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Participation in the classroom as a basis for democracy education? A conceptual analysis of the concept of student participation

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In our conceptual analysis, we focus on the concept of student participation and argue for a differentiated consideration of the same. To this end, we elaborate on constituent elements and first address the definitional understanding of the concept considered as well as the participation postulate. Furthermore, we name and discuss possible purposes and qualities of participatory practice and we give an overview of the established conceptualization of participation by means of a stage model and the interdependence of autonomy and heteronomy expressed in this model. We then address participatory fields in the classroom, concrete practices of participatory decision-making, prerequisites and implications of participatory classroom practices, and possible scopes of participatory influence.

KEYWORDS

student participation, autonomy, heteronomy, participation postulate, conceptual analysis

The overarching objective of a pedagogy of participation, if not its deep meaning on the whole, can therefore only be to learn to endure the ambivalence of participation (Reichenbach, 2007, p. 59).¹

1. Introduction

Starting from the general question raised in the research topic of whether, and if so under what normative and material conditions, educational institutions should and can take an active role in promoting learning for democracy, we focus on the concept of student participation. The question of the extent to which learner participation in the classroom can be a possible basis for the development of democratic processes, structures, attitudes, and competencies first requires an understanding of what is meant by democracy. That there is no easy way to answer this simply is obvious when looking at different theories of democracy (e.g., Schmidt, 2008) and will also have different consequences for the practical actualization of democratic decision-making and action (e.g., representative democracy vs. grassroots democracy) depending on individual premises and logics of argumentation. However, there is a certain minimal consensus that democracy understood as collective self-governance means that the members of a group are subject only to the rules they themselves decide

¹ Translated by T. Kärner.

on. To achieve self-determination, members must have control over the rules that govern decision-making (Beckman, 2021). Participation must lie at the center of any discussion of the concepts and actualizations pertaining to political, economic, and also educational democracy (e.g., Lempert, 1974; Seeber and Seifried, 2022; Culp et al., 2023), where “reciprocity” and “self-determination” can be identified as the essential values of the participation postulate. Analyzing the concepts and actualizations of democratic practice requires identifying and differentiating their purposes, contents, goals, their person-immanent as well as person-exogenous preconditions, as well as design-practical possibilities of implementation (e.g., Heid, 1991a; Daher and Saifi, 2018; Deimel et al., 2020). Making these distinctions seems to be especially important because there is no such thing as participation *per se*: participation is always participation in something, and that requires a more detailed analysis of the “what” (contents and qualities), the “why” (purposes), and the “how” (practical implementation) of participation, especially if one wants to realize participatory practice (Heid, 1991a; see also Reid and Nikel, 2008 for organizational questions for the investigation and practical implementation of participation).

In the following sections, we provide an overview of aspects that should be considered in a conceptual analysis as well as a practical implementation of participatory practices in educational institutions and classrooms. First we discuss the concept of participation, the postulate of participation, and conceivable purposes and qualities of participatory practice. We then provide an overview of ways of conceptualizing participation by means of a stage model in the context of which we address the interdependence of autonomy and heteronomy. This is followed by a description of possible participatory design fields in the classroom and the ways they are linked to conceivable contents of participatory decisions. We then name and discuss possible practices of participatory decision-making, prerequisites for participatory classroom practices, and possible scopes of participatory influence. We end our commentary with some conclusions.²

2. Definition of participation and the participation postulate

Participation generally describes a social negotiation process characterized by a dialogue that is fact-based, informed, open, voluntary, and cooperative. In addition to influencing a decision or action, joint responsibility for the outcome of the action is a central feature of participation. In order to be able to take responsibility, participants must be informed and actively involved, as well as have at their disposal corresponding freedom of action and decision-making power regarding the external conditions of their will and action (Habermas, 1974; Heid, 1991a; Oser and Biedermann, 2007; Reichenbach, 2007; Moser, 2010; summarizing Kärner et al., 2023).³ In the context of educational institutions,

participation is described as learners sharing “decision and will formation processes” (Reichenbach, 2007, p. 54; see text footnote 1) at the institutional or classroom level (Mager and Nowak, 2012). In order to be able to refer to participation, learners must be able to exert influence on decisions that are essential to the school or classroom, that is, they must be able to choose actions from a defined set of options for action. This also includes the possibility of deciding against something in a consequential way.

