STUDENT AUTONOMY IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN PORTUGAL:
STUDENTS’ IMPROPER REFLECTIONS

AUTONOMIA DOS/AS ALUNOS/AS NAS ESCOLAS SECUNDÁRIAS EM PORTUGAL:
REFLEXÕES (IM)PRÓPRIAS

AUTONOMÍA DEL ALUMNADO EN LOS CENTROS DE ENSEÑANZA SECUNDARIA
DE PORTUGAL: REFLEXIONES (IM)PROPIAS

Inês SOUSA
1 e-mail: ines_sousa14@hotmail.com

Elisabete FERREIRA
2 e-mail: elisabete@fpce.up.pt

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Deputy Executive Editor: Prof. José Anderson Santos Cruz

1 Centre for Research and Intervention in Education – Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Porto (CIIE-FPCE-UP), Porto – Portugal. Research fellow in the Doctoral Programme in Educational Sciences.
2 Centre for Research and Intervention in Education – Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Porto (CIIE-FPCE-UP), Porto - Portugal. Assistant professor and researcher in Education Sciences.
ABSTRACT: This article aims to understand the process of autonomy of students in the management of secondary schools, mobilizing a section of the study under development in Portugal on the Student Voice Movement. In this text, we seek to conceptualize and discuss student autonomy, based on their experiences, in a post-pandemic context, where different challenges and concerns about student’s voice arise at national, European, and global levels, and whether or not possibilities for democratic participation in school decision-making are identified. From a theoretical-methodological point of view, we start from the political-normative and theoretical framework that has guided autonomy and public school management (Cortella, 1999; Dewey, 1916; Ferreira, 2012; 2017; Lima, 1998; 2014; 2021; Melville et al., 2018) and a qualitative-quantitative methodology is used, making visible the voices, experiences and improper reflections of students at a school in the north of Portugal, highlighting the complexity of the school reality and realizing that the presence of students in decision-making bodies and formal spaces, organized and institutionalized in schools, may continue ad aeternum to have little influence on real student autonomy. However, other initiatives, practices, and experiences of students may be pointing to other strategies and paths, which we want to continue studying as part of the ongoing research.

KEYWORDS: Secondary public schools. Students’ voice. Students’ autonomy and participation. Democratic school management. Democracy and decision-making

RESUMO: Este artigo pretende compreender o processo de autonomia dos/as alunos/as na gestão das escolas secundárias, mobilizando um recorte do estudo em desenvolvimento em Portugal, sobre o Movimento Voz dos/as alunos/as. Neste texto procuramos conceptualizar e discutir a autonomia dos/as alunos/as, a partir das suas experiências, num contexto pós-pandémico, onde surgem diferentes desafios e preocupações com a voz dos/as alunos/as, a nível nacional, europeu e mundial, e se identificam ou não possibilidades de participação democrática na tomada de decisões escolares. Do ponto de vista teórico-metodológico, parte-se do enquadramento político-normativo e teórico que tem orientado a autonomia e gestão escolar pública (Cortella, 1999; Dewey, 1916; Ferreira, 2012; 2017; Lima, 1998; 2014; 2021; Melville et al, 2018) e utiliza-se uma metodologia quali-quant, visibilizando as vozes, experiências e reflexões (im)próprias dos/as alunos/as de uma escola no norte de Portugal, salientando-se a complexidade da realidade escolar e percebendo-se que a presença dos/as alunos/as nos órgãos de decisão e espaços formais, organizada e institucionalizada nas escolas, poderá continuar ad aeternum a influenciar pouco a real autonomia dos/as alunos/as. Mas há a registar outras iniciativas, práticas e experiências dos/as alunos/as que podem estar a apontar outras estratégias e caminhos, que queremos continuar a estudar no âmbito da investigação em curso.

RESUMEN: Este artículo pretende comprender el proceso de autonomía de los alumnos en la gestión de las escuelas secundarias, movilizando una sección del estudio en desarrollo en Portugal, sobre el Movimiento Voz Estudiantil. En este texto, buscamos conceptualizar y discutir la autonomía de los alumnos, a partir de sus experiencias, en un contexto post-pandémico, donde surgen diferentes desafíos y preocupaciones sobre la voz de los alumnos a nivel nacional, europeo y mundial, y se identifican, o no, posibilidades de participación democrática en la toma de decisiones escolares. Desde un punto de vista teórico-metodológico, partimos del marco político-normativo y teórico que ha orientado la autonomía y la gestión escolar pública (Cortella, 1999; Dewey, 1916; Ferreira, 2012; 2017; Lima, 1998; 2014; 2021; Melville et al, 2018) y se utiliza una metodología quali-quant, poniendo de relieve las voces, experiencias y reflexiones (im)propias de los alumnos de una escuela del norte de Portugal, destacando la complejidad de la realidad escolar y constatando que la presencia de los alumnos en los órganos de decisión y en los espacios formales, organizados e institucionalizados en las escuelas, puede seguir teniendo ad aeternum poca influencia en la autonomía real de los alumnos. Pero hay otras iniciativas, prácticas y experiencias de los alumnos que pueden estar señalando otras estrategias y caminos, que queremos seguir estudiando como parte de la investigación en curso.


