

The Role of the School as a Space for Democratic Participation: A Systematic Review (2019-2025)

El papel de la escuela como espacio de participación democrática: una revisión sistemática (2019-2025)

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Abstract: Student participation in school decision-making is a relevant aspect of contemporary discourses on educational innovation and social justice. This study presents a systematic review of student participation in school decision-making in primary education. The main objective is to explore how this participation is being implemented in real educational contexts, its benefits and the challenges involved. Following the guidelines of the PRISMA Declaration ensured a rigorous and replicable methodological approach. A total of 16 studies were selected from the following databases: ERIC, Web of Science and Dialnet. A systematic review methodology was used to identify recurrent patterns, participatory strategies and structural barriers to authentic student participation. The analysis also considers the different levels of decision-making (classroom, school, and

community) in which students are involved, as well as the pedagogical frameworks that support these practices. In particular, it examines the influence of democratic education models, project-based learning, and participatory governance structures on the development of students' agency and sense of belonging. Furthermore, the review highlights the role of institutional culture and leadership styles as determining factors that either facilitate or hinder meaningful participation. The results show that most of the student participation is conceptualised through active methodologies. However, the study identifies a significant disconnect between the normative discourse promoting participation and the reality of school practices, where tokenistic rather than meaningful participation tends to prevail. The study concludes by stressing the fundamental role of teachers as agents of change and underlines the urgent need for teacher training in democratic culture.

Keywords: Student Participation, Decision-Making, Formal Education, Basic Education.

Resumen: La participación de los alumnos en la toma de decisiones escolares es un aspecto relevante en los discursos contemporáneos sobre innovación educativa y justicia social. Este estudio presenta una revisión sistemática sobre la participación del alumnado en la toma de decisiones escolares en Educación Primaria. El objetivo principal es explorar cómo se está implementando esta participación en contextos educativos reales, sus beneficios y los retos que conlleva. El seguimiento de las directrices de la Declaración PRISMA garantizó un enfoque metodológico riguroso y replicable. Se seleccionaron un total de 16 estudios extraídos de las bases de datos: ERIC, Web of Science y Dialnet. Se empleó una metodología de revisión sistemática para identificar patrones recurrentes, estrategias participativas y barreras estructurales que dificultan una auténtica participación de los estudiantes. El análisis también tiene en cuenta los diferentes niveles de toma de decisiones (aula, escuela y comunidad) en los que participan los estudiantes, así como los marcos pedagógicos que respaldan estas prácticas. En particular, examina la influencia de los modelos de educación democrática, el aprendizaje basado en proyectos y las estructuras de gobernanza participativa en el desarrollo de la capacidad de acción y el sentido de pertenencia de los estudiantes. Además, la revisión destaca el papel de la cultura institucional y los estilos de liderazgo como factores determinantes que facilitan u obstaculizan una participación significativa. Los resultados muestran que mayoritariamente el concepto de la participación de los estudiantes se trabaja mediante metodologías activas. No obstante, el estudio identifica una desconexión significativa entre el discurso normativo que promueve la participación y la realidad de las prácticas escolares, donde tiende a prevalecer la participación simbólica en lugar de la significativa. El estudio concluye haciendo hincapié en el papel fundamental de los docentes como agentes del cambio y subraya la urgente necesidad de formación del profesorado en cultura democrática.

Palabras clave: Participación estudiantil, toma de decisiones, educación formal, educación básica.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Student Participation: A Question of Justice and Democracy

The active participation of students in school decision-making is an element that stands out in contemporary discourses on educational innovation and social justice. Far from being a merely methodological issue, it is an internationally recognised right (United Nations, 1989) and a basic component of building democratic citizenship from childhood (UNICEF, 2023). However, it is important to recall that participation represents only one of the three interdependent pillars that constitute the right to education provision, protection, and participation. These three pillars involve, respectively, the guarantee of access to and availability of educational resources, protection from any form of violence and discrimination, and the right of children to take part in decisions that affect them (Neubauer & Gonzalez-Garcia, 2025).

From the perspective of the European Union (EU), the participation of children in decision-making processes that affect them is firmly supported as a fundamental right. In its EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, the EU stresses the importance of placing children "at the centre of policy-making" (European Commission, 2021a, p. 3) and promotes mechanisms to

ensure that their voices are heard. This strategy provides for the creation of an EU Children's Participation Platform, together with the European Parliament and child rights organisations, with the aim of enabling children and young people to influence policies and legislation that concern them at local, national, and European levels (European Commission, 2021a). In this way, Europe not only recognises children's right to be heard but also institutionalises concrete spaces where this recognition can effectively materialise (Council of Europe, 2023).

This commitment to child participation is also reflected in the educational sphere, where the EU promotes models of democratic and inclusive schooling. Projects such as Voices into Action (VIA) provide practical tools for schools to integrate the voices of students and families into decision-making, with particular attention to justice, equity, and inclusion (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2022). In addition, the strategy encourages Member States to develop coherent national policies, including resources and training for teachers and institutional leaders, in order to ensure meaningful, ethical, and sustainable child participation (European Commission, 2021b). Through these initiatives, the EU contributes to building more democratic and inclusive educational environments in which students are not merely recipients but active agents of their own learning and civic development.

In the context of Spanish Primary Education, this participation is far from being a consolidated reality. Despite its presence in regulatory and curricular frameworks, such as Organic Law 3/2020, of 29 December, which amends Organic Law 2/2006 on Education (LOMLOE) and Royal Decree 157/2022, of 1 March, which establishes the organisation and minimum teachings of Primary Education in Spain, school practices continue to reproduce hierarchical and adult-centred structures that limit student agency (González-Contró, 2024). At the legal level, child participation is supported by international instruments such as the United Nations General Assembly Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) and by other national regulations such as the Constitución Española (1978) and current educational legislation. In particular, the Primary Education curriculum establishes active participation as a pedagogical principle and as a key competence for the exercise of citizenship (Real Decreto 157/2022, de 1 de marzo, por el que se establecen la ordenación y las enseñanzas mínimas de la Educación Primaria). However, several studies note a gap between these normative frameworks and their actual implementation in schools (Cardona Llorens, 2020; Lay-Lisboa et al., 2021). This dissonance is partly explained by the persistence of an adult-centred culture that underestimates children's capacity to participate in matters that directly affect them (González-Contró, 2024). As a result, student participation is often relegated to marginal spaces or one-off activities, with no real impact on pedagogical or institutional decisions.

