Z f Bildungsforsch (2021) 11:35–53
https://doi.org/10.1007/s35834-021-00296-5

ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR BILDUNGSFORSCHUNG

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Student participation in everyday school life—Linking different perspectives

Daniela Müller-Kuhn · Pascale Herzig · Julia Häbig · Enikö Zala-Mezö

Received: 29 September 2020 / Revised: 1 April 2021 / Accepted: 7 April 2021 / Published online: 4 May 2021
© The Author(s) 2021

Abstract Although student participation is required by convention and law, this is no guarantee of its implementation in everyday school life. The main aim of this article is to show how student participation is perceived by members of the school community and how it occurs in their daily routines. This article examines how students and teachers perceive student participation in upper primary and lower secondary school and which correlations between student participation and student characteristics exist. Furthermore, we investigate which practices of student participation appear in school life and which correlations between student participation and other dimensions can be observed in the daily routine.

The analysis was based on a mixed methods design which enabled the combination of different perspectives, namely of students, teachers and the observer. Survey data from 762 students aged 9 to 15 and 182 teachers as well as ethnographic observations in six classes were analyzed for this paper, using data from the Swiss research project "Strengthen Participation—Improve School".

The investigation led to the following main findings: while students perceive some participation, teachers perceive quite a lot of student participation. In addition, students are significantly less satisfied with student participation in their school than teachers. Correlations between student participation and the students' gender, school grade, school performance and attitude towards school exist. In everyday school life, students participate in aspects of content, school organization and social spheres. Further there are observable differences regarding school grade and gender.

Keywords School · Student participation · Pupil participation · Involvement · Mixed methods

D. Müller-Kuhn (✉) · P. Herzig · J. Häbig · E. Zala-Mezö
Zurich University of Teacher Education, Zurich, Switzerland
E-Mail: daniela.mueller@phzh.ch

Partizipation von Schülerinnen und Schülern im Schulalltag – eine Verknüpfung verschiedener Perspektiven

Zusammenfassung Obwohl Kinder laut Kinderrechtskonvention und Schulgesetz mitbestimmen können sollten, ist dies keine Garantie für deren Umsetzung im Schulalltag. Das Hauptziel dieses Artikels ist es daher, aufzuzeigen, wie Schülerinnen- und Schülerpartizipation von den beteiligten Personen wahrgenommen wird und wie sie im Schulalltag stattfindet. Infolgedessen untersucht dieser Artikel, wie Schülerinnen, Schüler und Lehrpersonen der Primar- und Sekundarstufe Partizipation wahrnehmen und welche Zusammenhänge zwischen Partizipation und den Eigenschaften der Schülerinnen und Schüler bestehen. Des Weiteren untersuchen wir, wie Partizipation im Schulalltag stattfindet und welche Zusammenhänge sich zwischen Partizipation und anderen Dimensionen zeigen.

Die Analyse basiert auf einer Methodentriangulation, die es ermöglicht, verschiedene Perspektiven zu kombinieren, nämlich diejenige der an der Schule beteiligten Personen und die Perspektive des Beobachters respektive der Beobachterin. Für diesen Artikel wurden Fragebogendaten von 762 Schülerinnen und Schülern im Alter von 9 bis 15 Jahren und 182 Lehrpersonen sowie ethnographische Beobachtungen in sechs Klassen analysiert, wobei Daten aus dem Schweizer Forschungsprojekt „Partizipation stärken – Schule entwickeln“ verwendet wurden.

Die Untersuchung führt zu folgenden Erkenntnissen: Die Schülerinnen und Schüler nehmen etwas und die Lehrpersonen viel Schülerinnen- und Schülerpartizipation wahr. Die Schülerinnen und Schüler sind deutlich weniger zufrieden mit Partizipation an ihrer Schule als die Lehrpersonen. Es bestehen Zusammenhänge zwischen Partizipation und dem Geschlecht der Schülerinnen und Schüler, ihrer Stufe, ihren schulischen Leistungen und ihrer Einstellung zur Schule. Im Schulalltag zeigt sich Partizipation bei inhaltlichen, organisatorischen und sozialen Aspekten. Darüber hinaus gibt es beobachtbare Unterschiede in der Partizipation bezüglich Stufe und Geschlecht der Schülerinnen und Schüler.

Schlüsselwörter Schule · Schülerpartizipation/Schülerinnenpartizipation · Mitwirkung · Beteiligung · Methodentriangulation

1 Introduction

Student participation received global legitimation through the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989). The content of Article 12 of the Convention regarding children's views was explicated by Lundy (2007): she demands *space* and *voice*, so children receive "the opportunity to express a view" (Lundy 2007, p. 933) and are facilitated in doing so. Furthermore, she claims *audience* and *influence*, so children's "view[s] must be listened to [and ...] acted upon, as appropriate" (Lundy 2007, p. 933). Also local school law enshrines student participation in the sense of taking the student perspective into account (e.g. Volksschulgesetz Kanton Zürich 2005). Since the implementation of such laws are "constructed through conversation among teachers, administrators, and external experts" (Spillane

2004, p. 60), it cannot be taken for granted that student participation is implemented in schools in a uniform way. Hence, it is important to investigate in research projects how student participation is realized in schools.

The theoretical background for this article is framed by the concepts of relational agency (Esser 2014; Esser et al. 2016) on the one hand and the idea of generational order on the other (Alanen 2005; Heinzel 2019) which are both considered to have great influence on how participation is realized.

