Student Participation: Auspices And Contradictions in An Educational Innovation Context

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Understanding children and youngsters' participation as a key dimension in educational innovation processes assumes the evolution from a conceptualisation of learners as beneficiaries to another which sees them as partners within that innovation and active individuals, agents of the teaching-learning-evaluation process. The research was centred on this topic, focusing on secondary education, within the scope of an ongoing innovation process in a school located in Porto. We sought to understand how the co-constructed social change is being experienced and perceived by the protagonists and which factors may enable or hinder it. The research was based on qualitative information, assuming it was an exploratory, descriptive, interpretative study. Data was collected through three focus groups – one with teachers and two with students (one with 5th and 9th graders and another with 11th graders) –, as well as an individual interview with the headmaster. The data analysis showed that the transition from conditional or advisory forms of participation to collaborative or co-decision-making ones is neither simple nor immediate. In identifying the barriers to their participation or the factors which can promote it, students have shown to be able to go deeper into the issues at stake and to clearly understand the need to walk a path towards the shared assumption of a participation perspective based on continuous and committed dialogue. As well as allowing an understanding of the innovation process being analysed, this study can also shed light on other research or practical experiences that link student participation and innovation in school education.

Introduction

The paper presents and discusses some of the results obtained from research that sought to understand, over the course of the 2021-2022 school year, how educational innovation took place in a school as part of a wider innovation dynamic in a network of schools in Portugal, considering the areas in which it occurred, the key dimensions which could make it successful,

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and the appropriation of that innovation by the social actors who led it, whilst seeking to understand their modes of adherence and its consequences (Jesus, 2022).

Considering innovation in school education as a multidimensional and multilevel concept, and also as a political act because it always corresponds to a specific social mandate, we adopted Santos Guerra's (2018) conceptualisation in our research, shared by Carbonell Sebarroja (2008): a set of ideas, processes, and strategies, more or less systematised, through which changes are introduced and brought about in current educational practices. These contribute to improve students' learning and educators' teaching practices, at the service of both subjects and communities founded on democratic respect, equity, and solidarity, with education viewed as "a common good in the public space" (Nóvoa, 2020).

The literature review carried out enabled us to identify the interrelated dimensions that can favour innovation development at school level – a clear horizon, prior preparation and planning, "evidence based" innovative action, teacher collaboration, coherence of processes, invested leadership, student involvement, inter-institutional support networks, resources and infrastructures, permanent evaluation and the innovation impact in the classroom – and allowed us to draw up a possible model to analyse innovation, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Framework to analyse innovation at school level
Source: Jesus (2022), p. 156; based on Azevedo (2020)

The data presented in this paper focuses exclusively on the dimension of student involvement. Despite the increasing interest in student voice and student participation in debates and studies on improving school education, there is still a long way to go before students are considered effective players in the processes of educational innovation and transformation (Fullan, 2016). Acknowledging that gap, we considered to be pertinent to investigate an innovation process underway in a school that has taken on student participation as a key dimension, seeking to further understand the phenomenon and identifying clues that would not only shed light on its future development, but also deepen research in this field.

Thus, we chose to carry out a case study, which, according to Morgado (2019), is not a specific research method, but a particular form of study. The knowledge it generates is more concrete and contextualised, and depth of analysis is favoured over scope.

Student participation and educational innovation

In the legal and political sphere, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) laid the foundations for the right of children to have an opinion and for that opinion to be considered in matters that affect them, as reflected in article 12. Nonetheless, the effective development of this right remains limited and outside the main concerns of schools, in a daily practice in which the children's voices are still silenced and undervalued by the power of adults (Argos *et al.*, 2011).

According to Castro & Manzanares (2016), the processes of listening to these voices should be aimed at achieving active processes of exchanging meanings, which start from the need to understand and assume the ethical requirement of recognising the other, giving children the floor and helping them express their opinions in its various forms of presentation. This acceptance brings the concept of listening closer to the process of participation, understanding it as the process of exchanging thoughts and ideas and sharing decisions that affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives. In other words, it conceives "students as an essential group for promoting initiatives for change and improvement, involving them in the school, thus increasing their sense of belonging and responsibility for it" (p. 926). The participation of children and young people should be consistent, contributing to the "construction of a common narrative," as Amorim & Azevedo (2017, p. 69) state, meaning that it should produce changes, either at a micro or macro level within the school institution, becoming a tool to build learning with the students.

In recent years, the "student voice" movement has become famous as the "umbrella" for initiatives undertaken by schools to increase the role of students in decision-making on the design, development, management, or evaluation of any school life issue (Fielding, 2012; Lodge, 2005; Susinos & Ceballos, 2012). However, this evolution has not been matched by a basic consensus on the deep semantics of the expression. According to Lodge (2005), student voice is often perceived as soliciting learners' points of view on comfortable subjects. Nevertheless, it can also mean deepening the dialogue about what learning in a school means for all community members.

For researchers Susinos & Ceballos (2012), the primary source of diversity between student voice initiatives lies in the ultimate objective of each one, i.e., the school's commitment to the idea that its students participate, the fundamental role they play, what the school submits to the opinion of children and young people or what degree of autonomy students have in the project in development. In this continuum of experiences, the authors argue that one extreme is those initiatives in which student participation has minimal and clearly established spaces, which are

abundant in schools. At the other extreme there are those experiences which are defined by having adopted the student voice as the identity mark of schools. This horizon can permeate the whole school life in managing both the organisational and curricular fields. In these schools, student voice is growing.

From this perspective, the authors emphasize student voice initiatives' complex and multidimensional nature and state they can become more complex, open, and committed to a democratic and inclusive school model. The process of progressively listening to students' voices, of expanding the spaces for collegiate participation with them, is not just a superficial methodological change which can be rapidly introduced into teachers' pedagogical practice but a change which causes an impact on the teacher's professional identity and, as a radical change, it may at times be turbulent and problematic.

Understanding the participation of children and young people as a critical dimension in educational innovation processes presupposes the evolution from a concept of students as objects of teaching and beneficiaries of innovation (Fullan, 2016) to one that views them as partners in this innovation and active subjects of the teaching-learning-evaluation process (Gerard & Roegiers, 2011).

Ladders of participation or participation as a path to follow

To frame the diversity of "student voice" experiences, over time, some authors have proposed models of analysis or practical tools to contribute to the construction of a theory of student participation as a device for school change and improvement (Fielding, 2001, 2012; Hart, 1992; Lodge, 2005; Shier, 2000; Susinos & Ceballos, 2012). In this study, we highlight the proposals of Lodge (2005), Fielding (2012) and Susinos & Ceballos (2012), who recognise themselves as indebted to the contributions of Hart (1992) and Shier (2000). In all of them, the vision of educational institutions as communities of learning and intergenerational development emerges.

