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Teachers' and Students' Perceptions of Learning Decision-Making and Democratic Participation in School A Case Study in Catalonia

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Abstract

This case study investigates the perceptions of teachers and students about learning decision-making and democratic participation in their primary education school. This research, conducted at a public school in Barcelona (Catalonia), aims to characterize the opportunities and limitations the studied school provides in this regard, based on the perceptions of 101 students aged 6 to 8 and six of their teachers. Following a qualitative methodology, which included interviews with teachers and a research dossier for the students, the investigation reveals that students perceive that they engage in decision-making within their immediate environment, but show limited awareness of broader, long-term decisions. As inferred from the interviews, teachers appear to significantly influence these processes, since their opinions and beliefs about citizenship and decision-making seem to shape the guidance they provide to students. The findings point out the complexities of learning decision-making and democratic participation in school to foster an active, critical and participative citizenship.



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Introduction

Numerous studies show that the health of democracy has declined in nations around the world during the last years. Democracy is not delivering and, as a result, many citizens are dissatisfied with the political system in their country and claim major changes or a complete reform of their structure and functioning (Wike et al., 2021; Wike & Fetterolf, 2021). These studies convey the idea that, even though people like democracy, their commitment to it is often not very strong.

Furthermore, while the population has embraced the idea of representative democracy, there exists an important number of citizens that considerably support direct democracy (Wike & Schumacher, 2019) or authoritarian policies (Estellés & Castellví, 2020). This belief might indicate a general distrust towards the current government institutions and the politicians making the decisions. In fact, the study conducted by Wike and Schumacher (2019) shows that the population in most European countries feels that politicians are not listening to them, and many people perceive the government as working for the few rather than the many. Moreover, their investigation also concluded that, aside from voting, relatively few people take part in other forms of political and civic participation.

Despite this, some types of engagement are more common among young people, especially those on the political left and with higher education. Conversely, people with less education are more likely than those with more education to think that a military government would be a good political system (Wike & Schumacher, 2019). On the other hand, those with higher education are consistently more likely to be motivated by certain controversial issues, such as free speech, poverty, healthcare, or the quality of education (Gramilch, 2018; Wike & Castillo, 2018; Wike et al., 2017). However, while education is undoubtedly a significant contributor, it is neither the primary problem nor a magical solution (Estellés & Castellví, 2020; Sant & Brown, 2021). It is important to recognize that other factors, such as socioeconomic status, cultural context, and personal experiences, also play a critical role in shaping individuals' civic engagement.

The population's disengagement from politics and civic participation is a serious issue in our society, and it has the potential to harm the democracy in which we currently live. Wike and Castillo (2018) argue that an engaged citizenry is often considered a sign of a healthy democracy: high levels of political and civic participation increase the likelihood of ordinary citizens' voices being heard in important debates, which in turn gives legitimacy to democratic institutions.

Westheimer and Kahne (2004) identified three types of citizens based on their involvement, participation, and purpose, an approach that serves as a valuable framework for understanding the issue at hand: the personally responsible citizen, who acts by abiding by the law; the participatory citizen, who acts by participating in the established systems and the social life of the community; and the social justice-oriented citizen, who acts by questioning and changing systems if unfair models are established. In parallel, Kennedy (2019) discussed a framework defined by thin and thick conceptions of democracy. While the thin conception is related to civic knowledge and following the rules, the thick conception of democracy is more oriented towards developing citizenship self-efficacy, understood as the "confidence expressed by oneself regarding the abilities to participate in civic life" (Kennedy, 2019, p.38). What Westheimer's and Kennedy's proposals have in common is that they both differentiate citizens' actions according to their activeness in relation to social engagement and their inclination towards transgression for change.

Building on the theoretical foundations of citizenship types and democratic conceptions, it is essential to explore how these frameworks translate into educational practices. Schools play a

pivotal role in shaping students' understanding of citizenship by providing opportunities to engage with these concepts in meaningful ways. Table 1 illustrates how the principles of citizenship practice can be implemented in educational settings, highlighting the strategies that align with the different types of citizens and their corresponding democratic approaches.

Table 1
Kinds of Citizenship Promoted in School

	Personally Responsible Citizen	Participatory Citizen	Justice Oriented Citizen
Description	<p>Acts responsibly in his/her community.</p> <p>Works and pays taxes.</p> <p>Obeys laws</p>	<p>Active member of community organizations and/or improvement efforts.</p> <p>Organizes community efforts to care for those in need, promote economic development, or clean up the environment.</p> <p>Knows how government agencies work.</p>	<p>Critically assesses social, political, and economic structures to see beyond surface causes.</p> <p>Seeks out and addresses areas of injustice.</p> <p>Knows about democratic social movements and how to effect systemic change.</p>
Sample action in school	<p>Works and learns according to school rules and accepts the proposals given by teachers and the management team.</p> <p>Examples: Completing assigned group tasks according to the instructions and rules set by teachers. Following discipline policies, such as maintaining respectful behavior in class and during breaks.</p> <p>Attending mandatory school events, such as cultural days, without questioning or proposing changes to their content or structure.</p>	<p>Participates in school decision-making when given the opportunity, proposing improvements and changes.</p> <p>Examples: Contributing ideas and suggestions during student council meetings to improve school policies or initiatives.</p> <p>Participating in surveys or discussions where students provide input on school events, such as sports days or assemblies.</p> <p>Collaborating on group projects where students are encouraged to propose innovative solutions or improvements related to the school environment.</p>	<p>Advocates for school changes at both the curricular and organizational levels, seeking social justice.</p> <p>Examples: Organizing initiatives to address inequalities, such as advocating for gender-neutral uniforms or accessibility improvements for students with disabilities.</p> <p>Working with teachers or administrators to suggest the inclusion of topics like climate change, human rights, or social justice in the curriculum.</p> <p>Leading or participating in peaceful demonstrations or petitions to address perceived injustices in school policies, such as unfair disciplinary practices or lack of representation in school leadership.</p>

Note. Adapted from Westheimer & Kahne (2004).

