WHAT DO POLITICAL PARTICIPATION MEANS TO SPANISH STUDENTS?

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Abstract

In this article I explore how a group of Spanish students (aged 11-19) understand the meaning of ‘political participation’ in society and discuss the implications of their views for debates and practices in citizenship education. I analyse from an in-depth and interpretative approach using open questionnaires and interviews, the ways in which these students (n=112) describe and interpret political participation. The results suggest that most students value political participation in positive terms and that ‘activists’ students have a more optimistic view of the effectiveness of participation and specially, of new forms of participation such as protests.

Résumé
Dans cet article, j'explore comment un groupe d'étudiants espagnols (11-19 ans) à comprendre la signification de la «participation politique» dans la société et de discuter les implications de leurs points de vue pour des débats et des pratiques en matière d'éducation à la citoyenneté. J'analyse, à partir d'une approche interprétative à l'aide de questionnaires et d'entretiens ouverts, les façons dont ces étudiants (n = 112) décrivent et interprètent la participation politique. Les résultats suggèrent que la plupart des étudiants apprécient la participation politique en termes positifs et que les étudiants «militants» de ont une vision plus optimiste de l'efficacité de la participation et spécialement, de nouvelles formes de participation telles que protestations.

Resumen

En este artículo explore como un grupo de estudiantes españoles (11-19 años) perciben la “participación política” y discuto las implicaciones de sus puntos de vista para el debate y las prácticas en educación para la ciudadanía. Analizo, des de una perspectiva interpretativa con la ayuda de cuestionarios y entrevistas abiertas, la manera en que estos alumnos (n=112) describen e interpretan la participación política. Los resultados sugieren que la mayoría de alumnos valora positivamente la participación y que entre ellos, los alumnos activistas son mas optimistas sobre la eficacia de la participación, en especial sobre las formas alternativas de participación política como las protestas.

1. Introduction

There are several reasons why research into the views of young people is useful. Following the socio-constructivist and symbolic interactionist approach, I assume that students’ constructs of citizenship concepts contribute towards their identity as citizens and thus guide their present and future political actions (Dahlgren 2003; Haste, Hogan 2006; Dejaeghere, Hooghe 2009). I believe we need to understand the ways students perceive ‘political participation’ and the links that those understandings might have to the ways they are currently engaged- and perhaps will engage- in politics. Students’ perceptions act as useful source of information by which we may reflect upon how we, as society, are educating the citizenry to behave and can provide insights into whether or not citizens’ educators are discussing the teaching of political participation in the same ways students do.

Existing research has highlighted the complexity in which students conceive citizenship and citizenship concepts (Husfeldt, Nikolova 2003: Kennedy et al. 2008; Farthing 2010) and it has been suggested that theoretical literature can be helpful as we seek to understand students’ citizenship constructs (Kennedy 2007). Due, in part, to the links between the concept of political participation and the idea of democratic citizenship (Dalton 2006), there are many different debates regarding the construct of political participation (Ekman, Amnå 2012). One of these debates discusses whether or not ‘activism’ should be considered a form of political participation. In this paper, I assess the utility of these debates to inquire about students’ construct of political participation and its links with the construct of civic activism. The literature review is here used to identify the theoretical disagreements regarding the definition of political participation and these debates are later contrasted, dynamically, with information emerged from data. The purpose of this comparison is to identify whether or not students perceive political participation in the same terms scholars do.

Spanish society has recently experienced a wide range motivations for and types of engagement and as such there are opportunities to explore the characteristics of political participation that are held by young people (van Stekelenburg 2012; Robles et al. 2012; Fathing 2010). In comparison with other countries such as the USA, UK, Australia and the Netherlands (e.g. Torney-Purta et al. 2001; Westheimer, Kahne 2004; Leenders et al. 2008; Schultz et al. 2010) and notwithstanding the current political debate regarding the characteristics of citizenship education in the Spanish curriculum (see e.g. Gómez, García 2013), little research has been conducted in Spain concerning students, political participation and civic activism. Consequently, the knowledge about Spanish students’ perception of the meaning of participation is currently undeveloped relative to the theoretical debates discussed in the present literature.

This research attempts to fill these gaps by reflecting on scholarly debates and further exploringthe perceptions of the meaning of political participation among Spanish students and discussing the possible orientations to citizenship education that their definitions of participation can suggest. Following this review I summarize the research method used in this empirical project and I describe how the theoretical discussions have been used in my data analysis. I present the results of those analyses and finally discuss possible orientations to citizenship education that students’ definitions of political participation can suggest.

2. A review of the literature

Prior to and simultaneously with the development of the empirical project involving Spanish young people a literature review was completed. Searches were principally undertaken between September 2009 and September 2012 and completed by September-October 2013. This review focused upon two topics: the definition of ‘political participation’ and the research about students’ understanding of ‘participation’.