Assuming the confrontation between instrumentalism in learning organisations and growth in learning communities, Lodge (2005) created a scheme which illustrates approaches to student involvement in school improvement around two dimensions: the students' role (which varies from passive to active); and the purposes of their participation (which varies from a functional/institutional perspective to a community logic). Combining these two dimensions, the author achieved a framework to identify four types of student involvement: quality control, source of information, compliance and control, and dialogical. A dialogical approach, she argues, may favour the learning of both teachers and students through community questioning about learning. From this perspective, children and young people are not constrained to the role of mere information providers but share with teachers a process which results in the joint development of enriched understandings of the school's central purpose: the learning of its members.

Michael Fielding (2012), for his part, proposes a practical tool which aims to support the process of what he calls intergenerational learning and democratic development. Thus, the proposal in "Patterns of Partnership: How Adults Listen to and Learn with Students in Schools" (p. 48) suggests six levels of interaction between adults and young people in schools and other educational contexts: students as a source of information; students as active respondents; students as co-questioners; students as knowledge creators; students as joint authors; and intergenerational learning as lived democracy. At the sixth level of interaction, the author points to a perspective of a "democratic fellowship," which considers not only power but creative and

joyful relationships between people, care, rights, and justice (*ibid.*, p. 54).

According to this author, the perspective of a democratic community not only insists on the need for emancipatory values to guide its development but also requires a set of open and creative dispositions and understandings which provide the motivational energy and engagement at the heart of its aspirations. Fielding wants his partnership standards and democratic community perspective to challenge the dominance of neoliberal views and to create the means to perceive democracy as a way of life and learning together, with schools as examples of democracy in action.

For Susinos & Ceballos (2012), it is possible to represent the intensity or the scope of student participation on a continuum that begins with initiatives in which learners participate as informants or their opinions are applied as an additional element for teachers to make decisions about the curriculum or the school. In these cases, the students' voice is more of a symbolic action than a real one, in which their opinion is used for specific purposes previously decided by adults. To the extent that interest in knowing the students' point of view brings about more intense participation and encourages more significant debate and autonomy in managing the matter in question, progress can be made towards models of student voice that are more committed to actual participation which ensures that the student's opinion is considered and valuable. Therefore, their role in managing change is of greater relevance. The categorisation proposed by these authors comprises four levels of participation: no authentic participation; students as a source of information; students as co-investigators; and intergenerational learning.

For these authors, who consider that there are two preferred areas or objects for student voice activities – the curricular route and the organisational route –, student participation can be aimed at developing educational organisation and management, negotiating the school curriculum, improving the school's physical and social environment, improving teaching and intervening in the community.

Research questions
        To gain a more effective understanding of the educational realities associated with the phenomenon set out to study, based on the literature review, we formulated several questions:
        a) What are the purposes for which student participation is sought?
        b) Which factors are perceived as barriers to student participation and involvement in positive changes at school?
        c) Which factors are perceived as facilitating student participation and involvement in positive changes at school?
        d) How does student participation in curricular innovation materialise?
        e) How does student participation in organisational innovation materialise?
        f) What changes have occurred in the students due to their participation?
        g) What transformations have occurred in teachers due to promoting student participation, particularly in their positive expectations of students' ability to be agents of positive changes at school?
        h) What transformations have occurred in the school due to student participation?
        i) What pattern of student participation is predominant?
        j) Is there an organisational strategy to develop/strengthen student participation in everyday school life? If so, what are the guidelines for action?

Methodology

This study is part of a broader investigation which focuses on how educational innovation took place in a school in Portugal, considering the areas in which it occurred, the key dimensions that could make it successful, and an understanding of how that innovation was appropriated by the social actors who took part in it, whilst seeking to understand their respective modes of adherence and its consequences. In this sense, the research aimed at understanding the effects of the innovative actions adopted by the school at a curricular and organisational level, considering various dimensions of analysis. Student participation is one of those dimensions, and it's the one this paper focuses on.

The school where we conducted the study, between December 2021 and May 2022, is a private school in Porto. It is an institution with an educational offer which includes all stages of schooling from pre-school to secondary education, and its pupils essentially come from medium-high socioeconomical status families.

The school did not take part in the autonomy and curricular flexibility project (PAFC), which took place in Portugal in 2017-2018, but it did join the innovation project promoted by the educational network to which it belongs in that same school year, and over the following years it has increasingly involved teachers in the training and action processes resulting from it. It has implemented strategic pedagogical innovation actions which have gradually involved more students. Table 1 summarises the evolution of the number of projects and teachers engaged in training-action processes within the pedagogical innovation area of student participation from the 2018-2019 school year to 2021-2022, considering a sample from the 5th to 12th grade – the universe to which we have confined our research.

Table 1. Evolution of the number of activities/projects and teachers involved

School Year	Students' Participation
2018-2019	**Three student participation projects** **Five teachers involved**
2019-2020	**Three student participation projects** [1 repeated project in continuity] **Nine teachers involved**
2020-2021	**Six student participation projects** [2 repeated projects in continuity] **6 "non-formal" projects developed on students' spontaneous initiative** ... **Eight teachers involved** 13 headteachers involved in making it happen
2021-2022	**Eight student participation projects** [3 repeated projects in continuity] **24 quarterly student assembly meetings per school year** [all grades from 5th to 12th grade] ... **Two teachers were directly involved in the preparation** 13 headteachers and six teachers involved in dynamisation/monitoring

As we sought to understand how the protagonists were experiencing and perceiving the co-constructed social change and what factors could favour or hinder it, based on qualitative information, we considered the research to be an exploratory, descriptive, and interpretative study (Morgado, 2019).

Concerning student participation, data was collected through three focus groups – one with teachers and two with students (one with 2nd and 3rd cycle students and the other with secondary

students) – and an individual interview with the headmaster. The preparation of the data collection benefited from the collaboration of the headmaster, namely in the scheduling of the focus groups with teachers and students, and in appointing the participants to whom we could send the invitations, according to our criteria: for teachers, six to ten, of both genders, involved in an area of pedagogical innovation – curriculum management and/or student participation – who taught, as a whole, in the three cycles, with a diverse number of years involved in pedagogical innovation; as for students, by focus group, six to ten of both genders involved in student participation activities/projects, with diverse years of involvement and school performance.

Once the students who could take part in the focus groups had been identified, they were contacted and informed consent was obtained from both the parents and the students themselves. The same happened with the educators identified as potential participants in the focus group with teachers.

The participants were distributed as follows: 13 learners (seven in the focus-group with 2nd and 3rd cycle students and six in the focus-group with secondary students), six teachers (in the focus-group) and the headmaster (in the individual interview). Our intention was for the sample to be diverse and to ensure heterogeneity in participants' profiles, which we believe was achieved. On the one hand, we realise there may have been some bias in the constitution of the samples, since the definition of criteria is not in itself a guarantee they will be met. On the other hand, the choice of a descriptive and interpretative study recommends that the findings should not be read from a generalisation perspective.

