

‘I think we are still very directive’. Teachers’ discourses on democratic student participation

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The objective of this study¹ is to gain a deeper understanding of the analysis of the discourses that different education professionals in the Spanish education system have on student participation in schools, based on the premise that they tacitly reflect different models of democracy and advance very diverse school practices. The study is based on the Student Voice Movement, which is defined by its commitment to deliberative democratic education and its role in the development of inclusive schools. In this paper, we have conducted a qualitative analysis of the data from 31 in-depth interviews carried out with teachers and other education professionals from 9 schools. These teachers’ discourses are summarised in four dimensions, which we have named: individual, pedagogical, organisational and socio-political. Some conclusions of this work demonstrate a predominance of discourses linked to an individual and pedagogical dimension of participation, based on the idea that this fundamentally depends on some personal dispositions that some students have. It is less frequent to appeal to the socio-political dimension that refers to participation as a citizen's right to debate and make decisions regarding common and public affairs. This suggests that teachers still see their work from a technical point of view, rather than envisaging the school as a space for democratic participation and practice. In short, with this study we aim to contribute to normative theories on participation and democracy in order to expand their empirical and practical support in schools.

Keywords: student participation; discourses of teachers; teaching democracy; deliberative democracy.

Introduction

The need to cultivate democratic participation between school children has been widely justified, starting with the renowned John Dewey, for whom the school should constitute a ‘community in miniature, an embryonic society’. This concept of democratic participation is linked to the possibility of creating spaces so as students may take action based on their own personal contexts both in and out of the school environment. Thus, researching how democratic participation is taught and learned constitutes both a necessary and unfinished task, as well as a dynamic issue since social discourses on civic coexistence continue to evolve and permeate school life.

Our work forms part of a recently concluded research project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, which was developed in Cantabria (Spain). The research that provides a framework to this work has its roots in some fundamental theoretical pillars. Primarily, the design of this research is inspired by what has come to be known as the Student Voice Movement (Bragg 2007; Fielding 2012; Rudduck and Flutter 2007; Authors, 2011), with an extended tradition in some English speaking countries, but not very well known in Spain. In this theoretical framework, students are seen as ‘authorised voices’ for school improvement, and their capacity to make decisions related to elements of school life, such as the curriculum or the school’s organisation, is praised. This position contradicts the tokenistic practice, widely evidenced in much research where the student’s participation in relevant issues related with school life is not considered (Maitles and Ross 2006; Robinson 2014). Ultimately, it seeks to introduce

¹ Susinos, T. (dir.). ‘Schools moving towards inclusion: learning from the local community, the student voice and educational support’ (I+D+I, EDU2011-29928-C03-03).

deep changes towards a greater democracy and participation in schools by opening spaces for democratic debate within school life (Fielding and Moss 2011; Thomson and Gunter 2006; Authors 2014).

Therefore, understanding the discourses that education professionals have on democratic participation in schools is essential in order to address this task. The analysis of their previous ideas should accompany any process focused on introducing changes in schools, given that the main objective of our research is to encourage spaces in which students could demonstrate real democratic participation in different aspects of school life.

Although we consider that young people's learning of democratic participation cannot be confined to schools and teachers (Biesta and Lawy 2006, p. 65) and is indeed developed in very different formal and non-formal settings, we still believe schools can be relevant socialisation agents when it comes to their contribution to education for democratic citizenship and participation (Reichert, 2016). In Spain, democratic tradition is more recent than in other European countries. First attempts to introduce a subject on civic education date back to the 1970s. Lately, several governments have included a course on civic education or eliminated it from the compulsory curriculum depending on how conservative or progressive they are. The subject was only compulsory and assessed during a period from 2006 to 2013 and was known as Citizenship and Human Rights Education. Likewise, and as a consequence of this absence in the school curriculum, this specific content is not included in preservice teacher training, but instead diluted among other subjects such as social sciences or guidance and mentoring.

