals of the questionnaire were to explore to what extent students of 10 and 16 years old participated in the 26 target out-of-school activities, to examine the features of the social and/or institutional contexts in which these activities took place and to establish what they learned from them. The questionnaire comprises three sections with closed questions (see the appendix). The first gathers sociodemographic information from students, as well as their age and gender. In the second section, a list of the 26 out-of-school activities is presented and the participants have to say whether they participate in them or not and the importance they ascribe to participating in them. They are also asked to describe the characteristics of activities in which they participate and consider important, their reasons for participating, and to indicate which digital technology they use when engaging in these activities. In the third section, they are asked how much they think they learn through these activities outside school and how important this learning is for them.

In this paper, we present the results of the first question in the second section of the questionnaire, “Do you often engage in this activity?”, which has two possible answers: “yes” or “no”. During the administration of the questionnaire, we explained to the participants that “often” means at least once per month. We also present the results for the third section questions: “How much do you learn in this activity?”, “Is what you learn in this activity important?” and “Why do you do this activity?”. For the two questions that assess the knowledge acquired through out-of-school activities there are three options: “none at all”, “a little” and “quite a lot”. However, for the question asking why they engage in these activities, there are multiple response options including the following reasons: “I enjoy it”, “it makes me feel good”, “to learn”, “because other people around me engage in it”, “to please my parents”, “I would feel bad if I didn’t”, “under compulsion” and “I don’t really know why.”

Procedure

Firstly, we had previously conducted focus groups with students and their families that allowed the identification of 26 out-of-school activities that children and adolescents usually perform. Those activities were used in the design of the questionnaire. Similarly, prior to the application of the questionnaire, a pilot study was carried out. In the pilot study the questionnaire was administered to groups of students of different ages in order to assess its validity and reliability. The students’ understanding of the statements they had to evaluate was checked in this first part of the application and, on the basis of their answers, some necessary adjustments were made. Face validity (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000) was checked by asking some of the participants in the pilot study what they thought each part of the questionnaire measured and whether they believed that it was measured adequately. As regards internal consistency, we calculated Cronbach’s alpha with respect to the different items that make up interest, with results of 0.978 in the questionnaire for the 10-year-olds and 0.966 for the 16-year-olds.

The final version of the questionnaire was administered online during the 2014-15 school year to full class groups of each age under the supervision of teachers and researchers. We collected the data from the schools sampled through an online application. Students were advised that their answers would be anonymous and would only be used for the purposes of the research. We had previously collected informed consent from the legal tutors of the students in collaboration with the management teams of the schools.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data from the questionnaire was performed with SPSS statistical software v22. We used descriptive analysis to calculate the frequencies for the total sample and according to the different variables studied. We also used Pearson's chi-square test to identify statistically significant differences in student participation in out-of-school activities within each of the sociodemographic variables. The significance level was set at $p \leq .05$, working with a confidence level of 95%.

Results

Participation in out-of-school activities and differences according to the sociodemographic features

The results indicate that there is great variety in the participation of students across the 26 activities being surveyed. Consequently, we have established four ranges of participation to classify the activities, taking into account the percentage of students who answered that they have participated in them (see Table 2): activities carried out by 75% or more of the students, activities in which between 50% and 74% of the students participate, activities in which between 25% and 49% of the students participate, and activities carried out by less than 25% of the sample. The list is ordered from highest to lowest percentage of students who declared participation in those activities (from highest to lowest participation). This classification of the 26 activities in said ranges is maintained in Tables 3 and 4 to facilitate the interpretation of the significant differences found.

