

The participation of youths-students in secondary schools: learning, generational relations, and political inventiveness

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Abstract: This study addresses initiatives concerning training and encouraging the participation of secondary school students. Data originated from the collaborative study *Smart citizens for participatory cities* (2017-2018), conducted by researchers affiliated to universities in Argentina, Brasil, Spain, and Mexico. The objective of this qualitative study was to understand the “gap existing between youths’ civic experience in the formal education sphere and their lives as citizens.” First, a bibliographic survey was performed on the secondary education structure and public initiatives directed to youth sectors and segments in each participating country. Next, discussion groups were organized in each school, and the students’ sociodemographic data were collected (i.e., nature of the teaching institutions, school year, age group, sex/gender, and whether the students had a paid job). In Brazil, 58 female and male students, aged between 16 and 19, belonging to urban middle-class families living in different cities in the state of São Paulo, participated. Interpretation of pedagogical propositions, school dynamics, and culture intended to train and encourage student participation was based on the sociology of youth and education. How students appropriate these propositions, and the meanings they assigned were also addressed in addition to their learning and experiences participating in school life. In addition to intergenerational tensions and intergenerational inventiveness permeating the actions within schools, this study highlights the critical role adult generations play in the political learning of younger generations.

Keywords: secondary school students; participation curriculum propositions; adult culture in schools; student participation in school life.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, secondary education in the Ibero-American context has witnessed considerable changes, either caused by institutional formats and purposes or the democratization of access and attendance of adolescents and youths from different socioeconomic levels.

As a result, secondary education became more segmented and hierarchical due to the identities and objectives assigned to it. Nevertheless, it has assumed a new profile, less selective and elitist to the extent that a more democratized access has favoured students' growing social and ethnic heterogeneity; simultaneously, students in the Brazilian and Latin-American contexts have become younger. Hence, these situations have triggered many changes in intergenerational relationships and school culture (Martuccelli, 2009; Marteleto, Carvalhaes & Hubert, 2012; Dias, Mariano & Cunha, 2017; Sposito, Souza & Arantes e Silva, 2018; Watty, 2018; Nuñez, 2019).

Since the 2000s, collective actions resurfaced in Ibero-American countries, with secondary school students protesting, resisting, and antagonizing educational and pedagogical (curricular) reforms proposed to secondary education, such as in Mexico, Chile, Argentina, and Brazil. Another example is what recently happened in Argentina, where students joined and acted as cultural and conflict actors taking a stand towards social and political issues, such as fighting for the right to abortion (Melucci, 2001; Aguilera Ruiz, 2011; Martuccelli, 2016, Nuñez, 2019; Reguillo, 2017; Calleja; 2018; Sposito, Almeida, Corrochano, 2020a; Belando-Montoro, Blanco, Noguera, Almeida & Pérez, 2020; Tarábola, Martínez, Vommaro, 2020).

Because of the situations mentioned above and given these actions' increased visibility in the public sphere, the topic regarding social participation among secondary students is once again problematized – after a long interregnum –, either as a sociological, educational, or a “public subject” (Mills, 1982, p. 14).

However, discussing and producing knowledge regarding the ways of acting and meanings assigned by secondary school students within the world of school demand caution because, in addition to each country's cultural context, one has to consider the challenges these individuals face in society and how they relate with the different institutions of the adult world. Additionally, the ambivalences and constraints inherent to the condition of an individual and student in a specific time of the life cycle – youth, need to be considered.

Female and male secondary school students experience school life and participation from multiple belonging perspectives; however, first and foremost, they simultaneously combine the positions and statutes that define them as students and young people. Hence, we need to consider that they are on the threshold of juvenile condition, a time in the course of life, when, for the first time, they tend to exercise their autonomy and seek answers to crucial issues of individual and social experience (Fabbrini & Melucci, 1992).

Currently, this process is marked by ambivalence, light, and shadow, because secondary students establish a relationship with time and social life, combining their economic dependence and subordination to their families of origin – and the position their families occupy in the socioeconomic structure –, seeking to break the bonds of social and moral heteronomy (Foracchi, 1975; Singly, 2005). Thus, even though some students in Latin American countries have financial independence, as they reconcile studies with a paid job (Abramo, Venturi & Corrochano, 2020), it is as individuals constrained by a dependency on their family circle that these individuals seek emancipation and the realization of “age-specific cultural aspirations,” undertake disaffiliation processes (Martuccelli, 2016, p.), and move from the domestic to the school sphere, now experiencing other sociabilities, not previously available during primary school, and then, public life. Therefore, even though students still share a common world with adult generations, they occupy different positions in the socio-historical process (Arendt, 2001, Tomizaki, 2018).