The review strategy focused principally on theoretical studies published in journals since the 1980s until 2013 with keywords provided for titles in both English and Spanish (‘political participation’, ‘civic participation’, ‘political engagement’, ‘civic engagement’, ‘active citizenship’, ‘political involvement’, ‘community involvement’, ‘activism’ and ‘definition’, ‘meaning’) in google scholar. Available handbooks and dictionaries on citizenship studies, political science and political philosophy were also consulted (e.g. Isin, Torner 2002; Vallès 2004; Nohlen 2006; Estlund 2012). 65 papers and books were retrieved using this procedure. The second topic reviewed related to the literature regarding students’ understanding of participation and political participation. Searches were conducted within empirical studies in English, Spanish, Catalan and French since the beginning of the 1990s (to include the first IEA Civic Education Study) up until  2013, for students aged 11-18 (with special attention applied to studies incorporating Spanish students) with titles including specific keywords (‘political’, ‘civic’ and ‘participation’, ‘engagement’, ‘active citizenship’, ‘involvement’, ‘activism’ and ‘students’, ‘teenagers’, ‘young’) within journal databases (Eric and google scholar). Following these criteria 279 articles were identified and only those focusing on students’ understanding of the concepts searched (this is perceptions, conceptions, views, representations about participation, engagement, active citizenship) were analysed (n= 79).

2.1 Literature Review: Meanings of ‘political participation’.

The purpose of this literature review is to identify the different definitions of political participation present among the scholarly community as a framework to better understand students’ views. This implies the assumption that, besides the several debates undertaken to define the concept (e.g. Schwartz 1984; Conge 1988; Day 1992; Haste, Hogan 2006; Teorell et al 2007; Reichert 2010; Ekman, Amnå 2012), there is no consensus upon what is and what is not political participation.

The definition of political participation is controversial in terms of selecting the concrete actions that are ‘political’. Using several categories of analysis (e.g. legality, conventionality, violence), social science scholars have long discussed what types of actions might be considered political participation (Conge 1988; Ichilov 1990; Vallès 2004; Nohlen 2006; Friedrich 2007; Farthing 2010; Ekman, Amnå 2012). This debate can be summarized into two paradigms (Dalton et al. 2001; Farthing 2010).  The ‘old paradigm’ understands political participation as the conjunction of legal, conventional and governmental actions such as voting, joining a political party or becoming a candidate (e.g. Putnam 2000; Macedo et al. 2005). In contrast, the ‘new paradigm’ supports a wider definition of political participation that also includes illegal, unconventional or non-governmental actions such as boycotting, network campaigning, etc. (see, for example, Inglehart 1997; Norris 2002; Bennet et al. 2009). Whereas the old paradigm excludes ‘civic activism’ as a form of political participation, the new paradigm highlights the importance of any sort of activism. According to Ekman and Amnå (2012) the old understanding of political participation includes exclusively the ‘formal political participation activities’. In contrast, the new paradigm identifies political participation as equivalent to participation by including as political participation manifest political participation activities (this is formal political participation and legal and illegal forms of activism) and latent political participation activities (this is involvement and civic engagement).

Existing empirical studies on students’ understanding of ‘good citizenship’ suggest that the debate of old versus new participation is also present in students’ views, especially in Spain. Phenomenological research (Martínez et al. 2012) –with data emerging from Chilean students’ answers- supports the existence of two different approaches to political participation: those students who define participation as old participation and those who define it as new participation. This division also seems to be supported by specific research focused on understanding whether Belgian students’ perception can be classifiable into one group or the other (Dejaeghere, Hooghe 2009). The debate of old versus new participation is probably the most used criterion to classify students’ perception of participation (Torney-Purta et al. 2001, Haste, Hogan 2006; Martin, Chiodo 2007; Benton et al. 2008; Tupper et al. 2010; Schultz et al. 2010) and the existing results suggest that Spanish students are easily classifiable into the aforementioned groups (González Balletbó 2007; Schultz et al. 2010). Furthermore, it has been suggested that Spanish students are more susceptible to perceive activism and other new forms of participation as political participation than other European students (Anduiza 2001; García, Martín 2010; Schultz et al. 2010). Although the consensus of this two approaches to participation in students’ views would advance the probable existence of this dimension within students’ definition of participation, in the present research I have chosen to take into consideration the old versus new dimension without imposing any established category to the data.

The nature of political participation has also been debated as an important issue within the liberal/republican discussion on rights and duties and has been used to increase the understanding of students’ answers. Although in the theoretical debate generically political participation is described as a right (liberal model) or as a duty (republican model) (Janoski 1998; Heater 1999; Annette 1999; Frazer 1999; Barnes et al. 2004), the overlap between these conceptions is large. For instance political participation might be understood as both right and duty at the same time (Janoski 1998); some sort of political activities can be considered rights and other duties (Schultz et al. 2010); and an intermediate approach can be supported by understanding that political participation is a right and a political virtue (Gutman 1987; Macedo et al. 2005; Galston 1991). Applied to educational research, this debate and sometimes, its overlaps, have been used to inquire about students’ perceptions.

Research studies have been conducted to identify whether students understand participation as a right, as a duty or as both. Students’ understanding of participation as rights or duties have emerged from data (Santisteban, Pagès 2009; Martínez et al. 2012) and have been used as a constructed dimension from which to analyse students’ understanding (Cabrera et al. 2005; Schultz et al. 2010; INJUVE 2012). Nevertheless, there is not a consensus regarding the findings of these studies and it could be argued that the discrepancies in their results are due to the different decisions taken by researchers in the process of data collection. As students were required to answer different questions, their answers were different and this have an impact on the findings researchers have presented. Indeed, rather than intending to classify students into two or three specific boxes, I argue that the duties/rights debate and its overlaps might be more helpful to understand students’ construct of political participation as a complex reality.