Concerning the participation postulate, it is worth asking why it is necessary to address participation in educational discourse and to enable or demand participation in educational practice. Interest in the very phenomenon of participation is rooted in the fundamental value placed on individual self-determination for every human being in the occidental tradition and, among other things, in the formal right to freedom of expression and in its anchoring in human rights law by way of self-determined participation (e.g., Lundy, 2007). Moreover, findings from psychological research (e.g., Ryan and Deci, 2017) have demonstrated the prominent role that self-determination, and thus self-determined participation, plays both for the individual in him- or herself and in social practice. In light of the significance of self-determined participation, demands that are directed against any suppression of participation need no further justification. In contrast, any (social) practice that excludes (certain groups of) people from such self-determined participation requires both a rationale and a justification. Criticism of such a justification can be seen as an expression of a gradually differentiable participation.

With regard to the demand for self-determined participation, it must be asked and decided whether participation is addressed or postulated as an end or as a means for educational or socio-practical action.⁴ In the first case, it would be a case of supporting the development of autonomous judgment and action competence. In the second case, the need for self-determination would be in the process of being instrumentalized to induce people to do or, even more, to want what they are supposed to want according to external determinations (Heid, 1989, 1991a). Consequently, it only makes sense to demand “real” self-determination in situations where self-determined participation is vulnerable to being suppressed in social practice and people can be deprived of the possibility of participating in decisions concerning their own affairs and interests—that is, to think, want, or do what they “really” want themselves, because it is they themselves who (can) justify what they consider justified and why.

3. Purposes and qualities of participatory practice

As the aforementioned definition of the concept of participation shows, it generally has a positive connotation,

⁴ As a basic maxim, Kant (1785/1952, p. 54; see text footnote 1) already formulates: “Act in such a way that you use mankind, both in your person and in the person of everyone else, at all times simultaneously as an end, never merely as a means.” Possibly this ideal-typical or theoretical alternative “end versus means” is in practice rather a polarity with the two endpoints of a continuum, which, however, can only be indicated at this point and not elaborated in more depth.

² The arguments, results, and content referred to in this article were mainly taken and translated from the German article by Kärner et al. (2023).

³ For a differentiated discussion and analysis of person-immanent and person-exogenous preconditions of responsible acting, see Heid (1991a).

but this fact cannot hide the ambivalence inherent in the participation postulate. Those who ask about the purpose of participating in decisions concerning the aspects mentioned above assume that participation is a subject of (free) decision. This may be true in several respects, but who would then actually be “the” subject of such a decision? And exactly what sorts of decisions could be made? Are conditions in institutionalized education not in reality such that actually only teachers (school principals, or the government) ultimately decide on what constitutes participation? Who else could allow or try to prevent participation? Learners can demand it by criticizing what they consider and describe as external determination, but the extent to which such a demand is met is presumably largely dependent on the teachers because of the structurally conditioned power asymmetry. However, this circumstance cannot hide the fact that a participation or involvement of teachers in learning is impossible in principle, as long as learners can only learn or not learn by themselves. Teachers can try to control and dose the learning of learners in terms of content—for example, by accepting and supporting desired reactions or resonances and prohibiting or trying to prevent undesired comments on the teacher’s actions or otherwise sanctioning them in a negative way. Thus, teachers can try to influence learning that they cannot force, prevent, or spare (Heid, 2019a). What teachers can respect, allow, desire, support, and influence as participation by learners can be determined by different goals, ranging from increasing the efficiency and quality of teaching and learning to “humanizing” teaching-learning interactions (e.g., respecting the need for self-determination) and even encompassing usurpation and instrumentalization. Corresponding goals thus prove to be as heterogeneous and sometimes as contradictory as the general value bases of the participation postulate, which range from “work/performance” to “reciprocity” and “self-realization” (Reichenbach, 2007).