Still, from the perspective of the adolescent condition, secondary school students have their individual and social experiences marked by ambivalence and disturbances, as members of society and as citizens participating in public life. In many Western countries, differently from adults and their +18-year-old peers, adolescents achieved the status of subjects of rights, having the protection and guarantee of civil rights. However, they remain under the care of the adult world and institutions, enjoying restricted political rights in the traditional participation system. For instance, in some countries, such as Brazil, 16 and 17-year-olds are allowed to vote. These circumstances impose new challenges to the school world in general, especially secondary schools, because its social dynamics are also modulated by the encounter of representatives of different generations with differentiated access to civil rights and experiences (Quintelier, 2007). Thus, on the one hand, there are “teachers-adults-citizens,” and on the other hand, there are “students-youths-included” with restrictions in specific spheres of modern citizenship (Martuccelli, 2016, p. 157).

Currently, not only has the school lost its central role in the socialization processes of new generations, but it is also increasingly more challenged by the practices and values of youth cultures, usually produced outside and in parallel with the school world – both in the legal sphere, in the industry of cultural goods and services, and also in the illicit/illegal sphere (Martuccelli, 2009; Litchever & Nuñez, 2005; Reguillo, 2017). These processes bring new elements and values into schools, causing varied modulations in the school culture, based on cooperation and solidarity practices, and causing friction and tension in the different territories of a teaching institution, challenging the teachers’ authority. Thus, the authority model previously grounded on tradition and acknowledged as legit is increasingly challenged by demands for a less hierarchical regime, guided by justice and respect (Dubet & Martuccelli, 1998; Martuccelli, 2007; Fanfani, 2007).

We cannot disregard the challenges faced by students in their schooling process and their ways of participating in the school space-time; it is a “brief time” rooted in the present (Melucci, 1997), experienced amid crossroads of choices and aspirations, between strangeness of arrivals and departures marked by uncertainty. Arrivals to a “new world,” sometimes a new school, probably at a higher level of education or

one that is equivalent to the level achieved by other family members. On the other hand, departures are marked by uncertainty regarding the future, considering high unemployment rates, precarious jobs, and the slight chance of entering a Higher Education Institution for many from lower classes. In this context, for some youths, secondary school is the time for them to socialize with peers and enjoy leisure (Sposito & Galvão, 2004).

In addition to the issues concerning: a) “vital reserve” (Mannheim, 1968); b) variants of the so-called youth “moratorium” (Margueis & Vesti, 1996), given profound inequalities in the living and educational conditions of young people (Pelegrino, 2010); c) experiences in the world of work in certain societies, (Corrochano, 2014); and d) the various studies reporting tensions introduced to the school world by youth cultures and young people’s sociocultural expressions (Dayrell, 2007; Carrano, 2008), difficulties in democratizing secondary school (Carrano, 2011) and the meanings assigned by adult professionals to the “appropriation of the school by young people, the establishment of sociability networks and transformation of teaching institutions based on youth practices”, frequently perceived by teachers, coordinators, and school principals as acts of indiscipline, confusion, and even violence (Pereira, 2016), show that generational issues urgently need to be included in the educational debate.

Even though sometimes troubled relationships and disputes around rules of coexistence and school practices established by informal groups of young people may result in an “anti-school culture” (Willis, 1991), data collected in this study indicate other nuances of the interactions established between students and teachers, from whom more horizontal relationships are expected. In line with studies conducted in other contexts, the students not only demand teachers to know how to teach, but they also expect them to have some attributes concerning different contexts and disciplines, resulting from these professionals’ personal characteristics (Dubet & Martuccelli, 1998; Nuñez & Litichever, 2015). Teachers who can establish relationships with students and make them feel recognized and legitimated are frequently acknowledged as authorized mediators (Sposito, Almeida & Tarábola, 2020). Some cases are discussed here.

Based on this brief overview, this paper’s objective is to provide an analytical discussion of the propositions and encouragement promoting the participation of secondary students attending the Brazilian educational institutions that participated in the research from which this paper originated. These experiences derived from pedagogical propositions of schools or teachers, who autonomously attempted to encourage and promote the participation of students in the implementation of teaching plans in their respective curricular disciplines.

We also intend to discuss the ways students appropriate these propositions and the meanings they assign to them, and what experiences they construct with educators in this context. In other words, how students relate and what they do with what educators provide to promote their participation within the school and in the city’s public sphere. Hence, it is not only a matter of examining socialization processes focused on the processes and practices of young students’ participation but also “self-education” undertaken within the school world (Dubet & Martuccelli, 1998, p. 14).