From a theoretical perspective, student participation in school decision-making is fundamentally based on socio-constructivist and democratic pedagogical approaches grounded in collaboration and dialogue. Drawing on the constructivist theories of Piaget, Vygotsky, and contemporary scholars, meaningful participation is understood as a vehicle for the co-construction of knowledge, where students and teachers jointly build understanding through active participation and dialogue (Vygotsky, 1978). This framework is enriched by Paulo Freire's (1970) dialogical pedagogy, which conceptualizes education as a critical process of conscientization and mutual humanization. Furthermore, John Dewey's (1938) pragmatic philosophy of education underscores the need for participatory practices in schools that function as "democratic spaces," where students learn through lived experiences related to decision-making, dialogue, and collective problem-solving.

Participation in the school environment cannot be reduced to the mere presence or consultation of students. As Loyola Bustos (2020b) points out, it is a complex process that implies the active involvement of all members of the educational community in the decisions that affect their school life. In the case of children, this participation must be meaningful, informed and voluntary, respecting their progressive capacity and their right to be heard (Ciudades Amigas de la Infancia, s.f.; Hart, 1992). In this regard, it is worth highlighting a conceptual tool that is widely used to analyse levels of child participation: Hart's (1992) ladder of participation, which distinguishes between non-participatory forms (manipulation, decoration, tokenism) and increasing levels of genuine participation, from consultation to shared decision-making between adults and children (Table 1).

Table 1: Hart's Ladder of Participation.

Level	Description	Type of Participation	Is it Participation?
1	Manipulation	Not considered participation	●
2	Decoration	Not considered participation	●
3	Tokenistic participation	Not considered participation	●
4	Assigned but informed	Transitional participation	●
5	Consulted and informed	Transitional participation	●
6	Initiated by adults, decisions shared with children	Transitional participation	●
7	Initiated and directed by children themselves	Genuine participation	●
8	Initiated by children and shared with adults	Genuine participation	●

Source: own elaboration adapted from Hart (1992).

This perspective makes it possible to identify when participation is merely ad hoc and without any purpose and when it becomes a truly participatory, authentic and transformative experience for learners.

1.2. Active Participation in Decision-making and Child Development at School

Active participation in school decision-making not only responds to an ethical and legal imperative, but also has direct implications for students' cognitive, social and emotional development. Decision-making is linked to skills such as anticipation, planning, critical reflection and autonomy (Díaz-Moreno et al., 2018; Villanueva Ospinal, Valenzuela Moncada, & Chirinos Gastelu, 2022). It also fosters a sense of belonging, self-esteem and shared responsibility, which are fundamental elements for an inclusive and democratic education (Cook-Sather, 2020; Saiz-Linares, Ceballos-López, & Susinos-Rada, 2019). From this perspective, giving students a voice is not a symbolic gesture, but a pedagogical strategy with real effects on learning and school coexistence. The school, as a social space, must offer opportunities for children to exercise their citizenship from the present, and not as a preparation for an abstract future (Fuentes Matute & Candela Soto, 2021).

Against this backdrop, it is urgent to rethink the role of the school as a space for democratic participation. As proposed by Loyola Bustos (2020a) and Fuentes Matute and Candela Soto (2021), schools should be conceived as open social microcosms, where students not only learn about democracy, but also practice it daily. This implies reviewing power relations, school governance models and teaching methodologies, promoting horizontal structures and genuine dialogue processes. In this respect, teachers play a key role. Their attitude, training and willingness to cede decision-making spaces to students are determining factors in moving towards a more inclusive and participatory school culture (Vecina-Merchante & San Román-Gago, 2021). Teacher training in democratic culture cannot be an option, but

rather a necessary condition for transforming educational practices from a perspective of equity and social justice.

To foster genuine student participation, teachers must employ active methodologies that position learners as protagonists in the construction of their own knowledge. From a socioconstructivist perspective, these approaches promote collaborative knowledge building through dialogue and peer interaction (Rangareddy et al., 2025; Rustemi & Kurteshi, 2025). Strategies such as inquiry-based learning and cooperative learning enhance not only conceptual understanding but also the critical and social competences required for democratic citizenship.

Similarly, meaningful student participation depends on strong teacher training in democratic pedagogies. Teachers need theoretical knowledge and interpersonal skills to facilitate horizontal interactions and collaborative learning environments (Odescalchi, Paleczek, & Gasteiger-Klicpera, 2025). For this reason, professional development programmes focused on education for democratic citizenship and participatory pedagogy are essential for sustainable change (Council of Europe, 2024), particularly when they include practical experiences, reflective practice, and professional learning communities (Kahts-Kramer & Wood, 2023). So, these competences enable progress towards more democratic and participatory schools (de Sousa, Loizou, & Fochi, 2019).

This work is based on a central concern: the disconnection between the normative discourse that promotes child participation and the school dynamics that, in practice, restrict it or reduce it to symbolic forms (Pinkney, 2011). In this sense, the general objective of this study is to analyse recent scientific production on the active participation of pupils in school decision-making in Primary Education. The specific objectives are:

- a) To analyse the influence of student participation on the personal, social and academic development of primary school pupils.
- b) To examine the role of the school as a facilitating or limiting space for student participation in decision-making.
- c) To identify strategies that promote pupils' active participation in school contexts.
- d) To detect structural, cultural or institutional barriers that hinder student participation in school life.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a documentary approach, based on a systematic review of the scientific literature. The review has been developed following the guidelines of the PRISMA protocol (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) in its protocol version (PRISMA-P) (Page et al., 2021), which guarantees the transparency, completeness and reproducibility of the search and study selection process.