However, in contrast with restrictive visions of teaching democracy and participation which are conceived as content related to one or several subjects (i.e. Citizenship Education) and aim at teaching about democracy rather than through democracy (Maitles and Ross 2006), we propose that participation has to do with individuals and their contexts and furthermore support that 'encouraging democratic practice is the most promising way to introduce democracy and democratic values and attitudes' (Menthe 2012 p. 77). We, therefore, understand that citizenship is not a goal to be achieved after taking a specific syllabus successfully but a progressive growth a person makes by actively participating in public affairs - citizenship as practice - (Biesta and Lawy, 2006). Promoting a culture of participation is a central part of any school or community as is the capacity of these to become laboratories for various ways of expressing participation.

Consequently, a future objective of our work is promoting participation, understood here as deliberative democracy. Out of the four models of democracy (competitive, participatory, procedural and deliberative) summarised by Strömbäck (2005), our research is aligned with the latter, which outlines a system that recognises the importance of carrying out processes of public and egalitarian deliberation which facilitate reaching agreements and understand the values at stake in each public decision (Young 2001). This model of democracy is linked to the 'active citizen' who, in contrast with the classical concept of the 'good citizen' -referred to as the one who shows civil obedience on legal terms-, 'will be able to discuss whether laws work well, if they are inequitable, and how they can be changed' (Ross 2012 p. 7).

In this vein, as suggested by Habermas (1998), a process of democratic deliberation can be defined as a communicative situation in which everybody can freely and equally contribute to the dialogue, without any kind of restraint or manipulation. In other words, according to this author, the core of deliberation is a respectful dialogue in which all voices must be heard. Deliberative democracy gives legitimacy to agreed decisions because the process followed respects the moral agency of the participants

(Thompson 2008; Della Porta 2005; Englund 2006). Lastly, these deliberative processes should guide action for social change (Ross, 2012).

Teaching democracy as a practical content has the virtue that students can accomplish skills and values that are indispensable in democratic participation: decision-making and exploration skills, logical thinking, coherent and fair debate, the consideration of different points of view, etc. (Samuelsson 2016). All of them lead to the critical understanding of the conceptions of good life and good society (Gutmann 2001) and undoubtedly also play a role in deliberation processes. The fundamental premise that can be derived from these approaches is that individuals learn to participate in public life by participating in motion (Pateman 2012). In short, democratic deliberation aims to resolve how to manage the common good. In order for this to be possible, all students must have the opportunity to participate, thereby avoiding one person or group completely dominating the debate process. It is precisely for this reason that the arguments developed during the participatory process must be accessible to all (Gutmann and Thompson, 1996; Thompson 2008).

If we regard schools as institutions that prepare children for exercising their citizenship, we need to understand and be aware of what the discourses of education professionals on participation are, given that they tacitly reflect different ways of understanding democracy. In the last few years, some studies have attempted to look deeper into the multiple theoretical approaches involved in the diverse ways of summarising normative models of democracy (Habermas 1994; Van Dijk 1996; Katz 2001; Teorell 2006). Carrying out a detailed description of each one of these models is not an objective of this work, but it should be recognised that these normative models demonstrate different conceptions of the role that citizenship needs to play in the intervention and management of public issues and, therefore, how schools can become sort of laboratories where children experiment with these models.

As several authors have stated (Röcke 2014; Canal 2017), there is a disconnection between theoretical-normative studies and empirical ones or those on the real practices of participation. Our work tries to contribute to bridge this gap and contrast what the teachers' beliefs on participation are, what their role in teaching it is and how their daily practices are organised. In other words, it is ultimately about explaining the diversity of conceptions of participation that teachers use on a daily basis and avoiding participation becoming an empty signifier in teachers' narratives (Verge 2007) and also prevent it to become a widespread practice stripped of any political meaning.

Methodology

From a methodological point of view, this research is based on the pillars of the qualitative tradition (Flick 2014), responding to the idea of building in-depth, situated knowledge within the phenomenon of study.

This work presents the results from the analysis of 31 semi-structured interviews with education professionals who work in various schools in Cantabria (Spain). These interviews were designed with the aim of raising awareness and analysing the meanings that teachers attribute to student participation and the models of democracy that are supported by these discourses.

