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Midday educational time in primary education. A participatory evaluation using the Photovoice methodology

El tiempo educativo de mediodía en la educación primaria. Una evaluación participativa a través de la metodología Photovoice

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Abstract

Midday educational time in primary education is a key moment for children's personal, social, emotional, and educational development. However, its pedagogical value has rarely been evaluated from the students' perspective. This study, commissioned by a third-sector organization and conducted by an interdisciplinary team from the Faculties of Psychology and Education at the University of Barcelona, analyzes what learning children identify in this time and what factors facilitate or hinder it through a participatory evaluation based on the Photovoice methodology. Five schools in Catalonia participated, with 50 fourth- and fifth-grade students who generated photographs and narratives that were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. The results show that children learn about social interaction and social-emotional skills; participation and engagement; positive time and space management; and nutrition education and sustainability. Key facilitators include variety of activities, suitable spaces, and opportunities for participation. Barriers include conflicts among peers, infrastructure limitations, repetitive menus, and limited child participation in organizational decisions. The study demonstrates the potential of Photovoice

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to incorporate children's voices into evaluation processes and provides evidence for rethinking midday educational time as a comprehensive pedagogical space focused on personal development, well-being, and child participation.

Keywords: primary education; school canteen; child well-being; photovoice.

Resumen

El tiempo educativo de mediodía en educación primaria es un espacio clave para el desarrollo personal, social, emocional y educativo de la infancia; aunque su valor pedagógico ha sido poco evaluado desde la voz del alumnado. Este estudio, encargado por una entidad del tercer sector a un equipo interdisciplinar de las Facultades de Psicología y Educación de la Universidad de Barcelona, analiza qué aprendizajes identifican niños y niñas en este espacio y qué factores los favorecen o dificultan mediante una evaluación participativa basada en la metodología Photovoice. En el estudio participaron cinco centros educativos de Cataluña con 50 estudiantes de 4º y 5º de educación primaria que generaron fotografías y narrativas analizadas mediante análisis temático inductivo. Los resultados muestran que niños y niñas aprenden sobre convivencia y habilidades socioemocionales; participación y dinamización; gestión positiva del tiempo y de los espacios; y educación alimentaria y sostenibilidad. Destacan como facilitadores de este aprendizaje, la diversidad de actividades, los espacios adecuados y las oportunidades de participación. Como barreras, emergen los conflictos entre iguales, las limitaciones en infraestructuras, la repetición de menús y la escasa participación infantil en decisiones de tipo organizativo. El estudio muestra el potencial del Photovoice para incorporar la voz de la infancia en procesos de evaluación y aporta evidencias para repensar el tiempo educativo del mediodía como un espacio pedagógico integral, orientado al desarrollo personal, al bienestar y a la participación infantil.

Palabras clave: educación primaria; comedor escolar; bienestar de la infancia; photovoice.

Introduction

The specialist literature addresses midday educational time (MET) from various complementary perspectives. Firstly, it highlights its value in promoting healthy lifestyle habits – healthy eating and physical activity – and in preventing issues such as a sedentary lifestyle or childhood obesity (Soares et al., 2017). It is conceived not only as a space for food intake, but also as an educational environment in which behaviours, values and learning related to health care and food sustainability are shaped. Secondly, this space is recognised as a key setting for socialisation. Andersen et al. (2017) and Stone and Murakami (2021) emphasise the social function of shared meals, which foster the development of meaningful and friendly relationships among peers and with adults. Benn and Carlsson (2014) highlight the educational role of the moments of rest and

everyday life that occur during these times; whilst González-Garzón et al. (2003) emphasise their potential for fostering social interaction, cultural diversity, leisure and respect for the environment.

Finally, evidence has been found of a link between positive experiences in this setting and pupils' emotional and cognitive wellbeing. Active breaks, free play and interactions during the TEM contribute to the development of socio-emotional skills and academic performance (Baines and Blatchford, 2011; Gray, 2011; McNamara et al., 2018; Veiga et al., 2017).

