Scope and quality of student participation in school: towards an analytical framework for adolescents

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(Received 18 October 2014; accepted 16 January 2015)

There is growing support for the relevance of adolescents’ participation in school, as a result of different works which focus on singular aspects of pupils’ involvement. Yet, there is a lack of advancement in regard to integral analytical frameworks that are capable of providing fundamental dimensions and concepts in the study and evaluation of student participation in school. This article aims to fill the gap by introducing an analytical framework for a more holistic examination of such practices. By using data from a mixed methods research, which included qualitative work in two schools from contrasting municipalities of Mexico City, and a representative survey ($n = 828$) of third grade students from the secondary schools in these two areas, the article shows the empirical applicability of the model, and reveals its capacity for mapping, understanding and evaluating student participation in school from an integral perspective, based on two fundamental dimensions of inquiry: scope and quality.

Keywords: adolescent participation; student voice; school participation; citizenship education; democratic schools

Introduction

There is growing empirical evidence, as well as theoretical and normative arguments, to support the intrinsic and instrumental relevance of adolescent participation in school. Intrinsically, through student participation “the school embodies the democratic society it aims to create” (McCowan, 2010, p. 21). This is why it has become an important expected learning outcome of different programmes of citizenship education (Pérez Expósito, 2014b). As part of the project of forming active citizens, these programmes encourage students to learn how to participate effectively in their daily communities, including the school (e.g. ECS, 2000; Great Britain, 1998; Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2004; SEP, 2007, 2011). Also, since the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1989, a body of research has emphasised student participation as a right of children and adolescents which must be guaranteed in school (Lansdown, 1998, 2001; Lundy, 2007; Osler & Starkey, 2005). Instrumentally, research has shown the role of students’ participation in developing meaningful knowledge, skills and attitudes. These include communication abilities, interpersonal and social skills, critical thinking, problem identification, problem solving, decision-making, creation and development of plans of action, supportive relationships with adults and peers, and a rising sense of tolerance and solidarity.
Student participation in school: scope and quality

Scope: potential configurations between domains, agencies and repertoires in student participation in school

In regard to historical transformations in the forms of political participation, Norris (2002) states that it evolves and diversifies ‘in terms of the who (agencies or collective organisations), what (repertoires of actions commonly used for political expressions), and where (the targets that participants seek to influence)’ (p. 4). In this section, I propose to employ such categories to the analysis of adolescents’ participation in school. It means to
analyse these practices as different configurations between targets or domains of participation (where), agencies (who) and repertoires (what) (Byrne, 2010).

Domains of participation

Research shows that students’ participation is oriented to a variety of domains of the school life: for instance, curricular choices, school governance, classroom dynamics and rules (Apple & Beane, 2007a, 2007b; Mitra, 2009; O’Brien, 2006; Raby, 2012), the improvement of school’s facilities (Nuñez, 2011; TvPTS, 2010), school safety, no violence and anti-bullying programs (Lansdown, 2005a), conflict resolution (Bickmore, 2008), community problems (Annette, 2009; O’Brien, 2006) and school reform (Mitra, 2008).

I identify five core domains of student participation in school, in which such a variety can be classified. These are: binding decision-making, conflict resolution, knowledge construction, resolution of community problems and identity construction.

Binding decision-making. A key aspect of adolescents’ participation in school is the possibility of influencing various processes of decision-making, whose resolutions have a binding character for different school actors. Major possible areas of binding decision-making are: school governance, curricular and pedagogical decisions, and the definition of community problems.

Among other things, participation in school governance includes making decisions about the academic project of the school, its goals and procedures; effective use of resources and school budget; head teachers’ and teachers’ appointments; integral evaluation of school performance (Balarin, Brammer, James, & McCormack, 2008) and the establishment of policies and rules that organise the functioning of the school according to a normative construct (Potgieter, Visser, Van der Bank, Mothata, & Squelch, 1997). In regard to curricular and pedagogical decisions, students’ involvement has to do with having voice in the following debates: What do we learn, and why (Knowledge selection and justification)? How do we learn (Pedagogical and didactical strategies and procedures)? How is learning organised during school time (Curriculum organisation and timetable)? (Apple & Beane, 2007a). Lastly, as O’Brien (2006) points out, when students participate in the analysis and resolution of problems in the school and surrounding communities, these are usually defined from others’ perspective (authorities and adults from school or community). Due to the fact that the definition of problems in these communities is not neutral, student participation in binding decision-making also involves taking part in defining what is problematic in such contexts.

Conflict resolution. Teachers, school counsellors or head teachers commonly solve conflicts among students and between other school actors. They play the role of judges, juries or mediators. It means that students are usually excluded from the resolution of their own conflicts and those between adults in the school (e.g. between parents and school authorities).

The idea of conflict resolution is generally seen as a non-violent way for solving conflicts. Based on previous analysis of experiences of conflict resolution (Bickmore, 2004, 2008; Fierro, 2011; Fierro et al., 2010), student participation in this domain can be classified according to three types established by Bickmore (2008): (1) Peacekeeping: students take decisions and measures for ‘controlling’ violence in school, rather than solving the problems causing that violence. (2) Peacemaking: students solve their own conflicts through negotiation and mutually acceptable forms of resolution.
(3) Peacebuilding: adolescents participate in the construction of long-term policies and actions to overcome violence in school, and the causes of conflict.

Knowledge construction. Most of the time in the school day is dedicated to organise activities aimed at constructing meaningful learning. An important consideration in achieving this goal is students’ motivation, which is closely linked to being convinced about knowledge’s validity, as well as its relevance in regard to students’ present and/or future lives (Ausubel, Novak, & Hanesian, 1968; Illeris, 2003, 2008). Student participation in establishing what is valid and relevant knowledge, and why it is so, demands at least three conditions: (a) to overcome the dichotomy educator–educand (Freire, 1970/2002), (b) a school and classroom climate open to controversy and debate (Hess & Avery, 2008; Hess, 2009) and (c) a differentiated pedagogy (Perrenoud, 2008; Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011; Tomlinson, 1999; Tomlinson et al., 2003). These three aspects are interrelated. The first involves the active deconstruction of conservative teacher and student identities, where the former ‘possess’ the valid knowledge, and the latter (the dispossessed) ‘receives’ it without questioning. Such redefinition of roles occurs through a deliberative practice which allows active student participation in knowledge construction. Both, deliberation and the deconstruction of the dichotomy educator-educand, presuppose a welcoming climate open to controversy and debate (even in the less ‘controversial’ areas of knowledge). Yet, controversy, debate and deliberation tend to favour outgoing students, or those with a better development of certain communication skills. A differentiated pedagogy, then, appears as the approach that opens opportunities for every student to interact and debate with the teacher, other school authorities and his/her peers, according to his/her readiness to learn, interests, style of learning, his/her experiences and life circumstances (Tomlinson, 2000).

