


# The type of participation promoted in schools is a constraint factor for inclusive education

## *El tipo de participación que promueve la escuela, una limitante para la inclusión*

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### Abstract

Several authors have shown that one of the barriers for learning and inclusion is the level of participation that is promoted within the school context, since through participation the conditions are created for the appreciation of diversity and, therefore, for the inclusion. However, in the school context, the participation experience to which students have access is limited. On this basis, a study was conducted with the objective of analyzing the type of participation promoted in secondary school. To achieve the objective, a questionnaire was applied to 539 middle school students from public schools in the metropolitan area of the city of Querétaro, Mexico. The results shown that although the school is the main area of participation that students recognize, their ideas regarding of their participation are limited to the issuance of an opinion that must be carried out in a specific way, which limits learning and inclusion.

**Keywords:** Inclusion, inclusive education, participation, secondary education, inclusion barriers, young children, teenagers.

### Resumen

Diversos autores han mostrado que una de las barreras para el aprendizaje y la inclusión es la participación que se promueve dentro del contexto escolar, ya que a través de la participación se crean las condiciones para el aprecio a la diversidad y, por ende, para la inclusión. Sin embargo, en el contexto escolar la experiencia de participación a las que el alumnado tiene acceso son limitadas. Sobre esta base, se realizó un estudio con el objetivo de analizar el tipo de participación que se promueve en la escuela secundaria. Para alcanzar el objetivo, se aplicó un cuestionario a 539 estudiantes de nivel secundaria de escuelas públicas de la zona metropolitana de la ciudad de Querétaro, México. Los resultados muestran que si bien la escuela es el principal ámbito de participación que reconocen las y los estudiantes, sus ideas al respecto de la participación están acotadas a la emisión de una opinión que debe ser realizada de una manera específica, lo cual limita el aprendizaje y la inclusión.

**Descriptores:** Inclusión, educación inclusiva, participación, educación secundaria, barreras para la inclusión, niños, niñas y adolescentes.

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## 1. Introduction and state of the issue

The normative documents of basic education in Mexico establish educational equity as a priority. Talking about equity necessarily refers to the school climate that is generated to create environments conducive to learning not only concepts, but also attitudes and values that support the democratic society, this would mean that the school is “a place of life for the child in which he is a member of society, is aware of his belonging to it and to which he contributes” (Dewey, 2001, p.224)

Based on the above, we believe that education at school should provide formative experiences that allow a coexistence in which everyone participates, since participation ensures inclusion.

Inclusive education refers to an educational process that seeks that children and adolescents have access to quality education, which would imply taking into account the diversity of people's needs and this could be achieved through the promotion of participation. To promote inclusive education, then, priority must be given to an appreciation for differences, which requires recognizing each of the people who make up the school groups and, from this, encouraging participation to generate learning. This necessarily implies that educational institutions privilege organizational and pedagogical practices in which differences are not assumed as deficits and where the participation of the community is present in all areas of school life through various means.

Participation from this perspective allows:

Learn with others and collaborate with them during classes and lessons. It implies an active involvement with what is being learned and taught and the same could be said in relation to the education that is being experienced. But participation also implies being recognized for what one is and being accepted for it (Echeita, 2016, p.4).

The importance of promoting child participation lies not only in what is a legally established right, but is a process that will allow children to develop better learning and improve the conditions of the environments in which they operate. In addition to the above, participation allows students to exercise active citizenship because it is from this that they enter into relationships with others, assuming responsibilities for the improvement of the community.

In a previous work (De la Concepción, 2015), we describe the trends that have occurred in the approach to research or experiences reported around child participation: the first has to do with participation since the recognition of rights (IFE, 2007; Zanabria, Frago, & Martínez, 2007); the second is related to the works that show that with the participation of children, childhood develops the capacity to influence and transform the environment in which they live (Muñoz, 2003, UNICEF s.f, Valderrama, 2013). The third trend in research is that which considers participation as a core component between the concepts of citizenship and democracy (Acosta, & Pineda, 2007, Botero, Torres, & Alvarado, 2008, Cajiao, 1998, Van Dijk, 2007, Hart, 1993, Fernández, 2009, Lansdown, 2001, Trilla, & Novella, 2011). Finally, the studies that have to do with the meanings or conceptions that the protagonists give to the term participation are identified (Carmona, 2008, Bosch, & González-Montfort, 2012, Hernández, 2014, Ochoa Salinas, & Díez-Martínez, 2014; Ochoa, 2015). Within this last approach, the results of the present study are inserted.

