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**Analyzing participation in school contexts: triggering change through the use of indicators**

**Analizzare la partecipazione nei contesti scolastici: innescare il cambiamento attraverso l'utilizzo di indicatori**

*di*

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**Abstract:**

This article presents results from the first phase of an action research process conducted together with a group of secondary school teachers, with the aim of experimenting with actions that reduce educational risk and improve inclusion and participation in schools. The 'Framework for Participation' tool (Black-Hawkins, 2010) was introduced as a system of international indicators, to examine educational contexts in order to highlight different interpretations that can be associated with concepts of participation, inclusion, exclusion, disability, and special educational needs. The use of a system of indicators has made it possible on the one hand to stimulate systematic and rigorous reflection, and on the other to suggest sources of evidence that can facilitate the development of a model of 'best practices' and plan innovation paths.

**Keywords:** participation; inclusion; indicators; vulnerability; educational risk.

**Abstract:**

Il presente contributo presenta la prima fase di un percorso di ricerca azione condotta assieme ad un gruppo di insegnanti della scuola secondaria di secondo grado, che si è posto l'obiettivo di

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sperimentare azioni di contrasto al rischio educativo e di migliorare l'inclusione e la partecipazione all'interno degli istituti scolastici. Lo strumento "Framework for participation" (Black-Hawkins, 2010) è stato introdotto come sistema di indicatori internazionali, per esaminare i contesti educativi allo scopo di mettere in luce diverse interpretazioni che possono essere associate a concetti quali partecipazione, inclusione, esclusione, disabilità e bisogni educativi speciali. L'utilizzo di un sistema di indicatori ha consentito da una parte di sollecitare una riflessione sistematica e rigorosa, dall'altra di suggerire delle fonti di evidenza che possono facilitare l'elaborazione di un modello di "buone pratiche" e progettare percorsi di innovazione

**Parole chiave:** partecipazione; inclusione; indicatori; vulnerabilità; rischio educativo.

## 1. Introduction

According to the ecological-cultural perspective, students' educational paths are the consequence of the interactions between individual aspects, contextual conditions and the quality of their lived experiences at school (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Vygotskij, 1987; Bruner, 2000). To encourage the learning and participation of all students, it is necessary analyze school contexts that considers the plurality of factors that influence learning trajectories.

Under this perspective, thinking about inclusion and participation means acting in a broad and global sense; not only in terms of specific responses to the needs of students with disabilities, but through general processes of improvement processes involving the entire learning community.

Participation in the school community is understood as a fundamental aspect of inclusion and is considered a central factor for school success (Booth & Ainscow, 2002, 2014; Black-Hawkins, 2010). The concept of participation in school contexts has broad meaning, and implies strategies and actions that schools can implement to overcome barriers that can obstruct the students' learning pathways. In order to guarantee equal learning opportunities to all, the concept of participation considers the need to foster school conditions that favors collaboration amongst students, everyone's active involvement, as well as the recognition and acceptance of each individual with their peculiarities, as fundamental. The theme of participation in school is therefore a complex consideration which requires in-depth analysis and reflection on the culture, policies and practices disseminated by the school, in order to initiate processes of improvement and change where required. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to employ tools to guide analysis and provide a useful reference framework for directing observation. The use of international indicator systems is thus a useful for examining educational contexts, in order to highlight different interpretations that can be associated with concepts such as participation, inclusion/ exclusion, disability, and special educational needs.

The literature highlights how the use of tools can raise the awareness of the school community (Brugger-Paggi *et al.*, 2013; Ianes, 2008; Demo, 2013; Black-Hawkins *et al.*, 2008; Booth & Black-Hawkins, 2001; Black-Hawkins, 2022). An indicator is an instrument designed to provide information on the functioning of an education system, capable of detecting both its' strengths and weaknesses. The use of indicators in educational research responds to the need to describe, through statistical indices, the functioning of the school contexts (Bottani & Tuijnman, 1994; Hammersley, 2010; UNESCO, 2004).

