

Youth Empowerment from the Educator's Perspective: The Individual and Community Dimensions

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Abstract

This research studies how educators help young people to be empowered. It is built from a pedagogical model of youth empowerment comprising nine variables: self-esteem, responsibility, critical capacity, efficacy, community identity, meta-learning, participation, autonomy and teamwork. Our aim is to analyze youth empowerment factors from the educators' perceptions of this concept, taking into account different educators' fields and different uses of methodological strategies. In this quantitative cross-sectional study, the survey technique is applied. We analyzed responses to a questionnaire obtained from 696 educators (including teachers and social pedagogy professionals), through structural equation models (multigroup analysis) and non-parametric techniques. The results suggest that both groups of educators see youth empowerment as a unitary concept, but with two dimensions: the individual and the community. Teachers and social education professionals share the same conception of empowerment and perceive their contribution to it in the same way. On the other hand, differences were detected in the use of methodological strategies when working with young people. The results are discussed in the light of the existing literature, and appear to confirm the need to revisit the differentiation between the formal and non-formal when characterizing educators' actions.

Keywords: youth empowerment; educators; teachers; social education professionals; structural equation models

Resum. *L'empoderament juvenil des de la perspectiva de qui educa: les dimensions individual i comunitària*

Aquesta investigació estudia com els educadors i les educadores ajuden les persones joves a empoderar-se. Parteix d'un model pedagògic d'empoderament juvenil compost per nou variables: autoestima, responsabilitat, capacitat crítica, eficàcia, identitat comunitària,

metaaprenentatge, participació, autonomia i treball en equip. L'objectiu és analitzar els factors d'empoderament juvenil a partir de les percepcions que qui educa té sobre aquest concepte i en funció dels àmbits educatius en què treballen i de l'ús de diferents estratègies metodològiques amb els joves. En aquest estudi transversal amb la tècnica de l'enquesta, analitzem les respostes a un qüestionari obtingut de 696 educadors/es (docents i professionals de la pedagogia social), mitjançant models d'equacions estructurals (anàlisi multigrup) i tècniques no paramètriques. Els resultats suggereixen que tots dos grups d'educadors/es veuen l'empoderament juvenil com un concepte unitari, però amb dues dimensions: la individual i la comunitària. Docents i professionals de l'educació social comparteixen la mateixa concepció de l'empoderament i perceben la seva contribució a aquest de la mateixa manera. D'altra banda, es detecten diferències en l'ús d'estratègies metodològiques per treballar amb joves. Els resultats es discuteixen tenint en compte la literatura existent i semblen confirmar la necessitat de revisar la diferenciació entre formal i no formal en caracteritzar les accions dels/de les educadors/es.

Paraules clau: empoderament juvenil; educadors; professorat; professionals de l'educació social; models d'equacions estructurals

Resumen. *El empoderamiento juvenil desde la perspectiva de quien educa: las dimensiones individual y comunitaria*

Esta investigación estudia cómo los educadores y las educadoras ayudan a las personas jóvenes a empoderarse. Se parte de un modelo pedagógico de empoderamiento juvenil que comprende nueve variables: autoestima, responsabilidad, capacidad crítica, eficacia, identidad comunitaria, metaaprendizaje, participación, autonomía y trabajo en equipo. Nuestro objetivo es analizar los factores del empoderamiento juvenil a partir de las percepciones que quien educa tiene sobre este concepto y en función de los ámbitos educativos en que trabajan y del uso de diferentes estrategias metodológicas con los jóvenes. En este estudio transversal con la técnica de la encuesta, analizamos las respuestas a un cuestionario obtenido de 696 educadores/as (docentes y profesionales de la pedagogía social), mediante modelos de ecuaciones estructurales (análisis multigrupo) y técnicas no paramétricas. Los resultados sugieren que ambos grupos de educadores/as ven el empoderamiento juvenil como un concepto unitario, pero con dos dimensiones: la individual y la comunitaria. Docentes y profesionales de la educación social comparten la misma concepción del empoderamiento y perciben su contribución al mismo de la misma manera. También, se detectaron diferencias en el uso de estrategias metodológicas con jóvenes. Los resultados se discuten a la luz de la literatura existente y parecen confirmar la necesidad de revisar la diferenciación entre formal y no formal al caracterizar las acciones de los/as educadores/as.