2. Smart citizens to smart cities: a collaborative study and the Brazilian context

This text benefits from the final results of collaborative research developed in 2017 and 2018 by an inter-university and multidisciplinary team of researchers affiliated with Ibero-American universities located in Argentina, Brazil, Spain, and Mexico. The primary objective was to understand the “gap between the students’ civic experience in the formal education sphere and their lives as citizens” (Projeto Cidadel I, 2017¹; Belando-Montoro *et al*, 2020). Currently, intelligent cities are not reducible to their spatial structure and public and technological services; the core of their architecture must also be supported by processes and products of citizens’ experiences with social participation.

Hence, in this study, we worked beyond the guidelines

given us by maps or GPS; mental or emotional cartographies that vary according to personal ways of experiencing social interactions. When referring to his place, Granada, Luis García Montero used to say that ‘every person has a city that is an urbanized landscape of his/her feelings.’ (García Montero, 1972; p. 71; Canclini, 2008, p. 15)

The field activities developed in this qualitative study were based on triangularly connected paths: a) searching and systematization of academic bibliography addressing the teaching systems of different countries, emphasizing secondary education, and the institutional mechanisms that ensure the students’ right to participate in educational institutions; b) searching and systematization of bibliography addressing public initiatives directed to youth sectors and segments and the ways and meanings assigned to the participation of young individuals in the public sphere in recent years; and c) discussions were promoted with groups composed of up to twelve (12) secondary school students attending educational institutions with different characteristics and cultures (i.e., public, private, secular, and religious schools). Gender, age, and school years were equally represented among students who voluntarily contributed to the study.

Ascript was adopted during the discussion groups to encourage the free expression and debates among the students, to identify consensuses, disagreements, and ambivalence regarding: a) their participation in educational institutions, emphasizing institutional devices promoting student participation in the school world, in curricular activities training and encouraging student participation, and autonomous initiatives proposed by the students; b) examples of student participation in the social sphere – at school, in their neighbourhood, city, and institutions other than school; c) participation in social media and digital technological communication channels; d)

¹ This Project was financially supported by the Ibero-American Union of Universities Research Collaboration Fund, call 2017-18, under the title CIDATEL I, Smart Citizens for Participatory Cities-Ciudadanos inteligentes para ciudades participativas. The participant researchers were affiliated with the *Universidad Complutense de Madrid - UCM*, *Universitat de Barcelona - UB*, *Universidad Autónoma de México - UNAM*, *Universidad de Buenos Aires - UBA* and the *Universidade de São Paulo – USP* and *Universidade Federal de São Carlos-campus Sorocaba – UFSCar-Sorocaba*.

participation in situations concerning transition from childhood to adolescence; and e) representations constructed by the students concerning current challenging social problems, the various possibilities of participation, and regarding their loss of respect towards the traditional participation system policies (Projeto Cidadel I, 2017).²

The groups enabled interacting and dialoguing with 274 female and male students, aged between 15 and 19, attending different secondary school modalities and different years, who belonged to middle-class families⁴. The students attended public schools (15), private schools (2 secular and 1 religious), and a concerted private schools (4), most located in the urban areas of Madrid, Barcelona, the city of Mexico, Oaxaca, and the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires. In Brazil, the discussion groups were held in public teaching institutions located in five cities in the state of São Paulo.

1.1 Brief contextualization of secondary education in Brazil and São Paulo

Unlike other Ibero-American countries, the universalization of primary education in Brazil started in the 1980s. Mass school started with basic school; however, it has not been effectively implemented with all its social and political implications for upper secondary education. In 2016, only 57.5% of the population above 25 years old had attended upper secondary school (Pnud, 2016).

Brazil is a federal republic composed of autonomous management spheres that must cooperate with each other. Regarding secondary education, most public schools in 2016 were under the responsibility of state governments (68%), while only 1.8% and 0.9% were under the responsibility of federal and municipal governments, respectively. The remaining 29.1% were private schools belonging to business groups, religious or philanthropic institutions, etc. The total number of schools distributed according to administrative dependence shows the large presence of state governments in providing secondary education in the country (Inep, 2016)

Secondary education is provided in 28,300 schools, 89.8% of which are located in urban areas, and only 10.2% are located in the diversified Brazilian rural area (Brasil, 2017). Hence, the federative units are responsible for providing this level of education. However, we need to emphasize that the conditions of secondary schools are not the same across regions; Brazilian states and cities persist with uneven socioeconomic development, despite the advance of democracy in Brazilian society.

