

Factors that enhance and limit youth empowerment, according to social educators

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to identify the contextual and relational factors that enhance and limit the empowerment of young people from the perspective of social education professionals.

Design/methodology/approach – Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model made it possible to locate the narratives of the educators in the territory. These narratives include field diaries, i.e. hybrid narratives that include visual, written and spoken materials, and focus groups with 11 educators from different fields of action and related to youth empowerment projects.

Findings – According to these educators, the most important factors for empowering young people are their immediate environment, and the issues that affect them most. For these factors to be empowering, young people need to be accompanied, with support based on connectedness, horizontality and the creation of safe spaces and learning experiences. Both the microsystem and the mesosystem form the immediate reality for their action. Aware of this, educators do the work of connecting with the exosystem.

Practical implications – It is evident why communities are spaces with opportunities for youth empowerment, and the authors observe the need for more transversal and less welfare-based social and youth policies that generate empowerment instead of dependency.

Social implications – This methodology evidenced the environmental structures of educators and the dissimilar levels to explore and understand the work of educators and the complex interrelationships, which play an important role in empowerment processes.

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Originality/value – This research presents a new perspective that allows traditional qualitative reflection to be embedded in the bioecological model. All of this sheds light on relational ecosystems with young people and proposes youth policies, in this case, oriented towards empowerment.

Keywords Youth empowerment, Educators, Youth policies, Bioecological model

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Empowerment is complex, as it involves individual and collective psychological and social-relational processes (Rappaport, 2002; Zimmerman, 2000). From a pedagogical point of view, and according to the documentary analysis of Ucar Martínez *et al.* (2017) and the pedagogical model for guiding youth empowerment by Soler *et al.* (2017), empowerment requires people to be able to implement and exercise those capacities. It is a time of great vitality and expansion, when decision-making and individual and collective experiences have an important impact on the later stages of life (Dahl *et al.*, 2018).

Empowerment is a process that takes place within an environment and therefore in interaction with it. The actions, activities, relationships and structures in each environment can facilitate or limit empowerment. Studies by Doneys *et al.* (2020) have shown that environments and relational aspects play a significant role in empowerment processes. Similarly, Corrêa Cavalieri and Neves Almeida (2018) stated that empowerment is an active social process that occurs in relation to others and that varies according to the environment and the people involved. They also noted that it is difficult to separate the individual from the community, the personal from the environmental.

Several studies (Cahill and Dadvand, 2018; Ferreira *et al.*, 2021; Naezer *et al.*, 2017) have emphasized that empowerment processes depend on interpersonal relationships; power relationships also play a relevant role. Among these relational aspects, special attention should be paid to the relationships young people have with adults, especially with those adults who play an important part in their life process, including educators. Previous studies have brought to the fore some of the differences between youth empowerment and the empowerment of adults (Peterson *et al.*, 2011), and the role that adults should play in the empowerment of young people (Blanchet-Cohe and Brunson, 2014). Salusky *et al.* (2014) analysed the role of adults in the processes of youth empowerment, although they gave them a secondary and flexible role. They also attributed specific functions to adults, such as encouraging, supporting, listening and assessing. The educator's role is one of collaborator, facilitator and provider of resources, facilitator of processes, and generator of environments and opportunities, rather than that of an expert.

While numerous studies, especially within the field of psychology, have focused on the more individual dimensions of empowerment (Christens, 2012; Rodrigues *et al.*, 2018; Speer *et al.*, 2019), little research has analysed the environmental and relational factors that enhance or limit empowerment.

The educators' point of view, using the ecological perspective of human development

Educators are responsible for generating scenarios that enable the emotional, educational and participatory empowerment of young people. This educational component helps the relationships between young people and adults flow and circulate, leading to the development of the processes of empowerment of young people.

Analyzing youth empowerment from the perspective of educators requires taking into consideration: (a) the environments where empowerment occurs and where young people and educators meet; and (b) the interventions of educators in the environments where young people interact. It therefore seemed appropriate to adopt the ecological perspective to analyse those environments that enhance the processes of youth empowerment.

Silva and Martínez (2004), inspired in Bronfenbrenner (2001), saw the “empowering environment” as the ecological environment with different milieus in and between which

complex interrelationships occur. According to these authors, it is necessary to differentiate environments from processes, without forgetting the aspects of the processes connected with interrelationships in each environment. Although [Silva and Martínez \(2004\)](#) proposed analysis by levels of social aggregate (individual, organizational and community), in this article we have used the categorization of systems proposed in Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective of human development, given that it includes environmental, process, and relational aspects.