The information thus collected can be used by those who are part of an educational system (such as school principals, teachers, educators, students, families, and personnel working in the schools), to

guide new and experimental perspectives. The goal is therefore to provide indications that can then guide the development of new approaches and innovation pathways, leading to the growth and improvement of the learning contexts.

### **1.1 The Framework for Participation tool**

Kristine Black-Hawkins (2010) identifies and describes the main aspects that define participation, through developing a system of indicators that constitute the tool 'Framework for Participation'. This instrument was conceived with the aim of investigating the practices, the policies and the strategies that can be adopted by teachers to improve student participation and inclusion.

The tool was designed to provide a reference structure to support the investigation of participation in school contexts, through encouraging rigorous reflection guided by a set of indicators that help identify sources of evidence useful for research. It bills itself as a simple, manageable and suitable data collection tool, designed to examine school culture; therefore, although the Framework is configured as a research tool which can support the process of investigation and analysis of schools, it can also help the collection of evidence to support an improvement process.

In addition, it addresses the issue of participation in a broad way, systematically considering the experiences of all members belonging to the observed context and the set of factors that can influence inclusive processes.

The 'Framework for Participation' is grounded in solid theoretical foundations and clearly explains the principles on which the concepts of inclusion and participation are based. Specifically, the concept of participation is detailed through seven principles that describe the meaning of participation adopted in the Framework (Black-Hawkins 2000):

1. Participation impacts upon all members of a school and all aspects of school life
2. Participation is a never-ending process, closely connected to barriers to participation
3. Participation is concerned with responses to diversity
4. Participation is distanced conceptually from notions of special educational needs
5. Participation requires opportunities for learning to be active and collaborative for all
6. Participation is based on relationships of mutual recognition and acceptance
7. Participation necessitates the active right of members to 'join in.'

The principles provide a well-defined conceptual framework with respect to the theme of participation, which is understood in a broad sense, including both the school staff, the teachers, the students, and all aspects of school life (such as the dynamics and the interactions that take place in the class group, but also the policies and practices that are widespread in the school). Furthermore, participation is not understood simply in terms of the physical access of students with special educational needs within the school, but rather as the possibility for global participation in the activities.

It is also underlined how the concept of participation is closely connected to the concept of 'barriers', and how this relationship is dynamic and changeable: in fact, when barriers are reduced, participation increases and vice versa. Participation also means considering all multiplicities and differences, considering them as a resource for all, without implying that students should receive identical learning experiences. It is a question of creating learning environments where students are actively involved through collaboration, favoring the differentiation of experiences, skills and interests and the enhancement of everyone's peculiarities.

Finally, participation is understood as a right for all, where relations between members are based on the principles of freedom and equality. Thus, all individuals have the right to be themselves within the community, but at the same time must take responsibility for accepting others as equals.

The Framework consists of three main dimensions:

1. Participation and ACCESS: being there (Indicators: Joining the school; Staying in the school; Access to spaces and places; Access to the curriculum)
2. Participation and COLLABORATION: learning together (Indicators: Learning alongside other students; Supporting students to learn together; Members of staff working together; Staff and students learning together; Schools and other institutions working together)
3. Participation and DIVERSITY: recognition and acceptance (Indicators: Recognition and acceptance of students, by staff; Recognition and acceptance of staff, by staff; Recognition and acceptance of students, by students).

Each section is described through a series of indicators, which in turn are accompanied by a set of questions that are useful for guiding the survey and data collection. These questions require an exploration of the beliefs and values that shape cultures, practices and interactions in a school setting.

## 2. The experimental project

This study involved an action-research and training process, focused on participation and launched with some secondary schools in northern Italy, as part of the project ‘Educational risk: inclusion, participation and innovation as contrast measures’. The overall project drew on an exploratory survey to examine the factors that shape educational risk, with the subsequent objective to promote actions research and training paths with teachers to counteract school failure.

During the first phase of the project, several preliminary meetings were organized with the teachers which served to share the aims of the project, the methodology and the theoretical conceptual framework of reference, and to collect data to address the complexity of social systems through a detailed exploration of the context and the experiences of the members who belong to it.

