

PARTICIPATION, AGENCY AND WELL-BEING: TOWARDS A DEMOCRATIC VISION OF SCHOOLING

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Abstract

International educational debate increasingly highlights the urgency of adopting a holistic vision of education capable of integrating well-being, inclusion, and democratic citizenship (OCSE, 2018; UNESCO, 2014). These dimensions, closely connected to learning and educational success - particularly for students in situations of vulnerability (OCSE, 2018) - call for a profound rethinking of the traditional school model, which often remains characterized by transmissive practices and hierarchical relationships. Although many schools formally provide opportunities for representation and participation, these frequently remain ritualistic or symbolic, offering limited possibilities for students to exercise genuine agency or to meaningfully influence educational processes. This contribution explores the relationship between participation, agency, and well-being through the research project “The School is Us!” (2023–2025), conducted in secondary schools in Milan. Grounded in the Student Voice approach (Cook-Sather, 2006; Fielding, 2004; Mitra, 2008), the study conceptualizes students as epistemic agents and co-constructors of educational meaning, emphasizing that authentic participation represents a generative condition for both well-being and a sense of belonging. The project investigates the transformative potential of student voice and participatory research practices in fostering more democratic and relational school environments (Pastori & Pagani, 2025). In its first phase, an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007) combined a survey on school climate, student voice, and participation (2023–2024) with eleven focus groups aimed at deepening students’ experiences of recognition, influence, and marginalization. In the second phase (2024–2025), mixed groups of students and teachers engaged in participatory research pathways to co-develop and experiment with proposals for school improvement, progressively transforming the project into a laboratory of democratic practice. Findings suggest that school well-being should be understood not only as an outcome but also as a driver of participation: when students are genuinely listened to and recognized as competent subjects, motivation increases, a stronger sense of belonging develops, and the school can regenerate itself as a relational and democratic community. Building on these insights, the paper discusses the implications of participatory and student-centered practices for the professional role of teachers, highlighting their key responsibility in creating dialogic learning environments, supporting students’ agency, and fostering classroom conditions that sustain both participation and well-being.

Keywords: *Student voice, mixed-methods, well-being, students’ agency, participation.*

1. Student voice as a driver of democratic educational transformation

International educational debate increasingly emphasizes the need to adopt a holistic vision of education capable of integrating well-being, inclusion, and democratic citizenship (OCSE, 2018; UNESCO, 2014). These dimensions are closely intertwined with students’ learning trajectories and educational success, particularly for those in vulnerable conditions (OCSE, 2018). Such a perspective challenges traditional transmissive models of schooling and calls for a profound rethinking of educational relationships, participation, and the role of students within school communities.

Despite the growing recognition of participation as a key educational principle, many schools continue to offer only formal or symbolic opportunities for student involvement. Participation often remains confined to consultative practices that do not substantially affect decision-making processes or institutional cultures. In this sense, contemporary schools may be interpreted through the lens of post-democracy (Crouch, 2005), where participatory structures formally exist but are deprived of transformative power. Within these contexts, students frequently experience marginalization, weak recognition, and limited opportunities to exercise meaningful agency. As highlighted in recent studies (cfr. Pastori & Pagani, 2025), students often describe school as a “non-place” (Augé, 1992), characterized by emotional distance, performative pressure, and scarce opportunities for dialogue and self-expression.

The relationship between participation, belonging, and well-being has become increasingly central within educational research. Several studies demonstrate how school climate, recognition, and opportunities for active involvement significantly influence students’ motivation, psychological well-being, and academic success (Borgonovi & Pál, 2016; Govorova et al., 2020; Anderson et al., 2022). International frameworks such as OECD-PISA have progressively incorporated indicators related to well-being and sense of belonging alongside disciplinary achievement, signaling a shift toward a more holistic understanding of education. In this perspective, well-being should not merely be conceived as an educational outcome, but also as a precondition and driver of participation, engagement, and democratic citizenship.

This paper discusses these issues through the research project “The School is Us!” (2023–2025), conducted in three upper secondary schools in Milan within the framework of the PNRR-MUSA initiative. Grounded in the Student Voice approach (Cook-Sather, 2020; Mitra, 2008), the project conceptualizes students as epistemic agents and legitimate stakeholders capable of contributing to educational transformation. The theoretical framework also draws on Hart’s (1992) ladder of participation and the model proposed by Welty and Lundy (2013), emphasizing authentic participation as a condition for democratic school cultures and relational well-being. The project ultimately positions schools as democratic learning communities where participation, agency, and inclusion are deeply interconnected.