2.1. Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted in March 2025 in three academic databases recognised for their relevance in the field of education: ERIC, Web of Science and Dialnet. Combinations of keywords in Spanish and English were used, related to the central concepts of the study: 'Primary Education', 'decision-making' and 'student participation'. The following boolean operators were applied: ("student participation" OR "participación estudiantil") AND ("decision-making" OR "toma de decisiones") AND ("primary school" OR "educación primaria").

To ensure a comprehensive and accurate search, specific combinations of thematic

descriptors were designed using Boolean operators. Specifically, the terms 'Primary Education', 'decision-making' and 'student participation' were used in both English and Spanish to broaden the international scope of the review. These keywords were combined using the OR and AND operators, which made it possible to retrieve documents that addressed any of the related terms within the same thematic axis (OR), and that, in turn, met the intersection between the different axes (AND). For example, the formula ('primary school' OR 'primary education') AND ('decision-making') was used, as well as ('student participation') AND ('primary school' OR 'primary education'). This strategy allowed us to identify relevant studies that addressed student participation in school contexts from multiple approaches and educational realities.

2.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure the relevance and timeliness of the selected studies, the following eligibility criteria were established (Table 2).

Table 2: Eligibility Criterio.

Nº Aspect assessed	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
1 Date of publication	Studies published between January 2019 and March 2025	Studies prior to 2019
2 Language	Publications in English or Spanish	Publications in other languages
3 Type of document	Peer-reviewed articles	Books, chapters, theses, non-peer-reviewed papers
4 Educational level	Studies focusing on Primary Education	Studies focusing on other educational stages
5 Thematic	Active student participation in school decision-making	Studies not directly addressing student participation
6 Accessibility	Full text available	Papers without access to the full text
7 Type of research	Empirical	Non-empirical

Source: own elaboration.

Seven key aspects were defined: the date of publication (limited to the period January 2019- March 2025), the language (Spanish or English), the type of document (peer-reviewed articles), the educational level (focused exclusively on Primary Education), the subject matter (active student participation in school decision-making), the accessibility (availability of the full text) and the type of research (empirical studies). These criteria made it possible to guarantee the topicality, relevance, scientific quality and thematic relevance of the documents included, thus ensuring the validity and reliability of the results obtained in the analysis.

2.3. Selection Process

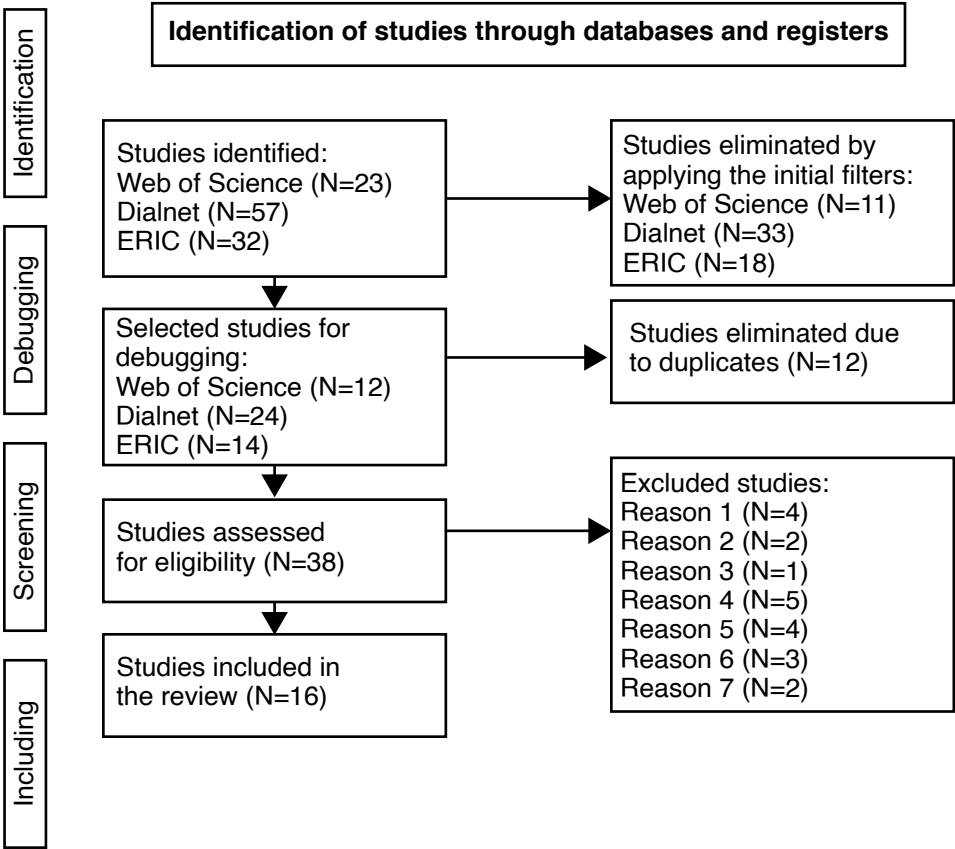
The study selection process was carried out in five consecutive phases, following the guidelines of the PRISMA protocol. First, a total of 112 records were identified by searching the ERIC, Web of Science and Dialnet databases. Secondly, titles and abstracts were reviewed, and 62 studies were eliminated as they were far from the thematic interest of the present research. Then, thirdly, 50 studies were selected for cleaning and 12 duplicate records were removed from the databases, so that 38 were screened. In a fourth phase, the selected texts were read through, resulting in the exclusion of 21 studies that did not meet the established inclusion criteria.

- Four studies were discarded because they were published before 2019, thus failing to meet the defined time criterion (Reason 1).

- Two studies were eliminated because they were written in languages other than English or Spanish, making rigorous analysis difficult (Reason 2).
- One of the documents corresponded to a non-peer-reviewed publication type (Reason 3), such as book chapters or theses, which contravened the scientific quality criterion.
- In addition, five studies were excluded because they focused on educational stages other than Primary Education (Ground 4).
- Four more were excluded because they did not directly address students' active participation in school decision-making (Reason 5).
- Three studies were discarded for not having access to the full text (Reason 6), which prevented in-depth analysis.
- Two studies were excluded because they did not present an empirical approach as required by the methodological criteria (Reason 7).

