VEU i BOT

# Concluding report__

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## VEU i BOT! (SPITEC):
### A participatory project aimed at children and young people

**VEU I BOT! (SPITEC): A participatory project aimed at children and young people**
**Concluding report**

aFFaC

ASSOCIACIONS FEDERADES
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# Índex

# 1. Introduction

The document you have in your hands contains the learning outcomes of the SPITEC project carried out in eight schools around Catalonia, under the name "VEU i BOT!", between 2022 and 2024.

As part of this project, several approaches were introduced to classrooms and schools to increase children and young people's participation. As a result of this experience, and following analysis of the challenges and opportunities identified along the way, this report presents a series of strategies and reflections points which may prove useful for other schools that wish to encourage greater student participation.

To this end, the document summarises the guidelines and strategies for the introduction of the approaches in question, a range of successful experiences from the schools which participated in the pilot project, a list of dos and don'ts for teachers, and a participation self-assessment test for schools.

The report is not intended to be exhaustive nor does it seek to offer a theoretical definition of what student participation is (or is not). The aim of the report is to share, with those who wish to make use of them, the knowledge and reflections gained from specific experiences grounded in schools' everyday realities. We hope you find it interesting and useful.

# 2. The SPITEC project (VEU i BOT!)

The SPITEC project (VEU i BOT!)[1], spearheaded by the aFFaC in collaboration with Eduxarxa, Consell Nacional de la Joventut de Catalunya (CNJC), the Consell Nacional dels Infants i Adolescents de Catalunya (CNIAC) and the Departament d'Educació, aims to bring together different forms of learning-focused student participation in schools in Catalonia using active educational methodologies.

It was designed to boost the confidence of students and bolster fundamental democratic values such as responsibility, critical thinking and respect for others.

The project was piloted in eight early childhood education centres (preschool) and primary and secondary schools across Catalonia during the 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 school years. These eight public schools are diverse and distinct in both location (urban, suburban and rural) and nature (primary, secondary and combined schools, complex learning needs, etc.), and were selected on this very basis, in order to gain an appreciation of the nuances of each given context. The participating schools were:

## Preschool and primary education

- Escola Minyons d'Urgell de Fondarella (Pla d'Urgell - Lleida)
- Institut Escola El Cabrerès de L'Esquirol (Osona - Barcelona)
- Escola Edumar de Castelldefels (Baix Llobregat -Barcelona)
- Escola Tarlatana de Sabadell (Vallès Occidental -Barcelona)

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1 The original name of the project is Student participation as an integrated tool in emergency contexts (SPITEC). Funded by the European Commission (EU) as part of the CERV-2021-CHILD programme.

## Secondary education

- Institut Lluís de Peguera de Manresa (Bages - Barcelona)

- Institut Sòl de Riu d'Alcanar (Montsià- Tarragona)

- Institut Nicolau Copèrnic de Terrassa (Vallès Occidental - Barcelona)

- Institut Jaume Botey de l'Hospitalet de Llobregat (Barcelonès - Barcelona)

During the initial 2022-23 academic year, a participatory analysis was conducted with students from each school, and during the first and second terms of the 2023-24 academic year, the co-development and implementation of approaches for student participation chosen by each school were carried out.

# 3. Right to participation and conditions for encouraging partici- pation in schools

The word *participation* can have different meanings and be expressed in a variety of ways in schools. Without wishing to establish an academic definition, it is important to keep in mind that, with regards to this project, when we talk about encouraging student participation, we are not referring to children and young people's daily activities in the classroom or school: studying, speaking in class or asking the teacher questions, collaborating with peers, being proactive, etc.

When we talk about participation, we refer to whether children and young people have the opportunity to voice their opinions on issues related to how their classroom or school works.

Participation is not intended as a substitute for the responsibility of key decision-makers. Nevertheless, it means that decisions are made once students have been heard, and where appropriate, their suggestions taken on board.

Encouraging student participation in the educational environment can have **significant benefits for students and the school**, such as:

- Increased student involvement and motivation
- Co-responsibility in decision-making
- A better understanding of needs and interests
- Greater cohesion among students and a sense of belonging to the school
- The acquisition of new skills and abilities
- Improved classroom and school organisation and operation

Of course, when we talk about the need to encourage student participation in an educational environment, we do not do so only for these reasons, as strategic as they may be. We do so, first and foremost, because children and young people have the right to participation. This is reflected in the **Convention on the Rights of the Child**, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 20 November 1989, which states:

**The opinion of the child**  (article 12)

Every child has the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, and these must be given due weight and consideration.

**Freedom of expression**  (article 13)

Every child has the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, provided that, in doing so, the rights and reputations of others are respected.

**Freedom of association** (article 15)

Every child has the right to freedom of association and to peaceful assembly, as long as this does not infringe upon the rights of others.