Simultaneously to the debates about the concrete actions and the duty/right nature of political participation, other debates have been held on this topic, although their impact on educational research has been much more limited. Within these debates, the representative/participatory discussion can be highlighted for its increasing impact on social science theory (Kateb 1981; Schwartz 1984; Oldfield 1990; Held 1992; Kymlicka, Norman 1994; Knopf 1998; Cleaver 1999; Nohlen 2006; Friedrich 2007; Altman 2013; Dufek, Hotzer 2013) and research (e.g. Hibbing et al. 2001; Donovan, Karp 2006; Bowler et al. 2007). In brief, the representative scholars advocate representative forms of participation arguing that the value of participation is in its results and that representativeness is the only way to ensure quality politics. In contrast, the participatory scholars support that participation is valuable itself –especially for its educational potential- and therefore it should be promoted and extended to direct participation. The overlaps and internal discussion within these two trends are, nevertheless, considerable. There is a wide range of options between the extreme representative participation and the extreme direct participation (Mazo 2005; Altman 2013) and the participatory scholars do not reach an agreement on whether political participation is a way to achieve consensus (deliberative) or to generate conflict (conflict theorists) (Mouffe 1999; Janoski, Gran 2002; Ruitenberg 2009).

Research on young people’s perception of democracy suggests that students use the opposition between direct and representative participation when constructing their definition of political participation. The results of Magioglou (2000), in young Greeks (aged 18-26), indicate that young people differ between ‘real democracy’, which is based on representative participation and ‘ideal democracy’, which is based on direct participation. However, beyond Magioglou’s research, no other investigations have been found associating the participatory/representative debate with students’ perceptions. This would suggest that the relevance of this debate remains unknown in the determination of students’ construct of political participation.

The key issue for the purposes of the current study is that students’ perceptions of political participation have been subject to limited investigation through the lens of selected theoretical debates (old/new; right/duty), usually, as a part of wider programmes of research on students’ perception of ‘good citizenship’ or ‘democracy’. This application has provided us with contradictory results about how students perceive political participation. Due to these existing investigations, we are aware that Spanish young people can be classified between those who understand political participation as old form of participation and those who understand political participation as new forms of participation (González Balletbó 2007; Valls, Borisson 2007). We are also aware that they may understand political participation in terms of rights/duties (Santisteban, Pagès 2009). However, there are contradictory results regarding the possible links between their understanding of political participation and their views about rights and duties (Cabrera et al. 2005; Messina et al. 2007; Santisteban, Pagès 2009; INJUVE 2012). Finally, the incidence of other scholarly controversies (whether participation is valuable by itself or it is valuable to achieve some external goals; whether participation is a way to generate consensus or a way to generate conflict) into students’ discourse remains unknown.

Taking into account these research gaps and with purpose to contribute to the understanding of Spanish’ students perceptions of the meaning of political participation and its links with activism, the objectives of this research are:

·      To explore further the perceptions of the meaning of ‘participation’ among a group of Spanish students;

·      To analyse whether students and citizens educators discuss the meaning of ‘political participation’ in the same terms.

3. Method

To inquire into students’ perception of political participation I followed the theory and method of social representations included into the socio-constructivist and symbolic interactionist approach. I assumed, from a naturalistic approach, that humans actively construct their own meanings (Cohen et al. 2011) and that students have a social representation of political concepts such as ‘democracy’ (Moodie et al. 1995; Magioglou 2000), ‘community’ (Moodie et al. 1997), ‘public sphere’ (Jovchelovitch 1995) and ‘participation’. ‘Social representation’ is here defined as a "system of values, ideas and practices with a two fold function: first to establish an order which will enable individuals to orient themselves in their material and social world and to master it; and secondly to enable communication " (Moscovici 1973, p.xiii). The theory of Social representations was used as a frame to inquire about students’ perceptions.

3.1 Participants.

In this small-scale study I conducted a two-stage sampling without any intention to obtain a simple random sample. In the first stage, I conducted volunteer sampling. Although I was aware of the weakness of this sampling strategy (in particular the non-representativeness of the sample) (Morrisson 2006), I considered it appropriate due to the socio-constructivist approach of the research and the availability of resources. Students whose teachers volunteered to participate in the research were selected. These teachers (n=6) were volunteers among the 21 Barcelona teachers with professional experience and commitment to citizenship education who were directly requested via professional network. 1 class of students for each of these teachers (each of them from 1 different school) volunteered and was surveyed (total of students, n=112).

The first stage sample (n=112) was composed of 43.8% boys and 56.3% girls and the range of ages was between 10 and 19 years (10-11 years, 17.9%; 12-13, 29.4%; 14-15, 32.1%; 16-17, 16%; 18-19, 3.6%). 8.9% of these students were special needs students. They were aged between 16-19 but their schooling age was equivalent to 13-14 years old.