The sample was intentionally selected according to a criteria that seeks to guarantee the widest variety of educational realities within a same region. To this end, we tried to consider the different professional profiles that cohabit in Spanish schools, as well as different educational levels and types of school ownership. Thus, 9 schools were

selected including both state and ‘concerted schools’², covering the following levels of education: Infant, Primary and Secondary, as well PCPI³.

The final sample of participants was constituted as shown in the following table:

Table 1. Summary of the interviews conducted at each educational level

For the purpose of designing the interviews we devised a script with a series of topics and questions that would guide the conversation. Other researchers from the University of Cantabria (experts) participated in its preparation so that the final interview guide was a result of a process of shared reflection in order to guarantee the validity of this tool. Nevertheless, it was conceived as an open format that allowed other equally relevant issues, which had not been previously considered, to emerge so that the flow of conversation would develop according to the emotions, experiences and knowledge of the interviewees (Kvale 2011).

Professionals were interviewed about different dimensions of which are listed in the following table.

Table 2. Thematic dimensions of the interview.

We would like to highlight some ethical considerations that we have adopted in the process of producing data through the use of interviews (BERA 2003). The use of an interview involves a process of dialogical interaction between the researcher and the participants which must adhere to communicative ethics. This entails recognising all the participants as interlocutors authorised with the right to reply and argue their case. In other words, even when the same interview script exists, the conversational process will not be exactly the same, taking into account the personal history, personalities and plural interests of respondents, which is why we opted for a semi-open interview model.

We also ensured that the participants voluntarily joined the research after they fully understood the intentions and implications of the study (informed consent). To this end, we contacted each school headteacher and explained the purpose and requirements for participating in the project before beginning our research. Once this first contact was made, another briefing session took place with the teaching staff so that we could openly invite the different education professionals to participate. In addition, the confidentiality of information and the right to privacy or anonymity was guaranteed and the project has been approved by the Ethical Committee of the University of Cantabria. This Commission/Committee complies with Spanish Science Law and aims at creating a Code of Good Practice in Research equivalent to other European Universities’ systems.

To carry out the analysis of the data we used a thematic coding system in which we defined the categories and codes of analysis. In this sense, the starting point of this data’s thematic coding system was the dimensions addressed in the interview. In order to do this we used inductive and deductive strategies to the extent that, although we had begun with an initial list of issues and codes to analyse, the work developed with the data meant that we needed to redefine some of these categories and codes during the process of analysis. Using these codes we then proceeded to the development of theories by means

² “Concerted schools” in Spain are publicly funded schools of a private nature. Most of them are of catholic orientation and they make up approximately 30% of all schools in the country.

³ The Initial Professional Qualification Programmes (PCPI) were designed to offer a second opportunity to pupils who have not reached compulsory secondary education objectives and are considered “Second Chance Programmes” in Spain.

of a process of abstraction (Flick 2014). MAXQDA, the qualitative analysis programme, was used to group data into different categories.

Results

During the process of analysing the data produced in the interviews we were able to identify four areas of meaning that the professionals give to the concept of participation.

We have grouped these sets of meanings into what we will call participation dimensions: individual or psychological, pedagogical, organisational and socio-political. Each one of these shapes a kind of explanatory cosmos and constitutes a specific window of meanings that helps teachers respond to questions such as: What does participation mean? Who is allowed to participate? How is it promoted? What difficulties are involved in participatory practice as a school methodology? How is participation linked to different models of understanding democracy?

Although each one of these dimensions can be interwoven in the interviewees' discourses, it is often the case that one of them tends to dominate over the others. As we will now explain in more detail, the four visions of participation are coherent with many other ways of understanding childhood and also determine the role of adults (teachers) in democratic participation within schools.

According to the most relevant results of this study, teachers envisage student participation as individual nature (individual or psychological dimension), since it is understood to be related to psychological dimensions. On the contrary, less common positions link participation with a citizen's right that can be learnt through democratic debate and active participation in contexts such as, in this case, the school.

Individual or psychological dimension

In particular, this dimension relates to more traditional ways of understanding democratic participation since it conceives children and young people as 'citizens in the making'. In this sense, it is supported by a developmental and individualistic approach towards childhood and participation which understands 'young people as individuals lack proper knowledge and skills, the right values and the appropriate dispositions' (Biesta, Lawy and Kelly, 2009).

