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### **Five Contexts and Three Characteristics of Student Participation and Student Voice – A Literature Review**

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**Abstract:** In current scientific literature a wide variety of definitions and terms are used to describe student participation and student voice. In particular, this article examines how the terms participation, student voice, and their synonyms are used in the current literature to provide a structured overview of how these terms are being used. A systematic literature review led to 325 articles. From this number we selected 126 articles according to the criteria of topic (student participation in school), age group (primary and secondary school) and language (English or German). The results showed that student participation was discussed across five contexts: democratic education, children's rights, well-being, learning and school practice. After comparing similarities and differences between the five contexts, three characteristics which characterize student participation became apparent: considering others, power dynamics between students and teachers, and change that is inherently connected to participation. These five contexts and three characteristics of student participation serve as a possible structure for the discussion surrounding the varied terms and concepts used regarding student participation.

**Keywords:** Student participation, student voice, literature review

## Introduction

Student participation has become a popular topic within the last several years. It can be seen both as an instrument of education and as one of its goals (Neumann, 2018). In the German literature, participation is referred to as ‘a term that is a master of confusion’ (Oser & Biedermann, 2006; translated by authors). Based on this statement, and based on our<sup>1</sup> impressions from reading about participation issues, it seems to us that the concept of student participation is described using different terms (e.g. student voice, involvement, collective decision-making, democratic education) and contemporaneously, the same terms do not always have the same meaning. As such it is important to better understand what student participation and its (putative) synonyms mean, as student participation will remain an often-discussed topic in the future because of its importance to practice and as its potential for implementation has not yet been fully reached.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the goal of this article is to examine how the term participation and its synonyms are used in the current literature and to identify patterns. Due to the perceived diversity, which is also partly addressed in the literature, it makes sense to identify patterns in the use of terms, because familiar patterns create orientation and help one avoid getting lost in a complexity of terms.

Our work is guided by the following understanding of student participation – as it refers to students in primary and secondary school, aged 6 to 16 –, which includes any kind of activity or communication and involves several individuals: “Students are offered the possibility of forming and expressing their opinions, getting involved in decisions, and actively influencing school life” (Zala-Mezö, Datnow, Müller-Kuhn & Häbig, 2020, p. 3). This working definition guided our search process.

In this paper we refer to three reviews which provided important insight into the complexity of the research and discussion surrounding student participation. The first is the literature review of Mitra (2018) looking at the role of student voice in school reforms in high schools and how student voice can impact change. She placed a special focus on power relations between youth and adults. The second is the international literature review of Mager and Nowak (2012) which sought out the effects of student participation in school decision-making processes. The third is a literature review focusing on student voice research in the United States by Gonzalez, Hernandez-Saca and Artilles (2017). Our study was constructed similarly but pursues a different purpose.<sup>3</sup> We conducted a conceptual literature review, based on theoretical and empirical articles written in English and German about student participation in primary and secondary schools. In our review we looked for explicit and implicit theoretical argumentation, definitions, and

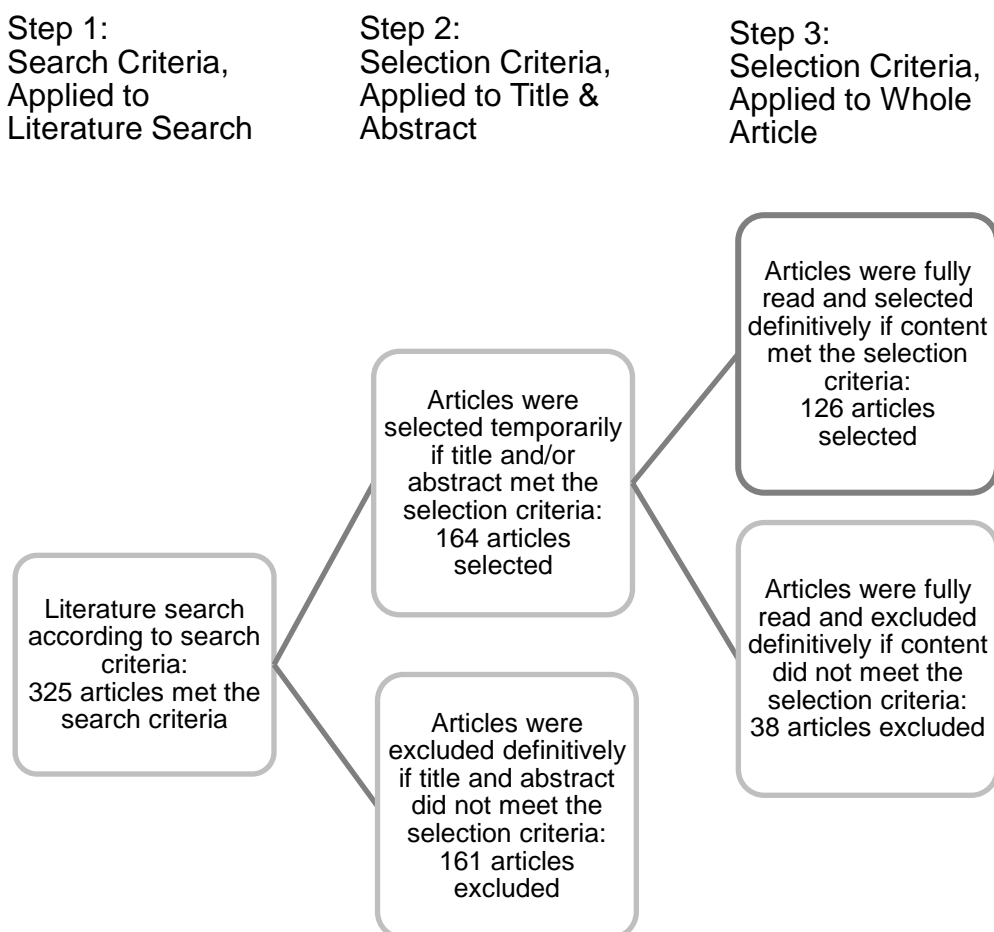
constitutive conceptual elements of student participation and its (putative) synonyms in order to answer the following main research question: How is the term student participation and its (putative) synonyms described in the current scientific literature and what are emerging patterns in the reviewed articles? We also aim to derive practical use from this conceptual work for educators and policy makers.

### **Method**

The method used for this article was a combination of systematic and rapid review (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006, p. 39f.): It is systematic because our goal was to identify relevant empirical and theoretical articles to answer our particular research questions. Simultaneously, it was a rapid review as we applied restrictions to time, search engine and text type. The selection of the articles, which are included in the present paper, occurred in three steps, as Figure 1 demonstrates and as explained in the following sections.

## Figure 1

*Procedure of selecting articles for the present literature review.*



*Note: The numbers in this figure differ from those in the subsequent Table 1 because articles which appeared in more than one search were subtracted in this figure.*

### Literature Search (Step 1)

This previously stated working definition of student participation guided our search process: In the first step we conducted the literature search according to pre-defined search criteria. Due to the global relevance of the English language, we were interested in the discourse on student participation in English, and due to the linguistic background of the authors, we were interested in the German<sup>4</sup> discourse on the topic.

Therefore, we conducted the literature search using three different search engines. The Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) was chosen to discover the education-related, worldwide discourse about student participation written in English. We conducted this search via ProQuest. We used the Web of Science to incorporate articles whose source was not only in the educational sector but also belonged to other fields such as psychology, sociology or politics. To include the discourse in German, a literature search was also carried out on a German search engine called Fachinformationssystem Bildung (FIS Bildung).