To illustrate this circumstance: it could, for example, be the case that certain proponents of the participation postulate are not concerned with participation on the basis of whether or not it should exist, but rather with a desired form of participation as far as its content is concerned. For example, it is evident that in certain forms of business practice, granting self-determined participation is determined less by respect for the autonomy of the addressee than it is by business management considerations (so-called “indirect control”, which is a neoliberal management/governance principle; e.g., Peters, 2011; Han, 2014; Mustafić et al., 2021). Thus, it is not the case that it is freedom of decision, action, as well as assuming responsibility for one’s own decisions and actions as the essence of self-determined participation, that is being granted here; rather, such qualities of self-determined acting are being imposed for economic and/or political reasons (Heid, 2005; see also Heid, 1977, 2019b). As in business practice, demand for and promotion of self-determined participation in educational practice could also be aiming at strengthening heteronomy (e.g., Rousseau, 1762/1965; Spranger, 1959). Referring to corresponding instrumentalizing practices, it is reasonable to assume that—depending on the concrete objective and conditions of actualization—granted self-determination can be understood as an attempt to transform an externally determined “should” into self-determined “will” in order to perfect the effort of implementing what has been externally determined as far and as efficiently as possible (Heid,

2005). However, instrumentalization of self-determination and self-determined participation is limited—independently now of the concrete and practical context—by the fact that it cannot be realized without the consent (however qualified) of the person being coerced: even the strongest coercion is based and dependent on the fact that the coerced person him- or herself does—or, even more, that he or she wants—what he or she is supposed to do or want according to the will of the one who is exerting the coercion (Heid, 1991a,b).

In light of these considerations, the way in which a participation opportunity is dealt with—for example, when such an opportunity is not necessarily taken up, even though it is available—would be a possible indicator for evaluating the quality of participatory practice and opening it up to discussion. In view of the postulate of self-determination and self-determined participation, for example, it would not be legitimate to “force” participation, since this would contradict the fundamental demand for self-determined participation. Under the premise of self-determined participation, learners would logically also have to be granted the option to decide, albeit justifiably, against a concrete participation opportunity without having to fear negative sanctions.

4. Degrees of learner influence and the interdependence of autonomy and heteronomy

As the preceding statements illustrate, analyzing the concept and postulate of participation also requires considering the categories of “autonomy” and “heteronomy”, as well as the relationship between them. Existing and established theoretical conceptualizations of participation usually depict it in the form of gradual levels relating to different degrees of control over one’s own actions as well as personal decision-making possibilities and assumption of responsibility (e.g., Arnstein, 1969; Hart, 1992; Oser et al., 2001; Sembill et al., 2007; Mayrberger, 2012; Heid, 2019a; summarizing Kärner et al., 2023; see Abs, 2006 for a multidimensional extension of the classical stage approach). On this basis, Figure 1 summarizes essential gradations or levels, together with respective content characterizations with regard to the design, structuring, and organization of the external conditions of learning in schools. Participation (in the narrower sense) and pseudo-participation can be located in the area of tension between relative autonomy and external organization, which implies non-participation due to the non-existent possibilities for learners to exert influence (relative heteronomy). Participation can be expressed in the form of sub-stages (contribution, co-determination, self-determination), which differ in quality or degree from learner influence according to the content characterization in Figure 1. Although the pre-stage of participation (information, consultation, involvement) goes beyond a completely external organization of learning conditions, relevant decisions are ultimately made by the teacher, despite hearing or informing the learners.

As shown in Figure 1, we consider the categories of autonomy and heteronomy as relational categories that are institutionally linked to the social roles of “teacher” and “student,” which

Degree	Characteristics	Description
Relative autonomy (beyond participation)	Self-organization	→ Learners organize and shape the external conditions of their learning themselves, make decisions independently within the framework of legal and social reference systems and take responsibility for the decisions made; teacher is informed and advises as needed
Participation (in the narrower sense)	Self-determination	→ Learners make their own decisions on shaping the external conditions of their learning by choosing independently between different (sometimes predefined) alternatives; teacher supports as needed
	Co-determination	→ Learners have the right to participate and share responsibility; decisions regarding the design of the external conditions of learning are made with the involvement of all participants (teachers and learners) (e.g. by means of consensus principle or majority decision)
	Contribution	→ Teacher shapes the external conditions of learning and provides the content and structural framework; learners have the possibility of indirect influence by articulating their own ideas and interests
Pseudo participation (preliminary stage of participation)	Involvement	→ Teacher makes relevant decisions regarding the external conditions of learning, but incorporates learner opinions at his/her discretion; learners are adequately informed about teacher decisions
	Consultation	→ Teacher makes relevant decisions regarding the design of the external conditions of learning and asks learners for their opinions, which, however, do not necessarily have to be included
	Information	→ Teacher makes relevant decisions regarding the design of the external conditions of learning; learners are informed about processes, but have no voice in the process (“alibi participation”)
Relative heteronomy (Non-participation)	External organization	→ Teacher makes all relevant decisions regarding the organization and design of the external conditions of learning without involving or consulting the learners; content, goals and processes are defined externally from the learners' perspective; learners are instructed and not informed about backgrounds and processes

