Bridging the Gaps: Promoting Competences for Democratic Culture and the Wellbeing of Girls Through Digital Storytelling

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Abstract

This chapter presents a thematic analysis of videos created by girls during digital storytelling workshops and discusses how this process can contribute to promoting competences for democratic culture and wellbeing. Empathy, especially for victims of bullying, was a highly relevant competence throughout the narratives. The analysis focused on wellbeing and the need to recognize differences and to be accepted and respected. The workshops enabled a space for girls to express their concerns and views on wellbeing, a fundamental condition for promoting and sustaining conditions for democratic participation.

Keywords

Digital storytelling · Girls · Young people · Digital citizenship · Media literacy · Wellbeing · Democratic culture · Digital inclusion

In this post-pandemic world, listening to people's voices is more important than ever. Assuming that digital technologies enable us to create and share stories to connect with others, we were inspired to develop digital storytelling workshops with girls, from 14 to 20 years old, from vulnerable backgrounds, in the context of a European project. In particular, we sought to empower these teenage girls as they transitioned towards adulthood to find and use their voices and to belong in a digital world. This belonging was sometimes fraught with emotional, gender and physical issues.

In this chapter, we will describe the approach used in the workshops based on the "seven steps of digital storytelling" proposed by Lambert [1]. We present a thematic analysis of the videos created by the girls, focused on the Council of Europe's 'model of competences for democratic culture', and discuss how ways of storytelling can contribute to a sense of wellbeing and wholeness. The girls were enthusiastic about the opportunity for their voices to be heard and

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acknowledged. From the analysis, several themes emerged: hate speech, cyberbullying, sexting, physical violence, health, emotional and family issues, grief, homophobia, sexuality, dreams and future, professional perspectives, social acceptance, social/cultural inclusion in a host country and resilience.

Ethical guidelines and permissions were obtained to collect, analyse, and further disseminate the data collected.

1 Introduction

Social inclusion in the twenty-first century is related to digital inclusion, which implies access, skills, and participation in the knowledge and information society [2]. Livingstone et al. [3] advocate for online rights of protection, provision, and participation in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child [4]. Ultimately, digital citizenship education is related to civic engagement and participation [5]. This concern is also reflected in Sustainable Development Goal 4: 'Quality Education'. However, the UN SDG progress report [6] reinforced the importance of teachers and the learning environment in keeping pace with technological changes and improving learning outcomes, especially for children and young people in most vulnerable situations.

Avid users and daily consumers of diverse social and digital tools, young people are especially exposed to content that can have harmful effects on their wellbeing [7]. Their online habits are frequently difficult for parents to supervise; at the same time, peer group pressure to conform/transgress plays an important role in their individual/collective identities and behaviours [8–10]. Besides fake news, young people are also exposed to online risks: not suitable content (pornographic/violent), conduct risks (e.g. cyberbullying), and contact risks (usually from adults), involving the possibility of inappropriate interaction [7]. Young people's access to violent content online is often decontextualized, extreme, and inadequate for their age, and most are not prepared to cope with possible disturbing experiences.

According to the International Computer and Information Literacy Study [11], only 1% of Portuguese youngsters managed to select the most relevant online information and were able to assess useful and reliable information. These rates are even lower for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The relationship between social, economic, and contextual family variables and the vulnerability to online risks seems indisputable [12, 13].

This chapter draws on data from the experience of the project MINDtheGaps: Media literacy towards youth social inclusion, 2020–2021 [14]. It involved five partners from four countries, Portugal, Bulgaria, Turkey, and Norway. MINDtheGaps was an ERASMUS+ KA2 project (2019-2-PT02-KA205-006226) that used a participatory intervention with young people in vulnerable situations, based on digital storytelling and other open educational resources, to develop media and digital literacy, and therefore, increase opportunities for social inclusion [15].