To obtain a comprehensive picture of the discussion about student participation we chose more than one keyword combination and entered the same combinations of keywords in all search engines. Due to the large variety of terms which are used in the field of student participation, it was impossible to search every combination. Therefore, we decided to use (1) one combination of terms that were more general; both in English and in German, (2) a combination of terms located in the area of the UN children's rights in English and in German (United Nations, 1990), and (3) a word combination which covered the democratic education perspective in English and in German. The pre-defined keywords can be retrieved from the left column in Table 1.<sup>5</sup> The keywords were entered in the 'topic' or 'Freitext' field. To capture the discussion about student participation, the search was restricted by time and genre. Only journal articles published from 2014 to 2016 were included. Due to the large number of publications that have appeared in this field so far, a sample had to be drawn, as it was not possible to assess the entire volume of literature. The middle of the last decade was chosen as suitable insofar as the UNCRC then achieved an important goal. With the exception of the United States, which still has not ratified the UNCRC to date, all countries in the world had ratified the UNCRC as of 2015. In this respect, this year is a milestone in the UNCRC's history, and the period chosen covers the time shortly before and after.

The middle column in Table 1, titled "Total in Step 1" shows the results of the literature search for each keyword and search engine combination. Some articles appeared in more than one search. Step 1 yielded 325 different articles which we reviewed for thematic accuracy in the next two steps.

**Table 1**

*Results of the Literature Search of the Six Selected Keyword Combinations which were entered in Three Different Search Engines*

Keywords	Search Engines	Total in Step 1	Included in Step 2	Included in Step 3
"studentparticipation" AND school	ERIC	41	23	16
	Web of Science	81	29	23
	FIS Bildung	5	5	3
Partizipation AND Schule	ERIC	0	-	-
	Web of Science	0	-	-
	FIS Bildung	54	26	17
"student voice" AND school	ERIC	32	24	22
	Web of Science	50	33	32
	FIS Bildung	0	-	-
Mitbestimmung AND Schule	ERIC	0	-	-
	Web of Science	0	-	-
	FIS Bildung	14	12	10
"democratic education"	ERIC	46	35	23

	Web of Science	63	23	20
	FIS Bildung	3	1	0
Demokratiepädagogik	ERIC	0	-	-
	Web of Science	0	-	-
	FIS Bildung	1	0	-
<b>Total</b>		<b>390</b>	<b>211</b>	<b>166</b>

Note: The “total” column shows how many articles met the literature search criteria of Step 1. The columns titled “included” show how many articles met the selection criteria of Steps 2 and 3. Some articles appeared in more than one search, therefore the numbers in this table differ from those in Figure 1 because articles which appeared in more than one search had not yet been subtracted in this table (e.g. the 390 articles which resulted from Step 1 were actually only 325 *different* articles).

### **Selection of Suitable Articles (Steps 2 and 3)**

In Step 2 (see Figure 1 and Table 1) we applied three selection criteria on *title* and *abstract*. The selected papers were then entered into Step 3, where we applied the selection criteria on the *entire article*. Those pieces which met the selection criteria in Step 3 built the sample for further analysis (126 different articles).

The selection criteria in Steps 2 and 3 were as follows: 1. Participation had to include student activities in school which went beyond merely attending school or answering researchers’ questions. Student participation had to refer to a *student’s* influence on *school* issues (e.g., Mager & Nowak, 2012; Thomas, 2007); 2. Primary and secondary schools were targeted, since at these levels the largest part of the compulsory school period can be covered; 3. The article had to be written in either German or English.

### **Elaborating on the Focus of Investigation**

To apply the selection criteria in Step 3 and for further analysis we generated categories as advised by Petticrew and Roberts (2006, pp. 170–177). Therefore, we took systematic notes on every article regarding the following topics: a brief description

of content; the article's regional background; the terms used to describe participation; any frequently cited sources; important insights; context and assessment of suitability. These notes were open coded (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). The further analysis was an iterative and inductive process. Based on the coding, we looked for patterns across the articles and identified categories allowing us to build distinguishable groups. Therefore we compared the coding of the different articles and looked for codes which appeared several times. This took place in the software program MAXQDA and was also discussed at meetings attended by all the authors until consensus was reached. Based on the analysis in MAXQDA and the exchange at the meetings, initial assumptions for patterns were derived. Then we re-examined the apparent patterns systematically across all articles. We identified five distinguishable groups of articles which we then called contexts – respective 'student participation in five contexts'. While 103 articles could be clearly assigned, this was more difficult for 23 of them: In 14 articles, more than one context occurred. Nine articles did not correspond to one of the five contexts and could not be categorized in another way.<sup>6</sup> The five contexts that could be elaborated on are described in the following section.

### **Results – Five Contexts of Student Participation**

Student participation has various meanings and is used in different contexts. This literature review led us inductively to five main contexts<sup>7</sup> in which student participation was discussed: democratic education, participation as children's rights, well-being, learning and school practice (see Table 2 and subsequent sections).



**Table 2***Overview of the Five Contexts of Student Participation*

Contexts of Student Participation	Brief Description
Democratic education (44 articles)	Articles belonging to the context of democratic education focused their arguments on the link between democratic society and education. They explored the issue of what kind of (democratic) education children need to become democratic citizens.
Children's rights (9 articles)	In articles that belong to the context of children's rights participation began with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and examined student participation at the level of the entire school with focus on change especially concerning the hierarchical relationship between students and teachers.
Well-being (10 articles)	Articles that belong to the well-being context had the purpose of better understanding the link between well-being and participation and their respective impact on each other.
Learning (43 articles)	Articles that belong to the learning context established a relation between student participation and learning – seeing learning as an outcome of participation.
School practice (28 articles)	Articles belonging to the context of school practice described concrete practices or examples of participation in schools.

All contexts of participation include articles from different searches, as Table 3 demonstrates. There is no clear correlation between keywords and contexts, but tendencies can be observed.

**Table 3***Crosstab of Keywords and Contexts of Participation*

Keywords	Participation in the context of									
	<i>Democratic education</i>		<i>Children's rights</i>		<i>Well-being</i>		<i>Learning</i>		<i>School practice</i>	
	abs.	in %	abs.	in %	abs.	in %	abs.	in %	abs.	in %
"student participation" AND school	6	12.5	2	20.0	2	20.0	22	48.9	2	5.9
Partizipation AND Schule	4	8.3	2	20.0	1	10.0	2	4.4	8	23.5
"student voice" AND school	8	16.7	5	50.0	7	70.0	15	33.3	13	38.2
Mitbestimmung AND Schule	1	2.1	1	10.0	0	0.0	2	4.4	7	20.6
"Democratic Education"	29	60.4	0	0.0	0	0.0	4	8.9	4	11.8
Demokratie- pädagogik	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0

Note: Absolute numbers of articles and column percentages. Articles can occur from more than one keyword combination and can belong to more than one or none of the five contexts. Thus, the absolute number of articles can vary from the absolute numbers of articles in other tables.

The articles originated in different regions: most of the 126 included articles concerned either North America (51 articles) or Europe (45 articles). Numerous articles came from the continent of Australia (21 articles), a few addressed Asia (11 articles) and one article described an African country. Several articles referred to more than one country or even continent and one (theoretical) article did not refer to a specific country or continent. Since we searched for articles written in English (107 articles) or German (19 articles), it should be noted that the German-speaking countries were more likely to enter our analysis than other non-English speaking countries.<sup>8</sup>

Student participation was discussed in different contexts across the different continents, as can be retrieved from Table 4.<sup>9</sup>

**Table 4***Crosstab of Continents Referred to in Articles and Contexts of Participation*

Continent	Participation in the context of									
	<i>Democratic education</i>		<i>Children's rights</i>		<i>Well-being</i>		<i>Learning</i>		<i>School practice</i>	
	abs.	in %	abs.	in %	abs.	in %	abs.	in %	abs.	in %
Africa	0	0	1	10.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Asia	5	10.9	0	0.0	0	0.0	5	11.9	0	0.0
Australia	5	10.9	2	20.0	3	27.3	10	23.8	5	17.9
Europe	11	23.9	6	60.0	5	45.5	10	23.8	17	60.7
North America	25	54.3	1	10.0	3	27.3	17	40.5	6	21.4
South America	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0

Note: Absolute numbers of articles and column percentages. Articles can concern more than one or none continent and context. Thus, the absolute number of articles can vary from the absolute numbers of articles in other tables.