The aim of the second stage sampling was to select students with different perceptions of political participation to take part in individual and focus group interviews. To identify these key informants I assumed the association between the conception of good citizenship and the perception of participation (Dalton et al.2001) and I selected students with different models of good citizenship. The entire group of the students completed a questionnaire (Westheimer, Kahne 2004)[1] and was classified into one of the three models of citizenship described by Westheimer and Kahne (2004): Personally responsible citizen; Participatory citizen; and Justice-oriented citizen. It was naturally not possible simply to impose this framework on the students’ data. Rather, Westheimer and Kahne’s categories were regarded as useful broad labels that allowed for a variety of perspectives to be included in the research. 4 representative students of each type of citizenship were selected (n=12) to be interviewed individually and as part of a group. The second sample was composed of 7 girls (58.3%) and 5 boys (42.7%) whose mean age was 13.8 years (11 years old, 2 students, 16.7%; 12 years old, 2 students, 16.7%; 14 years old, 2 students, 16.7%; 15 years old, 4 students, 33.3%; 16 years old, 2 students, 16.7%).

3.2 Data collection and analysis.

Data collection was conducted via questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. In line with previous research on social representations (Wagner et al. 1999), all the students from the first sample (n=112) answered a questionnaire and the 12 students from the second sample were interviewed and took part in a focus group.

As part of a wider programme of research (*Author* 2013), the questionnaire contained questions to classify students into models of citizenship for sampling purposes (see the participants’ section) and one open question. Using the example of existing research on social representations (Lorenzi-Cioldi 1996; Moodie et al. 1997) and with the purpose to collect spontaneous responses, students were asked to write down the first sentences that came into their minds related first to ‘politics’ and then to ‘participation’. I assumed that the word participation (and not political participation) was more useful to research about students’ understanding of political participation in all its possible meanings attributed from different theories (see the debate new/old participation in the literature review for a wider explanation). To avoid any confusion as to whether the question was about participation in society or participation in class, I used first the word ‘politics’ to contextualize in students’ minds the word participation. Free association has already been explored and critically justified to obtain subjective meanings by Davies and Fülöp (2010) following the Associative Group Analysis strategy proposed by Szalay and Brent (1967). Students’ responses to the word politics are only used here when they gave meaning to the participation answer (e.g. one student wrote a full sentence divided into the space attributed in the questionnaire to answer the question about politics and the space to answer to participation).

After the first data analysis, brief semi-structured interviews were conducted with the key-informants students (n=12). To assist the interviews, I decided to use vignettes due to their capacity “to ‘get under the skin’ of complex ‘undiscussables’ thought prompts” (Hurworth 2012, p.179). The vignettes presented a situation where a bank crashed in a town and 50% of the population lost their savings, students were asked to read three different ways of acting in this circumstance and decide which one they thought was better. Each of these different ways of acting was based on the models of citizenship described by Westheimer and Kahne (2004).

3 heterogeneous focus groups were later conducted to increase the potential for discussion (Cohen et al. 2011). In each case, 4 students from the same class who had chosen different models of citizenship in the questionnaire[[1]](#endnote-1) (Westheimer, Kahne 2004) (at least one student for each kind of citizenship model) were encouraged to debate about the different views of participation and their reasons to support those views.

Following the research method described by Wagner et al. (1999) about Jovchelovitch’s study on social representations, data was first systematized and later analysed. Data from the questionnaires was initially systematized and codified by using the qualitative software package TAMSanalyzer. Following Miles and Huberman (1994), 43 codes and sub-codes emerged from data and I classified them into 6 large dimensions of analyses. Codes and sub-codes were contrasted with data from the interviews and 4 more codes emerged (n=47) (the full matrix and the frequencies of each code are shown in table I).

Once the full data was systematized I conducted qualitative and quantitative analyses. First, I contrasted the codes and dimensions that had emerged with the theoretical debates identified in the literature review and found some similarities and some differences. The differences were identified and the similarities were used to understand and classify emerged codes within each of the emerged dimensions (see these codes in italics in table I). Second, and following the procedure used by Jovchelovitch (1995) in her research about social representations of the ‘public sphere’, I analysed data based on descriptive statistics of the codes. Each student was assigned to be a level of analysis and the existence or non-existence of each code was tested for each student independently of the type of data collection conducted. Absolute and relative frequencies were calculated using the rule that each code would be only applied once to each student of the larger sample. Finally, I interpreted the data using the co-occurrence of codes and the argumentation developed by students in the groups and individual interviews.

4. Results

In the table I, I present the results from the data systematization and analyses. It must be highlighted that whereas the codes and sub-codes (n=47) emerged directly from data, the dimension (n=6), sub-dimension (n=4) and code-family (n=9) were built upon these codes. Most of the categories emerged from the analysis of the codes, but some of them (those in italics) were applied to data after the first contrast with theory.

