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# Participation in democratic school management from the students' perspective: proposal for an assessment instrument

## *Participação na gestão democrática escolar sob a perspectiva dos estudantes: proposta de instrumento de avaliação*

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## Abstract

This paper describes and analyzes an instrument for assessing participation in democratic school management from the students' standpoint. Based on the principles of psychosocial assessment in Liberation Psychology, the instrument is explored as a research tool in qualitative epistemology, emphasizing psychopolitical validity. The instrument consists of three parts: the first investigates how students distribute decision-making power over aspects of everyday school life among various school actors. The second assesses students' knowledge of legally guaranteed participatory spaces, and the third examines their real opportunities for participation in school. Three hundred twenty nine elementary school students from a municipal school in Campinas (SP) participated in the administration. We concluded that, despite the need for further studies on the composition of the instrument, it offers valuable indicators on how schools encourage student participation. It has the potential to be adapted to different local realities, and its results can mediate reflections with different school actors with a view to promoting democratic school management.

**Keywords**: Child development; Educational psychology; Psychosocial intervention; Qualitative research; Social participation.

## *Resumo*

*Este trabalho descreve e analisa um instrumento de avaliação da participação na gestão democrática escolar sob a perspectiva dos estudantes. Com base nos princípios da avaliação psicossocial da Psicologia da Libertação, o instrumento é explorado como ferramenta de pesquisa na epistemologia qualitativa, enfatizando a validade psicopolítica. O instrumento é composto por três partes: a primeira, investiga como os estudantes distribuem o poder de decisão sobre aspectos*

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*do cotidiano escolar entre diversos atores escolares. A segunda, avalia o conhecimento dos estudantes sobre os espaços participativos legalmente garantidos e, a terceira, examina suas oportunidades reais de participação na escola. Trezentos e vinte e nove estudantes do ensino fundamental de uma escola municipal em Campinas (SP) participaram da aplicação. Conclui-se que, apesar da necessidade de estudos adicionais sobre a composição do instrumento, ele oferece indicadores valiosos sobre como as escolas fomentam a participação dos estudantes. Tem potencial de adaptação a diferentes realidades locais e seus resultados podem mediar reflexões com diferentes atores escolares visando promover a gestão escolar democrática.*

***Palavras-chave**: Desenvolvimento infantil; Psicologia educacional; Intervenção psicossocial; Pesquisa qualitativa; Participação social.*

Student participation in political and everyday decisions concerning their school is ensured by the principle of democratic management that guides Brazilian education, as established in the *Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação* (LDB, Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education) — Law No. 9,394 (Presidência da República, 1996), and is incorporated into federal, state, and municipal educational plans.

This study aims to describe and analyze the development of an instrument that assesses how fully this right is realized in practice from the students' perspective. It is argued that the proposed instrument can enrich the practices of education professionals seeking to expand student participation in democratic school management by providing a diagnosis of students' general perception of this topic. Furthermore, the instrument has an intervention potential, as discussing the results with students can stimulate reflection and raise awareness about the importance of participatory spaces and democratic management in schools. Finally, the instrument can also provide evidence of the effectiveness of interventions aimed at expanding student participation in school management if administered before and after their implementation.

Proposing such an instrument is part of the effort to resist growing attacks on the constitutional principle of democratic management of institutions, with education among the areas most affected. The debate surrounding Democratic School Management (DSM) gained prominence in the 1980s, during Brazil's re-democratization process, when educators sought ways to reclaim the public character of education, that is, to serve public interests. In this context, DSM represents an opportunity to promote the decentralization of power in schools and ensure the direct participation of various school stakeholders (Araújo, 2009).

As highlighted by Saviani (2008), the democratization of schools is intrinsically linked to the democratization of society. Similarly, the construction of a democratic society demands the democratization of education. The author emphasizes that it is not enough to guarantee access to schools and democratize their management processes; it is equally necessary to democratize the quality of education. For effective participation in the democratic process, the development of critical thinking is fundamental. Therefore, the population must have access to content that has been historically developed by humanity and mastered by culture, providing them with the necessary conditions to defend their interests.

This understanding of Education's role, however, is gradually losing ground in the formulation of educational policies. As Laval (2019) discusses in an international context, the advancement of neoliberal logic has increasingly steered Education toward a utilitarian approach. Institutions such as the World Bank and the World Trade Organization, among others, exert growing pressure for educational systems to adapt to the production of so-called "human capital". In this context, education ceases to be considered a right and instead becomes a commodity whose value is limited to its contribution to the improvement of economic productivity. Traditional content is replaced by

an emphasis on "learning to learn" to foster citizens who perceive themselves as "entrepreneurs of the self" capable of adapting to a world characterized by technological advancements and constant change. Thus, labor is no longer regulated by statutes and collective rights but increasingly depends on individual skills. According to the author, a series of educational reforms incorporated this approach, beginning in the 1980s and intensifying in the 1990s.

In Brazil, the escalation of neoliberal logic in education intensified from 2016, a year in which a parliamentary, media, and judicial coup overthrew the then-President Dilma Rousseff. During this period, various measures were adopted aiming to maximize the interests of capital to the detriment of social concerns, especially within the educational sphere. Among these measures, Constitutional Amendment No. 95 (Presidência da República, 2016) stands out, which established a 20-year freeze on public spending, further exacerbating the precarious situation of Education. Furthermore, there were frequent attempts to advance Bill No. 867 (Câmara dos Deputados, 2015), known as "Escola sem Partido" (School Without Party), a proposal that represents a serious threat to the democratization of the school environment (Santos & Biroli, 2023). Another significant reform was that of secondary education, implemented through Provisional Measure 746/2016 and converted into law less than six months later (Presidência da República, 2017). This reform intensified the deterioration and impoverishment of education, widening the disparities between public and private schools. Finally, it is important to mention the National Program of Civic-Military Schools (Presidência da República, 2019), launched under the Bolsonaro administration and discontinued during the Lula administration, but which has since resurfaced in certain states and municipalities, as in the case of the Civic-Military School Program approved in São Paulo in 2024 (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado de São Paulo, 2024). This program runs counter to the democratization of schools, as it hands over their management to the military and relies on authoritarian methods to impose behaviors and pedagogical practices.