Introduction

Education research has contributed to several studies highlighting the complexity and change of and in schools. Over time, schools have changed and continue to change and, in Portugal, the areas of study show several changes in the political, administrative, normative, pedagogical, and curricular practices, teaching, and learning processes and, in a way, we have seen greater investment in teacher training and an accentuated look at student participation. In fact, research on students’ participation, autonomy and voice in school has always aroused interest and relevance, but at the same time, it has not been undertaken consistently and systematically.

Although this millennium has seen the development of a field of study on youth, the school context has been studied more in the context of teachers’ problems, curricula, and learning, and, as far as students are concerned, it is restricted to social issues of inclusion and dimensions and factors of school success (or lack of it). Nevertheless, in recent years, interest has intensified, and research has sought to involve students more and understand their autonomy and the ways in which they participate in their schools. Discourses on school autonomy and students’ autonomy in schools have been emphasized, through an interest in and studies on
young people’s participation in the various scenarios in which they move, namely civic, political, school, and interpersonal participation, very much in line with broader perspectives of being and feeling good in all contexts of life (Ferreira, 2004, 2007, 2012; Lima, 1988, 1998; Matos, 2013; Menezes, 2005, 2011; Menezes; Ferreira, 2012).

However, current school life can be characterized by very paradoxical, ambiguous, and uncertain times, which are experienced simultaneously in a permanent state of contradiction in ways that are hopeful and disturbing or (dis)hopeful and almost alienated. That is, contradictory logic and actions are perceived as coexisting side by side, collaborative logic alongside competitive and mercantile logic. More democratic perspectives can be found alongside elitist, meritocratic proposals, with multiple demands on teachers and the social devaluation of the profession. There is involvement and participation of students and valorization of transversal competencies alongside an excessive valorization of grades and academic results, among many other examples. These kinds of demands can generate movements for change or a wide range of resistance, and in recent times, they have mainly led to a marked discouragement among students and general discontent among teachers.

Nevertheless, during the pandemic, the importance and functioning of schools and the extraordinary responses of teachers were well demonstrated by the functioning and adaptation of schools and the efforts of their teachers. In this sense, this text brings the recognition of the school as a highly complex and composite organization that cannot solve all social problems. This can be described as naive optimism (Cortella, 1999); yet it always solves something fundamental and consists of guaranteeing the right to education for all and in the development of new generations, with the purpose of greater democracy, more respect for human rights and more school and educational justice – thus a critical optimism (Cortella, 1999). Therefore, the problem of the defense of democracy in schools and the democratic management of Portuguese public schools is clear.

Specifically, with this article, we intend to start discussing students' participation and involvement in school life and the democratic management of their schools and to ascertain and understand levels of students' participation in schools, seeking to broaden the debate on students' voices and autonomies, their democratic practices and experiences of participation in school decision-making. In this way, we present tensions between school and democracy, students' conceptions of autonomy and their political framework, and mobilize data collected in a school in the north of Portugal during the school years 2021-22 and 2022-23. Through the
description and analysis of these data, we seek to illustrate the students' voice movement, which we are studying in depth at the national level in several schools.

Telling the story of students’ voice in schools

Perspectives and studies on student participation, now also entitled *Movimento Voz dos/as alunos/as* in secondary schools, go hand in hand with almost 50 years of democracy in Portugal and Portuguese societal development and policies for democratisation. Telling this story implies remembering that there can never be too much study of the development of democracy in public schools – *Where has democracy in school life been and where is it going?* (Ferreira, 2023a, 2023b). Talking about democracy at school allows us to return to *democratising and developing*, which moved the Portuguese at the start of the democratic process. According to Ferreira (2023a, 2023b), the experience of democracy in schools requires the respective autonomy, freedom, and responsibility to *democratise, develop and decide*, and *decision-making* can play a central role in consolidating democracy (Ferreira, 2023a, 2023b).

This view implies the involvement and participation of the entire educational community in a continuous daily routine of problematization, critical thinking, development, democratization, and strict commitment to collective decision-making in all school matters. Everyone can and should participate in the problematisation and co-construction of answers to the problems and challenges of democratic schools, highlighting the importance of seeing schools as laboratories of humanisation, generational, communicational and relational encounters of democratic exercise (Ferreira, 2007, 2012, 2023a, 2023b). In other words, it is “the place of the person to be made in the encounter with others” (Grácio, 1995), and therefore, in a certain sense, schools can be or are *laboratories of democracy and workshops of peace*.