In childhood studies, children are understood to be active agents who are able to construct and determine their own social lives, the lives of those around them, and the societies in which they live (Prout and James 2015). However, it is important to consider that children's agency is not pervasive. As Abebe (2019, p. 12) points out "children agency is both constituted in social contexts and negotiated through social interaction with 'other' generations". Esser (2014) suggests that to understand agency relationally: "that even the abilities and possibilities for action [i.e. agency] are never pre-social, but these only arise in the social relationships in which children are involved" (Esser 2014, p. 236, translated by authors). Following this concept, social relationships deserve special attention as they are relevant for how participation is realized. The social relationships in which children are involved at school are marked by generational order: School is a place shaped mostly by adults with rules and prescriptions but is also a place where children spend a lot of time. That time is marked by them, a generation of children facing a generation of adults (Heinzel 2019, p. 283), whereby these child/adult categories are produced constantly in so-called 'generationing-practices' (Alanen 2005, p. 79). So when children are "structurally disadvantaged in relation to adults" (Esser et al. 2016, p. 19) but at the same time able to display agency, their actions and practices allow for conclusions about how the generational order is constructed. Do adults enable student participation and in what way? How do students perceive offers of participation and how do they respond? Heinzel sees the danger of students being placed in an inferior position and calls for "child adequacy" ("Kindgemässheit", Heinzel 2019, p. 279; translated by authors) to the adults. With regard to participation this implies that children are offered participation possibilities of which they can take advantage and which correspond to their age, abilities and other characteristics.

This article intends to further this field of study and investigates student participation in five Swiss primary and secondary schools, particularly how members of the school community perceive participation, how the practice of student participation appears to an external observer, and which correlations between student participation and student characteristics exist. To investigate these topics, we used two different types of data: quantitative survey data and qualitative participant observation data. The inclusion of the students' and teachers' perspectives (from the survey data) along with the perspective of an external observer (in the participant observation data) is advantageous in that the same topic can be viewed from three different perspectives. By linking these perspectives, we point to the fact that schools must deal with the implications of the generational order that intrinsically puts students in an inferior position and makes participation a challenge.

1.1 Understanding of student participation

Student participation[1] is a continuum (Zala-Mezö et al. 2020) describing a concept with "a wide range of terms and activities" (Fleming 2015, p. 223). It is a frequently-used term to describe student voice, involvement, taking part, engagement and other forms of contributing and negotiating. The definitions describe in different ways how students receive an active role and decision-making authority, and are involved in shaping their school.

The following three concepts of participation outline the range of participation as it is used in this article:

The first concept was developed by Lundy (2007), who refers to Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989). She emphasizes "two key elements [of Article 12]: (i) the right to express a view, and (ii) the right to have the view given due weight" (p. 931). The right to express a view can be fulfilled by giving students *space and voice*, while the right to have the view given due weight can be acted upon in terms of *audience and influence* (Lundy 2007).

The second concept of participation to which we refer describes participation as student *involvement* in binding, (Jaun 1999, p. 266) collective decision-making processes (Mager and Nowak 2012, p. 40) with appropriate methods (Jaun 1999, p. 266) where teachers might pass some of their power on to students (Banneyer et al. 2015, p. 7).

The third concept of participation is based on the previously mentioned *agency*, which is one of the key elements of the OECD[2] Learning Compass 2030 (OECD 2019, p. 2): "Student agency is thus defined as the capacity to set a goal, reflect and act responsibly to effect change. It is about acting rather than being acted upon; shaping rather than being shaped; and making responsible decisions and choices rather than accepting those determined by others." It is important to consider that agency embraces the collective and is not self-involved or a selfish action.

Ideally however, participation is implemented in such a way that students experience *space* for having a *voice* including *audience* with resulting *influence*, and *involvement* and *agency* at the same time.

1.2 Previous research about student participation

The approach of investigating participation in primary and/or secondary school from both the perspective of the school community and an external researcher in the same sample has the great advantage of examining the subject from two different angles. This seems however, to be a rather unique methodology.[3]

[1] From here we will only use the term participation however, the intended meaning remains *student* participation in the sense described here.

[2] Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

[3] For example, the study by Hargreaves et al. (2020) is a recent one which includes both perspectives in the same sample. Participation refers more to actively taking part in class rather than having a voice in the sense of the UNCRC.

Research on participation is quite varied and leads to many relevant findings on the topic. One of the overarching findings in previous research is that the views of students and teachers differ from each other (Anderson and Graham 2016; Niia et al. 2015), which could be connected to the concept of generational order (Alanen 2005; Heinzel 2019). For example, teachers mention other areas for participation than students do, e.g. whether the students participated in creating the school or class rules (Forde et al. 2018).

On a more concrete level, it is known that participation, which is important for personalized learning (e.g. Fleming 2015) and supports students' motivation, responsiveness and interest (Greenwood 2019), takes place in different areas of school life such as school and class councils (e.g. Andersson 2019; Brückmann and Lippert 2014), compiling individual learning plans (e.g. Quinn and Owen 2016) and project weeks (e.g. Hecht and Hartmann 2014). There are even cases in which students become involved in decisions usually made by the teacher (Nelson 2018). Despite several known areas where participation occurs, and the fact that students do wish to participate (e.g. Müller-Kuhn 2020), many students do not perceive the school as a place of shared decisions or having possibilities for participation (Forde et al. 2018). Students do not feel heard (Keisu and Ahlström 2020)—even in class and school councils—and they barely have the opportunity to actually make an impact (Andersson 2019). So the question arises: to what is this related? Are there specific student characteristics which are linked to whether or not participation occurs?