### **Participation in the Context of Democratic Education**

Numerous articles (44) dealt with the topic 'democracy and education' and focused on how those concepts are linked. Articles referred to a democracy definition and derived from that definition objectives for schools. Some lines of argument suggested principles and governing values of society influenced school life and student participation. Half of the articles originated from the United States (22). Twenty-two articles were empirical, eighteen were theoretical<sup>10</sup>, three articles were answers on scientific papers and one article was a book review. In the following sections, we give

insights into the discussion about participation in the context of democratic education. We do this, on the one hand, from the perspective of the theoretically-oriented articles, which refer primarily to Dewey, but also to Sen and Nussbaum. On the other hand, we summarize empirical papers focusing on participation connected to democratic education in schools.

*Educational theories* – Fifteen articles that emerged from the literature review introduced holistic educational theories based on the concept of democracy of Dewey (1916). Winkelman (2016), who was one of these authors who based their elaboration on Dewey, argues that Dewey's understanding of democracy was based on the concept of vocation. The aim of his ideal of manual occupation was to "engage students in active work directed at learning" (Winkelman, 2016, p. 314). So in this understanding, participation means being actively involved in order to learn. Hawley et al. (2016, p. 7) explain how participation in the sense of democratic education can be implemented in practice: "Encouraging students to make judgments about what needs to be changed, how to go about changing it and taking action to do so, is teaching students to live democratically." Kessel (2015) stressed that politics could not be kept away from schools and suggested a school practice where democratic behavior could be exercised. Children should learn to engage critically in discussions and participate in a pluralistic community. Therefore they are challenged by the opinions of others – students and teachers – and learn how to negotiate: "Democratic citizens must practice critical discussion and collective decision-making with diverse others" (Kessel, 2015, p. 1432).

Duarte (2016), who refers to Nussbaum (e.g. 2002) brings up citizenship education as a theme and refers to education for democracy, which does not depend on school subjects but on the way of teaching: letting and motivating students to think in a critical and autonomous way in order to become an autonomous subject.

A slightly different understanding of participation – and quite a different aim of the participative processes – is raised by DeCesare (2014) who refers to Sen (1979): Active engagement and negotiation play a central role in the educational theory based on Sen's capability approach (DeCesare, 2014). Capability means, rather than functioning and merely reproducing existing ways of living, creating a new altered way of living, where participation comes into effect because new lifestyles must be negotiated between members of a society to become legitimate. Schools can provide many opportunities for "learning that happens through our engagement in political-democratic practices. In other words, it is not preparation for democratic life; it is democratic life itself" (DeCesare, 2014, pp. 163–164).

*Democratic education from an empirical perspective* – Twenty-two articles discuss participation within the context of democratic education from an empirical perspective. Quite different conceptual understandings of student participation and student voice coincide here. There are understandings which are very close to what the authors referring to Dewey (see beginning of the section “Educational theories”) share. So for example Bradshaw (2014) states: At school, students learn ‘in miniature’ the skills they will need later as citizens: “deciding what to study or what game to play is precisely a way to practice, in a low-stakes setting, the skills students will need in the future” (Bradshaw, 2014, p. 3). So, students learn how to participate by exercising these skills in everyday practices (Reimers et al., 2014). Furthermore, there is a group of authors who relate participation in the sense of democratic education to the classroom and study rather specific features, such as that students should be able to communicate their needs (Diera, 2016; Thurn 2014b), and should be heard (Pereira et al., 2014), that students are involved in social interactions (Niia et al., 2015) or that participation means transparency and equal distribution of power between all participants (Korkmaz & Erden, 2014). Other articles conceive participation in a larger context. In these articles, participation in school is not related to the classroom, but means involvement at the level of the entire school. In the concept of Rutkowski et al. (2014), student involvement and autonomy refer to having influence at the organizational level and in structural decisions. Leung et al. (2014) use participation to describe students taking an active political role in school affairs and, more specifically, allowing them to participate in the school development plan and school rules, among other things. The width of conceptual understandings in this context is illustrated by Pomar and Pinya (2015), who describe participation as a continuum that begins with deliberation, with students acting as informants and spokespersons, and extends to shared responsibility among students and adults: “managing both organizational and curricular issues in the classroom, of the cycle and of the whole school” (Pomar & Pinya, 2015, p. 114).

*Summary* – Student participation is described with different terms and concepts. Participation in the context of democratic education refers to the role of education in a democratic society and the question of how democratic education functions. Democracy is assigned to education; it is “a mode of associated living” (Quay, 2016, p. 1024) and school is a suitable place to exercise and learn those capabilities. There is also an important parallel between education and democracy: they both need “continual rethinking because education, as Dewey noted with democracy, is never something fixed” (Kessel, 2015, p. 1025).

## **Participation in the Context of Children's Rights**

Nine of the selected articles emphasized the judicial aspect of student participation. They referred mostly to Article 12, paragraph 1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which states that children must have the opportunity to express their views and these views must be considered (United Nations, 1990, p. 5). The articles which focused on participation as a right originated mostly from European countries. They had at least three things in common and differed on one point, as explained in the following paragraphs.

The first commonality was that these articles concerned the entire school. Articles which referred to children's rights often included examples which applied to the whole school– as opposed to those at the individual class level. Students should be active, involved community members (Males et al., 2014; Niia et al., 2015) and they should disclose their view about school affairs and decisions (Mitra et al., 2014; Quinn & Owen, 2016). Student participation can contribute to school improvement (Fleming, 2015; Nelson, 2015; Posti-Ahokas & Lehtomäki, 2014).

The second commonality was that the articles discussed the question of hierarchical order. Most of the articles distanced themselves from the hierarchical order traditionally found in schools. A new hierarchical order (Mitra et al., 2014) was mentioned which identified students and teachers as partners (Nelson, 2015; Quinn & Owen, 2016) with equal rights (Hartwig & Laubenstein, 2014), who communicate at eye level (Edler, 2014). Certain authors even described a role reversal where adults were learning from students (Posti-Ahokas & Lehtomäki, 2014).

The third commonality within the articles was their focus on change: the goal of participation is achieving change (Mitra et al., 2014). Students should improve school – as described previously – and their individual learning (Fleming, 2015; Nelson, 2015).

The point on which the articles differed, concerned the conception of student participation. While most authors referred to different conceptions of student participation, two groups of definitions emerged. One group of authors understood participation as having a say and being heard (Posti-Ahokas & Lehtomäki, 2014). Students are able to make informed decisions, choose their own learning focus and express their point of view (Quinn & Owen, 2016, Hartwig & Laubenstein, 2014). The other group of authors did not describe participation in concrete actions. Instead, they referred to participation as a continuum which comprised all stages from informing students to affording them power (Edler, 2014), partly with reference to the common model of the ladder of participation as designed by Hart (1992; Males et al., 2014).

To *summarize*, student participation from the point of view of children's rights takes place at the school level and points to change. The goal is to reduce existing hierarchical differences between teachers and students and to foster partnerships. There is no common definition or understanding of student participation. Instead, two types of definitions were observed. Student participation is either seen as concrete engagement or as a continuum where participation can take place on different levels.

### **Participation in the Context of Well-Being**

Ten of the papers explicitly explored the connection between well-being and participation. Eight of them were empirical, introducing a study or providing a review of several empirical studies. They focused primarily on a specific intervention (e.g. programs for well-being or forms of participation such as action groups or a community forum) to change school life and school climate. The articles originated in Europe, North America and Australia. Several papers covered case studies of activities or programs in schools where participation had been implemented (e.g. Baroutsis, Mills et al. 2016).