By encouraging students to participate in the issues that affect them at school, we also encourage them to effectively exercise their right to be heard.

To ensure children and young people's participation, they must have:

- an **INTEREST** in participating
- **KNOW LEDGE** on how to participate
- the **ABILITY** to participate

INTEREST

ABILITY

KNOWLEDGE
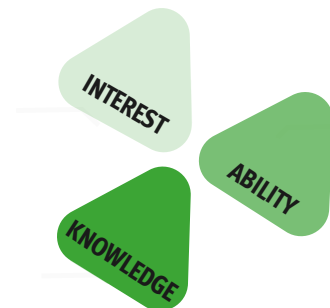
# Interest

Students' desire to participate in what we offer them at school depends largely on three factors:

- **Connection with their needs and interests.** If the topics of discussion we propose connect with students' interests and needs, they will be more inclined to participate. No one participates in something that does not interest them. Therefore, students must be able to participation in the topics that engage them, and the best way to do this is by asking them. We often tend to interpret what students want or need instead of asking them.

- **A sense that participation is worthwhile.** Children and young people are more motivated if they perceive that their voice is being heard and that their participation has a tangible impact or outcome. No one participates meaningfully if their participation isn't meaningful in itself. Participation involves effort and opening ourselves to others, and this is only rewarded when it is valued and translated into action, no matter how small. If our ideas are not listened to as a matter of practice, if nothing we propose is done and we do not see the results of our participation, our motivation drops. This is why it is important to acknowledge each and every contribution, take all ideas into account, and give a reasoned and appropriate response to children and young people's contributions.

- **A safe and welcoming group environment.** Positive and constructive relationships between children and young people lead to increased motivation. This drops if there is ill-feeling or conflict. No one likes to participate if it means feeling judged, targeted, criticised or mocked by others. Therefore, it is essential to create safe spaces for participation in which students feel that they can express themselves and be respected. It is essential to establish trust in the classroom and lay down ground rules for participation that are respected by everyone.

# Knowledge

We learn to participate through participation. Children and young people don't have to know how a classroom assembly is organised or how to express ideas in the way adults want them to. Learning to participate is progressive and involves the acquisition of certain skills and abilities by the students. **Schools, as learning spaces, are the best place to learn and put these skills into practice.**

Learning to participate involves:

- **Learning to work with others:** understanding how to listen, learning to express yourself, working as a team, etc.

- **Learning to self-organise:** assigning tasks, taking on responsibilities, etc.

- **Learning to give opinions and argue:** analysing, debating, explaining and reasoning with arguments.

# Ability

Finally, children and young people need to *be able to* participate. Sometimes, their lack of participation is not because they don't know how or don't want to, but because they are unable to. The school must provide the opportunities for students to be able to effectively participate in the issues that interest and affect them. We need to develop inclusive spaces and strategies for genuine participation.

This means:

- **Creating spaces and opportunities:** We must think about what topics or areas we want students to participate in, and set up the channels to make this possible. Participation doesn't have to be binding. Opening up a topic for discussion and participation for children does not necessarily mean that we have to accept their ideas. What it does show is willingness and a sincere predisposition on the part of decision-

makers (teaching staff and school management) to listen to their opinions and ideas, with a commitment to give a reasoned response explaining what steps will and won't be taken as a result.

- **Organising participation.** Participation is not improvised: it is organised. Formats and channels need to be properly thought through and designed so that individuals can participate on an equal basis. Multi-person assemblies do not facilitate participation on equal terms. Not all children have the same skills and abilities. Some children are timid and others more forward, with some acting as leaders and influencing their peers, etc. We need to develop spaces that enable everyone to participate. As such, we need to look at various strategies such as working in small groups, anonymous suggestion boxes, etc.

In section 4 of this document, we will provide a specific practical example of **the classroom assembly** approach to participation – not to be confused with tutoring, restorative circles or other classroom spaces – detailing the organisational guidelines in terms of Interest, Knowledge and Ability.

# 4. Learning from participatory experiences in schools

The pilot project carried out in the eight participating schools offers learning and experiential outcomes relating to a range of different strategies designed to encourage child and young people's participation in the learning environment. Any observable change in student participation, however, requires more time and a firm commitment from schools to continue the work begun these last two years.

Nevertheless, this section offers some **strategies that have already proved a success in a number of the participating schools following their introduction, and which could be useful or inspiring for others** that wish to replicate them.

The project has provided added value in a range of ways, including:

1. **Introduction of areas of participation which are relevant and interesting for students**
2. **Consolidation of stable participation structures**
3. **Introduction of steering strategies**
4. **Improved traceability of proposals**
5. **Introduction of participation champions**

## 1. Introduction of areas of participation which are relevant and interesting for students

Many decisions that affect the students are made each day at school. The teaching team, tutors, school managers, school councils or parents' associations, to list only a few examples, make decisions as part of their roles that have a direct effect on students' everyday environment.