Palabras clave: empoderamiento juvenil; educadores; profesorado; profesionales de la educación social; modelos de ecuaciones estructurales

Summary

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1. Introduction

Since its first appearance in the 1970s, the versatility and popularity of the term “empowerment” has led to its increasingly widespread use, both in the field of science and in everyday life. Despite this, it remains an ambiguous and poorly defined concept that is applied to very different situations and processes in different ways (Úcar et al., 2017; Soler et al., 2017). It is precisely that versatility that has made its use possible in disciplinary fields as diverse as, among others, psychology, education, politics, economics, sociology and culture. An added problem has been that of translating the term into other languages which, given the connotations that accompany words in their respective languages, has contributed to the absence, even today, of an international, homogeneous and consensual definition of the concept (Úcar et al., 2017; Planas-Lladó & Úcar, 2022).

The body of research on youth empowerment has increased notably over the past two decades (Planas-Lladó & Úcar, 2022). Although it initially mainly focused on young people in situations of risk or social vulnerability (Muturi et al., 2018), its fields of action have become considerably more widespread in recent years and have extended to areas such as health and social networks, among others (Zimmerman et al., 2018).

Furthermore, it should be noted that there has been a significant increase in international debate around youth policies and youth empowerment and the number of intervention programs that establish it as a primary goal (Soler, 2017).

Despite the efforts to conceptualize empowerment in the field of youth, the existing literature shows that research in this sphere has generally been conducted with adults (Rojas, 2014). This means that the results of studies on the empowerment of young people are imprecise and, on many occasions, reveal characteristics that are applicable to a larger and more general context, with little information regarding the specificities of young people (Wagaman, 2011).

Russell et al. (2009) pointed out that studies on youth empowerment tend to blur the concept, equating it with “youth leadership”, “civic involvement”, “self-efficacy” or “youth activism”. These authors also stated that studies have tended to ignore the multidimensionality of the social contexts in which youth empowerment occurs and have instead focused mainly on the oppressed or at-risk, as already mentioned.

The concept of empowerment on which this study is based is the one developed by Soler et al. (2017) from their systematic analysis of the academic literature. According to these authors:

Empowerment is a process that increases the chances of individuals being able to decide and act consistently on everything that affects their own life, participate in decision-making and intervene in a shared and responsible way in relation to that which affects the community of which they form a part. This requires two conditions: that individuals acquire and develop a series of personal capacities [...] and that the environment enables them to effectively exercise those capacities. (p. 22)

From this perspective, whether understood as a process or a result, youth empowerment is always the effect or consequence of an interaction between the capacities that young people possess and the possibilities that the environment in which they live offers to develop those capacities or put them into practice. We understand that the role of educators can be of paramount importance in such interaction.

The theoretical perspective that frames the research work conducted by our team is that of social pedagogy (Soler, 2017). What we are interested in is not so much youth empowerment itself, but the ways in which educators can contribute to it.

Following Froufe's (1997) theoretical distinction, educators can be classified into four sectors:

- Specialized education: socio-educational intervention with young people in situations of risk and/or marginalization.
- Occupational training: socio-educational intervention with young people in processes of labor market insertion.
- Socio-cultural animation: socio-educational intervention and promotion of socio-cultural events aimed at young people.
- Formal education: compulsory secondary education, upper secondary education and vocational education and training.

In each field of action, educators can conceive empowerment in different ways. However, they all accompany the young person in their empowerment process, so it is necessary to analyze how they perceive their specific contribution to the development of youth empowerment.

The scientific literature on the dimensions of empowerment reveals a widely accepted distinction between individual empowerment and community and social empowerment (Checkoway, 1997; Zimmerman, 2000). With respect to this, Maton (2008) posited the existence of three axes in a context of empowerment: the individual, the community and the social. Pick et al. (2007) have stated that empowerment makes sense when the individual dimension impacts the community, especially when individuals discover their potential and the effects that their actions can have on it. Until now, this distinction between individual and community empowerment has been considered primarily at the theoretical level. Applying their empowerment indicators to three case studies, Soler et al. (2014) proposed that a single indicator can be found in both the individual and community dimensions, since it can involve both individual actions aimed at personal development and collective actions in and towards the community.