From the previous review, we affirmed that for children to be able to exercise their participation, it is a priority that the necessary conditions are created for it, specifically in the school context, as well as its proximity, it is the context recognized by girls, boys and adolescents (NNA) as the main area of participation; so it is necessary that the school teaches to participate developing skills, knowledge and attitudes that allow dialogue and association. However, to



achieve this, it is necessary to create a climate of trust in which horizontal relationships are established between the adults in charge and the children. This would imply to banish beliefs about participation since in previous studies it has been possible to verify that the pedagogical activities in the schools are rigid and the forms of participation have to do with the emission of a response or with the follow-up of the instructions given by the Teachers (Cerdeña, Loreto, Magendzo, Cruz, & Varas, 2004, De la Concepción, 2015).

Based on the idea that participation is promoted at school, it is necessary to reflect on whether the forms of participation guarantee educational inclusion as they are characterized by high directionality and rigidity.

*Typologies to observe -and promote- the participation of NNA*

Some authors and organizations (Hart, 1993, Trilla, & Novella, 2001, Gaitán, 1998, OEA/INN, 2010) have proposed some useful forms and parameters through which it would be possible to observe the participation of children and adolescents; these proposals can serve as general indicators to promote school participation in a climate of respect and appreciation for diversity.

*The menu of indicators and monitoring system of the right to participation of children and adolescents* considers that child participation is a process that to be effective, should consider three moments: information, construction and recognition of opinion and expression and listening. Therefore, it is necessary to provide accessible and pertinent information, allow and respect opinions and maintain active listening so that their opinions can be expressed (OEA/INN, 2010).

Roger Hart (1993) makes a proposal for analysis with the aim of reflecting on the scope of children's participation in community projects. Uses the metaphor of a ladder to gradually describe child participation. The first step on Hart's ladder refers to *manipulation*; the second step is that of *decoration*, in which, for example,

boys and girls "wear shirts" related to some cause, even if they do not know what it is and therefore do not participate, only "they are". As a third step is the *symbolic participation*, this is characterized by the possibility that children are allowed to express themselves, but this expression does not influence the project. The author refers to the three previous steps as "no participation".

Continuing up the ladder we find the fourth step, that of *assigned but informed*, in which the participants know the objectives of the project, know about their role in it and have the opportunity to get involved voluntarily after they have enough information to make this decision. In the fifth step, *consulted and informed*, the children become consultants of the people in charge of the project. The sixth step called *projects initiated by adults* is that decisions about activities are shared with children. The seventh step are the so-called *projects initiated and directed by children*, and finally, the highest level of participation in the ladder, the eighth step of *projects initiated by children* in which decisions are shared with adults (Hart, 1993).

Based on the previous typology, Trilla and Novella (2001) propose four kinds of childhood participation:

*Simple participation*, consisting of taking part in an activity as a spectator without the intervention of children in the preparation or content or development. They just follow directions.

*Consultative participation*, involves taking the opinion of students in matters of their competence or interest, this implies active listening by adults.

*Projective participation*, children become responsible for the project and become actors of change. This type of participation is more complex and can be presented at different times of the project.

*Meta-participation*, is that the students claim their right to participate, which requires the creation of mechanisms and spaces for participation, as well as a climate of trust that allows it.



The authors emphasize that the levels are not progressive, but that advances and setbacks can occur. In turn, Gaitán (1998) conceives child participation as a process to increase the power of organized childhood in its relationship with adults and proposes three indicators, with sub-levels, to observe it:

*Awareness* refers to the ability of girls, boys and adolescents to understand their right to participate “The more awareness they have, the greater their participation” (p.91). In turn, this indicator is composed by the sublevels: no awareness, intuitive awareness, basic awareness and deep awareness.