Table I. Matrix of analyses and absolute and relative frequency of occurrence of codes. All codes and categories emerged from data except those shown in italics.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Dimension | Sub-dimension | Code-family | Code | Sub-code | Frequency of occurrence (ni) | Relative frequency of occurrence (fi) |
| What is the fundamental nature of participation? |  | Key areas | Importance |  | 21 | 22.83 |
|  |  |  | Contribution |  | 10 | 10.87 |
|  |  |  | Need |  | 10 | 10.87 |
|  |  |  | Good/Bad |  | 9 | 9.78 |
|  |  |  | Interest |  | 8 | 8.70 |
|  |  | Value | Positive |  | 46 | 47.82 |
|  |  |  | Ambiguous |  | 9 | 9.78 |
|  |  |  | Negative |  | 3 | 3.26 |
| What is the aim of participation? | *Instrumental aims or intended external goals* |  | To change |  | 7 | 7.61 |
|  |  |  | To help others |  | 6 | 6.52 |
|  |  |  | To maintain democracy |  | 2 | 2.17 |
|  |  |  | To maintain public spaces |  | 2 | 2.17 |
|  |  |  | To maintain stability |  | 2 | 2.17 |
|  |  |  | To select representatives |  | 1 | 1.09 |
|  |  |  | Goal (not explicit)  |  | 15 | 16.30 |
|  | *Benefits of participation itself or intended internal goals* |  | To decide |  | 5 | 5.43 |
|  |  |  | To enjoy |  | 2 | 2.17 |
|  |  |  | To communicate | To express | 3 | 3.26 |
|  |  |  |  | To know others’ opinions | 7 | 7.61 |
| Who benefits from participation? |  |  | Person or group of people |  | 13 | 14.13 |
|  |  |  | Whole society |  | 11 | 11.96 |
|  |  |  | Underprivileged |  | 5 | 5.43 |
|  |  |  | Politicians |  | 4 | 4.35 |
| What sort of process is associated with participation? |  | Participation as people joining together | Same opinions |  | 18 | 19.57 |
|  |  |  | Different opinions |  | 12 | 13.04 |
|  |  | The purpose of people joining together | To consensus |  | 16 | 17.39 |
|  |  |  | To achieve one’s own goal |  | 10 | 10.87 |
| What sorts of concrete actions are relevant to participation? | *Old – Representative* | Mechanism | To vote |  | 15 | 16.30 |
|  | *New - direct* |  | To protest | To demonstrate | 4 | 4.35 |
|  |  |  |  | To strike | 1 | 1.09 |
|  |  |  |  | To protest (not explicit) | 7 | 7.61 |
|  |  |  | To collaborate |  | 7 | 7.61 |
|  |  |  | To opine |  | 5 | 5.43 |
|  |  |  | To decide |  | 1 | 1.09 |
|  |  |  | To help |  | 8 | 8.70 |
|  |  | Characteristic | Legal |  | 2 | 2.17 |
|  |  |  | Illegal |  | 6 | 6.52 |
|  |  |  | Peaceful |  | 3 | 3.26 |
| What are the differences between reality and ideal participation? |  | Reality/ Ideal | Reality |  | 3 | 3.26 |
|  |  |  | Ideal |  | 6 | 6.52 |
|  |  | The difference between ideal and reality | Number of participants |  | 8 | 8.70 |
|  |  |  | Importance |  | 1 | 1.09 |
|  |  |  | Effectiveness |  | 11 | 11.96 |
|  |  |  | Implication |  | 6 | 6.52 |
|  |  | Other codes | Right |  | 2 | 2.17 |
|  |  |  | Voluntarily |  | 1 | 1.09 |

As shown in the table I, most of the investigated students’ described their view of the fundamental nature of participation (63.04%). In the questionnaire these students described participation in terms of “It is/isn’t important” (22.83%), “It is/isn’t necessary” (10.87%), “It contributes/helps” (10.87%), “It is good/bad” (9.78%), “I like/don’t like it” (8.70%).  Half of the students who answered the questionnaire valued participation positively in relation to one of the key areas previously mentioned but some noted down an ambiguous opinion (9.78%) and some explained their negative opinion of participation (3.26%).

53.26% of the students identified the aims of participation. The most quoted terms were “to contribute/achieve something” (16.30%), “to contribute to change” (7.61%), “to know others’ opinions” (7.61%), “to help others” (6.52%) and “to decide” (5.43%).  These students’ responses were classified into two sub-dimensions: aims concerning external goals or possible beneficial results of participation, such as “to help others” or “to change something” (38.04%) and those with aims concerning internal goals or the benefits of the act of participation itself, such as “to enjoy” or “to communicate” (18.47%).

Approximately 30% of the students investigated noted that participation was beneficial for someone. These students described that participation provides a benefit exclusively for the person or group that participate (14.13%), for the whole society (11.96%), exclusively for the underprivileged (5.43%) and exclusively for the politicians (4.35%).

28.26% of the students associated participation with a process whereby single individuals join together. Whereas some students understand that this constituted group share the same goal in its entirety (19.57%), others mentioned the existence of different goals within the group (13.04%). For some students, the goal of the participation group was to build consensus towards a common goal for everybody (17.39%). For the others, the goal was to achieve their own goal that was not necessary shared by the others (10.87%).

The concrete actions relevant to participation also appeared in 46.73% of the students’ responses. Specifically, the most mentioned mechanisms were “to vote” (16.30%), “to help” (8.70%), “to protest” (7.61%), “to collaborate” (7.61%) and “to opine” (5.43%). Some students also described ‘participation’ as a peaceful action (3.26%), as a legal action (2.17%) or as a combination of legal and illegal actions (6.52%).