It is necessary to use quantitative data to verify whether this dual individual and community dimension found in empowerment indicators also occurs at the empirical level. The aim of the present study is therefore to demonstrate this based on data obtained on educators' perceptions of the concept of youth empowerment. Within the framework of the current research project, the following objectives have been established:

1. To analyze the factor structure of youth empowerment based on educators' perceptions;
2. To identify differences in the factor structure of youth empowerment among groups of educators;
3. To identify differences in the methodological strategies used by different groups of educators to promote youth empowerment.

Within the first objective, we propose two alternative hypotheses:

- H1a: For educators in general, the construct of youth empowerment is unitary;
- H1b: For educators in general, the construct of youth empowerment presents two different dimensions (individual and community), although derived from the same broader concept.

We can also pose the hypothesis that there will be differences in the factor structure of empowerment in the two groups of educators, supported by the vision of two differentiated fields of education, the formal and the non-formal (Coombs, 1968), which are exclusive and clearly differ in their characteristics. On the other hand, we could also find that the different groups of educators perceive the structure of youth empowerment as not having any differences, which would support a more permeable vision of the fields and profiles of education professionals (Colom, 2005). Regarding the second objective, we propose the following alternative hypotheses:

- H2a: The construct of youth empowerment presents different structures depending on the group of educators (teachers and social education professionals);
- H2b: The construct of youth empowerment shares the same structure for both groups of educators (teachers and social education professionals).

Two situations might also be considered in relation to the third objective, also following the same idea of identifying the actual distance between the two groups of educators, based on their perspective of youth empowerment and the strategies to foster it:

- H3a: There are no significant differences between the use of methodological strategies reported by teachers and social education professionals;
- H3b: There are significant differences between the use of methodological strategies reported by teachers and social education professionals.

2. Method

To address these objectives, we proposed a quantitative cross-sectional study that employed the survey technique to gather the views of education professionals with regard to the object of study.

This research meets the guidelines of the Ethics Committee of the University of Girona for research with adults. Participants gave their written, informed consent before answering the questionnaire.

2.1. Instruments and variables

An *ad hoc* questionnaire was designed, based on a review of literature on the relevant variables employed in the analysis of youth empowerment. The instrument was divided into the following five sections: (A) Profile data, (B) Methodologies and strategies applied by educators who work with young people, (C) Contextual elements that benefit or hinder the work educators do with young people, (D) Contribution of the work done by educators to youth empowerment, (E) Assessment of critical spaces and incidents in relation to youth empowerment.

Validation was obtained by means of an initial pilot review of the items by 17 experts, followed by a second pilot involving four cognitive interviews with educators, which led us to design a new, smaller and more understandable version.

This article focuses on Blocks B and D of the questionnaire. This information was collected by asking educators about the degree to which they use the proposed methodological strategies (17 items that will be displayed in Table 6) on a scale from 1 = Not at all to 4 = A lot; and, using the same scale, the degree to which their work contributes to young people developing each of the nine youth empowerment variables, each of which was explicitly defined in the same section of the questionnaire:

- Self-esteem: a positive attitude towards oneself that allows one to appreciate and value oneself, thereby facilitating relations with other people on an equal footing, without feeling inferior or superior;
- Responsibility: the ability for individuals to assume and carry out the tasks entrusted to them and their own decisions, accepting the consequences that may arise from this;
- Critical ability: the ability to formulate one's own arguments and confront them with external ideas;
- Effectiveness: the ability to achieve the desired objectives;
- Community identity: an awareness of sharing socio-cultural elements with a group that identifies as a community;
- Meta-learning: awareness regarding one's own learning;
- Participation: being part of and/or taking part in something;
- Autonomy: the ability to equip oneself with objectives and one's own rules of behavior that make it possible to undertake and self-manage initiatives and actions;

- Teamwork: the interaction between a group of people who intentionally collaborate to achieve a common goal.

2.2. Procedures

The questionnaire was uploaded to the University platform and disseminated during the last term of 2019, having been translated into the co-official languages where needed. It was distributed to different institutions (professional associations, local government agencies, universities, etc.) in the five regions as previously delimited by the project (Catalonia, the Basque Country, Galicia, Madrid and Andalusia). Finally, it was also disseminated on social networks. Therefore, sampling was voluntary response-based, using the snowball method.

2.3. Participants

We obtained a refined sample of 696 participants, mostly (66%) women; more than half of whom (59%) had an undergraduate degree or Bachelor's degree and 36% had a post-graduate degree. In Table 1, the spheres of intervention of these educators are described.

