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Social participation in High School: Informed or Practiced Citizenship?

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Abstract

According to National and European discourses on participation (Andersson et al, 2016; Becquet et al, 2019), young peoples' participation should be enhanced already in the teenage years as an integral part to individuals' socialization processes and outcomes in later life. This discourse is particularly significant and reflecting the Structure of the European Education Systems 2018/19 (the Eurydice model). In this vein, the paper explores school participatory discourse in relation to the regulations and to the development of the participation experience in the Italian national context.

Key words: *young people, participation, high school, educational system, discourses on education*

1. Introduction

Young people's engagement is often portrayed as apathetic and disengaged from political and social processes. Some scholars state young people are less interested in political matters and less likely to vote, become members of formal organizations such as political parties, and in general as having limited knowledge regarding public issues across the different national and regional contexts (Park et al., 2004). However, other scholars remark that such approaches adopt a narrow concept of youth participation (Marsh, et al., 2007; Manning, 2014) and a deficit approach to youth (France, 2007), neglecting the structural barriers that young people face in their effort to participate in democratic processes.

Moreover, from the "golden age" of 1960's onwards, due to the expansion of mass education, the increased levels of protest and the following gradual recognition of youth as social actors (Coleman 1961; Côté 2014; Furlong 2013), scholars and policy makers have shown increasing interest in young people's civic and political participation in society.

Despite this interest, in most public discourses on youth engagement "participation" has been often interpreted more as a "status" than as a "lived practice" (Lister, 2008). Few attempts have been made to understand "how" young people experience participation considering their living conditions, socio-cultural backgrounds and local contexts of engagement. Other critical studies of youth participation - developed by sociologists and educationalists during the 1970s in different research fields - remark that these developmental discourses, positioning young people as "becoming" rather than "being", have been used to define young people as partial, and deficient in contrast to the complete, and rational adult (James, Jenks, and Prout, 1998; Wyn and White, 1997).

In this sense, what is rarely taken into account is the multi-factorial interrelation between different elements characterizing youth participation and that, concerning in particular the forms of participation in school contexts, interacts also with the important goal of autonomy (also civic and citizen) that the school intends to promote and achieve for each student. From this point of view, participation as "lived practice" becomes an important pedagogical aim of the school (especially the high schools).

Pursuing the directives promoted and encouraged by the Eurydice project, the Italian educational institutions are also trying to take into account this multi-factorial experience embedded in the participation.

The European Education System clearly highlights what it intends to promote through citizenship education, redefining the aims, goals and practices of democratic and civic education (the difference between these two areas is reported in the legislation). As is stated in the first page available on the web site: “Citizenship education is understood, in this report, as the subject area that is promoted in schools with the aim of fostering the harmonious co-existence and mutually beneficial development of individuals and of the communities they are part of. In democratic societies citizenship education supports students in becoming active, informed and responsible citizens, who are willing and able to take responsibility for themselves and for their communities at the local, regional, national and international level.”

What is intended to be promoted in schools it is more similar, at least from a normative point of view, to the concept of participatory practice expressed as “lived practice”. This change of perspective is also useful for trying to define young people no more like “beings in progress” but as (already) active citizens. They are not only subjects “in power” but also (and for this reason) competent citizens who contribute to the change and progress of society (and its meanings).

This way of understanding young people and participation recalls the educational concept of *autonomy*, as defined by the philosopher of education P. Foray when he states that “autonomy is nowadays both a school and a social injunction: students must be trained to “become independent”, citizens are invited to “take up the arm” and be autonomous [...]. Becoming independent means being able to come into spaces where you can meet your peers” (Foray, 2016, p. 9). Foray highlights two fundamental aspects of autonomy in relation to the construction of citizenship.

1. Autonomy is part of a transition path that can be promoted and guided by adults, however,
2. It is not possible to encourage autonomy without enhancing the meeting between peers behind the mediation of the adult world.

Foray goes on developing this concept of horizontal socialization and writes: “the ‘horizontal socialization’ that takes place between the peer group, the age group, or the same generation, and not just between one generation to the one that follows, or between the adults towards the younger ones, it is few mentioned” (Foray, 2016, p. 10). In this way, he revealed that participation is (often) primarily conceptualized as being ‘involved in something’ that is defined (by adults).