This exploratory phase was deepened through the use of a questionnaire addressed to the teachers. The construction of the tool referred to a broad theoretical framework, involving a multifactorial analysis perspective which identifies the factors that affect learning outcomes and dropouts: aspects related to participation and inclusion at school, to well-being and to the construction of the students’ future-selves (Black-Hawkins, 2010; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Konu & Rimpelä, 2002). The dimension of participation in particular was explored through an elaboration of the indicators identified by the Framework for Participation tool.

The Framework for Participation was developed to respond to the needs of the British educational system; therefore, the application of the tool in other contexts required critical reflection in order to adapt the indicators for the Italian context. In fact, some indicators required reformulation or in some cases a reformulation, in order to be applied in the chosen schools.

Here, some of the significant findings that emerged from the survey relating to the three macro dimensions identified by the Framework, are shown below; the results were presented to and discussed together with the teachers who joined the project. The debate provided an opportunity to hold discussions, to reflect with teachers and to pinpoint ‘hotbutton’ issues yet to be addressed.

### 2.1 Participants

The school enrolled in the action research process is a technical institute (located in northern Italy),

which is known to place emphasis on inclusion, is very engaged in design experimentation and digital activities. Table 1 provides an overview of key characteristics of participants in the survey. 78 teachers took part (65.4% female; 33.3% male, 1.3% undeclared), with most involved over 50 years of age (60.3%); there was a prevalence of participants with over 10 years of teaching experience. Furthermore, 64.4% of teachers declared that they have participated in training activities on the topics of inclusion, participation and well-being in the last 5 years. The teachers answered an online questionnaire which included closed questions (answered on a Likert scale from 1 to 4).

78 Teachers							
Sex (%)	Age (%)		Years worked as a teacher		Training on inclusion/participation issues		
F	65,4%	20-30	5,1%	From 1-5 years	19,2%	Never	17,9%
M	33,3%	31-40	12,8%	From 5-10 years	14,1%	Yes, more than 10 years ago	6,4%
		41-50	21,8%	Less than a year	5,1%	Yes, between 5 and 10 years ago	10,3%
ND	1,3%	Over 50	60,3%	Over 10 years	61,5%	Yes, in the last 5 years	65,4%

Table 1: Descriptive data of the participants

### 3. Results

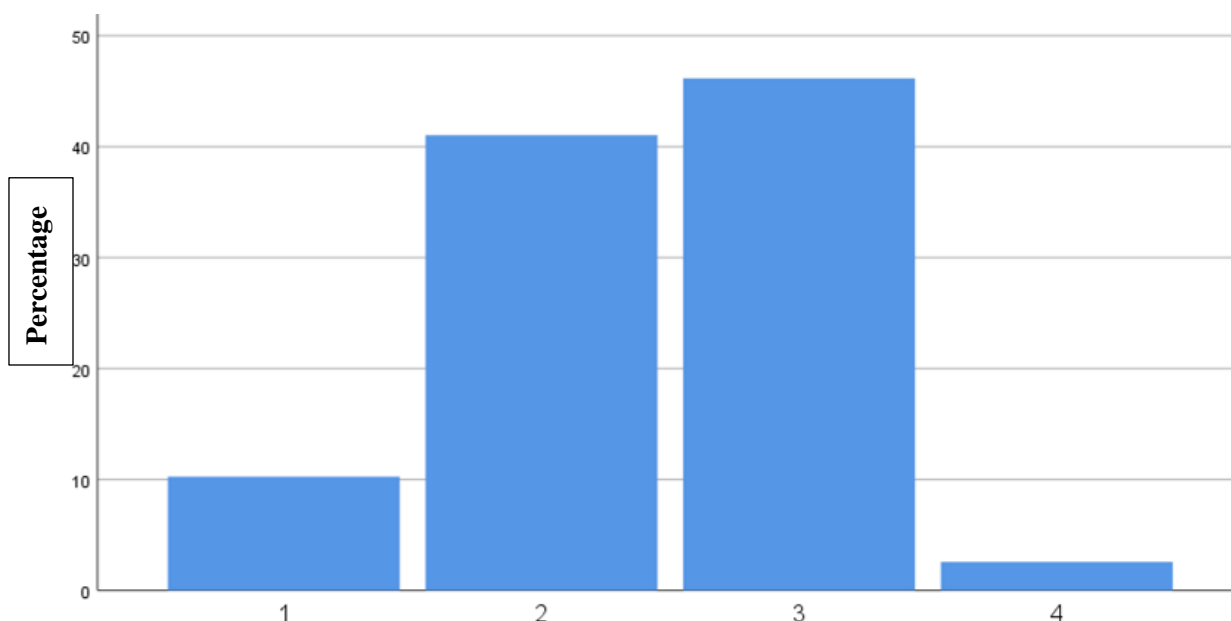
#### 3.1 Participation and access: being there