Given these distinctions, the research presented in this paper has been designed with the conviction that it is necessary to promote social justice-oriented citizens and a conception of thick democracy in schools to increase social engagement and contribute to maintain, or even rebuild,

the health of democracy. Political education and education for democratic citizenship and participation might be one of the main paths to follow.

Contributions of Political Education to Decision-making and Democratic Participation

Arendt (1997) described political education as an education that provides students not only knowledge about political institutions and their functioning, but also about social intervention, which includes the construction of judgments, giving an opinion and participating in society. Constructing judgments, seen as the analysis, rationalization, and transformation of prejudices into coherent and solid judgments; giving opinion as interpreting information to debate, make decisions and justifying facts; and participating, as accepting the individual responsibility of collaborating to community, and improving the world in which we live. Thus, political education fosters the development of competences such as critical analysis, conflict resolution, dialogue, and decision-making.

Nowadays, Citizenship Education in democratic countries is focused on consolidating democratic processes, institutions and values (Kennedy, 2019). On the other hand, educational programs that emphasize social change seek to prepare students to improve society by critically analyzing and addressing social issues and injustices (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). By having social issues as the curricular backbone, students are given the opportunity to recognize conflict between different ideologies, while sharing common values such as freedom and equality to all people (Mouffe, 2007). Furthermore, they are encouraged to deal with controversy, which might be seen as the essence of democratic education (Santisteban, 2022). In fact, Harell (2020, p.1) argues that “conflicts and disagreement are central to the educative value of employing democratic processes in the classroom,” and emphasizes the importance of helping students understand that conflict goes hand in hand with human life. Otherwise, schools would be showing to their students a reality distant to society (Santisteban et al., 2023). These programs are less likely to emphasize the need for charity and volunteerism as ends in themselves, and more likely to teach about social movements and how to provoke systematic change in the community (Ayers et al., 1998; Bigelow & Diamond, 1988; Isaac, 1992). Along the same lines, Kennedy (2019) maintains that critical analysis of information will be essential for young people to make moral decisions and to take action that seeks to improve human conditions. For this reason, the author emphasizes that citizenship education should not only be restricted to teaching discrete content areas but rather be integrated as a transversal theme at different school levels, supported by a comprehensive, school-wide approach. He emphasizes on the idea that a more civic school environment would provide opportunities for participation, such as school councils and other decision-making processes.

In relation to this, other research has studied the reasons why youth are disassociating from politics and are not being able to develop their citizenship competence (Santisteban & Pagès, 2007). One of the main reasons identified is the lack of attention to political education in schools. Despite the importance given to Citizenship Education by various investigations, other subjects have overshadowed these programs in schools. As a result, Citizenship Education has become an empty field, that lacks a democracy-based purpose in which Human Rights, critical thinking and social issues are the backbone of the learning processes (Santisteban & Pagès, 2007). In addition, according to these authors, there is a widespread belief among teachers, family members, and adults in general that students are not ready to talk, discuss, or learn about social issues that directly affect their immediate contexts. Most of the time, the students' concerns and opinions are not considered in democratic education. Such a protective attitude from adults may lead children to

develop emotional dependence and instill a fear of situations that require decision-making, both in the present and the future (Santisteban et al., 2023). The underestimation of students' capacities leads the social and citizenship competence development to lose priority in the teaching-learning processes, both at home and at school. Schools should enable children to work on their social competences and the development of their abilities to give opinions, think critically and state judgements. On the contrary, "they will be unable to take part in democratic decision-making" (Krapf, 2010, p.27) and participate in their communities.

In our daily life, every human is constantly making decisions, either big or small ones. Gollob and Weidinger (2010, p.11) describe the competence in decision-making as the "ability to express opinions, values, and interests appropriately [...], to negotiate and compromise". In addition to that, Krapf (2010, p.61) emphasizes that "in every decision that we make, we pick certain options and turn down others. [...] Whatever is decided can be questioned, as there are alternatives that we could have chosen". He describes the decision-making processes as an "attempt to achieve the goal of common good" (p.11) and explains that the result of said processes is always incomplete and open to critical discussion and improvement. Once the decision is made, it is implemented. As a result, it will cause an impact to which people will form opinions, and different perspectives will arise concerning its effect and usefulness to solve the original issue. Consequently, there will be some reactions, which might lead the decision-makers to have another debate on which new problems should be discussed. This will lead the process to be started again. At the primary education stage (ages 6–12), most decisions that students must make are set within the school context and community (Gollob & Weidinger, 2010). Therefore, learning to make informed decisions becomes an essential skill and a competence that needs to be developed from the early years of primary education onward.