This debate on democracy at school is based on various studies (Dewey, 1916, 1979; Freire, 1981, 2007; Grácio, 1971, 1995; Lima, 1998, 2011, 2014, 2018) due to the effort to democratise Portuguese schools and the sense of educating that these authors provide us. “To educate is to provoke, promote and emancipate” and only “with the democratisation of teaching” (Grácio, 1971) and the development of *democratic management* (Lima, 2018) can progress be made in the autonomy and management of schools, seeking to consolidate, or not, the practice of democratic management of Portuguese public schools. In a critical analysis, as we advance in the chronological and normative framework, the deviation from democratisation

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3 Public expression of the Portuguese minister of education, João Costa – Portugal, 2022
and democratic management is accentuated, which democracy and school autonomy could possibly benefit if done with decision-making logic and emancipatory action (Ferreira, 2012). However, more manageral, regulatory and hyper-bureaucratised logic may be accentuated, competing with a permanent sense of critical autonomy (Ferreira, 2004, 2012).

Today, it may be pertinent to tell the story of the movement and argument: student voice in schools, in the global, European, and Portuguese context. On a worldwide scale, the United Nations (UN) has released several studies focused on youth participation and voice, including the UN World Programme of Action for Youth, which calls for young people’s full and effective participation in society (UN, 2010); and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015), which specifies the importance of young people acting as active agents of sustainable development. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), together with the Council of Europe, is also conducting research in this area and has published the results of a study analyzing the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on students’ voices and the consequences of school closures in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa (UNESCO; Council of Europe, 2021). In particular, this study starts with the idea that students’ voices in education systems can play a fundamental role in learning democratic values. Still, from the results of the survey, it can be realised that the vast majority of young people lost the opportunity to make their voice heard and to acquire the necessary skills to claim their rights as a consequence of the pandemic because “more than half of formal governance structures such as school councils (52%) were suspended during lockdown” (UNESCO; Council of Europe, 2021, p. 15).

This is a report that presents different barriers to student participation and voice during the pandemic, namely the socio-economic context, access to digital technologies, and the lack of a culture of democratic participation, making it even more challenging to find creative ways for students to express themselves and give their opinion (UNESCO; Council of Europe, 2021). Based on identifying these barriers, different recommendations are also made for school principals, teachers, and policymakers, drawing attention to the importance of an authentic culture of participation in everyday school life and through the curriculum and teacher training focusing on student voice and democratic values.

They also describe different recommendations for young learners, namely working together with policymakers, teachers, school principals, community representatives, and parents; active involvement in assemblies, councils, or other collective bodies of learners; peer support and mentoring; developing digital citizenship skills; participating in citizenship projects
at the local, national and international level, to have different experiences; and proposing ideas and synergies between school projects and other activities outside school (UNESCO; Council of Europe, 2021).

These last three years of a pandemic have demonstrated the importance and effort of teachers and schools. But at the same time, there has been a loss of contact and the collective experience of students, forcing them to reinvent and replace a face-to-face culture with a digitally mediated culture (Nobre et al., 2021). This has accentuated fear and anxiety, experienced in solitary and socially distant ways, and has tested the responsibility and individual organisation of each student (Sanz; González; Capilla, 2020), generating instability in mental health and greater student malaise.

At the European level, the Council of Europe project “Free to Speak - Safe to Learn” Democratic Schools for All (2017-2022), with the main objective of listening to the voice of teachers, students, school leaders and parents from all over Europe, makes known the work they do to develop democratic and inclusive schools, and is organised into different themes, including “making children's and students' voices heard”. The main challenges and barriers to implementation and participatory action are identified from this exchange of experiences and dialogue between other circumstances and school contexts. Still, various opportunities and alternatives are considered, and multimedia resources, tools, policy documents and scientific studies already carried out in the European context are available.

Lately, several European resolutions stood out, namely the European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027, referring to the importance of supporting social and civic engagement by ensuring that all young people have the necessary resources to participate in society; and the 2019 Flash Eurobarometer survey, revealing that young people are very active in democratic life and that levels of participation in various types of organised movements are increasing.

In the case of Portugal, this has been a constant concern. Between 16 and 18 May 2017, in Lisbon, Portugal, it was even emphasised at the Education 2030 project of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) meeting. This international meeting began with a seminar inspired by the Portuguese students' voice experience, which has become a global movement for listening to students, and which the OECD welcomed and committed to disseminating to schools in all member states of the project (Portugal, 2017c).

In the current Portuguese government (XXIII Constitutional Government), this concern is still present, with the continuity of the Movimento Voz dos Alunos, which refers to the promotion of student participation and involvement in school life, with spaces and times for
students to regularly intervene in a free and responsible way and make their voice heard (Portugal, 2021a). However, from what is public and is perceived by the actions undertaken by the Ministry of Education, this movement still seems incipient and dispersed, with only reference to evidence of activity through the number of class assemblies in school groupings, with 58% of these groupings implementing this action (Portugal, 2021b).