Data obtained through the thematic analysis [16] of 19 digital narratives created by the participants allowed us to answer the following research questions: *can digital storytelling contribute to express and develop competences for democratic culture and feelings of wellbeing of girls, both online and offline? In what way?*

2 Competences for Democratic Culture as the Foundation of Digital Citizenship

The Council of Europe ([17], p. 7) created a *model of competences for democratic culture*, which includes three sets of values, six attitudes, eight skills, and three sets of knowledge and critical understanding, presented in Fig. 1.

The term 'democratic culture' is used to emphasize that democratic institutions and laws, although fundamental, do not work without democratic values, attitudes and practices and that such a culture is founded upon an interdependent relationship with intercultural dialogue, and aims to secure the participation of all citizens through democratic discussion, debate and deliberation

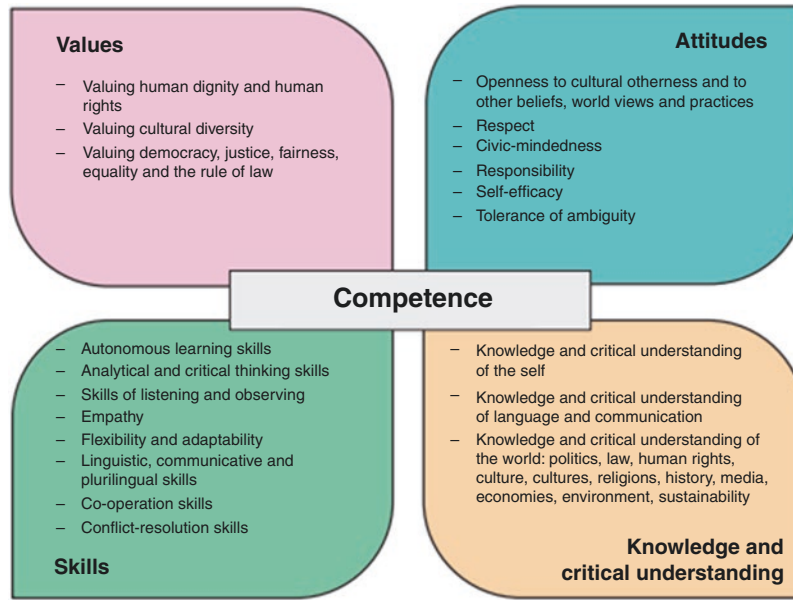

Fig. 1 Model of competences for democratic culture

([17], p. 5). Democratic participation of citizens also requires measures to combat social inequalities and structural disadvantages, without which people from disadvantaged groups would be sidelined in democratic processes. In this framework, democratic and cultural competence is defined as 'the ability to mobilise and deploy relevant values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and/or understanding in order to respond appropriately and effectively to the demands, challenges and opportunities that are presented by democratic and intercultural situations' and 'the term "competences" (in the plural)' means 'specific individual resources (i.e. the specific values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and understanding) that are mobilised and deployed in the production of competent behaviour' ([17], p. 6).

The competences for democratic culture are the foundation of the ten digital citizenship dimensions [18] and, ultimately, of digital citizenship. The Council identified three aspects of online life: *being online, wellbeing online and rights online*, in which the fundamental principles of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, should be promoted. The underlying assumption is that each person's responsibility as a citizen is similar, whether one is online or offline.

3 Digital Storytelling as a Means of Valuing the Voices of Young People in Situations of Social Vulnerability

As mentioned above, taking as its starting point the *competences for democratic culture* and the *digital citizenship* frameworks, the MINDtheGaps project promoted digital storytelling workshops in Portugal, Turkey and Bulgaria from June to September 2021, aiming to empower young people to develop media literacy and critical thinking and to be able to share knowledge and collaboratively solve problems in a non-formal context. The next section will present the analysis of the videos produced by the Portuguese girls who participated.