Citizenship education in Catalonia

Citizenship Education has already been incorporated into educational curricula worldwide (Davies et al., 2018). This is also true for Catalonia, where Citizenship Education forms part of the Catalan Educational Curriculum, serving as the contextual framework for this research. As a Spanish Autonomous Community, Catalonia has its own educational curriculum in harmony with the Spanish Educational Law. The Department of Education of Catalonia defines the educational curriculum as the tool to achieve a democratic society that includes all population and makes possible a real and effective equality of opportunities within its citizens (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2022a). The Educational Curriculum establishes Democratic Citizenship and Global Awareness as one of the six curricular transversal vectors (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2022d). This pillar is based on four specific competences aiming for students to develop the ability to critically analyze society to participate and improve it for a better future. Through social issues, this transversal competence seeks to engage students with their closest context, instilling a sense of duty to respect and improve it through their right to participate both individually and collectively (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2022c).

Other experts, such as Pagès et al. (2010), mention that the educational curriculum should aim for social intervention and democracy as general purposes, with foundations based on the concepts of plurality, citizenship, political systems, political culture, and civic culture. The educational curriculum that frames education in our region backs up the idea of promoting social intervention's development in schools by training abilities to construct judgments, give opinions, and participate in society as experts suggest. Moreover, the Education Department provides certain

autonomy to the schools of the region, allowing them to adapt teaching processes considering the learning needs of their students, thus giving schools a level of autonomy to make decisions (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2022b).

Given the importance of learning decision-making and democratic participation in school, our research aims to examine teachers' and students' perceptions regarding the opportunities and limitations associated with developing these competencies in their school during the early years of primary education (ages 6–8). To do so, it explores the teachers' perceptions about learning democratic participation and citizen decision-making in school. Additionally, it seeks to identify the social representations of students concerning the distribution of power and decision-making at school. Finally, the study examines the school activities described by participants that aim to foster decision-making and democratic participation, as well as the type of citizen these initiatives seek to cultivate.

Method

The research employs a qualitative methodology aimed at understanding and interpreting a specific case focused on the teaching-learning processes related to decision-making in primary schools in Catalonia. This research aims to characterize the opportunities and limitations the studied school provides in learning decision-making and democratic participation, based on the perceptions of 101 students aged 6 to 8 and six of their teachers.

The school where the study takes place was chosen due to its easy accessibility, facilitated by direct contact with some teachers and the school principal. The context of the school is significant as it is a public institution located in the Sants neighborhood of Barcelona. The diversity of the neighborhood is mirrored in the school population, predominantly consisting of nationalities such as Colombian and Pakistani (Oficina Municipal de Dades, 2023). The school is notable for its high level of collaboration with local neighborhood associations, as for example, with the neighbor's radio station and some municipal service-learning projects.

This study was carried out in two distinct stages. The first part of the investigation examines the main teachers' (tutors) perspectives and opinions concerning decision-making and democratic participation and their perceptions about it in their school. The second part, built upon the findings from the first, aims to identify the 1st and 2nd graders' perceptions of the same topics. In this initial phase of the research, we wanted participants -both teachers and students- to adopt an active role and share their perceptions regarding decision-making. Consequently, we opted to focus on approaches that encouraged participants to express their views on the topic.

It is convenient to mention that the whole study was carried out in Catalan, the official vehicular language in public Catalan schools. Afterwards, the results were translated into English for a further academic dissemination.

First Stage: Teacher-Centered Study

The teacher-centered study consists of a group interview with the tutors of both 1st and 2nd grade, plus a student-teacher in her internship period (see Table 2). The interview aims to gather information about the school activities and the teachers' perceptions and opinions concerning decision-making and democratic participation in the school. The group interview format promotes a discussion environment where teachers can reflect, exchange opinions, and engage in conversation if controversy arises.

For the analysis of the results, pseudonyms have been assigned to participants to protect their identities in accordance with the Code of Good Practice in Research (Autonomous University of Barcelona, 2020).

Table 2
Teacher Information and Experience

Grade	Name	Role	Studies & graduation year	Other studies	Years teaching experience	Years of teaching in the current school	Are 1st and 2nd grade your usual grades?
1st grade	Olga	Tutor	Degree in Primary Education (2000)	No	18	3	Yes
	Paula	Tutor	Degree in Primary Education (2010)	Master in Psychopedagogy	14	1	No (first time in 1st grade, previously in 3rd grade and as school specialist)
	Lídia	Internship teacher	Degree in Primary Education (still studying)	No	-	-	-
2nd grade	Maria	Tutor	Degree in Primary Education (2007)	INEFC	17	13	Yes
	Ona	Tutor	Degree in Primary Education (2015)	No	6	2	Yes
	Júlia	Tutor	Degree in Primary Education (2006)	Degree in Audiovisual Communication	8	5	Yes

Note. Information collected from interviews with teachers.

Second Stage: Student-Centered Study

The student-centered study, which is built upon the findings from the first stage, consists of an engaging questionnaire with both open and closed questions adapted for students and suitable for classroom use, to which we refer as research dossier. The dossier includes five main questions:

(1) Who makes decisions at school? (2) Who has power at school?¹ (3) From the given examples, who makes each decision? (4) From the given examples, which activities do you participate in at your school? (5) Make a drawing about an experience where you took an important decision at school. The questions listed here are translated from the original dossier in Catalan given to the students, excluding the examples or options for answering questions 1 to 4.²

Before answering the questionnaire, the students were engaged in a conversation guided by the researcher in which some of the main concepts were clarified, as for example the meaning of decision-making, the approached perspective of power or some of the examples in questions number 3 and 4, such as school principal or management team.