As an incentive and challenge to Portuguese schools, this may be a new opportunity for students to claim more presence, knowledge, and decision-making power in their schools. On the other hand, the manifestation of resistance on the part of schools to perspectives that tend to be more democratic and involve everyone in the democratic management of the school in a particular dominant culture of teacher protagonism needs to be studied, understood and contextualised. In this vein, there is a public and political interest in financing the in-depth study that we are carrying out. The Ministry of Education / Directorate-General for Education itself has shown interest in accessing the results and conclusions of this study, namely the questionnaire survey at a national level, since “they may provide important clues for work in the school context”.

Although, there is an accentuation on recent and current political discourses on the voice, participation and autonomy of young students in this telling of the story, it should be noted that the concern with mobilising Portuguese society in national designs and schools is an achievement of the revolution and the subsequent establishment of the Portuguese Republic.

**Political discourses and normative logics in Portugal**

In Portugal and education, administrative science and law have been central, with a strong influence on developing ideas, political discourses, and current normative logic. The law and the norms provide the structure for the Portuguese public school of centralist tradition, although since the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic (Portugal, 1976), the importance of democratic participation in education has been emphasised; it is stated in the law that “Teachers and students have the right to participate in the democratic management of schools”, through “forms of participation of teachers’ associations, students, parents, communities and scientific institutions in the definition of educational policy” (Portugal, 1976).
In turn, the Basic Law of the Portuguese Education System - LBSE (Portugal, 1986)\(^5\) refers to the adoption of participatory structures and processes in the definition of educational policies and the administration and management of the school system, developing democratic spirit and practice, to allow “decentralisation, deconcentration, and diversification of educational structures and actions, to provide a correct adaptation to circumstances, a strong send of community and effective decision-making levels” (Portugal, 1986)\(^6\).

Therefore, the concept of autonomy emerges in educational discourses from the effort to democratise Portuguese democratic society; although it is deeply marked by a traditional and centralist view of educational administration, there is applicability to the development of people in schools, to teachers and students, opening up possibilities for questioning the dimensions of power (emancipation versus regulation), authority and freedom in everyday school life.

While school autonomy can be understood in its genesis in political and administrative discourses on education in the national context, from the 1970s onwards, namely from the possibilities of democratic management of public schools, as provided for in the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic (since 1976), and then in the LBSE (Portugal, 1986), we know how difficult it is to implement, with genuinely democratic and participatory experiences for all. The last ten years have accentuated limits to the discourse of democratisation, democracy and democratic management in the various regulations because, gradually, three of the fundamental principles of guaranteeing more democratic processes have disappeared, which are election, collegiality and participation (Lima, 2018) in the school and the management bodies. This culminates in the legislation that returns to us 34 years after April 1974, the one-person figure of the school principal (Portugal, DL75/2008) and the disappearance of the ideas and principles of democratisation of education (Grácio, 1971) or democratic management (Lima, 1998, 2014, 2018) in the very statements of the law. This leads us to ask whether it is still possible today to speak of democratic management of public schools or simply school management in Portugal. It seems that we have only come closer and are increasingly witnessing exercises of mere management of and in Portuguese public schools.

From a critical-reflective perspective, on the one hand, we recognize the remarkable advance of democracy in Portuguese schools and the dynamics of the school community, with committed teachers, curious students, and the involvement of all. Yet, on the other hand, we must mention many inoperative resistances and critical cycles that seek to maintain a specific

\(^5\) Law no. 46/86.
\(^6\) Article 3-G, Portugal, Law n. 46/86).
business or neoliberal logic at the service of the public school. There is a certain elitism, segregation and competition in the school community, very well structured in a hyper-bureaucratization and evaluative policy, which daily exhausts itself in bureaucratic tasks and alienates the pedagogical taste of the teaching profession and the attribution of meaning to school for the students, promoting much unease and loss of power on the part of teachers and students.

In this multi-paradigmatic framework, and around the study of school democracy over the years, we ask: How can democratic management and school autonomy be promoted? How can schools have a more significant influence on political decision-making? How can students be involved in school decisions?

Regarding the formal participation of students in the school’s administrative and management bodies, this is defined by Decree-Law n. 75/2008 (Portugal, 2008), with the participation of student representatives, with voting rights in the general council, as the school's strategic management body; and through the student associations (Portugal, 20067).

From this political-normative framework, conceptions of democratic management in schools are perceived, with the possibility of all school actors participating in decisions, in a genuinely democratic exercise (Formosinho et al., 2009; Lima, 1988; 1998; 2011; 2014; 2018; 2021). This is not just hypocrisy (Ferreira, 2007, 2012) but a proper exercise of creative citizenship (Sousa; Ferreira, 2019; 2024), in a communicative organisation (Botler, 2004) and in a framework that establishes new contexts and structures for developing autonomous, responsible and active students (Portugal, 2009, 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2021a).