Table 1. Description of participants in the sample: sphere of intervention

| Type of educational setting | Distribution |
|-----------------------------|--------------|
| Formal education | 59% |
| Socio-cultural activities | 22% |
| Specialized education | 12% |
| Occupational training | 7% |

Source: Authors' own.

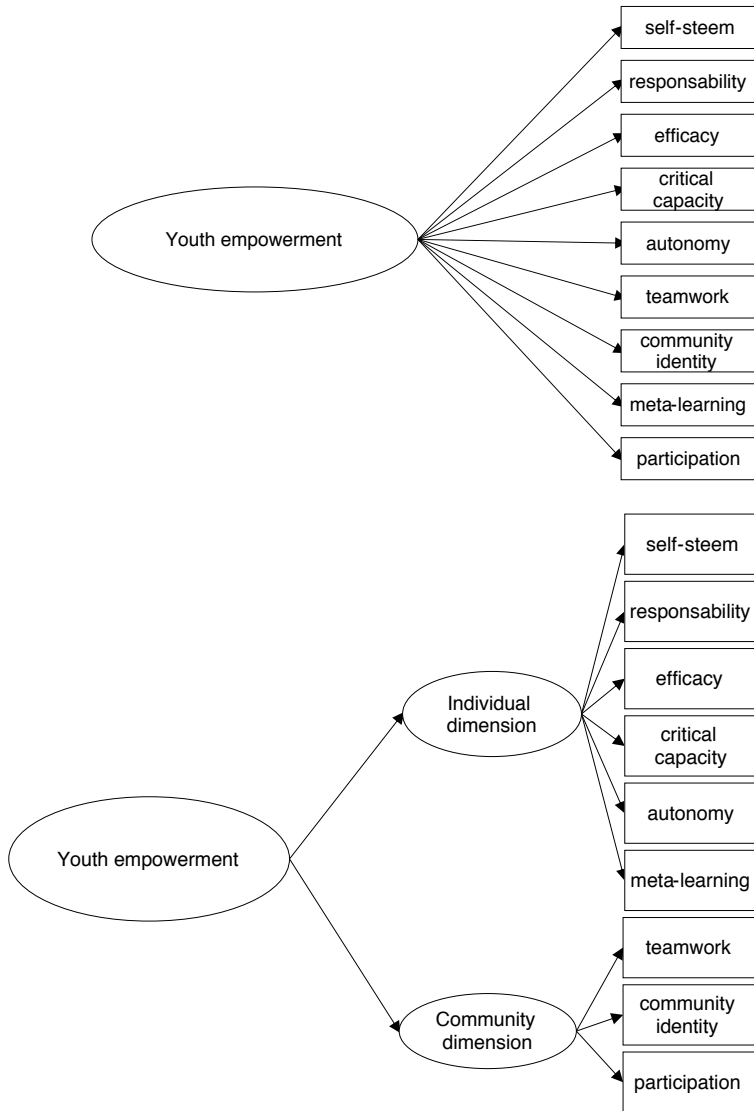
In an adaptation of Froufe's (1997) distinction, we decided to group the participants into the following two large blocks: professionals in social education (specialized education, occupational training and socio-cultural activities, 40.7% of the sample) and teachers of compulsory secondary and upper secondary education and vocational training (59.3% of the sample). This differentiation is the classic classification of non-formal and formal education (Coombs, 1968) and serves to establish two groups that are relatively balanced in size.

2.4. Data analysis

To address the first two objectives of the study, structural equation models with maximum likelihood estimation were used. More specifically, this entailed multigroup confirmatory factor analysis (Putnick & Bornstein, 2016). This technique can identify latent variables (in this case, educators' conceptions of empowerment and their contribution to it) from responses to the items in the questionnaire (observed variables).

First, two hypothetical models (Figure 1) were tested on the overall sample: a one-factor model, with the single latent variable “empowerment”; and a second-order model, with the two dimensions of the “empowerment” variable: “individual” and “community”. The nine items in the scale were divided into the two dimensions (which are also latent variables) in accordance with the

Figure 1. Hypothetical models: one-factor model, and second-order model



Source: Authors' own.

definition of the observed variable. Specifically, those capacities that can be developed in reference to individual experiences and activities were considered part of individual empowerment, while those components that can be developed and expressed in relation to a group were placed in the community dimension.