In this context, it is clear that the debate on DSM is losing ground, making it necessary to reaffirm its very existence and relevance before discussing ways to promote public participation in educational decisions. In the field of Psychology, we have previously emphasized the importance of participation from a human development perspective in published works (Meireles & Guzzo, 2021a; 2021b). Drawing upon the foundations of Cultural-Historical Psychology, we argue that participatory spaces constitute social situations of development as different functions necessary for participation are promoted on the interpsychological plane and subsequently become intrapsychological functions.

Based on the class assembly records, we analyzed how the mobilization of dramatic relationships prompted students to develop capacities such as dialogue, argumentation, seeking information about the functioning of the issues debated, solidarity, and collectively building proposals for resolving problems faced in everyday school life, among others. Thus, we aim to foster the development of individuals capable of collectively expanding their agency and actively participating in the democratization of schools and society.

Participation is likewise emphasized in the document "Technical References for the Work of Psychologists in Basic Education", published by the Federal Council of Psychology (Conselho Federal de Psicologia, 2019). The document argues that Psychology should, above all, contribute to strengthening democratic management practices in Education. Based on accumulated knowledge in the field, the document posits that all interventions carried out by Psychology in schools must be guided by the principle of collectivity, given that the developmental process, as well as the contradictions and limitations that permeate it, are shaped by the relationships established within

the school environment. Therefore, it is crucial to overcome the individualistic perspectives that this science has historically constructed.

In line with these understandings, the promotion of participation has been one of the fundamental principles of the Espaço de Convivência, Ação e Reflexão (ECOAR, Space for Coexistence, Action, and Reflection) project, a university extension initiative aimed at confronting violence in schools. This project is developed by the Research Group on Psychosocial Evaluation and Intervention, Prevention, Community, and Liberation, at Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Campinas (PUC-Campinas) (Guzzo et al., 2019). Based on critical approaches to Psychology, the project operates on the premise that violence must be addressed from its earliest emergence in everyday relationships, highlighting the importance of creating spaces for coexistence and collective practices to address this issue effectively.

Because promoting student participation is crucial to this objective, Carvalho et al. (2018) analyzed education plans in force in 2017 (at federal, state – São Paulo – and municipal – Campinas/SP – levels) to identify the proposed strategies. The authors observe that, although these plans include goals and strategies for participation, few refer to the participatory spaces provided for by legislation (such as student councils), according to Law No. 7,398 (Presidência da República, 1985). Consequently, these strategies, which should be concrete, become more abstract, hindering comprehension and implementation by educators and students themselves in daily school life.

Given this scenario, this article presents and justifies the development of an instrument to facilitate the assessment of participatory processes from the students' perspective. This instrument was created within the ECOAR project as part of doctoral research, which posited that the action of Psychology in schools, guided by a critical perspective, contributes to the process of conscientization, potentially leading to an expansion of students' agency (Meireles, 2020).

The need to develop this instrument stems primarily from the absence of tools on this topic that capture the students' perspective. Little progress can be made in establishing effective participatory spaces if we do not understand students' views on this issue. Perez's (2023) dissertation discusses this reality by highlighting the lack of instruments to guide the practice of Brazilian school psychology professionals. We first present the theoretical foundations underpinning the instrument's construction, followed by a description of the methods used for its development and administration. We then present and analyze some of the results from the instrument's administration and, finally, discuss its limitations, adaptation needs, and potential uses.

## Theoretical Foundations: Qualitative Epistemology and Psychosocial Assessment

To develop the Student Participation Scale, we drew upon González Rey's (1997) qualitative epistemology combined with the psychosocial assessment process proposed by Guzzo et al. (2011), which is grounded in the concepts of Liberation Psychology and Cultural-Historical Psychology.

According to González Rey and Martínez (2017), qualitative epistemology emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, a period marked by criticism of the predominant positivist model in the Social Sciences, especially in Psychology. This model argued that the use of measurement instruments for a quantitative analysis of psychological issues was the only way to ensure supposed scientific neutrality. Around the same time, Patto (1997) highlighted the problem of the reification of human beings when methodologies similar to those of the Natural Sciences are employed to understand them.

To counteract this logic, many researchers began to propose studies based on qualitative methodologies. However, there was not always an in-depth discussion about their underlying

epistemological bases, which led many to reproduce the very conceptions they were criticizing (González Rey & Martínez, 2017). In this context, González Rey (1997) delved into the study of scientific knowledge production from a qualitative perspective, identifying elements that should be considered in Social Sciences research, especially regarding subjectivity. For the author, knowledge does not derive directly from contact with the object, but is constructed through encounters with reality. This perspective assumes the complexity of human subjectivity, given that both the subjects under study and the researcher are active participants in a specific social and cultural reality, possessing their own ways of perceiving and conceptualizing this reality.

Therefore, the researcher is no longer an external and neutral evaluator but a subject who engages in relationships with other subjects. From this interaction, the researcher constructs indicators relevant to knowledge production, a process guided by their theoretical conceptions, which enable the continuous construction of interpretations. Thus, research becomes a permanent and open process, always open to new meanings (González Rey, 1997).