Resolution of community problems. Student participation in school is not only a discursive or linguistic practice (Jager & Maier, 2009; Van Leeuwen, 2008). It is more than a deliberative exercise of decision-making, conflict resolution or knowledge construction; it also involves taking action. A participatory school is a place where young people do things and get involved in the resolution of problems in the school community and other communities to which they belong (Apple & Beane, 2007a). Once students have participated in the definition of these problems, they can organise and decide a course of action. Adolescents can participate in a wide scope of actions, from improving school grounds (Rickinson & Sanders, 2005) to health campaigns in their neighbourhoods (Apple & Beane, 2007a).

Identity construction. This domain of participation seems particularly relevant for adolescents. It is about students’ identity disclosure and construction within the school. Even contesting perspectives on adolescence recognise this stage as highly vibrant in terms of identity definition and disclosure (Crocetti, Jahromi, & Meeus, 2012; Lesko, 2013). Adolescence appears as a period of discovering the power of self-definition. However, adults usually restrict the scope of identity exploration and expression in adolescents. School is not an exception. Teachers, parents and head teachers frequently constrain students’ identity by classifying them according to their own categories (e.g. immature, eccentric, superfluous or dangerous), sanctioning adolescents’ identity expressions (e.g. body appearance) or imposing right identity models (Raby, 2012).
Therefore, this domain has to do with students showing who are they, what do they like or dislike, what do they think and feel, what do they want to be and what they are searching for. It is about displaying their identifications and discovering their own subjectivity. This can be done through a myriad of ways, from body appearance, artistic expressions in the school and drama performances (O’Brien, 2006), to formal debates about their identity with adults in the school.

I have briefly explained five core domains of student participation in the school. These are not restricted to a particular space. For instance, while participation in knowledge construction is more likely to occur in classroom, it also takes place in extra-curricular activities outside the school. The five domains of participation, then, are not mutually exclusive. Their separation facilitates a better analytical description, but I acknowledge that in the school’s dynamics they are likely to overlap in the same practice. For instance, student participation in a school-based youth court can be oriented to the domain of conflict resolution between school actors, since most of the cases in these courts relate to disciplinary offenses (Vickers, 2004). However, as adolescents participate playing the role of judges, lawyers or juries, trying to solve a particular conflict, they also make decisions that might have a binding character. Therefore, the domains of conflict resolution and binding decision-making overlap in the same activity.

Agencies for student participation in school

Student participation in school can be channelled through a variety of agencies: school councils (Whitty & Wisby, 2007), student councils, student assemblies, student clubs, youth courts (O’Brien, 2006), community organisations (Annette, 2006), non-stable and spontaneous student organisations (Mejias, 2012) and individual participation. In my approach, agencies for student participation can be differentiated at least through two dimensions: a) organised/non-organised body and (b) Composition. The first is related to whether student participation occurs through an organised agency and its degree of formality. Adolescents can influence decision-making in the school through the school council, or participate in the resolution of community problems through a student club, but they can also get involved in knowledge construction in classroom by enacting their individual or collective agency with no need of an organised body. The degree of formality refers to whether the agency has a legal or predefined regulation, an institutionalised structure and functioning, and pre-established roles for its members. In this regard, the school council and the student club represent different degrees of formality. School councils usually have a legal or predefined regulation regarding its composition, functioning and participants’ roles. Their structure and division of labour are independent of current members, who disregarding their individual characteristics have a pre-established role and position. In contrast, a student club is more likely to have a horizontal and flexible organisation, without a legal or predefined regulation: its composition, functioning and the roles of its members can be constantly redefined depending on the characteristics of current participants.

The second dimension in the concept of agency refers to its composition. It includes two relevant aspects: (1) whether the agency comprises individual or collective actors, and (2) to what extent these are homogenous or heterogeneous in terms of typical school categories: students, teachers, head teachers or parents. For example, youth courts for student participation in conflict resolution include individual actors playing different roles; however, all of them are students. In contrast, a meeting of the school assembly for solving
conflicts between students and teachers comprises at least two collective actors. A third variation occurs in those agencies such as school councils, which are constituted by individual participants who frequently play a representational role; they are the voice of a collective actor.

**Repertoires**

Regarding the repertoires of student participation in school, diversity prevails. For instance, in school councils, adults usually guide student participation, and reach decision-making through voting; whereas in youth courts, students organise participation, and debate leads to decision-making. Sometimes, students seek to influence school and classroom rules through an organised participation in student councils, or by an individual and more informal negotiation (Huddleston, 2007; Raby, 2012). Adolescents can communicate their points of view about school problems through the use of the Internet and social networks, through drama performances and other artistic expressions (Goldman, Booker, & McDermott, 2008; O’Brien, 2006), by a demonstration outside the principal’s office (Mejias, 2012) or on the streets (Nuñez, 2011; TvPTS, 2010). Students can also have a voice in the school through alternative roles, such as evaluators (Campbell, Edgar, & Halsted, 1994) or researchers (Fielding, 2001; Osler, 2010).

As noticed, there are several dimensions in which repertoires change. For example: Is participation organised or spontaneous? Who is leading the action (Leadership)? How do actors make decisions (e.g. voting, deliberation, deliberation–voting or consensus)? What is the form of participation, and how it is performed (e.g. protest, debate, dialogue, artistic expressions and body appearance)? How actions are coordinated, and how do students communicate to each other (e.g. face to face, mobile technologies using social networks, voice and text messages)? And, to what extent participation is violent, contentious, non-violent, legal or illegal?

I have shown how the concepts of *domains of participation*, *agencies* and *repertoires* can be used for distinguishing different components of student participation in school. The multiple arrangements between them constitute an array of configurations of potential participatory practices in school. Table 1 presents in a synthetic way the scope of such potential configurations across these three categories. Nonetheless, the actual characteristics of student involvement depend deeply on particular sociocultural, political and economic contexts; on the specific features of national and local education systems, and on administrative and pedagogical orientations and practices in every school. As other actors involved in social or political participation, students draw on forms of participation historically established in their society, communities and schools, over which they can make variations and ‘innovations’ (Pérez Expósito et al., 2012; Tarrow, 2011). Because of this, it is difficult to determine the most common pattern in the configuration of adolescents’ participation in school. While there is a growing participation in school and pupil councils in the UK oriented to the domain of decision-making (Cross, Hulme, & McKinney, 2014; Whitty & Wisby, 2007), recently in Chilean and Argentinian schools, adolescents have been able to participate through their own organisations and displaying rather contentious repertoires (Chovanec & Benitez, 2008; Nuñez, 2011). In Mexico City, in contrast, adolescents mostly participate through spontaneous agencies or outside organised bodies; although by law there must be a student society in every secondary school (a representational agency), the *repertoires* of participation in these agencies tend to be led by teachers and school authorities (Pérez Expósito, 2014a; Sandoval, 2000).
Table 1. Potential configurations of student participation in school: domains of participation, agencies and repertoires.