The individual or psychological dimension is therefore linked to a concept of participation that is found within the subject and becomes a personal disposition dependent on certain qualities that are considered to be inborn or reliant on personal maturity. Thus, factors such as age or the so called extroversion would help to create individuals with greater or lesser 'participatory capacity', which, besides, could be potentially modified according to character transformations and also as children progress in their evolutionary state.

This understanding of participation, which we come across in a large number of the education professionals accounts, connects primarily with a developmental vision of childhood, which is understood as a period of immaturity and, therefore, of delay until reaching the state of adulthood. According to evolutionary mandate this is the moment in which each subject is able to understand, express opinions, decide and participate in society. In short, we discover a propaedeutic or preparatory vision of childhood for citizenship and life in democracy, which can only develop once we reach adulthood, regarded as a definitive point of arrival.

These notions are quite generalised among the professionals interviewed and demonstrate, in some way or another, a certain naturalisation of a restrictive and ‘infantilised’ vision of children which uses the evolutionary barometer to measure levels of participation in terms of quantity but also with respect to the quality of these experiences: the more advanced their state of development is, the more capable the students will be for making decisions on fundamental aspects of school life, such as the curriculum or school organisation.

‘[10-12 years old students] started [with assemblies with the school’s headteacher], because they are the oldest. In a future third year [9 year olds] they could also take part, because they are also in second cycle. And first cycle students [6-8 year olds], I think they are still quite young (Primary teacher -state school-).

As a result, this developmental vision ultimately reinforces participation as an individual concept since it suggests that, when all citizens reach maturity, a democratic society is achieved as they are able to exercise their democratic knowledge, skills, values and dispositions as a whole (Biesta, Lawy and Kelly 2009).

This helps us to understand why the spaces where we find a greater presence of students, as well as consultation and decision-making power, are linked to non-academic and/or less meaningful moments in school life, like the choice of activities at break time or in classroom assemblies, while initiatives to participate and to make decisions about school issues such as the curriculum are scarce. These moments are specifically reserved for giving opinions, expressing concerns and resolving class conflicts.

‘They choose the games [to play during break time] that they like the most by voting in class. Later in the Assembly of Delegates they present what we have decided in class, well in sixth grade [12 years old] they want to play this, and later a selection is made so that the options are seen to be represented in some way in the games’ (Primary Teacher -state school-).

In keeping with these conceptions, the professionals identify those aspects that benefit individuals and improve their personal qualities of motivation, interest, attention, self-confidence, etc. as main strengths of school participation, thereby generating a kind of private benefit or welfare. This is how it is expressed by an Infant teacher when she highlights:

‘[...] that’s how I notice it, because I can see their satisfied faces, because I can see that they are pleased, they arrive happy. Then I believe in how it reflects in children and in their attitudes’ (Infant teacher -state school-).

Therefore, many of the teachers who have taken part in this research understand that the main value of the pedagogy of participation lies in the development of a series of positive attitudes and feelings in students.

The discourses of these professionals suggest that teachers confer a certain ‘therapeutic’ value to participation, in the sense that they believe that creating comfortable listening spaces where students can express negative feelings and talk about difficult situations has a cathartic benefit. To some extent these spaces for expression, removed from any external threats, contribute to creating more confident personalities with a higher degree of self-control.

‘Maybe in the Initial Professional Qualification Programmes there are more people who arrive in a bad mood, people who live in foster homes and have their own problems. They are people who are not heard much in the residences where they are or at home, they come from broken families. But they come to class and they can speak and they are much healthier mentally. And they are more attentive at school, they feel assured’ (Secondary teacher - Initial professional qualification programme-).

According to the professionals, all this will revert on their motivation and involvement in school tasks and, in general, in their concept of school, now more connected to their own world and their interests.

‘The positive thing is a school closer to them, which will motivate them a lot. I think that when you contribute something you will get much more involved in it and you will feel part of it and they will be much more motivated’ (Infant Education Teacher -state school-).