A similar critique of the supposed neutrality of the scientist is present in Martin-Baró's (1986/2006) formulations on Liberation Psychology. For him, restricting oneself solely to directly observable data to understand a given reality blinds the researcher to constitutive factors and the negative dimension – that is, what that reality is not, but could be. For instance, the author cites the administration of psychological intelligence tests across various segments of the U.S. population, which suggested that Black people possessed inferior intelligence. Martin-Baró argues that, when conducted in a purely descriptive manner, such an assessment can imply a naturalization of historically and culturally constructed inequalities, as well as the notion that this population is destined for failure.

Building upon Martin-Baró's ideas, Guzzo et al. (2011, p. 166) emphasize that psychological assessment should expand and diversify, taking the form of a psychosocial assessment, which "requires a contextualized understanding of psychological and social processes, social actors, and the events in which they are protagonists, identifying their convergences and divergences" (translation by the authors). In the context of School Psychology, the authors argue that this assessment should consider the daily lives of children, which unfold in various contexts, with school being one of the most significant spaces for development. This implies that, when evaluating a child's development, Psychology must go beyond investigating only their capacities, seeking to understand the aspects of their everyday life contexts that create conditions for what they can become. In this way, the assessment process guides the actions of the Psychology professional, making them broader and more complex.

The challenge in psychosocial assessment is to formulate an understanding of the relationship between the individual and society. Aligned with the critical principles of the approaches discussed here, the exploration of Klaus Holzkamp's formulations, which constitute the so-called German Critical Psychology, has made valuable contributions to this understanding. Holzkamp (2013) emphasizes the importance of considering two mediating levels in the individual-society relationship. The first comprises the "constellations of meaning" present within a given social structure, which appear to individuals as more restricted or expanded possibilities to act. The second level concerns the subjective reasons for action from the individual's perspective. Assessing from the standpoint of the subject moves beyond a "third-person standpoint", where a researcher interprets the subject's actions, to a "first-person" assessment. This means psychologists structure their investigations not to categorize individuals, but to understand their worldview, including their possibilities to act and their reasons for action in a particular way.

In sum, promoting forms of psychosocial assessment from the standpoint of the subject and based on a qualitative epistemology demands more than merely constructing an instrument. However, the use of quantitative instruments and data does not contradict this approach. According to González Rey (1997), all instruments are appropriate if they contribute to knowledge production, allow for the construction of indicators, and make sense for the research process. In many situations, these instruments promote a moment of personal reflection for the respondent. Furthermore, the author argues that the use of quantitative data to facilitate the construction of indicators does not transform research into a quantitative endeavor, but can instead be a specific phase within qualitative research.

This discussion implies that knowledge is qualitative in its epistemology when data are employed not as intrinsically meaningful entities, but as part of a process of construction and interpretation, acquiring its significance within that context. From this perspective, the congruence and continuity of information provided by an instrument within the context of theoretical construction are more relevant than validity and reliability processes. Furthermore, qualitative criteria replace sampling criteria, such that the identity of the subjects who responded to the instrument gains greater relevance than the number of subjects who did so.

Finally, we emphasize that the instrument to be presented is an effort to construct an assessment that demonstrates psychopolitical validity in research focused on student participation. The concept of psychopolitical validity, introduced by Prilleltensky (2008), emphasizes that community interventions should stem from a clear understanding of power dynamics in psychological and political issues, especially when aiming to produce tangible social changes. According to the author, power is a central dimension in understanding and transforming oppressive relationships, promoting liberation, and achieving community well-being.

In this context, we must consider psychopolitical validity in two dimensions: epistemic and transformational. Epistemic psychopolitical validity questions the extent to which research accounts for the role of power in dynamics of oppression, liberation, and well-being at collective, relational, and personal levels. In turn, transformational psychopolitical validity asks to what extent actions developed in an intervention promote well-being, transform power inequalities, and stimulate political action (Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Prilleltensky, 2008). Thus, changes resulting from the intervention or participatory action research are evaluated by comparing the subject (or the reality in question) with itself, before and after the intervention, rather than based on predefined statistical standards.

## Method

### Constructing the Student Participation Scale

Given the theoretical considerations presented so far, we now present the Student Participation Scale. As mentioned in the introduction, this scale was developed in the context of a university extension project aimed at addressing school violence (Project ECOAR), in which we acted as members of the Psychology team. Therefore, our research constitutes praxis: action in the school and reflection constructed and shared with the participants, the school agents.

When the project was first implemented in six elementary schools in Campinas (SP), the teams sought to understand and integrate their work into existing participatory spaces. However, they encountered numerous difficulties: collegial bodies that existed merely on paper, a lack of

awareness or clarity among school actors regarding the functions of these participatory spaces, centralization of decisions within school management, and the exclusion of student participation in spaces in which they had a legal right to participate. The team's discussions, which indicated the presence of these characteristics in different schools, raised some essential questions: how do students themselves perceive the distribution of power for decision-making in school? What are the spaces in which they have the right to participate, and where do they actually participate? Are there spaces unknown to them? In addition to what is guaranteed by public policies, what are the daily activities in which these students help to decide and build within the school?

In light of these complex questions – which could be more concretely answered through daily school experiences – we chose to develop an instrument that complements this experience. This instrument allows elementary school students to express their own conceptions of participation. The objectives of this instrument are to evaluate democratic school management from the standpoint of the students, as well as to understand their views on the distribution of power for decisions relevant to daily school life. We avoid classifying students as more or less aware of democratic management issues in schools, or even evaluating whether their responses are "right" or "wrong," as many of the questions do not have a definitive answer.

Therefore, we divided the instrument into three distinct parts: the first allows us to assess how students perceive the division of decision-making power among different school agents (what should be); the second evaluates their degree of access to participatory spaces guaranteed by law (what is); and the third analyzes their real opportunities for participation in daily school life (what is).