[García Gómez et al., 2009](#) highlighted the value of ecological systems theory for understanding and proposing more holistic pedagogical practices across various environments that favour meaningful learning and improve quality of life.

According to this theory, every individual is part of various social systems within which they act and define their personal characteristics, doing so conditioned by the impact these systems have on their personal development. Moreover, the characteristics of a system are also influenced by relationships with other systems.

Critics of ecological systems theory have questioned Bronfenbrenner's diagram of concentric circles. [Rogoff \(2003\)](#), for example, argued that people's development cannot be separated from their social, cultural, and historical environment. Later, however, [Bronfenbrenner \(2001\)](#) proposed the bioecological systems theory, which emphasized the role of the person and proximal processes as central elements, and valued both objective and subjective experiences in surrounding environments and over time. This theory is based on the Process-Person-Context-Time model, which, as [Gifre and Esteban \(2012\)](#) stated, proposed that it is necessary to know the individual in different contexts, environments and spaces in their interactions and relationships. This approach facilitates a holistic view of the processes and factors that interact and intervene in the development of social, psychological, and personal processes, as well as the role of the person themselves in these processes.

In this study, however, we wanted to disaggregate, and understand, those factors that may enhance or limit empowerment in the different environments in which young people interact, so using the five systems of [Bronfenbrenner's \(2001\)](#) ecological systems theory was useful:

- (1) **Microsystem:** the level closest to the individual. The microsystem consists of the relationships, roles, and activities that the person experiences in a particular environment, such as family or school.
- (2) **Mesosystem:** a system of microsystems that includes the interrelationships of two or more environments in which the person participates or is immersed (family, work, and social life). It is about the interrelationships between microsystems; for example, the relationship between a specific family environment (the home) and the centre of education.
- (3) **Exosystem:** environments that do not include the person but affect the environment in which that person participates. In other words, these are environments that affect an individual's life, but indirectly; for example, their partner's friends or their parents' workplace.
- (4) **Macrosystem:** as described by [Gifre and Esteban \(2012, p. 83\)](#), this includes belief systems, religion, and the political, social and economic organization of a given region, which together mould - design, even - microsystems, mesosystems, and exosystems.
- (5) **Chronosystem:** the fifth and final system, which is related to the individual's moment in life. In other words, depending on the moment they are in, they will be affected by the events in their environment in a certain way.

In the results of our research, we did not use the chronosystem, as we were interested in framing the factors that enhance and limit the empowerment of young people within different

social and relational systems. Likewise, we did not consider the genetic influences on development that Bronfenbrenner proposed in his bioecological systems theory.

Objectives and methodology

To provide evidence that helps understand how to encourage youth empowerment, this article presents some of the results of the HEBE project [1]. Specifically, our aim was to identify, in the discourse of educators, the contextual and relational factors that enhance and limit youth empowerment.

A qualitative methodology was used. To understand processes of 11 educators for encouraging youth empowerment, it was necessary to know what happens in the space between their knowledge and practice. This process is often automatic; the process of reflection and analysis leading to action is rarely visible. In the field of pedagogy, the co-production of knowledge between academic and non-academic communities poses a challenge that must be addressed to make sense of research (Gibbons *et al.*, 1994).