Table 2. *Percentage of student participation in each activity*

Ranges of participation	Activities and percentage of participants
Activities performed by more than 75% of the sample	Doing homework (91%)
	Listening to music (87%)
	Physical activities (84%)
	Doing sport (83%)
	Helping with the housework (81%)
	Watching television (80%)
Activities performed by between 50% and 74% of the sample	Shopping (72%)
	Participating in social networks (72%)
	Taking photos (60%)
	Reading (59%)
	Studying languages (58%)
	Travelling (58%)
	Singing, playing an instrument, dancing (53%)
	Looking after animals (52%)
	Playing alone or with friends (50%)
Activities performed by between 25% and 49% of the sample	Going to the cinema, theatre, etc. (49%)
	Painting, drawing, handicrafts (47%)
	Playing video games (46%)
	Cooking (41%)
	Trips to the countryside (33%)
	Playing board games (33%)
	Studying music (30%)
	Growing plants (28%)
Activities performed by fewer than 24% of the sample	Collecting things (24%)
	Going to museums, exhibitions, zoo (24%)
	Going to church/the mosque (19%)

Table 3 highlights the presence of significant differences in the percentages of student participation in the 26 out-of-school activities, considering each of the four sociodemographic variables being analysed. The results of the Pearson's chi-square test show significant differences in the participation of students in a greater number of activities, depending on the age and gender variables.

Table 3. *Significant differences in participation according to the geographical location of schools, SES, gender, and age*

Ranges of participation	Activity	Geographical location of schools	SES	Gender	Age
Activities performed by more than 75% of the sample	Doing homework	-	-	.000	.000
	Listening to music	-	-	.004	.000
	Physical activities	-	-	-	.049
	Doing sport	-	-	.004	-
	Helping with the housework	-	-	.000	.002
	Watching television	-	-	-	-
Activities performed by 50-74% of the sample	Shopping	-	-	.000	-
	Participating in social networks	-	-	-	.000
	Taking photos	-	-	.000	-
	Reading	-	-	.000	.000
	Studying languages	-	-	.000	-
	Travelling	.019	-	.030	-
	Singing, playing an instrument, dancing	-	-	.000	.011
	Looking after animals	.000	-	-	.000
Activities performed by 25-49% of the sample	Playing alone or with friends	.043	-	-	.000
	Going to the cinema, theatre	-	-	.000	.003
	Painting, drawing, handicrafts	.047	.004	.000	.000
	Playing video games	.026	-	.000	.000
	Cooking	-	-	.000	-
	Trips to the countryside	.039	-	-	.000
	Playing board games	-	-	-	.000
	Studying music	.003	-	.042	.000
Activities performed by less than 24% of the sample	Growing plants	-	-	-	.000
	Collecting things	-	-	.000	.000
	Going to museums, exhibitions, zoo	.008	.009	-	.000
	Going to church/the mosque	-	.000	-	.000

With regard to the geographical location of schools, significant differences are observed: in six activities (“travelling”, “looking after plants”, “playing alone or with friends”, “painting”, “trips to countryside” and “studying music”) the proportion of students who

participated is higher in rural areas, whereas for the other two activities (“playing video games” and “going to museums”) the higher proportion corresponds to those students from urban areas. Minor differences are seen according to SES: “painting” and “going to church/the mosque” are more frequent among low-SES students, whereas “going to museums/exhibitions/zoo” is more frequent among high-SES students. We also note that for both variables the differences have been found mainly in activities in which less than 50% of the sample participates.

Much more apparent are the differences observed according to students’ gender and age, which have significance in 16 and 19 activities, respectively. Table 4 presents the frequencies of participation broken down according to the two variables and their corresponding categories. The direction of the differences is highlighted in bold.

Table 4. *Significant differences in participation according to gender and age*

Ranges of participation	Activities	%	%	%	%
		Females (n=498)	Males (n=448)	10 years (n=411)	16 years (n=535)
Activities performed by more than 75% of the sample	Doing homework	95,78	85,49	96,59	86,54
	Listening to music	90,16	83,93	75,43	96,26
	Physical activities	-	-	87,10	82,43
	Doing sport	80,12	87,05	-	-
	Helping with the housework	87,55	73,21	76,16	84,30
Activities performed by 50-74% of the sample	Shopping	82,93	60,71	-	-
	Participating in social networks	-	-	44,77	92,15
	Taking photos	73,49	45,98	-	-
	Reading	65,06	51,34	75,67	45,42
	Studying languages	65,26	50,89	-	-
	Travelling	61,45	54,46	-	-
	Singing, playing an instrument, dancing	66,27	38,17	57,66	49,35
	Looking after animals	-	-	61,31	44,67
Activities performed by 25-49% of the sample	Playing alone or with friends	-	-	70,32	34,58
	Going to the cinema, theatre, etc.	54,82	41,52	43,07	52,71
	Painting, drawing, handicrafts	53,61	39,06	72,02	27,29
	Playing video games	22,09	72,77	53,04	40,75
	Cooking	47,59	34,60	-	-
	Trips to the countryside	-	-	55,72	27,48