To achieve a more robust research, we resorted to triangulation by collecting the same type of information from the different actors involved – students, teachers and the headmaster –, which allowed us to control the validity of the meanings expressed in the researcher's narratives, descriptions and interpretations.

Before the focus groups and the individual interview took place, we tried to validate the scripts to ensure they were as clear and congruent as possible within the research objectives. Thus, the script for the focus group discussion with teachers was pre-tested with a different sample of educators in January 2022. The same occurred to the scripts for the focus groups with students, which were pre-tested with other learners, also in January 2022 – a small group of 9th graders and another small group of 10th graders. It was possible to take notes on the process of conducting the discussion and then to change or improve the questions, based on suggestions made by teachers and students respectively.

The reformulated scripts were finally reviewed by an expert who assessed the substance of the questions and their suitability according to the research objectives. The focus groups with teachers and students, as well as the individual interview, were held in person at the school in January and February 2022. The data obtained through audio recordings was later transcribed and subjected to content analysis.

Each focus group and interview were considered contextual units and were coded using the corresponding initial letters, FG for the focus groups, and I for the interview. Those letters were followed by: i) in the focus groups, the letters S (Students) and T (Teachers); and ii) in individual interview, the letter H (Headmaster).

Both in the focus groups and the individual interview, a number was assigned to each

participant, provided that the number assigned to a specific person from a particular social group was not repeated. To exemplify, a recording coded unit as FGS4S12 corresponds to Student 12, a participant in FGS4.

Results

In the search for an understanding of student involvement in the school, with a focus on their participation in innovation processes, we organised the perceptions of students, teachers and the headmaster along the following lines: (i) purposes for which participation is sought; (ii) students' role; (iii) barriers to students' participation in positive school transformations; (iv) factors facilitating students' participation in positive school transformations; (v) students' participation in the curricular field and the organisational field; (vi) transformations in students, teachers and the school resulting from that participation; and (vii) strategy for deepening students' participation in the school.

Purposes for which participation is sought

From the accounts of those involved, it was possible to see that student's participation, as shown in Figure 2, was requested in the context of i) participation in social solidarity projects, ii) participation in curricular areas, iii) providing information about student well-being; and iv) making proposals for improvement.
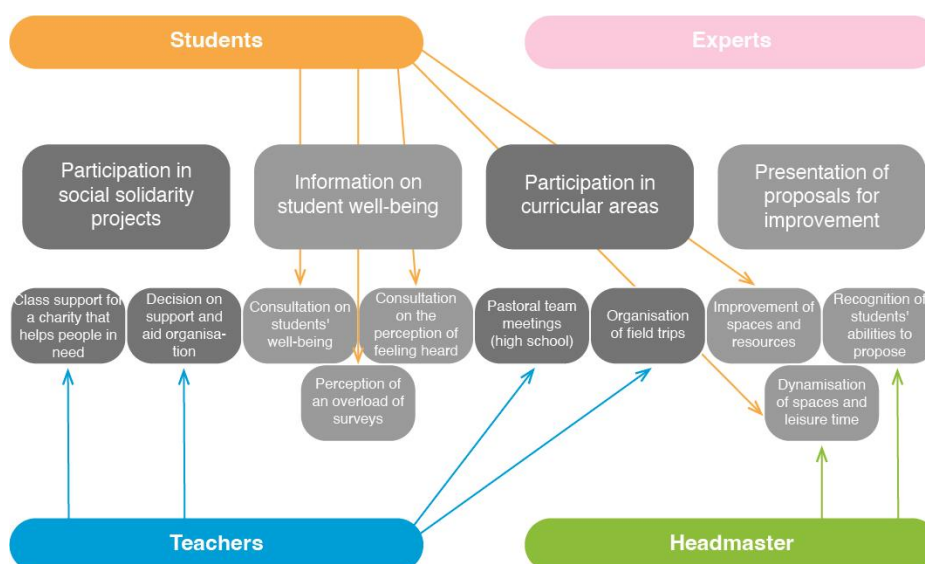

Figure 2. Purposes for which participation is sought

Teachers claimed that students are asked to get involved in the context of the support usually given to charities, clarifying that this involvement takes the form of support for a proposed charity and the organisation of that support throughout the school year.

Concerning student involvement in curricular areas, teachers declared that student involvement is usually limited to organising field trips and senior trips. Although, two secondary school students participated in the school network's pastoral team meeting.

Regarding the involvement of students in putting forward proposals for improvement, the students themselves and the headmaster, agree that these have focused on issues related to the dynamisation of recreational and leisure sights. The students added that they have also made

proposals to improve spaces and resources.

It seems important to highlight the headmaster's recognition of the students' aptitude to make (very relevant) proposals for school improvement –

> *"There is an extraordinary source. They know us, they know the structure, they know the educational project, and what they propose has extraordinary potential because if a student hands me a poorly written "paper" saying "It would be great to have music in the playground", – that's an opportunity for improvement. We've had endless meetings about how the playground could be more dynamic for the students when, in reality, all you need is a piece of paper saying "Put on some music, we like it""* (IH1).

Moreover, students pointed out that their participation has been sought to get adults to listen to them about i) students' well-being and ii) their perception of feeling listened to (or not) by adults at school. However, without detracting from the intentions behind these initiatives, students felt they are being asked to fill in questionnaires too often – "*They're always giving us questionnaires. I feel like every day we have a different one to fill in*" (FGS4S10).

Students' role

To further understand the students' role, we organised the information into three subcategories – their role: in the teaching-learning process, in improving the school, and in another orbit highlighted by the students themselves, communication in everyday school life. The key issues highlighted by the students, the teachers, and the headmaster are shown in Figure 3.
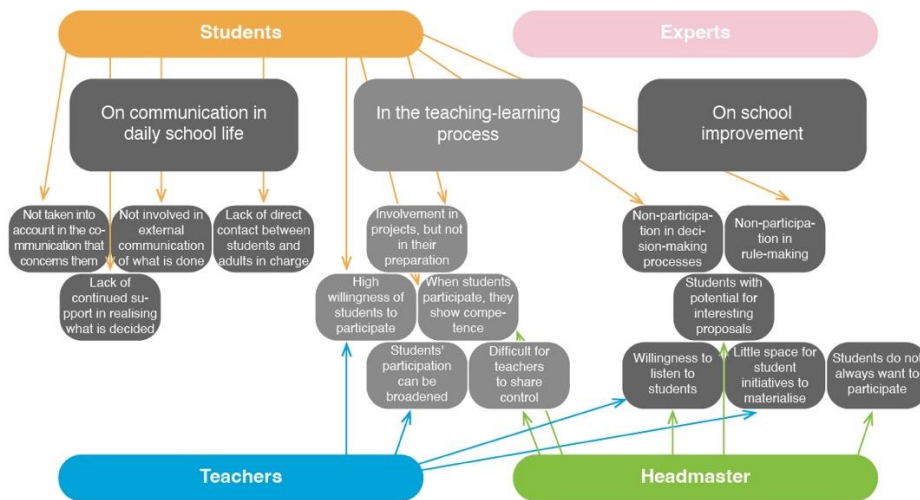

Figure 3. Students' role

Students and teachers seemed to agree that students are willing to actively participate in the teaching-learning process. In line with this view, teachers claimed to believe there is room for widening student participation in this area.