Participation is not intended as a means of taking these roles away, but it does challenge us to ask ourselves if any of these decisions or areas could be opened up to student participation.

We have already seen that children have the right to be heard, as stipulated in the Declaration of the Rights of the Child. Therefore, we must assess how and when students can exercise this right in the classroom and the school, as well as considering the opportunities we as teachers or school managers can provide them with..

Although in theory students should be able to be heard and participate in each and every decision that affects them, from a realistic standpoint, there are certain areas that are very difficult for schools to open up to participation. Whatever the circumstances, it is a matter of finding a balance between what can be discussed and what is of interest or relevant to students.

As part of this pilot project, school management teams reflected on this issue in an attempt to identify which areas of relevance to children could be opened up for participation.

- The **Escola Minyons d'Urgell** decided to use reading time at the school as an opportunity for nursery and preschool students to participate. The children were encouraged to discuss the kind of books they wanted to read, where and how they wanted to do so within the school, and at what time of day. Based on their ideas and suggestions, the school's management team developed a new proposal for structuring reading time at the school.

- The **Escola Tarlatana** sought to make the most of the pilot project in order to address an issue of concern for the teaching staff and management: classroom and playground harmony. A conversation was held with nursery and preschool students on how to improve coexistence and resolve conflicts that arise on a day-to-day basis. As a result of this work, the children designed a set of individual and group proposals and commitments with this in mind.

- A final example – in this case, in one of the secondary schools – comes from the **Institut Sòl de Riu**. In seeking a subject which could stir interest among 1st to 4th year students (ESO), a decision was made to focus on the organisation of the school Christmas party. As part of the project, the organisation of this party – which had never been altered before – was opened up to encourage student participation, with inclusion of their proposals and increased student involvement in the event itself. Ideas and proposals were gathered in class and subsequently developed and coordinated by the delegate assembly, breathing new life into the party.

## 2. Consolidation of stable participation structures

Student participation in schools should not be a one-off, time-limited activity, but instead a continuous opportunity for engagement that lasts over time. We have already said that participating is a learning process, both for students and for the teaching team, and this plays out progressively. It is important that we create, consolidate and improve spaces and channels for participation, ensuring they have an enduring and stable role to play within the centre.

The pilot project provided an opportunity, in certain cases, to review or consolidate existing participation structures within the schools while, in other cases, it offered the chance to launch new ones.

- The **Escola Edumar** and **Escola Tarlatana** already offered a Children's Council, made up of delegates from the different year groups that met periodically to discuss school issues. These issues are first raised in the classroom, with the delegates then acting as spokespersons for their classroom. As part of the pilot project, the functioning of these Councils was reviewed, with proposals made for more participatory strategies and practices such as alternating assemblies with group work, group debate for certain topics, moderation and secretarial roles to enhance children's sense of autonomy within the debates themselves, and steps to guarantee feedback and traceability (minutes, Council report book, shared Google drive, etc.).

- The **Escola Minyons d'Urgell** also offers a Students' Council, composed of the entire student body of the school (approximately 90 children in total), which meets three times a year. Improvement in its operation were introduced as part of the project, including: a suggestions box to collect proposals for discussion topics; working in smaller groups; the introduction of coordination, moderation and secretarial roles to encourage greater autonomy; asymmetrical participation depending on the age of the children (preschool children only participate during one part of Council meetings and can then leave).

- The **Institut Nicolau Copèrnic** secondary school has a firm commitment to student participation, including it within its Service Learning project (known by the initials APS). This means that all students and teachers must participate for an hour a week in one of the commissions set up at the beginning of the course based on student proposals. The themes which the commissions handle are many and diverse (parties, nursery education, working with the elderly, gender and LGBTI issues, mental health, healthy living, etc.). As part of the pilot project, the participatory nature of these committees was enhanced, with an emphasis on HOW work is done over and above the final result, that is, WHAT each committee achieves. Meetings between representatives of each committee (the spokespersons of the APS) were restructured to improve coordination.

- The **Institut Lluís de Peguera** has held its so-called Green Parliament for many years. This is an assembly of delegates in which a number of the school's teachers also actively participate. The pilot project served to initiate a review of how this Parliament works, and to propose improvements to increase opportunities for participation.

- The **Institut Jaume Botey** had already begun the task of fostering an assembly of delegates, which initially held informal meetings in the school's recreation grounds. As part of the project, a new student vision for this space was laid out, and the foundations for its running established.