Regarding secondary education in Brazil, one of its historical specificities is that since 1930, the government has assigned different purposes to it: it has already been defined as “simple continuity of primary education” (1930-1961), propaedeutic for higher education (1961-1971), and technical-vocational training (1971-1996). The legal directive established between 1996 and 2016 determined it was the “final stage of basic education.” In 2017, intending to implement a curricular reform, it assumed a hybrid structure that simultaneously provides preparatory scientific training to

² The representatives of the schools’ management boards (and the students’ legal guardians, in the Brazilian case) authorized the dialogues and discussions established with the discussion groups to be recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each research team developed specific reports based on the transcripts and bibliographic search on the socio-economic, political, and basic education in each country/place. This paper refers to these reports as Informe UB, UBA, UCM, UNAM, and USP.

access higher education or technical-vocational training with different possibilities of educational itineraries (Brasil, 2018).

1.2 Brief characterization of the schools institutions and students in the state of São Paulo who contributed to the discussion groups

The discussion groups were held in five state public secondary schools located in different cities in the state of São Paulo³. These schools were founded at different points in time, not coinciding with the democratization process facilitating access to public school – particularly secondary school, with traditions and cultures marked by singularities. Three are centenary schools, the one located in Santo André, one in Ribeirão Preto, and one in the city of São Paulo. The school located in Sorocaba was founded in the 1980s as a response of the state to the population's demands. The school linked to the University of São Paulo, located in the city of São Paulo, has its origins linked to the initial movements of educational research in the Brazilian and São Paulo contexts in the 1950s (Beisiegel, 2003). Hence, even though the youths participating in this study are anchored in the present, reminiscences of the histories of each of these educational institutions permeated their reports.

Fifty-eight (58) students participated in the study. Most were female students (53.4%), aged between 16 and 18, attending the last year; according to self-reports, 51% were Caucasians, and 41% were of mixed race or Afro-descendant; 29% reported a paid job. Most students reported a religion (55%), though a large portion reported no religion (45%). Most of those reporting a religion were Evangelical (19 individuals), the remaining being Catholic (12), one (1) was Spiritist, and one (1) was *Umbandista*⁴.

Data concerning the membership and participation of students in groups and/or associations were also collected; the most frequently reported were religious groups (21.1%)⁵, student associations (20.70%), sports (19%), political parties (6.9%), and voluntary work (6.9%). Groups organized around communication activities (e.g., radio, newspapers, etc.), socio-environmental and community improvement, were less frequently reported.

The students' socioeconomic statuses were estimated according to family monthly income⁶. A significant percentage (48%) of the groups' participants belonged

³ São Paulo significantly distinguishes itself from the remaining Brazilian states, given its growth and socio-economic development achieved throughout the 20th Century and due to the magnitude of problems and varied conflicts – social, cultural, and political- resulting from these two processes. The state and its capital, São Paulo, present the highest GDPs in the country, and part of its wealth mainly derives from its diversified industrial sector, followed by the services sector. Available at: <https://agenciadenoticias.ibge.gov.br/agencia-sala-de-imprensa/2013-agencia-de-noticias/releases/18785-pib-dos-municipios-2015-capitais-perdem-participacao-no-pib-do-pais.html>.

⁴ The largest number of Evangelicals reveals an ongoing trend in Brazil, even though the country is still predominantly Catholic.

⁵ Fuentes Vásquez & Nakano (2020), present and analyze data concerning this study's Spanish, Argentine, and Brazilian participant students in the social sphere, including religious groups of students who collaborated with Cidatel I.

⁶ The Brazilian official minimum wage in 2018, converted into US\$.

to lower-middle-class families, with an income between one and three times the minimum wage, while upper-middle-class families, with a monthly income between three or more than five times the minimum wage, represented 38%.

3. Education for participation: students demand teachers and managers to adopt sensitive listening

From a sociological point of view, we must understand teaching institutions from two perspectives: that of the instituting field, of those who established these institutions, and that of those who institutionalize them as stable bodies. Hence, teaching institutions appear as institutionalized collectives with their bureaucratic and administrative organization and their socializing and educational projects determined by the public power's conscious and rational guidelines. At another time, other institutional actors institute schools through legal guidelines, teaching reforms, educational policies, etc. (Cândido, 1964). On the other hand, in addition to these two perspectives, we should bear in mind that schools are social collectives, which, within the scope of relative autonomy, produce and reproduce their own social dynamics and school culture. From hybridization processes, schools appropriate and process orientations and values external to their internal order, integrating them to the ways of acting, thinking, and values generated by the generational groups they shelter. Therefore, schools tend to adjust to legislation, political guidelines, and general values, but distinguish from one another and singularize to the historical space and time in which they are inserted by the action of their actors (Cândido, 1964, Viñao, 2000).