##### a. Inclusiveness of learning spaces

Teachers were asked how inclusive they consider the learning spaces in their school to be. In general, the answers ranged around an average score (mean=2.41; standard deviation=0.71) between values 2 and 3 on the Likert scale (Table 2 and Graph 1).

Likert scale	Frequency	Percentage
1	8	10,3%
2	32	41,0%
3	36	46,2%
4	2	2,6%

Table 2: Frequencies and percentages of the question: 'How much do you think the learning spaces have been designed to be truly inclusive?'



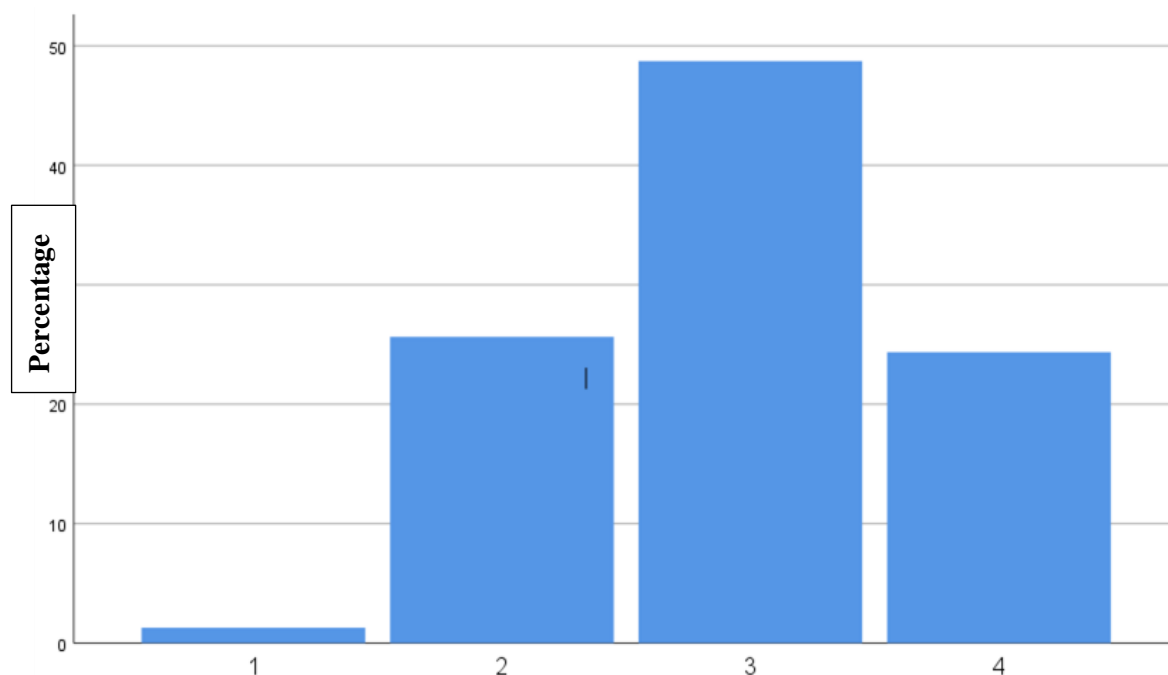
Graph 1: Percentage distribution of responses related to the question: 'How much do you think the learning spaces have been designed to be truly inclusive?'