Enabling children to express their views on the spaces of which they are a part involves conceiving research processes from a perspective in which people are not merely seen as informants, but as active and legitimate participants, capable of contributing to and generating knowledge based on their everyday experiences (Trilla and Novella, 2001). In this context, photovoice emerges as a tool that enables the principle of child participation to be realised through a critical and creative approach. It is a form of visual ethnography (Delgado, 2015) that combines images and narratives created by the participants themselves to express their thoughts, emotions and values regarding the proposed topic (Wang and Burris, 1997). The technique combines photography and personal narrative as forms of subjective representation of reality. Wang and Redwood-Jones (2001, p. 82) define it as "a process through which people can identify, represent and improve their community using a specific photographic technique"; whilst Luna et al. (2024, pp. 4–5) note that Photovoice is both an educational tool and a participatory action research technique, which "enables the collection of information about participants' own experiences through photographs (photo) and brief narratives (the participants' voices)."

The benefits of photovoice include challenging dominant institutional discourses (Rübner and Allan, 2022); the empowerment of participants (Labbé et al., 2020); the creation of emotional and social bonds through support and collaborative work (Agner et al., 2023); the reduction of power hierarchies to create more egalitarian spaces (Dwight and Meshulam, 2020); and the raising of the profile of groups who struggle to express themselves or who face oppression (Fisher-Borne and Brown, 2018; Leivas, 2020; Papa, 2019). However, it also involves ethical challenges relating to privacy and confidentiality (McMorrow, 2022), and the risk that it may become a symbolic gesture with no real impact if the effective inclusion of these voices in decision-making is not guaranteed (Sanon et al., 2014).

This study analyses the learning that children undertake in an interlective educational setting such as the TEM, where the fulfilment of basic needs, the building of relationships and the development of rules for coexistence converge. It aligns with studies in the field of social pedagogy that have explored learning in everyday settings (Caride et al., 2012) and the informal learning that emerges from daily interpersonal interaction (Úcar, 2015). To this end, the decision was made to collect information directly from the children using

the photovoice technique.

The research analyses the educational value of the TEM. Specifically, this article presents two main research objectives, derived from the accounts provided by the children through their participation using the photovoice technique: (1) to identify the learning that children undertake in this space, (2) to identify the factors that facilitate or hinder this learning within the TEM. The research also includes a third – secondary – objective focused on improving the TEM in the participating schools. In this way, and in line with the study's participatory approach, the results were shared with the teaching staff at the participating schools to initiate joint reflection processes aimed at improvement, ensuring that children's voices have a direct influence on pedagogical and organisational decision-making.

The decision was made to apply the photovoice technique, starting with the formulation of two open-ended questions centred on the participants' experiences: 'What do you like about the TEM?' and 'What don't you like about the TEM?', rather than asking directly about learning outcomes. This decision stems from a desire to facilitate pupils' expression, particularly amongst children and young people, by encouraging narratives rooted in their everyday experiences.

Method

The research is based on a constructivist-interpretative approach, centred on understanding the social and cultural phenomena of education through people's experiences (Fodouop Kouam, 2024). This approach recognises the importance of individuals in shaping their educational reality and their actions within specific contexts (Ponce et al., 2022). A practical participatory evaluation methodology was adopted, using the photovoice technique with children and young people (Exner-Cortens et al., 2021). This model prioritises the participation of individuals in the evaluation as active agents in identifying the needs and areas for improvement of a specific programme or activity (Cousins and Al Hudib, 2023).

A steering group was formed comprising researchers from the University of Barcelona and professionals from Fundesplai, a non-profit third-sector organisation that manages the TEM programme in over 200 nursery and primary schools in Catalonia. The main functions of this group were: a) to facilitate access to schools, b) to assist with data collection, and c) to make decisions based on the emerging findings of the research.

Participants

The fieldwork was carried out in schools affiliated with Fundesplai. The schools were selected using purposive sampling, based on criteria of geographical, structural and socio-economic diversity:

- 2 schools in the city of Barcelona (population over 200,000): a single-form high-complexity school and a two-form school located in a district with a medium-to-high per capita income.
- 1 school in Sant Cugat del Vallès (Barcelona Metropolitan Area, population 80,000 to 100,000), with a high per capita income, comprising two streams.
- 1 school in Sant Boi del Llobregat (Barcelona Metropolitan Area, population 80,000 to 100,000), with a medium per capita income, comprising two classes.
- 1 rural centre in a municipality in the province of Girona (fewer than 5,000 inhabitants), with an average per capita income, offering a single course.