| Domains of participation | Agencies | Actors’ composition | Repertoires (some characteristics) |
|--------------------------|----------|---------------------|------------------------------------|
|                          |          |                     | Organised Participation (OP). Lead by authorities (LA). Decision Making through Deliberation (DMD), and Decision Making through Voting (DMV). Dialogue (DI) and Debate (DE). Face-to-Face Coordination and Communication (FF). Non-Violent (NV). Legal (L). |
| Binding                  |          |                     |                                    |
| decision-making          |          |                     |                                    |
| School council           | ✔        |                     | ✔                                  |
| Students’ council        | ✔        |                     | ✔                                  |
| School assembly          | ✔        |                     | ✔                                  |
| Student council          | ✔        |                     | ✔                                  |
| Student assembly         | ✔        | ✔ or ✔             |                                     |
| Student parties          | ✔        |                     |                                     |
| Student societies        | ✔        | ✔ or ✔             |                                     |
| Student clubs            | ✔        |                     |                                     |
| Conflict resolution | Youth courts | OR | OR | OR | OR | OP and SP, LS, DMV, DMC, or DMD, DI, DE, PT, BA, or AE, FF, ICT and MT, NV, L. |
|---------------------|--------------|----|----|----|----|-------------------------------|
|                     | Student assembly | OR | OR | OR | OR | OP and SP, LS, DMV, DMC, or DMD, DI, DE, PT, BA, or AE, FF, ICT and MT, NV, C or Violent (V), L or Illegal (IL), NV, C or Violent (V), L |
|                     | School assembly | OR | OR | OR | OR | OP and SP, LS, DMD, DI and DE, FF, NV, L |
|                     | Student council | OR | OR | OR | OR | OP, Lead by Teacher (LT) or LS, DMD, DI and DE, FF, NV, L |
|                     | School council | OR | OR | OR | OR | OP through Peer mediator programs, Circle processes, or Inter-group contact encounters. SP, DMD and DMV, DI, DE, or AE, FF, ICT and MT, NV, L |
|                     | Class | OR | OR | OR | OR | OP, Lead by Teacher (LT) or LS, DMD, DI and DE, NV, NV, L |
|                     | Outside any organisation | OR | OR | OR | OR | OP through specialised programs for promoting controversy and debate, SP, Lead by Teacher (LT) or LS, DMD, DI and DE, FF, ICT and MT, NV, L |
| Classroom climate and knowledge construction | Intra-class organised groups | OR | OR | OR | OR | OP and SP, LS, DMV, DMC, or DMD, DI, DE, PT, BA, or AE, FF, ICT and MT, NV, L |
|                     | Class | OR | OR | OR | OR | OP and SP, LS, DMD, DI and DE, FF, NV, L |
|                     | Outside any organisation | OR | OR | OR | OR | OP and SP, LS, DMD, DI and DE, FF, NV, L |
| Resolution of common problems | Student societies | OR | OR | OR | OR | OP and SP, LS, DMV, DMC, or DMD, DI, DE, PT, BA, or AE, FF, ICT and MT, NV, L |
|                     | Student clubs | OR | OR | OR | OR | OP and SP, LS, DMD, DI and DE, FF, NV, L |
|                     | Other student groups, committees and organisations | OR | OR | OR | OR | OP and SP, LS, DMD, DI and DE, FF, NV, L |

(Continued)
| Domains of participation | Agencies | Actors’ composition |
|-------------------------|----------|---------------------|
|                         | Formal   | Informal            | Individual | Collective | Single | Mixed | Repertoires (some characteristics) |
| Community assemblies    | ✓        | ✓ OR ✓              | ✓          | ✓          | OR     | ✓     | OP and SP, Lead by Adult Community Members (LACM), DMD, DMV or DMC, DI and DE, FF, NV, L |
| Community councils      | ✓        | ✓ OR ✓              | ✓          | OR         | ✓       | ✓     | OP, LACM, DMD, DMV or DMC, DI and DE, FF, NV, L |
| Community groups        | ✓        | ✓ OR ✓              | ✓          | OR         | ✓       | ✓     | OP and SP, LACM or LS, DMD, DMV or DMC, DI and DE, FF, ICT and MT, NV, L |
| Outside any organisation | ✓        | ✓ OR ✓              | ✓          | ✓          | OR     | ✓     | OP and SP, Lead by Teacher (LT) or LS, DMD, or Unilateral (DMU), DI and DE, PT, FF, ICT and MT, NV, L |
| Identity construction (subjectivization) | Artistic groups | ✓ OR ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | OR | ✓ | OP and SP, Lead by Teacher (LT) or LS, DMD, or Unilateral (DMU), DI and DE, PT, FF, ICT and MT, NV, L |
| Student clubs Other student groups, committees and organisations | (See above) |                |                 |           |       |       |                      |
| Outside any organisation | ✓        | ✓ OR ✓              | ✓          | ✓          | OR     | ✓     | OP and SP, LS, DMV, DMC, or DMD, DI, DE, PT, BA, or AE, FF, ICT and MT, NV or Violent (V), L or Illegal (IL) |
Quality: authenticity, autonomy and efficacy in student participation in school

I have described a broad scope of configurations for student participation in school. However, widening the possibilities of student involvement does not guarantee the quality of participation. The growing authority of a positive discourse on student involvement has a common effect in different schools: authorities, teachers or parents consider it sufficient if they provide participation through tokenistic, manipulative and decorative forms of student participation (Fielding, 2004), or by restricting students’ voice and actions to a few aspects of the school’s life, usually the ones that do not modify school’s mechanisms of decision-making, power distribution and power relations (Whitty & Wisby, 2007). Assuming a literal definition of participation as ‘the action of taking part in something’ (Oxford dictionaries, 2013), these would be considered as forms of student participation in school, but with a very poor quality. I am using quality in regard to the following questions: how authentic students’ involvement is? To what extent it allows autonomous action? And, how efficacious it is? The analysis of student participation urges us to consider not only the scope of adolescents’ involvement in school (first dimension), but also to what extent such participation is authentic, autonomous and efficacious (second dimension: quality).

Authenticity and autonomy

Recovering Gramsci’s reflections on political action, Kiros points out that one can participate ‘either foolishly and ignorantly, or wisely and knowledgeably’ (Kiros, 1985, p. 147). Following this idea, authenticity in student participation in school is related to how knowledgeable and aware students are in regard to the content, purpose, realisation, and consequences of participation. This idea is closely related to the degree of control that they have over different stages within the participatory process, and how this process, as a whole, responds to their own interests (autonomy).

A way of analysing these two interrelated dimensions (authenticity & autonomy) is through Hart’s ‘ladder of participation’. It establishes different levels, from non-participation processes such as manipulation and tokenism, extending through five degrees of participation (Hart, 1992). The highest step involves that children and adolescents initiate the process and invite adults to join them in decision-making. Other authors have drawn on Hart’s work and proposed different arrangements: simplified and hierarchised models (Bruun Jensen & Simovska, 2005; Lansdown, 2005b; O’Brien, 2006; Shier, 2001), and a non-hierarchical typology (Simovska & Jensen, 2009). Among them, Lansdown (2005b) and O’Brien (2006) consider as the highest level of participation when children and adolescents act as the main or exclusive decision-maker during the whole process. Based on Lansdown’s work, I identify four different levels for analysing how authentic and autonomous student participation is in school: (1) no involvement or simulated forms of participation (i.e. manipulation or tokenism); (2) students are consulted and informed, (3) adolescents take part in the process with voice and initiative and (4) participation is led and controlled by the students.