	Playing board games	-	-	57,18	14,77
	Studying music	33,33	27,23	42,34	21,31
	Growing plants	-	-	47,69	13,46
Activities	Collecting things	18,88	29,24	44,28	8,04
performed by less	Going to museums, exhibitions,	-	-	26,76	12,34
than 24% of the	zoo				
sample	Going to church/the mosque	-	-	27,49	11,96

For gender, we found significant differences in 16 activities: males are more likely to participate in “doing sports”, “playing video games” and “collecting things”, whereas females preferred the other thirteen activities. However, it is important to note that the most marked differences (of more than 20%) in frequency of participation are found in “shopping”, “taking photos” and “singing/playing an instrument”, with a greater proportion of females, whereas males are overrepresented in “playing video games” (72% vs. 22% of females).

In relation to the age variable, we observed that the 16-year-old students are involved in particular activities such as “listening to music”, “helping with the housework”, “participating in social networks” and “going to the cinema, theatre, etc.”, whereas the other significant activities are more frequently performed by the younger children. Concerning those activities with a difference in frequency of more than 20% between the ages, we found seven activities which are more common for 10-year-old students, in contrast to just two predominant activities among adolescents: “listening to music” and “participating in social networks” (this last leaping from 44% to 92%).

Subjective value of learning outside school, and differences according to age and gender

We also analysed the participants’ subjective evaluation of their participation in out-of-school activities and the amount of learning they experience by doing them. We have explored: a) to what extent students consider they have learned from their participation in out-of-school activities (see Table 5); b) how much importance they attach to what they have learned (see Table 6), and their motives for engaging in those activities. Recall that in this block of the questionnaire the participants only answered questions about those activities they reported engaging in “often” and that were “most important for them”; all other activities were excluded. The results, which we present below in Tables 5 and 6, only include out-of-school activities with a frequency rate of more than 75%. This is why only six activities appear in the comparisons.

Table 5. List of the six out-of-school activities where children and adolescents consider they learn the most (and frequency of responses), and differences according to age and gender

	10-year-old males	10-year-old females	16-year-old males	16-year-old females
1	Doing homework (90.6%)	Learning languages** (96.2%)	Learning languages (100%)	Learning languages (100%)
2	Playing sports (86%)	Doing homework (95.6%)	Reading (99.1%)	Travelling* (99.5%)
3	Learning languages (83.4%)	Playing sports (85.7%)	Doing homework (98.9%)	Doing homework (99.2%)
4	Travelling (76.6%)	Looking after animals (84.1%)	Travelling (96.2%)	Reading (97.9%)
5	Trips to the countryside (76.2%)	Reading** (83.1%)	Playing sports (95.8%)	Listening to music*** (97%)
6	Looking after animals (73.4%)	Travelling (77.4%)	Listening to music (92%)	Playing sports (96%)

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

In general terms, Table 5 indicates that children and adolescents perceive more learning to be associated with those out-of-school activities that are closely linked to school (e.g., “learning languages”, “doing homework”, “reading”), although they also mentioned “playing sports”, “travelling” and “listening to music”. The most highly valued out-of-school activities in terms of the amount of learning being experienced are almost the same at both ages and for both genders, except in the case of “playing sports” and “looking after animals” for the 10-year-olds and “listening to music” for the 16-year-olds. Significant differences in the participants’ impressions of the amount they learn in the activities are found according to gender and age. Among the 10-year-olds, differences are observed in two activities, “reading” and “learning languages”, with females considering that they learn more from these activities than males ($p = .019$ for “reading”, and $p = .017$ for “studying languages”). At the age of 16, females reported learning while “travelling” ($p = .021$) or “listening to music” ($p = .004$). Note that in this age group, the positive response rate is above 90% for all activities.