The selection focused on state schools, which make up the majority of the schools where Fundesplai operates. A total of N=50 boys and girls in Years 4 and 5 of primary school (aged 9–10) took part, divided into five groups (one per school), each comprising between 8 and 13 participants. The selection process sought to maintain a gender balance, as well as to ensure participants' availability and that the diversity of each school was represented. However, the study did not aim to compare subgroups, schools or regions, but rather to explore shared experiences in relation to the service.

Procedure

The photovoice project was carried out in three main phases:

A. Phase 1. Preparation and taking of photographs (January–February 2023)

The design was based on existing literature on photovoice with children and young people in socio-educational contexts. Firstly, the TEM tutors at the selected schools were trained through two online training sessions. Next, participating pupils were recruited with the support of the TEM tutors, who, thanks to their existing relationship with the pupils, explained the process and accompanied them whilst they took photographs on school premises. Finally, each participant selected one or two representative images. This phase took place without the research team being present, to encourage spontaneity and minimise potential bias in participation.

B. Phase 2. Constructing narratives from images (March 2023)

Five focus groups were held, one per school, led by the research team with the support of the monitors. During these sessions, the children shared their reflections on the photographs they had taken, which served as a basis for discussion and fostered a collaborative dialogue. The sessions lasted around an hour and were audio-recorded. The facilitators were responsible for organising the groups of children and putting them in touch with the researchers. Thereafter, they did not interfere with the dynamics of the discussion groups or the evaluation of the photographs.

C. Phase 3. Thematic analysis of the discourse (April–July 2023)

The recordings were transcribed and a thematic analysis was carried out by the research team.

Analysis of the data

An inductive approach to thematic analysis was adopted (Braun and Clarke, 2006), following the recommended practice in recent studies on Photovoice in educational and social contexts (González-Granados et al., 2025). This approach allowed the participants' experiences to be respected, so that codes and themes emerged from the data without imposing pre-defined categories. The analysis process was carried out systematically in several stages (Forni and De Grande, 2020):

1. Initial reading: each researcher read through the transcripts repeatedly to familiarise themselves with the data.
2. Independent coding: the discourses and images produced in the photovoice project were coded individually. During this phase, each verbatim quote was classified as a positive or negative assessment, depending on the sentiment expressed by participants regarding different aspects of the service. Nineteen content identification codes were identified.
3. Discussion and consensus: the codes and assessments were compared and discussed collectively until interpretative consensus was reached.
4. Grouping into themes and sub-themes: in a second phase of analysis, these codes were grouped into broader categories that enabled the identification of lessons learnt from the experience. Furthermore, lessons learnt were identified within both the positive and negative assessments. The 19 initial codes were reorganised into four final categories, corresponding to the lessons learnt identified.
5. Review and refinement: the themes were reviewed jointly by the research team to ensure internal consistency and alignment with the data as a whole, through a process of cross-checking and consensus-building.

The ATLAS.ti v23 programme was used as a tool for organising the data and managing codes; however, all analytical decisions were interpretative in nature and agreed upon by the research team. Independent coding and reflective discussion amongst researchers constituted a triangulation strategy, reinforcing the credibility of the analysis and the interpretative coherence of the emerging categories and themes.

To ensure traceability, the data were coded to indicate the participating centre (CE1, CE2, CE3, CE4, CE5). The analysis aims to identify shared patterns and meanings, without making comparative distinctions between results by region or centre.

Ethical considerations

The research was approved by the Bioethics Committee of the University of Barcelona, under code *IRB00003099*. The participation of children was voluntary and informed throughout the various stages of the process.

To ensure that the research complied with ethical standards, the following measures were taken. Firstly, school management were informed of the purpose of the research and permission was sought to access the premises. Secondly, informed consent was obtained from the children and their families or legal guardians, informing them of the research objectives and seeking authorisation for the use of images for scientific purposes. Thirdly, particular attention was paid to the ethical considerations associated with the use of photovoice with children. To this end, protocols were established to guarantee the confidentiality of participants, clearly defining the limits regarding the taking of photographs and emphasising the need to avoid capturing faces or features that might allow individuals to be identified. Efforts were also made to ensure that the process was accessible and practical for all participants, adapting the photographic tours to suit the mobility needs of children with disabilities.