The contribution of adult to the definition about “youth participation” is a critical point and an interesting resource in order to research social representation about this topic. In order to describe evidence of this meaning of youth participation, in this contribution we will present some suggestions and reflections starting from an “expert interview” conducted with the Principal of a high school of Bologna addressing the core research questions of an European project (Partispace project Horizon 2020).

The expert interviews collected from the project were conducted with key persons such as members of the municipal council, representatives of local authorities, youth workers, principals of secondary schools and representatives of youth organizations, or youth activists in each partner city. Some of the experts had professional roles but we also interviewed persons with key roles in a more informal way, for example leading figures of informal social movements.

This contribution focuses on the interview with the Principal of secondary school. In fact, it was particularly relevant and it allowed us to understand the difficulties of the school in implementing the elements which could enhance students’ possibility to experience participation as a “lived practice” in the formal context, which from a pedagogical and social point of view some scholars define as a specific and a fundamental stage of “transition to adulthood” (O’Donnell, V. L., and Tobbell, J., 2007).

According to the National and International rules and normative (Eurydice programme)¹, we consider the civic and political participation of young people as a part of the transition path to the adulthood: as a tool both for exploration and presentation of the ‘own identity in transition’,

¹ We refer in this specific case to the Eurydice, which each year provides those responsible for education systems and policies in Europe with European-level analyses and information which will assist them in their decision – making and which addresses the theme of participation. (https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/index_en.php_en)

and as a means used by young people to answer the questions “who am I?” and “who do I want to become?” (Spencer et al. 2007; Crocetti et al. 2008; Meeus et al. 2010). However, some contradictions emerged from this interview reflecting the complex balance between students’ autonomy and the scholastic rules (aims and specific norms), which sometimes acts as a barrier in attaining the goal of participation as a lived practice.

Therefore, one of the principal questions emerging from this interview regards the participation promoted in the school. Should participation be promoted as an informed citizenship or practiced citizenship? What is the role of the principal in promoting active participation of young students?

In order to effectively reflect upon this question, this paper is structured as follows:

- overall approach starting from a short explanation of the project background and its main aims according to which we adopted a qualitative approach;
- approaching the fieldwork: consisting in a presentation of the sampling of the experts and in-depth Principal’s interview of the Italian High School;
- some comment and suggestions about the relationship between the European and Italian normative on participation and the educational/school practices emerging from the interview.

2. Project Background: “Partispace”

The interview and analyses that will be presented in this section is part of an ethnographic research work conducted in the framework of the European project Spaces and Styles of Participation - PARTISPACE 2015-2018 (this project receives funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme). The project aims at undertaking a comparative analysis on youth participation, in terms of young people’ involvement and engagement in decisions “which concern them and, in general, the life of their communities” (European Commission, 2001a, p. 8).

The reconstructive analysis of young people’ participation starting from the expert interview was one part of the mixed-method and multilevel

approach adopted in the Partispace project and consisted of 7 research phases. Starting from a national research literature reviews, youth policy and discourse analyses and analyses of the youth participation discourse at European level (documents the European Commission, Council of Europe, European Youth Forum), the project included a qualitative local studies in in the eight cities including (Bologna (IT), Eskisehir (TK), Frankfurt (DE), Göteborg (SE), Manchester (UK), Plovdiv (BG), Rennes (FR) and Zurich (CH).

Qualitative research was conducted through mapping youth participation (188 expert interviews, 100 focus groups and city walks with young people) and ethnographic case studies (N=48) of formal, non-formal, and informal practices of youth participation including participatory observation, group discussions and biographical interviews with young people (N=96). At the end of the project a participatory action research was developed by and with young people (N=18) and was a dissemination through local and European advisory boards a supplemented, alongside a video, a training module, a policy brief, evidence papers, newsletters and scientific publications.

The central research question of the project is how and where 15- and 30-year-old young people participate differently across social millieaus and youth cultural scenes and across eight European cities (framed by different national welfare, education and youth policies). What *styles* of participation do they prefer, develop and apply and in what *spaces* does participation take place? Answers to these questions could improve understanding of the complexities and contradictions of youth participation – on the side of policy makers as well as on the side of young people – and thereby help to empower young people in participating in society, renovating concepts, definitions and discourses on what (youth) participation is, could and should be. Corresponding to the work program topic YOUNG- 5a-2014: Societal and political engagement of young people and their perspectives on Europe, PARTISPACE starts from the assumption that social and political engagement and participation develop through practice in everyday life contexts (as school, family, peer groups) and in relation to issues of biographical relevance (turning point, family background etc.). Over recent years, youth work and youth participation have become central elements in the European youth policies as well as in

Italy, especially in school programs. From here stems the possibility to investigate spaces of participation which may or may not be recognised as such by the entities or authorities that regulate youth. The fieldwork was thus characterised by an openness that allowed finding different modes of participation and different styles of promotion and regulation of these (also) scholastic aims.