FIGURE 1
Degrees of learner influence (summarizing Kärner et al., 2023 with reference to the aforementioned references).

are in turn characterized by different degrees of power and influence (e.g., Helsper, 2004; Misamer and Thies, 2014). From the students' perspective, it is reasonable to assume that increasing opportunities for learners to influence instructionally relevant decisions may sometimes be accompanied by a perceived and/or de facto reduction in teachers' opportunities for influence; and *vice versa*, increasing opportunities for teachers to influence may be accompanied by a reduction in learners' opportunities for influence. Nevertheless, for successful teaching, all participants must preserve their personal characteristics and their individual needs (e.g., for autonomy, control, relatedness, etc.) and balance them (Kärner et al., 2023). With regard to the teacher and learner perspectives on learner participation opportunities, the literature reveals interesting differences between the two perspectives: teachers tend to rate learner influence opportunities in descriptive terms and sometimes significantly higher than learners themselves do (Gamsjäger, 2019).

Due to the assumed role-related reciprocal connectedness of the categories autonomy and heteronomy, it is necessary to think about the dynamics of the interrelationship between heteronomy and self-determination in a (more) differentiated way and with reference to respective forms of realization. In this respect, corresponding stage models would have to be seen less in static terms, but rather the dynamic process character of included stages or degrees of influence must be taken into account (Hart, 2008). For example, in every “granting” of participation to a greater or lesser extent, there is always contained within it a moment of instrumentalization of said participation. For what people (really) want themselves, what convinces them, what makes sense to them, they do or try to realize without having to be induced to do so. What people are (or have to be) induced to do, they (initially) do not want themselves. Therefore, it would be important to consider that every behavioral inducement contains moments of external determination and, in the extreme, of instrumentalization or domestication of both

self-determined decision-making and acting and self-determined acceptance of responsibility (Heid, 1991a, 2005).

5. Participatory instructional design fields and contents of participatory decisions

The presented stage model ultimately contains an abstract description of different gradations of personal possibilities of influence (in the presentation primarily from the learners' point of view). Since there is no such thing as participation *per se*, but only participation in something, it is indispensable in the course of this conceptual analysis to reflect on those areas which represent the contents of participatory teaching practice. In institutionalized education, fundamental possibilities of learner-side influence open up in the context of teaching–learning arrangements that, in their respective externally organized content-related, and their didactic-methodical and social manifestations, aim at the initiation, execution, and maintenance of learning actions and internal learning processes (Sembill et al., 2007; Heid, 2019a). If one considers the possible fields according to which external learning opportunities can be characterized in terms of both content and process, learning goals and content, aspects of social and didactic-methodical design, structuring, and organization of learning opportunities, as well as applied forms of assessment and evaluation criteria can be identified as the essential elements where the learner could exert some influence. If we ask about those aspects and conditions of learning in which students can participate, we can identify different decision-relevant fields that mark the contents of participatory teaching practice (e.g., Weinert, 1982; Kraft, 1999; Reisenauer, 2020; Hauk and Gröschner, 2022; summarizing Kärner et al., 2023).

First, there are the learning objectives and learning content. Learners can participate in making decisions that relate to the definition of learning objectives. Learning objectives can differ in their degree of concreteness and can accordingly be divided into broad (e.g., curricular objectives; e.g., Leat and Reid, 2012; Guadalupe and Curtner-Smith, 2020) and operational goals (e.g., specific lessons or tasks; e.g., Andrade and Du, 2007; Chan et al., 2014). The same applies to learning content: here, too, learners can in principle be involved in determining thematic foci in a plan for the longer term (e.g., school half-year) (e.g., Biddulph, 2011; Boatright and Allman, 2018; Bron et al., 2018) as well as in designing the content of more narrowly thematic lessons (e.g., Bätz et al., 2009) or in specific task content (e.g., Deed et al., 2014; Gamsjäger, 2019).