Efficacy

The degree of authenticity and autonomy is related to the efficacy of student participation. This concept comes from the political science literature (Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954) and includes two dimensions: internal and external efficacy. The former refers to the ‘beliefs about one’s own competence to understand, and to participate effectively in
politics’ (Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991, p. 1407), whereas the latter relates to ‘beliefs about the responsiveness of government authorities and institutions to citizen demands’ (p. 1408). If we apply these concepts to student participation in school, a high internal efficacy would mean that they strongly believe in their capacity to participate in order to produce a significant change in school. A low external efficacy would mean that even when they believe in their own capacity of effective participation, students do not feel that school authorities will respond positively to their demands. Therefore, the expected changes will not occur.

Internal efficacy is cyclically related to authenticity and autonomy in students’ participation. As they get more autonomous and knowledgeable in the participatory process, it is more likely to expect a stronger belief in their competence for promoting a change in school (internal efficacy). Likewise, internal efficacy increases the odds of undertaking authentic and autonomous actions.

External efficacy, however, depends on two additional factors: (a) the proportion within a given domain of participation in which students are allowed to participate and (b) the extent to which students have symmetrical access to valuable resources and powerful agencies for participation in school, in comparison to other school actors. In regard to (a), each domain of participation has different sub-domains or potential spaces where students can have a voice or take action. It is expected that adolescents’ feeling about the school’s responsiveness to their demands will positively increase as they get more opportunities to participate in a greater proportion within each domain. In regard to (b), it is more likely that this feeling increases as students get access to similar valuable resources for participation, and equal or similar agencies. For instance, if students are allowed to participate in the school council with the same prerogatives as any other member, and accessing to the same information about the school, it is reasonable to expect a more positive feeling about the school’s responsiveness to their demands, than if they are only consulted and informed about the council’s decisions.

**Understanding and evaluating student participation: an empirical analysis**

I have described two dimensions of an analytical framework of adolescents’ participation in school. The first focuses on the scope, and the second on the quality of students’ participation (Figure 1). Both were presented as analytical dimensions of inquiry, which,

![Figure 1](image-url)
however, establish a normative horizon: the desirability of students’ participation increases as it expands in scope and quality. Thus, the two fundamental dimensions of inquiry previously presented can be applied to the analysis of student participation in school, but also to its evaluation. As an illustration of their empirical applicability, in the following I use both dimensions for examining student participation in the secondary schools from two areas of Mexico City.

**Data and methods**

The data in the analysis come from a broader research about students’ representations of political participation and their implications for citizenship education in Mexico City’s secondary schools. I worked with students, teachers and principals from secondary schools located within two contrasting municipalities (delegaciones) of Mexico City. One of them is the municipality with the highest level of human development (HD) in the city, and highly urbanised. The latter is among the municipalities with the lowest levels of HD in the city and it is considered as mostly rural.

The research followed a sequential mixed-methods strategy (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009), with three stages. The first was based on a concurrent embedded strategy (Creswell, 2009) in which a documentary analysis of the legal framework for Mexico City’s secondary schools was treated from both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The second was a qualitative stage comprising three workshops with a group of third-grade students in two schools (one per municipality) four semi-structured interviews with teachers of Civic and Ethical Formation in the same schools (two per school); and two semi-structured interviews with schools’ principals (one per school). The third stage was a quantitative phase in which a self-administrated questionnaire was applied to a representative sample of third-grade students from all the general secondary schools in these two areas. The total number of students in the sample was 828 (n = 828). The sampling frame for the survey comprised 2984 students in 17 schools: 1964 adolescents in 12 schools in the urban area, and 1020 in 5 schools within the rural one (SEP, 2012). It was a probabilistic, stratified and clustered sample with unequal probabilities.

The questionnaire was especially designed to gather information about two main aspects: (1) students’ representations of political participation; and (2) students’ representations of their participation in family, school, local, national and global communities. According to these interests, I divided the questionnaire in five sections: (A) Demographics, (B) Participation in family, (C) Participation in school, (D) Representations of PP and (E) Participation in communities. The data used in the following analysis comes exclusively from section (C) concerned with participation in school. This section comprised four requests for an answer (Saris & Gallhofer, 2007). Requests 1 and 3 were aimed to measure students’ participation in the domain of decision-making; request 4 was focused on the domain of knowledge construction in classroom, and request 2 was designed to measure the degree of authenticity and autonomy in students’ participation in school. All the requests comprised items in battery. Requests 1 and 4 had seven items, request 2 eight and request 3 five. Requests 1 and 4 were taken from the student questionnaire of the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study 2009, developed by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (Schulz & Sibbers, 2004), whereas requests 2 and 3 were originally designed for this research. In the following section, the requests referred in the analysis are presented as they appeared in the questionnaire.
The questionnaire was tested and evaluated through a pilot study with 87 third grade students from one urban secondary school, who answered the questionnaire in a session of 45 minutes. Among the various methods for testing the quality and functioning of the questionnaire (Presser et al., 2004), I used two: (1) statistical analysis (multiple item correlation, factor analysis and computation of Cronbach’s $\alpha$ coefficients) and (2) cognitive interviews (Beatty, 2004; Willis, 2004) with 10 students. The questionnaire was tested in some usual problems with questionnaires pointed out by Forsyth, Rothgeb, and Willis (2004), but particularly in: (a) Comprehension, (b) Keeping interest and motivation, (c) Adequacy of response alternatives, (d) Social desirability, (e) Construct Validity and (f) Reliability.\footnote{7}

**Scope and quality of student participation in the domain of binding decision-making in school**

Using the qualitative and quantitative data from the research design summarised earlier, in this section I analyse students’ representations of their participation in school, exclusively related to the domain of Binding decision-making. Due to space reasons, it is not possible here to apply the model to the analysis of student participation in the five domains previously outlined. I rather present an in-depth analysis of the scope and quality of adolescents’ participation in the domain of binding decision-making, which due to its centrality and constitutive sub-domains, clearly illustrates the importance of examining both the scope of participatory practices, and their quality, in order to provide a more integral understanding and evaluation of student participation in school.

**Scope of participation in the domain of binding decision-making**

As a first examination of students’ participation in this domain, I present their responses to request 1 from Section C of the questionnaire: *In your school, to what extent students’ opinion is considered in decision-making on the following issues?*

- The way in which courses are taught.
- Courses’ content.
- Learning materials and resources.
- Courses’ timetable.
- Classroom rules.
- School rules.
- Extracurricular activities (for instance, visiting a museum).\footnote{8}

Participants were asked to respond each of these seven items in a four-point Likert scale: *Much – Somewhat – Not Really – Not at All.*\footnote{9} As shown in Graph 1, the percentage of students who think that their opinion is ‘Much’ considered is the lowest in every item, excepting participation in *Classroom rules.* Accordingly, this is the only item in which the majority of students are located within the proportion comprising the ‘Much’ and ‘Somewhat’ responses.