*Decision capacity* is to assess the alternatives that exist within the project, the sub-levels that make up this indicator are: no option, single option, relative option, multiple options.

*Capacity of action*, this indicator refers to the activities that were driven by the participants, this indicator presents the sublevels: imposed action, driven action, negotiated action and vanguard action.

Unlike the previous authors, for Gaitán (1998) these indicators are related to each other and their order is also important, since it determines the direction of the path to be traveled. A higher level of awareness translates into more decision-making capacity and a better quality of action.

These typologies could be useful not only to observe but also to generate the conditions so that authentic participation is encouraged and, at the same time, to promote inclusion since the lack of participation is a barrier to it.

In order to promote participation, it is important to foster a climate of trust that allows for the expression and exchange of ideas, thoughts and feelings, as well as the implementation of methodological strategies based on active pedagogy and learning based on experience, which would imply the collective construction of knowledge.

Based on what has been proposed, in this paper we aim to analyze the conditions for participation that are given-or not-in secondary schools based on what the students say.

## 2. Materials and methods

A qualitative study was carried out following the case method. This method allows the in-depth description of the multiple causes that the problematic generates, because “important human actions rarely have a simple cause” (Stake, 2010, p.43). In this method, several data collection techniques are used to collect the voices and scenarios involved in the case under study. In this regard, Hernández, Fernández and Baptista (2006) define it as “studies that, when using quantitative, qualitative or mixed research processes, deeply analyze a unit to respond to the problem’s approach” (p 224).

According to its objective, the present case study was descriptive, since what is sought is to characterize the conditions in which participation in secondary schools takes place.

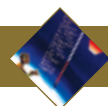
The sample consisted of 539 high school students from two public schools in the city of Querétaro, Mexico, of which 183 were first grade, 178 second grade and 178 third grade.

The instrument was a questionnaire to investigate the conditions in which the participation of the students takes place, from the participatory experiences that they claim to live in their school, the instruments were structured in the following sections: the first with general data, the second described four situations with problems that affected them on a daily basis. In this section they wrote, in addition to their opinion, what they would do in that situation. The third section was composed of fifteen open questions that inquired about the following aspects:

*Conceptions of girls and boys about participation:* When you hear the word participate, what do you think about? in what places can you participate? how do you participate?

*Conceptions of girls and boys about participation in the school context:* Can you participate in your school? How do you participate in your school?

*Conceptions of children about child participation as a civil and political right:* Is participa-



tion a right? Why is participation a right for girls and boys?

The answers were transcribed and the data of the questionnaire were tabulated in categories to later make a global analysis, that is, a comparison of the data with the theoretical referents.

### 3. Analysis and results

As mentioned in the description of the methodology, the questionnaire was applied to the students, and since the questions were open, they were transcribed and organized based on their conceptual similarity. As an answer could contain several ideas, we proceeded to place them in categories, later they were counted and percentages were calculated to observe the trends

in the answers. Therefore, the percentage that is presented in the corresponding charts does not refer to the number of participants but to the types of response.

The first question had to do with investigating the ideas that the students have about participation, they were asked the question: When you hear the word participate, what do you think? As can be seen in Chart 1, the idea of participation they present has to do with the *issuance of an opinion, followed by speaking or saying*. It is also interesting that the answer that has the following proportion is that of *I don't know* and *others*. This is important because it can indicate that this population does not have clarity in one of the necessary conditions to promote participation, the recognition of the right to do so.

Chart 1. Percentages of response types to the question: When you hear the word participate, what do you think?

Categories	%
Give an opinion	40
Talk or say	16
Other	10
I do not know/Did not answer	10
Participate	9
Is a right	6
Raise your hand	4
Help	4
School activities	1
	100

Source: own elaboration.

In order to deepen the recognition of participation as a right, the next question was whether they considered participation as a right and why they considered it as such. 100% of the participants considered that participation is a right, this data is relevant because for a right to become effective its recognition is necessary.