These questions were strategically chosen for their relation to each type of citizen described by Westheimer and Kahne (2004), enabling the research to study what type of citizen is promoted through school activities, according to their perceptions. The questions also considered the findings from the First Stage of the study, therefore some specific school decision-making examples given by the teachers were included on the questionnaire. Additionally, the first question has been adapted from the project “Future Education and Democratic Hope: Rethinking Social Studies Education in Changing Times” led by Dr. Antoni Santisteban Fernández from UAB (GREDICS, n.d.). Due to time limitation, there was no possibility to pilot the questionnaire questions prior to the study.

The research dossier aims to provide insights into the perceptions of 1st and 2nd graders regarding decision-making and democratic participation in their school environment. By involving students in reflective and creative tasks, the dossier facilitates a deeper understanding of how democratic principles are practiced and internalized by young learners.

Analysis

The teachers’ interview was key for the development of the investigation. The information and examples they provided were essential to finish the design of the research dossier for the students, and their opinions and beliefs gave a general idea of the perspective towards democratic participation and decision-making that the school has. Lídia described decision-making learning as the various processes that help students learn to evaluate all the aspects involved in making a decision. All the teachers agreed on the importance of learning how to make decisions from an early age. From their contributions to the conversation, they reached a common definition of decision-making learning: to work on the ability to consider all the options available and manage the frustrations that arise in children when their proposals are not developed. Furthermore, Júlia mentioned some steps that should be emphasized when guiding the students throughout decision-making processes: (1) To listen and to understand the decision that has to be made; (2) To get information about the different options available and the consequences each option might have; (3) To decide; and (4) To be responsible for the impact and consequences of the decision made.

¹ The question “Who has power at school?” refers to who holds the authority to make decisions, take action, and influence school-related matters. It does not refer to supernatural abilities or “superpowers”. The focus is on the individuals or groups that have the power to shape policies, enforce rules, or guide the direction of the school community.

² Find a copy of the original questionnaire translated to English in Appendix number 1.

The concepts of democratic participation and decision-making were quickly related. Ona described democratic participation as a “variety of communication strategies and tools that facilitate making daily decisions which will affect the context in which we live”. In addition to that, Júlia pointed out the importance of understanding democratic participation as a holistic approach to life. She affirmed that “democracy goes beyond voting every four years”. Furthermore, Maria also emphasized that democracy “requires basic values such as solidarity, empathy and respect”, and includes “being aware of your own opinion and being capable of critically judging the opinions of others”. During the discussion, Júlia stated the following:

During the school day, there are some moments in which the students must make decisions. The options are limited and given by us, nevertheless they can choose where to go, what to do, and the classmates they want to work with.

Different examples of decisions were mentioned throughout the interview with the teachers. These have been organized into three main categories, considering their frequency and impact:

- **Learning decisions:** decisions that have a direct and short-time impact on the learning process of students. In this section, the decisions have been organized in two groups: the first covers decisions that affect the content being learned, and the second deals with decisions that shape the students’ learning environment.
- **Social relationships and decision-making during leisure time:** decisions that determine their friendships and the way they spend their free time.
- **Decision-making about school space:** decisions made for the playground transformation; a school project developed two years ago.

Learning decisions

Decision-making related to contents. In some projects, the students have the responsibility to choose from a widen topic a specific field of study. During the sessions with the students, one child mentioned as an example a project they developed about the Solar System. He explained how they chose the specific planet they wanted to focus on from the general topic, which was proposed by the tutor (Ona). Even though the tutors mentioned the projects as an example of decision-making practice (Maria, Júlia), the students' research dossiers show that most of the students were not aware of making any decisions in relation to projects: 74 students out of 101 considered that teachers are the ones who choose the projects' topics, and only 5 students answered that they had the power to make this decision. As seen, there exists a wide contradiction between the teachers' explanations and the students' perception concerning this experience.

On the contrary, teachers' and students' responses align regarding learning decisions made during the learning corners. At the beginning of the school year, the learning corners are presented: the topic, the vacancies, and the functioning of each of them. Three times a week, different spaces are prepared around the school, and the students get to choose to which learning corner they want to go (Júlia). These spaces are indeed prepared to offer a variety of options to students and to promote their autonomy and decision-making abilities. For instance, 81 students answered positively when asked if they choose which learning corner they will attend, which shows that most children recognize they are given opportunities to make decisions. In Images 1 and 2, we can

see examples illustrating these children's perceptions. In Image 1, we can see the drawing of a second-grade student where she clearly depicted herself choosing between two different corners. On the other hand, in Image 2 (drawing on the right side), the student had already decided that she wanted to go to the sewing corner. Still, she depicted herself deciding what to do specifically in that space, using the materials available.

