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# What Factors Promote Participation at School Among Adolescents in Secondary Education?

Pilar FOLGUEIRAS<sup>1</sup>, Ruth VILA<sup>2</sup>, Assumpta ANEAS<sup>3</sup>

## Abstract

This study presents an analysis of the factors favouring participation among adolescents in compulsory secondary education in the city of L'Hospitalet de Llobregat (Catalonia, Spain). The sample was composed of 297 young people with an average age of 15. We investigated the adolescents' concept of participation, enquiring into what principles, behaviours and feelings they identified with it. Also, we questioned them on their purposes for participating and the consequences deriving from their practice. Finally, we enquired into the different spheres in which they thought they could participate. One outstanding finding was that respondents saw participation in much broader terms than simply voting in elections, instead associating it with feelings of belonging, expression and learning. For the adolescents participation brought personal benefits linked to self-esteem, but above all social benefits oriented towards community development. The different spheres in which they participated were mostly their families and schools. A regression analysis was carried out, calculating the predictive weight of all the variables relating to participation. Results indicated that adolescents with a broader concept of participation, i.e. those for whom participating brought a wider range of benefits, participated more. Also, higher levels of participation in the family and neighbourhood were related to greater participation at school.

*Keywords:* adolescents, participation, school, citizenship, secondary education, community, family.

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## Introduction

Participation is both a right and a responsibility of citizenship, enhancing the quality of democracy and educating people in personal and social competences (Folgueiras, 2009). Through participation, we can develop tolerance, interpersonal trust, links with the community, the feeling of belonging, and moral awareness, in addition to enhancing various aspects of our learning (Green & Brock, 2005; Hooghe, 2003; Morgan & Streb, 2001; Schmidt, Shumow Kackar, 2007). However, despite these benefits, participation in schools, especially in compulsory secondary education, is still seen as scarce and insufficient. This is, amongst other things, the result of decades of socialization and indoctrination which have moulded students as passive recipients, mere consumers of education (Márquez, Vázquez & Sandoval Mena, 2016), instead of assigning them an active, creative, fundamental role both in the learning process and in the community. This, combined with the lack of participatory culture in many schools, has promoted passivity among students, reinforcing their position as mere receivers of contents in the educational sphere (Susinos & Ceballos, 2013).

Despite this situation among young people and in schools, participation remains essential for the education of active, reflective and committed citizens (Kahne & Spote, 2008; Folgueiras, Massot & Sabariego; 2008 and García, 2017), and it is for this reason that the topic of participation in secondary schools is so important (Lenzi, Vieno, Sharkey, Mayworm, Scacchi, Pastore & Santinello, 2014; Rossi, Lenzi, Sharkey, Vieno & Santinello, 2016). In fact, schools represent the most accessible arena for educating adolescents in democratic principles and participation. They are also ideal contexts for fostering students' commitment to the objectives and values involved in advancing democracy and the common good (Flanagan, Syvertsen & Stout, 2007). All of these are important values for our globalized society, currently suffering from so many social injustices and challenges to democracy. Previous works as Agud, Novella & Llenas (2014) have explored the conditions of children experiences in the schools. In the present paper it is going to focus on the adolescents's participation in the secondary schools.

This study was carried out in L'Hospitalet de Llobregat<sup>4</sup>, a city where most of the typical social problems of developed countries are present: vulnerability and sociocultural complexity stemming from several generations of immigration (both from other parts of Spain and abroad); low levels of qualification among the population; and economic activities based almost exclusively on low-skills services. These features, combined with an extremely crowded urban environment (the city's 254,803 inhabitants have a density of 20,324 per square km.) result in a scenario which produces exclusion, social division and ideological radicalization. In

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<sup>4</sup> L'Hospitalet is the second largest city in Catalonia and shares its city limits with Barcelona. It is the 16<sup>th</sup> largest city in Spain, bigger than many provincial capitals, and its population density is one of the highest in Spain.