2. Research design and methodology

The study adopted an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007), articulated in two main phases. During the first phase (2023–2024), quantitative data were collected through a questionnaire administered to 1,118 students attending the second, third, and fourth year of upper secondary schools (mean age = 15.8). The questionnaire investigated several dimensions related to school climate, participation, engagement, motivation, and students’ perceptions of educational relationships. For the purposes of the present paper, the analysis specifically focuses on the dimensions explored through the Multidimensional School Climate Questionnaire validated for Italian secondary schools by Grazia and Molinari (2021).

The instrument included eleven scales organized around two broader dimensions: *classroom practices* — including Rules, Student Support, Student Involvement, Positive Teaching, and Encouragement — and *school atmosphere*, comprising Student Relations, Student–Teacher Relations, Educational Climate, Sense of Belonging, and Interpersonal Justice. Students responded using a six-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.”

The quantitative phase was followed by an in-depth qualitative exploration through eleven focus groups involving 101 students. All focus groups were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis adopting an inductive and bottom-up approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This methodological choice aimed to preserve students’ voices and experiences as closely as possible, allowing themes and meanings to emerge directly from participants’ narratives.

In the second year of the project (2024–2025), the research evolved into participatory pathways involving mixed groups of students and teachers. Participants collaboratively analyzed school contexts, identified critical issues, and co-developed proposals for school improvement. Through this shift, the project progressively transformed into a laboratory of democratic participation and educational co-responsibility.

3. Findings: Participation, recognition and school well-being

The quantitative findings highlighted several relevant aspects concerning students’ perceptions of school climate. Positive evaluations emerged mainly regarding peer relationships and classroom management, while student involvement and student-teacher relationships received significantly lower scores. In particular, student involvement showed the lowest mean value among the investigated dimensions, suggesting persistent difficulties in fostering authentic participation within school life.

To further investigate the influence of the different dimensions of school climate on student involvement, a multiple linear regression model was estimated using Student Involvement as the dependent variable (cfr. Pastori & Pagani, 2025). The model (see Table 1) showed good explanatory power ($R^2 = .466$; adjusted $R^2 = .461$; $F(11,1044) = 82.9$, $p < .001$), confirming the multifactorial nature of the phenomenon. Among the significant predictors, respect for rules ($\beta = .180$), perceived support ($\beta = .155$), encouragement from teachers ($\beta = .151$), positive teaching practices ($\beta = .138$), student-teacher relationships ($\beta = .115$), educational climate ($\beta = .073$), and interpersonal justice ($\beta = .096$) were positively associated with student involvement, with small effect sizes according to Cohen's (1988) guidelines. Conversely, the quality of peer relationships showed a negative association ($\beta = -.071$), while classroom management ($\beta = -.006$) and sense of belonging ($\beta = .024$) were not statistically significant. Finally, school track also showed an effect, although modest in magnitude, with higher levels of involvement reported by students attending academic high schools compared to vocational schools ($\beta = -.139$). Overall, the findings suggest that student involvement does not depend on a single factor, but rather on the interaction among multiple dimensions of school climate, highlighting the need for a systemic approach to its promotion.

Table 1. Regression Model.

Model Fit Measures

Model	R	Overall Model Test					
		R^2	Adjusted R^2	F	df1	df2	p
1	0.683	0.466	0.461	82.9	11	1044	< .001

Coefficienti del Modello - SI

Predictor	Estimate				Standardized Estimate
Intercept ^a	-0.17865	0.2174	-0.822	0.411	
R	0.29655	0.0442	6.709	< .001	0.17959
SS	0.15542	0.0313	4.973	< .001	0.15506
PT	0.14470	0.0361	4.006	< .001	0.13838
E	0.13549	0.0285	4.755	< .001	0.15098
CM	-0.00573	0.0274	-0.209	0.834	-0.00564
SR	-0.07107	0.0254	-2.793	0.005	-0.07100
STR	0.11219	0.0329	3.413	< .001	0.11468
EC	0.08204	0.0357	2.300	0.022	0.07324
SB	0.02997	0.0356	0.842	0.400	0.02375
IJ	0.09249	0.0286	3.232	0.001	0.09574
Track: academic – vocational	-0.13654	0.0535	-2.554	0.011	-0.13867

^a Represents the reference level.