The importance given to learning in out-of-school activities also presents differences according to gender and age (see Table 6). The reasons for choosing a particular activity are also mentioned, although they are not mutually exclusive.

Table 6. *List of the six out-of-school activities in which children and adolescents consider that what they learn is very important according to age and gender*

	10-year-old males	10-year-old females	16-year-old males	16-year-old females
1	Learning languages (97.9%)	Learning languages (98.1%)	Learning languages (96.3%)	Learning languages* (98.7%)
2	Doing homework (97.7%)	Doing homework (97%)	Doing homework (91.6%)	Doing homework (93.4%)
3	Growing plants (96.2%)	Travelling (95.4%)	Reading (83.5%)	Travelling** (88.4%)
4	Travelling (96%)	Reading* (93.1%)	Travelling (80.4%)	Cooking (80.9%)
5	Playing sports*** (95.2%)	Looking after animals (91.7%)	Playing sports (78.9%)	Reading (79.9%)
6	Trips to the countryside (93.9%)	Growing plants (91%)	Helping with the housework** (75.7%)	Playing sports (76.7%)

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

As in Table 5, results in Table 6 show that the out-of-school activities most closely linked to school are the ones that are considered most valuable by students in terms of the learning obtained. The main reason stated for choosing these activities at the age of 10 is “to learn” (with no significant differences between males and females, and a response rate of 73%). However, they also report that “doing homework” is something they do “under compulsion” (34% females vs. 34.5% males, *n.s.*) or in order “to please my parents” (27% females vs. 14.4% males, $p = .002$). In addition, “learning languages” is done either “for pleasure” (46% females vs. 31% males, *n.s.*) or “to please my parents” (21.7% females vs. 8.3% males, $p = .008$).

At 16 years old, both genders report “doing homework” mainly “under compulsion” (76.6% females vs. 72.4% males, *n.s.*), and “to learn” (75% females vs. 73% males, *n.s.*). In the case of “learning languages”, most teenagers reported the reason “to learn” (92% females vs. 83% males, $p = .007$), followed by “it makes me feel good” (25.8% females vs. 15.4% males, $p = .014$) and “I enjoy it” (24.5% females vs. 13% males, $p = .005$). The other four activities show a similar pattern of choice according to children’s age but also within the same gender.

Some significant gender-based differences emerged in the participants' impressions of the value of learning through particular activities. Among the 10-year-olds, males report valuing "playing sports" more than females do (95% vs. 89%, $p = .047$), while females consider "reading" to be more important in terms of the learning obtained (93% vs. 86% $p = .046$). Analysing the reasons for choosing those activities, both genders report intrinsic reasons. Specifically, for "reading" the motives are "I enjoy it" (70% males and females, *n.s.*) and "to learn" (61.5% females vs. 58.5% males, $p = .028$). In the case of "playing sports", no significant differences are found by gender, the main reason reported being "I enjoy it" (88.8% females vs. 87% males).

Moreover, for the 16-year-olds there are also significant gender-based differences in three activities: "learning languages", "travelling" and "helping with the housework". Females report attaching more importance to "learning languages" ($p = .001$) and "travelling" ($p = .005$), while males value what they learn while "helping with the housework" ($p = .001$) more highly. Examining the reasons for choosing these activities, we found that for "learning languages", both genders emphasise intrinsic reasons, though largely more females do so. Specifically, the reasons reported are, above all, "to learn" (91.7% females vs. 82.7% males, $p = .007$), followed by "it makes me feel good" (25.8% vs. 15.4%, $p = .014$) and "I enjoy it" (24.5% vs. 13%, $p = .005$). In addition, females in particular choose "travelling" because "I enjoy it" (94% vs. 89%, $p = .042$), followed by "it makes me feel good" (77% vs. 62%, $p = .002$) or "to learn" (57% vs. 54%, *n.s.*). In contrast, both females and males report "helping with the housework" to be "under compulsion" (66% vs. 55%, $p = .018$) and "to please my parents" (61% vs. 54%, *n.s.*).