The option of digital storytelling has been successfully used with children in educational contexts to promote skills to deal with, violence, bullying and discrimination [19, 20], to build empathy and 'enhance the learning experience and attitude change' [21]. Furthermore, several authors mention that digital storytelling has an impact on the person who tells the story as they share their ideas and feelings with others in a safe context, bringing a sense of togetherness and the

comfort of being listened to while, at the same time, creating knowledge, empathy and sensitivity in those who listen to the story [21, 22].

Digital storytelling ultimately supports social inclusion by enabling an inclusive learning environment [19, 23, 24]. This is in line with the overall aim of Sustainable Development Goal 4, "Quality education", to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. According to the United Nations ([25], p. 7), the right to education must be guaranteed at all levels—early childhood, primary, secondary, tertiary, technical and vocational training—and should encompass all people, irrespective of sex, age, race or ethnicity, as well as persons with disabilities, migrants, indigenous peoples, children and youth, especially those in vulnerable situations. In this sense, other SDGs were also of relevance during this project, namely: SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 10 (reduced inequalities). The reader can access a more detailed description of the SDGs in chapter "Promoting Learning Inclusion Through the Global Network of Learning Cities and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)".

3.1 Developing Digital Storytelling Workshops with Girls

Nineteen girls participated in the workshops in Portugal, aged from 14 to 20 years old, with an average age of 16.8, standard deviation 1.8. The girls' schooling level ranged from 9th to 12th grade, with 47% attending the 11th grade. Their mother's schooling ranged from the fourth grade to university, with the majority having just completed the ninth grade (47%), corresponding to the level of compulsory education for their age group.

3.1.1 Ethics

During the process, the team of facilitators considered ethical issues, especially as they were dealing with minors in a situation of social vulnerability. With this in mind the following conditions were ensured [26]:

1. Assure storyteller wellbeing: together with the girls' teachers and legal guardians, conditions were considered to ensure that they felt comfortable and emotionally supported during the process of sharing and developing the stories.
2. Informed consent: all parents or guardians signed the informed consent agreement. In addition, all the young girls were informed about the project and supported in making informed choices about workshop participation and the content, production and use of their narratives. They were also informed about the possibility of withdrawing at any time.
3. Knowledge production and ownership: conditions ensured that the girls were able to tell their stories with freedom and in different languages. In cases where more sensitive and compromising content was shared, after discussion with the facilitators, these digital stories were not shared or were kept anonymous.
4. Local relevance: the MINDtheGaps project worked with local partners to design the workshops. Each session was carefully prepared and adapted to local contexts and needs.
5. Ethical engagement: ethics issues were observed along the process, and the young girls were listened to during the development of the objectives, selection, workshop design and implementation.
6. Story dissemination: The digital stories were primarily shared with the girls' local communities. After that, some of them were shared online, while the sensitive ones were stored in a place of restricted access.

The Digital Storytelling Workshop Development

The digital storytelling workshop followed the seven steps [1] presented in Fig. 2.

The diversity of situations, emotions and insights presented in Fig. 2 is consistent with the