For more than 45 years, there has been a political-normative discourse full of regulatory norms and proposals for students’ participation in schools in Portugal. However, the grammar of the school has mostly stayed the same regarding effective students’ participation and involvement in decision-making at school.

**Grammar of the school and students’ autonomy**

From this political-normative framework, we define a specific grammar of the school and the theoretical-conceptual perspective for studying students’ autonomy and the will to relate autonomy and students’ voice as a right and respect to be heard (Bron, Laan, 2019; Cook-Sather, 2006). The aim of the program is to build more democratic schools where students can

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7 Portugal, Law no. 23/2006, amended by Law no. 57/2019
have opportunities and possibilities to rehearse and develop their ideas, perspectives, and contributions to the governance of their schools. In this way, the framework of students’ autonomy in school administration and management becomes essential.

Etymologically, school autonomy is linked to freedom, self-government, free will and the ability of individuals and organisations to govern themselves by their own rules (Barroso, 1997) and can be referred to as a more regulatory and controlling or emancipatory and communicational process (Ferreira, 2012; 2013; Botler, 2004). In the study under development, we consider autonomy to be closely linked to democracy, with sharing of power between the different school actors, including the school principal, teachers, and students (Ferreira, 2012; 2013) in a process of **dialogical-argumentative construction** (Botler; 2004), which implies a reduction in the competences of the centralised state (Carvalho, 2020). From this ideal of autonomy and democracy in schools, we question whether **crisis autonomy** will persist (Ferreira, 2004; 2007; 2012; 2013; 2017) or be **constructed** (Barroso, 1996; 1997; 2017) in **solidarity** (Correia, 2021), with space for action, association, initiative and participation in decision-making by students at school.

The conceptualisation of learner autonomy is intertwined with school autonomy and is naturally related to it. However, it is necessary to take into account that greater autonomy of schools, with more decision-making power, simply does not mean greater autonomy for learners; for this it would be necessary to recognise the role of learners in the school context through various forms of participation, such as in school management bodies, exercising conditions of direct supervision of decisions made by leaders and teachers (Paletta, 2014).

Based on this idea, it is essential to emphasise that the creation of councils or bodies where students can participate does not mean their immediate or automatic proactivity and demand for participation in decisions. They have to develop their awareness and critical experience and promote freedom, democracy, personal autonomy, initiative, critical spirit of nonconformity and reinvent the **ethics of rebellion** (Cortella, 1999) in preparation for greater participation in school and in life (Ferreira, 2013).

In the argument of Strike (1982), we need to consider three components to understand the complexity of learner autonomy, namely (1) psychological freedom, i.e. self-control and the ability to choose independently; (2) the right to self-determination, being able to choose one's own beliefs; and (3) the right to participate in collective choices.

In this line of thought, more individualistic dimensions of learner autonomy are emphasised; on the other hand, Kerr (2002) questions the notion of learners' autonomy when
they live and breathe in a community, thus arguing that "autonomy is best understood as describing a particular kind of relation between individuals and their community" (Kerr, 2002, p. 15). He defends this idea by imagining a person trapped on a desert island and questions whether this person is autonomous because he can choose what to do to survive on the island. This example illustrates how autonomy may not be related to individual capacity, but to the moral ability to choose and decide collectively.

In this sense, we are interested in students' autonomy as seen in self-determination theory (Deci, Ryan, 2002; Zabaleta; Pérez-Izaguirre, 2022), considering autonomy in relation to others, where the individual acts in a self-determined way. According to this theory, three necessary conditions exist for people's growth and cognitive well-being: competence, relatedness and autonomy. (1) Competence refers to the feeling of efficacy in social interactions and experiences, demonstrating and expressing one's abilities and competencies. It is not the set of skills that the individual holds, but the feeling of confidence and effectiveness in their action with others. (2) Relatedness refers to belonging, in the connection established with others, which makes us feel accepted. (3) Autonomy means acting from integrated interests and values, feeling behaviour as one's expression and initiative, but recognising that actions are influenced by external sources (Deci; Ryan, 2002).

We problematize these conditions of relationship, autonomy, and competence of students for their participation in school, thinking about the importance of the collective and the strong relationships created, for example, within the class group or the student association. But does this mean participation and autonomy in effective decision-making?

In the definition of autonomy by Melville et al. (2018), there are three criteria for learners’ decisions to be considered autonomous: (1) autonomous decisions must be informed by several possibilities and not just one option; (2) autonomy requires that a decision be well thought out and informed; and (3) learners’ thinking must be in line with everyone’s needs, so that everyone shares the right to make decisions. This definition reflects the focus under study, considering that we can only win the right to make autonomous decisions if there is a context of respect and equality, in a committed collective (Melville et al., 2018) and in an “arena where the understanding of the rules of collective life is established as a result of a public debate” (Nóvoa; Alvim, 2021, p. 15).