#### b. Accessibility of learning spaces

Teachers were asked how accessible they considered the learning spaces in their school to be (accessibility is understood as the characteristic of an environment that can be easily used by any person). In general, the answers clustered around a medium-high score (mean=2.96 standard deviation=0.714), with 48.7% placing on the 3 value of the Likert scale (Table 3 and Graph 2).

Likert scale	Frequency	Percentage
1	1	1,3%
2	20	25,6%
3	38	48,7%
4	19	24,4%

Table 3: Frequencies and percentages of the question: 'How much do you think school environments are accessible for everyone?'



Graph 2: Percentage distribution of answers relating to the question: ‘How much do you think school environments are accessible for everyone?’

The discussion with the teachers highlighted how the need to redesign learning spaces in the school was a central theme. The school had begun a process to rethink the layout of laboratories and classrooms in order to better promote well-being, inclusion, participation, experimentation, and collaborative learning. In fact, most of the classrooms maintained a traditional structure, set up for frontal teaching. The redesign therefore responded to the need to rethink these environments to promote more participatory learning. The teachers therefore asked themselves what innovative proposals could lead to transform their teaching, beginning from the modification of the setting (thinking, for example, of classrooms assigned according to the disciplines; of flexible and modular spaces; and of the integrated use of technologies).

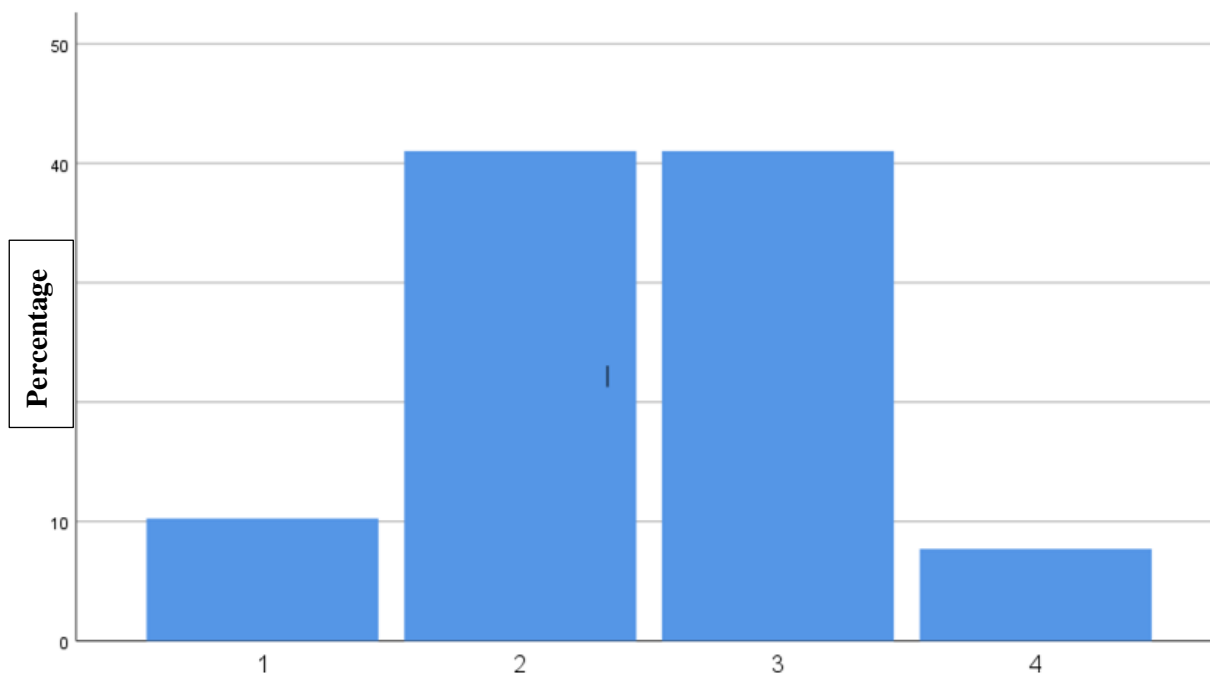
### 3.2 Participation and collaboration: learning together

#### a. Collaboration between colleagues

Teachers were asked if there were practices in the school that promoted collaboration among colleagues. In general, the answers clustered around an average score (mean=2.46 standard deviation=0.78) between values 2 and 3 on the Likert scale (Table 4 and Graph 3).