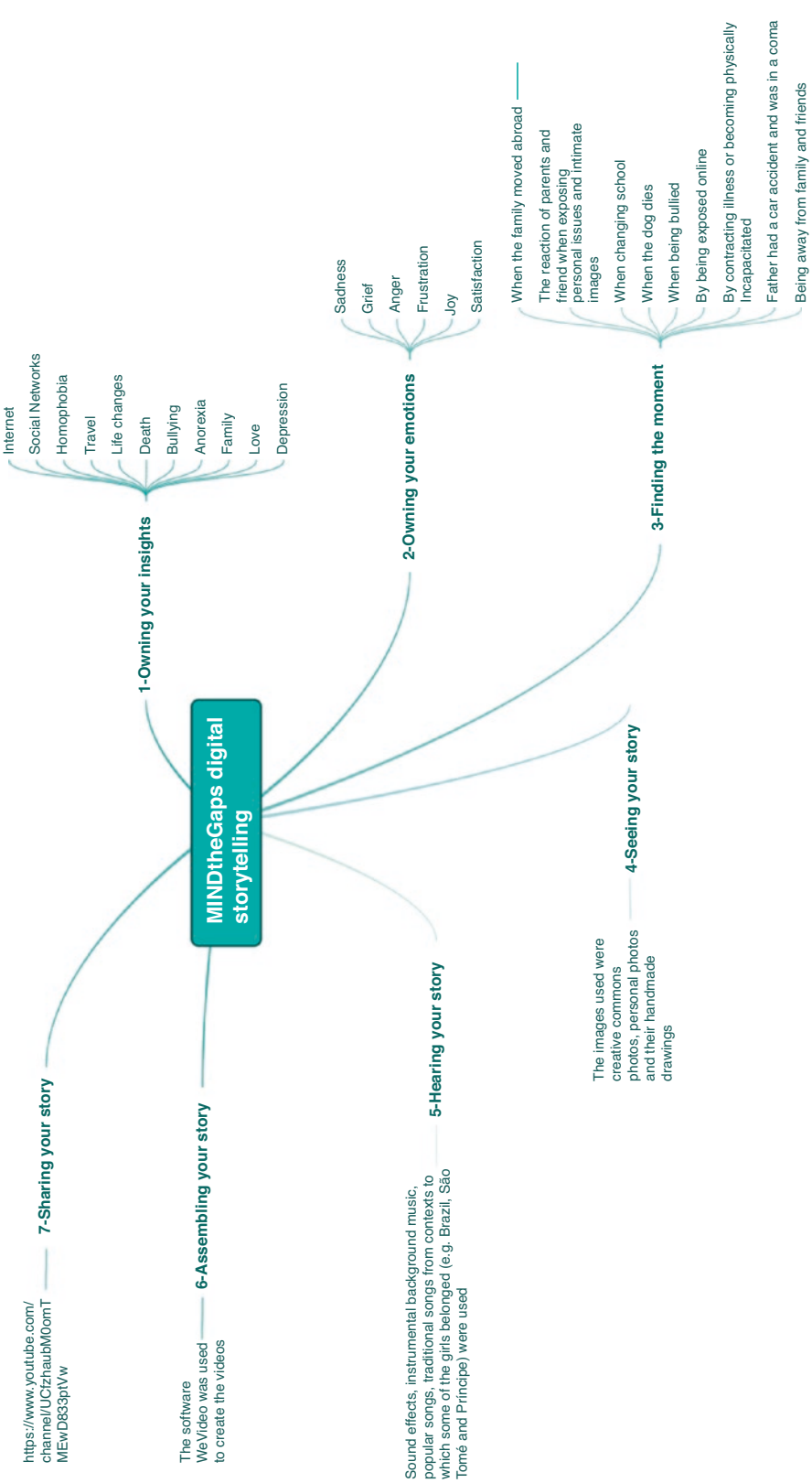

Fig. 2 Digital storytelling steps and MtG digital stories systematisation

diversity of the girls' life stories. As Lambert ([1], p. 10) points out: "This process of self-reflection helps move from an awareness of "I am" to a deeper awareness of "I have been… I am becoming… I am… and I will be….". As life proceeds and is reflected upon, changes can be better understood, and stories have the chance to ripen".

4 Democratic Culture and Wellbeing: Expressing and Developing Worldviews and Feelings Through Digital Storytelling

4.1 Analysing Competences for Democratic Culture Expressed Through Digital Storytelling

For the analysis of the 19 digital narratives produced by the girls who participated in the MTG storytelling workshops in Portugal, a thematic analysis [16] was used, based on the model of competences for democratic culture [17, 27] (Fig. 3). [1]

Concerning *values*, the most frequently mentioned, with 42.1% of references in the girls' digital stories, was *valuing human dignity and human rights*, often related to the absence of those values online, as stated by Rita (18 years old):

> Why don't people and society think before criticising someone?
> We are in the 21st century and there is still the prejudice of image and of how people look.
> (…) Why does our society have to criticise people with coldness, arrogance, and negative points?
> Why do they only see this side? And why don't they see the good side of people?