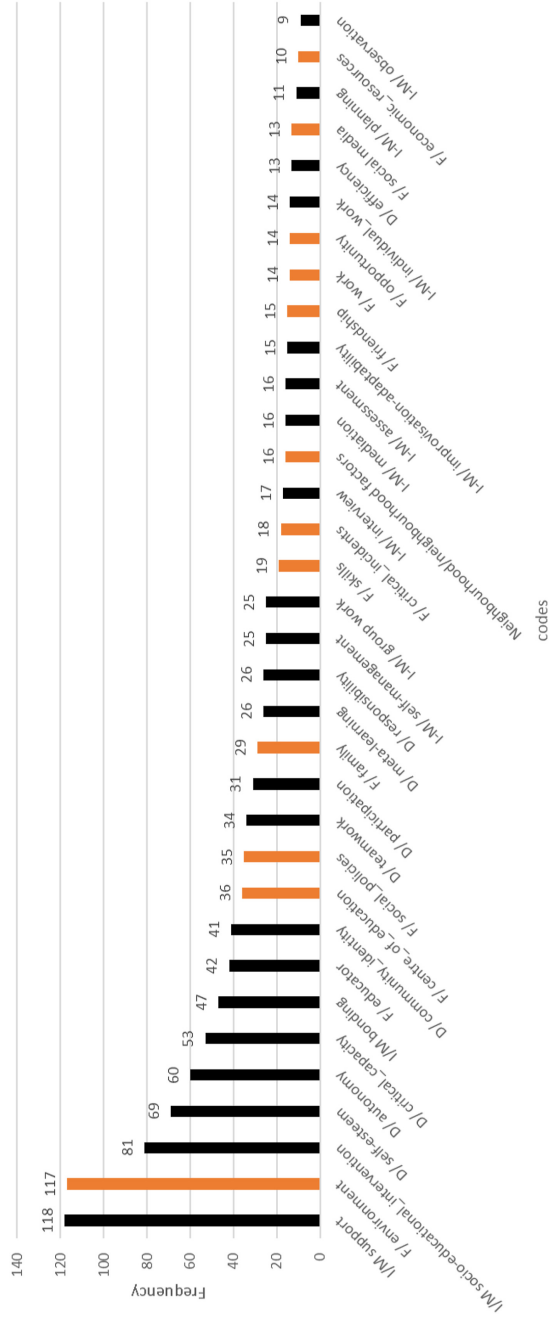
The selection of cases to be studied took into consideration gender equality, as well as professionals with experience in four areas: formal education - regulated, occupational training, specialized education, and socio-cultural animation and leisure. The intervention encompasses a diverse range of areas, namely the role of social educators within educational centers, work integration projects, training companies, governmental organizations, training centers focused on community and audiovisual education, as well as leisure time schools and associations. The educators selected had a minimum of four years of experience, ranging in age from 25 to 47 years and their involvement in programmes explicitly aimed at empowering young people. Finally, an open call was made to all the provinces of Catalonia, and the educators participating in this study are based in the provinces of Barcelona and Girona. Each participant maintained a field diary for one year and part in four focus group sessions.

To stimulate the creative and reflective process, we suggested creating field diaries in a hybrid format (visual, written, audio, etc), with the possibility of including digital narratives (Ranieri and Bruni, 2013). Most of the educators used a digital format for their reflections (combining written documents, audio, photographs and video). Some also used paper to write text, draw and make diagrams. Fifty-six text documents, with or without images, were analysed (including transcriptions of audio documents). Some submissions were not considered because they lacked reflection (a song without text, and a photograph or internal documents of the socio-educational project itself).

The focus groups (Nyumba *et al.*, 2018) dealt with: (1) the concept of empowerment; (2) decisions made in the youth empowerment process; (3) the empowerment process and methodologies used; and (4) organization according to the importance of the dimensions of empowerment. Seven to ten educators participated in each focus group, with a member of the research team acting as rapporteur and moderator. A semi-structured set of questions was used in the focus groups, which lasted around 60 min.

The process of defining the units of analysis was as follows: (a) theoretical debate to create a list of codes that took into account the dimensions, factors and methodologies for empowerment; (b) creation of a Hermeneutic Unit from all the primary documents (four from the focus groups, 56 from the field diaries), and the agreed codes, using Atlas.ti software; (c) content analysis using cross-checking logic - a team of two researchers analysed a part of the material, it was exchanged, and once the codes for each comment were agreed on, a second group of two researchers reviewed and modified or validated the contributions; (d) sharing of the emergent codes that resulted from the first readings and the agreements on which ones to use for the analysis; (e) closure of the analysis and extraction of the first reports of codes and comments; and (f) elimination of codes of little relevance and with few comments (less than 5). Figure 1 shows the 32 final codes that resulted from the bidirectional, inductive-deductive approach to the process of analysis through theoretical emergent codes, and the frequency with which they were mentioned.

Frequency count of most important factor codes



Source(s): Authors work

Figure 1.
Analysis codes
resulting from the
educators' field diaries
and the focus groups,
with frequency counts

The educators who participated in this study did so freely and voluntarily. They completed an informed consent form, in which they were informed of the confidentiality and anonymization of the data. The Code of Good Practice in Research was applied: they were personally informed of the ethical principles of the research and that they were able to exercise their rights of access to their personal data and to correct, delete and oppose it. Finally, the results were communicated through the same channels through which the initial contact was established with each educator.