In these assumptions we are interested in pursuing the Freirean perspective (Freire, 1981; 2007) considering education as a dialogue between teacher and student, where each builds their autonomy in the experiences and decisions they make: "a pedagogy of autonomy
must be centred on experiences that stimulate decision and responsibility, that is, on experiences that respect freedom” (Freire, 2007, p. 107).

In Freire’s (1981; 2007) argument, we perceive the refusal of assertions of authority (if exercised in authoritarianism), considering them as a contradiction in the face of the freedom of others. However, it is important to problematise this idea of teacher authority and student autonomy (Aquino, 1999; Thesing, Morosini, 2018) in the sense that the pedagogical relationship can be established in the teacher’s authority. The action and posture committed to dialogue and collective reflection should be recognised in them, encouraging the autonomy of students to solve problems, conflicts and act, in collective respect for standard rules.

Student autonomy, as a process of action, association and initiative at school, gains new urgency and emergency in this pandemic context, requiring rapid measures and decisions to change from traditional teaching to distance education. Still, at the same time, it may have widened the range of possibilities (Nóvoa; Alvim, 2021), and now may be the time to repair the damage and take into account the autonomy and students’ voice “in a generation that is perhaps more suffering and unequal, but also, paradoxically, more mature and more attached to the joy of living.” (Sarmento, 2022, p. 11).

Methodological paths: (im)probable in students' experiences and lives

The research, which is being carried out at a national level, is a case study (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, 2018; Morgado, 2012) with a quali-quant methodology, on the study of autonomy and voice of students, seeking to ascertain the meanings that students attribute to their actions in schools, considering the rigorous attention and ethical care with the data protection legislation in force.

As far as the qualitative study is concerned, it will take place in several Portuguese schools, with a representative sample in terms of location (coastal and inland - urban and rural) and training offered at the secondary level (regular and vocational education). It will employ: focussed discussion groups (FGD) with students, with the main objective of understanding their participation practices in decision-making, considering the possibilities/opportunities for making themselves heard at school; and semi-structured interviews with teachers and school principals, to understand how they value and encourage students' autonomy, participation and voice at school. The quantitative study consists of a nationwide questionnaire survey of secondary school students in Portugal.
The section that we bring to this article uses the same methodology and represents a microcosm of the study being undertaken at the national level. It uses data collected in a school in the north of Portugal where a new school principal took office who, in her action plan (2021-2025), highlights new strategies for direct student participation, highlighting the importance of their voices being heard. She has even appointed an advisor, specifically attentive to and involved in projects and dynamics that encourage student participation, initiative and voice.

The analysis and discussion in this article are based on field notes, with descriptions and transcriptions of discourse at meetings between students, teachers and the school principal; and the semi-structured interview with one of the teachers involved in the projects to encourage student autonomy and voice. In addition to this qualitative collection, a questionnaire survey was also applied, and the questionnaire was answered by 48 students from this school. These questionnaire responses were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 29, with different descriptive analyses, given the small sample of questionnaires collected in this school (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, 2018; Ghiglione, Matalon, 2005; Hill, Hill, 2005).

The critical and reflective analysis that we provide here allows us to identify concrete proposals and to learn about the voice of these students involved, their experiences of autonomy and democratic practices in the management of this school, but also offers us clues to clarify perspectives to improve and expand on in the study that we are carrying out at the national level.

**Learners' reflections and perspectives on autonomy**

From the responses of 48 students, from two 11th-grade classes, science and technology and visual arts, to the questionnaire survey, we sought to understand (1) how these students perceive/know school autonomy; (2) their autonomy; and (3) their voice at school.

Following this organisation into three main axes and the conceptualisation of students' autonomy based on the possibilities of school autonomy, we questioned these students regarding their knowledge of **school autonomy**, autonomy instruments/documents and school administration and management bodies, as shown in Graph 1.
From these data can be seen that, although 35 students answered that they had heard about school autonomy, the majority do not know the autonomy instruments/documents (N = 34), nor the administration and management bodies of their school (N = 30).

Regarding students' autonomy, there are marked differences between autonomy in making decisions in their lives in general and autonomy in making decisions at school, as shown in Graph 2.

Concerning students’ voices, to understand the initiative, autonomy, and participation of these students, in action and association with others, a set of questions was constructed (Table 1), using a Likert scale of agreement from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree).
Table 1 – Students’ voice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<tr>
<td>I find out about the issues discussed in the different school bodies.</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>1.152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I learn to participate and intervene in the various issues and decisions of the school.</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>1.210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I vote in the election of student representatives (for the student association, class representative).</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>1.085</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I try to develop communication and information between students and teachers.</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>1.148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I work together with other students to develop proposals for improving our school.</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>1.205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I develop participation and democratic citizenship.</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>1.307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I vote in the election of student representatives to the general council.</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>1.304</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I participate with colleagues in solving class problems.</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>1.193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know the student representatives on the general council.</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>1.328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know the students elected to the students’ association board.</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>1.302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I value the discussion of class problems between students and delegates.</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>1.127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In my school, I do self-evaluation, follow up and participate in my evaluation.</td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>0.570</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I work with colleagues to solve school problems.</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>1.140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can participate in and influence essential school decisions.</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>1.106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know and get involved in the activities organised by the school.</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>1.181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is tough to influence decisions on school matters.</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>0.999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At my school, they explained to us what the rules of procedure are for.</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>1.128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At my school, they explained to us what the School Education Project is for.</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>1.236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At my school, they explained to us what the Annual Activity Plan is for.</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>1.158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am familiar with the Students’ Statute, which outlines rights and duties.</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>1.273</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ elaboration (2024); (M = media; SD = standard deviation).