demographic terms, L'Hospitalet is a city of immigrants. 27.37% of its inhabitants come from other parts of Spain and 20.43% are of foreign origin (mainly Latin Americans, Africans and Asians); substantially higher than the Spanish average of 9.57%. Only 8.8% of the foreign population originates from EU countries, in contrast to 19.85% in Catalonia<sup>5</sup> as a whole. Yet the social fabric of the city does not only produce factors of risk; in L'Hospitalet we can also see opportunities for analysing youth participation in schools through an optic emphasising constructive and effective aspects. Amongst these positive factors we find both the immigrants' ability to integrate and the city's willingness to welcome them, due to the origins of its population: 49.63% of its inhabitants were born in Catalonia, 21.46% come from other regions of Spain and 28.89% were born abroad. This orientation is shown in municipal, regional and national elections, in which parties espousing xenophobic and far-right postures have never been able to make a breakthrough. This may be explained by the city's rich history of democratic activism, which dates from the Franco period and, since the Spanish transition to democracy, has borne fruit in municipal policies favouring citizens' participation on various levels and in various spheres. Activists, however, tend to be restricted to a specific age ranges and ideological backgrounds; thus to spread this civic attitude to other layers of the population the municipal council and various socio-political bodies have worked over the years to promote participation among the youngest and most culturally diverse, seeing their participation as a key means of fostering social cohesion and inclusion in the city.

In this context and taking into account these risks and opportunities we decided that it was necessary to determine how we might improve students' participation in secondary schools, thus averting social division and exclusion and spreading civic awareness to different groups of the population, younger and culturally distant from previous activists. For this purpose we formulated the research question: Are there any factors influencing students' participation in secondary schools? In this article we show the responses given.

## Methodology

The overall objective of the study was to identify factors influencing adolescents' participation in schools, specifically among young people in the second cycle of compulsory secondary education in state schools in L'Hospitalet de Llobregat (Catalonia, Spain). For this non-experimental descriptive study we adopted an appropriate research method for collecting information on the concept of participation among the adolescents, in order subsequently to identify and analyse factors promoting participation in schools.

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<sup>5</sup> Statistics from IDESCAT (<https://www.idescat.cat>) and L'Hospitalet City Council Barometer ([http://www.l-h.cat/laciutat/264540\\_2.aspx](http://www.l-h.cat/laciutat/264540_2.aspx)).

*The participants*

The sample was chosen by convenience and comprised 297 young people (159 females and 138 males) in the third and fourth years of compulsory secondary education in three schools. The mean age was 15 (data shown in *Table 1*).

*Table 1: Participants*

	Participants from each school					
	3rd year		4th year		Total	
	Number	% of total	Number	% of total	Number	% of total
School 1	60	20.2%	54	18.2%	114	38.4%
School 2	0	0%	52	17.5%	52	17.5%
School 3	62	20.9%	69	23.2%	131	44.1%
Total	122	41.1%	175	58.9%	297	100.0%

Participants mostly lived in the same area as their schools, although many also lived in different parts of Hospitalet and a few in other nearby cities such as Barcelona, Cornellà and La Llagosta.

*The instrument*

To gather data we used a questionnaire on participation designed for adolescents from 14 to 16, following the normal procedures for constructing a questionnaire (Ruiz-Bueno, 2009). The most important feature of this instrument was that it was developed deductively, inductively and through participation (see Folgueiras & Sabariego, 2015). The instrument was validated by judges and in a pilot study.

The questionnaire was organised around five dimensions<sup>6</sup> and composed of 12 Likert-scale questions (ranging from 1 to 5, the minimum value being “nothing” and the maximum “a lot”) in addition to open-ended textual questions. An analysis of the items’ internal consistency using Cronbach’s alpha showed the scales to be valid and reliable. To identify the factors associated with adolescent participation we centred our analysis on three of the five dimensions: (1) the concept of participation; (2) the purposes and effects of participation; and (3) spheres in which young people participated. This selection was based on the premise that we could ascertain which factors determined participation in this population group by: (a) understanding what participation meant to the adolescents; (b) determining the benefits and impacts that could be attributed to their participation; and (c) knowing

<sup>6</sup> The complete questionnaire (Folgueiras & Sabariego, 2015) comprised five dimensions: (a) concept of participation; (b) degree of participation; (c) spheres of participation (physical and online); (d) purposes and effects of participation; and (e) initiatives, actions, and activities undertaken by the young people. In this article we focus only on dimensions (a), (c), and (d).

in which spheres they felt they could participate. Thus we centred our analysis on the scales referring to these dimensions.

*Table 2: Details of the instrument*

Dimensions	Contents	Items	Reliability (Crombach alpha)
Concept of participation	In this dimension the following aspects were included: Cognitive Affective Behavioural	10-item Likert scale	0.712
Purpose/ Effects of participation	This dimension embraced the social and personal purposes of participation	5-item Likert scale	0.759
Spheres of participation	Family School Neighbourhood Online	15-item Likert scale	0.806

The questionnaire was administered during study hours in each school. Two forms of administration were used: in-person self-administration on paper and in-person self-administration online.