However, there is another side to this individual dimension of participation that entails some risks. Some of the professionals who view the benefits of participation exclusively in terms of the well-being of the student ‘in singular’ also identify a series of barriers which are linked solely to the individual student. Consistent with this vision of participation, measured according to the evolutionary period, these professionals identify age as a definite barrier. Accordingly, the quantity and quality of school spaces where students can participate and make decisions is determined by this variable, based on the understanding that the responsibility to develop full democracy can only be acquired when they reach adulthood.

‘Often [children] do things to waste time. When you set up a meeting with the delegates [...] they start to ask about issues and you realise that they are prolonging the meeting because they are wasting class time’ (Headteacher - concerted school-).

Similarly, personal characteristics of the students (for example, shyness, demotivation, introversion, etc.) and also academic results and good behaviour appear as other factors, which determine greater or lesser participation at school. Thus, a certain tendency appears to exist on the part of the teachers to ‘grant’ a voice to a restricted group of students who, because of their personalities, are more willing to speak in class and to those who are not going to disrupt the normal rhythm of the class as defined by the teacher.

‘There are certain teachers who only grant a voice [...] to those that they call good students, the well behaved ones in class, the ones who get good results and don’t disrupt class much and do what they are told’ (Primary teacher - state school-).

The other side of this approach would both blame individuals themselves for their social malfunctioning and make them responsible for working out a solution (Biesta, Lawy and Kelly 2009). Indeed, we run the risk of taking away responsibility from the teacher, from the school and ultimately, from the social system for the lack of participation, thereby avoiding the introduction of changes and favouring the conservation of the status quo. From a more socio cultural perspective, these

psychological dominant discourses related to the notion of 'child', as well as the deterministic constructions of progress, are questioned (Edwards, 2003). Likewise, it is understood that such a cognitive activity is a shared social process among adults and children, and a child's development is absolutely influenced by social interaction (Edwards, Blaise and Hammer 2009). Thus, it is essential to recognise students, no matter their age or personality traits, as individuals-in-context capable of developing a complex understanding of their social environment and influencing fundamental substantive aspects of it.

Pedagogical Dimension

The pedagogical dimension refers to those discourses in which the professionals regard participation as a means that permits the promotion of some transversal skills affecting different school subjects. More specifically, the people interviewed suggest that student participation in educational institutions facilitates the development of skills linked to oral communication, the ability to participate in groups or the maintenance of positive social relationships. The teachers understand that school participation encourages the development of some interpersonal skills (the ability to listen and pay attention, self-control, the ability to debate, confidence) that make individual students more competent at integrating into society, something which requires skills beyond curricular contents.

The professionals' discourses suggest that these types of skills are taught 'practising':

'Oral expression is taught in a way that they don't notice... they learn to express themselves, they have very good vocabulary in this group, so I give them a lot of freedom to be active in the assembly, which at the beginning was more for explaining, explaining and explaining...and now they are autonomous enough to tidy up, to organise, they know what they have to do at all times, ' (Primary teacher -state school-).

Thus, participation is conceived as a tool that allows the development of a series of *soft skills* considered relevant by teachers, but also regarded as minor and used in moments of school life which are informally given a secondary value. In addition, these abilities can be taught or practised in a way that is not connected to real proposals for social change.

The discourses of the teachers reveal that a contradictory relationship exists when addressing these types of skills. Although they affirm that they place importance on promoting participatory processes in which students can develop these skills, they reveal that the existence of curriculum contents to be achieved becomes a barrier that makes it difficult to implement these types of participation dynamics. In Spain this situation has worsened because of diverse compulsory external exams, something which has made teachers focus their efforts on preparing students for getting good marks in these tests.

'We cannot go further either because...the syllabus is the syllabus, and at the end of Year 4 we have an (external) evaluation and there are some significant failures [...] If I have to divide up my time to be able to help all those I have in the classroom, if as well as this I have to promote a collective feeling, if I also have to do social and dynamic group activities... I wouldn't fulfil even half of the syllabus that is demanded of me' (Primary teacher -state school-).