## 3. Introduction of steering strategies

Steering participation spaces requires strategies which guarantee equal opportunities for participation and orderly debate. Since learning is progressive, children need to learn to listen, respect others when they are talking, express their own opinions, etc. Until they learn to manage decision-making spaces autonomously, it is advisable to provide them with tools and strategies to help them acquire these skills. A number of these strategies were called upon during the pilot project, including:

» Establishing and assigning roles for steering debates

» Assigning turns to speak in an orderly manner

» Organising, moderating and highlighting who participates to a greater or lesser degree in the assemblies

» Focusing and connecting students with participation spaces

• At the **Escola Minyons d'Urgell** and the **Institut Lluís de Peguera**, a series of roles were created to help stimulate debate: a coordinator, in charge of time management and making sure that group discussions stay on-topic, and of ensuring that objectives are met in the set time; a moderator, in charge of ensuring that all students in the group participate and that turns to speak are correctly managed in discussions; a secretary, in charge of gathering the group's contributions and putting agreements into writing, and a spokesperson, in charge of communicating the discussions and agreements reached by each group to the assembly. These roles are indicated on a card or accreditation pass and are carried out on a rotational basis, so that all students have the opportunity to take on these responsibilities.

• The orderly management of turns to speak is something which children learn naturally as they advance (visual cues, raising hands, etc.). However, when they are younger, this can entail certain difficulties. At the **Institut Escola El Cabrerès**, preschool students use a *speaker's object*, chosen by

each class, which authorises the person holding it to speak. Children pass on the object and have the chance to give their opinion when they receive it. At the **Escola Minyons d'Urgell**, preschool students use cuddly toys which are sat in the middle of the circle and "listen to the ideas of the children". Each child has pebbles that represent the number of the times they can speak. Each time they speak, they place one of these pebbles next to the toy, thus moderating and offering a demonstration of their degree of participation.

- Engaging with participation spaces is also important, especially when children are tired or distracted. At the **Escola Tarlatana**, the Children's Council begins with a "ritual" during which each child takes a pillow to sit on the floor and form part of the circle. Candles and incense are used to relax the atmosphere, and a "gong" is passed round that each child strikes silently in order to connect with the activity and the space. Once everyone is relaxed and connected to the space, the meeting begins.

## 4. Improved traceability of proposals

One of the key aspects of participatory actions is to collect ideas and ensure their traceability. This means being able to see what stage an idea is at, whether it has been appraised, and to ensure that children receive feedback on the ideas they provide. Many contributions are made and agreements reached in participation spaces, and these must be properly recorded and communicated to others: classmates, teachers, the school management team, etc.

- At the **Escola Tarlatana**, a Council report book is provided to each class delegate as an aid. Each child who attends Council meetings brings with them a note of the contributions from their classroom, and makes a note of the agreements reached by the Council, in order to be able to communicate this information correctly to their classmates.

- At the **Institut Lluís de Peguera** a Google drive is used to share the minutes of the Green Parliament so that all students can consult the agreements it reaches.

## 5. Introduction of participation champions

Participation in schools tends to occur primarily in tutorials; as such, the role of tutors as student participation champions is crucial. Primary school teachers take on this task with ease, but it has been observed that, in secondary schools, the job is more complicated.

- At the **Institut Nicolau Copèrnic** the role of a mentor has been created to facilitate this. The role is designated to a teacher who is not a member of the management team, but who has an interest in and awareness of issues concerning participation. They are responsible for coordinating activities and providing information to tutors on the school's participation initiatives.

- At the **Institut Lluís de Peguera** a number of teachers participate in the Green Parliament, and serve as a nexus between students and teaching staff in this participative space.

- The **Institut Sòl de Riu** has taken on the challenge of revitalising staff assemblies with the entire teaching team. This has been chosen as a way of meeting two needs. The first of these is to foster staff participation, since it has been discovered that teachers, and not just students, also find it challenging to get involved. The second of these is to offer first-hand experience of participatory methodologies, so that each teacher can gain an idea of the difficulties they may encounter, as well as the benefits participation can bring.

# 5. How can we replicate these practices in our schools?

Replicating these practices in other schools is not complicated. That being said, we will provide you with some key points that need to be taken into account if this is to be achieved:

1. **Define the framework for participation with the management team**

   1.1. Spaces and channels for participation

   a. Classroom tools in preschool education

   b. Classroom tools in primary and secondary education

   c. Tools, spaces and resources to encourage participation at school

   1.2. Limits to participation

   a. In the classroom

   b. Within the school

2. **Share and agree on the project with the entire teaching team**

3. **Put tools into practice**

   3.1. Guidelines for structuring and revitalising classroom assemblies

   a. Before the assembly

   b. During the assembly

   c. After the assembly

4. **Evaluate experiences with students and staff**

## 1. Define the framework for participation with the management team

Encouraging student participation is a challenge for the school as a whole, and leadership from the management team is crucial. A first step in showing leadership is to fully define the framework for participation. When we talk about the framework for participation, we mean clearly established rules which set out the spaces and channels for participation and the limits to student participation.