In order to have a global insight on students’ perception of their participation in decision-making regarding the aspects of the school indicated in the items, I present the results of students’ scores within a summative average index (Langbein, 2012). It was developed by assigning a numeric value to each of the four response categories (*Not at All* = 0, *Not Really* = 1, *Somewhat* = 2, *Much* = 3). The lower limit of the index is 0, and, to establish the upper limit, the higher value (3) was multiplied by the number of
items in the battery (7). Therefore, the index ranges from 0 to 21. Students’ scores were computed by adding the value that corresponds to the category selected by the respondent in each of the seven items. If a student scores 21, it means that in every single indicator (item), he or she answered the category Much \( (\frac{3}{3}) \). In order to improve and clarify the interpretation of scores, I rescaled the index by dividing the maximum limit (21) between the number of items (7). The final index, then, ranges from 0 to 3, and the individual respondents’ scores can be interpreted using the original response categories (Langbein, 2012): 0 = Not at All, 1 = Not Really, 2 = Somewhat and 3 = Much.\(^{10}\)

The Mean of students’ score across the index is 1.17 (SD = .68) and the Mode is .86, the maximum score was 2.57, but only 12% of respondents scored between 2 and 2.57; whereas 46% scored 1 or less.\(^{11}\) According to this distribution and the value of the Mean, it is possible to say that students perceive that their opinion is not really considered in decision-making at school, at least in regard to the aspects presented in the seven items earlier.

The qualitative results reinforce this finding. As I have explained, the domain of binding decision-making includes at least the following sub-domains of student participation: school governance, curricular and pedagogical decisions, and the definition of community problems. When I asked students in the urban municipality about their participation in decisions about the school, one of them (Lucía\(^{12}\)) answered that before the current principal:

there was one meeting with the principal and the deputy head teacher, and some teachers asked us our point of view, and all together made a decision. For instance, the school needed an equipped facility for the French course, [...] So, all of us reached an agreement and made decisions.
It is important to emphasise that at the time of my fieldwork, participants had been in that school for two years and a half, and Lucía could only recall one meeting related to decision-making for school governance. The lack of students’ involvement in binding decision-making related to school governance turns evident in the definition of school and classroom’s rules. Students and teachers share the idea that most of rules have already been established by government entities outside of the school, for instance, the SEP, and by the school’s authorities, mainly the principal. The following three excerpts, the first from the rural school and the next two from the urban one, illustrate this view.

Facilitator/interviewer: How are the rules and norms […] in the school or classroom decided?

Ana: Through agreements among the authorities with the highest responsibility, in this case the principal, the deputy head teacher, and other authorities that make the school’s regulations that we have to comply.

Interviewer: How do you perceive the school environment for students’ participation in decision-making, and the possibility of being listened in relation to things that affect them?

Teacher Rose: I think it is very difficult, because of the regulation from the Secretariat of Public Education.

Facilitator/interviewer: How do you decide the rules and norms in the school?

Pedro: The principal, I think. Because […] in the first [week] the regulations are given to us, and those are the valid ones for the whole school year.

Facilitator/interviewer: And who decide those regulations?

Moises: The SEP [Secretariat of Public Education], I think.

Pedro: Yes

Due to the centralised and hierarchical school regulation, the classroom becomes a slightly more flexible space for student participation in decision-making about the rules to be followed:

Facilitator/interviewer: In classroom, what other rules do you have? […] How are they decided?

Moises: As a group

Mario: Between all of us, it is the only occasion where we interact […]

Facilitator/interviewer: And which rules…?

Mario: Normally they are always the same: no trash…

Carmen: No food

Pedro: No food, no water…

Moises: No cell phones, no yelling…

Facilitator/interviewer: But, do you decide as a group?

Carmen: Some of them…

Pedro: Or, for example, some teachers bring their rules, we read them, and they tell us: would you like to add something else?

Mario: But it never really happens
The excerpt shows different opinions among the students about the opportunities to participate in the definition of rules in the classroom. Yet, it seems that their involvement depends on the teacher, and normally the teacher has already decided most of the rules and the process through which these are established. As Teacher Ivan from the same school says:

I give them the rules, but I explain them, and if there is any problem, if there is any inconformity, we talk about it. But I give the reasons. It is not that we do what I say, but ‘look boys this is the reason’…

To a great extent, the limited involvement in the domain of binding decision-making is explained by the lack of regular practices and effective mechanisms for students’ inclusion in decisions related to school governance and the definition of common problems. When I asked the principal from the urban school about whether there were real opportunities for students to have influence in decisions about the school, she said:

I think we are not used to it. […] We don’t even have in mind that they take a decision through a sort of survey, to see what is the most important decision we should make in the school? How do we want to approach a given problem? How we would like that the school shows itself to the community? What are the things that make us uncomfortable? […] We are not willing to participate. This participation doesn’t happen.

Similarly, it seems that students rarely participate in curricular and pedagogical decisions:

Facilitator/interviewer: How opened are teachers to your contributions to what should be taught? Have you ever proposed any topic that you want to learn?

Pedro: Just one teacher. Well, in my class, with the teacher of chemistry, we told him what we want to work with […] and he allowed us to do that. But it is just one.

Agencies and repertoires of student participation in school

The lack of students’ involvement in binding decision-making is largely a consequence of their exclusion from powerful and efficacious agencies for participation in school. Adolescents are not formally included in the two main bodies for collective decision-making in the Mexican secondary school: the School Technical Council (STC) and the School Council of Social Participation (SCSP). However, principals, students and teachers concur in representing two main agencies for student participation in school: the Student Society (SS) and the chiefs of class.

The SS is a formal organisation, legally regulated, and with a pre-established hierarchised composition, whose positions and roles are stable over time, independently of the individual characteristics of its temporal members. All secondary schools in Mexico have to form a Student Society (SS) each academic year. However, students tend to discredit both the SS and the process for electing the student representatives who chair it. They seem rather sceptical about the efficacy of this organ, to which they refer as ‘planillas’. I present the following excerpts from the urban and the rural schools, respectively, as an illustration of students’ incredulity on this agency:

Facilitator/interviewer: So, what are the planillas for?

Pedro: Supposedly they are for improving the school

Moses: but it doesn’t work

Facilitator/interviewer […] why?

Moses: they did nothing; they said there would be mirrors in the toilets, but it didn’t happen

All: Yes, nothing.
Facilitator/interviewer: So, if we think about the school’s problems, have you done something to solve them?

Miriam and Ana: We? Nothing.

Adrian: Supposedly that’s why we vote for the planilla.

Karina: But they do nothing.

Ana: Yes they do nothing. Well two years ago I think we have more control.

[...]

Adrian: Yes, if we noticed something wrong we left it to the planilla and they tried to fix it. But now the planilla sucks, they do nothing, simply nothing.

Facilitator/interviewer: And... two years ago the planilla was better, they tried to solve some problems?

All: Yes.

Facilitator/interviewer: And how did they try to solve the problem?

Some students: with the principal.

Ana: they talked to the principal.

Laura: they were like our intermediaries. There were some requests like... obviously impossible [to be realised] [... ] but anyway; they tried to solve things, to look after us.