## Part 1: Distribution of Decision-Making Power from the Standpoint of the Students

To develop the first part, we began by identifying the different segments of actors directly involved in school decisions: staff, students, students' families, and city government, as these were municipal schools. We organized these segments from closest to furthest from the students in terms of ease of access: 1) Students; 2) Parents/Guardians; 3) Teachers; 4) Non-Teaching Staff; 5) School Administration; 6) Public Management.

Drawing on the Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education (LDB), which establishes that education systems must define democratic management norms (Presidência da República, 1996, Art. 14), we consulted the School Regulations of the City Government of Campinas (Prefeitura Municipal de Campinas, 2010) for the construction of the items, considering the particularities of the school's daily life. "Chapter II, Article 14 of the School Regulations stipulates that school management should be carried out by the "school community and collegial bodies", defining the school community as "educational professionals, students, and parents or guardians" (Prefeitura Municipal de Campinas, Chapter II, Section 1, Article 16) and collegial bodies as "representative bodies of the school community, of a consultative, deliberative, supervisory, and mobilizing nature" (Prefeitura Municipal de Campinas, Chapter II, Section II, Article 21). Furthermore, the document exemplifies some of the functions to be performed by these actors in the daily management of schools: "I) time management; II) space management; III) management of internal, community, and intersectoral social interactions; IV) management of school knowledge, information, and data; V) management of material resources" (Prefeitura Municipal de Campinas, Chapter II, Article 15).

Based on this, the challenge was to translate these functions into concrete, simple practices that elementary school students can understand. To this end, we wrote 11 items outlining actions that address these functions:

Who should decide...

1. ...the rules of the school?
2. ...what improvements the school needs?
3. ...how to solve the school's problems?
4. ...what activities (workshops, games, parties) the school will offer?
5. ...how to solve classroom problems?
6. ...what happens to those who do not follow the rules?
7. ...what students will learn?
8. ...the teaching method?
9. ...what trips/visits students will undertake?
10. ...what meals will be offered?
11. ...how school funds are spent?

The pedagogical advisor and classroom representatives reviewed all items at one of the schools participating in the ECOAR Project. They had the opportunity to evaluate whether the items were appropriate or whether they wished to add anything. The students agreed but suggested including a 12th item: "what the school uniform will be?". Based on the question "In your opinion, who should decide...", students were asked to mark with an "x" all school stakeholders they believed should be involved in the decisions regarding the items. In Figure 1, we present the instrument, which allows us to observe how this question was presented to the students.

As we announced, there is no right or wrong answer to these questions. However, students' responses enable an understanding of their standpoint on the distribution of power within the school. The first part provides a database for mediating discussions with students, who can observe and reflect on the opinions expressed by the collective, as we will see in the results section of this article.

## Part 2: Participation in Collegial Bodies and Participatory Spaces

To structure the second part, we conducted research on which collegial bodies students are entitled to participate in. According to Item XXII of Article 55 of the School Regulations of the City of Campinas (Prefeitura Municipal de Campinas, 2010), student participation is guaranteed in Class Councils; School Councils; Institutional Assessment Committee; and Student Council. In accordance with the specific laws governing each collegiate body, students must comprise a determined percentage of members: School Council: 25% students (Prefeitura Municipal de Campinas, 1991); Class Council: Representatives from each class (Prefeitura Municipal de Campinas, 2010, Art. 24); Institutional Assessment Committee: At least one student representative; Student Council: Students elected by vote.

In addition to these collegial bodies, we included participation in class assemblies (given their role in our work in schools) and the Political Pedagogical Project, whose development by the entire school community is regulated by the LDB (Presidência da República, 1996, Art. 14). We organized the response options into five categories, from which the student should choose only one: 1) I participate: Indicates that the student has direct influence in that participatory space; 2) I know someone who participates: Indicates that the student can participate indirectly, by making suggestions or listening to peers who participate; 3) I've only heard about it: The student is aware

**Figure 1**

*Instrument for assessing students' perceptions of participation in school*

Do Risco à Proteção ECOAR
Espaço de Convivência Ação e Reflexão

# STUDENT PARTICIPATION SCALE

| NAME: | AGE: |
|---|---|
| I GO TO THIS SCHOOL SINCE THE _____ GRADE | CLASS: |

| 1) WHO DO YOU THINK SHOULD DECIDE... (YOU MAY CHOOSE MORE THAN ONE OPTION) | STUDENTS | PARENTS/FAMILY | TEACHERS | SCHOOL STAFF | SCHOOL PRINCIPAL | MUNICIPAL MANAGEMENT |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ... THE RULES OF THE SCHOOL? | | | | | | |
| ... WHAT HAPPENS TO THOSE WHO DO NOT FOLLOW THE RULES? | | | | | | |
| ... HOW TO SOLVE CLASSROOM PROBLEMS? | | | | | | |
| ... HOW TO SOLVE THE SCHOOL'S PROBLEMS? | | | | | | |
| ... WHAT ACTIVITIES (WORKSHOPS, GAMES, PARTIES) THE SCHOOL WILL OFFER? | | | | | | |
| ... WHAT STUDENTS WILL LEARN? | | | | | | |
| ... THE TEACHING METHOD? | | | | | | |
| ... HOW SCHOOL FUNDS ARE SPENT? | | | | | | |
| ... WHAT TRIPS/VISITS STUDENTS WILL UNDERTAKE? | | | | | | |
| ... WHAT MEALS WILL BE OFFERED? | | | | | | |
| ... WHAT IMPROVEMENTS THE SCHOOL NEEDS? | | | | | | |
| ... ON SCHOOL UNIFORM? | | | | | | |