There was a shared understanding in these papers that participation has an impact on students' well-being, health or social behavior in schools. The authors assumed that promoting participation would foster an individual's well-being as well as the social climate of the entire school, but with different theoretical or methodological approaches. Student participation in the context of well-being seems to be mostly defined and studied in terms of student voice (e.g., Anderson & Graham, 2016; Baroutsis, Mills, et al., 2016; Fletcher et al., 2015; Kostenius & Bergmark, 2016), having a say and being heard (Baroutsis, Mills, et al., 2016; Thurn, 2014a) or involved in school life (e.g. Baroutsis, Mills, et al., 2016; Fletcher et al., 2015; Niia et al., 2015). Authors often proclaimed that students should have a voice to feel they are an active part of the school community (e.g. Baroutsis, Mills, et al., 2016; Niia et al., 2015; Thurn, 2014a). They argued that students are in the center of schools (Morse & Allensworth, 2015) and their voices and active engagement should be heard as a resource to improve schools and learning (Anderson & Graham, 2016).

The theoretical background in those articles varied. Certain authors used democratic education, children's rights or social justice as an argumentative context (Baroutsis, Mills, et al., 2016; Niia et al., 2015). Others emphasized the students' viewpoints as important perspectives on school improvement and school life and as a prerequisite to promote students' health or well-being (Fletcher et al., 2015; Hawe et al., 2015; Kostenius & Bergmark, 2016; Thurn, 2014b).

*All in all*, participation in the context of well-being highlighted the link between the two fields (well-being/health and participation) and their impact on each other. The



papers shared an understanding of participation as having a say and communicating views, and emphasized the importance of students being heard and taken seriously or recognized, according to concepts of student voice (Cook-Sather, 2006; Mitra, 2004), recognition theory (Honneth, 1995), self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1993) or democratic education (Dewey, 1916).

### **Participation in the Context of Learning**

Forty-three articles were found that belonged to participation in the context of learning. When comparing the articles one important point we identified was that they referred to learning on different levels: student learning, teacher learning and learning of schools as organizations. The last two aspects were discussed in articles from North America and Australia while there were contributions from all over the world which mentioned student learning.

*Student participation and student learning* – The link between student participation and student learning was found in various articles with reference to different approaches. One of them was self-assessment (Beutel & Beutel, 2014; Bourke, 2016; Panadero et al., 2014; Sandholtz & Ringstaff, 2014; Tong & Adamson, 2015): student participation could take place by writing self-reflections in the form of journals, a teacher asking for feedback from students after lessons or the school asking for a student's perception of school-based-assessments.

Another approach is agency, which was seen as an instrument to empower students as active and self-determined subjects. Jackson (2016) described that students “appreciated self-directing their learning experiences in three ways: through flexibility, especially of time, through freedom – especially from structure –, and through self-regulation of when, where, what, how and why one engaged in education” (Jackson, 2016, p. 3). Agency is closely connected to autonomy, which was defined by Jackson (2016, p. 2) as “the ability to make one's own decisions”. Student participation connotes that students are informed about the options they have and can decide about their learning by themselves (Baroutsis, Mills, et al., 2016).

Another perspective emerged when student participation was tied to communication and as such seen as a collective activity. Here learning was conceived as a process of communication mainly undertaken by students: when they engage in class in processes such as sense-making and reasoning (Reisman & Fogo, 2016, p. 192).

*Student participation as a learning opportunity for teachers* – Articles concerning student participation as a learning opportunity for teachers highlighted the potential that

lies within student participation for curricula design. Howley and Tannehill (2014) mentioned the effects for students that occur when teachers provide them with the opportunity to decide on the curriculum. Doing so increases ownership and responsibility and therefore influences the teacher as well because the teaching itself is facilitated. Bourke and Loveridge (2016) discussed the chance for teacher development when they listen to the students' voices. Kane and Chimwayange (2014) illustrated how this can be realized: students and teachers begin a dialog with the consequence that "the teachers were motivated to discover if what they were doing in their classroom was promoting student learning and if not, to consider alternative approaches informed by the voices of their students" (Kane & Chimwayange, 2014, p. 6).

While most authors referred to 'student voice' Baroutsis, McGregor et al. (2016) employed the term 'pedagogic voice' defined as "young people's active engagement, participation and voice in the areas of teaching, learning and the curriculum" (Baroutsis, McGregor, et al., 2016, p. 125). This concept underlined a shift that occurs – pedagogy is not only in adults' hands, students are becoming involved in core pedagogical questions. Teachers must actively provide choices and should listen to the voices of students which calls for a new understanding of the role of teachers themselves.

*Student participation serving to improve schools* – A broader perspective of student participation within the field of learning was found in articles that referred to the learning of the school as an organization. The authors stressed the benefits of student participation but pointed to the challenge of it as well. In this context Damiani (2014) mentioned the special role of school leaders who should take the voice of the students into account, respecting it when applying school leadership. Downes et al. (2016) gave an example of how students can be active at their school and contribute to the learning of the school organization: when students engage in projects to implement new media technologies in classrooms they serve to improve the school at large.

*Summary* – All in all within the context of learning, participation refers to learning on three different levels: student participation can enhance the learning of students, is seen as a learning opportunity for teachers and can contribute to the improvement of schools as organizations.

### **Participation in the Context of School Practice**

Twenty-eight articles introduced the issue of participation from the context of school practice. Participation is seen as related to concrete situations or processes of everyday school life. The goal of these participation processes is not primarily to improve learning but to have the opportunity to shape school life. Articles considering school practice were mostly written in Europe (17 out of 28).

It is conspicuous in this context that participation is defined primarily by active behavior. Students collaborate to implement their own ideas, join conversations, and take part in decision-making (e.g. Brückmann & Lippert, 2014). References to passive forms of participation were less frequent. Only a few articles also defined participation as becoming informed, taking notice of students and partaking (e.g. Vockerodt, 2014). Some authors emphasized their critical view of contemporary school practice concerning the implementation of student participation (e.g. Edler, 2014). Apart from these critical perspectives, the context of school practice can be divided into three sub-themes, as explained in the following paragraphs.

*Participation as an attitude* – A few articles investigated people's attitude about participation. Definitions varied from informing students to children's self-determination. On this edge of the spectrum, participation was connected to the view that no one knows what is good for children except children themselves (Vockerodt, 2014).

Participation as an attitude also raises the question of the relationship between students and teachers: students and teachers are seen as partners (Nelson, 2015), being of equal value (Klaffke, 2014), having equal rights (Hartwig & Laubenstein, 2014) or "shared power and voice" (Zion et al., 2015, p. 920). Haug (2014) stressed that the 'school climate' being based on positive attitudes of teachers towards student participation, enabling students to engage in school and take part is crucial. Another author highlighted that being able to participate does not depend on the competences a child has, but on the chances offered to the child (Vockerodt, 2014). In summary, having a participative attitude is the basic principle for lived participation in everyday life at school.

*Institutionalized forms of participation* – Another group of articles described formalized or institutionalized modes of participation referring to forms of participation such as class council and school parliaments. The latter is also called "represented democracy" (Pereira et al., 2014, p. 941). Brückmann and Lippert (2014) portrayed experiences with additional forms of institutionalized participation such as student involvement in school activities, reflection during class as well as project-based learning. Taines (2014) pointed out that "when the administrators discussed student voice in their schools, they uniformly pointed to formal student leadership" (Taines, 2014, p. 163). Mitra et al. (2014) illustrated the so-called carpet time democracy which "describes a form of classroom-level practice [... where] students sit together, usually in a circle, and talk about a variety of academic/non-academic topics or concerns" (Mitra et al., 2014, p. 294). In sum, there was a large variety of institutionalized forms of participation, which can sometimes be formalized, imitating adult democratic institutions and other times can be non-formalized, inspiring interactions and dialog.

*Innovative approaches of participation* – Several papers presented innovative approaches of how participation was enabled and how an alternative educational environment could be created (e.g. Baroutsis, Mills, et al., 2016). In one school for example each student decided on their own what to work on all day long while decisions concerning others were made by the community comprised of students and teachers (Hartwig & Laubenstein, 2014). So in sum, participation included conversations with others as well as considerations of self.