Research indicates numerous correlations between participation and student characteristics. A student's age and respective school grade represents one of these factors, as a Swiss study shows: children and youth perceive less participation in school with increasing age (Rieker et al. 2016). The researchers assumed a difference in the participation culture of primary and secondary schools. The same researchers showed that a student's gender slightly mattered regarding the rating of participation: girls perceive participation more as a burden due to the higher responsibility they link to participation, while boys stress the benefits of an increase in influence (Rieker et al. 2016). Participation is also connected to children's performance: key skills and competences of children are required for successful participation (Sadownik 2018) and vice versa: participation positively influences students' achievement in math (Ing et al. 2015). Furthermore, motivation has a positive influence on participation especially for girls (Aziz et al. 2018). Students with a migration background are less familiar with participation but no differences in the participation practices in school were perceived (Rieker et al. 2016). The question arises: Are there certain student characteristics which fit better with a traditional generational order than in a more participative environment?

2 Purpose

Complementary to the existing research, the aim of this paper is to investigate the implementation of participation in Swiss primary and secondary schools. Thus it encompasses more than one point of view: On the one hand we examine how students

and teachers perceive participation (RQ 1) and which correlations between student characteristics and participation exist according to the students' data (RQ 2). On the other, we explore the practice of participation in the daily routine at school from an observer's point of view (RQ 3) as well as correlations between the observed practice of participation with student characteristics (RQ 4). This leads to the following research questions:

RQ 1: How do members of the school community perceive participation?

RQ 2: Do correlations between the students' perception of participation and characteristics of the students exist?

RQ 3: How does participation appear in the daily routine at school?

RQ 4: Do correlations between the practice of participation and characteristics of the students exist in the daily routine?

3 Design and methods

The research material we report on here is part of the Swiss study "Strengthen Participation—Improve School".[4] In this article two types of data from the second wave of data collection were used based on a convergent mixed methods design[5] (Creswell and Clark 2018): quantitative survey data from an online questionnaire and qualitative participant observation data from school visits. The quantitative survey data depicted the perceptions of students and teachers, while the qualitative participant observation data provided an external perspective on participation in the daily routine. The different data types were used to report on the various parts of the research questions:

1. Quantitative survey data were used to investigate the research question of how members of the school community—namely students, teachers and other school staff[6]—perceive participation in school, since these data gave us insights into the self-description of the members of the school community.
2. Quantitative survey data were used to examine the correlations between the perception of participation and characteristics of the students.
3. In order to obtain insights about the existing practice and determine what the concrete implementation of participation in the practice of everyday school life looked like, qualitative participant observation data were used. This method allowed us to capture the implementation of participation in the daily routine.

[4] See Zala-Mezö et al. (2018) and www.phzh.ch/zse. The project was financially supported by the Mercator Foundation Switzerland.

[5] In the convergent mixed methods design, the quantitative and qualitative data are collected and analyzed separately and then the results are related to each other (Creswell and Clark 2018).

[6] Teachers and other school staff are henceforth referred to as teachers.

4. To explore correlations between the practice of participation in everyday school life and student characteristics, qualitative participant observation data were used with a focus on those student characteristics which resulted from research question 2 and which were observable.

3.1 Quantitative analysis of survey data

The quantitative analysis was based on data of students and teachers collected through an online questionnaire. This survey data represents the individual perspectives of members of the school community regarding their views on participation.

The sample for the quantitative survey analysis consisted of students from grades four to nine and teachers from five Swiss schools, who participated in an online questionnaire. A total of 762 students and 182 teachers answered the questions in 2017 about their perception of participation in their school. 42.7% of the students

Table 1 Dimensions of quantitative investigation

Dimension (Nr. of Items)	Description	α Students Sample	α Teachers Sample	References
Participation				
Encouragement (4)	How strongly teachers encourage students to participate	0.84	0.76	De Róiste et al. (2012), Marty and Brägger (2008)
Voice (4)	Measuring participation in the sense of having a say and co-determination	0.68	0.81	Biedermann and Oser (2006)
Taking part (5)	Measuring participation in the sense of active involvement	0.67	0.68	Biedermann and Oser (2006), Marty and Brägger (2008), addition by project team
Satisfaction with possibilities (1)	Satisfaction with possibilities to participate	–	–	Rieker et al. (2016)
Satisfaction with result (1)	Satisfaction with result of participative processes	–	–	Rieker et al. (2016)
Grade (1)	Teachers stated the grade they currently teach the most; students chose their current grade	–	–	Designed by project team
Student characteristics				
Gender (1)	Male, female, no answer	–	–	Designed by project team
Migration background (1)	Based on spoken language at home, place of birth and place of school enrollment	–	–	Designed by project team following Rieker et al. (2016)
School performance (6)	Self-assessment of school performance	0.78	–	Rauer and Schuck (2003)
Like going to school (1)	How much the students like going to school	–	–	Designed by project team

Note. α = Cronbach's Alpha; school performance concerned only students (students sample only)

were in upper primary school and 57.3% in lower secondary school. 48.4% of the students were male while 51.6% were female. 50.3% of the students did not have a migration background considering place of birth, place of school enrollment and language spoken at home, while 49.7% did.

For analysis, ten dimensions are relevant (see Table 1). All measures are self-reports by students and teachers. For all scales, reliability and factor analysis were conducted in the overall sample as well as in the students' and the teachers' sample.[7] Analyses were carried out using IBM SPSS Statistics 24.

Quantitative survey data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics to explore the student's perspective compared to that of the teachers (research question 1). Group differences were estimated with independent sample t-tests after conducting the Levene's test for equality of variances. Additionally, Cohen's d was estimated to investigate the effect size of the group comparison.

Bivariate correlations, based on students' data were estimated to show correlations between student characteristics and participation in the sense of having a voice, taking part, encouragement, satisfaction with possibilities to participate and satisfaction with the result of participation (research question 2). According to the levels of measurement of the student characteristics[8], different correlation coefficients were used: Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient was calculated for the metric dimensions (school performance and how much the students like going to school) as well as for the categorical variables with only two categories (gender and migration background), which formed an exception and for which Pearson's correlations were also feasible (Field 2009, p. 177). For the ordinal variable (grade), Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was used.