Summarising, the analysis of our sample's subjective evaluation of learning derived from participation in out-of-school activities indicates a direct relationship between the perceived amount of learning and the importance they attach to this learning. In general, all participants, and especially females, tend to attach importance to participating in activities more closely related to what is done in the school context. In contrast, males tend to give more importance to sports-related activities, even though at 16 years old significant differences disappear. In general, the whole sample rate academic-related activities as more important than other kinds of informal learning.

Discussion and conclusion

In this study, we have explored whether there are differences in the participation of children and adolescents in out-of-school activities, according to four sociodemographic variables. Unlike many previous studies focused on organised activities (e.g., Barber et al., 2009; Bruyn & Cillessen, 2008; Feldman & Matjasko, 2005; Kadar-Satat, 2014; Simpkins et al., 2005), the selection of the 26 activities in our study comprises a variety of activities that vary in their degree of formality and organisation, and that can take place in different contexts outside school. On the other hand, we have not only considered students' frequency of participation, but also the students' point of view regarding the value they attach to the learning gained from out-of-school activities and their reasons for participating.

The analysis shows differences according to the age and gender variables in the selection of activities outside school, whereas factors such as SES and the geographical location of schools have a very limited influence, affecting less than a third of the activities taking place outside school, the vast majority of them being selected by less than 50% of the sample.

In terms of geographical location, as expected, findings indicate that the features of the context in which students live determine, in part, their engagement in certain activities. For example, students from rural areas seem to take advantage of their natural outdoor surroundings (enjoying for instance, "trips to the countryside", "looking after animals", "playing alone or with friends") while students from urban areas have more opportunities to participate in cultural activities ("going to museums, exhibitions, zoo"). However, few differences in participation have been found according to SES, and these are much less marked and very occasional. Unexpectedly, engagement in out-of-school activities does not seem to be limited by socioeconomic status except for three cases: "painting, drawing, handicrafts"; "going to the church/the mosque", and "going to museums, exhibitions, zoo", the first two being most frequent among students with low socioeconomic status, and the last being most frequent among students with high socioeconomic status. Other studies have found significant differences in participation in out-of-school activities according to SES, pointing out the many barriers to participation for adolescents from low-income families (e.g., Kadar-Satat, 2014; Lareau, 2011; Simpkins et al., 2005). We think these differences can be partially explained by two factors: a) the features of the activities being surveyed, because in some other studies the

unit of analysis was “organised activities” whereas we have surveyed a variety of out-of-school activities that take place in informal and in non-formal contexts, most of which do not imply any economic burden for the families, and b) the kind of analysis we applied, because the use of general categories (high or low SES) tends to homogenise the sample features.

In contrast, age and gender variables showed clear differences in our findings. It seems that engagement in out-of-school activities follows a developmental pattern according to the participants' age. Thus, activities such as “listening to music” and “participating in social networks” are much more frequent among the 16-year-olds, while there is a greater variety of activities among 10-year-olds. In addition, participation in some out-of-school activities related to activities in the school context decreases substantially in adolescence (e.g., “reading” drops from 75% at 10 years old to 45% at 16 years old), while other decreases are less marked (e.g., “doing homework”, which decreases from 96% to 86%, even though it is the most frequent out-of-school activity reported by students). The opposite tendency is found in activities such as “participating in social networks”, which gain a marked increment as students grow older. Our results are in line with Engel et al. (2018), who found that many students used ICT outside the school context for entertainment or communication rather than learning.