| 2) KNOWLEDGE ABOUT PARTICIPATORY SPACES | I PARTICIPATE | I KNOW SOMEONE WHO PARTICIPATES | I'VE ONLY HEARD ABOUT IT | IN MY SCHOOL, THERE IS NO... | I DON'T KNOW WHAT IT IS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SCHOOL COUNCILS | | | | | |
| CLASS COUNCILS | | | | | |
| INSTITUTIONAL ASSESSMENT COMMITTEE | | | | | |
| STUDENT COUNCIL | | | | | |
| CLASS ASSEMBLIES | | | | | |
| PLANNING/ASSESSMENT OF THE POLITICAL PEDAGOGICAL PROJECT | | | | | |

| 3) ANSWER WITH YOUR SCHOOL IN MIND: | ALWAYS | FREQUENTLY | SOMETIMES | NEVER |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| TEACHERS/PRINCIPALS CARE ABOUT WHAT THE STUDENTS AT THIS SCHOOL THINK | | | | |
| TEACHERS DISCUSS WITH MY CLASS WHAT/HOW IT WILL BE TAUGHT | | | | |
| I AM INVITED TO HELP ORGANIZE PARTIES/EVENTS/SOIRÉES/GAMES | | | | |
| I CONTRIBUTE WITH SOLUTIONS TO SCHOOL PROBLEMS | | | | |
| I CONTRIBUTE WITH SOLUTIONS TO PROBLEMS IN MY CLASS | | | | |
| I FEEL THAT PROBLEMS ARE RESOLVED THROUGH DIALOGUE | | | | |
| I HAVE SEEN STUDENTS' DEMANDS BEING MET | | | | |
| WHEN SOMETHING IS ABOUT TO CHANGE AT SCHOOL, THEY ASK FOR MY OPINION | | | | |
| I VOTED FOR MY CLASS REPRESENTATIVE | | | | |
| TEACHERS REPEAT THE EXPLANATION WHEN I ASK THEM TO | | | | |
| THE THINGS I LEARN IN SCHOOL HELP ME SOLVE THE PROBLEMS I ENCOUNTER (IN MY NEIGHBORHOOD, FOR EXAMPLE) | | | | |

that such a space exists but does not know whether it exists in their school and has not had contact with its participants; 4) At my school, there is no...: Even if the student is aware of the possibility of participation, if it does not exist at their school, they cannot participate; 5) I don't know what it is:

Indicates that the student has never heard of this possibility of participation. Figure 1 also includes the second part of the instrument.

### Part 3: Democratic Practices at School

The third part relates to students' perceptions of their opportunities to participate in different school activities. We selected activities based on the different management areas they encompass, such as time, space, interactions, knowledge, and management of material resources. When presenting the options to the pedagogical advisor and student class representatives, they proposed no changes to this section. For each statement, students are to select only one option, indicating the frequency with which they typically participate in the described activities: "always", "frequently", "sometimes", and "never". Figure 1 also includes the third part of the instrument.

After administering the scales, we organized the information into graphs and presented them to the school's administrators, teachers, and students. The discussions generated from these presentations were recorded in Field Diaries by the ECOAR project's team of psychologists.

### Context and Participants

The instrument was administered in 2016 at a Municipal Elementary School located in a low-income neighborhood on the Campinas-SP (Brazil) outskirts. The majority of the school's students resided in the neighborhood itself or nearby areas, coming from low-income families. This study included 329 elementary school students from the 4th to 9th grades, aged between 9 and 15 years old. To meet ethical requirements, we obtained approval from the PUC-Campinas Ethics Committee, under CAAE nº 76331317.9.0000.5481. The names of the students and the school were not disclosed. The school administration signed the Informed Consent Form, and the students' families were duly informed. The students also signed an Informed Assent Form.

## Results and Discussion

This section presents the graphs related to each part of the instrument and analyzes the information, reporting some of the discussions held with the students, as recorded in the Field Diary.

### Part 1: Who Should Decide

As detailed in the methodology, this part of the instrument aims to investigate students' perceptions regarding the distribution of power in school decisions. There were no right or wrong answers; students could select as many actors as they wished for each described situation, as shown in Table 1. We organized the information from the table into a distribution graph, as shown in Figure 2.