Results

The results were grouped into different categories (Figure 2) according to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory of development (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem). Factors linked to the microsystem came up most often in the educators' discourse, while those linked to the exosystem were the least frequent.

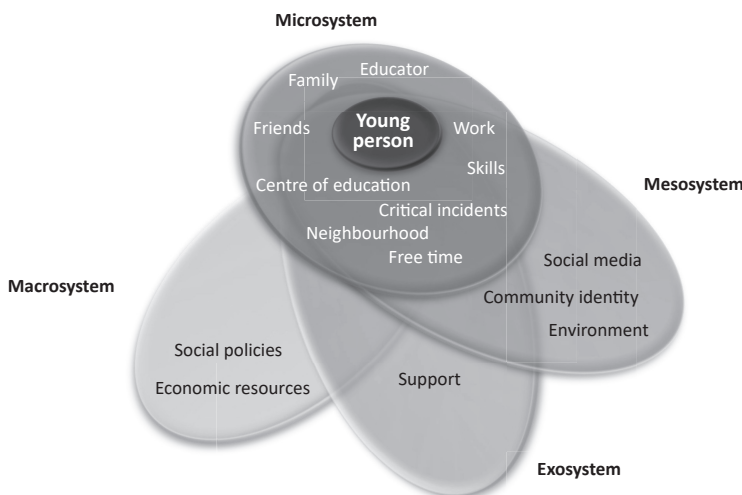
Microsystem

The educators' comments about the spaces where youth empowerment happens stood out among the factors in the microsystem: family; peer groups; neighbourhood; centres of education; education in their free time; work; and their educators.

The family was perceived as the most influential space for youth empowerment.

Undoubtedly, parents have the most influence on young people and favour, or not, their empowerment. I see that when, from a young age, there's been strong support and a positive education by the family - stimulating, accepting, constructive - the young person reaches adolescence or youth with greater guarantees of success. (51:1)

The family was seen as an empowering space in terms of: (a) the relationships within it; (b) how it interrelates with other spaces or contexts; and (c) what it can or cannot offer (family resources and tools). The educators stressed the importance of the family having an active attitude to young people's network of relationships (collaboration and coordination with the centre of education, socio-educational spaces, etc) and adopting similar criteria as educators when making decisions concerning young people.



Source(s): Authors work

Figure 2. Empowerment factors mentioned by educators, grouped according to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory

Friendships and peer groups also featured in the educators' discourse. Although in the educators' discourse the term "friendships" was used, we interpreted it as being more correct to refer to peer groups, as the value of the relationship was not mentioned, but instead the fact of belonging to a group of young people. Educators leveraged peer dynamics to enhance empowerment processes.

We as teachers realized that we had to adopt other strategies to approach this young person. One of these strategies came from the group's own need to understand him and to be able to help him as his peers; our actions until then hadn't been effective. This boy attaches a lot of importance to his peers and needs to feel respected by them, in whatever way. (59:7)

The student with ASD just listened and from time to time he would say: "I'm not coming! Finally, his own friends confronted him with the pros and cons of coming and pointed out that the timetable can be changed (they restructured the afternoon visually). In the evening, the student came to his family saying that he had changed his mind because schedules can be changed. Sometimes we do not intervene in other people's decisions because they are theirs, but we can teach them to be flexible in certain things, without imposing or ordering them. (58:6)

The neighbourhood was an influential environment for youth empowerment. The educators explained how, through projects or partnerships, they worked to get young people involved in their immediate environment. The neighbourhood was a factor that enhanced youth empowerment.

The fact that many of the girls in this project had been volunteering in educational leisure spaces was a positive point, because they had a lot of interest and a strong motivation for the topic. We decided to take advantage of this and gave them the possibility to investigate their concerns further. We saw a strong empowerment that spread through the whole group of participants (a large majority of girls, almost 90%) and they immediately took responsibility for the project themselves. (14:1)

Through the project, students became involved in issues in their neighbourhood, they learned first-hand about realities that surround them but which they had never approached before, and we observed real empowerment when they took the reins of the research to ask questions about what intrigued and concerned them. (14:25)

Although the educators themselves did not do so explicitly, we interpreted centres of education as largely being environments where young people had relationships that were a factor that enhanced youth empowerment. They saw the centre of education as an opportunity, referring to the space educators and young people shared, which was, therefore, a space for relationships, for detection, for reaching out to each other, etc.