3.2 Qualitative analysis of participant observation data

The second method we used in our mixed methods design was ethnographic or participant observation (Scholz 2012). This method is characterized by the fact that the observer goes into a situation and observes according to the principle "what the hell is going on?" (Goffman 1974, p. 17). Independent and free from predefined hypotheses and criteria for observation, the observer tries to recognize patterns and takes notes on what can be perceived.

The data used for this article was based on six classes[9] in the five participating schools, corresponding to the classes which completed the questionnaire. Of these classes, three were in upper primary school (grades 4 to 6; students aged 9 to 12), and the other three classes were in lower secondary school (grades 7 to 9; students aged 12 to 15). The fieldwork took place from January to April 2017. Each of the six classes was visited twice (half-day visits). Altogether 48 h of multi-sited participant observations were carried out. All participant observations were conducted

[7] A detailed description of the applied method can be retrieved from the authors.

[8] The participation dimensions all had metric levels of measurement.

[9] The schools that participated in the project were asked to provide us with access to one class from each of the levels we requested.

by the second author of this article, who is qualified and experienced in conducting participant observation.

During the fieldwork, observations were written down by the observer to explore the practices of participation in school. The process of analysis began as the data was being collected (Bluff 2005). Later, the situation in the field was memorized and the fieldnotes were done through a process of 'thick description' (Geertz 1995). These so-called rewritings (Reh 2012) represented another step of analysis. Later on the data were analyzed using open coding according to grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1996).

As Corbin and Strauss (1990) mention, coding is the fundamental analytic process used by the researcher. The data was coded openly with a focus on practices of participation in schools. Knoblauch (2005) calls this strategy focused ethnography. The observed practice of participation provided insight into the concrete arrangement of participation.

The observer had the opportunity to be part of diverse situations in school life such as regular classes, class councils and break-time activities (inside and outside the classroom) as well as informal exchanges with students and teachers. Special attention was given to situations where agency and involvement of students could be observed. Thus, the analysis reflects how participation takes place in everyday school life (research question 3). During the analyzation process we asked if there were any correlations between the student characteristics and the degree of participation teachers or schools allowed or adopted, limiting ourselves to those factors that emerged from the quantitative survey analysis and that were observable (research question 4).

4 Findings

The findings section is structured to align with the research questions.

4.1 Students' and teachers' perception of student participation

Analysis of the survey data demonstrated how students and teachers perceived participation (see Table 2). The students rated all five dimensions of participation above the average of the scale. This indicates that the students did perceive (at least some) participation in school and were satisfied with it. Looking at the means of the teachers, data showed high means, especially concerning encouragement.

In four of the five dimensions, teachers reported significantly higher means than the students did with partly medium and large effect sizes. This indicates that teachers perceived greater participation in terms of encouragement and taking part than the students themselves did and were slightly more satisfied. The one dimension that was perceived similarly by students and teachers was participation in the sense of voice.

Table 2 Mean levels, standard deviations, level of significance (p) and effect size (d)

	Students		Teachers		Group Comparison	
	$n=762$		$n=182$			
Participation measure	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	*p*	*d*
Encouragement	2.83	0.72	3.60	0.41	***	1.31
Voice	2.96	0.58	3.01	0.55	n. s.	0.08
Taking part	2.91	0.56	3.27	0.41	***	0.73
Satisfaction with possibilities	2.81	0.79	3.09	0.57	***	0.40
Satisfaction with result	2.90	0.79	3.03	0.62	*	0.18

Note.* $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$, between students and teachers. A 4-point quasi Likert scale was utilized, ranging from 1 meaning low to 4 meaning high

4.2 Correlations between perception of student participation and student characteristics

The quantitative analysis indicated significant correlations among all tested dimensions of participation and four of the student characteristics (see Table 3):

Grade correlated significantly negative with the five dimensions of participation. This indicates that students in lower grades perceived more participation than in higher grades.

Gender correlated significantly positive with participation. Female students reported more participation than male students.

Migration background did not correlate significantly with participation.

School performance correlated significantly positive with participation. The students who reported a higher performance based on their self-assessment at school were also the students who perceived more participation and were more satisfied with it.

Like going to school correlated significantly positive with participation. The students who liked going to school more, were also the students who reported more participation.

Table 3 Correlations of participation and student characteristics; $N_{Min}=725$, $N_{Max}=762$

Measures	Grade[a]	Gender[b]	Migration background[b]	School performance[b]	Like going to school[b]
Participation					
Encouragement	–0.16***	0.08*	n. s.	0.11**	0.41***
Voice	–0.23***	0.09**	n. s.	0.15***	0.40***
Taking part	–0.23***	0.08*	n. s.	0.11**	0.39***
Satisfaction with possibilities	–0.26***	0.11**	n. s.	0.12**	0.36***
Satisfaction with result	–0.10**	0.11**	n. s.	0.11**	0.27***

Note.* $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$; *scales*: range = from low to high; *gender*: 1 = male, 2 = female
[a] Spearman's rho,
[b] Pearson's correlation coefficient

While most correlation coefficients were significant but rather small, the correlation coefficients of the correlations between participation and how much the students liked going to school were medium.

4.3 Practice of student participation in the daily routine

We now leave the students' and teachers' perceptions of participation, which were the focus of the previous two chapters, and continue with the ethnographic perspective. Participation can be observed in various situations in school life such as regular classes, class councils and break-time activities. In the current chapter we will show how participation takes place in the daily routine of the selected classes.

Many situations in regular classes were observed where students could participate regarding the content or topic. Most students had the opportunity to do something in a way they chose for themselves. For example, the students chose a topic for their own project or presentation, they tried out different musical instruments and then selected one to play the school song or they talked about ideas for the school celebration.