The model's fit was assessed with a combination of different fit indices: χ^2/df values indicating acceptable fit if the value is below 3 (Schermelleh-Engel et al., 2003); the comparative fit index with a cutoff value of .95; the root mean square residual (RMR), whose value should be below $4/\sqrt{N}$; the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), considering as acceptable values below .08; the p value of the close fit test, which should be non-significant (Hu and Bentler, 1999); and the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC), where a lower value would indicate better fit (Geiser, 2011). Model parameters were assessed by focusing on the standardized factor weights. In order to assess local misfit, the standardized residual covariances were examined.

Second, the same models were tested on the subsamples of educators from the formal and non-formal settings, comparing the fit in the two cases. The methodological process proposed for the multigroup analysis involves different steps that are taken according to the emerging results; first, verification of the configuration invariance by comparing the fit statistics; next, metric and structural invariance, setting the parameters to verify whether the fit decreases significantly with increasing degrees of freedom. Specifically, models are tested by fixing the measurement weights, structural covariances, structural residuals and measurement residuals. If the fit significantly decreases between the unconstrained model and the constrained ones, this implies that the model is not invariant between the two groups. The IBM SPSS Amos v.23 program was used for all these analyses.

Finally, the means of the two groups were compared for the two dimensions with regard to their contribution to community empowerment. This was done by one-way analysis of variance, after checking parametric assumptions.

The Mann-Whitney U test was used to meet the third objective, since a significant violation of the parametric assumption of normality was detected. The mean rank was used instead of the median to report the results, since the distributions were different shapes; the IBM SPSS v.25 program was used to this end. Finally, the effect size (Cohen's d) was estimated following the procedure posited by Lenhard & Lenhard (2016).

The data used for the analyses can be consulted online (Ciraso-Calí et al., 2021). The authors assume all responsibility for the integrity of data.

3. Results

3.1. Factor structure of youth empowerment

Throughout the sample, the second-order model presented a better overall fit, with a lower AIC and better absolute and relative fit indices (Table 2).

Table 2. Fit indices in the tested models, whole sample (N=696)

| Model tested | χ^2 | df | p | χ^2/df | CFI | RMR | RMSEA | P CLOSE | AIC |
|--------------------|----------|----|-------|-------------|------|------|-------|---------|---------|
| One-factor model | 266.47 | 54 | <.001 | 4.94 | .909 | .031 | .075 | <.001 | 338.476 |
| Second-order model | 138.74 | 52 | <.001 | 2.67 | .963 | .023 | .049 | .55 | 214.737 |

Note: CFI: comparative fit index. RMSEA: root mean square error of approximation. RMR: root mean square residual. PCLOSE: *p* value of close fit test. AIC: Akaike information criterion. Reference value for RMR: 0.152.

Source: Authors' own.

When detecting local misfits, only one significant standardized residual was found, specifically between community identity and meta-learning; while higher residuals were found in the one-factor model. All of this indicates that the second-order model fits the data better and presents satisfactory indices in the overall sample.

The same analysis was performed on the two subsamples. As Tables 3 and 4 show, in both cases the second-order model is the one that best fits the sample covariances, especially in the case of the group of non-formal educators. The RMSEA indices can be considered acceptable in both groups for the second-order model, but not for the one-factor model.

Regarding the configuration invariance, the values for the CFI, RMR and RMSEA indices reveal that the fit is very similar, although somewhat better

Table 3. Fit indices in the tested models, teachers (N=413)

| Model tested | χ^2 | df | p | χ^2/df | CFI | RMR | RMSEA | P CLOSE | AIC |
|--------------------|----------|----|-------|-------------|------|------|-------|---------|--------|
| One-factor model | 133.41 | 27 | <.001 | 4.94 | .927 | .026 | .098 | <.001 | 169.41 |
| Second-order model | 78.75 | 26 | <.001 | 3.03 | .964 | .022 | .070 | .030 | 116.75 |

Note: CFI: comparative fit index. RMSEA: root mean square error of approximation. RMR: root mean square residual. PCLOSE: *p* value of close fit test. AIC: Akaike information criterion. Reference value for RMR: 0.197.

Source: Authors' own.