The educators also considered projects generated in the centre of education that led to the establishment of relationships with entities and people in the neighbourhood beyond the project to be an empowering factor. This approach invited us to think of the centre of education as a mesosystem, as it involves relationships between different microsystems.

The young people built relationships with the organizations and people in the neighbourhood that will last beyond the duration of the project. The empowerment of the students can be seen in the pride they show in the video they've made and in the way they debate and reflect on the topic they researched in the presentations of the audiovisual works that have been organized so far at the school, in the neighbourhood, and in other places in Barcelona. (14:26)

The centre of education was a limiting factor for youth empowerment when, within the context of the school curriculum and sometimes with unmotivated teachers, apathy was generated towards working on other types of projects with educational objectives linked to youth empowerment, such as taking part in creating audiovisual projects. The educators also referred to the centre of education as a space that was underused; for example, in relation to the lack of flexibility in centres of education in finding empowering spaces. They also mentioned how little time was dedicated to certain activities or projects, or the lack of listening to young people's interests.

to make young people aware that they are doing things well, because many times they are perhaps a little bit contaminated by their own environment, by the educational system that is not useful for everyone and so on, so the fact of saying, 'Is, don't listen to me, maybe you don't do this well, but you do this really well and you are a crack at it, makes them believe they are capable of doing what they set out to do. (78:91)

Spaces for education in free time were presented as environments in which relationships are established that enhance youth empowerment. On the one hand, educators were able to use them for socio-educational interventions and, on the other hand, they acknowledged the skills and empowerment generated in these spaces.

Camps are a place where you're with them 24 hours a day, doing all kinds of activities and you can also see how they interact, how they relate, the incidents that happen, if we can talk to them, if not, this has happened, we've been told something by the camp organizers, what you have to say, so for me there are these two slightly different analyses. One is perhaps the issue of assessment, which, as a professional, you may like more or less, but there's the more human side or that of values, of coexistence and all that, which for us too, the fact that students can come on camps is a success for me, because it's a very large space for social coexistence. (78:85)

Educators also saw work as an environment that enhances youth empowerment, because of the possibility of increasing young people's self-esteem and autonomy, and because of the relationships that are made in the work environment itself.

One of the elements that I think is most influential in the empowerment process of young people is the fact of having to feel accepted by the peer group. Self-acceptance, i.e. "accepting yourself as you are", is something that comes with maturity and is not something that comes at a younger age. That is why young people, who are still building their personality, tend to attach a lot of importance to the acceptance they receive from the outside in their peer groups (class, sports team, extracurricular activities . . .). (45:4)

The participating educators used the term "empowerment" a lot more as a result of this research. Their narratives were coloured by their experiences. They commented, for example, on the difficulty of being aware of their own processes of reflection and narrative construction. The educators worked from a base of what they already were, of their own skills. This allowed them to identify each young person's personal development skills and abilities. The educators emphasized that it was important to be aware that skills and abilities can be transferred from one environment to another.

. . . fragility has connected you to your strength. As the story says, emotions and thoughts have to be let in, observed, attended to and and thoughts we have to let them into our home, observe them, attend to them and treat them with a listening attitude always with a listening attitude because they carry a message for us. (22:3)

. . . when we create a bond with the young person, this credibility comes from experience . . . "What I'm sharing with you isn't because I've read it - I may have read it - but because I've experienced it . . ." And for me that's fundamental, isn't it? The fact of entering into this reciprocal relationship, right? I accompany you, you accompany me, and we are both in different places, but we are doing very human work between two people. (40:54)

Although the educators' influence was valued positively, it was also accepted that some young people's previous experiences with educators, especially young people in vulnerable situations, might have limited the empowerment process.

. . . It's difficult because for some people when you get to them, they've already been conditioned. They may not want to get to know you because they have the preconceived idea that you're a supervising, controlling element, that you come across as a nice person but in reality, you want to know things and you won't be able to help . . . (6:6).

Finally, there were certain unplanned and unexpected situations that constituted educational opportunities. The educators identified: (a) opportunities that arose in daily practice, from

interrelationships among young people and between young people and educators; and (b) critical incidents, which, although they might initially appear to have been distorting elements of youth empowerment, were able to provide moments of personal growth and opportunities to get to know young people and their environment.