The qualitative findings deepened these results and offered a richer understanding of students' experiences (cfr. Pastori & Pagani, 2025). Many participants described teaching practices as predominantly transmissive, characterized by long frontal lessons with little room for dialogue, interaction, or critical reflection. Students frequently reported feeling unheard and excluded from decision-making processes directly affecting their school experience. One student explained that teachers often “listen to students speaking, but not to what they are actually saying,” emphasizing the symbolic rather than authentic nature of participation.

Students also highlighted the absence of supportive and meaningful relationships with teachers. Educational relationships were often perceived as limited to academic evaluation and performance, with scarce opportunities for encouragement, dialogue, or personal recognition. This relational distance contributed to feelings of detachment and demotivation. Several participants associated school life with constant pressure, overload, and stress, describing the normalization of anxiety and performativity as “anti-pedagogical.”

However, students' narratives did not express a rejection of schooling itself. Rather, they revealed a strong desire for schools capable of recognizing students as persons, not merely as learners subjected to evaluation. Participants explicitly requested spaces for dialogue, opportunities to express their perspectives, and educational practices fostering critical thinking, belonging, and meaningful participation.

4. From student voice to democratic transformation

The second phase of the project represented a crucial turning point, as participatory research pathways enabled students and teachers to collaboratively imagine and implement processes of school improvement. Mixed groups engaged in activities aimed at critically analyzing their educational contexts, identifying priorities, and co-constructing proposals for change.

Participation pathways took different forms across the three schools involved. In some cases, teachers actively co-designed projects alongside students; in others, they acted as critical friends or supervisors supporting students' reflections. Across all contexts, however, the project fostered opportunities for collaborative inquiry, collective deliberation, and democratic negotiation.

Students gradually transformed their reflections and concerns into concrete projects aimed at making schools more inclusive, welcoming, and participatory. Proposed initiatives included redesigning school spaces through murals, creating mixed student-teacher committees for civic education planning, and increasing the use of outdoor spaces for educational activities. Although the projects differed in scope and feasibility, they all reflected a shared desire to transform school into a more dialogic and relational environment.

An important aspect of this phase concerned the educational value of participation itself. Through activities such as debates, role-playing, collaborative discussions, and public presentations, students practiced argumentation, empathy, critical thinking, and collective decision-making. Participation became not only a research methodology but also a formative experience of democratic citizenship. Students reported developing greater awareness of their own agency and realizing that they could concretely influence school life. One participant affirmed: "We realized that students are not aware of the strength they actually have... [...] and we made it."

Teachers also recognized the transformative potential of the experience. As one teacher stated, the project demonstrated that "it is possible to break down walls" between students, teachers, and institutions through collaborative and dialogic practices.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The findings discussed in this paper suggest that school well-being should be understood not only as an outcome of positive educational experiences, but also as a condition capable of generating participation, engagement, and democratic agency. When students are authentically listened to and recognized as competent subjects, motivation increases, stronger forms of belonging emerge, and schools become more capable of regenerating themselves as relational communities.

The project "The School is Us!" highlights the transformative potential of Student Voice and participatory research practices in rethinking school culture. Rather than limiting participation to symbolic consultation, the project promoted forms of shared responsibility capable of challenging adult-centered educational models and fostering democratic practices within everyday school life. Participation, in this sense, became both a pedagogical and political process through which students could experience recognition, agency, and citizenship.

These findings also have significant implications for teachers' professional roles. Promoting participation requires educators willing to adopt dialogic approaches, share power, and recognize students as legitimate interlocutors. Teachers are therefore called not only to transmit knowledge, but also to create relational conditions that sustain well-being, trust, critical reflection, and democratic engagement. Similarly, school leaders play a crucial role in institutionalizing participatory practices and ensuring that students' voices produce concrete and visible changes.

Ultimately, the future of democratic schooling cannot rely solely on multiplying formal opportunities for participation. It requires a deeper cultural transformation grounded in reciprocity, recognition, and co-responsibility. Participatory research demonstrates its educational value precisely in this liminal space, where students' voices become a lever for institutional and cultural innovation, and schools can evolve from places of mere knowledge transmission into communities fostering well-being, agency, and democratic citizenship.

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