In many other situations, participation referred to organizational aspects of learning such as collaboration. The students chose with whom they wished to work or where they wanted to sit—however classes varied highly on this topic since it was always dependent on the teacher's flexibility. Furthermore, students were able to choose the order in which they accomplished tasks. However those forms of participation operated within an existing system of a teacher playing a central role in classes by providing instructions and regulating the classroom workflow.

In a few situations, students started to work autonomously without the observer hearing any instructions given by the teacher. It remains unclear whether these were self-directed work sessions or if the students were informed about the form and content ahead of time.

In some observed situations students negotiated with teachers. In other situations, students did not agree with a teacher's suggestion—regardless of whether the teacher intended to put the matter up for discussion or not. Sometimes, students raised their voice when they did not agree and often accomplished a change to the teacher's original plan. There was more than one example observed of students asking for test results which the teacher had originally intended to provide later, but then acquiesced to the students' requests. Students sometimes carried out an instruction extremely slowly in order to delay it. Disobedience was a strategy employed when students did not agree with the teacher.

However, in most of the observed classes the relationship between teacher and students was based on mutual respect. Therefore, role inversion was observed in several classes: students explained something to the teacher or helped them, as can be seen in the following extract from the rewriting of a music class in a secondary school, where the class listened to the school song they had recorded in order to find out what they wanted to improve:

> *The teacher explains that they are going to work on the school song and will keep another recording. He says: Let us listen to the song first. He gets up and*

asks Sarah if she got the song because he has sent it to her by email. No, she has not got it from the teacher but from a school mate. A few other students have received the latest version as well. While the teacher is talking to the class, he is looking for something on the computer. [...] A short time later, the teacher contritely admits that he only has an old version here. The new one is at home! Emely has the new version on her cell phone. She suggests listening to this version. The teacher likes the idea, so the song is played from her cell phone. (G-OS, 2017, 215–234, translated by the authors)

In addition to these participative situations from regular lessons, there was very specific ‘class council participation’ observed when students led the class council, either with enthusiasm or just because it was their duty. However, in most class councils observed, all students, even the ones without a predefined role, actively participated. They shared their opinions, made suggestions and negotiated with each other.

4.4 Correlations between practice of student participation and student characteristics

In the following section we ask what student characteristics are linked to participation in the daily routine at school. Are there patterns which can be observed? In doing so, we have limited ourselves to the factors that were significant in the quantitative survey analysis and that were observable: Dimensions with significant correlations in the quantitative analysis which were also observable with participant observation methods were the *grade* (students in primary school thought they had more opportunities to participate than students from secondary school) and *gender* (female students reported more participation than male students). Other dimensions such as *participation and school performance* or *participation and like going to school* were not observable. The dimension *migration background* was not significant and therefore has been excluded from triangulation.

4.4.1 School grade

The participant observation showed various forms of participation in primary school classes such as projects (students could choose the topic), class councils which are led by students themselves, and different forms of collaboration between students. However, differences between primary classes depended on the capabilities and personal preferences of the teacher, which of course also applies to teachers in secondary school. Observations in secondary school indicated that school life was dominated by the pressure of educational success. It became evident that the predominant aim of this school level was to find a place for each student whether in high school (students needed to pass an admissions exam) or in an apprenticeship as part of their vocational education. This pressure could be observed in the daily routine as well: teaching was less open and teacher-centered instruction was more prominent than learner-centered teaching styles with a higher level of participation. Also, seating arrangements varied between the grades: whereas students from the

observed primary school classes sat in groups together or horseshoe-shaped, secondary school students observed were seated in rows. In addition, the primary school classrooms used a chair circle (for morning rituals, discussions or class councils). The organization of the space as well as the different forms of teaching corresponded with the degree of participation that was observed.

The participant observation data confirmed the students' self-description: the older they were, the less they could participate.

4.4.2 Gender

In general, participant observation data did not indicate major differences between girls and boys regarding participation in ordinary lessons. If we differentiate according to school level and topic, slight gender differences can be seen: in secondary school the degree of participation depended on the subject (e.g. boys in Mathematics/girls in French; which may rely on gender but could also be founded on personal preferences). In class councils, boys often had an active role (such as leading the discussion or taking notes). Nevertheless, girls were active in the discussions and made suggestions to a similar degree. In some situations, teachers explicitly involved restless boys to quiet the class. In such situations boys more often received the teacher's attention. Regarding gender, the participant observation data were slightly different from the students' self-conception. Girls were more confident with the degree of participation and perceived more participation than boys according to the quantitative survey data, but the observed practice did not show major differences. Rather the opposite was true: boys were more involved than girls but were less content.

5 Conclusion

The goal of this article was to examine how members of the school community, namely students and teachers, perceived participation and how participation appears in the practice of everyday school life in Swiss primary and secondary schools. Additionally, correlations between student characteristics and participation were investigated. On one hand quantitative survey data were used to examine the perception of students and teachers. On the other, qualitative participant observation data were used to explore the daily practice of participation. For both methodological strands, data from the same schools were used. Overall, the research shows that participation—at least to some extent—is perceived by both students and teachers and appears in daily practice. Participation is also linked to certain student characteristics.

The key findings will be discussed in the subsequent section. Limitations are then mentioned before the article closes with some final thoughts.

5.1 Discussion with focus on the research questions

Counter to the findings in the existing literature (Forde et al. 2018), most students do perceive school to some extent as a place where they can participate in the sense of having a voice and being actively involved. They felt somehow encouraged by their

teachers to participate. Participation was observed in practice and many teachers involved students in decision-making processes. Students received or just seized the chance to verbalize a concern or opinion, showing agency by doing so. In a few classes participation took place in the form of involvement in collective decision-making which means that both teachers and students were involved in the process (e.g. Banneyer et al. 2015; Jaun 1999; Mager and Nowak 2012).