*Summary* – In the context of *school practice*, participation adopted institutionalized or innovative forms or was seen as an attitude, especially considering the relationship between teachers and students. Certain authors expressed a critical view concerning the lack of participation as such.

### **The Relevance of Language**

With the five contexts presented, one overarching aspect should be raised: the language of the reviewed articles. We mentioned that 19 German-language articles and 107 English-language articles were included in the literature review. Eighteen of 19 articles published in German referred to Germany; one article additionally referred to Switzerland; another article referred to Austria. These countries do not appear in the consulted articles in reviewed English articles. The articles in English referred to non-German speaking areas in the world. So, while the articles in German only refer to German-speaking countries, the English-language articles refer to various countries around the world – not only English-speaking countries but others including Spain, Norway, China, Turkey and Mexico.

Table 5 shows the distribution of articles published in German respective to English according to the five contexts. What is conspicuous about the German-language articles is the following: The largest group of articles written in German discuss student participation in the context of school practice (57.9 %). The second largest group discuss it in the context of learning (26.3 %). The articles written in German are thus very practice-oriented and were rarely placed in a larger context such as democracy education, children's rights, or the discourse around well-being. For the articles in German, the small number of cases must be taken into account. Looking at the articles in English, the following becomes apparent: There are two rather large groups of articles. The first discuss student participation with a focus on democratic education (40.2 %), the second puts the focus on learning (35.5 %). So, in the English discussion of student participation, both wide-ranging as well as very concrete and practical aspects of student participation are discussed.

The analysis of which understandings of participation were used in German respective to English also shows some differences: In the German articles, co-determination, student involvement and just participation are frequently used concepts to describe the phenomenon of participation. In the English articles, participation without further explanation, student voice/having a say, involvement and democratic education are the most used terms to describe the phenomenon of participation.

**Table 5***Contexts of Participation and Language of the Reviewed Articles*

Participation in the context of	Language of the articles			
	<i>Articles published in German</i>		<i>Articles published in English</i>	
	abs.	in %	abs.	in %
Democratic education	1	5.3	43	40.2
Children's rights	2	10.5	7	6.5
Well-being	1	5.3	9	8.4
Learning	5	26.3	38	35.5
School practice	11	57.9	17	15.9

Note: 100 % equals 19 articles in the German language respective to 107 articles in the English language. Reading example: 5.3 % of the articles written in German discuss student participation in the context of democratic education.

## Discussion

In the discussion section, we examine findings from the five contexts which resulted from the systematic literature review. Following the main research question of the article – How is the term student participation and its (putative) synonyms described in the current scientific literature and what are emerging patterns in the reviewed articles? – we first depict and discuss how the authors of the reviewed articles describe student participation. This is followed by a section in which we discuss key commonalities between the identified contexts – which result in three *characteristics* of student participation. Afterward some thoughts in terms of an overarching discussion are raised and limitations and future research needs are proposed. After that, the article concludes with some final thoughts.

### Meaning of Participation within the Five Contexts

In this section we provide a summary of how the authors *within* each context describe student participation, based on the content of the previous “Results – Five Contexts of Student Participation” section.

As anticipated, there was no uniform use of the student participation concept within the five contexts. Instead, there were several understandings, uses and definitions of student participation within each participation context. However, patterns were observed, which will be presented in the following sections.

Participation in the context of *democratic education* approached the topic to a large extent on a macro level. It was seen as essential to become a citizen in a democratic society and that ability should be learned in school: In this view, participation means being involved in discussions and being able to voice a critical opinion (Kessel, 2015). Since democracy is never complete, schools must also remain open for change (Hyde & LaPrad, 2015). According to Dewey (1916), referenced by Winkelman (2016) and others, the best way to learn participation is to participate. As such, active engagement and negotiation are important means of participation (DeCesare, 2014). Another approach to the concept of participation in the context of democratic education is shown by the empirical articles: Participation is understood as having a voice (Diera, 2016; Thurn 2014b), and being heard (Pereira et al., 2014), involvement in social interactions (Niia et al., 2015) and transparency and equal distribution of power between students and teachers (Korkmaz & Erden, 2014). Furthermore, participation is described as a continuum starting with deliberation and raising to shared responsibility among students and adults (Pomar & Pinya, 2015),

In the context of *children's rights* participation meant having a say and being actively involved, for example in learning decisions (e.g., Fleming, 2015; Mitra et al., 2014; Niia et al., 2015; Quinn & Owen, 2016). Also, participation could be described more generally as a continuum (Edler, 2014; Males et al., 2014), for example in reference to Hart's ladder of participation (Hart, 1992). In this context, participation often coincides with responsibility and power and therefore with modified roles for teachers and students.

In the context of *well-being*, participation is viewed in the sense of voice understood as expressing views and having a say (e.g., Anderson & Graham, 2016; Baroutsis, Mills, et al., 2016; Fletcher et al., 2015; Kostenius & Bergmark, 2016). Additionally, authors highlighted the importance of listening to each other and taking students' voices seriously (Baroutsis, Mills, et al., 2016; Thurn, 2014a). Involvement in school life (e.g. Baroutsis, Mills, et al., 2016; Fletcher et al., 2015; Niia et al., 2015) and active engagement (Anderson & Graham, 2016) are also understandings of participation mentioned in the context of well-being. All authors agreed about the connection between participation and well-being.

In the context of *learning*, student participation, also called pedagogic voice (Baroutsis, McGregor et al., 2016), referred to the learners' involvement in tasks that were formerly carried out by teachers, such as planning learning process (e.g. Jackson, 2016), assessment (e.g. Beutel & Beutel, 2014) and curriculum planning (Howley & Tannehill, 2014). Participation also embraces sense-making and reasoning (Reisman & Fogo, 2016). In addition to these understandings of participation in the context of learning, two tendencies are conspicuous. On the one hand, participation in the context of learning is quickly associated with self-determination (e.g. Jackson, 2016) and on the other hand, student participation is often presented from the teacher's or principal's perspective: The adults should listen to the students' voice (Baroutsis, McGregor, et al., 2016) and take it into account (Damiani, 2014) and furthermore, they should increase the enablement of ownership and responsibility (Howley and Tannehill, 2014). Participation in this context had mainly positive connotations and was seen as an occasion for learning – learning for all people involved: students, teachers and the whole school as an organization.

Participation in the context of *school practice* signaled transparency (Haug, 2014), opportunities for influence (Nelson, 2015) as well as chances which teachers offer to the students and responsibility assumed by students (Vockerodt, 2014). It referred to schools with school parliaments and class councils, where collective decision processes occurred, and students hold some power (Brückmann & Lippert, 2014). All in all, in the context of school practice, student participation is seen as an active behavior,

where students collaborate, are engaged in conversations and are involved in decision-making processes (e.g. Brückmann & Lippert, 2014).

This brief overview of the meaning of student participation within the five contexts illustrates the wide variety of its different characterizations. Furthermore, it demonstrates that most concepts and terms occur in more than one context.