3. Approaching the fieldwork: the expert interviews

Regarding the promotion of youth work and participation structures, both public and private institutions and associations are involved in Bologna. The municipality plays a central role in supporting the active involvement of youth in the socio-political life of the city. This is often done in collaboration with the provincial and regional authorities. The goal is mainly realized through the support of youth-led or youth oriented initiatives implemented by private actors, such as social and cultural associations, cooperatives, foundations, sport clubs and other organizations. The city's Youth Office is, for example, very important in this context since it functions as a collector of local initiatives and youth engagement's opportunities.

School can be considered as another relevant institutional actor/setting in the local promotion of youth engagement. Beyond fostering youth active citizenship and socio-political inclusion through educational activities, the local schools offer a lot of opportunities of direct engagement to the students in the school councils.

For the purpose of individuation of representation of "youths' participation" in the school, the project included expert interviews with key persons like members of the municipal council, representatives of local authorities, youth workers, principals of secondary schools and representatives of youth organizations, or youth activists in each partner city. These interviews contributed to an overview of spaces and clusters of participation in the urban context and provided access to key actors and settings, while serving as a forum to discuss emerging issues, trend, contradictions.

Moreover, the expert interviews (with city walks, group discussions and local advisory groups that we don't illustrate) constituted

the privileged way in which teams were engaged in the fieldwork. The sampling of the experts followed a set of criteria (documented in the 1st Guidelines), which aimed to create a diverse sample including classic and representative participation settings as well as access to spaces and clusters of participation that might not be immediately described or narrated as youth participations. A general point of departure was the level of institutionalisation within which experts and groups of young people operate (formal, non-formal and informal). The aim was to achieve diversity in terms of levels of formality, both in the ways the groups operated within themselves and in the relation with other groups and social institutions.

There was a set of guideline questions that researchers used to guide the interviews. However, these were only indicative and were not used to break the flow of the conversation or inhibit the interviewee from addressing other issues that were not predicted beforehand by the researcher. As such, the guidelines facilitated the address to the topic whilst at the same time providing the interviewees with necessary discursive space in which they could reflect upon issues related to youth participation not formulated in the interview schedule. The researcher (or researchers) conducting the interview also noted reflections and statements that addressed topics not covered by the interview guide. The table below resumes the amount of expert interviews carried out in each city implemented.

TABLE 1: SAMPLE OF EXPERT INTERVIEWEES PER LOCAL EUROPEAN CITY

CITY	EXPERT INTERVIEWS
BOLOGNA	20
ESKIŞEHİR	30
FRANKFURT	26
GOTHENBURG	26
MANCHESTER	21
PLOVDIV	21
RENNES	22
ZURICH	22

Regarding Bologna, the interviews with the Principal of the High School were particularly relevant. The interviews were meaningful in offering the school orientation about topics related to the participation, practices of democratization and socialization in the formal organization. The interview was done in September 2016 and was oriented to the observation of youth participation meaning at the beginning of the school year in order to investigate the elements/factors that promotes/or hinder particular forms of participation in formal context. The next section introduces the exemplary interview illustrating the main approach to forms and issues of participation in a specific Italian formal context (high school).

4. The expert interview on the Italian high school

The high school “Remi” is one of the leading high schools in Bologna and is embedded in a social context of widespread economic prosperity and cultural sensitivity. The school offers a variety of extracurricular activities, which are interwoven in the curricular offer. The Institute considers them as a key task to assess the achievement of its objectives (also through external assessment) and promotes projects for the certification of pupils’ skills.

Students can stay at school in the afternoon self-managing their activities (with positive results and a lack of significant vandalism) and make use of all school facilities (Copiers, PCs suitable for students, IBW, Interactive Whiteboard...). Still in the field of self-management, students are encouraged and supported in the presentation of specific projects because, like the headmaster said “The school has a good social recognition in the surroundings for the investment of "youth empowerment" that it promotes” and this world highlight important civic and democratic aims of education.