In the discussion groups, safe spaces were created for the expression of opinions and experiences, ensuring that all voices were heard. The researchers took on the role of moderating the discussion, with the aim of preventing interference or influence on the children's accounts, thereby ensuring their spontaneity and authenticity. Sensitive topics (conflicts, exclusion, conditions of the space) also arose in the groups; these were handled with emotional care, with support from designated facilitators.

Results

The analysis is based on 213 direct quotes provided by children during the five photovoice sessions carried out. Of these, 107 represent positive assessments, linked to learning outcomes and facilitating factors; and 106 represent negative assessments, associated with barriers, although in some cases these also generated learning opportunities. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), both the most frequent and the least frequent themes are considered. Table 1 presents the four general learning outcomes identified, the sub-outcomes derived from each general learning outcome, and the facilitators that enable learning and the barriers that have hindered it.

Table 1

Categories of analysis

General learning outcomes	Specific learning outcomes	Facilitators	Barriers
1. Social interaction and socio-emotional skills	1.1. Communication and interpersonal skills	Shared play areas	A social tendency to favour and promote individualism
	1.2. Collaboration amongst peers	Cooperative games Interaction between different age groups	
	1.3. Empathy	Taking part in shared activities Ability to apologise for actions that affect other children	
	1.4. Problem-solving	Assembly spaces Interventions by responsible adults	
2. Participation and engagement	2.1. Ability to make choices	Rotation of recreational activities Use of / presence of familiar materials	Practices perceived as being imposed
	2.2. Autonomy	Encouraging participation and active choice in childhood	Perception of not being listened to by adults
3. Positive management of free time and spaces	3.1. Identification of safe spaces	Having suitable spaces available	Poor infrastructure
	3.2. Habits of caring for the environment		Inadequate maintenance
	3.3. Use of free time		Irresponsible use
4. Nutrition education and sustainability	4.1. Habits related to healthy eating	Adult guidance on dietary choices	Repetition of menus
	4.2. Habits linked to environmental sustainability	Practices that children can understand	
	4.3. Hygiene habits at mealtimes	Adult supervision of habit formation	Poor infrastructure

The following section outlines the learning that takes place in the areas of social interaction and socio-emotional skills, participation and engagement, positive management of free time, and healthy and sustainable eating; for each of these areas, the factors that

facilitate or hinder them are highlighted. The results are presented using photographs taken by the children themselves at their schools, alongside verbatim excerpts from the discussions held during the photovoice activities.

Social interaction and socio-emotional skills

Social interaction and socio-emotional skills represent the first overarching area of learning identified by the children, encompassing the following specific areas: 1) communication and interpersonal skills; 2) collaboration amongst peers; 3) empathy; and 4) problem-solving.

Six quotes highlight the TEM as a learning environment for improving communication and social skills. Shared play areas facilitate this learning, where children are seen to be talking and having fun with classmates or friends. This is reflected in comments such as: “Without my classmates, it wouldn’t be the same” (CE3) or: “I really like playing with my classmates because I have a great time” (CE1).

Collaboration amongst peers is another form of learning identified. As a facilitator of this learning, the children particularly value cooperative games and those in which older children look after younger ones. As one of the participants points out: “When we’ve finished eating, they let us go with the little ones – the P5s, P4s and P3s – and we play with them and teach them” (CE2). Empathy is also identified as a learning outcome in this relational space, as the ability to put oneself in another’s shoes, apologise and accept activities that others enjoy. According to the account gathered, the children learn to behave empathetically in their interactions at the TEM, as:

Things have improved because last year they’d kick the ball at you, and when they gave you the ball back, they wouldn’t say sorry; they’d just take the ball and go off to play again. But this year things have changed, and some children are starting to say sorry (CE4).