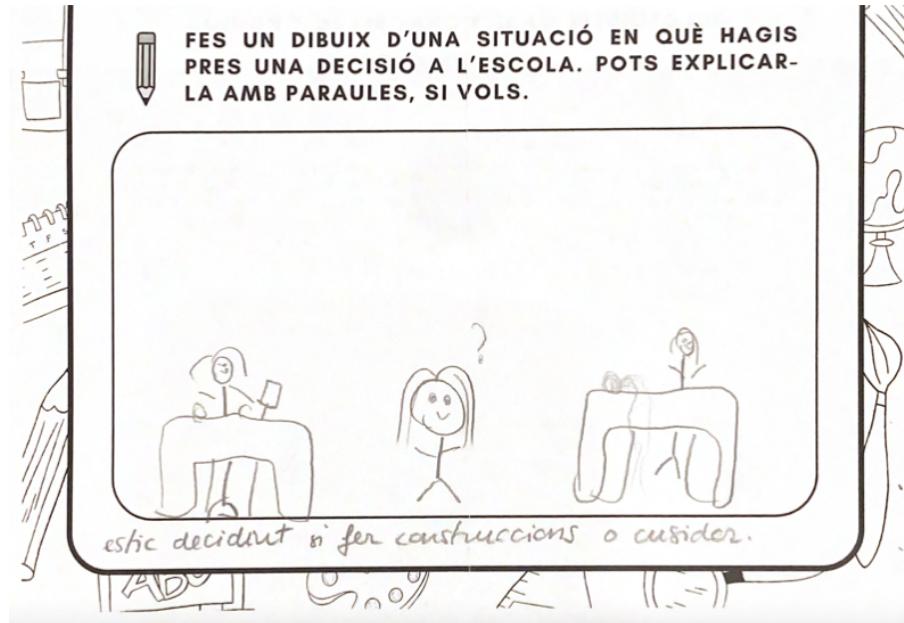


Figure 1. Drawing related to learning corners. The child explained that “she was deciding between the constructions or the sewing corner” (2nd grader).

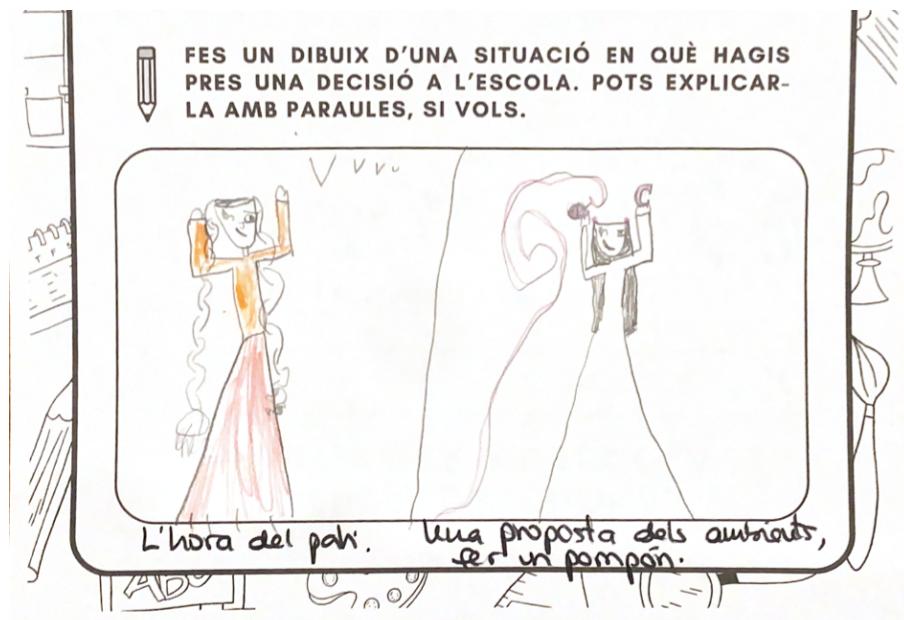


Figure 2. Drawing related to learning corners. On the right side of the paper, the student depicts herself choosing that she wants to make a pompom on the sewing corner (2nd grader).

The students were free to change corners any day. It is important to highlight that some learning corners have a limited number of vacancies. In this case, the teachers intervene with a “selection process”, in which it is considered the frequency to which each student has gone to each corner. Some students got accepted, and others got refused. Despite the conflicts and the frustration that may arise, Paula explained they consider this process a positive experience because it shows students that “deciding does not mean to do whatever they want all the time”. The transparency of the process is highly valued too. Júlia mentioned the importance of spending time showing the students how the “selection process” works, so they can understand the reasons for not going to the corner they preferred, a statement to which all the other teachers agreed on.

Decision-making related to the learning environment. The collected data shows a flexible learning environment in which students had certain freedom to decide where and with whom they want to work in class. Ona explained that the lessons always start with a circle, in which the activity is explained. According to the type of activity, the students decided their own learning space inside the class and with whom they want to share it. The research dossiers confirm that the students were aware of making this decision: 70 students agreed with the statement that they are the ones to decide the place where they will work, and 85 confirmed that they usually choose their working mates. An example of this perception is illustrated in Image 3, where a student depicted the moment she decided to work with her friend during a classroom task.



Figure 3. Decision related to the learning environment. The student draws how she chooses to “work with her friends during the classroom tasks” (1st grader).

The power to decide these aspects might promote a sense of responsibility and autonomy within the students, in addition to working as well on their social competence. However, Maria and Olga mentioned they sometimes need to establish limits on the students:

“We are constantly reminding them to choose the company and place that will enhance their concentration and working attitude (Maria). In some cases, we need to revoke this freedom to choose place and company, and this might provoke a conflict, because it’s difficult for them to understand why they cannot decide anymore (Olga).”

This statement could back up the 23 students who answered the teacher as the person responsible for choosing the working place in the classroom, a lower number of students but still a meaningful result.

Social relationships and decision-making during leisure time

Despite the absence of emphasis on this topic by the tutors, a notable number of students chose decisions related to their free time or social relationships for their drawing in the research dossier question number 5. From said drawings, it is possible to observe certain meaningful tendencies. In the first place, the data reveals that 37 of the students were aware of their involvement in decision-making during their leisure time, especially on the playground. Image 4 illustrates a drawing related to these decisions. In the drawing, the student depicts herself and her friends collaborating on the creation and agreement of the rules for the game they plan to play. When asked about the meaning of the drawing, she explained that they often hold differing opinions, requiring them to discuss and reach a consensus.