The flow chart (Figure 1) shows the phases of the systematic review process: identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion. We started with 112 records, applying filters by date, duplicates, thematic relevance and full reading, to obtain a final sample of 16 studies.

Figure 1: Flowchart.



Source: own elaboration completed from Page et al. (2021).

Finally, fifthly, as a result of this rigorous process, we obtained a final sample of 16 studies that directly address students' active participation in school decision-making in primary education. These studies form the basis for the analysis of this systematic review (Table 3).

Table 3: Bibliographic Information of the Final Sample.

No.	Author(s)	Year	Country	Study Objective	Main Findings	Thematic Categories
1	Salazar, Muñiz & Saldierna	2021	Mexico	To question how children's participation has developed in terms of being recognised as rights-holders, active subjects, and how their political attitudes manifest until citizenship is built.	A passive attitude was observed alongside a high interest in influencing decision-making. There are limitations to their effective development.	Child participation and agency; Democratic education and citizenship; Barriers to participation; Children's rights
2	González López	2020	Mexico	To highlight gender differences that limit equitable participation in the school setting.	Action research revealed an increase in participation and a decrease in gender barriers, due to strengthened self-concept and collective dialogue.	Barriers to participation; Gender equality
3	Vila Soriano & Monsalve Lorente	2024	Portugal	To promote civic participation in rural schools, contribute to local sustainable development and stimulate school-based research.	Pupils showed interest in civic participation and acted as change agents, promoting practical education.	Child participation and agency; Democratic education and citizenship
4	Moreno-Medina, Martínez-Garrido & Allen	2024	Spain	To understand teachers' conceptions of democracy in education.	Three conceptions were identified: school participation, sense of belonging and emancipation, and social responsibility.	Democratic education and citizenship; School identification and sense of belonging
5	Long & Grant	2024	United Kingdom	To assess Lundy's model of child participation as a framework to develop pupils' voice and influence.	The model is useful for enhancing participation but requires deliberation with pupils about space, audience and teacher role.	Pupil voice; Child participation and agency; Barriers to participation
6	Soldevila-Pérez, Farré-Riera & Simó-Gil	2025	Spain	To analyse how pupils' voices can contribute to more democratic and inclusive schools.	Participatory methodologies help but are insufficient without rethinking power relations and recognising the plurality of voices.	Pupil voice; Child participation and agency; Democratic education and citizenship; Barriers to participation
7	Balagueró, Solà & Martínez	2023	Spain	To present two processes linking school assemblies with municipal representation and participation bodies.	Children collaborate in school coexistence, discuss needs, address SDG topics, and learn democratic values.	Child participation and agency; Democratic education and citizenship; School identification and coexistence
8	Rodríguez Bustamante	2020	Argentina	To analyse how children and teachers understand school participation.	Conceptions that deny children autonomy of thought and capacity for participation prevail.	Child participation and agency; Barriers to participation
9	O'Brien et al.	2024	Ireland	To explore understanding student participation within the Educate Together network.	The school culture promotes pupil participation as a structural part of the institution.	Child participation and agency
10	Virtanen et al.	2021	Finland	To examine participation and school identification and their relationship with performance and absenteeism.	Promoting participation and identification in comprehensive schooling prevents disengagement in secondary education.	Child participation and agency; School identification and sense of belonging
11	Agustian	2024	Australia	To explore pupil voice in educational design and involvement in decision-making.	Lack of time and standardisation limit participation. Teachers want greater student involvement, who show positive attitudes.	Pupil voice; Child participation and agency; Barriers to participation
12	Stamatovic & Zunic Cicvaric	2019	Serbia	To examine pupils' knowledge of children's rights and their respect in school.	Students perceived limited knowledge. Rights such as freedom of expression were poorly respected. Discrimination persists.	Children's rights; Barriers to participation
13	Hargreaves, Buchanan & Quick	2021	United Kingdom	To explore participation of children labelled as underperforming in maths or writing.	These children face additional obstacles to participating within school.	Child participation and agency; Barriers to participation
14	Martínez-Sainz et al.	2024	Ireland	To analyse pupils' voices and their ability to influence learning, in contrast with teacher perspectives.	Children's narratives reveal structural challenges to genuine participation and its pedagogical impact.	Pupil voice; Child participation and agency; Barriers to participation
15	Rubenstein, Scott & Peake	2022	United States	To identify the impact of voice groups on students, community and school development.	The groups improve school and community and allow pupils to express opinions about their education.	Pupil voice; Child participation and agency
16	Kyrönlampi & Puroila	2019	Finland	To explore children's agency through photos taken by the children themselves.	Listening to children's voices strengthens autonomy and enhances school opportunities.	Pupil voice; Child participation and agency

Source: own elaboration.

2.4. Analysis of the Information

Once the 16 studies making up the final sample had been selected, the relevant data were systematically extracted. For this purpose, an analysis matrix was designed in

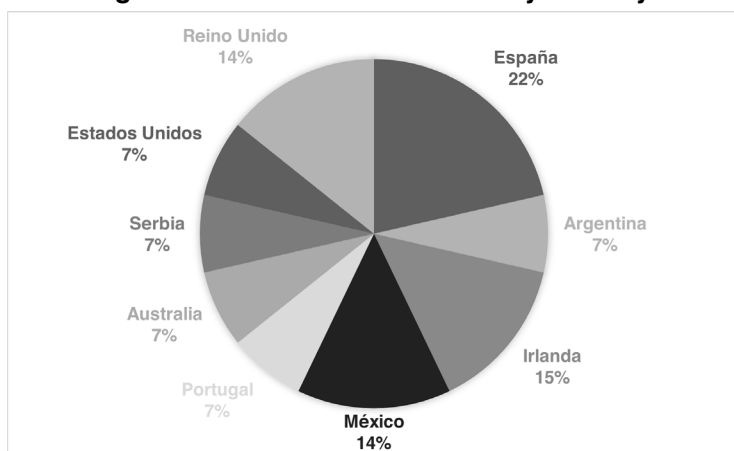
spreadsheet format, which was subsequently imported into Microsoft Excel software for its organisation and processing with the EzAnalyze package (Weiss, 2005). The following fields were recorded in this matrix: title of the study, authorship, year of publication, country of origin, type of study, objectives, methodology used and main results. This systematisation allowed for a comparative and structured view of the scientific production analysed.