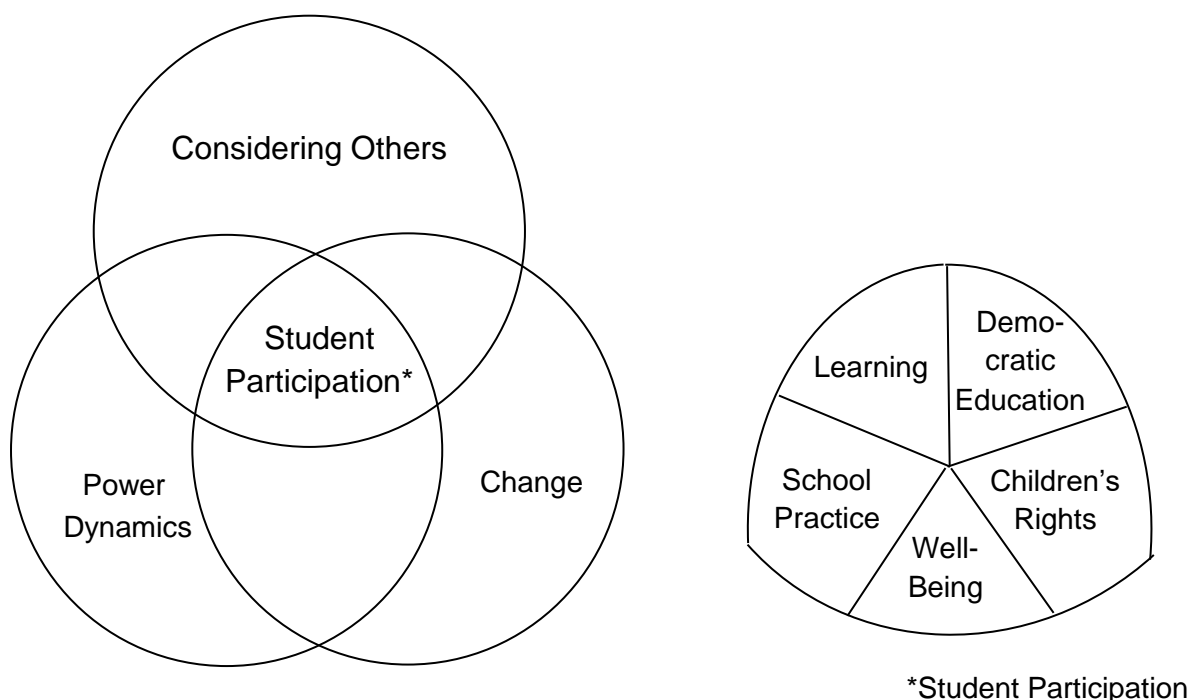
### **Three Characteristics of Student Participation**

The five contexts can be designated as emerging patterns of the discussion about student participation in the reviewed articles. Examining the commonalities *between* the five contexts brings a further pattern to light: three characteristics of student participation. In all five contexts we found the same three superordinate components of the concept of student participation: *considering others*, *power dynamics* and *change*. Thus we conclude that these three characteristics distinguish the discussion around student participation and constitute its conceptual frame. Figure 2 illustrates these patterns – the five contexts and three characteristics of student participation.



**Figure 2**

*Student participation is characterized by considering others, power dynamics and change. It is discussed in at least five contexts: democratic education, children's rights, well-being, learning and school practice.*



### ***Considering others***

Considering others occurred in terms of social interactions (Niia et al., 2015; Thurn, 2014b), active participation (e.g., Fleming, 2015; Fletcher et al., 2015; Kostenius & Bergmark, 2016; Mitra et al., 2014) and having a say (e.g., Anderson & Graham, 2016). Teachers considered a student's view so they could compare it with their own and obtain feedback from the students about their teaching (Tong & Adamson, 2015). Considering others in the sense of negotiating among students and between students and teachers was a basic and often-discussed principle of democracy (e.g., Howe, 2014; Hyde & LaPrad, 2015; Kessel, 2015). In school, students negotiated and discussed procedures (Reisman & Fogo, 2016) and different approaches to solve a task (Götze, 2014). Students and teachers negotiated about ideas, values and needs (Mitra et al., 2014). In some cases, as in the context of democratic education, negotiation between students and teachers or negotiation between multiple students has been

explicitly separated from self-determination, because self-determination, unlike negotiation, exclusively pursues self-interests (e.g., Meens, 2016).

Altogether, the articles demonstrated that student participation is connected to the idea of considering others. Decisions concerning others are taken by a group and not an individual person.

### ***Power dynamics***

In schools, considering others often included the students' interaction with teachers, school leaders and other adults working in schools. A second characteristic of student participation thus became apparent: power dynamics. This characteristic referred to a hierarchical relation between students and adults who were not considered as equal per se within schools. The concept of participation implied finding an appropriate way to deal with an unequal distribution of power: a conscious strategy to reduce hierarchies and encourage students with less power to participate.

This idea mirrored the following conceptions of power dynamics within the five contexts. In the context of democratic education there was a strong notion that democracy was connected to power – the ideal to attain was a fair distribution of that power. That ideal should also apply to schools, where students should be empowered (e.g. Hyde & LaPrad, 2015). Other authors argued for equal rights for students and teachers and believed that teachers could learn from students as well (e.g., Hartwig & Laubenstein, 2014; Nelson, 2015; Posti-Ahokas & Lehtomäki, 2014; Quinn & Owen, 2016).

A new hierarchical order where students and teachers communicate at eye level (Edler, 2014) was postulated in all five contexts. Students exercised ownership which meant that school was not determined by teachers alone. Instead, adults and youth were both responsible for student learning and school life. Students and teachers shared voice and power (Zion et al., 2015) – meaning that both co-determined school life. Nevertheless, several articles illustrated that the underlying hierarchy could not be completely dissolved (e.g. Brückmann & Lippert, 2014; Hantzopoulos, 2015; Vockerodt, 2014), although other articles provided concrete examples of how traditional power dynamics in school could be turned around (e.g. Mitra et al., 2014; Posti-Ahokas & Lehtomäki, 2014; Zion et al., 2015).

Altogether, power dynamics was a topic mentioned in all contexts and as such was linked to the concept of participation. Furthermore, power dynamics require special attention. Thus, the autonomy antinomy<sup>11</sup> (Helsper, 2004) is essentially a problem in schools; however, this problem becomes even more acute when it comes to

participation, since here, too, teachers should create an offer, but at the same time cannot allow total freedom since they have other obligations like providing safety for all students or adhering to the curriculum. The question of fair distribution of power in school was not ultimately answered.

### **Change**

Questioning power dynamics and calling for a new hierarchical order within schools were connected to the third characteristic of student participation: change. The central notion in the context of democratic education was that democracy is an unfinished concept and therefore is constantly undergoing change. School as the place to learn democracy is therefore also marked by change (Kessel, 2015). The concept of participation referred to students as change agents who define if and what needs to be changed and who implements that change (e.g. Hawley et al., 2016). Other examples of change that resulted from student participation were found in the context of learning: participation caused ownership and responsibility (Hawley et al., 2016) and modified the roles of student and teacher.

Many articles that linked the concept of participation to the idea of change presented change as a desired but not forcefully proven consequence of participation. In the context of children's rights, participation was a concept to achieve change (Mitra et al., 2014). In the contexts of well-being and learning, participation had a normative connotation and was used as a tool for improvement and development (Kostenius & Bergmark, 2016). And finally, the context of school practice pointed to the change that the practice of participation itself had undergone: in addition to the institutionalized forms of participation, innovative forms emerged. A critical view of the current reality of participation in the context of school practice implicated a requirement for further change.

Altogether, participation was seen as a never-ending concept, as a dimension without a final point. Participation means to constantly negotiate and initiate a change.

### **Relation of contexts and characteristics**

Each characteristic of student participation was found in every one of the five contexts – but with different emphasis. Table 6 shows the intensity of the three characteristics of participation for each of the contexts. The shading, which is based on the coding of the descriptions in the results chapter on the five contexts, indicates how strongly emphasized a characteristic is in the respective context. The darker the field, the more prominently the characteristic is represented in the literature of the relevant context. Power dynamics seems to be a very strong characteristic of student

participation. Democratic education is most strongly characterized by considering others; well-being by change.

**Table 6**

*Contexts and Characteristics of Participation*

Context   Characteristics	Considering others	Power dynamics	Change
Democratic education			
Children's rights			
Well-being			
Learning			
School practice			

Note: The darker the field, the more prominently the characteristic is represented in the literature of the relevant context

***Further Thoughts about the Three Characteristics***

Although the three characteristics result from the analysis of each of the five contexts, there are at least two questions remaining which should be discussed from a critical point of view: (1) Is it still participation if one (or two) of the three characteristics is missing? (2) Are these three characteristics really characteristics of participation or are they simply characteristics that describe interactions per se?