It can be seen that the items with the highest values concern voting for the election of the student association and/or class representative (M = 4.39; SD = 1.085), but values regarding the election of their representatives to the general council are much lower (M = 3.73; SD=1.304). Although the general council is the leading strategic management body in the school, these students do not participate in the election of their representatives. In fact, the items with the lowest values in this set of items concern the interest and participation of these students, for example, in the issues discussed in the different bodies (M = 2.70; SD = 1.152) or the decisions of the school (M = 2.96; SD = 1.210).

On the other hand, regarding the relationship and communication within the class group, it can be perceived that these students make their voices heard in solving class problems (M = 3.82; SD = 1.193) and in the discussion and dialogue with class delegates (M = 4.04; SD = 1.127), and thus the importance of peer work and discussion for these students can be perceived.
We, therefore, question whether the low levels of agreement in these students' responses about their knowledge of school autonomy and their voice and participation in school management could mean that they are less autonomous because they do not live in and experience a democratic culture. However, at the same time, we realize that these students have different forms, experiences, and participation practices in the school context. From the possibilities of participant observation in the moments of meeting and association of the students in this school, we identified different times and spaces created by the school to listen to the students and other possibilities and opportunities at a municipal and national level.

**Figure 1 – Students' experiences of participation at school**

![Diagram of participation levels](image)

Source: Authors' elaboration (2024).

At a national level, students participated in the **Democracy Summits**, a proposal launched for all schools by a private higher education organisation. It works through the prior presentation of policy measures, which are debated and voted on at the national session. In 2022 it was on the theme “democracy and new technologies”. In the same logic, students participated in the **Youth Parliament** (with this designation since the Resolution of the Assembly of the Republic No. 42/2006), organised by a public institution and which also worked through the presentation of measures related to the theme “the impact of disinformation on democracy” in 2022. The debate and voting occur first in schools and then at the district level, with the measures being defended and voted on, to go on to the national session in the Portuguese Parliament.

We can also see the participation of students at the municipal level, in spaces created by the municipal councils, such as **municipal youth assemblies**, which work by debating and voting on a draft recommendation prepared by each school grouping in the municipality, implementing three measures on a specific topic. Once the project has been constructed at the school level, it is presented, debated and voted on in the assembly at the town hall.
From observing these meetings of the municipal youth assembly, it could be seen, firstly, that they constitute a space for them to ask questions, pose problems and make suggestions for improvement to the municipality, for example, leisure and socialising activities in gardens and outdoor areas and promoting artistic spaces in the city. There is also more free time and space for students to ask the mayor questions, and issues have indeed been raised regarding: (1) the provision of an annual grant from the municipality for the students' study visits; (2) the works on the school's playing field and sports pavilion; (3) the lack of necessary gymnastics material; (4) the need to include students in new decisions, the responsibility of the municipality in this new legislation that gives more competences to municipalities (field notes_2022-05-18). From these examples, different problems can be identified that students see as needs or issues and transmit as concerns, in this case, to the mayor.

In addition to the municipal youth assembly, students are also represented in the municipal education council, usually through a representative of the students' association of each school cluster.

Regarding the places and experiences of student participation in the school context, we can highlight the Parliament at school, where students organise themselves into groups (with a maximum of five influential members) and propose two to three measures to be debated and voted on, in an assembly format, to be later presented to the General Council, as a strategic management body, and implemented in the school. We highlight here one of the measures proposed by one of the groups: “The effective participation of all in the organisation and functioning of the school”, received by the students' assembly as unnecessary, arguing that ”Our ideas are already heard, so this measure does not make sense.” (field notes_2022-06-01).

In these speeches, it is clear that students are heard in the organisation and functioning of the school and that there are already spaces for them to be heard. However, at another time of observation, in conversation with a group of students, they mentioned that they were not aware of the spaces in which they could participate: “I didn't know about the Municipal Youth Assembly, and I didn't know about the General Council either” (field notes_2022-05-18). This discourse of ignorance and lack of dissemination of information can also be perceived in the discourse of one of the teachers (in advising the school principal on the voice of the students), stating that “This is a problem that we have to realise internally, because there are already several things that are not reaching everyone. We have to see that in the management” (field notes_2022-05-27).
Also, in the words of the school principal, when responding to a problem mentioned by the students about the lack of benches in the outdoor space:

The school principal mentioned that a competition was launched to design benches, so that the mechatronics class can make the benches for our school. "Do you know how many proposals we received?" (school principal). And a student, through a gesture, said ‘0’. (field notes_2022-05-27).