The analysis of the information was carried out qualitatively, using a thematic coding strategy aimed at answering the specific objectives of the study. For the first objective, to analyse the influence of student participation on student development, the reported effects in terms of personal, social and academic development were identified and categorised. In relation to the second objective, to examine the role of the school as a facilitating or constraining space, the institutional conceptions, organisational structures and pedagogical practices described in the studies were analysed. The third objective, to identify effective strategies, was addressed by classifying experiences, methodologies and resources that promoted active student participation. Finally, for the fourth objective, to detect barriers, the obstacles identified in the studies were systematised, at the structural, cultural and pedagogical levels. The interpretation of the results was carried out jointly by the authors of the study, through discussion sessions and contrast of findings.

3. Results

The results are presented below according to the characteristics of the sample of studies analysed, as well as according to the specific objectives proposed in this study. Firstly, Figure 2 shows the analysis of the geographical distribution of the studies included in the review. Spain reveals a clear concentration of studies (22%). This is followed by a group of countries with equal representation—Mexico, the United Kingdom, Ireland and Finland—each contributing 12.5% of the studies. The remaining countries, namely Portugal, Argentina, Australia, Serbia and the United States, appear with lower but equal representation, each accounting for 6.25% of the total. This distribution shows a predominance of research in European and Latin American contexts, suggesting a higher scientific production on student participation in Primary Education in these settings.

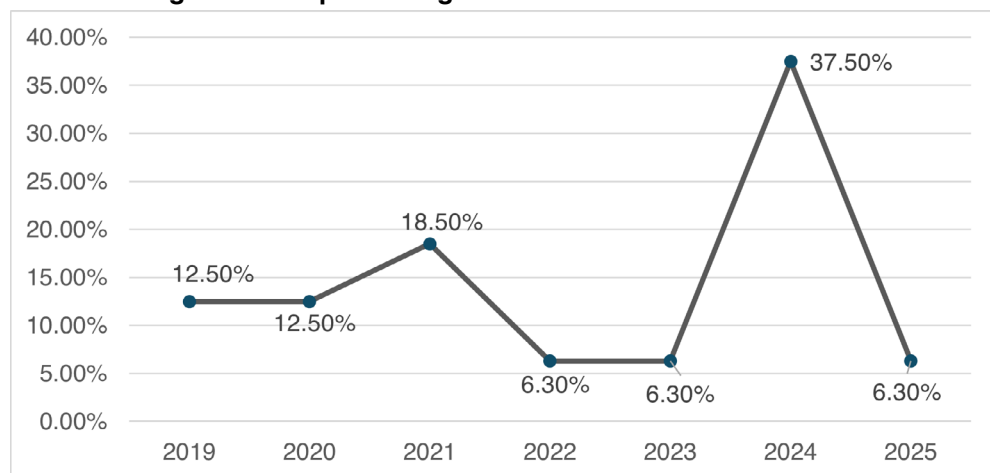
Figure 2: Distribution of Studies by Country.



Source: own elaboration.

Secondly, Figure 3 presents the temporal evolution of the studies selected in the systematic review, covering the period between January 2019 and March 2025. The data reflect an uneven distribution in scientific production, with a progressive increase that peaks in 2024, where 37.5% of the studies analysed are concentrated. The years 2019 and 2020 show an equal representation (12.5% each), suggesting an initial phase of thematic consolidation. In 2021 there is a slight upturn (18.8%), possibly linked to the implementation of new education policies and the strengthening of participatory practices in schools. In contrast, the years 2022, 2023 and March 2025 show a lower presence (6.3% each). Overall, the graph allows us to clearly visualise the evolution of academic interest in student participation, showing an upward trend that reinforces the relevance and timeliness of the object of study.

Figure 3: Temporal Progression of the Included Studies.



Source: own elaboration.

3.1. Influence of Student Participation on the Personal, Social and Academic Development of Primary School Pupils

Salazar, Muñiz and Saldierna (2021)h highlight children's interest in participating in their school environment, which favours their development as critical, autonomous and civic individuals. This participation encourages the expression of opinions, critical and creative thinking (González López, 2020), communication skills (Vila Soriano & Monsalve Lorente, 2024)97}, as well as personal and social learning with responsibility (Balagueró, Solà, & Martínez, 2023).

O'Brien et al. (2024) point out that such participation improves self-concept, self-confidence and autonomy, involving students emotionally and cognitively. In addition, it can improve academic performance, well-being, school governance and democratic formation (O'Brien et al., 2024). It also fosters interpersonal relationships, especially through practices such as assembly (González López, 2020)7B3}.

Virtanen et al. (2021) point to improvements in performance and school identification, preventing absenteeism in secondary school. This participation increases engagement, motivation and interest, allowing students to indicate their interests to teachers (Rubenstein, Scott, & Peake, 2022), which strengthens their sense of belonging (González López, 2020).

For Vila Soriano and Monsalve Lorente (2024), students are involved in an autonomous and reflective process, with teacher support, which favours metacognition and intellectual and social emancipation. Rodríguez Bustamante (2020) highlights that joint resolution of issues between adults and children improves skills, relationships and inclusion, and gives pupils an active role in decision-making, a view shared by O'Brien et al. (2024).

Finally, this active participation fosters notions of politics and justice (Rodríguez Bustamante, 2020), preparing students as tolerant and democratic citizens (Stamatovic & Zunic Cicvaric, 2019).

3.2. The Role of the School as a Facilitating or Limiting Space for Student Participation

Salazar et al. (2021) present the school as a micro-society that should provide students with civic education through real experiences of participation. In this sense, Vila Soriano and Monsalve Lorente (2024) stress the importance of a comprehensive education that increases students' political involvement. Thus, Guerra (1997; in Salazar et al., 2021) F0-93E1-BCE01F217A71} and Stamatovic and Zunic Cicvaric (2019) agree that it is not enough to know about rights: students must practice them. The school must therefore promote solid structures that guarantee their participation in issues of interest (Balagueró et al., 2023)46}, through active listening and respect for their ideas (Sirkko, Kyrönlampi, & Puroila, 2019).