### 1.1. Spaces and channels for participation

Participation is not improvised: it is organised. For this reason, we must define the spaces or means that we wish to put in place to encourage student participation, both within class groups and the school as a whole. In the first instance, this is a decision to be taken by the management team. We need to ensure consistency and an equal opportunity for all students to participate, above and beyond the disposition of individual teachers and tutors.

Participatory channels come in many forms: face-to-face, digital, deliberative, consultative, etc. and must be adapted according to students' ages and stages of maturity. Below are a few examples, separated according to students' ages:

#### a. Classroom tools in preschool education

| Classroom tools and resources | Main features |
| --- | --- |
| Class assembly or class circles | A circle in which children express what they think or feel about a specific topic, in response to the teacher's questions. |
| Suggestions box | Box for the anonymous submission of proposals or suggestions. |

| Games and changing roles | Activities in which children are invited to change roles, for example, to act as adults, teachers, etc. and to express what they would do in that position. |
|---|---|
| Ideas mural | Mural or billboard onto which children can pin ideas or proposals. |
| Collaborative art projects | Projects in which children work together to create a work of art related to an aspect of the school. They can make a mural, a model or an art installation. |
| Participatory storytelling | Storytelling sessions in which children can actively participate, either by gesturing, repeating sentences, or imagining the end of the story. Participation, language skills and creativity are developed. |
| Cooperative games | Cooperative activities in the playground and the classroom in which children have to work together to achieve a common goal. Teamwork, active listening and joint decision-making are developed. |
| Thematic celebrations | Thematic celebrations related to the interests of children, who can participate in the planning, decoration and organisation of the activity. |

## b. Classroom tools in primary and secondary education

| Classroom tools and resources | Main features |
|---|---|
| Class assembly or class circles | Assembly in which all students participate and address a specific issue. This can be regular or a one-off, with teacher participation optional. |
| Tutorial/Debate | An everyday discussion space in which the tutor puts forward a series of topics to be discussed. |
| Class delegates or other roles (representatives) | Students can participate as representatives who have been elected to carry out specific tasks. |

| School work/clubs committees | Thematic working groups which people interested in the topic at hand can sign up to and participate in. |
|---|---|
| Ideas mural/billboard | Mural or billboard onto which students can pin ideas or proposals. |
| Suggestions box | Box for the anonymous submission of proposals or suggestions. |
| Web page/email | Digital channel for collecting proposals or suggestions. |

## c. Tools, spaces and resources to encourage participation at school

| School tools and resources | Main features |
|---|---|
| Delegates' assembly | Meeting of delegates and/or sub-delegates from each classroom to discuss issues of collective interest. |
| School council (ESO) | Formal participation space in which students are represented, and can make their voice heard through their elected representatives. |
| School assembly | Meeting open to all students to work on a specific issue. |
| Committees and working groups | Thematic working groups which people interested in the topic at hand can sign up to and participate in. |
| Polls | Paper or digital questionnaires to gather students' opinions on a topic. |
| School suggestions box | Box for the anonymous submission of proposals or suggestions. |
| Web page | Digital resource on the school's website via which students can submit proposals or suggestions. |
| Student blog | School blog featuring articles, opinion pieces and news items written by students on topics of interest to them. |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Online participation platform** | Online platform for students to propose ideas and talk about and vote on school-related topics outside of school hours. |
| **Educational hackathons/ Innovation labs** | Hackathons or educational challenges in which students work to solve a specific problem and propose innovative ideas. |

## 1.2. Limits to participation

The management team must also clearly define the limits to student participation. There are certain aspects of classroom or school life that are difficult to open up to participation, no matter how much students may be interested in them. For this reason, the management team must assess which areas and debates can be included for participation, and under which conditions.

Below, we propose a template to be filled in by the management team:

### a. Classroom

| Possible topics and areas for classroom discussion | | Is it open to participation? Under what conditions? |
|---|---|---|
| **Classroom management and organisation** | Classroom roles | |
| | Distribution of tasks | |
| | Distribution of tables and chairs | |
| | Work materials in the classroom | |
| | Classroom design and decoration | |
| | Timetable management | |

| Learning proposals (curriculum) | Project proposals | |
| | Subjects and topics | |
| | Proposals for activities, outings and school trips | |
| | Working methods in the classroom | |
| Harmony and wellbeing in the classroom | Classroom rules | |
| | Student welfare | |
| | Equality and non-discrimination | |
| | Mediation | |
| Student assessment | Self-assessment proposals: guidance criteria and rubrics | |
| | Proposals for assessment in specific areas | |
| | Proposals for quarterly evaluation | |