Although teachers link participation to the promotion of some competencies that are not regarded as central to curricular development processes, they suggest that a certain correlation exists between school success and the development of these skills. Therefore, the teachers say that making decisions on different curricular elements would not favour the development of the agency of all students, but rather of those children who have more ability to deal with school tasks. Thus, and despite being conceived as secondary skills, students who have more difficulties following the ordinary curriculum are those who participate least in classroom activities and school life.

‘The students who participate least, perhaps, are those that have more difficulties following the curriculum [...].I suppose it’s because in some way or another the activities are designed for the majority of the group and don’t take into account the individual needs ’ (School counsellor -state school).

The data analysed allows us to infer that the professionals who maintain this vision of participation see students as apprentices who need to take an active role in educational processes that allow them to practice those soft skills, but whose ability to make decisions about relevant questions regarding school life is going to be limited.

‘I believe we are still very directive. I think that it is a type of participation that is excessively guided. We want to control it all too much and I believe that this control is sometimes excessive and what you limit in the end is the ability for them to express themselves or speak out’ (Primary teacher -state school-).

As stated by the teachers, the pedagogical dimension of participation would be summarised in predefined school activities conceived as closed proposals in which students have the opportunity to practice these skills, which involve both negotiation and public debate. This conception of the practice of democracy in school, supported by a technical model of teaching, does not enable students to develop certain activities, which are less ordered and require more creative and divergent solutions. To conclude, although these skills are essential in order to create citizens who are able to participate, they are not enough if those skills are not used for advocacy and decision making regarding relevant questions affecting the common good and community life.

Organisational Dimension

The organisational dimension of participation is identified in the discourses of some professionals who emphasise the purpose of participation as a tool for improving the school climate⁴. This dimension is closely linked to a conception of participation that transcends the boundaries of the classroom, aiming to incorporate students in decision making on some organisational aspects of school life.

‘As for student participation, yes it formally exists, there are some areas or minor activities or actions that we have tried to do. One of these [participation activity] is the assembly of delegates that is perhaps where there are all the

⁴ The concept of school climate is commonly used in Spanish literature and implies different elements of the school organisation that influence coexistence.

delegates and sub-delegates from all the groups from the first year to the sixth year of Primary education' (School counsellor -state school-).

The discourses of the professionals demonstrate that most schools implement some type of system aimed at promoting student intervention in the management of the organisation of the school. To this end, adults articulate competitive democracy procedures by means of systems in which different students representing each classroom are selected. Subsequently, these students have the responsibility of working with the school leadership team in order to address some problems that arise in school life.

'The selection [of these representatives] is made depending on the tutor and what he/she considers to be appropriate for his/her group [...] They are very clear about the role of representing the class, representing it to the teachers and the headteacher, to raise any type of problem that there is...' (Secondary teacher -state school-).

This type of competitive or delegated democracy constitutes the most common reference to student participation, even though this system means that only a few students play an active role and have some responsibility in the management of school life.

'There are very clearly defined roles in the group. And that's a bit what happens isn't it? There are some students who are unauthorised. And others who are 'the truth' in the classroom. It's something that is really difficult to remove because they are so sure of themselves, so confident that they go over the top. And the rest of them, because this role is taken for granted, that the one who talks is the one who speaks the truth, right? (Primary teacher -state school-).

Meanwhile, the professionals interviewed connect this dimension of participation to the creation of spaces that favour the improvement of the school climate, which is reduced to quite a scheduled discussion on the school rules that regulate school life. However, this participation is again described as a process with individual benefits, one that encourages students to feel at ease, happy and enjoy school.

'I recognise it by how they come to school in general, by how they move around it, they go everywhere, relaxed, without being afraid or feeling insecure (Headteacher of an Infant School -state school-).

Similarly, the organisational dimension of participation is also linked to the management of co-existence at school. Thus, some of the teachers said that they were developing experiences aimed at making students take a more active role in the conflict resolution.

'The mediator is not a judge, but they do help if there has been a conflict. They ask what happened to you and what happened to the other one, and in the end, if they can't resolve the situation with the mediator, then they always go to the teacher that is in the playground, but hoping that they themselves can learn how to resolve conflicts by talking and by other means' (Primary teacher -state school-).