Likert scale	Frequency	Percentage
1	8	10,3%
2	32	41,0%
3	32	41,0%
4	6	7,7%

Table 4: Frequencies and percentages of the question: ‘Are there practices within the school that promote collaboration between colleagues?’



Graph 3: Percentage distribution of answers relating to the question: ‘Are there practices within the school that promote collaboration between colleagues?’

The teachers highlighted how the moments of collaboration between colleagues mostly took place during collegial bodies, in which educational and teaching actions are planned and evaluated. According to them, however, there remains a lack of further meeting spaces necessary for co-planning transversal teaching activities, but also for spaces to experiment with teaching approaches and identify broader shared methodologies.

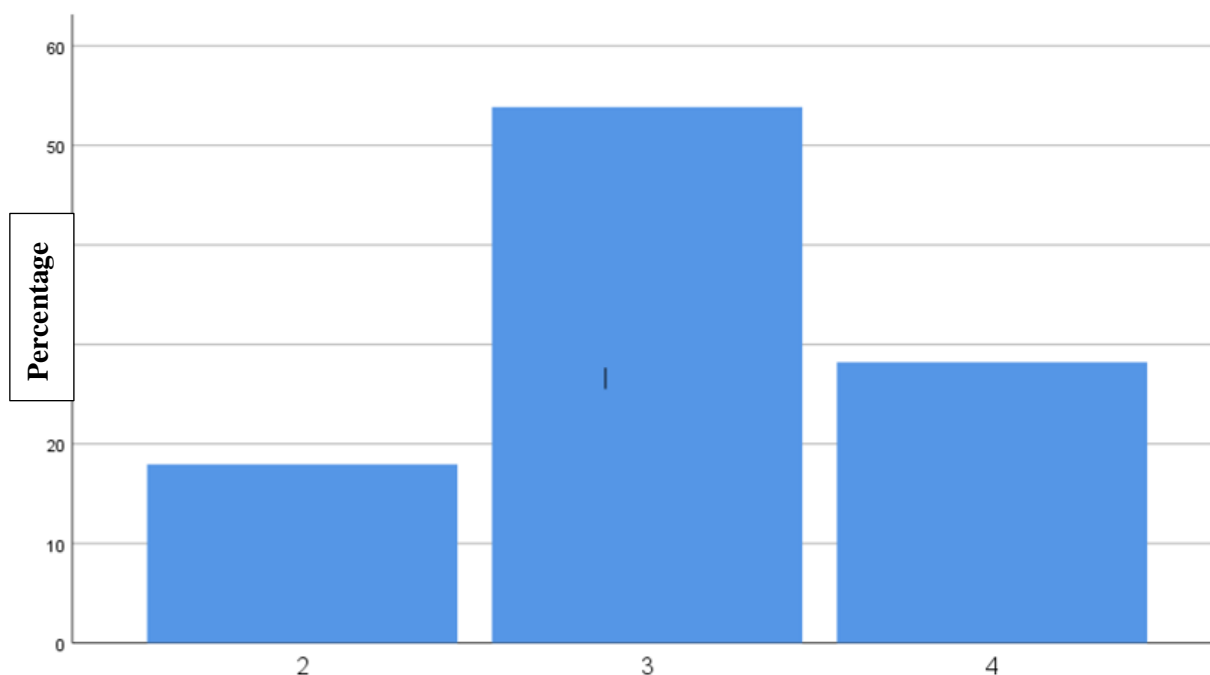
c. Didactics that favor comparison and argumentation

Teachers were asked if the teaching methodologies adopted promoted discussion between students and the possibilities to express and compare their hypotheses and arguments concerning concepts introduced in class. In general, the answers placed around a high average score (mean=3.10, standard deviation=0.678), with 53.8% of respondents placing on the 3 value on the Likert scale (Table 5 and Graph 4).