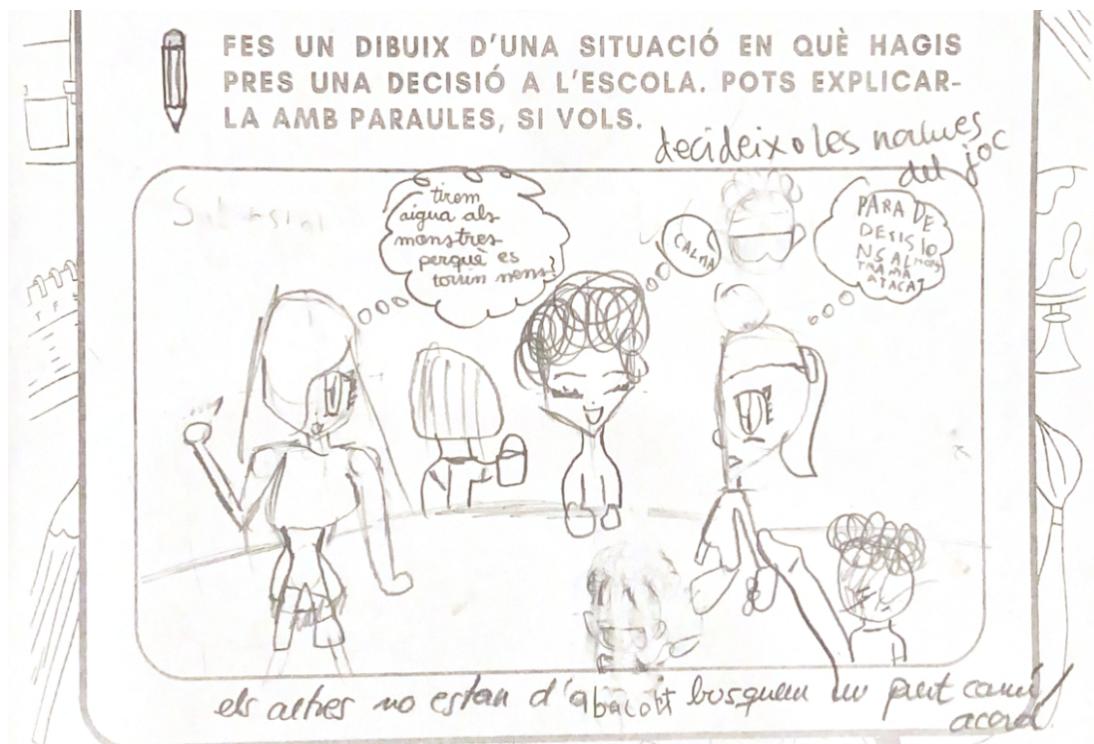


Figure 4. Decisions related to leisure time. The drawing shows how the students are deciding the rules of the game. They disagree, so they need to reach a consensus (2nd grader).

The fact that 37 students depicted situations in their drawings related to choosing what to play, where to play in the playground, or the rules of the games might underscore the significance

of these decisions concerning leisure time. Alternatively, this data could also be explained by the idea that playground decisions are the ones students were most aware of, given the autonomy and independence they experience in this school setting. On the other hand, although to a lesser extent, 10 students depicted situations related to choosing their friends. This suggests that some students recognized their autonomy in shaping their social connections, indicating an awareness of who contributes positively to their social well-being and comfort. Image 5 provides an example of these drawings, showing a student portraying himself selecting a peer to be friends with.



Figure 5. Decisions related to leisure time. The student (2nd grader) draws himself choosing who wants to be friends with. In the speech bubble, he says: "I already know! I'm going to be friends with Carlos".

Notably, the category of social relationships and decision-making during leisure time stands out with a total of 47 students (almost 50%) depicting it in their drawings, making it the most frequently represented theme. The fact that so many students chose this theme might indicate either that decisions about their free time and friendships are important to them, or at least they were the easiest or the most fun to draw. In any case, these decisions are the ones they remember the most, above other options related to learning situations or decisions about the environment. Moreover, this data indicates that decisions related to leisure time and social relations, since they are the most remembered by students, could have an impact on their learning experience in regard to decision-making. The significance of students' decision-making in the leisure space, an environment in which they have total freedom to make decisions, could point out how meaningful their autonomy is for them. This autonomy is crucial not only for their personal growth, but also for their academic development. At the same time, although this category could have been the most drawn by the ease or fun that leisure time brings to students, the results are relevant to justify the need to teach children to make decisions. If decision-making includes the ability to express one's own opinion, discuss and commit (Gollob and Weidinger, 2010) to choose an option and turn down others (Krapf, 2010), children need to develop these skills to face different decisions that they will have to make during their free time, autonomously and without the teacher's accompaniment,

shown through their drawings. The data thus show that students find themselves in situations where they must make decisions, also during leisure time and without the teacher's presence, which evidences the need for them to learn to decide autonomously.

Decision-making about the school space

This category refers to a concrete decision that was made two years ago in the studied school. Since the impact of changing the playground would last in time, the school tried to make the process as collaborative as possible. To do so, an external business was hired to guide all the playground transformation process.