Second, there are decisions regarding the methodological design, the structuring and organization of the external conditions of learning that have to be made discursively. Here, with regard to different conceivable forms of work, activities, media, ways of recording results, and learning and working methods (e.g., Deed et al., 2014; Granbom, 2016; Bron et al., 2018), decisions must be made about the methods and structure of instruction. Also at issue here is the question of social roles, namely how the various actors (students with each other, teachers, and students) should work together in class (e.g., Bätz et al., 2009).

Third, decisions need to be made about the design of exams and other assessment criteria. Here, the literature suggests that learners can have a voice in what content is assessed in exams and how exams are designed (e.g., oral or written exam, project report) (e.g., Tillema et al., 2011; Granbom, 2016; Guadalupe and Curtner-Smith, 2020). In addition, there are opportunities for learners to participate in making decisions that affect the criteria by which performance is evaluated. This can be realized, for example, by involving learners in the development of assessment criteria and in the assignment of grades (e.g., Dancer and Kamvounias, 2005; Andrade and Du, 2007; Sanchez et al., 2017).

With regard to the learner's perceived opportunities to influence the decision-making fields mentioned above, the literature shows that students consistently give higher approval ratings to external determination on the part of the teacher than to their own participatory influence (e.g., Bron et al., 2018; Meusburger, 2022). Furthermore, the level of participation opportunities perceived by students varies between different fields of instructional design. For example, students perceive their influence on assessment criteria and examination modalities to be noticeably lower than on teaching methods and forms of social cooperation in the classroom; vice versa, perceived heteronomy with regard to the first two fields is more pronounced than with regard to the latter two fields (summarized by Kärner et al., 2023).

The aforementioned fields of instructional design refer to dimensions of practical forms of instruction, which are more or less explicitly codified in the respective curricula. Thus, further questions refer on the one hand to the normative dimension of (extra-)curricular content and to the extent to which learners can influence those norms, values, beliefs, general patterns of thought and interpretation, and specific ideologies that are implicitly reproduced in the sense of a "hidden curriculum," in institutionalized education, and on the other hand, to the extent to which corresponding norms etc. are or are made accessible to class—or public—discourse at all (e.g., Giroux and Penna, 1979; Apple, 2019).

6. Practices of participatory decision making

With regard to the practical implementation of learner influence and to establishing democratic practices in the classroom, the literature points to different ways of reaching a decision by democratic means. In other words, this is about the "how" of participatory teaching practice. The first is individual decision-making, in the form of either choosing from a variety of predetermined options or choosing freely, without predetermined options (e.g., Deed et al., 2014; Cook et al., 2021). Second, there is dialogic-discursive decision-making in learning groups or in the classroom (e.g., Richter and Tjosvold, 1980; Boatright and Allman, 2018; Daher and Saifi, 2018); third, there is democratic voting for or against different choice alternatives, the formation of a majority opinion, and a resulting majority decision (e.g., Bätz et al., 2009). With the exceptions mentioned above, however, the exact discursive negotiation processes and modes of participation often remain opaque or are not described and defined in detail. Thus, in educational and teaching

practice, exact discursive processes of negotiation and modes of participation of teachers and learners have yet to be defined, as do the questions of whether decisions should be made individually or collectively; also yet to be decided is the question regarding how much weight should be given to individual influence on collective decision-making processes, which in turn entails corresponding implications regarding individual self-determination and external determination. The question of how exactly decision-making processes take place in participatory teaching-learning arrangements and how corresponding decisions should be made consensually and with the involvement of all participants is of course also a normative one; this normative issue could be discussed from the perspective of discourse and justice theory in further work on the participation of learners and made fruitful for educational and teaching practice (e.g., Habermas, 1998). The fact that in discursive decision-making, ethical principles have to be taken into account—and those rules, on the one hand, should themselves be open to discussion and, on the other, can lead to different results in each case, depending on the practical approach and normative assumptions (e.g., maxi-min principle according to Rawls vs. utilitarian principle according to Harsanyi; summarizing Binmore, 2021)—is not a trivial one; on the contrary, it is of substantial importance for educational practice and its consequences.