### *Procedure*

The results were analysed using descriptive statistics. A multiple linear regression analysis was performed to identify the factors associated with in-school participation. Collinearity tests were also applied to guarantee that there were no problems with multicollinearity. These procedures were carried out using the SPSS statistical program, version 20.

## **Results**

To answer our research question (Are there any factors influencing participation among adolescents in secondary education?) here we organize our findings into two sections. In the first we summarise our findings on the adolescents' concept of participation, their perceptions of the purposes and effects of participation, and the spheres of participation they identified. In the second section we explain the factors associated with the adolescents' participation in their secondary schools, obtained through the multiple linear regression analysis.

*The concept of participation*

To analyse the adolescents' participation we used a 10-item scale (resulting in a theoretical score of between 10 and 50 points). The group mean was 37.4 out of 50, with a standard deviation of 6.83. These data show a relatively specific concept of participation among the adolescents. The highest-scoring items describing the concept were: "participating is joining in with something" ( $\bar{x}=4.02$ ); "participating is giving your opinion" ( $\bar{x}=4.01$ ) and "participating is learning" ( $\bar{x}=4$ ). Also notable was that the lowest-scoring item was "participating is voting in elections" ( $\bar{x}=3.27$ ). Thus most of the adolescents surveyed linked their concept of participation with belonging, communication and learning, and were very clear that for them participation went further than merely voting in elections.

Table 3: Concept of participation

Concept of participation	Item mean out of 5 maximum points	Standard deviation
Participating is joining in with something	4.02	1.09
Participating is being part of something	3.84	1.19
Participating is learning	4.00	1.08
Participating is sharing	3.87	1.15
Participating is voting in elections	3.27	1.36
Participating is giving your opinion	4.01	1.12
Participating is listening	3.75	1.23
Participating is a responsibility	3.44	1.32
Participating is a right	3.52	1.43
Participating is helping the people I love	3.54	1.29

*Purposes and effects of participation*

With regard to the purposes and effects of participation, our respondents felt that "participating is useful for feeling good about yourself" ( $\bar{x}=4.02$ ) and "participating is useful for improving society" ( $\bar{x}=3.90$ ). In contrast, the lowest-scoring item was "participating is useful for getting personal benefits" ( $\bar{x}=2.91$ ). If we focus on the two groups of items referring to personal purposes/effects and social purposes/effects, we see that the latter score more highly ( $\bar{x}=3.68$ ).

Table 4: Purposes and effects of participation

Purposes and effects of participation	Mean out of 5 maximum points	Standard deviation
Participating is useful for having fun	3.29	1.16
Participating is useful for getting personal benefits	2.91	1.31
Participating is useful for feeling good about yourself	4.02	1.11
Mean personal purposes	3.41	.84
Social purposes:		
Participating is useful for improving society	3.90	1.09
Participating is useful for getting collective benefits	3.46	1.25
Mean social purposes	3.68	.96

### Spheres of participation

Regarding the spheres where the young people participated, none of the items scored highly, and both online and neighbourhood participation had particularly low scores (below the theoretical mean). Apart from some nuances we see that the young people situated their participation mainly in their schools and families.

Table 5: Spheres of participation

Spheres of participation	Mean out of 20 maximum points	Standard deviation
Participation in families	13.56	3.85
Participation in school	14.06	3.35
Participation online	9.72	4.23
Participation in the neighbourhood	8.79	4.39

### Factors associated with participation at school

For the multiple linear regression analysis participation in school was taken as the dependent variable, while the concept of participation scale, the purposes and social effects scale, and participation in the family, online and in the neighbourhood were taken as independent variables.

The results revealed a model of regression that was valid with 24% of prediction ( $r^2=0.238$ ). The regression had four assumptions: linearity, normality, independence and homoscedasticity.

The collinearity tests (included in table 5) showed that there was no exact linear relationship between any of the independent variables. The model included the following significant predictors (in order of degree of influence) for the level of participation at school: (1) Having a broad concept of participation; (2) Showing a high level of family participation; (3) Showing a high level of neighbourhood participation.