Hence, the reports of the different national teams participating in this study reveal that the legislation and/or educational norms in the different countries provide for student participation in the – public or private - schools surveyed, in different decision-making instances of the educational institution and design the organization of free and autonomous collectives of students. In this sense, each teaching institution's ways of thinking and acting are incorporated with its specific *school culture*. The Brazilian students' reports revealed that they approximate and appropriate institutional devices in different ways: suspiciously and distantly, or from a critical and revitalizing perspective, based on political inventiveness, which may be reconfigured based on a demand for more horizontal and less hierarchical relations (such as the so-called free, horizontal, boardless unions). In this context, varied and critical relationships are established with the representatives of the adult world within schools. Even though there are conflicts, miscommunication, and an aversion towards teachers who try to impose a specific political-ideological or party position unilaterally, the students value more open teachers who listen and take them seriously and recognize them as legitimate interlocutors. Some students reported that they asked these adults to intermediate discussions and debates among youths, showing the importance of intergenerational bonds for political learning. (Tarábola *et al*, 2020; Sposito *et al*, 2020b).

Still regarding pedagogical propositions, intended to promote student participation, unlike European Union countries, there is no legal guideline in the Brazilian context and, by extension, in the schools in the state of São Paulo,

determining that a curricular area or specific discipline provides knowledge and practices that materialize such an intention based on a set of previously defined principles and values concerning Citizenship and Human Rights. The presence of these subjects in a specific course - *Educación para la Ciudadanía y Derechos Humanos - EpC*, which had the objective to transmit and debate values related to “ciudadanía democrática y la participación”, and “promover la cohesión social y el entendimiento intercultural y el respeto de la diversidad” with students attending mandatory basic school (Cepc, 2007; Valenzuela, 2011; Mata & González & Monfort-Monfort, 2020) caused vivid debates and controversies in the Spanish context and its autonomous communities.

Instead, what has been seen in the Brazilian context and São Paulo, is the mobilization and a set of actions from emerging conservative movements, such as the self-titled *Escola sem partido* [School without a party]⁷, which is opposed to curriculum content addressing political matters, like those focusing on sexual and gender orientation, and cultural–ethnic-racial and religious–diversity. It defends non-partisanship, and the prevalence of the family in choosing the nature and modality of education of its offspring, the re-enchantment of school culture by welcoming and transmitting creationism principles and values, among others.

Even though Brazilian schools do not have a specific discipline with the purpose of providing socializing and training frameworks promoting participation, the students who participated in the discussion groups reported a set of impressions of what the most burning political and social problems are and issues that affect the individual and social experiences of the new generations.

Hence, according to the students, the pressing issues that affect the Brazilian society in general and young individuals are those concerning the improvement of the quality of primary education and public healthcare, security issues, and violence that pervades daily life, the transition from school to the world of work, and the achievement of economic independence, socioeconomic inequalities, oppression against women, prejudice, and discrimination based on ethnicity, race and gender.

Regarding traditional politics and actors from the formal political system, students from São Paulo and their peers from other contexts expressed disbelief towards politics and institutional democracy. The young individuals considered that the central actors in the institutional field use tactics marked by corruption and private interests. They distrust and are sceptical of potential change because traditional politics is a territory in which not everyone is represented, where there is male hegemony, “only men”; “some start with good intentions, but (...) the environment corrupts and transforms them; they become the means where they live”. On the other hand, the students relativized negative assessments of traditional political participation. They stated that changes in the long term would require strong movements from civil society and legislative power’s more positive actions, in which “public and social

⁷ This Brazilian movement emerged in 2004 through an initiative of civil society inspired by North American initiatives defending non-partisanship teaching and control of teachers’ behaviour within classrooms, such as the movements No Indoctrination, Campus Watch, in addition to Christian inspiration coming from Creation Studies Institute - CSI, which considered the so-called “theory of evolution” and multiculturalism themes to constitute the ideological indoctrination they oppose (Frigotto, 2017).

issues,” such as prejudice, machismo, homophobia, xenophobia (...) the problems (...) of social classes”, so that the interests and demands of various social sectors and segments, including new generations, would be met and ensured by overcoming and guaranteeing rights. Hence, given this context, the students admitted that for them and their peers, accessing knowledge, “wisdom,” and information is a fundamental condition to more comprehensively understand the meanings of politics and its actions; they insightfully acknowledge that they “do not understand the law,” “do not know what is to govern” or “what means taking care of a city.”