These two examples show how the SS hardly represent a reliable and efficacious body for student voice. In the case of the rural school, students acknowledge that its efficacy is highly dependent on who the representatives are, and how seriously they play that role. It reveals a lack of the objective mechanisms that formal agencies should have in order to guarantee a certain level of efficacy in a more durable way. Instead, adolescents’ participation through their representatives relies on the possibility of having a talk with the principal. On the one hand, this repertoire is not formally regulated and depends strongly on individual wills (the principal’s and the representatives’), and on the other hand, it confines student participation into a highly asymmetrical power relation. Formal agencies should provide opportunities for reducing this asymmetry, like a regulated process for listening and attending adolescents’ opinion, the inclusion of their representatives in the main school councils (the STC and SCSP), recognised influence in certain domains of the school life according to students’ concerns, the opportunity of recurring to a mediator or appealing to certain pre-established prerogatives in case of conflict. But the SS lacks these attributes.

The SS, then, is highly vulnerable. Due to this fact, it is prone to be treated as a ‘game’, as a parody of the national political realm, as a formative exercise or as a regulatory requirement that has to be accomplished:

Facilitator/interviewer: Have you ever taken part in an election?

Miriam: Yes, to elect some students [... ] We had to elect the representatives in the Student Society [... ] they gather together and count the votes... and supposedly there’s democracy [... ]

Facilitator/interviewer: And why did you say “supposedly”?

Miriam: [raising her shoulders] because it’s like a game.
Teacher Ivan: [...] no matter how much you explain to them that it [the elections for the student representatives] has to be an electoral process, and what generates the votes are the proposals, they [the student candidates] do the same [as in politics]: they give a candy [to the students], promises that are unrealistic [...] illogical things. Then, the exercise can be good [...] if they understand [...] the power they have to pick up someone who represents them [...] it is a good exercise. But we always fall in the absurd. At the end, this [thing] they do here is what happens outside, isn’t it [...] a [political] party convince us but it give us proposals that sometimes are unrealistic.

______________________________

Principal in the urban school: I say that it is ... a simulacrum.

Interviewer: ... a mock ...

Principal: A simulacrum of teaching them to make democracy. Teach them to choose who is your representative. [...] However, we give us the task of doing so in order to meet ... to comply with the requirement. If this Student society would truly work, if we really wish that students would have participation, they should be present in all the decisions at the school, isn’t it? [...] But haven’t been able to do so.

As the principal acknowledges, the SS is a requirement. According to the current regulations, every general secondary school must have one. Article 50 in the Agreement 98 (see Note 9) states that the SS will have the following ‘goals’:

- To exercise among its members the practice of democratic life, as a way to contribute to their formation.
- To promote the realisation of activities that contribute to construct in the educands a responsible personality, with a clear sense of their obligations and rights.
- To strength the relations of solidarity among the students.
- To promote whatever it estimate necessary and useful for the physical, moral, social and cultural improvement of its members.
- To promote to the school authorities the initiatives that advance the progress and improvement of the school.

Instead of being entitled with prerogatives, attributions or functions, the SS has ‘goals’. While other agencies for participation in school are mainly envisaged as organs for decision-making and consultation, the SS is primarily conceived as a pedagogical space. The first three goals reflect this emphasis. Additionally, its capacity for influencing school decisions is restricted to the level of suggestions or ‘initiatives’. This body does not have a clear prerogative for having a voice in decisions affecting the school. It is visualised more as a place for learning, than an agency for effective participation in school. This view confines the role of students: they go to school to learn something, not to participate in the decisions that affect their school.

Paradoxically, according to participants’ testimonies, it seems that the SS is not a place for a meaningful learning. As the research on situated learning has shown, in such processes, the learner’s motivation is oriented to having an authentic participation in the ‘doing’ (Chaiklin & Lave, 1996; Daniel Schugurensky, 2006; Lave & Etienne, 1991; Rogoff, 1990). It means that once the SS becomes an attractive and authentic channel for students’ participation, then the expected learning will be more likely to emerge. In this logic, students should first be seen as adolescents entitled to the right of participation, then as learners.

In regard to its composition, the SS only comprises a single collective actor: the students. In contrast with the Parents’ Association, which also has a single-actor composition, the members of the SS are not included in the agencies constituted with mixed individual and collective participants, like the STC or the SCSP. Therefore,
decisions made in the SS that affect other school actors will have to be treated through informal channels, which highly depend on the authorities’ criteria. Thus, the lack of legal prerogatives aimed at reducing the power asymmetry between students and school’s authorities within the process of binding decision-making, its conception as a pedagogical space and its single-actor composition make the SS the weakest formal agency for participation in school.

In contrast to the SS, the chiefs of class constitute a rather informal representational agency. Their role is not considered in the regulations. There are usually two chiefs of class per group who work jointly without a pre-established hierarchy or division of labour between them. According to participants’ testimonies, the chiefs of class should serve as a channel between students and the principal, through which the former can have a voice in decision-making, or effectively communicate some of their demands. However, sometimes the chiefs of class appear as the representatives of the principal before the students. This shift originates in their election. The chiefs are chosen by collective decision, but highly oriented by teachers and principal’s interests:

Principal: They [the students] choose them. In the classroom we make a meeting with the tutor, the [teacher that] accompanies them throughout the year in all their subjects. [...] You, as an adult lead, and the teacher leads the group towards choosing a particular person that meets some characteristics [...], [...] they decide who is the Chief and Deputy Chief and they are our monitors for all the activities. They decide it through that open way within the group.

As I have previously shown, some experiences of participation in the domain of binding decision-making take place because students exercise their individual or collective agency without any organised body. However, as noticed in the sub-domains of school governance and curricular and pedagogical decisions, usually these cases occur as a response to teachers’ or principals’ initiative. In other words, participation without an organised body tends to be dominated by repertoires led by schools’ authorities. Nevertheless, the analysis of the SS and the chiefs of class, reveals two main repertoires of student participation in the domain of binding decision-making: the elections and the personal dialogue with the principal. The first is an organised form of participation apparently led by adolescents, but many times, significantly oriented by teachers and principals. In the elections, decisions are reached through voting after a brief period of debate on candidates’ proposals. The second (personal communication) can be led by the principal or by students. It is performed through dialogue and debate, and decisions can be reached by deliberation or unilaterally. It is a rather spontaneous form of participation. Although socially structured, the procedure to be followed varies significantly depending on who the principal is, who the student representatives are and the issue to be treated. Based on these specific characteristics, its character may also change from a friendly conversation to a contentious encounter.

Quality in student participation within the domain of binding decision-making: authenticity, autonomy and efficacy

The previous analysis of the scope of student participation in the domain of binding decision-making shows different elements that reveal a minimum quality in the practices represented by the participants. These tend to be characterised by simulated forms of participation like manipulation or tokenism, or by teachers’ and head teachers’ intervention in order to lead students’ involvement according to their own interests. I have shown, for example, that in regard to the definition of classroom rules, students are encouraged to participate while the teacher has already established most of the regulations.
Similarly, in the case of the election of the chief of class in the urban school, adolescents get involved while the principal and teachers conduct the process according to their own judgement.