Table 4. Fit indices in the tested models, social education professionals (N=283)

| Model tested | χ^2 | df | p | χ^2/df | CFI | RMR | RMSEA | P CLOSE | AIC |
|--------------------|----------|----|-------|-------------|------|------|-------|---------|--------|
| One-factor model | 133.03 | 27 | <.001 | 4.93 | .880 | .035 | .118 | <.001 | 169.03 |
| Second-order model | 59.99 | 26 | <.001 | 2.31 | .962 | .024 | .068 | .089 | 97.99 |

Note: CFI: comparative fit index. RMSEA: root mean square error of approximation. RMR: root mean square residual. PCLOSE: *p* value of close fit test. AIC: Akaike information criterion. Reference value for RMR: 0.259.

Source: Authors' own.

for the social education group. In any case, we can conclude that the two explanatory models have a similar configuration: both teachers and social education professionals think about their contribution to youth empowerment in terms of two dimensions – individual and community.

In order to advance with the study of multigroup invariance and determine whether the parameters can also be considered invariant, we proceeded by setting them progressively equal in the two groups and examining the decrease in fit with respect to the unconstrained model. As Table 5 shows, the fit did not significantly decrease as the model had increasing degrees of freedom.

Table 5. Nested model comparisons (assuming unconstrained model to be correct)

| Models | df | χ^2 | p |
|------------------------------|----|----------|------|
| Fixed measurement weights | 7 | 2.663 | .914 |
| Fixed structural covariances | 8 | 3.002 | .934 |
| Fixed structural residuals | 10 | 5.532 | .853 |
| Fixed measurement residuals | 19 | 23.360 | .222 |

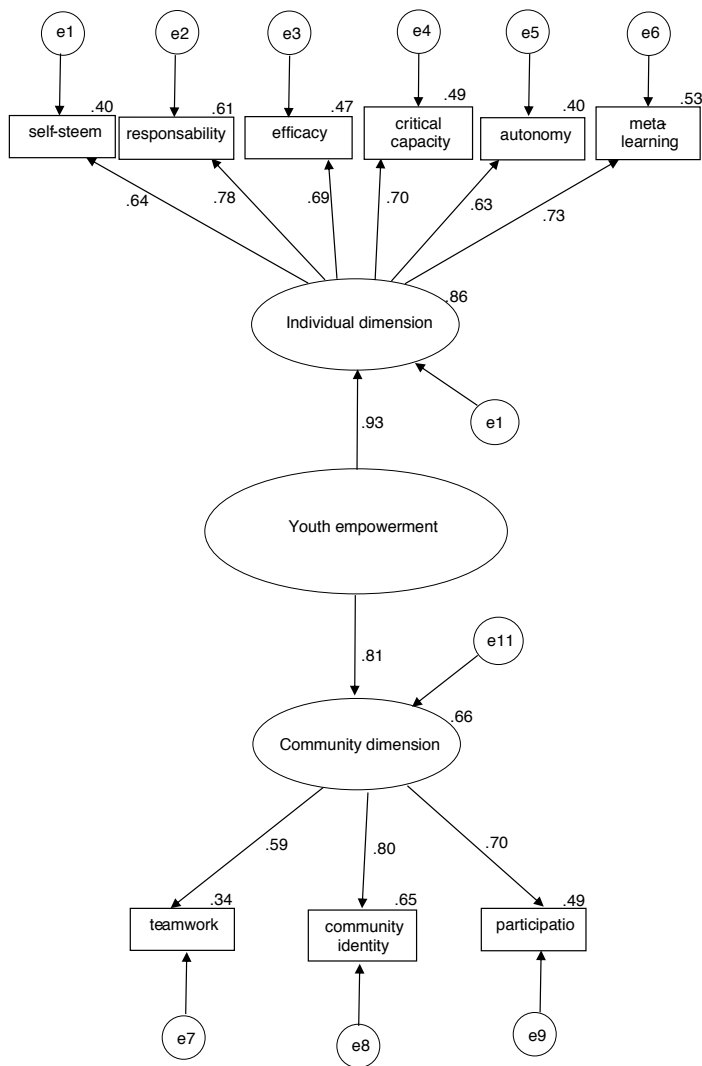
Source: Authors' own.

The decrease in fit of the constrained models compared to the previous one (each model nested under the less constrained one) was also examined. No significant decrease in fit was found.

These analyses revealed metric and structural invariance (the means of the factors were no longer fixed). The final model is presented in Figure 2.