Table 6: Multiple linear regression analysis for participation at school

Model		Coefficients <sup>a</sup>						
		Non-standardized coefficients		Typified coefficients	T	Sig.	Collinearity statistics	
		Beta	Typical error	Beta			Tolerance	FIV
1	(Constant)	4.160	1.046		3.976	0.000		
	Concept of participation	0.139	0.031	0.284	4.480	0.000	0.643	1.556
	Social effects	0.212	0.219	0.060	0.967	0.334	0.659	1.517
	Participation in the family	0.171	0.047	0.197	3.627	0.000	0.877	1.140
	Participation online	0.064	0.044	0.081	1.447	0.149	0.822	1.216
	Participation in the neighbourhood	0.110	0.043	0.144	2.552	0.011	0.804	1.244

a. Dependent variable: Participation at school

These results indicate that a broad concept of participation and high levels of participation in the family and the neighbourhood translate into greater participation at school. Online participation and the purposes and effects of participation were not significant factors relating to in-school participation.

## Discussion

With these findings we hope to contribute to the body of research on participation among adolescents and, more specifically, on predictors of participation among adolescents in secondary schools. Other studies as the developed by Agud, Novella & Llenas had appointed the conditions of children’s participation at the schools: (1) the acknowledgement of the rights of childhood; (2) how the participation-based experience works, and finally (3) the role of the educators. It transpires that the conditions stated by the children coincide greatly with the ones indicated by different authors in their theoretical proposals. Our study made with adolescents have showed other view and perceptions of the participation in this collective.

The fact that family and community participation are predictors of adolescent participation at school is important information that should be shared with schools in order for them to take advantage of their potential synergies, for example, sharing spaces for participation. Along the same lines, and by way of illustration, educational approaches based on participation, such as Service Learning (SL) and Learning Communities, may be advantageous in this respect.

SL, for example, fosters students’ learning through active participation in experiences of community service, thereby combining learning and community service in a single project (Puig & Palós, 2006). The community services offered

by SL projects represent, then, an opportunity for adolescents to develop empathy and social responsibility and to learn civic skills (Malin, Ballard & Damon, 2015). Also SL projects afford an opportunity to increase family participation at the same time as they help to engage students more deeply in their schools and communities. In fact, among the findings of our earlier study of the degree of satisfaction with SL among Catalan secondary education students (Folgueiras, Luna & Puig, 2014) we identified a range of initiatives linking families, schools and communities through SL projects. Turning secondly to Learning Communities, these are social and cultural transformation projects in schools and their environments based on community participation (families, organisations, residents, etc.) in the schools (Lanza & Flores, 2017; Pino & Parmisán, 2017).

In order to foster such actions it is essential that school management teams steer their centres towards participatory models. It is also crucial to promote educational practices which increase the quantity and quality of participation in schools. For example, Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald & Schulz (2001) found that discussion of civic issues in school, exploration of different opinions on civic matters and comparison of ideas among students correlated positively with future intentions to vote. Also, having the chance to debate civic issues is a predictor of both knowledge of and participation in civic activities among adolescents (Torney-Purta et al., 2001). Kahne & Sport (2008), for their part, found that opportunities for civic learning in classrooms had a strong impact on students' commitment to participation.

For schools to teach democratic principles and promote participation effectively they should be a microcosm of a society where democratic principles are put into action and can be learned. Processes in the school context can represent a "simplified version" of civil society's workings (Lenzi et al, 2014) and should thereby facilitate family and community participation.

Regarding the limits of this study, we would mention the size of the sample, which should be greater in subsequent studies, since due to the sample's limited scope our findings cannot be generalized. Further research prospects arise in the form of questions based on our study, such as: What social capital is held by the families of students in the sample? How does family social capital influence adolescents' participation in their schools? Do respondents have different concepts of participation according to their gender, cultural origin and family ideological orientation? Does the thinking of the school have an influence in shaping one type of participation or another?

## Conclusion

*A broader concept of participation means greater participation of adolescents at school.* In examining the concept of participation we should bear in mind its three-fold dimensions: cognitive, affective and behavioural (Folgueiras, 2009). The cognitive dimension is based on information, and provides data, contents, etc. which receive feedback when subjects act, thereby establishing the two-way relationship between information and action. Motivation is the basic element in the affective dimension, and is necessary if we want adolescents to act; thus there is also a relationship of interdependence between motivation and action. The basic element in the behavioural dimension is action. Participating actively therefore involves information (knowing), emotions (feeling) and actions (doing). While on the basis of our findings we cannot determine the degree of consistency between how the adolescents saw participation and its real exercise, we can on the other hand affirm that those who integrated the different dimensions in their concept and thus had a broader understanding of participation, took part more in their schools.