In relation to the reasons why they considered that participating is a right, most of them concentrated on *allowing them to express an*

*opinion* (79%); If we relate this result to the previous one, we can observe that the conception of participation is circumscribed to the expression or emission of an opinion. However, there are some answers that allude to other aspects, such as *because we are the same* (13%), the remaining 8% alluded to *is an obligation*.

Subsequently we inquired about the areas of participation that distinguish students.



Chart 2. Percentages of response types to the question: In what places do you think you can participate?

Categories	%
School	30
Home	28
Everywhere	24
Other	7
Classroom	5
I do not know/Did not answer	5
In the right place	1
	100

Source: own elaboration.

The answers in Chart 2 indicate that the school is distinguished as the privileged area of participation, followed by the home. The aforementioned is of fundamental importance because the school, given the proximity to the students, could promote participatory experiences that imply the construction of inclusive environments of learning and coexistence.

With the intention of inquiring about the initiative that students may or may not have to exercise participation, we asked them about their experience while participating. Most of the answers were concentrated in the category: *always* with 28%, followed by *when I want* 25%, *when they ask me to* 20%, *when is needed* 12%, and 12% *for school activities*. These responses are striking because they clearly denote the motivation factor as important to favor participation;

this should be taken into account to promote active methodologies.

To inquire about the participation experiences that the students said they had, they were asked how they participate. The answers mostly referred to: *giving my opinion* 57%, *helping* 11%, *talking* 10%, *raising the hand* 8%, *other* 8% and *Observing the formalities* with 6%.

It is observed that the way in which students distinguish that they participate is by *giving their opinion* followed by *helping* and *talking*. Relating these answers with those presented in Chart 1, it can be confirmed that the idea of participation presented by the participants is simple (Trilla, & Novella, 2001) or a symbolic participation (Hart, 1993).

To inquire specifically about the school context, we asked about how they participate in school. The answers are presented in Chart 3.

Chart 3. Percentages of types of response to the question How do you participate in school?

Categories	%
Giving my opinion	38
Raising my hand	23
Observing the formalities	14
Helping	10
Talking	9
School activities	6
	100

Source: own elaboration.

Unlike the answers of the previous question, the answer: *raising the hand* increases,

while the answer *giving my opinion* decreases. The emergence of the category we call *Observing*





*the formalities* is interesting, given that here were included answers about how participation in the school is expected, for example, with a strong and clear voice, without nerves, with confidence, among others. The emergence of this type of response denotes the influence of the beliefs of adults about participation

and their involvement in the implementation of activities and/or strategies where different forms of participation are promoted.

To inquire, specifically, about how participation in the classroom occurs, we asked about this particular space. The answers are presented in the following chart.

Chart 4. Percentages of response types to the question How do you participate in your classroom?

Categories	%
Giving my opinion	37
Raising my hand	26
School activities	21
I give proposals or ideas	10
Talking	3
Helping	3
	100

Source: own elaboration.

In this case, the highest percentage of responses is concentrated on *giving my opinion*, followed by *raising my hand* and *school activities*. This type of response included activities that had to do with exhibitions, go to the board, read, answer specific questions, that is, execute instructions from the teacher to complete some schoolwork.

In order to try to notice specific participation actions, they were questioned about the activities in which they have been invited at the school. The highest percentage of responses is concentrated in *none* (35%). The following trend

in the answers refers to *school activities* (21%), so it is deduced that the population of this study identifies the participation with the execution of proper school actions. The following trends in the responses alluded to sports (16%), cultural (13%), did not answer (9%) and others with 6%.

As it was said, in order to promote authentic participation, it is necessary to involve students in the problems that affect them, so that in turn they are also involved in their resolution. To know which problems they observe, they were asked to describe a situation that would worry them in their school. The answers are presented below.

Chart 5. Percentages of response types to the question: Write a situation that worries you about your school

Categories	%
Treatment among students	21
Attitude of teachers	20
School facilities	17
Situations of risk (insecurity, drug addiction, crime)	12
Cleanliness	9
Sexuality, gender	9
I do not know/Did not answer	8
There are none	2
Qualifications/Failing	2
	100

Source: own elaboration.



What concerns students the most is the *treatment among students*, followed by the *attitude of teachers*. It can be inferred, from these answers, that there may be conflicts of coexistence in these groups, since the two problems with the highest percentages of responses allude to this.