Finally, the educators' mean scores for the two areas were compared in terms of their perception of their own contribution to empowerment in the individual and community dimensions. The univariate ANOVA did not detect a significant difference in the individual dimension ($F_{(1,694)} = 1.862$, $p = .173$), whereas the difference in the community dimension was found to be significant ($F_{(1,694)} = 2.389$, $p = .012$). In this case, social educators reported higher scores (3.12, $SD=0.62$) than teachers (3.00, $SD=0.61$). However, the corresponding effect size was very small ($\eta_p^2 = .009$), making this difference practically irrelevant.

Figure 2. Final second-order model, for both teachers and social education professionals (standardized estimates)



Source: Authors' own.

3.2. Methodological strategies employed by educators

Finally, the use of different methodological strategies was compared for the two groups of educators. Table 6 shows the results of the Mann-Whitney U tests, together with the effect sizes.

Table 6. Comparison of use of methodological strategies, by educators' fields

| Items | U | p | Mean rank | | Cohen's d |
|---|---------|-------|---------------|----------|-----------|
| | | | Social ed. | Teachers | |
| Educate them to manage emotions | 50476.5 | .001 | 376.64 | 329.22 | 0.233 |
| Help them to construct a positive personal image | 53811.0 | .054 | 364.86 | 337.29 | 0.135 |
| Create scenarios so that they make their own decisions and assume the responsibilities deriving from them | 47584.5 | <.001 | 386.86 | 322.22 | 0.320 |
| Carry out planned educational activities in a flexible way | 57456.0 | .674 | 345.02 | 350.88 | 0.029 |
| Adapt educational activities to their personal characteristics | 50464.5 | .001 | 376.68 | 329.19 | 0.234 |
| Use active and participatory methodologies | 48119.5 | <.001 | 384.97 | 323.51 | 0.304 |
| Integrate Internet and social networks in educational activities | 56935.0 | .539 | 343.18 | 352.14 | 0.044 |
| Develop the education process together with young people | 46198.5 | <.001 | 391.75 | 318.86 | 0.362 |
| Manage difficult situations | 56320.0 | .372 | 355.99 | 343.37 | 0.062 |
| Work on resilience | 50463.5 | .001 | 376.68 | 329.19 | 0.234 |
| Promote the development of communication and negotiation skills | 55766.5 | .266 | 357.95 | 342.03 | 0.078 |
| Give them space to reflect on the results of their actions | 48362.5 | <.001 | 384.11 | 324.10 | 0.296 |
| Foster collaborative work | 52089.5 | .008 | 370.94 | 333.12 | 0.186 |
| Use the community as an educational resource | 45200.0 | <.001 | 395.28 | 316.44 | 0.393 |
| Promote reflection on the learning process itself | 57147.5 | .588 | 353.07 | 345.37 | 0.038 |
| Regulate the presence of the educator based on educational needs | 54244.0 | .079 | 363.33 | 338.34 | 0.122 |

Note: In the "mean rank" columns, the group of educators with the highest values in terms of the use of the methodological strategy is marked in bold (when the difference is statistically significant).

Source: Authors' own.

The two groups of educators were observed to differ from one another in the use of some methodological strategies. Social education professionals scored best for using the community as an educational resource, developing the educational process together with young people, creating scenarios for young people to make their own decisions and assuming the responsibilities derived from them and, finally, using active and participatory methods, while the teachers scored highest for accompanying young people in their learning process.

4. Discussion

The results indicate that educators see the construct of youth empowerment as having two dimensions (confirming hypothesis H1b): on the one hand, the dimension of empowerment referred to the individual, which is comprised of responsibility, autonomy, efficacy, critical capacity, self-esteem and meta-learn-

ing. In this dimension, the highest factor loadings are found for responsibility, autonomy and efficiency. These are therefore the variables with the most weight for the educators who participated in the study in terms of their contribution to the individual facet of youth empowerment.

On the other hand, we find the community dimension of empowerment, which is found to consist of three variables, with participation obtaining the highest factor loading. As it is configured in our model, the community dimension refers to competences that may be individual, but that are necessarily developed in relation to a community: awareness of sharing socio-cultural elements with a group we call the community, the ability to interact, work together and participate with others.

The two-dimensionality of the model supports the – fundamentally theoretical – claims in the literature regarding a distinction between the individual and community dimensions of empowerment (Russell et al., 2009; Soler et al., 2014; Zimmerman et al., 2018). Furthermore, the second-order structure is consistent with the idea of interdependent levels posed by Zimmerman (2000). In the constructed model, the dimensions are not simply correlated, but depend on a broader construct, that of youth empowerment.