Teachers, as indicated by Martinez-Sainz et al. (2024), must empower student voice, promoting freedom of choice in learning (Stamatovic & Zunic Cicvaric, 2019). Furthermore, participation should be equitable, offering equal access to all (Hargreaves, Buchanan, & Quick, 2021), in favour of an inclusive and democratic school (O'Brien et al., 2024). As stated by (Rodríguez Bustamante, 2020), scenarios of equality are required where all voices are heard.

From a socio-educational approach, Rubenstein et al. (2022) and Rodríguez Bustamante (2020) argue that learning arises from the interaction between students, environment and behaviour, which forces the school to recognise other ways of seeing the world. Furthermore, they stress that children already have knowledge about their context and must participate in order to democratise school relations. For this reason, UNESCO considers that the school should be a space where democracy is learned through responsible participation (Balagueró et al., 2023).

Balagueró et al. (2023) point out that participation is at the core of educational identity. The inclusive school must ensure the presence and success of all, recognising the value of their contributions (Soldevila-Pérez, Farré-Riera, & Simó-Gil, 2025)⁴. Thus, they link student autonomy with fairer democratic systems and insist that schools should foster inclusive participatory experiences.

It is not enough to hear their voices: they must be included, creating co-responsible spaces where everyone can express themselves (Soldevila-Pérez et al., 2025). Participation must be guided by active listening and egalitarian dialogue, generating democratic structures (Soldevila-Pérez et al., 2025). Rodríguez Bustamante (2020) encourages teachers to promote participation from an early age, starting from children's interests.

Finally, Salazar et al. (2021) argue that children should be seen as social actors, key to democracy, so it is essential to provide resources that develop participatory skills.

3.3. Strategies that Promote Active Student Participation

Several studies show that, although student participation in Primary Education is

encouraged, it often takes on symbolic or figurative forms, such as the figure of the student representative (Soldevila-Pérez et al., 2025). This form of representation, according to Hart's theory (1992, as cited in Soldevila et al., 2025), corresponds to a symbolic level of participation. While it offers opportunities for leadership training and civic development, it is often perceived by students as a game, and its real impact on decision-making is limited (Burke et al., 2024). Still, it can serve as a foundation for fostering political awareness and communication skills.

More authentic strategies for student involvement have been proposed. For instance, Classroom Councils facilitate dialogue between students and teachers around the organization of school spaces (Rodríguez Bustamante, 2020). These councils are not merely consultative but aim to create a shared decision-making arena where students, through designated roles such as the "counselor", can transmit proposals to General Councils and defend their classmates' interests. These forums strive to equalize adult-child power dynamics and engage all parties in negotiating topics such as space and time allocation within the school.

Teachers play a pivotal role in this process. Soldevila-Pérez et al. (2025) emphasize the need for teachers to reflect critically on their practices and acknowledge the existing inequalities in classroom power structures. By fostering horizontal and dialogical spaces, teachers can reposition students as active agents of educational change. Similarly, González López (2020) advocates for structured oral dialogue in which students can express themselves, debate, and co-construct knowledge around meaningful themes. Voluntary participation is essential to ensure genuine engagement, as these forums not only support emotional awareness but also promote collaborative problem-solving.

From a broader democratic perspective, Balagueró et al. (2023) propose creating contexts where students can practice active and respectful listening and engage in dialogue rooted in shared values. Teachers are encouraged to observe and facilitate inclusive participation, giving voice to all students while respecting principles of coeducation and diversity.

In terms of pedagogical strategies, cooperative learning stands out as a highly effective method. According to Soldevila-Pérez et al. (2025), it enhances dialogue, collective reasoning, and consensus-building. Importantly, such strategies should be integrated into everyday classroom routines rather than being confined to occasional or extracurricular activities. Similarly, Vila Soriano and Monsalve Lorente (2024) highlights the importance of real-world problem-solving through project-based learning. Her case study "Nos Propomos!" illustrates how students can engage with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda, identify local issues, and collectively search for solutions under the guidance of the teacher, who acts as a facilitator.

Agustian (2024) further supports student-centered approaches, emphasizing the value of weekly presentations (*spreekbeurt*) on self-chosen topics. This strategy not only fosters motivation but also acknowledges students as experts in their own learning journeys, aligning with participatory co-design principles (Boyle & Arnedillo, 2022; Ghaziani, 2020, as cited in Agustian, 2024). Sirkko et al. (2019) corroborate these findings, noting that children value open-ended learning tasks that offer freedom of choice and control over content and process.

Community-based initiatives also play a crucial role in enhancing participation. Balagueró et al. (2023) mention initiatives like the "Green School," where children engage in environmentally focused projects such as sustainable waste management or schoolyard improvement. These activities connect students with their surroundings and foster a sense

of agency and responsibility. Along the same lines, Rubenstein et al. (2022) describe “voice groups” as student-led spaces for articulating opinions on the educational system. Grounded in the theory of student voice (Fielding, 2001, as cited in Rubenstein et al., 2022), these groups promote self-determined goal setting and generate motivation through tangible improvements in school environments.

Student participation is also encouraged through mechanisms such as self-assessment and dialogue circles. Balagueró et al. (2023) describe a model in which students complete evaluative reports, share them with families, and discuss their strengths and areas for growth with tutors. Collective evaluations at the class level further support shared reflection. Assemblies or dialogue circles offer valuable opportunities to practice oral communication, respect, coexistence, and group cohesion. Over time, students are encouraged to take on more responsibility in moderating discussions and reaching consensus.

To institutionalize participation, Balagueró et al. (2023) highlight the Council of Representatives, where student-elected delegates convey issues raised in classroom assemblies to the school leadership. Many of these issues focus on improving coexistence and the use of school spaces. These councils provide stable structures for real participation and coordination between different representative roles.