To deepen in the above, they were questioned about the resolution of this problem and their participation as actors in the solution. The answers are given in the following chart.

Tabla 6. Porcentaje de tipos de respuesta a la pregunta ¿Cómo la resolverías?

Categorías	%
Sancionando	17
Dando aviso a una autoridad	15
Hablando/opinando	15
Participando	12
Medidas de Seguridad	11
Ayudando	9
Otras	8
Limpiando	8
Arreglando/Haciendo	5
	100

Source: own elaboration.

As can be seen in Chart 6, the way in which the problem is conceived is primarily *sanctioned*, followed by *giving notice to the authority*. These answers are revealing and confirm what is shown throughout the previous charts, and the students of these groups have a limited conception of participation and a passive attitude given that in the schools the participation experiences are limited to school activities directed by the teacher. This has as a consequence that the students assume a role of spectator who thinks of heteronomous options to solve the conflicts that concern them.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

Normative documents and political discourses recognize the importance of promoting inclusive education, however, these intentions are rarely translated into consistent practices within institutions. From the results it can be seen that the participation ideas mentioned by the students are related to the issuance of an opinion, we can also affirm that, although there is participation

in the school, it is a limited participation and limited to school activities, thought and planned by adults, what is called a simple participation (Trilla, & Novella, 2001). We agree with Gaitán (1998) regarding the need to promote participatory activities that allow children and adolescents a greater level of awareness about their decisions and their actions. However, this would imply that the students in the school would stop being spectators and mere executors of orders.

In this sense, and as it was observed in the results, if the students consider that the participation is limited to the issuing of an opinion and that this should be under the canons established by the institution, they are assuming a passive role, which does not favor the promotion of authentic participation. Therefore, it is necessary to generate a climate that promotes diverse activities that do not privilege a single form of participation -the oral one-, as it usually happens in our schools, which generates mechanisms of exclusion since usually the same children partici-





pate in this manner. In this regard, Corona and Morfin (2001) affirm that:

Verbal expression is only one and perhaps not the most important of the many ways that children have to manifest what is happening inside them. The acts, the emotional expressions including the tantrums, the attitudes and the silences are full of meaning and it is necessary to sharpen the sensitivity to understand them. (p 44)

From these results we can see that the experience that is lived in the school in relation to participation is limited to the academic sphere and is directed by the teachers, since the daily activities are structured and organized by the adults, assigning a passive role to the students. This is confirmed by contrasting previous works (Ochoa, 2015, Ochoa, Pérez, & Salinas, 2018). In this regard, Bolívar (2016) mentions that:

The institutional or organizational structure of a school provides a set of tasks, processes and meanings in daily life that are promoting a specific citizenship. The learning of values and attitudes requires, then, experiencing them in the organizational structure of the school or school establishment, so there are forms of organization that institutionalize better educate for a democratic society. A school to learn how to exercise citizenship must promote, in the first place, active participation at all levels. (p.79)

One of the barriers to inclusion is the type of participation that is promoted. The other is the non-recognition that the participation of children and adolescents is a right. This implies that the conditions for its exercise are not created. Moreover, if the children and adolescents themselves do not recognize it as such, it will be difficult for them to demand compliance. Hence the importance of being safeguarded and promoted.

Thus, in order to favor the participation of children and adolescents, and thereby gener-

ate environments of respect and appreciation for diversity, a change of view of adults about childhood and about their participation within the school is required. School that considers three aspects:

- The pedagogical, implementing participatory methodologies that impact on learning.
- The cultural, because it involves giving voice to children and with this redistributing the power of decision making.
- The promotion of rights. Participation should not be considered as a concession by adults but as a right that must be respected.

According to the Model of Compulsory Basic Education (SEP, 2017) proposed by the Mexican State, as well as various international organizations such as UNESCO (2015), inclusion and equity are “the cornerstone of a transformative education” (p. 7), which would imply the implementation of participatory strategies, as well as create the necessary conditions and mechanisms for everyone to participate.

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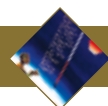
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