Likert scale	Frequency	Percentage
1	0	0%
2	14	17,9%
3	42	53,8%
4	22	28,2%

Table 5: Frequencies and percentages of the question: ‘Teachers organize the teaching activity in order to guarantee all students the opportunity to express and compare their hypotheses and arguments regarding the concepts introduced in class’.





Graph 4: Percentage distribution of answers relating to the question: Teachers organize the teaching activity in such a way as to guarantee all students the opportunity to express and compare their hypotheses and arguments regarding the concepts introduced in class.

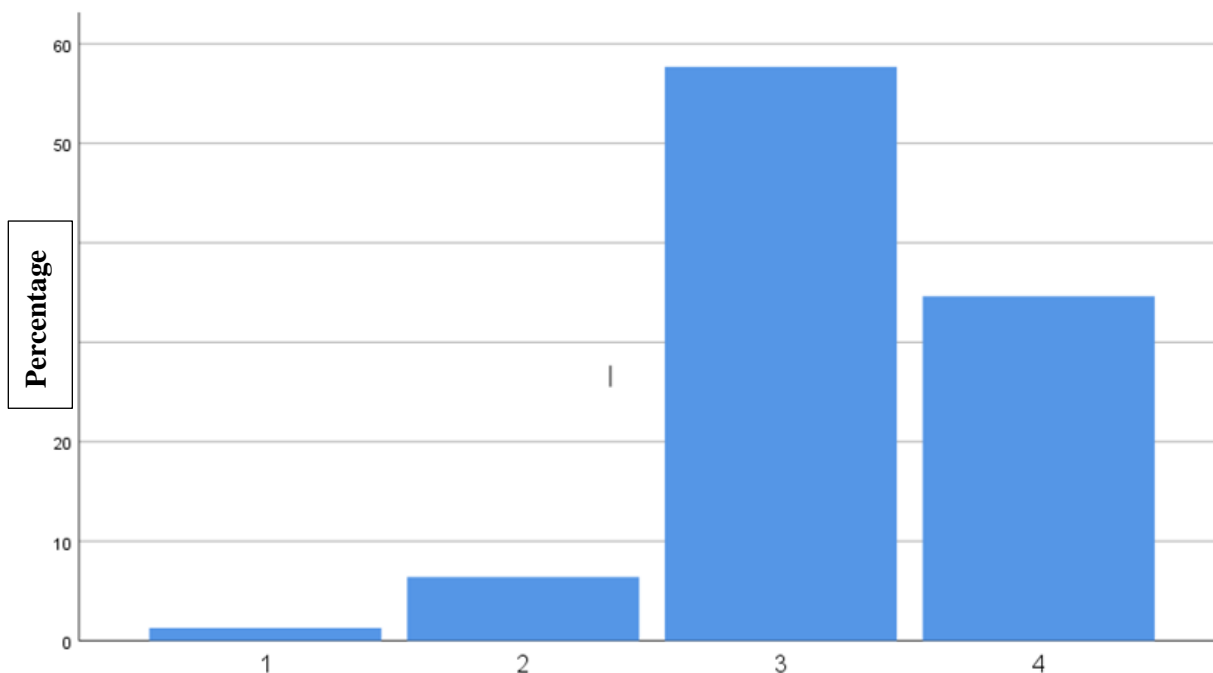
Teachers stated that they frequently propose educational activities that stimulate students to express, discuss and reason out their ideas. They therefore encourage students to develop critical thinking and broaden their problem solving skills. However, they find that this activity often proves difficult for students, who find it challenging to deal with a topic in depth and most of the time engage with them at a superficial level.

#### d. Collaborative learning and participation

Teachers were asked if the participation of all students was encouraged in collaborative activities. In general, their answers were placed around a high average score (mean=3.26, standard deviation=0.63), with 57.7% of respondents sitting around a value of 3 on the Likert scale (Table 6 and Graph 5).