In order to explore more carefully the first two components of the dimension of quality, I present the results of one request in the survey questionnaire, especially designed for capturing the four levels of authenticity and autonomy in student participation according to the theoretical classification presented in the first section of the article: (1) no involvement or simulated forms of participation (i.e. manipulation or tokenism); (2) students are consulted and informed, (3) adolescents take part in the process with voice and initiative and (4) participation is led and controlled by the students. The request comprised a battery with eight statements representing the different degrees of authenticity and autonomy (see Table 2), and students were asked, how often do the following forms of participation take place in your school? They had to answer in a four-point Likert scale comprising the categories Very frequently – Frequently – Rarely – Never.\(^{15}\)

In order to compare students’ responses through the four different degrees of authenticity & autonomy, I developed a summative average index per degree by following the same procedure explained in the previous section related to participants’ responses to

### Table 2. Statements in the survey questionnaire representing different levels of authenticity and autonomy in student participation in school.

| Degree of authenticity and autonomy | Statements in the survey questionnaire | Mean of students’ responses (0–3) | Mean of responses to summative average index |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| 1. No involvement or simulated forms of participation (i.e. manipulation or tokenism) | (a) In my school, only teachers and the principal participate, believing that they represent our interests.  
(b) I participate in my school by doing what teachers and the principal decide, but it is not important to me.  
(c) When I participate in my school, teachers or the principal tell me what to do and how to do it. I do not understand what is the purpose of it. | | $\bar{x} = 1.29$  
($\sigma_x = .696$) |
| 2. Students are informed and consulted | (d) I participate in my school when teachers or the principal decide what I have to do, but I understand why, and I agree with them.  
(e) When teachers do something that has consequences for students, they ask our opinion, consider it and inform us about what they did. | | $\bar{x} = .827$  
($\sigma_x = .478$) |
| 3. Adolescents take part in the process with voice and initiative | (f) I participate in my school by joining teachers or the principal in what they propose, and together we decide how to do it. | | $\bar{x} = .800$  
($\sigma_x = .786$) |
| 4. Participation is led and controlled by the students | (g) I participate in my school by doing what students propose and, along with teachers or the principal, we decide how to do it.  
(h) I participate in my school by doing what students propose, and we carrying it out in our own way. Others (teachers, principal or parents) help us. | | $\bar{x} = .689$  
($\sigma_x = .500$) |

\(^{15}\)
request 1 in Section E of the questionnaire. Each index ranges from 0 to 3, and the individual respondents’ scores can be interpreted using the original response categories (Langbein, 2012): 0 = Never, 1 = Rarely, 2 = Frequently and 3 = Very frequently. Because there is only one statement in the battery representing degree 3 of authenticity & autonomy, in this case students’ scores were obtained by assigning a numeric value to the original ordinal category selected by them (0, 1, 2 or 3).\textsuperscript{16}

The third column in Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation for each degree of authenticity and autonomy according to students’ responses to the summative average indexes, as well as the statement representing degree 3. One-way repeated-measures ANOVA was employed to test the differences between the four means. The results showed that students’ opinion significantly changed through the four degrees of authenticity and autonomy, $F(2.05, 1660.7) = 187.3, p < .000$.\textsuperscript{17} Table 3 presents the Pairwise Comparisons between the means, showing that the differences are significant, with the exception of the short distance between degrees 2 and 3.

As given in Table 2, the mean from degree 1 is just above 1, whereas the means for degrees 2, 3 and 4 are below 1. Thus, the results reveal, first, that all the forms of participation in the statements occur rarely or never in the schools studied. Second, the highest mean corresponds to degree 1 of authenticity and autonomy. It signifies that students perceive that no participation or simulated forms of participation are the most frequent practices in the school, compared to those with a higher degree of authenticity and autonomy. Third, the value of the means decreases as the degree of authenticity and autonomy in participation increases. These results, then, show how students perceived that participation rarely or never takes places in their schools and, when it happens, simulated forms of student participation (like manipulation or tokenism) prevail over more authentic and autonomous ones.

According to the previous results, it would be unlikely to expect experiences of efficacious student participation. As mentioned in the first section, efficacy as the third component within the dimension of quality is related to (a) the degrees of authenticity and autonomy.

Table 3. Pairwise comparisons from one-way repeated measures ANOVA between the means of students’ scores in the four degrees of authenticity and autonomy in participation in school.\textsuperscript{a}

| (I) Degree of authenticity and autonomy | (J) Degree of authenticity and autonomy | Mean difference ($I - J$) | SE  | 95% Confidence interval for difference$^a$ |
|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----|------------------------------------------|
|                                        |                                        |                          |     | Lower bound                             |
|                                        |                                        |                          |     | Upper bound                             |
| Degree 1                               | D2                                     | .466*                    | .029| 0.39                                    |
|                                        | D3                                     | .499*                    | .038| 0.4                                     |
|                                        | D4                                     | .608*                    | .031| 0.525                                   |
|                                        |                                        |                          |     | 0.691                                   |
| Degree 2                               | D1                                     | -.466*                   | .029| -0.543                                  |
|                                        | D2                                     | .033                     | .025| -0.032                                  |
|                                        | D3                                     | .141*                    | .017| 0.096                                   |
|                                        | D4                                     | .081*                    | .022| 0.049                                   |
| Degree 3                               | D1                                     | -.499*                   | .038| -0.599                                  |
|                                        | D2                                     | -.033                    | .025| -0.098                                  |
|                                        | D4                                     | -.141*                   | .017| -0.187                                  |
| Degree 4                               | D1                                     | -.608*                   | .031| -0.691                                  |
|                                        | D2                                     | -.108*                   | .022| -0.168                                  |
|                                        | D3                                     | -.108*                   | .022| -0.049                                  |

Note: Based on estimated marginal means.
$^a$The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.
$^b$Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni.
autonomy (internal efficacy), (b) the proportion opened to student involvement within each domain of participation and (c) the extent to which, in comparison to other school actors, students have symmetrical access to valuable resources and agencies for participation (external efficacy). In regard to (a), I have shown how poor student participation is in terms of authenticity and autonomy. Regarding (b), I have argued that adolescents’ involvement in all the sub-domains of binding decision-making in schools is limited, and therefore the proportion opened to student participation within the domain is small. And, in relation to (c), the analysis of the agencies for students’ participation shows, on the one hand, that compared to other school actors, adolescents are excluded from the main bodies for collective decision-making in the school (the STC and the SCSP). On the other hand, their main formal agency (the SS) does not provide the resources that are available in the agencies opened to other school actors for influencing binding decisions, like clear prerogatives for being consulted and informed.

Other actors, like teacher Ivan and teacher Rose, perceive the lack of efficacy in student participation:

Teacher Ivan: I think that [students] don’t take it [the elections for the Student Society] seriously because the power they have is very little.

Teacher Rose: They [students] realise that sometimes what boys ask for is impossible. For example, [...] they make their proposals about having toilet paper and soap in the bathrooms, but they already know that it is impossible, because they already know that the Secretariat does not send enough to school.

How and why having toilet paper and soap in schools has become something impossible to achieve? Certainly, it reveals some problems in the use of resources in the Mexican education system, but it also shows the lack of internal efficacy in student participation.