Finally, eight quotes reflect learning in problem-solving. The children point out that they usually resolve conflicts independently, through dialogue and in assembly sessions. In more complex situations, they value the intervention of monitors and, in exceptional cases, the involvement of their form tutors or families. These strategies facilitate learning within the TEM. As one participant states, “Sometimes we sort it out amongst ourselves, or if not, we ask the teacher, and she sorts it out herself or whoever is older than us” (CE2). Conversely, the prevailing individualism can become a barrier to learning. For example, they are concerned by a lack of empathy in situations where others show indifference to someone else’s distress or where classmates are excluded from games. As one child mentions: “When someone gets hurt and is lying on the ground, people don’t even bat an eyelid and just carry on playing” (CE5). And another: “I don’t like it when people don’t let others join in a game” (CE2).

Participation and engagement

This second general learning area is linked to the development of pupils' agency and engagement in the TEM, and includes: 1) the capacity for choice; and 2) autonomy.

Twenty-eight quotes from the children were identified that highlight their psychomotor and sociocultural development, through various learning facilitators, such as spaces for sporting activities—particularly football and basketball—and other activities such as crafts, drawing, board games, chess, reading, music and dance. This leisure programme acts as a facilitator enabling children to learn to participate through their capacity for choice. Thus, the rotation of recreational activities and the availability and presence of familiar materials for the pupils encourage their active involvement. As one participant put it: "These are the footballs and the basketball, because I like playing sport, I have fun and I like competing" (CE1). The opportunity for active choice and the encouragement of participation are two factors that foster autonomy as a learning process within the TEM. The pupils say they like being able to carry out activities independently, such as: having time to play freely, suggesting activities, serving themselves food or helping to look after the spaces. They put it this way: "I really like it because we have lots of free time and we can play whatever we want; we can make mud pies [...] we can play lots of different games" (CE3) and also: "I really like that they let us serve ourselves" (CE4).

However, 14 quotes highlight barriers to this learning during the TEM programme, due to the limited opportunity to influence decisions that directly affect them; for instance, when they are unable to influence the organisation of the dining hall or choose recreational activities. Practices perceived as being imposed, or the feeling that adults do not listen to them, represent a barrier hindering learning in areas such as menu planning, the layout of spaces and the organisation of the canteen. Even when they acknowledge that they were consulted at some point, they say they do not feel that their suggestions are taken into account. They express this in relation to the menu: "Many of us here eat here every day, and we'd like to be involved in creating the menu" (CE5), and in relation to their seating arrangements: "I don't like the seating arrangements for meals, the changes in seating in the canteen. [...] We don't like it because we're not with our friends" (CE5). These limitations restrict their autonomy, hindering their learning.

Positive management of free time and spaces

In their accounts, the children demonstrate the positive management of free time and spaces as the third general learning outcome they achieve in the TEM. In other words, they learn to diversify their cultural and social options during free time, acquiring and valuing artistic, sporting, cultural and folkloric knowledge as a cultural and social right. Within this, the following emerge: 1) the identification of safe spaces; 2) habits of caring for the environment; and 3) the positive use of free time.

22 quotes reflect lessons learnt regarding the positive management of free time and spaces. They highlight the importance of having spaces that convey a sense of calm and tranquillity, such as the vegetable garden and the library, as alternatives to sports pitches. These spaces are perceived as safe and pleasant places that facilitate learning and allow for a variety of activities, providing alternatives to sport. Figure 1 shows a photograph taken by the children at School No. 5 (CE5) of the vegetable garden at their school.

Figure 1. CE5 school garden



With regard to the library, the children reflect on a photograph, stating that: “This photo is of my study group because we feel that the library is a place where we can be at peace, studying or reading, and we like that” (CE3).

They emphasise the importance of green spaces, shade for playing and attractive décor, both in the school’s general facilities and in the canteen. They illustrate this, for example, by presenting the image in Figure 2 as an example of a suitable space for play.

Figure 2. Semi-shaded play area in the school playground CE1



Poor maintenance, such as problems with dirt – nine mentions – in both indoor spaces (canteen, toilets) and outdoor areas (playground), acts as a barrier to learning habits of caring for the environment. These situations are associated with litter, unpleasant odours and a lack of cleanliness, often caused by careless use of the spaces or a lack of maintenance; this highlights the importance of shared responsibility for cleanliness and care of the environment in which activities take place. They comment, for example: “I don’t like the chairs at the back because the children from the first session leave their food there... [...] The chairs aren’t clean, the floor is dirty...” (CE1). And also:

This photo shows the mess in the playground; things are strewn about, there’s rubbish lying around and the bins are full. [...] I also remember that one day, one of those bins smelled quite foul inside because people had thrown away breakfast leftovers – for example, bananas, apples, oranges and watermelons – and the rubbish had piled up so much that insects had got in. (CE5).