The headmaster argued that it is difficult for teachers to change their professional outlook to incorporate a sharing of control over the teaching-learning process – this is, in her opinion, a "*core issue of teaching activity, it is the feeling, the superego of responsibility*" (IH1), but she asserted to believe that when students participate, they prove to be competent. The students shared this perspective, but they expressed, nonetheless, that their involvement in activities such as interdisciplinary projects is usually mobilised in terms of implementation but not in

terms of planning.

Regarding student involvement in school improvement, teachers and the headmaster agreed that adults are willing to listen to students, their proposals, and questions. However, while the headmaster warned that students do not always want to participate, teachers said that, despite everything, there is little room for students' initiatives to materialise.

In this context, whilst students recognise that their participation is encouraged when proposing improvement proposals, they pointed out not being involved in decision-making processes or in drawing up rules on matters that concern them.

It is also interesting to note that in the conversation with the older students, they demanded opportunities to be involved in the communication that takes place daily at school, not only showing an interest in it but also arguing that it was appropriate. On the one hand, they pointed out the need for ongoing support over time in realising what the students decide. On the other hand, they regretted the fact that they are not considered or involved in communication about issues that concern them and external communication about the school's day-to-day life on social media, considering that they should be involved, for example, in the choice (and form) of what is posted.

Barriers to students' participation in positive school transformation

Looking at the diagram in Figure 4, there is an imbalance between the number of aspects pointed out by adults (teachers and the headmaster) and the number of factors noted by students as barriers to their participation in positive changes at school. Possibly because they experience these barriers themselves, learners seem to have a more in-depth knowledge than the adults of what makes it difficult to accomplish their participation on a day-to-day basis at school.
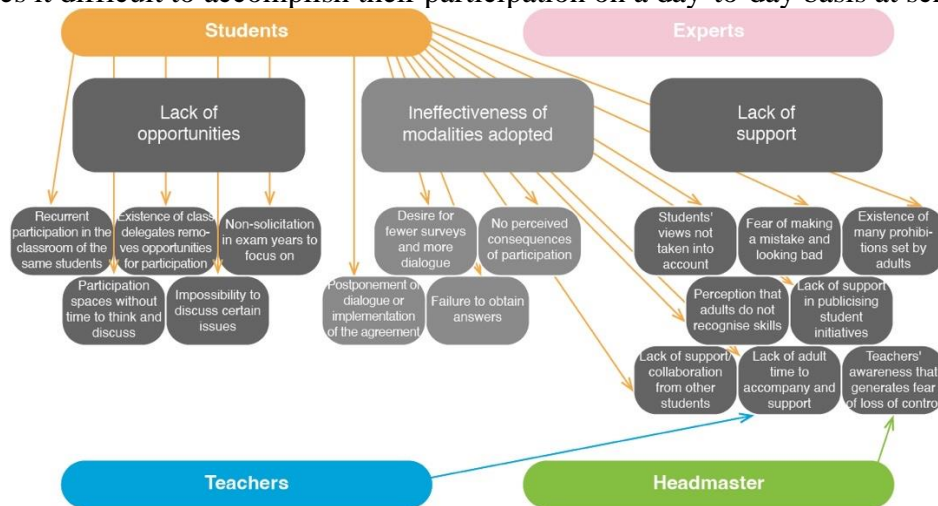

Figure 4. Barriers to students' participation in positive school transformation

For the headmaster, a barrier is the teachers' professional zeal, which creates fear of losing control of the teaching-learning process. Teachers, for their part, found another obstacle in the lack of time they have to support students in their participation processes.

The elements discussed by the students allowed us to categorise their points of view into three types of problems: those related to a lack of opportunities, those resulting from a lack of support from adults (and peers), and those related to the ineffectiveness of the participation methods adopted.

In the first, the lack of opportunities, the students mentioned i) the impossibility of discussing certain subjects of interest – "*It meant not having to wear a uniform from the fifth grade onwards (FGS3S1). Yes, and we, well, we weren't going to run away from school, we've got a mind of our own (FGS3S4).*"–, ii) the impracticality of reflection and discussion in existing participatory spaces due to lack of time – "*The school never gave us much time to think about what we'd like to improve, and, like, someone to talk to and someone with whom we can discuss what we want to improve and be able to do it.*" (FGS4S11) –, iii) the "removal" of participation opportunities in national exam years, so students can focus on proper preparation –

> "*Because nobody spoke to us (...) I didn't even know it existed. I was so sad.* (FGS4S11)
> *It's exam year, we have to focus.* (FGS4S10)
> *Yes, I think they're very focused on the content, and we have to fulfil the content, and they end up forgetting (...) the important values that should be passed on* (FGS4S13)",

and, in a more classroom-orientated lens, iv) the participation repeatedly requested by teachers from the same students and v) the perception that the existence of student class representatives takes away opportunities for other students to participate.

Moving on to the experience of lack of support, students mentioned the existence of many prohibitions set by adults, the perception that adults do not recognise their abilities to participate, the idea that their opinions are not taken into account, the lack of support from adults in publicising initiatives, but also their fear of making mistakes and being seen in a bad light and the lack of support or collaboration from other students in carrying out initiatives.

When it comes to what they consider to be the ineffectiveness of the methods adopted for their participation, students exposed difficulties which have to do with: the perception that their participation has no consequences; not getting answers to their questions (or not knowing there are answers); and the postponement of dialogue or the implementation of what is agreed between students and adults, expressing the desire for their participation to become more about dialogue and less about answering questionnaires – "*We didn't need so many questionnaires, but that we could be heard*" (FGS4S13); "*Just having ideas doesn't get us anywhere. Because if we don't have a teacher to talk to who can turn the action into reality?*" (FGS4S11).