38.04% of the investigated students differed between what could be described as “ideal participation” and the “real participation”. For these students, the difference between both types of participations was the effectiveness (11.96%), the number of participants (8.70%) and the commitment of each individual (6.52%).

5. Discussion

In the following paragraphs, I will discuss the results by using examples of students’ responses to the questionnaire, quotations from students’ explanations in the interviews and by contrasting this data with previous debates and research.

5.1 What is students’ perception of the fundamental nature of ‘participation’?

The ‘fundamental nature of participation’ dimension had the largest number of associated responses. Investigated students usually began their discourse using expressions such as [Participation] “is good to bring closer different points of view” [Boy, 13 years old] [[2]](#endnote-2) [[3]](#endnote-3) or “is important because if we don’t participate we can’t do things [Girl, 14 years old]. 80.4% of these responses interpreted ‘participation’ with ‘positive’ terms such as important, necessary, helpful and good.

Their responses did not include any connection with the scholarly debate about rights and duties. Although it could be suggested that the positive assessment of participation implies the understanding of participation as a duty (Messina et al. 2007), these data, rather than supporting this idea, seem to contradict it. In contrast with previous research (Santisteban, Pagès 2009; Martínez et al. 2012), only 2 of the students who answered the questionnaire explained participation in terms of rights. No students talked about duties, obligations or responsibilities neither in the questionnaire nor in the interviews. One of the students who wrote, “participation is necessary” in the questionnaire, later claimed in the interview:

“I think we must act in solidarity with the others… But we do not have to solve other people’s problems…”  [Interview. Girl, 15 years old]

In this example, the girl understood participation as something positive and necessary, but she did not understand participation as a duty or responsibility, at least in relation to the kind of participation described as helping others. This example evidences that, although most of these students described participation in terms of it being important, helpful, good, etc., these terms cannot be interpreted as proof of the connection between students’ perception of participation and the idea of duties. Students could understand participation as a right and a virtue (Gutman 1987; Macedo et al. 2005; Galston 1991) or their view could, perhaps, not share any connection between participation and rights/duties. Indeed, rather than an explicit connection, what these results show is that most of the students investigated do not use the terms rights, duties or obligations to define participation (96.7%).

Three of the investigated students explained that participation was “not useful” and was a “waste of time”. In their own words, [Participation] “is not useful at all, because all the votes go to the corrupt politicians” [Boy, 14 years old] or “ is a waste of time because you always will lose something on the way” [Girl, 14 years old]. According to these students, participation is linked with effectiveness. Although this could suggest the existence of a relationship between students’ perception of participation and students’ perception of the willingness of the political system to respond to citizens’ demands (this attitude in political science is known as external political efficacy) this relation should be investigated deeper before drawing any conclusions.

5.2 What are the perceived aims of ‘participation’?

The second dimension was related to the perceived aims of participation. This included the view of participation as an instrument for achieving a valuable external goal (69,8% of these responses) and the view that the ‘act of participation’ had intrinsic value (30.2%).

For those students who described participation in terms of its external value, the externals goals mentioned were ‘to contribute to stability’, ‘to select politicians’, ‘to enforce democracy’, ‘to change society’, ‘to help people’ or ‘to take care of the public space’. As it can be observed, there is a wide range of possible goals. While some students understood ‘participation’ as a way to contribute to stability (“to a stable world”, “to maintain democracy”, “to take care of the public spaces”), others perceived ‘participation’ as a way to change the society (“to change the world”). Hence, it could be argued that, although these students describe participation in terms of its goals, they perceive participation –and perhaps citizenship- in very different terms.

Participation was also described to have value itself. However, rather than arguing the its value in terms of its educational potential (as scholars such as Annette (1999) do), they argued that ‘participation’ was important for its social potential: [Participation] “is a really important fact because we are lucky to know what the others’ opinions are what are their projects…”  [Girl, 11 years old], “I like to participate because I can join the society I want” [Girl, 11 years old]. Indeed, these students understand participation as mechanism of self-expression and to socialize with others.

5.3 Who are the perceived recipients of ‘participation’?

Some students (30%) identified the recipients of the benefits of this participation. The mentioned recipients were the same participant (or the group the participant join), the whole society, the politicians and the underprivileged.

According to the results, it could be suggested that students perceive that different sorts of participation have different recipients. For those students who described participation as to help, the recipients of the benefits of the participation were the underprivileged. For example, “I agree with the idea that people participate to help to give money to those who need it” [Boy, 11 years old], “They should be helped… Because they might be poor… And moreover, I think they might be old” [Interview. Girl, 15 years old]. These students understood participation as a direct action where those who are ‘privileged’ (in terms of economic and social status) help those who are ‘underprivileged’.

In contrast, for those students who defined participation as ‘to vote’, the benefits of participation are the politicians and the society as a whole: [Participation] “is important because it allows the politicians to know what the people want” [Girl, 13 years old], [Participation] “is important for the country and for those who govern it [Boy, 14 years old].