**Table 1**
*Percentage of responses*

1 of 2

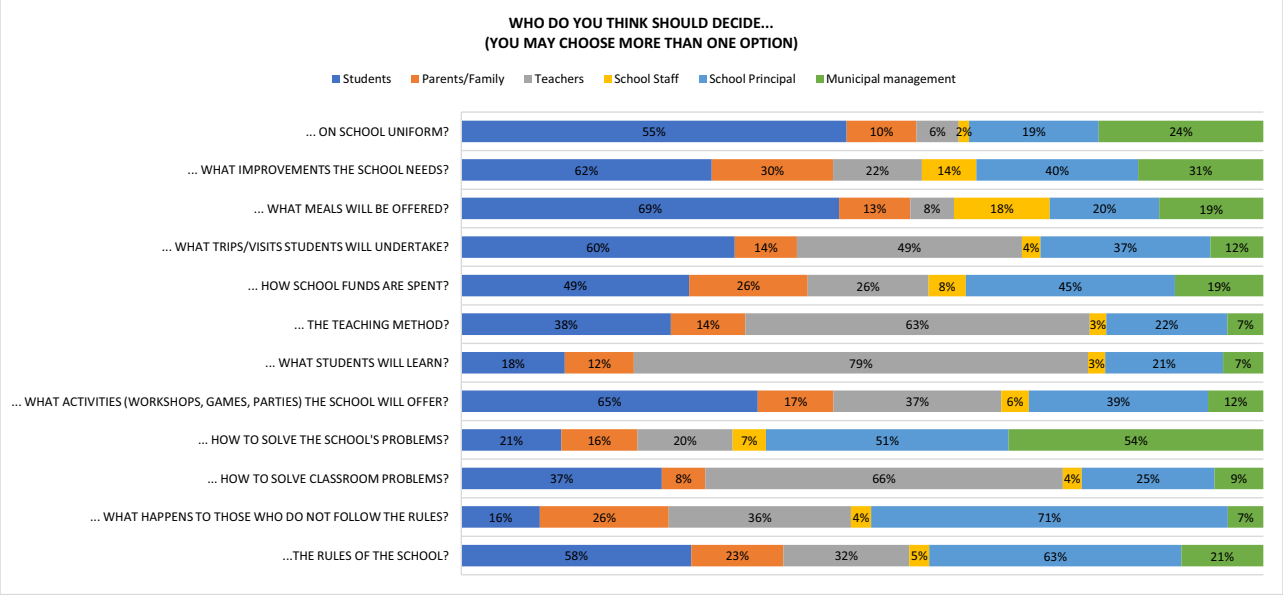
| Who do you think should decide... (You may choose more than one option) | Students | Parents/Family | Teachers | School Staff | School Principal | Municipal management |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | % | | | | | |
| ... the rules of the school? | 57.5 | 23.0 | 31.5 | 5.0 | 63.0 | 20.5 |
| ... what happens to those who do not follow the rules? | 15.5 | 25.5 | 36.0 | 4.0 | 70.5 | 7.0 |
| ... how to solve classroom problems? | 37.0 | 8.0 | 66.0 | 3.5 | 24.5 | 9.0 |
| ... how to solve the school's problems? | 21.0 | 16.0 | 20.0 | 7.0 | 51.0 | 53.5 |

**Table 1**
*Percentage of responses*



| Who do you think should decide... (You may choose more than one option) | Students | Parents/Family | Teachers | School Staff | School Principal | Municipal management |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | % | | | | | |
| ... what activities (workshops. games. parties) the school will offer? | 64.5 | 16.5 | 36.5 | 6.0 | 39.0 | 12.0 |
| ... what students will learn? | 18.0 | 12.0 | 79.0 | 3.0 | 20.5 | 7.0 |
| ... the teaching method? | 38.0 | 13.5 | 62.5 | 3.0 | 22.0 | 6.5 |
| ... how school funds are spent? | 49.0 | 25.5 | 26.0 | 8.0 | 45.0 | 19.0 |
| ... what trips/visits students will undertake? | 59.5 | 13.5 | 49.0 | 4.0 | 37.0 | 11.5 |
| ... what meals will be offered? | 69.0 | 13.0 | 8.0 | 17.5 | 20.0 | 19.0 |
| ... what improvements the school needs? | 62.0 | 30.0 | 22.0 | 13.5 | 40.0 | 31.0 |
| ... on school uniform? | 55.0 | 10.0 | 6.0 | 1.5 | 18.5 | 23.5 |

**Figure 2**
*Distribution of decision-making power*




It is crucial to highlight that the graph in Figure 2 represents the distribution of power attributed by the students. If power were distributed equally among the six actors, each would account for 16.7% of the graph. We chose this type of graph due to its ability to provide a quick visualization of how students distribute decision-making power. However, it has the limitation of not precisely showing the percentage of student responses for each option. Therefore, in our discussion, we will provide the percentage of students presented in Table 1 when we deem this information relevant for the analysis.

Students assigned themselves the largest share of decision-making power for the choice of school uniforms, followed by school meals (84%). By contrast, they assigned themselves the smallest share for the consequences of breaking school rules (10%), followed by solving school problems and deciding what students learn. The nature of the options students attributed to themselves was discussed by an 8th-grade class, as recorded in a field diary:

> Some students commented that they typically assume "fun" responsibilities, such as selecting uniforms and snacks, but when it comes to problem-solving, they delegate to management. This is an interesting moment because they openly discuss what each person's responsibility would be. (DCd22)

In this record, it is noticeable that the graph reflects the students' perception, raising questions and stimulating a more critical evaluation on their part. At another point, some students discussed how they attribute decisions about consequences for those who do not follow the rules or engage in problem-solving to managers and teachers, and subsequently complain about the decisions made.

Parents barely appear in the graph, with the highest distribution of power reaching 16% (consequences for non-compliance with rules). However, non-teaching staff members appear even less frequently in the responses, peaking at 12% in power distribution (in relation to the choice of snacks offered). When considering the data in Table 1, we observe that the 12% in power distribution actually indicates that only 17.5% of students selected this option. This issue was also discussed with the students:

> When I asked why non-teaching staff members appeared so infrequently in the graphs, some argued that they should not be involved in decisions regarding, for instance, student learning content. However, others emphasized that staff were generally underrepresented, stressing the need for their participation in decision-making processes, given their direct involvement and impact within the school environment. (DCd22)

Once again, we observed that students re-evaluated their positions and conceptions when confronted with the results of the scale. We highlight that in the most significant portion of the power distribution in the graph (56%), students attributed to teachers the decision-making power regarding what students learn. Teachers also appear significantly as responsible for resolving classroom problems (45%) and for teaching methods (43%). Managers appear with at least 14% in all alternatives, indicating that, in the students' conception, they should be mainly responsible for decisions in the school, revealing a very hierarchical mindset. Finally, what is most attributed to city government is the resolution of school problems.

Although this highlights certain aspects, we can analyze the information from various standpoints. For instance, it is possible to emphasize a specific trend by generating a dedicated graph or by conducting a more detailed analysis by examining the percentage of responses for each item, which highlights the instrument's potential to foster discussions and reframe students' understandings on how to distribute decision-making power.