Participant observation in classrooms showed that teachers in secondary schools often rely on teaching approaches based on direct instruction (with some elements of class discussions), except for the so-called "atelier classes", in which students were expected to work in a self-regulated manner. In primary school a variety of teaching approaches were observed including project work and weekly schedule, which were integrated in everyday classroom activities.

In line with the current literature (Rieker et al. 2016), our results indicate that less participation is perceived in higher school grades than in lower school grades, even though the effect is rather small. This may be an indication that there are fewer participation offers in higher school grades, or that in higher school grades the participation situations that teachers offer are not sufficiently 'child adequate'—hence not perceived as possibilities for participation by the (older) students (Heinzel 2019, p. 279). The upcoming transition to high school or apprenticeship seems to be another explanation for less participation in secondary school. An additional reason may be differences in school culture: while in primary school one teacher teaches many subjects, in secondary school there is subject specialization (Louis and Lee 2016), resulting in students having fewer lessons with the same teacher and, consequently, often a more distant relationship and less room for adjustments based on student suggestions. Since students in higher school grades are most likely familiar with participation from lower school grades and since it is known that student participation positively correlates with students' motivation, responsiveness and interest (Greenwood 2019), it is likely that students are frustrated and not motivated when participation decreases with higher school grades.

While the existing literature demonstrates that key skills and competences of children are required for successful participation (Ing et al. 2015; Sadownik 2018) and motivation to go to school supports participation (Aziz et al. 2018), our study confirms correlations with a small effect between participation and self-assessed school performance as well as correlations with a medium effect between participation and how much the students liked going to school. It seems that the "child adequacy" (Heinzel 2019, p. 279; translated by authors) of participation is higher for some groups of students than for others—providing real participation possibilities for children whose antipathy towards school is higher could be more difficult and hence not be realized by teachers. It is also conceivable that students with specific characteristics fulfill the expectations of the given school system better than others, so they have more access to certain decisions-making processes.

5.2 Discussion with focus on methodological issues related to the findings

The design of the study also invites a discussion of the findings regarding the methodological possibilities. In this article different perspectives and data types on

student participation investigating the same schools were brought together. Benefits and shortcomings of each data source became obvious by doing this and can be considered a great advantage of this mixed methods design: quantitative survey data clearly laid out the differences that could exist between varied investigated groups such as teachers and students. Our results confirmed that the students' and teachers' perceptions about student participation can differ (e.g. Anderson and Graham 2016; Niia et al. 2015). Since due to the large sample size, significance levels can mislead, it is important to consider the effect sizes as well.[10] Therefore it becomes apparent that group differences between students and teachers are noteworthy especially concerning the participation dimensions encouragement and taking part. The large effect about encouragement leads to the assumption that the teachers' efforts are not quite well received by the students—in the manner of Konrad Lorenz: "... said does not always mean heard correctly, heard does not always mean understood correctly ..." (translated by authors). Or with reference to previously cited Heinzel (2019): The "child adequacy" does not seem to reach all students, although to some extent the differences are possibly also due to a self-serving bias (McAllister 1996) of the teachers.

The quantitative survey data also set out which characteristics were linked to more or less participation which automatically leads to the question "why is this?": Why do boys perceive less participation and how can this be changed to guarantee fair opportunities? What does it mean—for students, teachers and for researchers—that boys report less participation than girls, when the practice does not identify major differences between the two groups regarding participation? The relevance of gender for participation seems to be an under-explored area of research. According to our investigation, there are potentially interesting results waiting to be explored around that topic.

The qualitative participant observation data allowed us to take a deeper look at interactions and reminded us that practice consists of the sum of many single situations that often depend to a great degree on the kind of relationship that exists between the individual teacher and the student involved. Flexibility given by the teacher seems to be very important for whether and how participation takes place. However, if participation is strongly dependent on the teacher, there might be great differences between students according to the individual teacher's practice, especially in the higher grades where there is subject specialization. It is possible, however, that students then want to apply the participation skills and opportunities they know from one subject in another subject as well. This could lead to difficult situations with the teacher, or to a profitable experience for all involved.

5.3 Limitations

Since only five schools were studied, the empirical base was solid but not extraordinarily wide. In a larger sample the empirical setting could be repeated to test the generalization of the findings. Furthermore, the finding that encouragement and tak-

[10] The same is true for correlations between participation and the student characteristics. Here, too, the significance levels can be misleading. So it is important to consider the correlation coefficients as well.

ing part were perceived differently by students and teachers, but voice was perceived similarly, requires further investigation. Additional dimensions of participation beyond voice, taking part, encouragement and satisfaction could be included in the quantitative portion of the study. Moreover, it would be helpful to have additional information about the students in the participant observation portion of the study (such as their school performance and whether they like going to school). The advantage of this design would be that, in addition to age and gender, other characteristics of the students could also be included in the analysis of the participant observation data. Finally, teacher influence on student participation was missed in the investigation of the perception of the school members, except for the dimension of encouragement. In the analysis of the practice of participation, the teacher was paid more attention. Still, it might be worth incorporating the teacher's role in student participation more closely. Additionally, in a further study it would be interesting to integrate one additional level: the role of the school leader regarding student participation could also be examined. This would make it possible to investigate the relevance of organizational structures and leadership for the implementation of participation as a school-wide topic.