The tutors explained different steps of this process. Firstly, the teachers and management team detected the necessity to change the playground, because of the limiting space and options to play during the breaks. Therefore, some teachers and families of the school were trained by the external business to be "the leaders" of the transformation. Secondly, this group of teachers and parents prepared a series of workshops to promote the exploration of the five senses and detect the real needs of students during their leisure time. Afterward, each class contributed with proposals and designs for their ideal playground, which were considered by the school council. The management team made the final decision on how the new playground would be, considering the accessibility and viability of each proposal. As seen, the playground transformation followed an ordered and inclusive sequence of events that tried to involve the whole school community in participating and deciding. The extent of the process enabled the students to give their opinions and make a direct impact on the final design of the playground.

Despite the efforts to involve all the school in the decision-making to transform the playground, over 70 students had the impression that the management team was responsible for deciding how the new playground would be. Only 15 students answered that this decision was made by the whole school, which might indicate that either the process was not as collaborative as the teachers explained, or that the age of the students, which were 4 and 5 years old during the playground transformation, determined a low impact on their decision-making perception. It is true that the students didn't have much to say on the final decision, a fact that supports some contradictions within the answers in the research dossiers. While only 15 students perceived that they were part of the playground transformation process, 55 students responded that they made proposals for spaces and games for the new playground. This difference shows that a lot of students remembered the process but still were not aware they were deciding. Therefore, another possible reason for students not being aware of their capacity to decide during the playground transformation might be that the teachers and management team did not emphasize or convey enough the decision-making process itself, but more the process of making proposals and detecting the necessities.

Discussion

The data collected suggests that certain experiences planned at the school are intentionally designed to foster students' decision-making competence and encourage democratic participation. While some of these experiences are remembered as impactful by students, others remain unnoticed or unrecognized by them. The interview with the tutors enabled the research to understand the perspective of the school towards citizenship and democratic participation: they believe education should implicitly include working on social intervention, training the abilities to form judgements, make decisions, give opinions, and participating, since these are abilities that

students will need to coexist in their community. These results align with the main ideas on citizenship education outlined in the region's educational curriculum (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2022c).

According to the teachers interviewed, throughout real-life situations, the students feel obliged to consider options, understand consequences, make choices, and own their decisions. When discussing decision-making specifically, some teachers also mentioned different steps of said process: listen and understand the decision, get informed about the available options and the possible consequences, make the decision, own responsibility. The closeness of these with the Decision-Making Steps defined by Krapf (2010) can be another evidence to support that the school aims to guide the students to develop their abilities to live in a community and to participate in democracy.

Furthermore, the conversation with the teachers revealed a variety of activities aimed at fostering decision-making and democratic participation in the school context studied. The activities reached different levels: from a more general level (school transformation, involving the whole school community) to a more individual level (choosing where to sit in the class or the learning corner where to go). Despite time is dedicated specifically to the decision-making process, the results from the dossiers express that the students do not perceive their power to choose in some of the experiences studied. Even though most of the students considered they had some kind of power in the school context (67 out of 101), only 25 of them considered they had real power to make decisions.

While the school transformation was highlighted by the teachers as one of the biggest choices the school community made, most of the students did not remember about the process and their involvement: even 54 students mentioned they made proposals for the spaces and distribution of the new playground, still, only 15 students out of a total of 101 stated they were part of the decision-making processes related to the playground transformation.

When referring to the other decisions discussed, the light was shed on the transparency of the decision-making process, the establishment of limits and providing options for students to choose on most occasions. In many of the school activities explained by the teachers, the students participate and decide within the established system (the school). They can make decisions, but most of the time they choose from the options given by the teachers or the school (e.g. project topic, learning corner). It is true that, daily, they choose where and with whom to work, and this is a free decision in which they themselves assess the environment they need to work calmly and with good concentration. If they wish, they can change their workspace and collaborators at any time. This shows an environment where students are given autonomy, an aspect also highlighted by Delval (2012), who affirms that a school for democracy should have the purpose of improving said democracy and, for that, attention should be given to the development of the students' autonomy in addition to eliminating any type of discrimination and exclusion.

Conclusions

Opportunities for the development of decision-making and democratic participation competences

The study revealed a variety of activities aimed at fostering decision-making and democratic participation, emphasizing the importance of these skills. As observed, the school

supports learning processes that imply learning on decision-making, which is supported by the teachers' experiences. From what the teachers perceive, these activities contribute significantly to the development of students' decision-making competence through real-life situations that require them to make decisions, consider options, understand consequences, take responsibility for their choices, and therefore involve into learning processes that might help developing the decision-making competence.

Teachers' opinions and beliefs about democratic participation and citizen decision-making directly impact students' learning on this topic, as they promote a specific type of citizen. Tutors have a clear understanding of the decision-making steps defined by experts and believe that citizenship education should prepare students for real-life situations, equipping them with social skills and competencies that enable them to coexist both at school and in broader society.

Teachers recognize that school is the primary context where students will make most decisions, highlight the necessity and importance of teaching democratic participation and decision-making, and supporting students in their initial experiences. The research identified several planned activities within schools aimed at teaching decision-making and democratic participation, as for example the ones regarding either the learning environment (e.g., choosing their workspace or collaborators) or the learning content (e.g., selecting learning corners or project topics). They are particularly notable for their frequency in the school setting, taking place on a daily and weekly basis, respectively, which evinces the school motivation and effort to provide the students with opportunities to make decisions.

However, the students do not seem able to recognize a lot of these opportunities. While the school and teachers try to engage their students on decision-making experiences there is few evidence supporting explicit conversation or scaffolding in regard to the process of making decisions, therefore on developing the decision-making competence itself.