Facilitators of students' participation in positive school transformation

Although substantially fewer than in the case of barriers, when it comes to identifying facilitators of participation, students continued to make a more significant contribution to analyse the factors in hand.
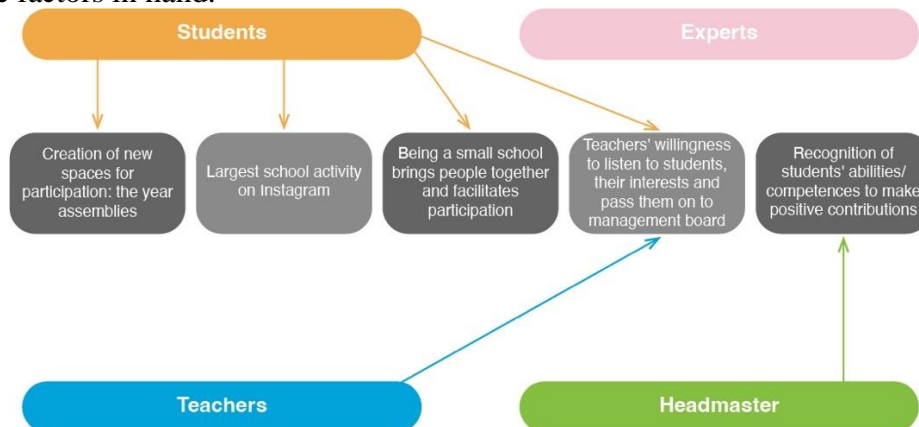

Figure 5. Facilitators of students' participation in positive school transformation

As shown in Figure 5, the headmaster pointed out that a facilitator is the adults' recognition that students possess the skills to positively contribute to improve the school.

Another aspect mentioned was teachers' openness or willingness to listen to students and pass on their concerns and interests to the board. This aspect is perceived as a facilitator by both students and teachers. In addition, students also referred to: the creation of new spaces for student participation, the year assemblies; the fact that the school is small, which facilitates communication; and the school's more significant activity on Instagram, the social media most used by young people, which therefore favours their connection to the school, despite feeling they could play a decisive role in this communication if given the opportunity –

> "*I think a factor was also social media. I don't know if the school had it before, but at least this last school year, it's been very active ...* (FGS4S12)
> *Does this encourage greater student participation in school life?* (FGS4Moderator)
> *Yes, sometimes the things they put there don't fit in with me. Because, you know, they're still adults, right? And it's hard to, it's hard to reach the young audience. However, I think ...* (FGS4S12)
> *And how do you think young audiences could be reached?* (FGS4Moderator)
> *It was putting a young person*" (FGS4S12).

Student participation both in the curriculum field and in the organisational field

We are now looking at student participation in school as an attempt to understand how it takes the form of curricular and organisational matters. Starting with the curriculum, we differentiated the references made by those involved in the study into: participation in the disciplinary scope; participation in the interdisciplinary scope; and non-participation.
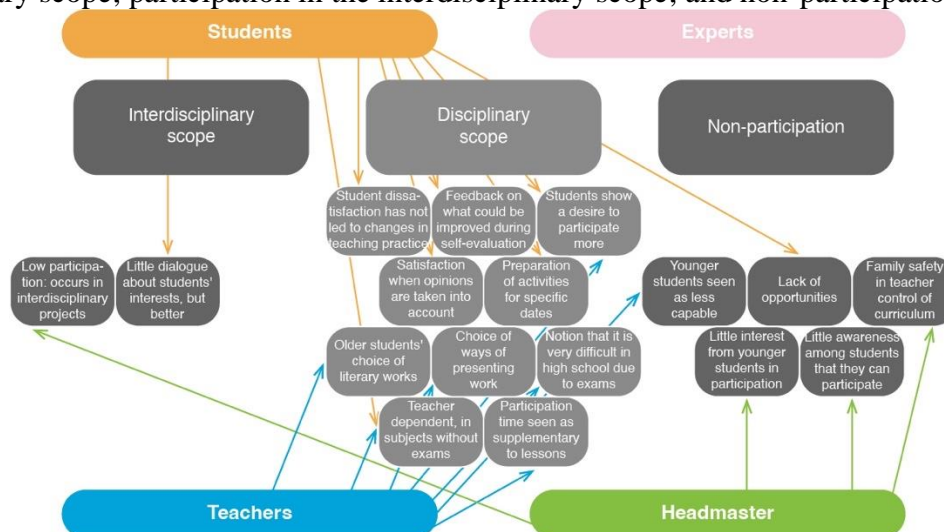

Figure 6. Student participation in the curricular field

Analysing the speeches conveyed the impression that the curriculum is a problematic area where there is a prevailing practice of students not participating, or participating only marginally, in peripheral aspects of the curriculum. There are several reasons for this. The headmaster assumed that, on the one hand, there is an expectation on the part of families – even a sense of security – that the curriculum control should be in the hands of the teacher. On the other hand, students have little idea they may participate. They admitted they have no opportunities to do so.

Another issue worth highlighting is the participation of "younger" students. The headmaster

referred to the fact that they show little interest in participating, while the teachers perceive them as less capable of doing so in a relevant way. In the interdisciplinary sphere, which in the headmaster's view is where there is some student participation, students still claimed they do not find much room for dialogue about their interests. However, they do see improvements in this regard.

In terms of student participation in school subjects, considered on its own, teachers and students are close in their perceptions that: nowadays students show a greater appetite for participation; the possibilities for participation are essentially dependent on the will of each teacher, in subjects that are not subjected to national exams. Teachers conveyed the idea that it is challenging for students to participate in secondary school due to the pressure of external assessment results – "*In secondary school, it's almost impossible, because of the exams*" (FGT4T9).

Teachers view student participation as an extra effort which requires spare class time – "*I even took a bit out of my Portuguese lessons to help them out*" (FGT4T12). On this issue, students said their participation is mobilised above all in preparing activities to celebrate specific dates and in expressing their opinion on aspects that could be improved, as requested during self-evaluation. In this regard, students expressed satisfaction when they experience that their opinions are taken into account – "*That was good because we felt that she paid attention to what we said and did it*" (FGS4S11) –, although they recognised that this usually does not happen, saying that their allusions have not led to changes in classroom practices.

Turning now to student participation in the organisational sphere, we chose to situate the data provided by students, teachers, and the headmaster in two sets of information: a first, resulting from the process of institutionalising student participation at school – which gained significant expression in 2021-2022 with the holding of year assemblies; and a second, linked to a perspective of student non-participation.

Assuming that the school has made a commitment to this area of innovation, having benefited from a significant increase in the 2021-2022 school year with the creation of quarterly student assemblies per school year, the headmaster described that the assemblies have allowed students to identify and vote on proposals to improve the school, resulting in draft recommendations with the three most voted submissions, which are then weighted in and deliberated on by the board as to which ones will be implemented.
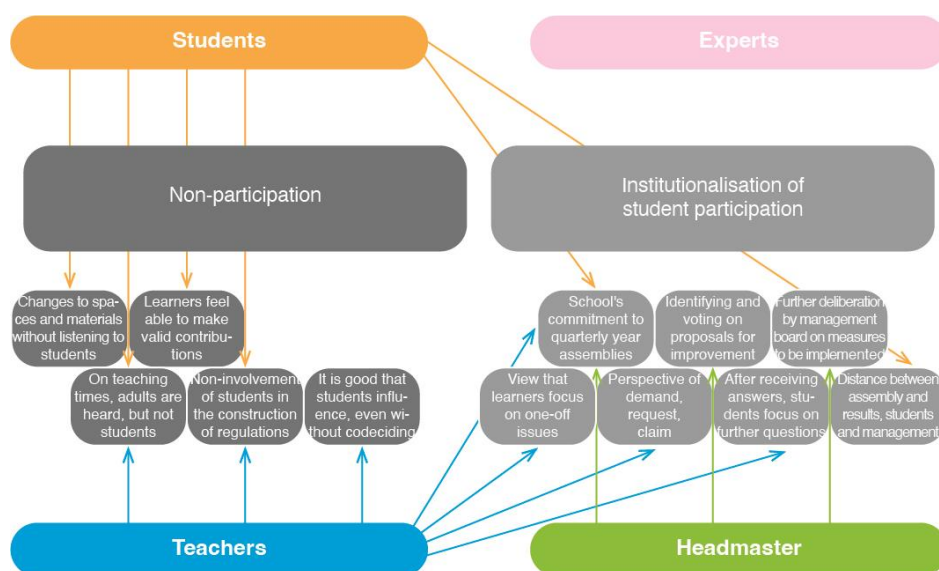
Figure 7. Student participation in the organisational field