*Concerning the first point:* The authors of this paper take the position that participation only exists if the process is accompanied by considering others, power dynamics and change. Therefore they refer to the combination of the existing definitions, and the fact, that in each of the five contexts these three aspects occurred. For example, in the context of school practice, according to Brückmann and Lippert

(2014) students collaborate to implement ideas, have conversations, and take part in decision-making, and according to Zion et al. (2015) students and teachers share power and voice. The combination of these two descriptions of participation results in the finding that student participation is always connected to the topics of considering others (as Brückmann and Lippert (2014) as well as Zion et al. (2015) mention), power dynamics (what Zion et al. (2015) point out) and change (as Brückmann and Lippert (2014) show concerning implementing ideas). All in all, the question of whether it is still participation if one (or two) of the three characteristics is missing, can at present only be answered with ‘it depends on which definitions one references’. So, to continue the above mentioned example, Brückmann and Lippert (2014) would most likely answer the question saying “yes” since their understanding of participation includes considering others and change, but not power dynamics. However, the summary of the numerous definitions shows that these three aspects are closely related to participation.

*Concerning the second point:* Participation is always interaction. But is interaction always participation? Interactions are processes between two or more people. Therefore, reference is generally made to each other and usually in interactions others are considered. We say ‘generally’ and ‘usually’ because one can also speak of interaction if the participants do not actually refer to each other. Interaction can be a one-way, power-based communication, like giving an order and not caring for the needs of others or talking past each other. In everyday interactions, for example a visit to the doctor or shopping, the roles are usually clear. There is generally no need for negotiation or reduction of power differences. Moreover, interactions do not necessarily have the goal of achieving change. Interactions can also be about reproduction rather than transformation (see DeCesare, 2014 and Sen, 1979 in the section on participation in the context of democratic education). Thus, we argue that participation is always interaction – but a specific form of interaction. So, if the interaction is accompanied by considering others, power dynamics and change, we speak of participation. The converse, on the other hand, does not apply: Not every interaction is also participation. The characteristics we have identified – considering others, power dynamics and change – help to distinguish between interaction and participation.

### ***Parallels to Recent Literature and Other Literature Reviews***

The three characteristics from our literature review show strong similarities with the findings of Pearce and Wood (2019), which presented requirements for student voice initiatives based on a literature review. According to their results, there are four conditions to be met, so that young people are able to initiate the transformation of education. The first is dialog. It should not be spoken for or about children, but with children and young people. Particularly high awareness of the omnipresent power

relations is needed, those must be permanently flattened. Here we see similarities with our characteristic 'power dynamics'. The second condition is the respectful relationship between the generations, since a dialog between teachers and children/young people can only develop when adults recognize that young people are capable of expressing their opinions. The third condition aims at collectivity and inclusion: the school community should strive to include all voices, even those perceived to be difficult or inappropriate. This aspect reflects our characteristic 'considering others'. By fulfilling the three previous conditions, young people are given the tools that make transgression possible. According to the authors, "student voice initiatives should be dialogic, intergenerational, collective and inclusive and transgressive" (Pearce & Wood, 2019, p. 118). In their understanding participation of students in school is an important technique to reduce social inequalities through the transformation of the education system. In this way, change – our third characteristic – is genuinely embedded in their framework. Those parallels underscore our findings which highlight the importance of similar elements of student participation in schools.

Power dynamics and change are also very prominent topics in the literature review about the role of student voice by Mitra (2018). She sees a "particular challenge of student voice work due to the re-shifting of power balances and the inherent counternormative nature of youth–adult partnerships compared to traditional teaching settings" (Mitra, 2018, p. 481). Considering others also emerges from her explanations. Although her article has slightly a different focus – student voice in school reforms in high schools – than this one, similar themes result. There is other current literature in which the three characteristics or some of them are addressed as well. For example, the study by Mayes et al. (2021), which deals with the Teach the Teacher project, i.e. the use of the student voice for teacher professional learning, shows a shift in power distribution – together with considering each other and change – because students give teachers feedback on their teaching, which was evaluated as very beneficial: "Student voice offers real opportunities to support this kind of authentic and generative learning. It can form the basis for dialogical, creative experimentation with diverse and just pedagogies for unknown educational futures" (Mayes et al., 2021, p. 208). This shift in power in favor of students may also be initially troubling for teachers – not all teachers were convinced of the value of student voice (Black & Mayes, 2020). Those who were, on the other hand, "draw energy and inspiration from their work with students" (Black & Mayes, 2020, p. 1076). However, the attitude of teachers plays an important role: Ingrained beliefs about the students' abilities, or certain attitudes of teachers, make change difficult (Gillet-Swan & Sargeant, 2019).

Different approaches and perceptions regarding power dynamics emerge from the various articles. For example, as Charteris and Smardon (2019b), recommend, it is

important to look more closely when students are caught in power dynamics and it is not possible for them to influence what happens at school. Implicit in this are the same concerns that Lundy raises in her well-known essay entitled "student voice is not enough": it is not enough for students to have a voice, but they must also be heard and their concerns must be acted upon to the extent possible (Lundy, 2007). Transferred to the case of Charteris and Smardon (2019b), this would mean that it is not enough to allow students to have a voice, but they must be given real opportunities for school decision-making.

Taking a look to the change characteristic of student participation, it becomes visible that change can have different scopes and affect different domains. The reviewed articles presented in this paper often focus on learning and the class-context. So, one push in this area is the personalization of learning: teachers and schools should be able to react to the individual learning needs of students and support students to take responsibility for their own learning (Gillett-Swan & Sargeant, 2018). One convincing argument supporting this driver is that students are experts in their learning and processes taking place in school and are therefore a precious source of information. Authors claim that students have a specific perspective and insight into school that adults do not possess (Levin, 2000; Thomson, 2011). Student voice or participation therefore does not have to be limited to class activities but can be used school-wide. The latter idea is also shared by Charteris and Smardon (2019a), who addressed different dimensions and intentions of student voice and mention, that student voice is often used to improve school.

All in all, then, the three derived characteristics of participation – considering other, power dynamics and change – emerge not only in the systematic literature review of the mid-2010s. They are also important themes in current discussions of student participation and student voice.

### **Overall Model and Further Points of Discussion**

This literature review demonstrates that there are different ways to conceptualize student participation as, for example, voicing proposals, ideas, needs or views as well as being actively involved in school and class events. It also shows that participation is not discussed with the same intensity in all five contexts. Democratic education, for example, is frequently discussed in the literature and is correspondingly well documented. Democracy is a central topic in society, especially in the United States. Therefore, it is not surprising that there are many publications about it. Participation in the context of children's rights, on the other hand, is discussed on a rather small scale. It is particularly noticeable that participation from this perspective is hardly discussed in the United States – which is understandable in the sense that the United States has not

ratified the UN children's rights. Well-being also seems to be a marginal topic of participation or possibly a marginal topic in schools generally, since there is an overwhelming discourse about student performance and less attention is paid to “soft” factors like well-being, belonging to school (Riley, 2019) and participation. In any case, the authors of this paper believe it deserves further attention. The learning context is again an area in which participation is widely discussed. School learning is a frequently studied field, on which much research and writing has been done. And since it is the main content and goal of school, it also makes sense that participation is discussed in the context of learning. With respect to school practice, there are also numerous articles related to participation. These articles appear both in rigorous academic journals and in more practical ones. So this is an area that is being discussed in different fields by different people.

While most of the articles could be clearly assigned to a context, 14 articles, were assigned to more than one context. Even though some articles connect two or more contexts, there is no context which always occurs together with the identical other one. Therefore, we would say that despite certain overlaps with other contexts, the contexts also stand on their own and, in particular, represent separate topics.

Systemizing student participation did lead to three further characteristics: *Considering others*, *power dynamics* and *change*. They seem to be distinctive, inevitable and constitutive for participation. They are not completely independent from each other but are distinguishable.