## b. School

| Possible topics and areas for school discussion | | Is it open to participation? Under what conditions? |
|---|---|---|
| Management and organisation of shared spaces | Entries and exits | |
| | Dining hall | |
| | Recreation grounds | |
| | Toilets | |
| | Lockers and other fixtures | |
| | Space design and decoration | |

| Learning proposals | Working methods | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| | School parties | |
| | Extracurricular activities | |
| Harmony and wellbeing | School rules | |
| | Wellbeing | |
| | Equality and non-discrimination | |
| | Mediation | |
| | Relationship with the local area | |
| | Community/volunteer services | |

## 2. Share and agree on the project with the entire teaching team

Once the management team has established the topics for discussion and conditions for students' participation, the matter must be communicated to teaching staff. The idea is that the teaching team as a whole, and particularly tutors, get involved in order to encourage participation in a way that is consistent with the school's educational aims.

The reasons behind each initiative – and the possible benefits and challenges that could be faced throughout implementation – must be adequately explained. The aim is to align the entire teaching team with the objectives of the project and ensure that all members of staff get involved in encouraging student participation.

As part of this engagement with the teaching team, it is important that the language used is consistent. This means listening to each other and sharing what we understand by the words we use: what do we mean when we refer to participation, dynamic activities, etc. In discussing this, we ensure that we are all reading from the same page.

It is also important to collectively agree upon how much time we need to test and implement participation schemes, bearing in mind that change is not immediate.

To facilitate coordination and support the teachers directly involved in encouraging students to participate (tutors, etc.), a member of the teaching team can volunteer to act as a *participation champion*. This person can take charge of coordinating the school's participatory activities, as well as seeking out and offering dynamic resources (activities, materials, training, etc.). A shared drive can also be made available with resources and tools that the entire teaching staff can consult and contribute to.

## 3. Put tools in practice

Once the entire teaching team understands and is aligned with the project, it's time to launch the participation scheme. In the case of classroom or school assemblies, it will be a matter of explaining the proposal to the students and opening debate around a set of specific topics. Participation can be an abstract concept, so it is important to discuss and work on things which are clear and tangible.

During the pilot project, the schools launched a face-to-face decision-making scheme which took the form of a **classroom or school assembly** that differs from existing tutorial sessions. The objectives and working methodologies (plenary sessions, group work, roles, etc.) which underpin these assemblies are very specific and closely tied to encouraging participation.

### 3.1. Guidelines for structuring and revitalising classroom assemblies

#### a. Before the assembly

**Define the aims of the assembly**

**Be clear about the objectives of the meeting** and **define the agenda.**
When preparing the assembly, it is crucial that we are clear about the objectives we want to achieve in this meeting and set out the topics to be discussed on the agenda.
When defining the agenda, priority should be given to topics that involve decision-making or work which children can engage in, and which relate to their interests and concerns.

This agenda must be presented in the days before the assembly so that children can ready themselves to talk about the chosen topic.

**Some ideas:**

- Offer a suggestions box (this can be anonymous) for the proposal of topics.

- Dedicate a tutorial session to brainstorming ideas on school or classroom topics in which students would like to participate.

- Carry out a survey to find out what they would like to discuss and participate in.

- Decide the topic of the next meeting before the end of the present one.

- During the assemblies, place a "Topics of interest" board in the classroom to note any issues of interest that arise but cannot be addressed in that assembly.

### Prepare for the assembly

Before the assembly, we must prepare some basic materials to aid in participation and the gathering of contributions:

» Post-it notes, various colours

» Flip charts

» Blu tack or tape

» Board markers, various colours

» Pens

» Blank paper

» Coloured paper

» Images

### b. During the assembly

#### Set up the space correctly

It is very important that children see the assembly as a space for participation which differs from others in the classroom or the school as a whole. For this reason, the layout of the space – and how children fill it – must be geared towards encouraging the desired participation:

- Distribution of seating in a circle or U-shape, so that everyone can face, acknowledge and fully interact with one another.

- Corners or tables can be used to make group work more comfortable.

- A whiteboard on which the agenda (Today we'll talk about...) and contributions can be noted and made visible to all children.

**Work step-by-step:**

**- Present the issue and agenda**

First of all, we need to present the topic of discussion (Today we'll talk about...). It is crucial to mention this and make it visible on the board, so that, when a child strays from the topic, we can redirect them by pointing to it as a reminder. We can also create a "Topics of interest" board for making a note of topics of debate for future assemblies, thus validating children's contributions and channelling them towards another participatory space and/or time.

**- Activate participation**

Participation doesn't have to be immediate. Children may need a few minutes to connect with the session and the topic of discussion. We recommend beginning the assembly with an activity geared towards activation/connection with the subject of discussion. This activity, which must be short, serves to present the topic and encourage some initial reflections.