Regarding the scope of student participation in year assemblies, teachers said students have focused on specific issues and, once they receive answers from the board, they quickly focus on other issues. It's important to emphasise that, from the teachers' words, we can see that the logic of student participation in this context is based on a perspective of requesting, asking for, or making demands from the students to the school board.

It is interesting to note in this regard that the students perceive a significant time gap between the assembly and its results and another gap separating the students and the board, with whom they have no opportunity to discuss matters.

Considering, at this stage, a perspective of non-participation of students in the organisational sphere, teachers and students seem to agree that: in the organisation of teaching time, adults are listened to, but not students; and students do not participate in drawing up regulations on matters which concern them. Learners also added that changes are made to spaces and materials without their opinion being sought –

> "*And it wasn't exactly good because we don't know how to work with it ...* (FGS4S13). *The teachers don't know how to use the board, which has fewer functions than the previous one* (FGS4S10).
> *So, if this choice, like others, had been made more in dialogue with the students, could you have helped there too?* (FGS4Moderator)
> *I was expecting to have a lesson where our head teacher would talk to us and say – "Look, they've heard your proposal," – or something. I was also expecting the school would make us talk about our proposals*" (FGS4S11).

However, what emerges from the students' words is the conviction that they are capable of making valid contributions if given the chance.

Finally, we would like to highlight a teacher's comment that it is already something students can have some influence on organisational changes at school, even without being able to take part in co-decision processes – "*We are permeable to this, this creates an impact, this will influence, it may not be significant in the decision, but ...*" (FGT4T8).

Transformation in students

As it can be seen in Figure 8, the data was positioned in two subcategories of analysis: the experience that participating is worthwhile; and participation as a learning process. About the first, students testified that, with the spaces created for participation, they have had the opportunity to express what they would like to see changed at school. The headmaster, nonetheless, maintained that progress has been visible in this field, which can be easily measured by: the fact that students do not get tired and have not given up on making proposals; the increase in the number and diversity of students with proposals; and even the increase in the number of proposals submitted by students – "*Basically, this shows that they are experiencing that it is worthwhile, even though not everything they propose is accepted*" (IH1).
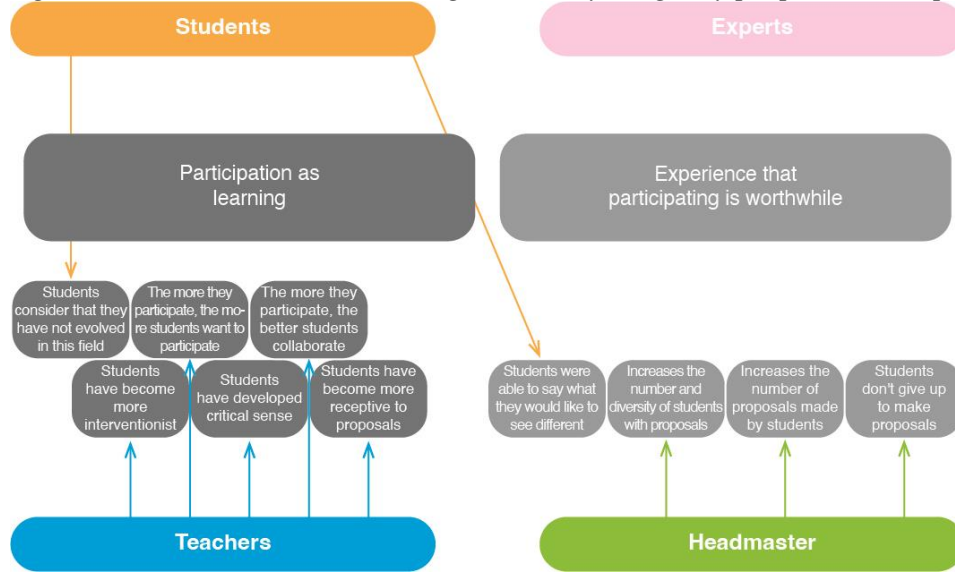

Figure 8. Transformations in students

Regarding participation as a learning process, teachers believe that the more the students participate, the more they: want to participate and collaborate. In addition, teachers stated that participation has made students more receptive to proposals, more interventionist and more critical.

It is curious, however, how this perspective contrasts with that expressed by the students. Possibly because they realise that participation is a learning process and that there is a long way to go, they perceive that they have not evolved in this area – "*I now have more knowledge than I did last year, but in terms of being more participative it's the same*" (FGS4S10).

Transformation in teachers

Considering the "institutionalisation" of this area of innovation at the school, the headmaster defended that just the fact that it happened opened up a "different perspective" in teachers and the good results obtained through the students' participation allowed any fears that might have existed to be dispelled. However, the headmaster noted that the fatigue caused by the pandemic has left teachers with little energy to go further in this area – "*There is little energy at the moment to allocate to these things because it is being drained into loss management*" (IH1).
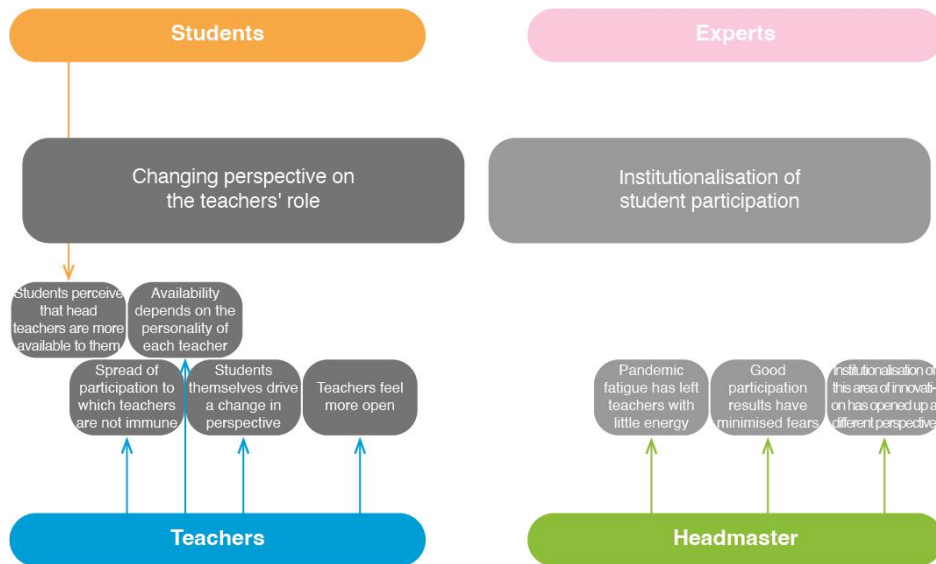
Figure 9. Transformations in teachers