Other students also emphasized the relevance of participation for the whole society. In this case, they highlighted the idea of having civic attitudes (e.g. taking care of public spaces): [Participation] “is important to maintain the city in good conditions” [Boy, 14 years old] or [it] “is essential to maintain the city” [Boy, 14 years old].

Finally, some students perceived that the recipients of ‘participation’ were the participants themselves. For these students, the participants (as individuals or as a group) benefit from participating by achieving a personal or group goal, by being able to express their own ideas and by joining groups: [Participation] “is really important to achieve things, if you do not participate you don’t achieve what you want” [Girl, 11 years old] or [it] “is when you like something and you join them” [Girl, 14 years old].

5.4 What sort of processes do students associate with ‘participation’?

Some students described participation as a process similarly to that described by the deliberative (Habermas 1984; Gutman 1987) and the conflict theorists (Mouffe & Holdengräber 1989; Mouffe 1999; Laclau & Mouffe 2001). By co-occurring codes, three different processes emerged from the data, each of them with a similar number of responses: participation as a process of unanimity, participation as a process of deliberation and participation as a process of conflict.

For some students, participation is a process in which all the individuals in a society share the same goal and participate towards its achievement. These shared goals might, according to these students, be “things we all share” [Boy, 12 years old] or simply “do good” [Girl, 17 years old]. Society is understood here as an uncontroversial arena without conflicts of interest and where all individuals share commonly accepted values such as peace or sustainability.

The perception of this uncontroversial arena is, nevertheless, not unanimous. For another group of students, participation was perceived as a process of deliberation, where people holding different opinions discuss to achieve some sort of consensus: “It is very important that everybody participates because it is required to know everybody’s point of view and choose the best option” [Girl, 14 years old] or [it] “is necessary to solve conflicts” [Girl, 15 years old]. Rather than being uncontroversial, these students, similarly to the “deliberative democrats” (e.g. Habermas 1984; Gutman 1987), described a controversial arena, in which ‘participation’ is the mechanism of discussing and solving conflicts.

However, ‘participation’ was also described as a process to generate conflicts. In accordance with another group of students, participation is a process where those who share similar goals collaborate against those who do not share the same goals.

[Participation] “is when one does something, such as going to a demonstration, together with other people who share the same opinion” [Boy, 11 years old]

“This [protest] is the only way they listen to us… We have tried in several different ways and they have not listened to us! (…)

*Who are* they?

The politicians! We keep on protesting and they don’t do anything! I hate it!” [Interview. Boy, 15 years old]

Certain links between the approach of these students and the conflict theory (e.g. Mouffe 1999; Laclau, Mouffe 2001) can be easily suggested. Both, these students and the conflict theorists, assume the existence of inherent conflicts within society attributed to different points of views and to an unequal distribution of power. For these students, the society is composed of those who want to be heard and those –perhaps the politicians or to a wider extent, the status quo elites- who do not want to hear. Hence, for these students, protest participation and what could be called activism becomes the way to ensure the impact of their voices.

5.5 What concrete actions are perceived as participation?

A large proportion of the students (46.73%) explicitly mentioned concrete actions. However, there was an overlap between those students who supported the old forms of participation and those who supported the new forms. Although approximately 34.88% of the students who mentioned a concrete action mentioned electoral actions, which could be understood as form of old participation, and 16.28% mentioned protest actions, which this could be classified as new participation. The rest of the students who described concrete actions (48.84%) used terms such as  ‘to collaborate’, ‘to opine’ and ‘to help’ that could vaguely attributed to both, new and old forms of participation.

The new participation and old participation division emerged, nevertheless, from the interviews. Students mentioned the existence of these two ways of participating and they identified themselves and their classmates in one group or the other.

The first group of students identified with old forms of participation (participation understood in the way Putnam (2000) and Macedo et al. (2005) do). Although disagreeing with conventional politics, they claimed their approval of these old mechanisms in contrast with new forms, which were perceived by these students as too demanding and engaged:

“Because this is how I am… Because I think… I never… Well, I almost never strike or similar things… (…) I agree with them! But I support the idea of voting always… Or casting a blank vote… And always being legal!” [Interview. Girl, 15 years old]

“Because is how I am… What I think… I know what is going on but I don’t do anything… Because I have to study and other stuff… And I don’t have enough time…”  [Interview. Girl, 16 years old]

“Honestly, I am not in the mood of striking, and being beaten and everything else… Definitely, they have my support, but I don’t want to get my hands dirty!“[Focus group. Girl, 16 years old]

As it can be seen, these girls manifested their support for those who undertook more engaged forms of participation (perhaps these ‘engaged’ students could be identified as activists) but they stressed that it was not their “way of being”. For the supporters of old participation, the activists are hopeful and naïve:

“Here in the school we have a schoolmate who is really engaged and motivated… (…) She strikes… and she is really committed! (…) She is hopeful; she thinks things can change… (…) She thinks that they will be heard because of the strikes… (…) But when you know what is going to happen, when you know that nothing will change… Absolutely nothing will change…” [Focus group. Girl, 16 years old]

In opposition to the less engaged students, the students who identified themselves with new forms of participation criticized the representative forms of participation for not being committed enough: “The first [character represented in the vignettes used in the interviews] doesn’t care about the problem… Ok, she says: “I vote, they will solve it”… In other words, she doesn’t care at all!” [Interview. Girl, 15 years old], “’Let the others take care about the problems’… I don’t think it’s right! One has to fight for the things you don’t agree with!” [Interview. Boy, 12 years old].