These experiences make it difficult to learn habits of caring for the environment, but at the same time they demonstrate an awareness of the issue. The use of space also refers to situations of conflict amongst peers (18 quotes); the problems appear to be particularly linked to the use of outdoor space, where the prominence of football generates tensions and anti-social behaviour: “It’s unfair. Everything’s taken up for playing football” (CE5). Such situations highlight learning opportunities to adapt available spaces to children’s different needs, whilst learning the necessity of jointly managing spaces and the use of resources.

Their accounts reveal how the TEM offers learning opportunities for the positive use of free time, understood as learning through diverse and varied activities. Shortcomings in the games are identified (5 quotes), linked to a lack of variety, unfamiliarity with certain activities, or insufficient available resources. As one participant points out: “I’ve never played because nobody’s told me how to play” (CE2). This highlights the importance of having guidance for a diverse use of resources.

I took a photo of this game, not because I don’t like it, but because I’ve never actually played it. I’ve never played it because nobody’s ever told me how to play, and that’s why I’d like to be able to use it at some point (CE2).

They mention the inappropriate use of the communal areas by some pupils, the deterioration of plants, and the mistreatment of play equipment and furniture. They say: “People treat the play equipment badly” (CE5) and “When the two planters were there, they put up signs saying ‘do not step on the plants’, but there were people who stepped on them and the plants died” (CE5). The lack of support or the inappropriate use of resources (4 quotes) affects pupils’ learning opportunities.

Finally, they mention physical shortcomings in school spaces that directly impact the TEM. Sixteen quotes refer to inadequate infrastructure (see Figure 3), identifying areas that

are damaged, unsafe or poorly maintained, as well as the lack of shade or the loss of spaces such as the school garden. They say: "I don't like that there's not much shade because it gets really hot in summer and to play we'd have to stay in the area where there's shade" (CE2), and also: "I don't like the corridor because there are lots of stones and children often fall over here and hurt themselves. And I do too." (CE2). These conditions affect access to and use of the spaces, impacting the learning opportunities they offer.

Figure 3. Poorly maintained play area, CE3



Food education and sustainability

The fourth general learning area relates to food education and sustainability. Three specific learning areas were identified: 1) habits linked to healthy eating; 2) habits linked to environmental sustainability; and 3) hygiene habits during mealtimes.

With regard to food, nine quotes reflect positive views on it. Favourite dishes include spaghetti, pizza, cannelloni, fruit, yoghurt, mashed potatoes, cream, chicken wings and broccoli. The variety and the pleasure of eating with classmates are highlighted. "A girl: I really like the food; A boy: I love it; Another girl: Me too; (the children speak at the same time)." (CE2). In Figure 4, the children photograph a dish from their menu as a positive aspect of their experience at the TEM.

Figure 4. Children's menu, CE5



In their accounts, they demonstrate what they have learnt about healthy eating and the importance of a varied and balanced diet; even if this involves eating foods they do not initially like, they get used to them and learn to appreciate them. A boy says: "Sometimes they serve really strange meals (...) spaghetti and then chickpeas, and there's loads of fruit" (CE2). At another school, a girl says: "Sometimes we have vegetables as a starter and then chickpeas. A boy: 'There are lots of chickpeas and beans'; Interviewer: 'You'd prefer battered chicken, wouldn't you?'; a girl: 'They do it for our health, you know!' (CE1). They explain how their culinary tastes have evolved based on their experience in the school canteen: 'They give us unsweetened yoghurt and I've come to like it' (CE3).

They also mention what they've learnt about hygiene habits – washing hands, brushing teeth – and organisational skills – setting the table, tidying up the canteen, serving food – which has a positive impact on their everyday habits.