As for a possible change of perspective on their role, teachers confirmed that there has been a contamination in the school around student participation, to which they are not immune, and therefore they feel more permeable today. In their words, students themselves are driving a change in perspective. Although, the willingness to accept and adopt this "new" perspective seems to depend on the personality of each teacher – "*I think it has to do with the person's posture*" (FGT4T12).

Students, for their part, see this change in the head teachers – "*One of the innovations then, I think, is that the head teachers care about us...* (FGS4S7) *Exactly* (FGS4S5). (...) *and even if something isn't happening, he can always come to us and help us out.*" (FGS4S7).

Transformation in the school

In terms of the transformations that have taken place in the school, we gathered the data around two topics, as shown in Figure 10: one stems from the institutionalisation of student participation, and the other stems from other forms of student participation.
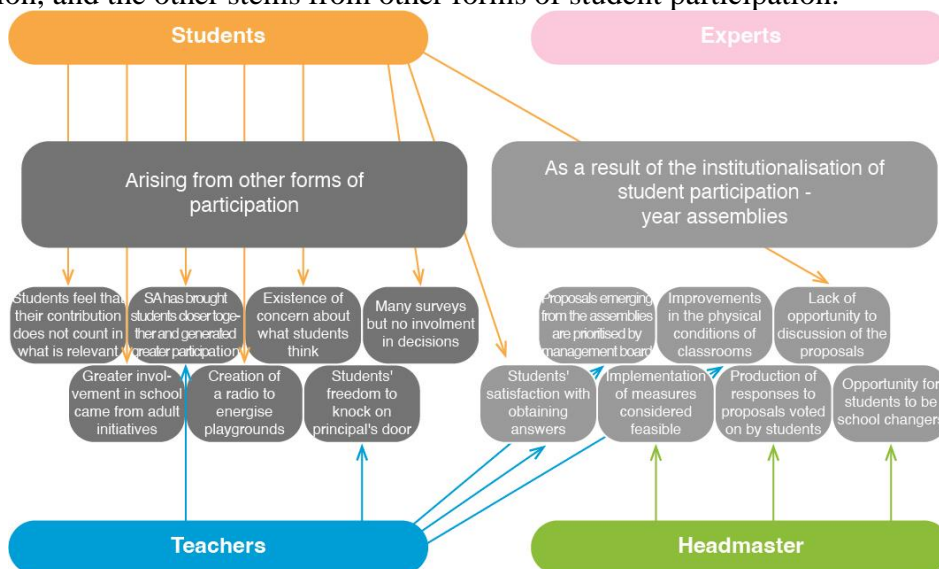

Figure 9. Transformations in the school

On the first point, the headmaster argued that the year assemblies were an opportunity for the students to become transformers of the school, requiring the board to produce responses to the proposals voted on by the students and implement the feasible measures. In this respect, the teachers emphasised that the proposals which resulted from the assemblies were prioritised by the board.

Teachers also attributed some of the physical improvements in the classrooms to student participation in the year assemblies. Teachers and students agreed that the latter were satisfied with the board's response to their draft recommendations. It does not mean that students feel they have the opportunity to discuss their proposals with the board though.

About other forms of student participation within the school, teachers said students are free to knock on the headmaster's door and express their views – "*And it's not just in those formal moments (FGT4T10). Not at all (FGT4T11). (...) because if a student wants to go knocking on the headmaster's door, they know they have all the freedom they need*" (FGS4S10).

A perspective teachers and students agreed on is that the student association has managed to bring students closer and generate more participation. And the creation of the school radio to energise the playgrounds is something students are pleased to see as a symbol of their participation.

However, other comments from students revealed some concerns. They realised that the adopted methods are not always the most appropriate, mainly because they do not allow them to be involved in decision-making processes. Besides, students said they feel their contribution does not count towards what is most central to the school – "*There are lots of questionnaires, and that sort of thing. But then when it comes to implementing measures, usually the ones that are implemented are things that aren't as relevant as the necessary ones*" (FGS4S12).

Strategy for deepening students' participation

We also wanted to find out if there is a strategy for deepening student participation in the school and, if so, what strategy it is. On this question, the headmaster admitted there isn't one yet – "*I don't think it exists. I think we're still living on plays, quite frankly. We're still living on the experience of assemblies; they're still small projects. I don't think there is*" (IH1).

Recognising that the school is undergoing experimentation, the headmaster expresses the hope that progress will continue and that it will soon be possible to define such a strategy.
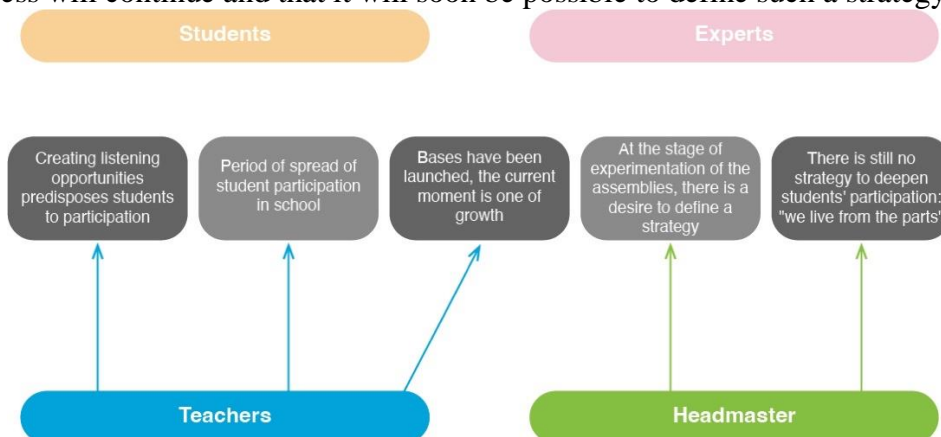

Figure 10. Strategy for deepening students' participation

Teachers believe there is a period of contamination in student participation at school. The foundations have been laid, and the current moment is seen as one of growth. From the outset, teachers noted that creating room for listening to students predisposes them to participation.

Thus, whilst for the headmaster it is impossible to verify the existence of a strategy to strengthen student participation – featuring the present time as an experimental phase –, for teachers, the strategy exists, and change is taking place.