These students described representative forms of participation as not being effective and they highlighted, in contrast, new forms of participation as effective mechanisms to have their voice heard.

“Nowadays… things are big… There are a lot of people demonstrating and occupying… And a lot of media and TV looking at them, and the politicians feel forced to do something!” [Focus group. Girl, 15 years old]

“It is like a threat… If you do not do anything, we will keep on [protesting]… And I think they will change! Well… I don’t know because all of them are… Well, they do not change immediately…” [Interview. Boy, 15 years old]

These students who perceived activism as a outstanding form of political participation and that could, perhaps, be described as activists or activism’ supporters, explained their willingness to be engaged and to make political elites aware of their complaints. They also perceived that those students who support old forms of participation are not engaged enough.

5.6 What is the reality and how is the ideal participation perceived?

Similarity to the research conducted by Magioglou (2000), some of the students investigated described participation in terms of ‘what it is’ and ‘what it should be’. For these students, the ‘real participation’ is characterised for involving a small amount of people and not being effective. In contrast, according to these students, ‘ideal participation’ should engage more people and should have more impact: [Participation] “is essential to have democracy, it is really bad that so few people vote, they should at least to cast a blank vote” [Boy, 16 years old], “I like people when they demonstrate, but I am afraid that they are not heard” [Girl, 18 years old].

All the students who mentioned this difference between ‘real’ and ‘ideal’ participation highlighted that ‘ideal participation’ should be more effective. However, they also pointed out that the achievement of this effectiveness was not in their hands: “If I do this, nothing will change, nothing at all will change… Because this is not in my hands…” [Focus group. Girl, 16 years old].

For most of these students, the difference between real and ideal participation was also in the grade of people’s engagement. Regarding this issue, whereas those who could be considered activists students complained that the commitment of others was too little, the students who preferred the old forms of participation justified the low degree of engagement in society. In agreement with those who highlight the importance of private life (e.g. Kymlicka, Norman 1994), these students argued that they could not be more engaged with society and politics because this would imply a decrease of their private life that they were not willing to assume.

6. Conclusions

It seems apparent from the results of this study that the students investigated perceive political participation in positive terms. Beyond the scholarly debate between ‘duties’ and ‘rights’, which does not seem to affect their perceptions, most of the students assume the importance, need and relevance of being participative in society. This could be understood as reason for optimism among those who desire to increase the engagement of young people. This optimism, however, would be limited in some aspects. First of all, the effectiveness of participation is the main criticism levelled by these students. Although it could be suggested that this perception of non-effectiveness could be faced by a model of citizenship education aimed to highlight the effectiveness of participation, Kahne and Westheimer (2006) have already pointed out the controversy of this approach. Secondly, although acknowledging the importance of participation, a considerable percentage of the students studied identified the ‘politicians’, the ‘underprivileged’ and the ‘participants themselves’ as the recipients of the benefits of participation. These associations could perhaps suggest views of participation where engagement is exclusively perceived as an uncritical support for political elites, as an uncritical and paternalist process to ‘help the underprivileged’ or as a process exclusively oriented to satisfy participants’ own wishes. Although these views could lead to an increase in the strength and number of people engaged by offering some arguments in favour of participation, they nonetheless have different implications and consequences. It behoves to the whole society to delimitate the rationality for raising participation and, in consequence, the sort of participation –and perhaps, citizenship- we want to promote.

The results of this small-scale study also suggest that those students who could be identified as activists have different social representations of participation when compared with the other students. These potential activists, similarly to those who have been denominated as ‘wanting to make their voice heard’ (Haste, Hogan 2006), are willing to be fully engaged. While they are optimistic with regards to new forms of participation and pessimist with the old forms, they do not discount the use of any particular form of participation. Following Kennedy (2004), it would seem better to educate these students in the processes of taking informed and critical decisions rather than to let them take impulsive and non-reflexive choices.

It could also be noted that the non-activist students describe the activists as well-intentioned and overly optimistic. Although evidencing their disagreement with old forms of participation, these non-activist students select these old forms as they find them less committed and thus more adaptable to the demands of their private life.  In spite of recognizing the possible validity of their argument in terms of the importance of private life (Kymlicka, Norman 1994), their selection of representative and old forms of participation by process of elimination should concern teachers’ educators and the whole society. Now may be the time to consider some alternatives forms of participation for those young people who, without having assumed full range of options to participate, are already disappointed with all kind of political participation.

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1. Cronbach’s alpha: Personally responsible citizenship, 0.67; Participatory citizenship, 0.74; Social Justice oriented citizenship, 0.65. Although some of the Cronbach’s alphas were not acceptable, the test was accepted based on previous consistency shown in previous investigations. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. All quotes have been translated from Catalan/Spanish into English [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Unless otherwise stated all quotes provided here have been taken from the results of the questionnaires. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)