The food also comes in for criticism (33 comments on this subject have been recorded), which are interpreted as barriers to children's learning: the repetition of menus; a dislike of certain foods, particularly vegetables and fish; a lack of salt, sugar or other seasonings; and differences in the menu due to allergies. As they put it in their comments: "I don't like the menu because sometimes it's repeated about three times. Fish, three times; chips, three times" (CE3); "I took a photo of the fish because I don't like it. [...] I don't like the taste" (CE2). They also express their discomfort at being given a menu that is very different from the rest for medical reasons, which creates a feeling of exclusion:

I'm allergic; I don't like being given food that's very different from everyone else's. I mean, when I can't eat anything else, they give me things that are much more different from what everyone else gets. ... and I'd like them to try to make the food a bit more similar, rather than this. (CE2).

These accounts highlight the importance of facilitators, such as professional support in understanding diet: offering comprehensible and meaningful practices promotes the development of healthy habits and raises awareness of diversity and the impact on sustainability.

Finally, the children confirm in their accounts the importance of the role played by professionals, whom we identify as cross-cutting facilitators who shape the learning processes within the TEM. This adult support is significant to the pupils' experience and is linked to conflict resolution, their relationship with food, emotional support, the organisation of activities, play, the playground and various other situations; it is viewed positively for its approachability and ability to help.

The impact of inadequate material conditions, deteriorating infrastructure and a lack of resources is also explicitly highlighted; these factors reduce the possibilities of creating contexts for the development of the learning processes identified. The results show that the learning identified in the TEM does not depend solely on spaces, activities or content; the conditions in which they take place and the support received are also significant.

Support is a cross-cutting element that acts as a pivotal factor, as it can sometimes enable the negative aspects identified to contribute to the creation of learning contexts. In this sense, the TEM is a situated learning space, in which experiences acquire educational value depending on the conditions in which they take place.

Discussion

The results obtained address the main objectives of the article, identifying what children learn in the TEM and which factors facilitate or hinder this learning, based on their accounts using the participatory photovoice methodology. Learning outcomes are identified across all the categories described.

These findings are consistent with the specialist literature. Learning in the areas of social interaction and socio-emotional skills is described by the children's own accounts, which highlight the TEM as a space for socialisation, learning, care and leisure; confirming its pedagogical potential beyond a purely logistical function. The social interaction that takes place in the TEM contributes to the acquisition of social, relational and emotional skills, with mealtimes—and playtime in particular—proving to be key opportunities for the development of empathy, communication and conflict resolution. This aligns with the work of Andersen et al. (2017) and Stone and Murakami (2021) on the social role of shared meals; the contributions of Benn and Carlsson (2014) regarding the educational value of break times and everyday life; and those of González-Garzón et al. (2003), who highlight its potential for fostering coexistence, cultural diversity and respect for the environment. Similarly, the idea is reinforced that TEM contributes to the formation of meaningful bonds, with positive effects on pupils' emotional and cognitive wellbeing (Baines and Blatchford, 2011; McNamara et al., 2018; Veiga et al., 2017). We believe it is necessary to

anticipate and prevent situations of conflict amongst peers, particularly in relation to the use of outdoor spaces and the dominance of ‘‘ football. Opening up assemblies and spaces for dialogue to mediate between interests and diversify play areas to cater for different needs presents an educational opportunity. Finally, they highlight the importance of addressing deficiencies in school infrastructure, such as dilapidated, unsafe or poorly maintained areas, and a lack of shade – factors that can lead to discomfort and conflict, thereby hindering social and emotional learning.

The accounts show that the TEM’s organisational and pedagogical model plays a key role in promoting participation; it can either facilitate or limit learning linked to the development of citizenship skills, such as autonomy, the capacity for choice and self-management. Enabling pupils to get involved in decision-making and in organising their time or spaces fosters the development of autonomy and agency. Conversely, as they have expressed, the perception of not being listened to hinders their development; at the same time, practices that are perceived as being imposed hinder the learning processes that enable improved participation and engagement.

The lessons learnt regarding participation and engagement highlight the importance of fostering autonomy, expressed through actions such as serving their own food or freely deciding which recreational activities to take part in, as well as taking an active role and responsibility in looking after the spaces. In terms of learning skills relating to autonomy, organisational ability and self-management of needs, the lack of children’s participation in decision-making stands out, particularly regarding the planning of menus and the organisation of the dining hall – spaces that would facilitate such learning. In light of the results, relevant issues emerge that can guide practical implications for improvement. Children value not only the quality of the activities and the food, but also the opportunity to exercise agency in their everyday school life. This highlights the need to move towards a more participatory governance model, institutionalising regular consultation forums where they can influence the organisation of time, activities and menus, always within the bounds of nutritional recommendations. As Gottschalk and Borhan (2023) highlight, the meaningful inclusion of pupils in school decisions leads to a greater sense of belonging and responsibility.