5.4 Concluding remarks

The Swiss schools studied showed participation in practice, and the teachers and students did perceive some student participation. But overall, student participation seemed not to be a self-evident attitude. If schools wish to develop further in the direction of increased participation, they need time for this process—to address school culture, internalize participation and see the value of participation. Research can support schools on that journey. While quantitative survey data may help to scrutinize the bigger relationships and existing inequality within the classroom and focus on certain groups, (e.g. "girls vs. boys"), qualitative participant observation data reminds us of the importance of taking a close look at individual situations. Viewing these situations in their unique contexts can be a helpful tool for each teacher to approach and improve their teaching practice. If the possibility of consulting an observer exists—a teacher colleague for example—this could be a very valuable resource.

Funding Open access funding provided by Zurich University of Teacher Education

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.

References

Abebe, T. (2019). Reconceptualising children's agency as continuum and interdependence. *Social Sciences*, *8*(3), 81. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci8030081.

Alanen, L. (2005). Kindheit als generationales Konzept. In H. Hengst & H. Zeiher (Eds.), *Kindheit soziologisch* (pp. 65–82). Wiesbaden: VS. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-322-81004-5_5.

Anderson, D.L., & Graham, A.P. (2016). Improving student wellbeing: Having a say at school. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, *27*(3), 348–366. https://doi.org/10.1080/09243453.2015.1084336.

Andersson, E. (2019). The school as a public space for democratic experiences: formal student participation and its political characteristics. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, *14*(2), 149–164. https://doi.org/10.1177/1746197918776657.

Aziz, F., Quraishi, U., & Kazi, S.A. (2018). Factors behind classroom participation of secondary school students (A gender based analysis). *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, *6*(2), 211–217. https://doi.org/10.13189/ujer.2018.060201.

Banneyer, H., Bergner, H.-P., Frye, S., Giese, C., Knauer, R., Marquard, P., Meeder, K., Meinhold-Henschel, S., Oppermann, J., Steimle, H., Terzioglu, E., Winklhofer, U., Wolff, M., & Zinser, C. (2015). *Qualitätsstandards für Beteiligung von Kindern und Jugendlichen Allgemeine Qualitätsstandards und Empfehlungen für die Praxisfelder Kindertageseinrichtungen, Schule, Kommune, Kinder- und Jugendarbeit und Erzieherische Hilfen*. Berlin: Publikationsversand der Bundesregierung

Biedermann, H., & Oser, F. (2006). Partizipation und Identität. Junge Menschen zwischen Gefügigkeit und Mitverantwortung. In F. Oser & C. Quesel (Eds.), *Die Mühen der Freiheit. Probleme und Chancen der Partizipation von Kindern und Jugendlichen* (pp. 95–136). Zürich: Rüegger.

Bluff, R. (2005). Grounded theory: the methodology. In I. Holloway (Ed.), *Qualitative research in health care*. London: Open University Press.

Brückmann, B., & Lippert, H. (2014). Schülerbeteiligung von Anfang an. Vom Klassenrat bis zur verantwortlichen Gestaltung des eigenen Lernens. *Pädagogik*, *66*(11), 24–28.

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative Sociology*, *13*(1), 3–21.

Creswell, J.W., & Clark, P.V.L. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. Los Angeles: SAGE.

Esser, F. (2014). Agency Revisited. Relationale Perspektiven auf Kindheit und die Handlungsfähigkeit von Kindern. *Zeitschrift für Soziologie der Erziehung und Sozialisation*, *34*(3), 233–246.

Esser, F., Baader, M.S., Betz, T., & Hungerland, B. (2016). Reconceptualising agency and childhood. an introduction. In F. Esser, M.S. Baader, T. Betz & B. Hungerland (Eds.), *Reconceptualising agency and childhood: new perspectives in childhood studies* (pp. 16–30). London: Taylor & Francis.

Field, A. (2009). *Discovering statistics using SPSS* (3rd edn.). London: Sage.

Fleming, D. (2015). Student voice: an emerging discourse in Irish education policy. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, *8*(2), 223–242.

Forde, C., Horgan, D., Martin, S., & Parkes, A. (2018). Learning from children's voice in schools: experiences from ireland. *Journal of Educational Change*, *19*(4), 489–509. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-018-9331-6.

Geertz, C. (1995). *Dichte Beschreibung. Beiträge zum Verstehen kultureller Systeme*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

Goffman, E. (1974). *Rahmen-Analyse: Ein Versuch über die Organisation von Alltagserfahrungen*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Greenwood, R. (2019). Pupil involvement in planning topics using KWL grids: opinions of teachers, student teachers and pupils. *Educational Studies*, *45*(4), 497–519. https://doi.org/10.1080/03055698.2018.1509773.

Hargreaves, E., Elhawary, D., & Mahgoub, M. (2020). "One girl had a different idea": children's perspectives on learning and teaching models in the traditional classroom. *Education 3–13*, *48*(1), 87–99. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2019.1586975.

Hecht, M., & Hartmann, U. (2014). 8 Wochen im Jahrgang 8. Das Entschulungsprojekt "Schlaraffenland". *Pädagogik*, *66*(7/8), 12–15.

Heinzel, F. (2019). Zur Doppelfunktion der Grundschule, dem Kind und der Gesellschaft verpflichtet zu sein – die generationenvermittelnde Grundschule als Konzept. *Zeitschrift für Grundschulforschung*, *12*(2), 275–287. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42278-019-00050-x.