The possibility of realization of students’ participation is in this case strictly connected to specific social status and guided by the influence of a particular family background. In this sense, particularly significant are the Headmaster’s words: “[...] We have a particularly privileged situation here, because, except for very rare circumstances, our students have a family that takes care of them, that cares about them and the value of school education. In our school, there is a sort of, how can I say, a pre-selection,

no wait, I can say it in a better way, there is a sort of self-selection before the beginning because, how can I say it, this is a school that has the reputation of being “very open” to students, welcoming, and in the last few years this has become our characteristic [...]” (Headmaster, September 2016).

Furthermore, the good quality of the institute proposal is demonstrated also by the educational outcomes of the students. Each year, teaching and learning objectives are achieved without great difficulty. Despite being a school that requires a great effort, most of the students have a good school success and teachers are very motivated in their work. Students attending our school (around 1500), come from homogeneous families and apart from a few rare exceptions, these are families who take care of the educational path of their children. Alongside the purely educational and didactic needs, the headmaster also stresses the importance of the moment when they welcome new younger students.

In this sense, the participatory activities described by the headmaster are characterized by a set of proposals – external to the didactic timetable - that the school already starts with the beginning of the school year.

The "structured" sign/trace of the participatory experience is clear from the first days through the organization of this welcome day. Furthermore, as the principal/headmaster’s words suggest, the privileged starting context and the family background of the attending students seem to make it easier to activate "politically" oriented participatory processes. In this sense, the homogeneity of the context, the family origins as well as the economic ones, are described as a fundamental premise of the activation of the participative process.

During the interview, the High school’s Principal states that “students are the owners of the school”. Usually, school is open till 7 p.m. and students can enjoy a lot of and times for discussion (e.g. student associations), meetings (peer-education), social activities (music, gardening, barbecue...). Despite this, when the word goes of students who act joining specific sided wings (i.e. association, collective working group), and of issues such as the occupation of school spaces during school hours, the Principal’s words start showing a very strong authoritative leadership and a full control of the situation: “so... about the occupation,

the last one took place 2 years ago, it lasted a few hours. I made a public announcement saying: tomorrow morning we're going to get the school back [...] you can do whatever you want, but tomorrow morning we're taking it back... and we did it, you know, in a non-violent way, we opened the doors, we all entered, we all went into the classrooms [...] that was the last occupation”.

Particularly from this episode it is possible to detect a risky situation (possible contradiction between normative and practice), that is the tendency of creating spaces of citizenship and participation at school just in order to provide a “ready-made container”, in which students are allowed to express their autonomy and agency just in preconditioned paths (it's not by chance that words like “occupation”, “self-management”, “political party” were introduced in the interview by the researchers and not by the Principal).

Together with formal participation where students have rights and duties, moments of active participation in terms of commitment and decision-making should also be promoted and created both inside and outside school as being a citizen means to be able to carry out a critical and reflective thinking in order to transform society (Di Masi, 2014).

A similar idea of citizenship is defined by McLaughlin as minimal and maximal (McLaughlin, 1992). A “minimal approach” to citizenship education limits itself in providing information about democracy and its institutions, whereas a maximal approach “demands the development of a critical comprehension of social structures and processes, so that they can be called into question, and of “virtues” that enable students to change them” (McLaughlin, 1992, p. 238). The first approach understand citizenship as a legal status, the latter can, instead, be defined as agency-based. Managing this kind of education is a hard task that runs on the delicate balance of the supply of a real space of autonomy within a strongly high controlled and structured context. To rephrase McLaughlin, a “minimal” citizenship education – which is, for example, stated by the Principal's words when he says that “the most important moment for students' growth and participation take place at this age, between 14 and 18” - is a kind of education easily provided and guaranteed within curricula and educational offer. An education promoting students' agency in terms of active participation involves “skating on thin ice” and, thus, it is more

difficult to be detected also within our case study, though it is a school known for being very much committed on promoting students' agency.

5. Comments and suggestions

From the Principal's narration emerged some contradictions and ambivalent ideas of social participation in the high school. In fact, weak and not very coherent ideas of "youth participation" experience/opportunity on the formal context came to the fore and these are not consistent with what the regulations promote in order to build citizenship competences.