Due to these and other reasons is that a significant portion of the students who collaborated to the study recognized the material and cultural ills of the school space-time but valued it as an essential *locus* for their process and relationship with knowledge and political socialization because, according to them, “one must know to change.” In addition to the family, media, and social network, the adult world of the school universe needs to provide “paths” for the present and future: “because education connects with everything else and whether you have knowledge or not affect all society’s issues.”

Similar to the educational institutions in Buenos Aires, Catalonia, and Madrid that participated in the study, the students from São Paulo emphasized that the difficulties they face concerning the issues previously mentioned and certain principles and values regarding rights are less related to the school culture and more related to the teachers of specific disciplines – History, Philosophy, Sociology, Portuguese – stating that

some teachers listen to the students, debate the subject, about what is happening in the world (...) of what will happen.

talk about (...) the huge social inequality and prejudice... it’s... for a gay person, Black person, Black woman, (...) prejudice hindering you from entering the job market.

However, these civil and political training possibilities they encounter in some disciplines are not free from ambivalence and tension, especially in the relationships of power and authority some teachers establish. Even though they referred to teachers who are sensitive to their demands for knowledge and attentively listen to their demands, they recurrently criticized teaching-learning relations that involve teachers who uphold the traditional authority and rigid political-ideological positions, reaffirming interactions that stress equality, inequality, and hierarchy. The students understand these situations as a lack of respect towards their expectations and the positions they defend. One student considered that there is no possibility to reason or learning how to reason, “it is an act of bad faith.” In addition to these feelings, the students perceive they live in an unfair situation (Dubet, 2004), which often triggers fear. Hence, some reluctantly agree with the positions defended by the teachers, while others silence, as the following excerpts show:

only that, sometimes, everything is too biased towards him [teacher]. (...) He lets us discuss our different points of view, but even so, he brings the class to the side he believes in.

I've got a [grade] five [in a 0 to 10 school] at the end of the term because my opinion is different (...). So, students lose the will to express themselves!

We'd rather stay quiet! How are we going to reason with him and other teachers?

When discussing these situations, in which asymmetric power modulates intergenerational interactions, including the relationships between teachers and students within the classroom, the students express a need for respect and interactions guided by principles other than hierarchical equality (Martuccelli, 2007). They point to the possibility of talking and being listened to, both in the relationships established between generations and among themselves, based on a "continuous process of learning in social interactions of the idea of otherness." p-98 (Sposito *et al*, 2020b, p. 324). The students require another type of authority from their teachers, which does not necessarily derive from their role and the position they occupy. The students demand an authority acquired in the dynamic of relations and daily interactions, to the extent that schools face challenges in ensuring the status of teachers' authority.

Sposito *et al* (2020b) dialogue with David Le Breton (1997) to discuss the relationships between generations within the school culture, marked by subordination, fear, and silence, drawing attention to the fact that the situations in which such interactions occur are those in which the communication's "data and codes" are "not mastered." And by resorting to the speak-silence dyad, a "permanent game of youth sociability" that crosses over the interactions that the young individuals establish with the representatives of adult generations and their peers, the authors once again evoke the reflections of Le Breton (1997) to indicate that polarization is related to "hierarchical systems," which allude to

channelling of speech, manipulation of silence that would appear as a withdrawal strategy, and, at the same time, a dangerous source of threat to those who suffer it. For him, an aspect of institutional authority would reside in the domain of silence and word, being a claim for the "right to speak" an attempt to break this monopoly, seeking to re-establish parity. Therefore, acquiring this right would transform the statute of silence, which, instead of an imposition, would become a choice (Sposito *et al*, 2020b, p. 323-4).

However, just as individual demands for respect do not always lead to collective actions marked by conflict (Martuccelli, 2007), the situations students experience with teachers imposing silence do not cause an intergenerational conflict capable of impelling them to active collective participation in the school time-space under study. Instead, what can be inferred from the reports collected in the discussion groups is that, in most cases, uncomfortable situations less frequently lead to apathy and increasingly lead to *defective participation* marked by distrust towards formal mechanisms of representation, and a certain "estrangement in engagement"

(Martuccelli, 2006), expressed by immersion in school life and approximation-distant movements from institutional spaces and didactic-pedagogical initiatives intended to train and encourage civic and political participation.

4. Participation experiences in the interstices of school life

For decades, academic literature from the North and South focused on reflecting upon the participation of youth segments in the public-political sphere, emphasizes the need to understand the ways and meanings assigned by new generations to participation based on references that go beyond the concept of participation and democracy and formalistic and conventional ways of conceiving “participation and representative democracy.” Hence, if youth and student segments distrust formal political practices, they should not be considered apathetic but instead invested in unconventional and multiple forms of participation. (Pleyers & Karbach, 2014).