The attitude of *respect* was also mentioned in the digital stories (21.1%) as a concern for other people's feelings. However, again, the absence of respect was highlighted:

> Always remember to be careful about the comments you make on the Internet because they can ruin a person's life. (Sofia, 14 years old)

> After a while, the conversation began to evolve, and he asked her for intimate photos, manipulating and threatening her, saying he would stop talking to her. (…) Mariana gave in (…) Pedro (…) shared it with his group of friends. (…) It was spread across the internet, which made the whole school, colleagues, and friends of Mariana see the photos. (…) She suffered a lot of bullying. (Helga, 15 years old)

In what concerns other *attitudes*, *self-efficacy* was the most mentioned (73.7%), mainly suggesting that the girls were aware of the necessary competences to meet life's challenges:

> In these last two months, I decided to concentrate on myself, and I learned to live with myself when I needed to, I was the only one there. I am proud of myself. I decided not to demand too much from myself and learn from it. I still don't feel 100%, I am worn out, but that is life. First it makes you strong, and then it makes you happy. (Teresa, 18 years old)

In her digital story, Teresa also clearly showed that she took *responsibility* for her 'mistake':

> 2021 came and I got sick from a mistake that resulted in two STDs [sexually transmitted diseases] that led to me going to the health centre every week and often to the ER. I was having treatments until one at night on one occasion, I became ill and I had, I can say, the greatest pain of my life. In the morning, I woke up and was frightened by what I saw, so I went straight to the emergency room. (…) What STDs can cause!

Regarding *tolerance of ambiguity*, an attitude equally mentioned in the digital stories (21.1%), the girls appeared to be comfortable in unfamiliar circumstances and to deal with uncertainty in a positive manner. In her digital story, Maria (21 years old), expressed her feelings of sadness about leaving her family, especially her younger siblings, to travel to Portugal to pursue her studies:

[1] For the qualitative thematic analysis, only the competences for democratic culture that scored above 20% in the quantitative analysis will be mentioned.