*A higher level of participation in the family context means higher participation at school.* Probably this is due to the major role played by the family in the attribution of cultural norms and values (Maganto, Etxeberria & Porcel, 2010). While during adolescence young people are strongly influenced by their peers (Furman & Buhrmeister, 1992) and by other contexts such as school, leisure activities, the media, etc., the family still has a crucial role. In fact it is the family which lays the basis for what adolescents will later transfer to their social, work, educational, etc. contexts. The importance of the family on the perceptions of the adolescents also has been identified in broader situations also has been identified by Mateos, Balsells, Molina and Fuentes-Peláez (2012). Adolescents' participation in the family, for example in housework, is linked to their processes of socialisation and has positive effects on both their individual and social development. Among the benefits, Mateo, Rojas and Murgiondo (2003) identify the development of skills and competences such as responsibility, cooperation, respect for others, endeavour and the will to work, trust and the feeling of belonging, etc.; all of which are skills germane to the exercise of participation. Thus patterns of agreement, contribution and distribution in domestic chores represent specific forms of the rights and duties entailed by belonging to any social or family group (Goodnow, 1996). In fact a relationship exists between the degree of participation of children in housework and their ability to fulfil their rights and responsibilities in other spheres (Mateo, Rojas & Murgiondo, 2003). Families which opt for participatory models at home contribute to the civic development of adolescents, giving them the chance to discuss issues, take part in family decisions, etc. Along similar lines various studies have shown that young people belonging to families which are more active in the community and foster responsibility at home have a more positive perception of civic commitment and participation (Flanagan & Sherrod, 1998, and McIntosh, Hart & Youniss, 2007). Likewise – although we do not know the characteristics

of our respondents' families in terms of their participatory action – there is a relationship between family involvement in civic activities, belonging to community organisations and adolescents' civic engagement (Rossi, Lenzi, Sharkey, Vieno & Santinello, M., 2016; Zaff, Malanchuk, Michelsen & Eccles, 2003). Families which bolster their children's civic attitudes and participate together in activities produce adolescents who are more likely to engage in participatory activities in other contexts such as their schools (Fletcher, Elder & Mekos, 2000). According to Mahatmya & Lohman (2012), family influence on children's participation varies according to the family's social capital; and in our case, this is true of the children's participation at school. The type of social capital existing in families may be defined as “bonding social capital—social relationships and resources cultivated by close relationships among people of similar backgrounds” (Coffe & Geys 2007; Coleman 1988; Wray-Lake & Syvertsen 2011; Loeber & col. 2000, cited by Mahatmya & Lohman, 2012: 1171). Thus in future studies the social capital of respondents' families should be ascertained in order to verify this relationship. The influence of the family on adolescents' community participation has also been acknowledged (Beaumont, 2011). Here we adopt the notion commented on earlier that some aspects of family life have similar characteristics to participation in general. Cognitive schemata, formed in the family, are generalized and have an influence in other spheres, for example in community or political participation (Šerek, Lacinová & Macek, 2012). In fact adolescents' perceptions of their own leverage in issues affecting their communities, schools, etc. may be related to their ability to influence family life.

*A high level of student participation in the community means greater participation in their schools.* Adolescents' participation in the community enables them to accede to community resources at the same time as boosting skills which can be later transferred to other contexts, for example their schools (Folgueiras, Luna & Puig, 2014). Likewise, community participation enables them to create new personal and social networks. Adolescents need opportunities for community participation to develop civic attitudes and become active citizens (Atkins & Hart, 2003). In fact levels of youth participation are higher in neighbourhoods with more organized resources dedicated to them (Quane & Rankin, 2006). Also, adolescent participation in community organizations represents an important social predictor of school performance, successful transition to adult life and the development of key competences which can be used in all spheres of their lives, not only at school (Quane & Rankin, 2006). The family, the school and the community represent the most important contexts of socialization for the wellbeing of young people and adolescents (Greenfield & Marks, 2010). Furthermore, these contexts are not independent of each other. Family, school and community participation are spheres which feed into each other and influence positively adolescents' psychosocial development, their academic results (Eptstein, 2001; Delgado-Rojas, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002) and advances in democracy in general (Folgueiras

& Luna, 2012). Likewise, the more opportunities for participation young people have, the more knowledge of participatory processes they will gain.

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