The professionals interviewed consider that in the organisational dimension, deliberation occupies a secondary place and is hardly reflected in their discourses, since the final decision on co-existence is made by students chosen to represent the will of each class or group (delegates, mediators, and so on).

The analysis of the data allows us to affirm that the professionals link this dimension of participation to a view of students as members of a group in which they need to learn to co-exist, take action and even delegate the responsibility of making decisions on issues that concern the whole group. As suggested by some interventions, these types of delegated participation systems could mean that some students hardly ever have the chance of having a voice in school life, since these positions of representation are usually held by those students who are more likely to have a successful school trajectory.

Socio-political Dimension

This final dimension which we refer to as socio-political involves an understanding of participation as a citizenship right and, thus, we will find here some arguments that refer to the learning and the real practice of democracy in schools and also some discussions about participation as a right. This dimension is clearly the most infrequent and meagre in teachers' discourses and is slightly presented by only some teachers in a very schematic way.

For teachers, the fundamental premise in this model is that individuals learn how to participate in public life through action, in their daily activities at school. Participation would be, as stated by a school counsellor, essential teaching in schools so that these become spaces for lived democracy:

‘Children need to learn to express their opinion (...) as citizens, from a democratic perspective. We need to experience that, live in our school space as a kind of training, as a kind of micro-society’ (School counsellor –state school-).

These are some of the arguments that appear defending the right of students to appropriate the school, make it their own and feel an important part of it, although there is little tradition among teachers, in the Spanish context, favouring this type of participation. Questions also arise about who participates and who does not in schools, reflections that are linked more to issues of equity and educational justice. Consequently, a teacher argues that participation opens up the possibility of ‘many students getting their dignity as students back’ which, in their opinion, has been damaged by having a system that only values academic knowledge and is therefore one that excludes a large number of young people.

On the other hand, participation interpreted as deliberative democracy is not organised in specific spaces or times, and neither does it require a format or identifiable conditions in order to guarantee its legitimacy, as stated by our interviewees. The most cited space for non-representative democratic participation (that is to say, for all students, not just for delegates) is the weekly classroom assemblies that take place in the classrooms of practically all schools. This meeting is always referred to as an informal and unregulated learning space for participation:

‘Then, perhaps, we leave the highest level of participation, although it is too focused, for a day when we have classroom assemblies. On this day we are free to make suggestions or express ourselves [...] when it’s classroom assemblies. The truth is that we always have something to talk about, I always tell them that, well, what do they think, if we have a problem, if there have been any problems between them due to disagreements that exist and so on’ (Primary teacher –state school-).

One of these reflections that forms part of this earlier debate is related to the place from which participation is evaluated, that is, on the judgements that determine if student participation is sufficient, appropriate or possible.

Teachers find it difficult to understand participation through the eyes of their students and to put themselves in their place. Thus, the discourses of the professionals suggest that adults are the ones who can judge whether student participation is adequate or possible at any given time. But as one teacher points out, the place from which participation is assessed is not irrelevant ‘you think about it as an adult, but not as a child. And often it is very different from a child’s position’ (Infant teacher –state school-).

This decentered position identified here raises some relevant questions for understanding participation related to the agency of students. Talking about student participation from their position, seeing what they see, is only possible from a renewed and enabling insight of childhood. Therefore, assuming a notion of infancy as a period in which the subjects are incomplete and are ‘under construction’, definitely compromises this possibility, collectively questioning the way participation takes place as it prevents the recognition of students as an authorised voice.

In this socio-political conception of participation the roles of students and teachers are transformed and diluted in a type of relationship closer to one of co-responsibility and mutual learning. Therefore, this theoretical position becomes unfeasible because it contrasts with the dominant model of teacher professionalism (the technical model) which is based on a conception of the teacher as an expert and in a hierarchical relationship between teachers and students. This idea is clearly highlighted by a counsellor:

‘Well I think the disadvantages are not so much in participation as in that there isn’t a culture in the world of adults to make them participate in the daily life of the school or in class’ (School counsellor state school-).