Ing, M., Webb, N.M., Franke, M.L., Turrou, A.C., Wong, J., Shin, N., & Fernandez, C.H. (2015). Student participation in elementary mathematics classrooms: The missing link between teacher practices and

student achievement? *Educational Studies in Mathematics*, *90*(3), 341–356. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10649-015-9625-z.
Jaun, T. (1999). Durch Identifikation zu Verantwortungsbewusstsein: Die Partizipation von Kindern und Jugendlichen als Chance für eine nachhaltige Entwicklung. In R. Kaufmann-Hayoz & C. Künzli (Eds.), *"... man kann ja nicht einfach aussteigen": Kinder und Jugendliche zwischen Umweltangst und Konsumlust* (pp. 261–274). Zürich: vdf Hochschulverlag.
Kanton Zürich (2005). *Volksschulgesetz*. http://www2.zhlex.zh.ch/appl/zhlex_r.nsf/0/13EF955B1682B079C12573B50025B2CC/$file/412.100_7.2.05_59.pdf. Accessed: 1 Apr 2021.
Keisu, B.-I., & Ahlström, B. (2020). The silent voices: pupil participation for gender equality and diversity. *Educational Research*, *62*(1), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2019.1711436.
Knoblauch, H. (2005). Focused ethnography. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*. https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-6.3.20.
Louis, K. S., & Lee, M. (2016). Teachers' capacity for organizational learning: the effects of school culture and context. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, *27*(4), 534–556. https://doi.org/10.1080/09243453.2016.1189437.
Lundy, L. (2007). "Voice" is not enough: conceptualising article 12 of the united nations convention on the rights of the child. *British Educational Research Journal*, *33*(6), 927–942. https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033.
Mager, U., & Nowak, P. (2012). Effects of student participation in decision making at school. A systematic review and synthesis of empirical research. *Educational Research Review*, *7*(1), 38–61.
Marty, H., & Brägger, G. (2008). *Instrument S55 b. Partizipation: Schüler/innen-Befragung*. Zürich: Stadt Zürich. in Zusammenarbeit mit IQES online
McAllister, H. A. (1996). Self-serving bias in the classroom: who shows it? Who knows it? *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *88*(1), 123–131. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.88.1.123.
Müller-Kuhn, D. (2020). Ja, wir wollen! Partizipationswünsche von Schülerinnen und Schülern sowie Lehrpersonen. In S. Thomas & J. Rothmaler (Eds.), *Partizipation in der Bildungsforschung* (pp. 291–323). Weinheim: Beltz Juventa
Nelson, E. (2018). Teachers and power in student voice: 'finger on the pulse, not children under the thumb. In R. Bourke & J. Loveridge (Eds.), *Radical collegiality through student voice: educational experience, policy and practice* (pp. 197–216). Berlin Heidelberg: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-1858-0_12.
Niia, A., Almqvist, L., Brunnberg, E., & Granlund, M. (2015). Student participation and parental involvement in relation to academic achievement. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, *59*(3), 297–315. https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2014.904421.
OECD (2019). *OECD future of education and skills 2030 concept note*. http://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/teaching-and-learning/learning/student-agency/Student_Agency_for_2030_concept_note.pdf. Accessed: 1 Apr 2021.
Prout, A., & James, A. (2015). A new paradigm for the sociology of childhood? Provenance, promise and problems. In A. James & A. Prout (Eds.), *Constructing and reconstructing childhood: Contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood* (pp. 6–28). London: Routledge
Quinn, S., & Owen, S. (2016). Digging deeper: understanding the power of "student voice. *Australian Journal of Education*, *60*(1), 60–72. https://doi.org/10.1177/0004944115626402.
Rauer, W., & Schuck, K. D. (2003). *FEESS 3–4: Fragebogen zur Erfassung emotionaler und sozialer Schulerfahrungen von Grundschulkindern dritter und vierter Klassen. Manual*. Göttingen: Beltz Test GmbH
Reh, S. (2012). Beobachtungen aufschreiben. In H. de Boer & S. Reh (Eds.), *Beobachtung in der Schule – Beobachten lernen* (pp. 115–129). Wiesbaden: VS.
Rieker, P., Mörgen, R., Schnitzer, A., & Stroezel, H. (2016). *Partizipation von Kindern und Jugendlichen. Formen, Bedingungen sowie Möglichkeiten der Mitwirkung und Mitbestimmung in der Schweiz*. Wiesbaden: VS.
de Róiste, A., Kelly, C., Molcho, M., Gavin, A., & Gabhainn, N. S. (2012). Is school participation good for children? Associations with health and wellbeing. *Health Education*, *112*(2), 88–104. https://doi.org/10.1108/09654281211203394.
Sadownik, A. (2018). Belonging and participation at stake. Polish migrant children about (mis)recognition of their needs in Norwegian ECECs. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, *26*(6), 956–971. https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2018.1533711.
Scholz, G. (2012). Teilnehmende Beobachtung. In F. Heinzel (Ed.), *Methoden der Kindheitsforschung: ein Überblick über Forschungszugänge zur kindlichen Perspektive* (pp. 116–133). Weinheim, Basel: Beltz

Spillane, J. P. (2004). *Standards deviation. How schools missunderstand education policy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1996). *Grounded Theory: Grundlagen Qualitativer Sozialforschung*. Weinheim: Beltz

UNCRC (1989). *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*. https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/. Accessed: 1 Apr 2021.

Zala-Mezö, E., Datnow, A., Müller-Kuhn, D., & Häbig, J. (2020). Feeding back research results—changes in principal and teacher narratives about student participation. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, *65*, 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.stueduc.2020.100848.

Zala-Mezö, E., Strauss, N.-C., Herzig, P., Müller-Kuhn, D., Häbig, J., & Kuster, R. (2018). Der Komplexität von Schulentwicklung methodisch begegnen: Das Projekt "Partizipation stärken – Schule entwickeln.". In E. Zala-Mezö, N.-C. Strauss & J. Häbig (Eds.), *Dimensionen von Schulentwicklung. Verständnis, Veränderung und Vielfalt eines Phänomens* (pp. 15–59). Münster: Waxmann