It can be presented as an initial moment for reflection or for individual work. Consequently, when the children are divided into groups, they will have had time to develop their own opinions/proposals, thus encouraging all participants to contribute.

**Some ideas:**

- Work with images: select an image related to the topic (What does this topic bring to mind? Choose an image that represents it, etc.).

- Ask some initial questions that encourage initial reflection on the topic.

- Make a sketch to offer children orientation on the topic at hand.

- Watch a short video related to the topic.

**- Discussion**

This is the core of the assembly. The debate or discussion is based on alternating group work and a plenary session. A participatory space is, above all, one in which decisions are made, in which children can share and discuss their own ideas and be enriched by the ideas of others.

**Some ideas:**

- Divide children into small groups (3-6 people). Small groups make it easier to participate: they are less intimidating for those who are shy, and more equal in terms of leadership. Groups can be mixed or divided by age, by interests, etc.

- Provide clear, visible questions or discussion topics on the board so groups know what to do.

- Designate internal roles within the groups to encourage autonomous working: moderator, spokesperson, time manager, secretary, etc.

- Provide specific material for gathering contributions (post-its, cards, etc.).

- Proactively manage the time for discussion in groups. This can be done with an hourglass or a digital stopwatch.

The plenary session of the assembly represents the point at which groups share the work they have done. Each spokesperson provides a summary of their group's work, and the contributions are collected on the board, ensuring acknowledgement. A discussion or debate with the entire group can be used as a way of highlighting points of agreement and divergence. Finally, a summary of the main ideas and points of agreement must be made to verify the result of the assembly with the children.

**Some ideas:**

- At the preschool stage, this can take the form of a collage of images and keywords.

- We can ask the children to summarise the ideas discussed. This is a useful point at which to consider their capabilities, and the involvement required from the teacher(s). In the case of topics raised by the children, we must be clear on how these will be addressed and what spaces are available for doing so. Teachers must also explain the procedures and levels of decision-making: school management, teaching staff, tutors, etc.

- An evaluation or brief feedback activity can be used to gauge how the assembly has gone and determine if anything needs to be changed (How did you feel? Were you able to participate comfortably?).

Finally, we must remember to thank everyone for their participation and contributions. Before concluding, the continuity of the process should be explained (we will continue to work on this topic, the school will evaluate the proposals, etc.).

### c. After the assembly

**Minutes**

The minutes of the assembly should be a simple record that highlights the most relevant agreements and information. There is no need to provide an account down to the last detail of everything that has happened or been discussed, but rather a summary of the main elements:

- Date and location
- Topics covered
- Agreements reached

**Response and feedback**

This step is critical. Children's contributions need to be met with a meaningful response. Participation doesn't have to be binding (we don't have to do everything the children propose), but there does have to be a guarantee of consequential feedback. This means providing a substantial response to their proposals once the teacher or school has assessed them. As such, we must provide information about:

- Which of their proposals will be carried out, highlighting this as the result of their participation;

- Which will need to be reformulated, and how, to ensure their traceability;

- Which cannot be carried out, and the reasons behind this, in order to offer transparency and enable learning about the limits of participation.

**Some ideas:**

- Make a classroom assembly notebook, in which the minutes and agreements are recorded.

- Create a folder using Google Drive and share it with students so they can consult any minutes and agreements from the assemblies.

## 4. Evaluate experiences with students and staff

Evaluating experiences with students and staff is key. It is important not to get discouraged at this stage. We all make mistakes, and the first time doing something new is not always as successful as we would like it to be.

Evaluation is the process of learning more about what we have done. Using this knowledge, we can design the appropriate measures for improvement in terms of both need and feasibility. This step is, therefore, a matter of identifying what has been done well and what needs to be improved. Any experience is an opportunity to learn, to identify what has been done well and what can be done better, and to take steps forward to address this.

# 6. Dos and don'ts for teachers and education professionals

Motivated teachers and education professionals are key in developing children and young people's participation. Below, we offer **10 key pointers** that must be kept in mind:

1. **Children have the right to be heard** in all matters affecting them (Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child). When you set up participation spaces, you are enabling the exercise of this right.

2. **Choose topics that are relevant and of interest to students.** If you connect with their needs and interests, it will increase their motivation to participate. Don't try to guess what they think: ask them!

3. When you create spaces for participation, you are giving students the opportunity to express themselves, debate, exchange opinions and make proposals and learn more about a topic. Remember: **participation is not improvised, it is organised**.

4. **Try to ensure positive participation experiences.** Start with topics that you are able to engage with, so that students can see the results of their participation. This will encourage them to continue to actively participate.