7. Person-exogenous and person-immanent prerequisites for a participatory teaching practice

In educational institutions, certain preconditions for the implementation of participatory approaches should be met: teachers should be appropriately trained to implement participatory methods and learners should show willingness and commitment to participate; in other words, existing opportunities for participation should be used thoughtfully on the part of learners. According to Roeder (1980, p. 199) (see text footnote 1) organizational arrangements for learner participation are effective and sustainable if

- the participants do not seek to maximize individual satisfaction of needs at the expense of the organization,
- the rules are directed toward the fulfillment of defined and manageable decision-making latitudes,
- these definitions are based on an overarching consensus on the goals and fundamental structures of the organization,
- the scope for decision-making simultaneously opens up subjectively significant alternatives,
- the complexity and scope of the decisions are adapted to the capabilities and resources of the participants, and
- the procedures—especially with regard to the students—are at the same time aimed at increasing decision-making competencies.

As these remarks show, learners' abilities to engage in discursive discussion are of particular importance in the implementation of participatory processes and structures. An essential prerequisite

for the development of corresponding judgment and decision-making competencies are available learning situations that give students opportunities to participate genuinely and influentially in determining the purpose, contents, and forms in which to actualize their engagement (Sembill et al., 2002; Sembill and Kärner, 2020), thus supporting them in developing competency not only to solve problems but also to critically assess, define for themselves, and rationally justify them (Heid, 1992, 2003). As participation is dependent on the socio-structural condition that there are persons or institutions who have the power, the means, and possibly a concealed interest in denying certain persons (or groups) the possibility of self-determined participation, any claim to participation requires, among other things, a critical discussion of the arguments with which the rejection of this claim is justified—and thus also the competence to engage in argumentative discussion. In the context of discursive debate, it is therefore important to be able to deal argumentatively with problematic claims to validity and to examine them for their justification (Habermas, 1984). The goal of discursive debate is the justification of actions taken in light of valid norms or the validity of norms in the light of worthy principles so that decisions are made which meet with the approval of all who are affected by them and whose results, side effects, and consequences can be accepted without constraint by all those involved (Habermas, 1988).

Considering the role of teachers involves taking into account that their actions are situated in the area of tension between their own demands for participation and political governance, and that they themselves cannot act completely autonomously. Corresponding governance practices restrict the decision-making and action scope of teachers through internal school pressure and bureaucratization, among other things, and thus make participatory work more difficult or even impossible (Huppert and Abs, 2008).

8. Effects of participatory teaching practice on the part of learners

When participatory school or classroom practices are successfully implemented and can be fruitfully used, the results show predominantly positive correlations with emotional-motivational learner variables (e.g., intrinsic motivation and interest, wellbeing, and the feeling of being taken seriously), different aspects of classroom and relationship perceptions (e.g., perceived opportunities to participate, positive teacher-student relationships), performance-related variables (e.g., problem-solving skills, metacognitive learning strategies) (summarizing Kärner et al., 2023) as well as democratic skills and citizenship (Mager and Nowak, 2012; see also Abs and Moldenhauer, 2022 for an overview of effects and correlates of participatory practice). In their article on the effects of so-called learner-controlled instruction, Hauk and Gröschner (2022) differentiate between organizational (time, working/learning environment, learning partners), content-related (subject, topic, task), methodological (learning activity, material, presentation), and legal/standard-related areas (instructional rules, assessment, learning objectives) of learner influence and control. The authors report that learner influence seems to be particularly effective in the areas

of organization and content with regard to motivation and learning performance. In general, however, it can be assumed that a fragmented implementation of participatory elements may be associated with limitations, since all relevant areas of instruction-related decision-making fields would have to be included simultaneously. If, for example, learners can exert influence on deciding on learning content, but not on the form of the examination, this may fall short. In such a case, learners would be deprived of helping determine what constitutes achievement, i.e., what skills should be mastered and what should be known (Heid, 1992). This assumption can be supported by the pedagogical approach of the so-called curriculum-instruction-assessment triad (Achtenhagen, 2012). According to this approach, curricular (e.g., learning goals and content), instructional (e.g., didactical methods and forms of social cooperation in class), and assessment-related (e.g., forms of examination and assessment criteria) aspects are interdependent and should therefore ideally be planned and developed simultaneously and in a coordinated manner (Achtenhagen, 2012), whereby participatory moments could unfold in each of the three dimensions mentioned as well as in their triadic ensemble.