Considering both the students' and the teachers' perceptions, and the tension between them, the results indicate that the school might be trying to promote a participatory citizen model, as described by Westheimer and Kahne (2004), by providing opportunities for students to participate actively in some school decisions, such as the playground transformation. However, these opportunities are usually limited by some predetermined options either by school tradition or teachers' choices (p. e. learning corners, project theme). Therefore, the students are able to choose only from these options, which leads them to work and learn according to the school rules and accepting the proposals given by their teachers, a closer feature to the personally responsible citizen model rather than the participatory citizen one.

Throughout the research, it became clear that students frequently make decisions within the school context -whether on a day-to-day basis, throughout the school year, or over the course of their academic life- as Gollob and Weidinger (2010) also conclude. The frequency of these decision-making opportunities indicates that developing the ability to make decisions is a relevant aspect for the educational experience in the studied school context.

Limitations for the development of decision-making and democratic participation competences

The school's transformation process involved various decision-making activities that engaged the entire school community and spanned a whole school year. Despite the variety of

activities and opportunities observed, the analysis revealed that students found the activities with direct, visible, and short-term results to be the most impactful. They are particularly aware of the short-term and one-time decisions affecting their daily lives. Conversely, attempts to involve students in decisions about school transformation did not appear to yield a meaningful impact.

Furthermore, students frequently discussed their capacity to make decisions during leisure time, a topic not addressed by their tutors during the interview. Given the possible relevance of leisure-time decisions on students, it is important to consider this aspect in future educational activities aimed at teaching decision-making.

The research also explored students' perceptions about decision-making and power distribution at school. The data indicates that while students often know what they are choosing, they are not always aware they are making meaningful decisions. This discrepancy becomes apparent when comparing their responses on who generally makes decisions at school (82 students identified the management team and 62 identified teachers) to their responses in more specific situations.

Although the students' young age (6–8) may limit their perceptions of significant long-term decisions, it has been shown that they can perceive opportunities to make short-term decisions that impact their daily lives when provided with appropriate tools and guidance.

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations

This investigation has several limitations. Firstly, the research scope was small and specific, focusing on a single case. Consequently, only one school from a particular context was studied. Furthermore, the results obtained are not generalizable because schools in Catalonia operate with autonomy and independence in applying the Catalan curriculum. Each school tailors the curriculum to fit its unique context, considering the school's values, the diversity of its students, and the needs of the school and its environment. While it is mandatory to work on the basic and transversal competencies established by the curriculum, the current educational law has been in force for less than two years, and more time is needed to observe its real impact on learning processes.

Despite these limitations, the results of this study are valuable as they highlight certain trends that could explain the opportunities and limitations associated with learning decision-making and democratic participation both within the framework of the Catalan curriculum and in other similar curricular frameworks. These findings provide insights into how the curriculum can be implemented at the school level, offering a foundation for understanding the ways in which schools would promote or hinder these critical competencies.

Future Research

In a second phase of the research, we plan to conduct a detailed observation of the activities aimed at promoting decision-making and democratic participation in the school, to complement the findings of this study. Furthermore, to broaden the scope of the research, similar studies could be carried out with older students at the same school. This would allow for a comparison between the results obtained in this study, which involved 6 to 8-year-old students, and the perspectives of 10 to 12-year-old students. This approach would enable the investigation to identify more

rigorously the factors that facilitate the awareness and learning of decision-making, as well as the common resistances encountered during learning processes according to the students' age. Additionally, future research could involve multiple schools across Catalonia to capture a broader range of contexts and practices. Expanding the scope even further, comparative studies could be conducted in different regions of Spain or internationally, offering valuable insights into how decision-making and democratic participation are taught and learned in varying educational systems and cultural contexts.

Authors Declarations

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Conflict of Interest. The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval. The study was conducted in accordance with the Code of Good Practice in Research of the Autonomous University of Barcelona (2020). Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants' legal guardians.

Data Availability. The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

Appendix

Research Dossier

DECISION-MAKING AND PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOL

NAME: _____ **CLASS:** _____

WHO MAKES DECISIONS IN THE SCHOOL?

MANAGEMENT TEAM TEACHERS STUDENTS THE WHOLE SCHOOL ME

DO YOU HAVE POWER IN THE SCHOOL?

YES NO ABIT I DON'T KNOW

WHO DECIDES EACH THING? DRAW A LINE.

THE TOPIC OF THE PROJECTS I DO IN CLASS THE CORNERS I SIGN UP FOR THE SPACE IN THE CLASS WHICH I WORK THE SPACES IN THE SCHOOL PLAYGROUND

WHICH OF THESE SITUATIONS HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED AT SCHOOL?

WE CHOSE WHICH PLAYGROUND WE WANTED FROM THE OPTIONS WE WERE GIVEN.
WE MADE PROPOSALS FOR HOW WE WANTED THE PLAYGROUND TO BE.
WE ASKED TO CHANGE THE PLAYGROUND.
WE CHOOSE WHICH CORNERS WE WANT TO ASSIST FROM THE LIST THAT THE TEACHERS GIVE US.
WE PROPOSE THE CORNERS THAT WILL BE CREATED.
WE ASK TO WORK BY CORNERS.
THE TEACHERS TELL ME WHO I HAVE TO WORK WITH.
WE CHOOSE WHICH PERSON I WANT TO WORK WITH.
I CHOOSE WHETHER I PREFER TO WORK ALONE OR IN PAIRS.

MAKE A DRAWING OF A SITUATION IN WHICH YOU MADE A DECISION AT SCHOOL. YOU CAN EXPLAIN IT IN WORDS, IF YOU WANT.

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