We also found significant differences in participation in out-of-school activities according to gender. As found in previous studies in Spain (Molinuevo, 2009; Nuviala et al., 2009) and in the US (Barber et al., 2009; Bruyn & Cillessen, 2008; Feldman & Matjasko, 2005; Simpkins et al., 2005), the choices of males and females at the ages of 10 and 16 reflect stereotyped trends towards participating in certain out-of-school activities in preference to others. It is worrying for example that males are overrepresented in “sports” and “playing video games” while females show a greater preference for choosing social- or school-related activities, at both ages. Our results are wholly in line with those of Bruyn & Cillessen (2008), who found that males were overrepresented in out-of-school activities dedicated to sports and cars, and those which involved computer use, whereas females were overrepresented in social and creative activities outside school. It is important to stress that the same tendencies appeared even though our study explored a range of 26 activities in contrast to the 70 out-of-school activities surveyed by those authors, and the data are much more recent, which suggests the strength of these dominant discourses over time.

According to a social practice perspective (Dreier, 1997, as cited in DiGiacomo et al., 2018), “personal engagements and stakes in context depend on their status in relation to other contexts in their trajectories of participation” (p. 53). Therefore, a young person’s pursuit of, and/or desire for participation in a particular out-of-school activity can have both enabling and constraining effects on the shape and outcome of related learning experiences and opportunities. In our particular study, it seems that certain stereotypes related to gender have a strong bearing on the children’s decisions regarding their participation in activities inside and outside the school context (Eccles, 2014), and can thus influence their learning experiences and their future choices.

As Philip & Azevedo (2017) pointed out, the socioeconomic and sociopolitical dimensions of learning are crucial. In this sense, the presence of significant differences between male and female participation in 26 out-of-school activities in our study might indicate how some contextual constraints, such as gendered conceptions about engaging in particular out-of-school activities, can lead to inequalities of access and participation in certain activities to the detriment of others. From our perspective, the inequalities of access to certain out-of-school activities have important effects on the learning experiences of youth, and also on the development of skills for learning throughout life. As being well equipped for the future depends on the appropriation of those skills in different contexts and on their use along and across life, when access to learning through certain out-of-school activities is limited, so is the development of lifelong and lifewide competencies and skills.

It is also worrying that there is a complete consensus among participants of both genders and at both ages about what counts as “learning”. At both ages, there is a direct relationship between the amount of perceived learning and the subjective value of what is learned through those out-of-school activities closely related to school content. However, the relationship is less clear when they talk about informal activities. Results in Tables 5 and 6 seem to indicate that students make a clear distinction between certain out-of-school activities that provide “valuable learning”, which are those with content or skills more closely related to the school context, and other activities that provide what we call “skills for life” (such as “travelling”, “playing sports” or “helping with the housework”). This finding suggests that school experiences have a strong influence on the value attributed to certain kinds of out-of-school learning activities to the detriment of others.

The motives that students report for participating in those out-of-school activities most valued in terms of learning range from intrinsic reasons (“to learn”, “because it makes me feel good” or “for pleasure”) to extrinsic reasons (“under compulsion” or “to please my parents”). It seems that discourses about school learning are also supported and reinforced by parents, who represent key elements in students’ perception of which kinds of out-of-school activities are more profitable in terms of learning. From a sociocultural perspective, learning is evidenced through people’s shifting participation in the meaningful activities of their communities, and is supported by and through social and material relationships that encourage learners to engage in new roles and responsibilities as they appropriate the practices that are valued in their sociocultural contexts.

According to our findings, it is vital that schools and similar institutions not only provide opportunities and resources for learning but also ensure that students reflect on the importance of participating in a wide variety of non-formal and informal activity contexts beyond school to optimise fulfilment of their personal learning needs (Leander, Phillips & Taylor, 2010; Coll, 2013, 2018; Sefton-Green, 2012). In accordance with other authors, we believe that educational institutions are the contexts best suited to providing this input. They need to be aware of the influence that gender stereotypes (Mosteiro & Porto, 2017; Colás & Villaciervos, 2007) and social discourses about formal learning may have on the decision making of students. New ways of validating non-formal and informal learning experiences must be implemented in order to recognise and increase the social visibility of those formative experiences that are developed outside formal contexts (Cedefop, 2016, p. 6).