Regarding the second goal, our analyses confirm the second hypothesis (H2b) and show that the model of educators' contributions to youth empowerment is the same for all, regardless of their specific field, formal or non-formal education. In this model, the concept of youth empowerment is a second-order construct with the two dimensions of individual and community. The different empowerment variables are grouped into two dimensions and the locations of each variable in each dimension are shared by all educators, regardless of their field. This model is the one that best fits the sample covariances in both groups of educators.

The analysis of variance reveals that even the perceptions of both groups of educators regarding their own contributions in the two dimensions are essentially the same. That is to say: in addition to demonstrating a similar conception of the structure of the youth empowerment variables, they also express that their own educational actions contribute to this empowerment in a similar way. Of greatest note is the analysis of the community dimension, which includes the awareness of being part of something (participation), interaction among groups of people to achieve common goals (teamwork), and awareness of sharing those sociocultural elements with a group that identifies itself as a community (community identity). Our results suggest that these elements, which are not necessarily associated with pedagogical action within the education system, are integrated into teachers' perceptions of their own performance.

The similarities in the views of both groups of educators challenge the classic distinction between the formal and non-formal fields, a differentiation that it should be noted has been contested in recent years and that in the European context has ended up being reduced to an administrative regulation linked to whether educators belong to the official education system or not (Colom et al.,

2001). Within the framework of complex societies, this differentiation has been overcome by the perspective of lifelong learning, which includes diverse educational initiatives and processes, in different spaces, with different education professionals (or even without them), meaning it is hard to categorize with such exclusive labels. Caride (2020) provides an in-depth analysis of the conceptual incongruities related to so-called “non-formal education”, which, on the one hand, integrates educational practices that are in themselves endowed with a historical and pedagogical identity (such as popular education, environmental education, occupational training, etc.), and on the other, thereby constituting a negative (“non” formal), seems to simply express the will to differentiate and preserve regulated education, protected by the State, from “other” forms of education that might be considered alternatives.

The results of our research seem to confirm the inadequacy of the distinction between formal and non-formal, at least in relation to the idea that educators in different spheres have of youth empowerment and their contribution to its development. Thus, regardless of whether they work in formal education or not, educators understand empowerment in a similar way, that is, configured by two dimensions, and perceive their own educational actions to be factors that enhance the empowerment of the young people with whom they work to a similar degree.

As for the third objective, the results do indicate that there are differences in the actions of teachers and social education professionals (hypothesis H3b is sustained). The largest difference ($d = .393$) is found in the methodological strategy of using the community as an educational resource, which is most used by social education professionals. Other strategies in which social educators stand out, according to our results, are developing the education process together with young people, using active and participatory methodologies and creating scenarios for young people to make their own decisions and assume the responsibilities that derive from these decisions. On the other hand, it is surprising to note that the methodological strategy of accompanying young people during the learning process is more widely used by teachers. This could, however, be explained by the central role of the concept of “learning” in the formal sphere, which is conceived as more efficient than in other areas of education (Colom, 2005). In contrast, the methodological approach adopted by social education professionals lends more weight to such aspects as collaboration with young people in the design and development of actions, teamwork and interaction with the rest of the community. The strategy of creating scenarios for decision-making is of particular interest, since it is the only one of those addressed in the questionnaire that comes close to putting empowerment into practice; that is, creating situations in which students can exercise their own abilities, participating in decisions about matters that affect individuals (Úcar et al., 2017). It would be appropriate to conduct further research on such methodologies and their use by different groups so as to promote them both in educational institutions and in the training of educational professionals.

Although the contribution made to youth empowerment by the two groups of educators is similar, we do observe that the groups adopt different methodological strategies, surely the result of their different educational or professional careers and fields of action. Following Trull et al. (2022), we understand these differences between the conception and its translation into practice in terms of the context in which the socio-educational intervention is developed, and the possibilities offered by this context. The formal environment is the context that most clearly determines the use of methodologies for youth empowerment that are more focused on the individual and pays little attention to the affective dimension and social interaction. In contrast, a more holistic and classical model emerges in the field of specialized education, and a methodological model focused on the social is found in occupational training and socio-cultural activities. In conclusion, the results seem to confirm the vision posited by Colom (2005), which suggested a continuum between the formal (teachers) and non-formal (social education professionals) spheres in terms of underlying pedagogical theory and concepts; while their practices and methods, although complementing one another, do differ.

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