Often in educational interventions we transmit things more related to the climate of relationships and respect that you create with the users (in this case, young people), than what you wanted to transmit with the activity itself. By this I mean that there is a whole series of learning/reflections or impacts that you can generate with young people that are not tangible. (65:1)

The educators also referred to the empowering opportunities of allowing young people to make decisions and act on them, as well as the need to make it easy for young people to express themselves and the need to listen to them. In these interrelationships, educators made a conscious effort to offer spaces for action, to give young people the opportunity to express themselves.

They were the ones who asked us for the camera and disappeared and hid; they worked by themselves, we weren't there with them, we didn't know if they were doing it right or wrong or if there was a technical problem or anything . . . And the result of letting them get on with it was that they opened up. (67:23)

Mesosystem

From an inter-organizational perspective, that is, within the mesosystem, there were elements linked to young people's environment. Sometimes relationships were created among micro-environments or micro-contexts aimed at fostering environments that facilitated empowerment, although this was not always achieved.

Faced with this situation, we proposed that before going to the canteen, they should record themselves answering a series of questions about what they were worried about in the canteen and what they imagined. In this way, they would see their previous ideas and prejudices reflected. The intention was to transform a difficult situation into an opportunity for the students to reflect, to put all the cards on the table, to know their opinions and to confront (13:1) them. The educators agreed that young people's personal and social situations had a strong impact on their empowerment and that not all young people had the same opportunities. The educators stressed the importance of relationships with the community, in the sense of belonging to a group and a network, of having a community identity.

I have a student who is currently discovering her sexual orientation. One day she came to me to see if she could talk to me and explained that she had met a girl outside school with whom she had become close friends and thought she was in love. She was confused. (9:7)

Having a community identity, feeling part of a social, economic, and work network that leads you to a very individual situation, I think that self-esteem is often difficult without having that community network and that feeling of being accompanied, apart from individual factors. (78:59)

The educators emphasized the factors that were involved in the creation of a network and a community identity (we included the creation of community identity as a factor in the mesosystem because it connects different microsystems). Relationships with the community, and with the different microenvironments that a community is made of, were a relevant factor for youth empowerment, as these micro-interrelationships provided opportunities that helped create a network, a network that was able to support young people. Sometimes the construction of this network was complex because of possible deficiencies in some microsystems, difficulties in connecting them, or because they did not offer a sufficient environment of opportunity.

I'm often more concerned about what it means in terms of networks. In other words, what kind of network you have in a society like today's, in which it's very easy to fall. Now that we're also talking about a very fashionable word which is "community", this network has been lost a lot and there are

young people who have a very complicated network, not the virtual community, but the one you touch . . . family, friends, schools, the neighbourhood. The place where you live . . . what opportunities they give you. So I do think that this is very directly related to “empower yourself or get your act together”, of being able to have this network that helps you. Sometimes I think it’s not so much the social or economic class that’s important but the network that you have around you that can support you when you might fall. (40:24)

The environment was perceived in two ways: on the one hand, as a space for the educator’s own interventions and, on the other hand, as influencing the educators’ work and the process of empowerment. Educators must have a good knowledge of the environment in which they work and of young people’s environments. It was noticeable how sometimes the environment made it difficult for the educator to go deeper into the process of working with young people. Often, these difficulties were overcome by the educators’ ability to adapt and improvise. The educators also came up with projects or actions that helped young people get to know, and connect with, their environment. Educational action prepares young people for the difficulties they may encounter but which are not their responsibility, and to adapt to their environment.

In general, I think it’s clear to say that the environment has enormous force in the empowerment of young people. Perhaps it’s important to differentiate between the immediate and the more distant environment, but both are important and need to be taken into account. (48:1)

Exosystem

For the educators, the work of the local network was very important. They stressed the importance of coordination between agents and services working with the same young person, and, above all, they emphasized the need for centres of education to connect with their environment.

On the other hand, the most distant environment, in my opinion, are all those agents who intervene indirectly, such as social services, coordination meetings with CSMIJs (child and youth mental health centres) or other centres outside the school, the EAPs (psychopedagogy assessment teams). I want to make this distinction clear because often, I think, a young person doesn’t know or isn’t aware that behind them there’s a coordination team working for or thinking about their welfare. But these agents are there and, although they don’t intervene directly, they know the young person and they guide us, as professionals, to act and work with them. (48:3)

The educators’ personal experiences conditioned their discourse and professional practices. During this reflective-narrative process, the educators realized that difficult situations and decisions made throughout their lives consciously or unconsciously shaped not only their outlook on life, but also their professional views and their own empowerment processes.