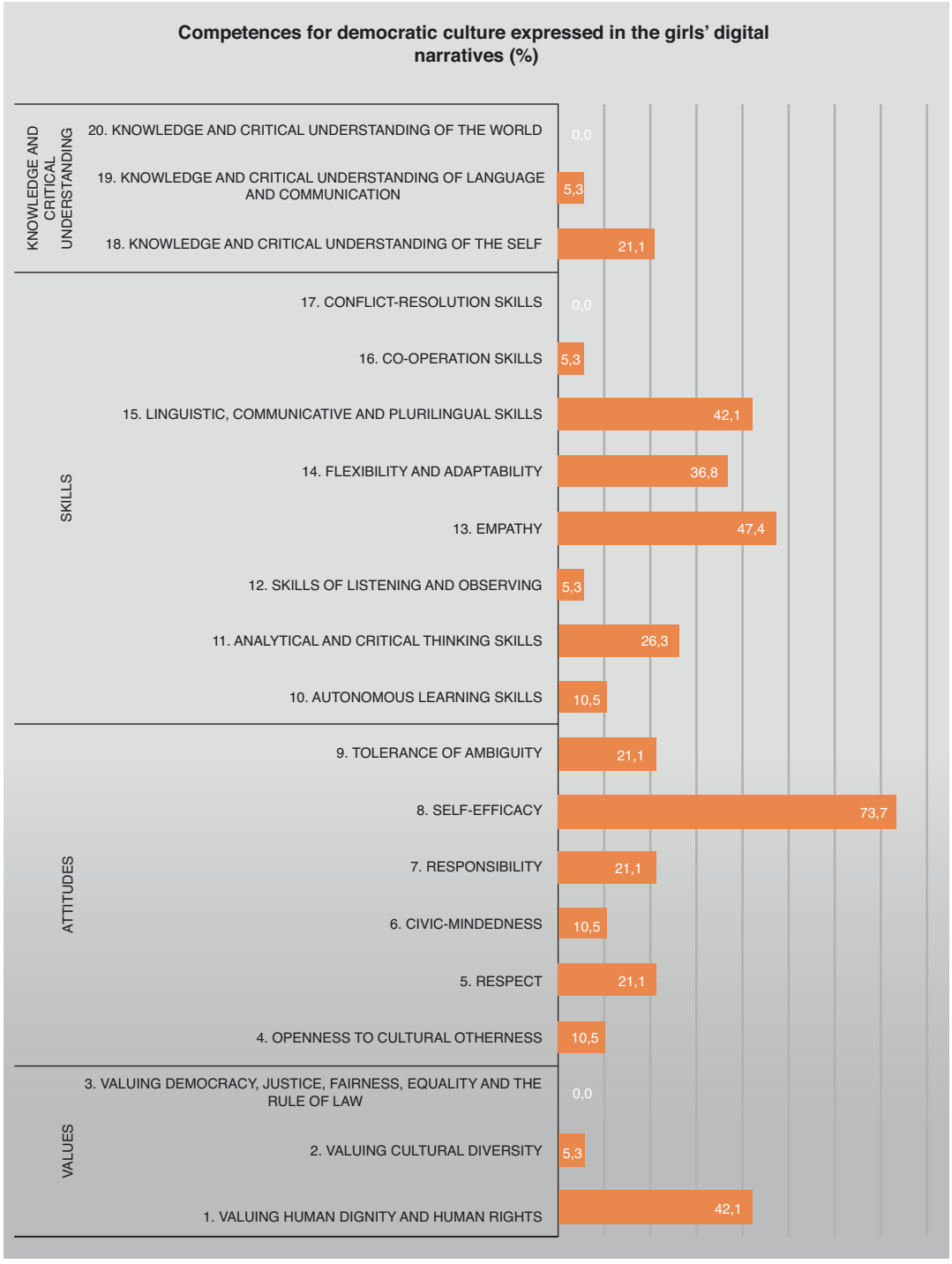

Fig. 3 Thematic analysis of the girls' digital stories using the model of competences for democratic culture [17, 27]

> I felt very bad about it, but I was discreet not to make things worse, and today I am in Portugal. At the beginning it was tough to integrate with new people, everything was different, I didn't feel well, I thought the others were better than me, but now I have new friends, and I have learnt new things and I accept the fact that I am far from the people I love.

Concerning the *skills* for democratic culture, *empathy* was the most relevant throughout the narratives (47.4%), especially related to the suffering of other young people who, in the stories, were victims of bullying:

> Isa has never been a person with a body like the ones shown as standards on the internet. But then again, none of us cared about that.
> However, when I saw her that day… She no longer had that sparkle in her eyes. She was much skinnier.
> I didn't want to comment because she might not feel comfortable, but I started to find it very suspicious when we ate a snack with our friends, and she barely touched her food.
> Later, I asked her if something was wrong (…).
> The Internet had destroyed her.
> I talked to her and quickly convinced her to see a doctor, or a psychologist, and she eventually agreed. (Sofia, 14 years old)

As to the *linguistic, communicative and plurilingual skills* (42.1%), the girls were able to express their thoughts on the problems around them, including developing their analytical and critical thinking skills (26.3%):

> The impact of influencers and YouTubers on society is becoming more and more noticeable. We see the younger generations being inspired and wanting to follow the path of those we call idols. We are influenced by their publications, ways of speaking, acting, and thinking. Social media is a medium that brings us closer to our friends and family, but it is also a place of very negative comments and vicious cycles. Take care of yourself and your mental health. Don't compare yourself and accept yourself just the way you are. That's what makes you special and unique. (Margarida, 15 years old)

In what concerns another relevant skill, *flexibility, and adaptability* (36.8%), the young women showed they were able to support other views, adapt to new situations and even to change their mind concerning future professional paths.