Discussion and final considerations

I have presented an empirical analysis of students’ participation in the domain of binding decision-making in the general secondary schools from two contrasting areas of Mexico City. It was based on the analytical framework developed in the first section of the article, in order to show its capacity for mapping, understanding and evaluating student participation in school. On the one hand, it allowed identifying the extent to which students take part in the sub-domains of binding decision-making in the school, the main agencies through which such participation is channelled, and the repertoires that students display in these practices, as well as to understand their characteristics. It also allowed classifying students’ experiences of participation according to their quality, in terms of their degree of authenticity and autonomy, and the characteristics that constrain or maximise their efficacy. On the other hand, the framework used in the analysis enables the evaluation of students’ participation, in so far it allows to establish how extensive or narrow the scope of participatory practices within the domain of binding decision-making, and how autonomous, authentic and efficacious it is. In this case, the analysis has shown that the scope of student participation is rather narrow, because the main subdomains of school governance, curricular and pedagogical decisions and the definition of community problems are significantly closed to adolescents’ involvement. To a great extent, such limited involvement responds to the lack of agencies for student participation in school and the weakness and poor efficacy of the ones that are formally established in the Mexican secondary school, such as the Student Society. Furthermore, adolescent participation in
school is poor in terms of its quality, in so far that simulated forms of participation, such as manipulation or tokenism, prevail over more authentic and autonomous practices, and the efficacy of students’ voice and actions is considerably limited.

**Limitations of the study**

There are two main limitations in the study. First, the empirical analysis focuses only on one of the five domains of participation proposed in the analytical model. It is necessary to expand the empirical examination to the other four domains, in order to test how the analytical framework proposed, expands our understanding of, and helps to evaluate, students’ participation in the areas of conflict resolution, knowledge construction, resolution of community problems and identity construction. Second, it is important to acknowledge that the analytical framework suggested in this article is exclusively concerned with the intrinsic aspects of student participation. More research is needed to integrate a dimension of inquiry related to the systemic, structural or other determinants of such participation. This can significantly improve the model for its application in practice and education policy, because in order to enhance student participation in school, it is necessary to know the state of it (scope and quality), but also its associated factors.

**Implications for policy and practice**

As I argued in the introduction, student participation in school is relevant mainly because in most countries it is a right of adolescents, and therefore, it has to be guaranteed. But also, adolescents’ participation in this setting seems necessary for the education of active citizens, and has been positively associated with the development of knowledge, attitudes and skills, also relevant in other domains (like the labour market), and with the reduction of violence in school and dropping out rates. Enhancing adolescent participation in school, then, should be part of the strategy oriented to tackle these problems. Before the rather fragmented state of the art in the study of student participation in school, this article provides an integral analytical framework, effective for empirical analysis that informs policy-makers and practitioners about the state of adolescent participation in their schools, and identify the specific areas that need practical intervention, both in terms of scope (domains, agencies and repertoires) and quality (authenticity, autonomy and efficacy).

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Funding**

This work was supported by the Program for Teachers’ Professional Development, Higher Education type (Programa para el Desarrollo Profesional Docente, Tipo Superior) [UAM-EXB-135].

**Notes**

1. The normative age in secondary school in Mexico is 12–15 years old. It is part of the basic education phase and it is located between primary education (6–12 years old) and medium education (15–18 years old). The Mexican secondary school system offers different types of services: general (academic), technical (vocational), tele secundaria (schools were courses are directed through television and other technologies, principally in distant rural communities),
communitarian (created for attending marginalised rural and urban communities, as well as camps of migrant rural workers) and secondary school for workers over 15 years old (INEE, 2012). The general secondary school is the most common service; half of all secondary students in the Mexican system (public and private) attend these schools (INEE, 2012).

2. Hart uses this term ‘to describe those instances in which children are apparently given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about the subject or the style of communicating it, and little or no opportunity to formulate their own opinions’ (Hart, 1992, p. 9).

3. According to the human development index used by the annual human development report, carried out by the United Nations (Klugman, 2011). In order to protect the anonymity of the participants in this research, I do not provide the specific levels of HD of both areas.

4. According to the ministry of environment of Mexico City (see www.sma.df.gob.mx).

5. In the urban school, the group comprised eight pupils: four boys and four girls. In the rural one there were four girls and three boys. In both cases, their age ranged between 14 and 16 years old.

6. Following these strategies, the questionnaire was administrated to a sample of 850 students in six different schools, four in the urban area and two in the rural. The sample size was calculated considering a $z$ value of 1.96 for 95% of confidence level, a value of 0.5 as percentage of the population, and a confidence interval of $\pm 2.84$. The response rate was 94%. The qualitative fieldwork took place during the academic year 2010–2011. The quantitative stage was undertaken in the academic year 2011–2012.

7. Cronbach’s $\alpha$ coefficients are presented for the batteries used in the empirical analysis.

8. Participants were asked to respond to every option in a four-point Likert scale: Very Much – Somewhat – Not Really – Not at All. The index was constructed by assigning a value to each of these categories from 0 (Not at All) to 3 (Very Much), adding participants’ score to each of the seven items in the battery, and rescaling the range into a 0–1 interval.

9. Cronbach’s $\alpha = .87$ (This value derives from students’ responses to the 7 items in the battery).

10. The construction of the index, by treating a categorical ordinal variable (each single indicator/item in the battery) as a numerical one, assumes that the former has an underlying continuous scale. As such, ‘the categories can be regarded as only crude measurements of an unobserved variable that, in truth, has a continuous scale (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993), with each pair of thresholds (or initial scale points) representing a portion of the continuous scale’ (Byrne, 2010, p. 149).

11. $n$(valid) = 792, missing = 36.

12. In order to guarantee the anonymity of my informants, no real names are used in this article.

13. The Agreement 98 is the legal document that regulates the organization and functioning of general secondary schools in Mexico. According to Article 31 in this Agreement, the main function of the STC will be to ‘support the principal in the planning, development and evaluation of the educational activities and in the resolution of the school’s transcendental problems’. The same Article, Fraction I, says that the STC will have a president, who ‘invariably will be the principal’. In Fraction III, it states that the president of the Student Society will be one of the members of the Council. However, in the General Guidelines for the Organisation and Functioning of Initial, Basic, Special and Adult Education Services in the Federal District (Mexico City) (GG), which is the regulatory document that has to be physically in every school and revised every year, some representatives are removed, among them, the president of the Student Society and the President of the Parents Association. This legal divergence leaves student inclusion in the Council to the principal’s discretion. While the STC is regularly more concerned with pedagogical and curricular decisions, the Council of Social Participation tends to be focused on school governance. Nonetheless, according to the GG are also excluded as members form this council.

14. They usually refer to the student society as ‘planillas’ or ‘planilla’, because these ‘planillas’ play the role of parties in the elections. However, even when the elections are finished they still refer to the student representatives in the society as the ‘planilla’.

15. Cronbach’s $\alpha = .63$ (This value derives from students’ responses to the 8 items in the battery).

16. See Note 10 for an explanation of the assumption made in the treatment of an ordinal variable as a numerical one.

17. Mauchly’s test indicated that the assumption of sphericity had been violated, $\chi^2 (5) = 573.05$, $p < .000$, therefore degrees of freedom were corrected using Greenhouse and Geisser estimates (Greenhouse and Geisser, 1959).
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