. . . Haven’t many of you sometimes had someone tell you “That’s your opinion”? “That’s your opinion, I have a different opinion.” I say this because before when I used to talk about personal opinions and said, “This is my personal opinion”, it’s because a personal opinion is a personal opinion, with all my experience and professional background. (52:18)

Macrosystem

The educators talked about the limitations to their professional practice, and therefore to youth empowerment, due to job insecurity and, in a broader sense, and probably because of them, existing social policies and the scarce resources dedicated to them. They also talked about the lack of knowledge that society has of the tasks and functions of these professionals. All this has a direct impact on youth empowerment projects and processes.

Working in an environment that has a lot of shortcomings and limitations in terms of management, politics, investment, budgets, whatever, well, we feel this and we live it and we know it, so when we

talk or when we have contact with the people who have influence, well, let's make them see our vision and, hell, in the end this has to be looked at, so we don't keep quiet, I don't know, I think it's also important, it's also an important point in our work in the environment, in the environment that, in the end, is young people as well. (78:72)

In their discourse, the educators saw social policies as welfare policies, as policies that provided resources or subsistence aid to young people, but that were insufficient and did not cover all their needs.

So this help is sometimes not accompanied by what it should be. And the other thing is that now this young person, for example, who finds themselves in this situation, if help is cut off because they have just had this little disappointment and they are left out of the round of having another chance, they will go back into a situation where at another time they will be offered something else, but maybe it's not what they need at that moment, right? (67:17)

There were two different sides to the educators' discourse about economic resources. On the one hand, they stated that socio-educational work must take into account young people's economic and social conditions and those of their network, and also the environment in which they live and the resources available in that environment. This means that young people are often dependent on help, which is detrimental to the empowerment process.

How do I intervene so that the agent is not a limiting agent? In the neighbourhood? Do they need more economic resources so as not to fall into classism? Does the City Council have a policy for the distribution of students according to neighbourhoods or not? Are there support policies? So, we work a lot with the public administration? But of course, I'm not a salesman, I build projects on the basis of social demand. (40:32)

On the other hand, the educators described how the lack of economic resources for the application of social policies affects the quality and continuity of projects. They stressed the difficulty of implementing long-term projects that enable continuous work with young people. The educators often found themselves working with scarce resources, in the form of subcontracting and part-time employment contracts. All of this made it difficult to put into place continuous and long-term processes with young people, which hinders empowerment processes.

We often start off being subcontracted by the administration or we work directly for the administration or whatever, so this has a social, social-democratic component, but it ends up being a bit of a patchwork (78:33). Finally, the educators expressed the need to develop policies that are not specific to young people but that listen to their voice and are more cross-cutting. This would contribute to greater involvement of young people in their environment. They also stressed the importance of evaluating these policies to measure their impact. Such policies would be a factor that enhances youth empowerment.

Discussion and conclusions

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model made it possible to locate the narratives of the educators in the territory (Vlcek, 2023). Most of the elements identified as enhancing or limiting empowerment were in the microsystem and the mesosystem. The places closest to where young people interact and interrelate, and what happens in those places, were what most contributed to empowerment processes. It is probably because we gathered educators' points of view that the focus was on the systems within which these professionals work. Bronfenbrenner (2001) also discussed the value of those spaces closest to young people, although spaces are all interconnected. Interaction in the close environment helps to activate empowerment processes. On the other hand, educators identified factors that limit empowerment in the macrosystem that are more distant, specifically policies and the lack of resources.

Soler *et al.* (2017) also identified the spaces closest to young people as enhancing empowerment. According to these authors, spaces for youth empowerment include formal educational institutions, non-formal educational and social education institutions, associations, cultural and sporting institutions and facilities, etc, public civic spaces, the family, the workplace and virtual spaces. All of them are spaces that offer, on the one hand, the opportunity to experience empowerment and put it into practice, but they are also spaces that have an impact on the empowerment of young people.

In these spaces in the microsystem, socialization agencies stand out as enhancers or limiters of empowerment, depending on how relationships, interactions, roles and moments for reflection, decision-making and action are configured. In addition to socialization agencies, there are other positive or negative moments and situations that can become contexts of opportunity. Experiences that can be positive or negative depending on how young people live through them, the meaning they attach to them or how they adapt to them, enhance or limit the empowerment process. The actors and agents that inhabit these spaces play a role that, although secondary, is relevant to fostering or facilitating positive experiences.