Finally, the Lundy Model (Long & Grant, 2024), based on the interaction between space, voice, audience, and influence, advocates for creating safe and inclusive environments where students can express themselves and be genuinely heard. Listening, as Lundy (2007, as cited in Long & Grant, 2024) asserts, is not sufficient; adults must also act on student input. The model positions educators as facilitators who support children in shaping and communicating their ideas. As O'Brien et al. (2024) conclude, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to student participation. Instead, effective strategies vary depending on the context, level of engagement, and desired impact, spanning a wide continuum of involvement and influence.

3.4. Structural, Cultural or Institutional Barriers to Meaningful Student Participation

Research consistently shows that student participation in Primary Education tends to be symbolic and superficial, often reduced to marginal decisions and shaped by the authority and control of adults (Balagueró et al., 2023; Salazar et al., 2021). In these contexts, participation is limited to activities that do not challenge existing hierarchies, with students perceiving themselves more as recipients of obligations than as bearers of rights. This imbalance hinders the development of responsible and active engagement.

Rodríguez Bustamante (2020) highlights a fundamental tension in how participation is approached in schools: although it is conceived as something to be learned and taught, its limited presence in educational practice raises doubts about whether it should indeed be exercised. This lack of implementation is further compounded by minimal commitment from teaching staff and the absence of sustained participatory spaces.

Power asymmetries are deeply embedded in the school culture. According to Soldevila-Pérez et al. (2025), although teachers may accept students' contributions, they tend to do so only when such inputs do not jeopardize their authority. This conditional recognition reinforces unequal power dynamics, restricting students' agency and limiting their influence on decisions that directly affect them. In fact, many pupils perceive that their main role is to carry out adult-made decisions, which aligns with Martínez-Sainz et al. (2024), who describe the complex gap between aspirations for student voice and the real possibilities to exercise it.

Furthermore, Stamatovic and Zunic Cicvaric (2019) observed that both students and teachers believe the right to express opinions is one of the least respected in schools, reinforcing a culture in which children's freedom of expression is insufficiently acknowledged. Soldevila-Pérez et al. (2025) also point out that engaging in participatory research *with* students, rather than on them, introduces challenges and tensions, yet also represents a promising avenue to democratize educational environments.

Gender-based stereotypes also play a significant role in restricting participation. González López (2020) found that such biases are replicated within the classroom, limiting girls' visibility and voice. There is a noticeable disparity in participation between boys and girls, with boys intervening more frequently in group activities. These findings emphasize the need to adopt deliberate strategies that ensure equitable participation and prevent social stereotypes from shaping children's choices.

Structural and institutional constraints further curtail students' autonomy. Sirkko et al. (2019) describe how certain participation mechanisms are overly formalized, subordinated to adult control and framed within moral and social expectations of the school culture. While some tools may promote autonomy in a limited subset of students, they simultaneously restrict others. Moreover, there is often an unequal distribution of participatory rights among children, reflecting broader societal inequalities.

Another key barrier is the persistent notion that children are not full political subjects. As Rodríguez Bustamante (2020) argue, the dominant view of childhood as a period of immaturity leads to the exclusion of children from political practices. This marginalization is rooted in historical and institutional traditions, which naturalize the avoidance of conflict, an essential component of social and political life. Formal participation mechanisms tend to exclude children precisely because they lack the legal and social status of citizens.

Rodríguez Bustamante (2020) further explains that the adult-child relationship is marked by a "minority bond," structured around institutional responsibilities. The restrictive assumptions regarding children's political and reflective capacities, along with the school's hierarchical organization, limit the expansion of participatory practices. Teachers and school leaders often bear civil responsibility for students, a factor that contributes to maintaining adult-centric authority and discourages shared decision-making. This is compounded by the difficulty many adults experience in recognizing exchanges with children as valuable contributions.

A lack of conceptual clarity about participation and democracy among both students and teachers also hampers progress. Moreno-Medina, Martínez-Garrido and Allen (2024) reveal considerable uncertainty among students regarding democratic principles, with even educators showing confusion depending on their school's sociocultural context. Rodríguez Bustamante (2020) notes that citizenship education is complex, embedded in competing dimensions and traditions, making its practical implementation particularly problematic.

Contextual and environmental factors also shape participation opportunities. These include teacher preferences and competencies, fear of embarrassment, institutional structures, and the general classroom climate (Müller-Kuhn et al., 2021; Crozier, 2020; Ladd et al., 2008; Nyborg et al., 2022; Fielding, 2012; Mannion et al., 2022; as cited in O'Brien et al., 2024). According to O'Brien et al. (2024), creating meaningful participation requires addressing these diverse elements and responding to the unique needs and interests of each child.

Additionally, Agustian (2024) emphasizes that fostering active participation challenges

the traditional conception of students as passive recipients of instruction. However, current educational systems often prioritize high-stakes testing, which acts as a significant obstacle to collaborative and creative engagement in curriculum design. Although many teachers express interest in involving students more deeply, they frequently encounter constraints such as limited resources and governmental pressure related to standardized assessments. Furthermore, participatory efforts are often directed more towards families than towards students themselves, with the latter being relegated to informal or peripheral roles.

Hargreaves et al. (2021) affirm that students' voices frequently have little to no influence over what or how they learn, as most rules and decisions are made for them rather than by them. This reality reflects a systemic lack of child-led decision-making within the school environment.

Finally, there is a notable absence of curricular space and learning environments designed to effectively promote children's voices. Martinez-Sainz et al. (2024) stress the need for learning settings that actively support expression and deliberation. Moreover, certain students, especially those who are more passive, hesitant to participate, or preoccupied with internal thoughts, are often overlooked or insufficiently supported (Sirikko et al., 2019).