Undoubtedly, out of the four dimensions this is the one that appears the least frequently and is hardly outlined in the teachers’ discourses. The other three conceptualisations that represent a much less politicised way of thinking, closer to a more technical vision of the teaching profession, appear much more frequently.

Conclusions

This work has enabled us to identify that the concept of participation has different meanings for teachers and is also conceptualised in diverse ways. Thus, the conceptions of the teachers are organised in a continuum that goes from those positions that see participation depending on individual characteristics (), to others that recognise that this concept must be understood from a social or political perspective, linking it to the right that the student has to intervene in making decisions through democratic deliberative processes on the common good. In any case, the majority of the teachers’ discourses place this concept in the psychological or pedagogical dimension, understanding that the lack

of participation is basically due to the specific individual limitations that students have (shyness, lack of interest, introversion).

Accordingly, this tendency reveals that in teachers' imaginary participation is mostly a depoliticised activity. This presents significant limitations from the perspective of what we recognise as a pedagogy of participation which is more complex and committed to a more democratic society and to a mode of associated living (Biesta and Lawy, 2006) that necessarily need to be learned from practice (Thompson 2008; Pateman 2012). The teachers' discourses are still quite far from the conception of participation as deliberative democracy described by Fielding (2012) when talking about schools as spaces for lived democracy.

Furthermore, the discourses that emphasise the more individual dimension of participation project a constraint image of children linked to the lack of maturity of students, something which has already been identified in other previous research (Masschelein and Simons, 2006).

Some studies on child development (Edwards, 2006; Edwards, Blaise and Hammer, 2009) encourage the exploration of teachers' understandings of child learning experiences through a post developmental lens, by assuming that individuals develop as they participate with others in shared endeavours. These findings once again emphasize the need for learning about democratic participation through social practice and participation in issues that are of a common concern (Biesta and Lawy, 2006; Samuelsson, 2016).

On the other hand the dimensions that have a more social or political insight tend to recognise the rights of children to intervene in the management of co-existence.

Moreover, some of the teachers' discourses reveal that the professionals show a certain concern for bringing together strategies that allow students to participate in very focused and scheduled issues connected to curricular development processes or school management. Thus, the results show that far from referring to schemes that could be linked to a model of deliberative democracy (Young 2001). The strategies mentioned previously are primarily connected to models of competitive democracy (Bellamy 2000). Somehow, the teachers who were interviewed understand that democratic participation in schools is reduced to a representative regime in which students select some delegates for negotiating minor issues of school life. Within the context of this understanding some authors have suggested the need to implement deliberative democracy teaching models in which some skills and values (communication and participation skills, equity and diversity values, social responsibilities...) essential for participation, can be developed by all children (Samuelsson 2016). Besides that, this work suggests that further research into the deeper meaning of participation is necessary. As our study indicates, participation is not exclusively an 'action to be carried out', it is not simply an active disposition of some students that question, organise or debate in the classroom. This view of participation is very limited and often eclipses the active (and participatory) presence of many students who collaborate 'silently' in common objectives. However, this inconspicuous form of participation is essential in groups where it is the silence of the majority that allows progress on agreed proposals. For this reason, the questions about what and who participates are inextricably linked to those of by whom and how is it heard. Both are equally essential and complementary, although our attention has only been focused on the first.

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Table 1. Summary of the interviews conducted at each educational level

Type of professional	Number of interviews
Infant teachers	7
Primary teachers	9

Secondary teachers	3
Headteachers	4
School counsellors	4
Special Educational Needs Teacher	2
Speech and language therapist	1
School social worker	1
TOTAL NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS	31

Table 2. Thematic dimensions of the interview

Dimensions	Question Examples
Socio demographic data and professional experience	What is your previous training?
Views about participation	What are the positive aspects of students' participation in school life?
Pedagogical Awareness	How do you think students' participation can contribute to the curriculum and school life?
Obstacles to and open spaces for participation	What aspects are complicating the creation of spaces for students to participate in?
Views concerning the students	How does a students' age influence their participation in school life?
Absent voices	Can you identify any student or group of students that have difficulties in participating in the school?