5. **Provide the assembly with a recognisable identity** for students. It needs to be distinct from other spaces in which you work with them, such as tutorials, group projects, etc.

6. **We learn to participate through participation**. This learning process is progressive. Don't expect to change everything at once. Children must learn to express themselves, to listen to others, to respect, to work together...and you can help them do it!

7. **Support your students to become more autonomous** when it comes to participating. Think strategically and work to empower children to make the assembly their own.

8. **Pay attention to what goes on in the classroom**. Make sure it's a safe place in which children feel they can participate. Do not allow teasing and deal firmly with any attempts to obstruct other students' participation.

9. **Get creative** when it comes to energising the assembly. There are plenty of games and group activities that can help you structure the discussion with your students. Find and share resources with the rest of the teaching team!

10. **Provide comprehensive feedback on proposals** made by the students. Ensure the traceability of ideas and make sure you give a coherent response to their proposals, telling them what you as a group will and won't be able to do, and clearly explaining the reasons for this.

# 7. Is my school participation-minded? A self-assessment

Now that you have an idea of the project and what it means to encourage students' participation in schools, it is time to see what stage you and your school are at. In this last section, we offer a quick (and thorough) self-assessment exercise to determine where your school stands in terms of students' participation. You can select more than one answer for each question:

| QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS | YOUR ANSWERS |
|---|---|
| **1. What does encouraging student participation in your school mean to you?**<br>a. Students can carry out activities at the school.<br>b. Students come to class with the right attitude.<br>c. Asking and taking into account students' opinions on issues that affect them.<br>d. Encouraging participation...what's that? | |
| **2. Why do you think student participation should be encouraged in your school?**<br>a. Because they are entitled to participate.<br>b. Because it can help them develop valuable skills.<br>c. Because it can improve their sense of belonging.<br>d. All of the above!<br>e. If you have more reasons, add them: | |
| **3. Who takes the lead in encouraging students' participation in your school?**<br>a. There's nobody at the wheel!<br>b. Me, and I do it quite well.<br>c. The management team.<br>d. Teacher(s) with the inclination to do so.<br>e. The students themselves.<br>f. Families and the Families Association (FA). | |

| | |
|---|---|
| **4.** **What spaces or schemes for students' participation are there in your school?**<br>a. Class or school assemblies.<br>b. Students participate in the school council.<br>c. An email address for complaints.<br>d. "Raise your hand and ask to speak".<br>e. We have other spaces or schemes, such as: | |
| **5.** **What topics or areas of school life have you asked your students to give their opinion about in the last 2 years?**<br>a. We ask for their opinion on EVERYTHING that happens at the school (we are very democratic).<br>b. We ask for their opinion on easy-to-handle topics (parties and the like).<br>c. We ask for their opinion on topics which interest and are relevant to them.<br>d. In the last two years we have been a little busy and we have not had the time to ask them. | |
| **6.** **When your students participate...**<br>a. I would be happy enough if they would participate.<br>b. They do so in an orderly manner and with respect.<br>c. Only the usual suspects participate.<br>d. I dread to think... | |
| **7.** **When it comes to carrying out student participation activities...**<br>a. I dread it, I haven't been trained for this.<br>b. I have the tools and resources I need.<br>c. No problem at all, the students listen to me!<br>d. I have to stop doing other important things. | |

| | |
|---|---|
| **8. How do you provide feedback and follow up the proposals made by your students?**<br>a. We acknowledge their proposals and provide a reasoned response.<br>b. Ok, you've got me…<br>c. There's no need, they already feel listened to.<br>d. Very informally. | |
| **9. In terms of the teaching staff as a whole, how many teachers do you think are on board with promoting students' participation?**<br>a. Only me, and even that depends on the day.<br>b. One out of every four, 25% (maths is our strong suit).<br>c. The majority, although there is some internal resistance.<br>d. The entire staff is perfectly aligned and focused on encouraging students' participation at the school (we're the best!). | |
| **10. What appraisal would you make of student participation?**<br>a. It's good to do it, but let's not fool ourselves, not much will change either.<br>b. It's a waste of time, and we don't have much time.<br>c. It brings change: in learning, in results, in group cohesion, and more.<br>d. Can I use a lifeline and phone a friend? | |

**Results:**

• If you haven't hesitated when answering, congratulations, you're a star! We're sure this guide can offer you more ideas that you can share with the rest of your colleagues!

• If any of the questions gave you pause for thought, then you are attuned to the subject. You're getting on well! Talk to your colleagues at school about how to open more opportunities for students to express their views on issues related to the functioning of the classroom or school that affect them.

• If you haven't taken the test but have got this far, you're asking yourself some questions. We don't have all the answers, but we encourage you to share these questions with your colleagues and to start thinking about how to promote student participation in your school. We hope this document has been of use to you!