Besides such structural-organizational conditions of successful participatory practice, person-immanent prerequisites have to be considered, which can also have an influence on the perception of participation opportunities and qualities. For example, research shows that grade level is relevant in this regard, as students tend to perceive fewer instructional participation opportunities with increasing age or grade level (Griebler and Griebler, 2012; Gamsjäger and Wetzelhütter, 2020). Possible explanations for this finding could be related to socialization processes. In this context, Fend (1989, p. 189), for example, contrasts the “normal draft” of a societal system of norms with the “subcultural counter draft” of the youth phase (e.g., competition vs. relationship, representative democracy vs. grassroots democracy). Institutionalized educational processes could therefore contribute to the fact that learners see few direct and immediate opportunities for participation and thus become more and more resigned. This could in turn lead to the formation of judgment and decision-making competencies being inhibited or even prevented, which in turn has possible consequences with regard to the anticipated and/or realized influence on decisions concerning one’s own affairs and interests (summarizing Kärner et al., 2023).

9. Scope of participatory influence

As the previous discussion should have made clear, not only the “how” (practical implementation of participatory practice), but also the “what” (content and qualities of participatory practice) and the “why” (purpose of participatory practice) of teaching–learning interactions play a decisive role in analyzing the concept of participation and the design of practical participative teaching–learning interactions. There is no “how” without a “what” and a “why.” While the “how” becomes apparent in the immediacy of participatory teaching–learning processes and is indispensable for the goal-oriented participation of learners in realizing promising learning conditions, the central question of the “what” and “what for” can be determined relatively independently

of current teaching–learning interactions in terms of time, space, and institution and can be distributed among different persons, groups, or other decision-making instances. Therefore, questions about the reasons learner participation tends to be predominantly related or limited to alternative formats of instructional practice are interesting and revealing. Doesn’t participation in teaching methods have to be organized in a more articulated way, the less the addressees of these methodological efforts are excluded from participating in the “what?” Furthermore, what direct or indirect possibilities do learners have (and use), under given conditions, to participate in educational policy, administration, development, and justification of curricula, and what reasons for or against this are asserted or can be asserted? Which (existing) organizational forms of individual educational institutions are or would be suitable to exclude or enable learners to participate in the determination of learning content? The social hierarchy of established teaching–learning practices, their structure and culture, set limits to the direct influence on educational policy frameworks of participatory teaching–learning interaction in this regard and provoke strategies for generating at least indirect involvement and participation in determining the “what” and “what for” (possibly even the “how”) of the postulated teaching and learning.

10. Conclusions

To conclude, “participation” is not a one-dimensional concept; on the contrary, it is multifaceted and sometimes ambivalent, which can already be seen, for example, in the postulate of participation and possible qualities of participatory practice. For a well-founded discussion in the pedagogical context, as the preceding remarks show, it is first necessary to establish a clear conceptual understanding of participation by way of explicating it discursively. Furthermore, within this very conceptualization of participation it is necessary to clarify the relationship between the categories of autonomy and heteronomy while considering different social roles (here the student role and the teacher role). Also, the contents, goals, scopes and qualities of participatory practice have to be defined, since there is no such thing as participation *per se*, but only participation in something; moreover, different, even contrary goals can be pursued through participation (e.g., appreciation of individual self-determination vs. instrumentalization of the basic need for autonomy). In the context of implementing possible practices of participatory decision-making processes, the necessary implementation prerequisites must be elicited and defined. These relate both to organizational and structural preconditions and to the individual preconditions of the actors involved (e.g., their judgment and decision-making competencies and freedom of action).

Author contributions

HH mainly contributed those parts of the article that deal with the terminological–analytical–philosophical discussion of the concept of participation. TK and MJ mainly contributed those parts of the manuscript that deal with the central results of the referenced

literature review. All authors contributed to equal shares to the manuscript and approved the submitted version.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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