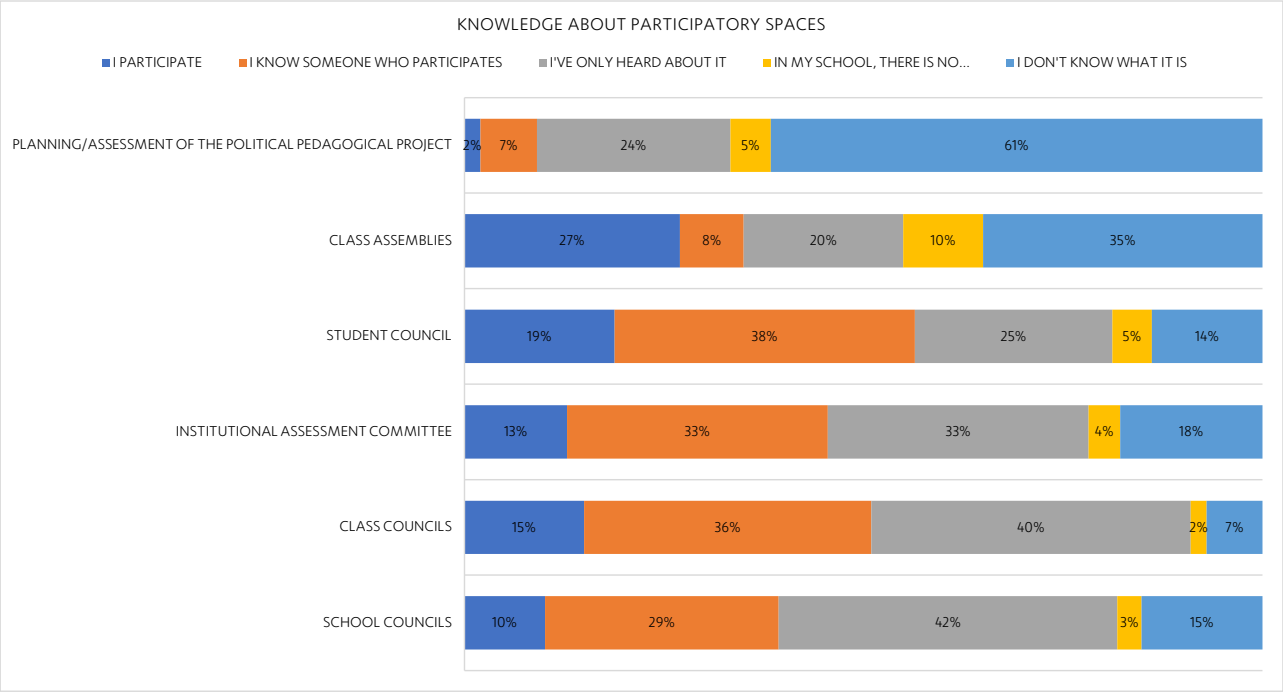
## Part 2: Knowledge about Participatory Spaces

The second part of the instrument aims to assess students' knowledge of participatory spaces, as illustrated in Figure 3.

Given that students could select only one option, the graph presents the exact percentage of students who responded to each alternative. "I participate" was most often selected for class assemblies (27%), reflecting students' involvement in an activity promoted by the ECOAR project.

The least selected alternative with "I participate" was in the construction/evaluation of the Political Pedagogical Project (PPP), which was also the most frequently marked with "I don't

**Figure 3**
*Knowledge about participatory spaces*




know what it is" (61%). As Aranda and Matias (2018) discuss, the PPP represents a vital instrument for democratic management when collectively constructed. In the process of elaborating the PPP, the school community can, based on knowledge of its history, territory, and community relations, propose the political meaning of educational practices within the school. However, in a neoliberal context, the PPP loses its "political" character and becomes merely a pedagogical project. Thus, students' lack of knowledge about the PPP reflects a context in which this document becomes increasingly bureaucratic and detached from its democratizing purpose.

Another significant point highlighted in the graph is that 5% of students indicated the absence of a student council at the school, and 14% were unaware of what a student council is. These data are striking, considering that the scale was administered shortly after a student council election, revealing that at least 19% of the students were unaware of the electoral process. The Institutional Assessment Committee (IAC) and the Class Council, on the other hand, are known to most students. This is attributed to the active work of a teacher who mobilized school stakeholders to participate in the IAC and use this space to present demands to the city government.

In the field diary entries, we observed the reactions of 8th-grade students upon seeing the graph:

> Many were startled when we presented the graph illustrating knowledge about participatory spaces. We explained that they had the legal right to engage in these spaces, and their responses included exclamations such as, "How embarrassing!" or "No one knows anything; how can we participate if we don't even know what it is?" I mentioned that we were developing materials to clarify each of these concepts, and they expressed significant interest in learning more. (DCd22)