Bringing the two found patterns – the five contexts and the three characteristics – together, a simple concept of student participation results (see also Figure 2 at the beginning of the previous section “Three Characteristics of Student Participation”). This very basic model can serve as a frame for focused, topic-centered discussions. So, researchers as well as practitioners can use the model to narrow down which participation context they apply when talking about participation. The characteristics should help to distinguish participation from non-participation in a simple and practicable way; namely, by using the three characteristics to identify whether all three conditions for student participation are met.

### **Limitations and Research Desiderata**

Our literature review covers the English and German written participation discussion. The 126 reviewed articles originated mainly in North America and Europe. Several articles concerned the continent of Australia and a few Asia. Only one article considered Africa and none South America. Not all contexts of student participation



were equally represented on all continents. Even considering the language bias, a satisfactory explanation for this result requires further study.

Since our research encompasses primary and secondary education, it would be beneficial to do a literature review on the same topic focusing on tertiary education.

Although the keywords for the literature search were chosen consciously, some articles which also contribute to the current discussion of student participation might not have been found due to the lack of additional keywords, for instance *pupil participation*<sup>12</sup> or *students' empowerment*. It would be interesting to repeat this literature review with related keywords. Hence it would be possible to confirm the presented results – five contexts and three characteristics of student participation to structure the current discussion– or to expand them.

In order to trace changes in the discussion on student participation and what they mean, such literature reviews should be completed every few years. Future research could empirically investigate whether the three characteristics (concerning others, power dynamics and change) can be confirmed as constituting components of participation and whether they provide a useful concept to expand student participation. Furthermore, future studies could ask if there are additional characteristics relevant to student participation.

### **Final Considerations and Invitation**

Our literature review shows plurality in the use of the terms. The concept of student participation is a multifaceted, commonly used and important topic in schools. Therefore, a well-grounded theoretical and empirical embedding is unavoidable. This literature review provides a possible structuring of the discussion surrounding student participation: The characteristics considering others, power dynamics and change show common characteristics of student participation and contribute to the unification of the different terms about student participation. At this point we would be very content to begin a dialog on what other authors think about those characteristics. Are they sufficient and reasonable or are there any additional characteristics to consider? The five contexts constitute frames for focused, topic-centered discussions about student participation and provide an overview of the current discussion about student participation from the point of view of *democratic education*, *children's rights*, *well-being*, *learning* and *school practice*. So, the presented structuring possibility should give orientation in the field of participation and student voice. It offers a palette of contexts that can be used to designate about which area of participation one speaks. It also offers three characteristics that can be used to understand whether an interaction is really participation. And because the goal should be to implement participation in

schools consciously, comprehensively and embedded in everyday school life, the article can also serve as a collection of ideas – for teachers or students who read this and perhaps come across areas in which they themselves experience little student participation and student voice. In this sense, a side product of this article is a collection of ideas for possible areas of participation. After all, it is about being able to conduct successful lessons from which all participants can benefit, and which are understood as the work of all participants.

### Online Discussion Questions

To what extent do the three characteristics of student participation presented here – considering others, power dynamics and change – align with your practical experiences of everyday school life but also in research projects? Do you think the three characteristics are necessary and sufficient building blocks to describe student participation and student voice? Are there other additional characteristics that should be considered?

Are you as researcher or policy maker aware of other contexts in which student participation or student voice is discussed?

What other terms would need to be included in such a literature review? Do you think other contexts or characteristics of student participation would emerge if additional terms were added?

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<sup>1</sup>The authors of this paper are researchers at the Center for School Improvement at Zurich University of Teacher Education and conducted a research project about student participation from 2016 until 2019 in Switzerland where they investigated in a mixed methods design how student participation is perceived and realized in everyday school life, the teachers' and school leaders' understanding of and attitude towards student participation as well as school improvement processes connected to student participation (see [www.phzh.ch/zse](http://www.phzh.ch/zse) and <https://phzh.ch/de/Forschung/projekt Datenbank/projekt detail/Partizipation-staerken--Schule-entwickeln-PasSe-p111.html>).

<sup>2</sup>There are numerous, convincing arguments for involving students in school life. Unfortunately, if we consider the existing practice induced by this normative imperative, we observe in schools a lot of tokenism (e.g. Rieker, Mörgen, Schnitzer, & Stroezel, 2016) and student participation which takes place

only in subareas of school instead of being a given part of everyday school life (e.g. Müller-Kuhn et al., 2020).

<sup>3</sup> These three literature reviews differ from our literature review in the following ways: Mitra (2018) focused on student voice in school reforms while we focus on student participation in school life in general. Gonzalez, Hernandez-Saca and Artiles (2017) gave an overview of the current state of research about student participation and its (putative) synonyms in the United States, while our literature review deals with the content and systematization of the student participation discussion – in empirical studies as well as from theoretical points of view. Mager and Nowak (2012) carved out five fields of everyday school life where students participate (namely councils, temporary school working groups, class decisions, school decisions, multiple types of decision-making environments). The systematization of Mager and Nowak and our systematization are not mutually exclusive. Our review employs a different perspective and categorized the studies according to their focus of inquiry.

<sup>4</sup>Articles in other common languages, such as Spanish or French, would also be of interest and present the possibility of further study.

<sup>5</sup>Even if the translation of the terms is not always quite identical on a purely linguistic level, the pairing was chosen for the following reasons: (1) “student participation” AND school was used as counterpart to Partizipation AND Schule (which means participation and school). In the English version we added “student”, because in the literature participation was often used in the sense of taking part in something, e.g. in a study and therefore often had nothing to do with participation of students in school. Therefore, the addition “student” was necessary in the English version. In German, this problem does not exist, because the term participation is hardly used to describe taking part. (2) “student voice” AND school was used as the equivalent of Mitbestimmung AND Schule (which means co-determination). There is no exact German equivalent of the metaphorical term student voice. If you look at it just linguistically, Mitsprache would be a closer translation. Because Mitsprache is used less frequently and is associated with less commitment than Mitbestimmung, and because our perception of student voice – particularly as Lundy (2007) describes the term – is closer to Mitbestimmung, we have decided to use Mitbestimmung instead of Mitsprache. Again, we have omitted the addition “student” because Mitbestimmung AND Schule automatically targets Mitbestimmung of students. (3) The last term analogy consisted of “democratic education” and Demokratiepädagogik, which is a very close translation.

<sup>6</sup>The articles which could not be classified in one of the five contexts focused on other aspects of participation such as its influence on social behavior, motivation, or participation as an unintended random effect in a research project about lesson preparation. Furthermore, there are articles where participation refers to students as researchers. The understanding of participation in these articles varied widely: Participation means being listened to, taking part, having a voice, co-determination and self-determination. The articles originated in different countries in Europe, North America, Australia and Asia. Collectively these articles did not have much in common.

<sup>7</sup>A list of all articles of the five contexts and the bibliography can be downloaded from <https://tinyurl.com/studpart-appendix1>.

<sup>8</sup>Although we did not impose any restrictions in this regard, it appears that most of the articles which are written in German are empirical studies and occasionally scientifically-prepared reports of experiences that relate to Germany or a specific school in Germany.

<sup>9</sup>Conspicuous distributions from Table 4 are pointed out in the respective foci sections.

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<sup>10</sup>In 15 articles, the authors referred to John Dewey, one article referred to Amartya Sen and another to Martha Nussbaum. One article contained theoretical considerations that refer to numerous authors.

<sup>11</sup>The autonomy antinomy according to Helsper (2004) describes the problem that teachers on the one hand promote and demand autonomy of the students and that at the same time the autonomy of the students is constantly restricted (e.g. due to the institutional framing).

<sup>12</sup>Although only the American English term “student” and not the British English term “pupil” was searched for, numerous articles from countries where predominantly British English is spoken nevertheless became part of the literature review: 7 articles from the UK, 2 from Ireland, 7 from New Zealand and 15 from Australia.