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The present research work is based on the premise that active participation in school decision making by Primary School students should be an indispensable component in schools, since it favours the integral development of students and pursues the democratic values of current citizenship. However, the reality of school practices is far from a real quality participation, and there is a clear desynchrony between current regulations and actual practices. In this context, children are excluded and made invisible due to the adult-centric vision of society, which tends to consider students as future active agents, forgetting their capacity, their interest and their right to be citizens in the present. This perspective provokes symbolic and superficial participations, which do not focus on the students as active agents in school decision making. The following conclusions have been obtained, organized around the specific objectives:

Firstly, in relation to the first specific objective, to analyze the influence of student participation in the personal, social and academic development of primary school students, we have been able to confirm the relevance of active student participation in the school context. This participation has a positive impact on their development, favoring autonomy, self-esteem, critical thinking and sense of belonging, among others. From this perspective, a more democratic and meaningful environment is generated for primary school students, key aspects for the development of active citizenship in terms of democracy. Within this framework, we advocate recognizing students as active agents in the present, overcoming adult-centric perspectives that only conceive them as citizens of tomorrow. However, the results show an ambiguous and restricted conceptualization of child participation. Although in some cases the right to participate is recognized, it is linked more to obedience or compliance with rules than to active, critical and transforming participation. This view coincides with the warning of Lundy (2007), who stresses that, without a holistic understanding of the right to be heard, participation tends to be instrumentalized. In addition, both students and teachers show a certain conceptual uncertainty, which coincides with the findings of Moreno-Medina et al. (2024), who point out that even teachers are not clear about what democracy or real participation in school contexts implies. Thus, this objective highlights the need

for teacher training and a thorough review of the normative and cultural frameworks that support the role of students in school. Therefore, it is concluded that student participation has a positive impact on the personal, social and academic development of students, favoring their self-esteem, sense of belonging and commitment to learning, as long as it takes place under conditions of recognition and active listening.

Secondly, in relation to the second specific objective, to examine the role of the school as a facilitating or limiting space for student participation in decision-making, pedagogical discourses advocate an active participatory culture at school. It is observed that the facilitating factors are related to the creation of safe environments, horizontal structures and teacher involvement. Results coincide with Fielding (2012), who argues that authentic participation is favored when student voice is valued and real opportunities for decision making are generated. Furthermore, studies by O'Brien et al. (2024) highlight the importance of attending to the diversity of interests and personal characteristics, which is aligned with the need to build inclusive and flexible spaces that recognize all students as valid agents. In this sense, the disposition of the teaching staff emerges as a key element. When relationships of trust and mutual respect are promoted, participation ceases to be symbolic and becomes a democratizing educational tool (Lansdown, 2011). However, the results show that the school is far from carrying out a culture of active participation, since participation is symbolic, punctual and conditioned. This reality limits democratic learning and hinders the formation of a participatory culture. Thus, there is a clear disconnection between what is said and what is done, promoting in many cases the adult-centric perspective through the teaching authority. However, the importance of the school in terms of participatory and democratic development is crucial, which is why we must promote its theoretical and practical training under an innovative and inclusive perspective of child protagonism. Therefore, it is essential to rethink its role and move towards an institution that recognizes and promotes the meaningful participation of students in a continuous and consistent manner. Therefore, it is concluded that the school can be both a driving force and a brake on child participation. Its facilitating capacity depends on the institutional culture, the relational model and the willingness of teachers to share power and promote more horizontal structures.

Thirdly, in relation to the third specific objective, to identify effective strategies that promote the active participation of students in school contexts, the research has made it possible to gather ideas and methods with potential; however, their effectiveness lies in their approach and implementation. Thus, methods such as curriculum co-design, assemblies, active methodologies, dialogues or approaches that listen to student proposals stand out. However, they do not have participatory quality effects if they are not consistently applied through solid structures that are continuously present, considering students as active agents and with valuable proposals considered when designing all those aspects that make up the daily life of schools. Therefore, it is concluded that the most effective strategies are those that recognize the voice of students, generate spaces for authentic dialogue and encourage co-responsibility, such as assemblies, cooperative learning or participatory projects with real meaning for the student body.

And, fourthly, in relation to the fourth specific objective, to detect structural, cultural or institutional barriers that hinder the meaningful participation of students in school life, the research has made it possible to detect the barriers that hinder its implementation. Participation is usually conditioned by adult-centered power relations, as pointed out by Soldevila-Pérez et al. (2025). Teachers accept student contributions only if they do

not compromise their authority, which seriously limits children's capacity for action and agency. Likewise, the weight of gender stereotypes, as González López (2020) exposes, reinforces inequalities in the visibility and protagonism of girls and boys, which prevents equitable participation. Added to this are educational practices marked by hierarchy and normativity, which hinder the emergence of a participatory culture based on dialogue and co-responsibility (Hargreaves et al., 2021). It also highlights the absence of adequate spaces and the lack of democratic culture, both among students and teachers. These obstacles are consistent with Agustian (2024) who states that the curriculum and institutional conditions do not usually favor real participatory practices. Therefore, overcoming these limitations requires a profound structural and cultural change in school practices, as well as a political and pedagogical commitment to the recognition of students as full citizens. Therefore, it is concluded that meaningful participation is hindered by adult-centric power relations, hierarchical structures, gender stereotypes and lack of institutionalized spaces, which prevent the full exercise of the right to participate.

The work carried out has been limited by not establishing exclusion criteria with respect to the geographic location of the sample, making it difficult to be specific with respect to a more concise location. However, the scarcity of results in specifying a geographic space made it difficult to establish exclusion criteria in this sense. Some of the future lines of research to which this work opens doors could deal with research on how to train teachers in participation and democratic culture of students in Primary Education, or research on the impact of real student participation in terms of academic results and classroom climate, as well as studies on strategies for transforming power relations between students and teachers in an adjusted and equitable manner, among other possibilities offered by this educational topic, for which there is still a long way to go.

It is also worth mentioning as a limitation the fact that the Scopus database was not integrated into this research. However, most of the findings on this topic were found in the databases used.

This study contributes to the scientific field a critical and contextualized understanding of student participation in Primary Education, by evidencing its role as a key factor in integral development and in the construction of citizenship from an early age. By integrating pedagogical, socio-political and ethical perspectives, the research reveals structural and cultural tensions that limit meaningful participation, while identifying practices and conditions that favor it. These contributions make it possible to move towards more democratic and inclusive educational models, with direct implications for the transformation of school policies and teacher training.

5. Notes

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