As regards learning how to use and manage spaces and resources, they call for a diverse range of activity proposals from the team of supervisors (sports, crafts, drawing, games) as well as those suggested by the children themselves. The central role of football in conflicts highlights the need to rethink the management of playgrounds and expand recreational options to ensure inclusive and equitable play opportunities for everyone. In this regard, Hazlehurst et al. (2023) add that well-structured outdoor spaces foster positive social interaction and reduce conflicts when play options are diversified. The accounts highlight the importance of the available space and equipment and their impact on learning; learning to identify and create safe spaces, learning to look after the space, and making diverse use of free time are skills that are easier to acquire when the facilities are designed

to support this diversity and sufficient support is provided. Thus, diversifying activities by promoting positive cultural and sporting uses contributes to the development of intellectual and social skills. Having suitable spaces and resources facilitates the development of safe activities that promote wellbeing, reinforcing the learning process of identifying safe and appropriate spaces for diverse uses. In this regard, the TEM serves as a space of opportunity for learning, not only to use and manage spaces, but to do so responsibly, emphasising the importance of looking after and adapting spaces for various uses.

This finding highlights the urgent need to review and improve school infrastructure, adapting it to a Mediterranean climate characterised by increasingly intense heatwaves, and to provide schools with resources that promote well-being and a variety of safe and accessible play experiences.

The TEM is a learning space dedicated to food education and sustainability. Children express their concerns about sustainability (such as recycling, composting and food waste), highlighting opportunities for action to achieve this educational objective. This suggests that the TEM can become a genuine laboratory for sustainability and citizenship, promoting environmental responsibility and strengthening children's sense of belonging and commitment to the school community (Cebrián et al., 2025). It also highlights the importance of training professionals in socio-educational practices linked to caring for the environment and fostering responsible habits. With regard to healthy eating, on some occasions pupils are not given explanations for the reduction in animal proteins and the increase in pulses – as sources of protein – or for the reduction in the use of salt and sugar; these changes are perceived as repetitive, or pupils disapprove of the absence of seasoning, or express a dislike for the increased use of vegetables and the consumption of fish. It is not enough simply to provide a healthy diet; this must be accompanied by explanations that help children learn positive eating habits. There is also a need to explain the differences in menus due to allergies or medical conditions, to ensure these are not perceived as exclusion.

Limitations and future lines of research

Regarding the limitations of the research, it should be noted that the results are not statistically generalisable. Nevertheless, the adoption of a constructivist-interpretative approach and the use of participatory-practical evaluation provide an example of good practice that can serve as a frame of reference for other contexts within the academic debate. In future research, it would be interesting to conduct studies with statistically representative samples and to analyse the results in a stratified manner, for example, by gender, type of school (rural or urban; state or state-subsidised private) or other relevant variables. Furthermore, based on the results of this study, an opportunity arises to analyse the possible relationship between educational projects and the systems of coordination between teaching staff and teams of youth workers, and their impact on the learning that takes place within this educational setting.

Conclusions

The study shows that the TEM is a space of high pedagogical, social and emotional value. It is a space where children can develop autonomy, social skills and a sense of belonging. The children highlight positively that the space offers opportunities for play, social interaction and participation; whilst also pointing out areas for improvement relating to food, conflicts over the use of spaces, a lack of participation in decision-making and shortcomings in school infrastructure. These findings reinforce the need to rethink the canteen as a holistic educational setting.

Furthermore, this study validates the potential of photovoice as a strategy for promoting children's participation in the evaluation of the spaces they inhabit and the services they receive. Its use allows their opinions to be included directly, fostering the construction of critical and creative narratives that generate situated knowledge and contribute to the improvement of socio-educational practices. It is worth recalling the importance of appropriate implementation to avoid adult-centred biases in socio-educational practice (Vila, 2020).

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