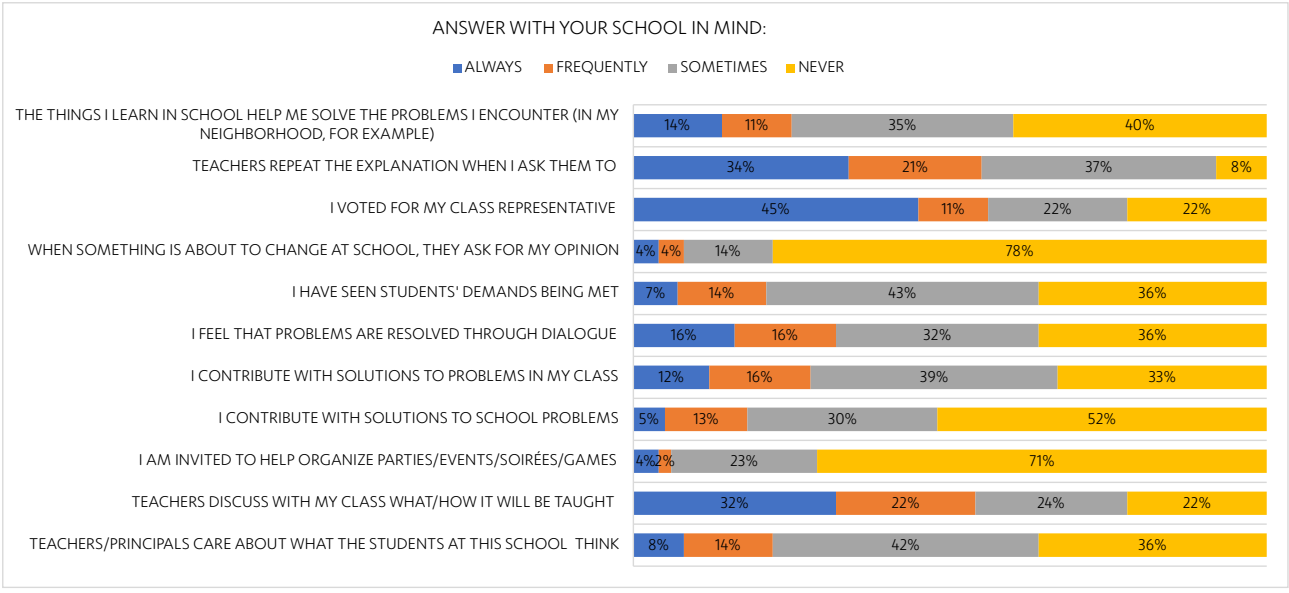
This excerpt demonstrates that the presentation of the instrument's results caused a stir among students, who realized their high level of unfamiliarity with participatory spaces. The material in question is an explanatory booklet on participatory spaces, aimed at students (Meireles

et al., 2017). This booklet was developed in response to feedback sessions in which students reacted similarly, and the idea for the material emerged during discussions with them. The results of the discussions about this booklet with the students can be found in the first author's doctoral thesis (Meireles, 2020). We verified that the scale results were an important step in sparking interest in the topic, and students received the material with great attention, which helped to expand their knowledge of participatory spaces.

## Part 3: "Answer with Your School in Mind"

In the final section of the scale, students evaluate how often they participate in the various listed activities, selecting only one answer, as shown in Figure 4.

**Figure 4**
*Frequency of participation in everyday school activities*




The highest participation rate is observed in the election of class representatives. Furthermore, over 30% of students indicated options related to teachers, either in discussions about content and teaching methods or in the repetition of explanations at students' request.

Nearly 80% of students indicated that they are never consulted when changes are to be made at school, highlighting their sense of detachment from decisions affecting their daily lives. This was also reflected in discussions during the feedback session:

> In the last part of the scale, students expressed significant discomfort regarding the frequency of "never" responses. They consistently reported never being consulted when changes occurred. At this point, they began to provide a series of examples, generally indicating strong resentment toward the authoritarian approach of the new principal. Their descriptions suggested that she has adopted a more pragmatic and less dialogical stance, which explains why she has been avoiding us or responding to everything very briefly to avoid prolonging discussions. (DCd22)

In this excerpt, it is evident that even the Psychology team perceived the principal's unavailability for dialogue regarding the changes. Throughout the school year, we observed

situations such as the separation of classes into different break times, which deprived many friends of opportunities to meet within the school environment.

Another prominent point is that over 70% of students reported not being invited to help plan and organize community events, such as parties and games. This indicates that, even in the more recreational activities of the school environment, their participation was limited, and the school thereby loses an opportunity to strengthen their sense of belonging.

Therefore, we emphasize that this part of the instrument elucidates the possibilities for action within the school as perceived by the students.

## Concluding Remarks

Participation is a fundamental dimension of child development, and school is a privileged space for fostering social situations that drive this development. There can be no civic education in authoritarian schools, just as there cannot be a democratic society without formative spaces that encourage the exercise of political participation.

We present the initial version of an instrument developed as part of a participatory action research project. We emphasize the need to adapt this instrument for use in other contexts, as some of the specified roles and collegial bodies are derived from documents regulating education in the city of Campinas (SP). Additionally, we highlight the limitations stemming from the instrument's construction process, during which we obtained perspectives only from psychologists on the ECOAR project team, a pedagogical advisor, and students from one of the participating schools. We suggest consulting other school stakeholders, such as family members, administrators, teachers, and non-teaching staff, for future adaptations, although the instrument is designed to assess students' perspectives.

We highlight that the functions of democratic management, used in this study as a parameter for the items (management of time, space, interactions, knowledge, and resources), can serve as a basis for developing other items not addressed in the initial instrument. Despite these limitations, we stand by our choice of items and the validity of this initiative in our research, given that the instrument makes it possible to assess students' perception of their power to influence different aspects of school life.

Analysis of the graphs, reflecting the students' perspective, allows for a critical examination of this reality, the identification of key areas for restructuring the school culture, and the planning of collective strategies for change. This is further supported by the students' expressed interest in learning more about participatory spaces during the feedback session, as documented in this study.

As reported in the doctoral thesis, we were able to analyze the readministration of the instrument after interventions aimed at promoting student participation. This analysis allowed us to verify changes in students' conceptions and in school management, as perceived by them. We conclude that the instrument can also be an important step in the construction of qualitative epistemology research on student participation, providing a joint analysis with participants about the psychopolitical validity of the actions carried out.

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