Lastly, regarding the cluster *knowledge and critical understanding*, we highlight self-knowledge, and the ability to reflect critically on themselves, their emotions, and feelings:

> In the Association I learnt to respect others, to improve my skills, such as my self-esteem and confidence, to control my emotions, to control my impulsiveness. I have also managed to change several things about myself, to have more goals, to express myself more, but above all I have grown, I am beginning to see life in a different way. (Paula, 15 years old)

4.2 Digital Storytelling and Wellbeing

Valuing the young people's voices through developing digital stories can contribute, as noted earlier, to developing competences for democratic culture. Considering wellbeing as a prerequisite for promoting and sustaining conditions for participation, we also analysed the digital stories' themes by using the indicators as constructs of wellbeing inspired by the New Zealand Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy [28] [2] (Fig. 4). The information about how the process of sharing experiences can contribute to *wellbeing-ness* is discussed in this book's chapter "Towards Wellbeing-ness as an Experience of Inclusion, Belonging and Voice in a Digital (Post-Covid) World of Global Change".

Through a second analysis of the young women's narratives we were able to identify the frequency with which the wellbeing indicators as constructs emerged as relevant. The data has been systematised in Table 1.

As can be seen in Table 1, situations involving the need to be *accepted, respected and connected* are the most represented in the digital stories (46%), related to themes such as coming out as homosexual and/or fighting homophobia; bullying situations and reporting bullying to school by

[2] Child and youth wellbeing strategy. Indicators: https://childyouthwellbeing.govt.nz/measuring-success/indicators

Outcome	Child and Youth Wellbeing Indicators
Children and young people are loved, safe and nurtured	Feeling loved, feeling safe, family/whānau wellbeing, injury prevalence, harm against children, and quality time with parents
Children and young people have what they need	Material wellbeing, child poverty: material hardship, child poverty: low income BHC50, child poverty: low income AHC 50, food insecurity, housing quality, and housing affordability
Children and young people are happy and healthy	Prenatal care, early exposure to toxins, subjective health status, preventable admissions to hospital, mental wellbeing, and self-harm and suicide
Children and young people are learning and developing	Participation in early learning, regular school attendance, literacy, numeracy and science skills, socio-emotional skills, self-management skills, and youth in employment, education, or training
Children and young people are accepted, respected and connected	Ability to be themselves, sense of belonging, experience of discrimination, experience of bullying, social support, support for cultural identity, and languages
Children and young people are involved and empowered	Involvement in the community, representation of children and young people's voices, making positive choices, and involvement in criminal offending

Fig. 4 Wellbeing indicators of the New Zealand Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy. (Source: Child Wellbeing and Poverty Reduction Group [28])

Table 1 Number of references per indicator of wellbeing expressed in the young women's narratives

Wellbeing outcome	Frequency
Accepted, respected and connected	40
Happy and healthy	15
Learning and developing	14
Involved and empowered	9
Loved, safe and nurtured	6
Have what they need	3

parents; the importance of accepting themselves as they are; mental health concerns, and the importance of seeking psychological help; emotional learning, including self-love and self-care, and, lastly, finding meaning in adversity.

The second most frequently addressed outcome in the digital stories' themes is *happy and healthy* (17%), which involves *health issues, mental wellbeing and recovery from trauma*. In the digital stories, some themes emerged involving physical and mental health, such as illnesses, infertility, sadness, depression, suicide attempt and dealing with death.

The *learning and developing* outcome, with 16% of the references, includes situations of emotional learning, vocational orientation, the

choice of a future profession and the areas of professional interest.

The outcome *involved and empowered* (10%) involves the girls' relationship with the community; *having their voices, perspectives, and opinions listened to and taken into account*; to be responsible citizens, they, and their families, are supported to make healthy choices. The themes in the digital stories relate to the use of social networks to affirm their sexual identity, the impact of influencers and YouTubers on young people, and recommendations to other young people about internet dangers, including making comparisons with unrealistic standards.