According to Pleyers & Karbach (2014), a way to currently apprehend non-established forms of participation of youth segments lies at the confluence and intersections between politics and everyday life; it is in the dimension of everyday life that they have constructed experiences and learning participation and forms to practice it.

The reports of students from the discussion groups held in the educational institutions located in different cities and contexts, especially schools in Buenos Aires, Mexico, and São Paulo, emphasize participation experiences that took place in the interstices of the institutional life of the school world that do not immediately establish relationships with formal participation devices, nor are they associated with curricular propositions or specific disciplines. In this sense, three learning plans for student participation and ways to exercise it are highlighted.

One of the participation plans and actions that involve specific groups of students are related to concerns they experience regarding the schools’ physical structure and public authorities’ neglect with this dimension of school life. The Argentine, Mexican, and Brazilian students reported these situations. In these cases, some discussion groups in São Paulo reported voluntary participation and collective solidarity, intended to interfere and give a more welcoming aspect to certain school areas, such as garden areas and the patio where they meet, eat, and socialize during class breaks: “we helped each other, we (...) helped the school, because we cleaned it up”; “some students cleaned up (...) the graffiti walls, painted the school, cleaned the cafeteria”. Other participation instances and voluntary actions emerged from a feeling of belonging, and the production of identities marked by the collective memory of groups of students in São Paulo anchored on emotions that carry previous generations and projected for the future “the students here have an attachment to this school,” it “goes on from generation to generation; (...) perhaps the same teacher will teach my brother, or even my children.”

Still concerning school life, the participation of young individuals marked by an effort of certain groups of students to transform the breaks between classes more playful, irreverent, by setting up a youth radio, was observed. This initiative allows students to enjoy music and performances of varied cultural styles, produced outside the school world by certain youth cultures, such as funk, rock, and rap, among

others (Informe UBA, Tarábola *et al*, 2020). These practices offer relevant elements for understanding the ways and meanings of student participation, because they show the relationships students often establish between school culture and cultural expression they develop in other spheres of daily life, in the interstices of institutional experiences (Sposito, 1993, Feixa, 1999, Nuñez, 2019).

Another revealing plan of participation learning and experiences collected from the discussion groups enabled the creation of student committees to organize events and parties. Regarding events, some students emphasized actions involving the teachers who appreciate and listen to them to debate and disseminate themes and social issues they deem relevant. Such events included “yellow September” – the month dedicated to an open discussion on the suicide issue, which has expanded among youth segments; the international women’s day, and “pink October,” dedicated to discussing and preventing “breast cancer awareness and promoting care to women’s reproductive health.” In addition, “We have a project to bring people to give lectures; there is a project for a career fair, and an ecological and environment project.”

Even though these activities present positive experiences of joint and collaborative actions involving students and some teachers, the students also emphasized that some initiatives faced much divergence and tension with the adults representing the school world. One example is the case of student committees organizing parties themed with cultural traditions of Brazilian regions and one specific party that is a rite marking the passage of young students, the graduation party. If its primary purpose is to celebrate the students’ success in school exams and their departure to other social universes involving socialization and sociability, the discussion groups referred to both their entry into other social dynamics and their experiences within school life amid relationships with the school culture.

However, regarding the June Festival, the direction of the school is the problem, they don’t allow [people outside the school to come], they only allow students!

The graduation, you can’t convince the principal about it. (...) She won’t take responsibility for it.

We spent years and years in school; we only wanted, at least in our final year (...) to keep a memory, to say goodbye, a memory.

Our purpose when revisiting these exercises of student participation reported by the discussion groups concerning the organization of parties in their schools was not to consider the contributions of anthropology or sociology, of different theoretical lines regarding this type of sociability and its possibilities to promote gathering, social exchanges, the inversion of social hierarchies, questioning moral values and frictions, or the insurgencies arising from them. Instead, our purpose was to highlight some unconventional ways students participated in the study’s schools. While some of the previously described situations resulted in intergenerational collaboration, clashes and tension between students and the representatives of the adult world within schools marked others. It is worth noting that whenever there were divergence

and disagreement regarding unconventional participation practices, the students' demands were not considered needs that would lead to intergenerational conflicts within the different school environments (Informe UBA, 2018). Hence, the adults' decisions prevailed not because of practices that involved discussions, negotiations, and consensuses but through the formalism of the bureaucratic norm.