Discussion and conclusions

Putting this data into dialogue with the typology of student involvement in school improvement created by Lodge (2005), which proposes the analysis of the "student voice" around the role of the students and the purposes for which their participation is sought, we recognise a tension in the representations of this role and these purposes. On the one hand, a more passive perspective on the role of the student, albeit with goals aligned with improving the community, framed by students seen as a source of information and confirmed in initiatives aimed at collecting their opinions in identifying areas for improvement in relatively comfortable aspects and their perceptions of their own well-being. On the other hand, a view which reflects a more active role for the students, framed, even so, by more functional or institutionally pre-defined purposes, which the author refers to as conformity and control, expressed in student participation initiatives on issues and in formats established by adults, examples of which are i) participation in the organisation of field trips (participation in the curricular field) or ii) involvement in the organisation to aid institutions which provide social support (participation in charity projects).

Repeating the analysis, now based on Susinos & Ceballos (2012) scale of levels of student protagonism, which focuses on the intensity of a school's commitment to getting its students to participate, the school seems to have a predominance of participation in which students are also viewed as a source of information. The authors define this stage of participation as a set of actions in which the interest in knowing the students' point of view can vary, which can imply greater or lesser participation and encourage greater or lesser debate and autonomy on the part of the students in managing the topics in question.

The highest levels of those frameworks, which Lodge (2005) calls to dialogue and Susinos & Ceballos (2012) reach intergenerational learning, and which point to a level where students are seen as active participants in their learning and where participation is not limited to one or several specific projects, but becomes a regular way of managing school life, both at the curricular and organisational level, still seem to be far from being achieved at school. Despite the great willingness of students to participate, both in the teaching-learning process (recognised by themselves and their teachers) and in other areas of school life, the following seem to be striking: i) the difficulty of this participation in relevant matters about the way teaching and learning is carried out, and ii) the students' perception that they are not involved in decision-making processes.

Nonetheless, it is crucial to bear in mind that both these and other models to analyse student participation as tools for educational innovation (Fielding, 2001, 2012; Hart, 1992; Shier, 2000) conceive this dimension as something to be developed, a path which individuals and educational organisations can travel within learning communities or communities of practice. Taking that into account, the exercise of student participation at school is still at the beginning of its journey. It can and should be enhanced to cover a broader scope in terms of participation spaces and pedagogical and organisational decision-making processes. This means recognising

that developing students' ability to participate "implies experiencing a learning process that can and should be built with the adults with whom they interact" and that only through students' active involvement in decision-making processes can they learn how to make quality participation (Cortesão & Jesus, 2022, p. 31). As Skivenes & Strandbu (2006) emphasise, this process entails the gradual abandonment of the traditional concept of education, which is perceived as a relationship in which an adult possesses something the immature child requires.

From analysing the data, it seems fair to consider that students are, as Lodge (2005) suggests, the "expert witnesses" at school in this dimension. Whether in identifying the barriers to their participation or the factors which enhance it or in realising this participation in different areas of school life, students have consistently shown to be able to delve further into the matters in hand than adults. There are perhaps three reasons for this: the fact that they experience the times and spaces for participation that have been created; the notion that they are still at the beginning of a journey and that, for example, the students' contributions are not being sought for what is relevant in the school; and a particular fascination on the part of the teachers, so to speak, with the impetus given to this area of innovation in the school, which may lead to the perception that they are already where they want to be or could be.

This area of innovation has received increasing attention at school, which has materialised in 2021-2022 with the creation of a system for regular student participation, quarterly year assemblies, for students from the 5th to 12th grades. As a result of students' positive support for the possibility of expressing their points of view, of the teachers' awareness that by participating more, students become more involved, critical, cooperative, and receptive to proposals, and of the board's conviction that students can present relevant suggestions for improvement, there has been a phase of "broadening" of initiatives and proposals, of "contagion" of student participation within the school.

Whilst it is true that the overall positive experience of implementing this area of innovation in the school is an essential asset for its future development, a particular boom in proposals, initiatives, and spaces for participation may hide the fact that the experienced forms of participation have been predominantly based on a logic of suggestion, request or demand from students, rather than one of joint construction. This perspective, which aims to build a "common narrative" between adults and students (Amorim & Azevedo, 2017), which is perceived to be desired by the latter, still seems far from being an aspiration widely assumed by the school.

Putting some of the data together, it is interesting to see that: i) according to the headmaster, students have little idea that they may participate in the curriculum, while they claimed they have few opportunities to do so; and ii) about younger students, the headmaster perceives them as showing little interest in participating, while teachers perceive them as having little ability to do so in a relevant way. These factors are certainly not independent from each other. In other words, from the perspective of participation as learning, non-participation does not lead to a predisposition or developing competencies for participation. Neither does the perception that there are low expectations regarding the results.

Another contradiction in the data collected from adults is the "ideal age" for students to be involved in participatory processes. If older students involved in preparing for national standardised tests, who are supposedly more competent to do so, are not engaged in dynamics in which they could participate, and if younger students are viewed as not skilled enough, then who can participate?

Dialogue is, as Lodge (2005) argues, more than conversation; it is the construction of a shared narrative between students and adults, or as Bernstein (2000) puts it, a "pedagogical right." Students express a desire for their participation in school to increasingly involve dialogue. Although they recognise the effort which has been made to create opportunities for their participation, they express dissatisfaction with i) the spaces created (referring to the questionnaires and the year assemblies), as they are not given time for more qualified participation, and ii) in these spaces there are few opportunities for dialogue.

For dialogue, understood in this way, to take place and become the way of conceiving student participation at school, we have identified two main challenges:

i) one at the organisational level, as it is necessary for adults to have time to accompany and support students and for the participation methods adopted to provide students time and opportunity to reflect on and discuss issues of interest to them and adults; and

ii) another at the level of the evolution of adults' representations of the students' role and their own role, which leads us to further the horizon of innovation (what does explicitly mean to educate students who are protagonists of their own lives and students who are agents of reality transformation?) and the development of collaborative cultures in school, which bring them closer to learning communities (Lodge, 2005) and communities of practice (Susinos & Ceballos, 2012).

To conclude, studying student participation as a key dimension in educational innovation processes proves to be crucial for its deep understanding. Even though we must not generalise the findings about a specific sphere – in this case, the educational network, or schools from Porto or Portugal –, we strongly believe that this research sheds some light on some key aspects, such as: firstly, identifying barriers to student participation and which factors may favour it in everyday school life; secondly, the importance of acknowledging the relevant contribution students can make to innovation and school improvement processes – as long as schools gradually climb the "steep steps" of student participation.

Future studies which aim to deepen this matter may benefit from further investigation on three levels: a longer study which would allow the analysis of these processes' evolution; the involvement of a wider number of participants, including, for instance, intermediate leaders with decision-making power; and the link between student participation and other key dimensions of educational innovation.

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