In this specific case, related as well to the McLaughlin analysis, two critical aspects emerged from the real opportunity to include a critical comprehension of social structures and processes that define the experience participation.

1. From one side, participatory activities in this formal setting are not always adequate as they follow only a standardized agenda and exclude the developmental and educational skills, both in terms of peer interactions and learning process about self-empowerment or emancipation, for example.
2. From the other side, considering participation only as a transition and experience phase aimed at building one's future identity neglect the importance of autonomy and self-empowerment that are inherent to the participatory experiences in the life-phase in which they are realized.

Instead, the concept of "transition to adulthood" which school are expected to support (also according to the National directives), concerns the possibility of developing useful skills for the realization of a citizen identity that acts in the present and involves above all those who are more distant from the possibilities of realizing empowerment and emancipation thanks to development of citizen and psycho-pedagogical skills.

From the point of view of European directives, it also emerges that this kind of participatory learning occurs transversally to other important skills to be acquired. In order to achieve these objectives, citizenship education needs to help students to develop knowledge, skills, attitudes and values in four broad competence areas:

- 1) interacting effectively and constructively with others;

- 2) thinking critically;
- 3) acting in a socially responsible manner;
- 4) acting democratically.

In this vein, the scholastic institution should remember that it isn't without tools or responsibility. For instance, the Eurydice model (The Structure of the European Education Systems 2018/19 – Schematic Diagrams) suggests some answers and adopts other terms like “participation” in order to promote this participative process amongst youth like a way of democracy and autonomy. In the last Eurydice report of 2017, in fact, on citizenship education (Eurydice Report, 2017), we can find several goals for youth participation at school. Four entangled categories are identified:

1. Democratic and civic education (today, after terrorism, there was another important evolution that provides standardization of the civic education in every school degree)
2. Political Literacy
3. Development of values and behaviours for a responsible citizenship
4. Active participation

The first goal refers to the acquisition of theoretical knowledge related to human rights and democracy, as well as the functioning of political institutions and social, historical and cultural aspects of a country (civics). The second goal concerns the development of soft skills including conflict management and non-violent resolution skills. The third concerns the development of skills necessary to achieve an active, critical and responsible commitment in the school and community life, including opportunities for direct forms of participation. These goals are provided within the Italian school system with forms of students’ participation both in school life and as an informed citizenship. Each institute, according to these indications, should facilitate different forms of students’ participation both within the formal bodies and in self-managed spaces. Democracy is a “right and duty” to be learnt and practiced every day and school could be the ideal place for that.

There are two main goals within the Italian school legislation:

- at individual level, the development of self-consciousness and agency within the educational trajectory and in the construction of an identity

as a citizen;

- at collective level, the development of soft skills finalized to collaboration, debate and coexistence in a community.

School (as family in a different way), is defined as the first space of community, in which to practice confrontation and as a social space in which forms of participation and democracy are experienced. The balance between “minimal” and “maximal” approach (McLaughlin, 1992) is very delicate and promoting a real agency in term of participation seems to be still a very complicated task.

In the light of all the above mentioned, we do not offer a new typology of participation. Instead, what is described are a few examples of how nodes of ‘participation’ might be explored and opened up in order to illuminate contradiction and the distance between narration and practice and intention and reality in the educational field. The example chosen is not chosen for its typicality but because of the representative insights they yield. These cross cutting themes - participation, education, autonomy - which have emerged from our interview can be taken as a basis to contemplate upon how “youth participation” might be reflected in democratic, innovative and “active” educational practices.

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Društvena participacija u srednjoj školi: Informirano ili uvježbano građanstvo?

Sažetak

Sukladno raspravama o participaciji na nacionalnoj i europskoj razini, (Andersson i dr., 2016; Becquet i dr., 2019), participacija mladih ljudi trebala bi se poticati već u tinejđerskim godinama kao sastavni dio procesa socijalizacije pojedinaca te ishoda u daljnjem životu. Ova rasprava je iznimno važna te reflektira Strukturu europsih obrazovnih susava 2018/19 (Eurydice model). U tom pogledu, ovaj rad istražuje participativni diskurs u odnosu na propise i razvoj participacije u talijanskom nacionalnom kontekstu.

Ključne riječi: *mladi, participacija, srednja škola, obrazovni sustav, obrazovni diskursi*