Regarding the outcome *loved, safe and nurtured* (7%), there were some situations in the narratives where the young women expressed this need through romantic love, their father's alcoholism, and coping with parental separation.

The outcome *children and young people have what they need* (3%) is present in the digital stories involving material issues that were mainly related to past situations experienced in the family and in the adaptation to new life contexts, such as economic difficulties, migration in search of new opportunities and the difficulties integrating into a new country.

Based on the young women's stories, the main concerns that emerged from the analysis were related to social aspects. Among the themes addressed, the need to recognise differences and to be accepted and respected by others, but also by oneself stands out. The process of feeling, representing, and sharing the stories also allowed the development of learning about emotion management. In most of the stories, they tended to close with a message of hope. In these cases, friends, family, and other professionals were asigned a fundamental role in the process of overcoming these situations.

5 Final Remarks

In this chapter, we have described the approach used in digital storytelling workshops held with Portuguese young people, from vulnerable backgrounds, based on the methodology proposed by Lambert, in the context of the European project *MINDtheGaps: Media literacy towards youth social inclusion*. The aim of the Project was to use a participatory intervention methodology based on digital storytelling (among other resources), to develop media and digital literacy, and critical thinking, thus increasing young people's participation and social inclusion.

For this chapter, we proposed to study specifically the situation of girls, considering the intersection of the category of gender with other categories of inequality existing in the lives of these young people, in line with concerns expressed in SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 10 (reduced inequalities). At the same time, based on previous research that showed that digital storytelling can be been positively used with young people to prevent and promote skills to deal with violence and discrimination, to build empathy and to promote attitude change, we questioned whether *digital storytelling can contribute to express and develop competences for democratic culture and feelings of wellbeing of girls, both online and offline and in what way*.

Through a thematic analysis of the 19 digital stories created by the girls, using the Council of Europe's 'model of competences for democratic culture', as well as the indicators of the New Zealand Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, we sought to answer questions concerning the assumption that digital citizenship education, a cornerstone of this Project, is related to civic engagement and participation (both online and offline). It also relates to *wellbeing online* and *rights online* as parallel concerns reflected in Sustainable Development Goal 4: 'Quality Education' [29], especially for children and young people experiencing vulnerable situations.

During the workshops, the girls expressed feelings of comfort and closeness after sharing their digital stories. Some digital stories mirrored self-reflection and moments of learning and self-improvement. At this level, regarding the competences for democratic culture expressed through digital storytelling, the most mentioned *values*

were those related to *valuing human dignity and human rights*, often related to the absence of those values online as well as the lack of respect from others. In relation to *attitudes*, *self-efficacy* was the most frequently mentioned, related to the need to meet life's challenges, as well as *tolerance of ambiguity*. This attitude equally moves us to the need to deal with unforeseen circumstances in a positive, engaging manner. Concerning the *skills* for democratic culture, *empathy*, especially for those who are victims of bullying, was consistently mentioned and of high relevance throughout the stories.

The girls were also able to express their thoughts on the problems around them, including developing their analytical and critical thinking skills and showing *flexibility and skills to adapt* regarding new situations in their lives, such as moving to a new country, their parents' separation, or openness to new ideas or professional paths. We also highlight that in many stories, the young women were able to critically reflect on their attitudes and behaviours. In this sense, the digital storytelling workshops not only enabled the expression of democratic competences, but they also enabled the development of a participatory and inclusive process, in which the young people felt free to express feelings and experiences without judgement while others developed democratic values, attitudes, skills and understanding.

As for the wellbeing indicators, we concluded that the situations involving the need to be *accepted, respected, and connected* were most represented in the stories, especially connected with the recognition of difference, the acceptance by others and the need for respect.

In sum, the young people's stories and the story circles showed in a highly appropriate way to the young people and adults involved in the Project that the competences we use in a culture of democracy, in features related to respect for difference, participation, and critical understanding of the world and oneself, affect our social and individual wellbeing. They are all connected and we cannot have one without the other.

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