We also emphasise the importance of learning across different contexts, as children will intentionally connect different experiences acquired in a wide range of contexts with other actors, settings and motives throughout their lifetimes (Bronkhorst & Akkerman, 2016; Erstad et al., 2016). In this respect, we believe that the subjective experiences of learning, and particularly the motives underpinning the involvement of students in certain out-of-school activities, become of high importance. Understanding how and why children and adolescents engage in different learning activities across contexts should support schools to connect their learning experiences in a positive way, and also help young people to attribute meaning to the learning they acquire in different contexts both in school and outside. The main goals should be to help students to rebuild their vision of learning beyond the formal context, and to ensure equity (Bronkhorst & Akkerman, 2016; Coll, 2013, 2018; Leander, Philips & Taylor, 2010).

Finally, among the limitations of our study, the methodological approach used has only allowed us to offer a general portrait of the participation of children and adolescents in out-of-school activities and the reasons behind their choices. Considering the general picture offered by our data, we see a need to develop more ethnographic cross-contextual and cross-cultural studies to investigate in depth the reasons for youth participation and engagement in particular out-of-school activities, paying attention to the social, economic and political dimensions of that participation as key features of further research. These studies should contemplate the analysis of activities that can be carried out in different learning contexts at the same time (and therefore, including activities mediated by the use of ICT), and should consider the weight of aspects such as the subjects' culture of origin, length of residence in a country, and adherence to certain community of practice or interests. Specifically, longitudinal studies using a qualitative approach with in-depth interviews are needed to explore children's and adolescents' subjective learning experiences in different contexts, both in and out of school, and the connections between them. Future research into these areas will help educational players (such as teachers, educators, family and community members), administrations and policymakers to be aware of the importance of lifelong and lifewide activities across contexts, and to introduce changes at different levels in order to fight against social, cultural and educational inequalities.

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Appendix

Structure and content of the questionnaire

First section: Sociodemographic information	Second section: Out-of-school activities	Third section: Learning experiences
Q1.1. School	Q2.1. Do you often engage in this activity?	Q3.1. How much have you learned through this activity?
Q1.2. Date of birth	Q2.2. How important is this activity for you?	Q3.2. Is what you have learned through this activity important?
Q1.3. Gender	Q2.3. Where do you do this activity?	Q3.3. Do you often learn things (through this activity) that are useful for school?
Q1.4. Country of birth	Q2.4. With whom do you do this activity?	Q3.4. Do you often learn things (through this activity) that you do not usually learn at school?
Q1.5. If you weren't born in Spain, how many years have you lived here for?	Q2.5. Why do you do this activity?	Q3.5. Do you often learn things (through this activity) that might help you when you grow up?
Q1.6. Family language	Q2.6. What electronic devices do you use when you participate in this activity?	Q3.6. Do you often learn things (through this activity) that you like and/or that interest you?
Q1.7. Mother's country of birth		Q3.7. Do you often learn things (through this activity) that you would like to pursue when you grow up?
Q1.8. Father's country of birth		Q3.8. Do you often learn how to behave with peers (through this activity)?
		Q3.9. Do you often learn how to behave with adults (through this activity)?
		Q3.10. Do you often learn what is right and what is wrong (through this activity)?

Question Q2.1 is asked for all 26 activities.

Question Q2.2 is only asked for those activities in which the student participates frequently.

Questions Q2.3, Q2.4, Q2.5, Q2.6 and Q3.1 are only asked for those activities the student participates in frequently and considers important.

Question Q3.2 is asked only for those activities the student participates in frequently, considers important and perceives as learning experiences.

Questions Q3.3, Q3.4, Q3.5, Q3.6, Q3.7, Q3.8, Q3.9 and Q3.10 are asked only for those activities the student participates in frequently, considers important, perceives as learning experiences and considers important in terms of what he/she has learned there.

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