Also at the level of participation in the school, there is the **general assembly of students**, which only worked with delegates and sub-delegates, due to the restrictions caused by covid-19 and given the impossibility of guaranteeing distance between students. This assembly is a space where representatives have the opportunity to ask questions, clarify doubts, share concerns and demonstrate their needs to the school principal. From the observations of these meetings and the interview with the assistant headteacher, it was clear that the students had nothing organised and asked questions as they thought of them: “The students don't prepare at all either. If you are a class representative, wouldn't you do a survey in your class?” (field notes_2022-05-27). Similarly, in the interview, the teacher refers to the lack of initiative and organisation of the students themselves, stating:

Of course, some students often take that initiative, don't they? They want to go and talk to the principal. But usually, these are superfluous issues, conflicts between them and things like that. Not in terms of school life! They don't have that initiative. If it doesn't come from these entities we are discussing here, there is no longer that initiative.” (Interview with a teacher).

These entities to which the teacher refers concern the different spaces and activities they create for the meeting, action, and association of students, since she considers that the participation of students in the general council and through the student association “in my view looks very little. Ends there.” (interview with a teacher), arguing that the student association focuses much more on parties and final year trips; in the general council “there is no concrete role in terms of management, in terms of opinion, in terms of change, innovation (...) it comes down to three meetings and often, our role there is to approve. Nothing emerges from there” (Interview with a teacher).

The results of this analytical work were presented, shared and debated in the school, with the management and school principal and some teachers and students in a school seminar and through the presentation of a poster, which we offered to the school. This practice of participatory and democratic devolution – where everyone, and especially the students, had the
opportunity to talk about our presentation and interpretation, of what we were seeing and hearing in this school, including raising questions and making critical comments about the process – is a constant ethical and dialogical attitude, with far-reaching educational aims, which we intend to implement and develop with students in schools.

**Improper and unlikely reflections**

The central argument of this text is the persistence of a dominant culture led by teachers, and a particular culture of resistance to the participation and involvement of students in school management and decision-making on school matters. It is clear how difficult it is to change this educational culture, even though the current school situation is profoundly heterogeneous and complex, both at the European and world level and at the national, Portuguese level, especially if we want to study and learn about the movement of students in the democratic management of public schools.

The educational relationship has traditionally been marked by asymmetrical and regulatory dimensions of power which restrict freedoms and autonomies, particularly for students. Thinking about the conceptualisation of autonomy as free will, emancipation, freedom, expression and involvement of students in decision-making with teachers in their schools, the traditional relational space is complexified; it is assumed that students have to have other protagonists in their learning and more involved and critical ways of thinking and be informed about the various options, taking into account the needs of all (Melville et al., 2018). These students from this specific school have different times and spaces to participate in the national, municipal and school context. Still, collective thinking and debate may not be exercised since, for example, students do not know the administrative and management bodies where they are represented and where collective decisions are made, and delegates do not raise issues and problems which the class feels should be presented at the general assembly.

In any case, this participation of students in decision-making bodies and formal and conventional spaces, organised and institutionalised by schools and power structures, may have little influence on the absolute autonomy and participation of students in decision-making. Their presence and representation at specific meeting times do not imply – directly – that their voice is heard and has an impact on decision-making about school management (Andersson, 2019; Ceballos-Lopez et al., 2019; Elwood, 2013).

We therefore problematised the essential role of teachers and school principals, perceiving the importance of a committed posture and permanent dialogue with students and...
encouraging their participation and collective action so that students seek and challenge the margins of school autonomy, considering that “(...) no one is looking to explore margins of autonomy, because no one seeks what they believe does not exist” (Carvalho, 2020, p. 253).

We thus consider the exercise of the use of freedom and the responsibility to develop the critical, reflective and argumentative spirit of students, accompanied by informed knowledge about the possibilities, opportunities and forms of participation and autonomy to be crucial in the experience of a democratic school culture in everyday school life (UNESCO; Council of Europe, 2021).

In conclusion, this is the first possible point of arrival for the more significant challenge of carrying out the macro study in different schools in Portugal. The visibility and recognition of the students’ voice, through the focus groups, will be fundamental, as we will be direct dialogue with students and able to directly question and reflect, seeking and understanding the reasons for their systematic lack of knowledge about their normative rights and their implications. We will also be able to find out together the best ways for them to become aware of, and take a leading role in, initiative and decision-making responsibility in the collective democratic management of their schools, and finally, to understand their school experiences as possibilities to experience school as a laboratory of democracy.

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