Within the mesosystem, the role played by groups and the community stands out. The community is perceived as a space of opportunities for youth empowerment. It is a relational environment, with multiple possibilities for participation and action, and with a diversity of referents and formal and informal leaders who can act as catalysts for empowerment. It is also a space that favours the creation of identity. However, although it has its benefits, the community can also be closed or too homogeneous, which limits young people's expression and individuality, and may cause difficulties in creating a network. Also, the excessive dependence of young people on a collective or a network can lead to a certain isolation, which is a factor that limits empowerment.

According to Maton (2008), communities aiming at empowerment should take into account six aspects: (a) the belief system of the group (e.g. building a positive vision of young people's expectations of success); (b) engaging activities, involving active and high quality learning; (c) a relational environment with support systems, caring relationships, and a sense of community; (d) a structure of opportunity roles that facilitate participation; (e) leadership (formal or informal) that is inspiring, talented, shared, committed, and empowered; and (f) mechanisms for maintaining and changing the environment that include an organizational learning focus, presence of bridging mechanisms, and external linkages.

The professionals who participated in the study specifically dedicated a large part of their discourse to defining some of the elements suggested by Maton (2008). Among them, they stressed the value of support in each environment and referred to the methodological strategies used to accompany young people's processes. They emphasized aspects such as: (a) building a relationship and creating a bond; (b) having more horizontal, closer relationships - that is, seeking spaces where adults and young people share power; (c) creating safe spaces where young people can put their decisions into practice; and (d) offering environments of opportunity and learning experiences to young people. Creating these environments helps to build young people's confidence in their abilities (Checkoway, 2011; To *et al.*, 2021). However, for young people to become active agents of change and innovation, aspects such as engagement in critical reflection on interpersonal and socio-political processes, participation in socio-political processes to effect change, and integrated individual and community level empowerment should be enhanced (Jennings *et al.*, 2006). To achieve this, work with young people must be based on listening, dialogue, and exploration, using methodologies that focus on enthusiastic participation, self-reflection, and the quest to be someone (Bradford, 2011).

It is important to stress the double value of the work that educators do in the exosystem, first, as connectors or mediators between systems that can enhance the empowerment process - in other words, educators determine the intensity of the links between empowerment networks

in the community - and second, as connectors within their own system, the one they have worked in throughout their lives, with their professional practice and their personal experiences. According to Bronfenbrenner, educators need to understand their own life processes and events, because they have an impact on and affect what happens in that environment (2001, p. 237). The exosystem is bidirectional, so events occurring within the exosystem that have an impact on the microsystem may also happen in the opposite direction.

The educators identified most limitations on socio-educational work in the macrosystem. This coincides with the macrosystem being where they are least able to take responsibility and where it is difficult for them to make an impact. Among these limitations, current social and youth policies stand out. To a large extent, these are welfare policies that are insufficient and generate more dependency than empowerment among young people. These policies are not very cross-cutting and young people's voice still counts for little. Another limitation is the scarcity of resources for the deployment of these policies. This scarcity not only affects resources aimed directly at people, but also the quality of programmes and services (professionals' job insecurity, discontinuity of projects, professionals being undervalued, etc.) (Soler *et al.*, 2014). As a consequence, this can contribute to the demotivation of professionals and can affect the confidence of young people in these programmes and services.

Finally, two types of limitation to this study should be mentioned. The first refers to the educators who participated in the study and the heterogeneity of the services where they work (ranging from formal centres of education to professional employment services). Although this heterogeneity allowed us to glimpse youth empowerment trends in the educators' discourse, working with more educators from services that are similar to each other would allow for a more in-depth analysis of the limits and possibilities of empowerment in each type of service. The second limitation refers to the methodological process itself, which is based on analysis of the participants' narratives. These are hybrid narratives that include visual, written, and spoken materials, with the difficulties of analysis that this entails.

The concept of youth empowerment, and the factors that enhance and limit it, appears more and more frequently in the discourse of educators and institutions working with young people. Awareness of these factors should enable and facilitate decision-making that influences the changes needed to increase the effectiveness and impact of youth programmes and services related to youth empowerment.

Note

1. HEBE Project. Identification of factors that enhance and limit youth empowerment: Analysis of educator discourses and practices. Project financed by MINECO - State R&D&I Programme, Society Challenges 2017. Ref.: EDU2017-83249-R. Website: <http://www.proyectehebe.com/>

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