Resuming and reaffirming the potential of these practices to train and encourage student participation, and understanding how they were appropriated and enriched the repertoire of activities of the secondary school students who took part in them – in São Paulo schools (Corti, Corrochano & Silva, 2016; Sposito *et al* 2020a) – and also in Buenos Aires context (Informe UBA, 2018; Tarábola *et al* 2020) –, seems to be an important exercise for those who seek to understand today's youth, their ways of acting, and their issues.

While their occupations and achievements were relevant collective actions considering that secondary school students took part in the public arena as actors of conflict, based on direct action marked by horizontality, we need to acknowledge that their repertoire of activities does not present only novelties. Many of these actions had some basis in the ways they participated in their schools. Some were sought in a collection of actions and forms of participation that characterize certain youth cultures, e.g., *do it yourself*, practice, and symbolism that characterize many actions and forms of participation of different generations in the punk movement.

5. Final Considerations

The results from the discussion groups held in secondary schools located in the state of São Paulo and the urban areas of Argentina, Spain, and Mexico indicate that schools in the different contexts have a historical accumulation of rational-legal ordinances that provide for student participation in free and autonomous organizations, or in collegiate decision-making bodies within their schools. Data reveal that students approximate and appropriate these devices in multiple ways, varying according to the different national contexts and even within the same school. However, there is a range of similar participation practices among students and youth experiences across the different schools, countries, and cities. Another recurrent event found in the data collected refers to how students appropriate and put into action, or not, participation in existing devices. It is related to the ways in which the new generations formulate and forward their demands and issues to social and political institutions in general, but above all, to the representatives of the adult generations within the school world. Sometimes, these are marked by encouragement and cooperation; however, other times, intergenerational interactions and relations are marked by ambivalence and tension (Informes UBA, UNAM, USP, 2018, Tarábola *et al*, 2020, Sposito *et al*, 2020b).

There are no legal regulations in São Paulo or the Brazilian context, or in the remaining school contexts, for secondary school curricula to incorporate a specific area or discipline to socialize and train students for civic or political participation. However, the reports of the different countries reveal that some disciplines are in charge of topics concerning participation and related themes such as sociology and history. These incorporate the theme as content or teaching methodology. In

these cases, during teaching-learning relationships, the teachers of these disciplines discuss political or social relevant subjects with students (Informes UB, UBA, UCM, UNAM, USP, 2018).

The students reported that they value initiatives of this nature, especially when the teachers are sensitive, listen and establish dialogues and build ties of trust, putting themselves in the role of mediators in the school's social and political dynamics. However, the students also emphasized tensions in the intergenerational relationships within the classroom. These tensions reveal how they challenge and assess teaching authority in at least three ways: some teachers exercise their teaching role based on authoritarian behaviour and inflexible political-ideological attitude, appealing more to the inculcation of principles and values than welcoming and debating non-convergent opinions. Teachers tend to disregard the fact that students and teachers share a common world. Teachers do it occupying diverse generational situations in the socio-historical process, which result in a different understanding of topics such as rights and duties, equality, cultural diversity, democracy, social and political participation, and meanings of what participation in the public sphere means, as studies addressing the participation of modern youth segments show (Pleyers & Karbach, 2014, Quintelier, 2017, Sposito *et al* 2020a). In this sense, from the perspective of two approaches of social interactions across the school world, we need to pay attention to the fact that students in São Paulo and their peers in other contexts demand respect. We also need to heed the students' vital experiences, orientations, and worldviews that set apart adult educators and young students.

Even though data collected from the discussion groups reveal that students are sceptical and reticent towards their schools' institutional mechanisms of student participation, we need to be cautious, not classifying these stands as apathy or non-participation. Note that the students also circumscribed and considered various learning and participation exercises they put into practice in school life to be relevant. The students acted around what they considered meaningful and essential for them and for the institution with which they hold a strong experience of belonging, identification, constructing subjectivation processes. In summary, it is about different ways of appropriating the school space that opens up and gives new contours to the routine of student life, enabling ruptures and the exercise of the imagination. Recreating space and time are possibilities to effectively belong to the school world, which is observed in the interstices of daily life.

The students who contributed to this study are about forming their convictions amid various orientations, some of which conflict with values held by their families, teachers, or school managers. Thus, schools face a significant challenge, that of giving opportunities for debates, providing information, and enabling students to form personal convictions despite the schools' heterogeneous governing and academic staff and diverse dominant orientations in their different socio-cultural circles of socialization and sociability.

Similar to young people who connect and act based on youth cultures, the secondary school students who participated in this study revealed that they want to act and create sociability forms within their schools, with an idealistic view of transforming the activities' time and space. However, this ideal often clashes with the institutional project incorporated by adult generations, including the formats and

meanings they give to civic and political participation within the school world and in the city where they experience their youth.

6. References

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