Likert scale	Frequency	Percentage
1	1	1,3%
2	5	6,4%
3	45	57,7%
4	27	34,6%

Table 6: Frequencies and percentages of the question: 'Everyone's participation is encouraged during collaborative learning activities'.



Graph 5: Percentage distribution of answers related to the question: ‘Everyone's participation is encouraged during collaborative learning activities’.

Teachers claimed to be attentive towards the participation of all students during collaborative learning activities. However, they pointed out that this objective is not always easily achievable, since despite adopting shared strategies for the management of cooperative learning, these are not always effective. In fact, they observed how motivation is critical for ensuring all students effectively participate, as well the need to adopt evaluation criteria.

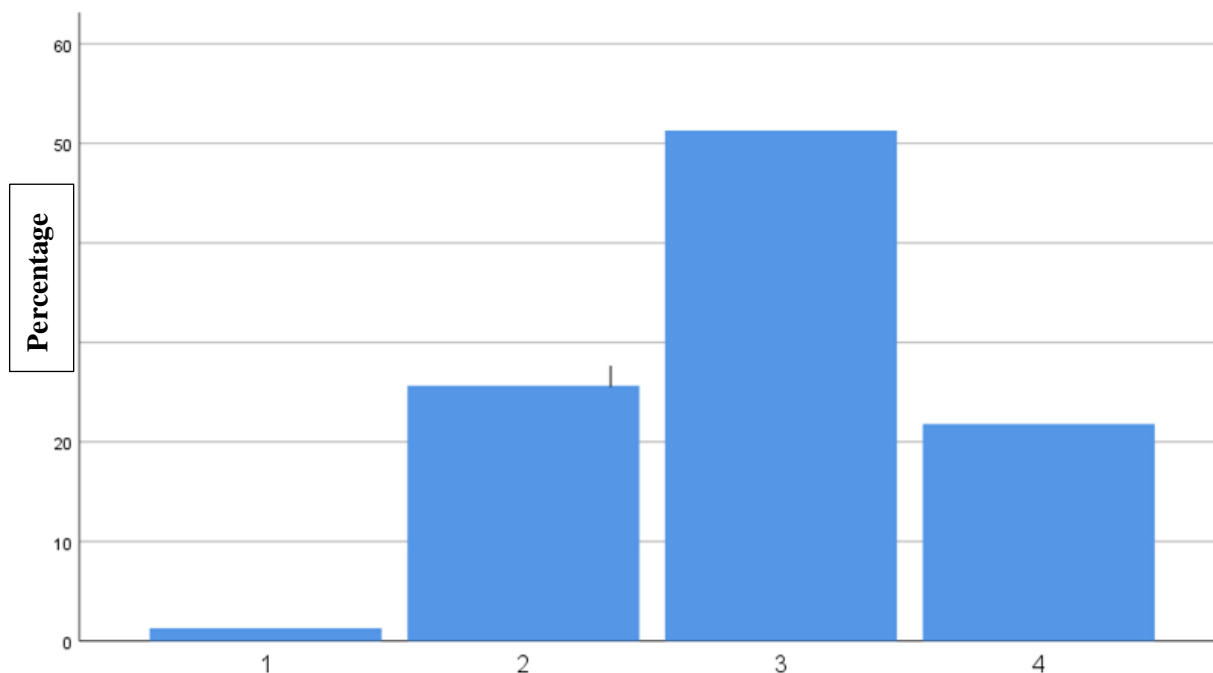
### 3.3 Participation and diversity: recognition and acceptance

#### a. Recognition and acceptance of diversity

Teachers were asked if the school proposes activities that promote the recognition and acceptance of diversity. In general, their answers were placed around an average score (mean=2.94, standard deviation=0.72) with 51.3% of respondents sitting at 3 on the Likert scale (Table 7 and Graph 6).

Likert scale	Frequency	Percentage
1	1	1,3%
2	20	25,6%
3	40	51,3%
4	17	21,8%

Table 7: Frequencies and percentages of the question: "Does the school offer activities that promote the recognition and acceptance of diversity?"



Graph 6: Percentage distribution of answers related to the question: ‘Does the school offer activities that promote the recognition and acceptance of diversity?’

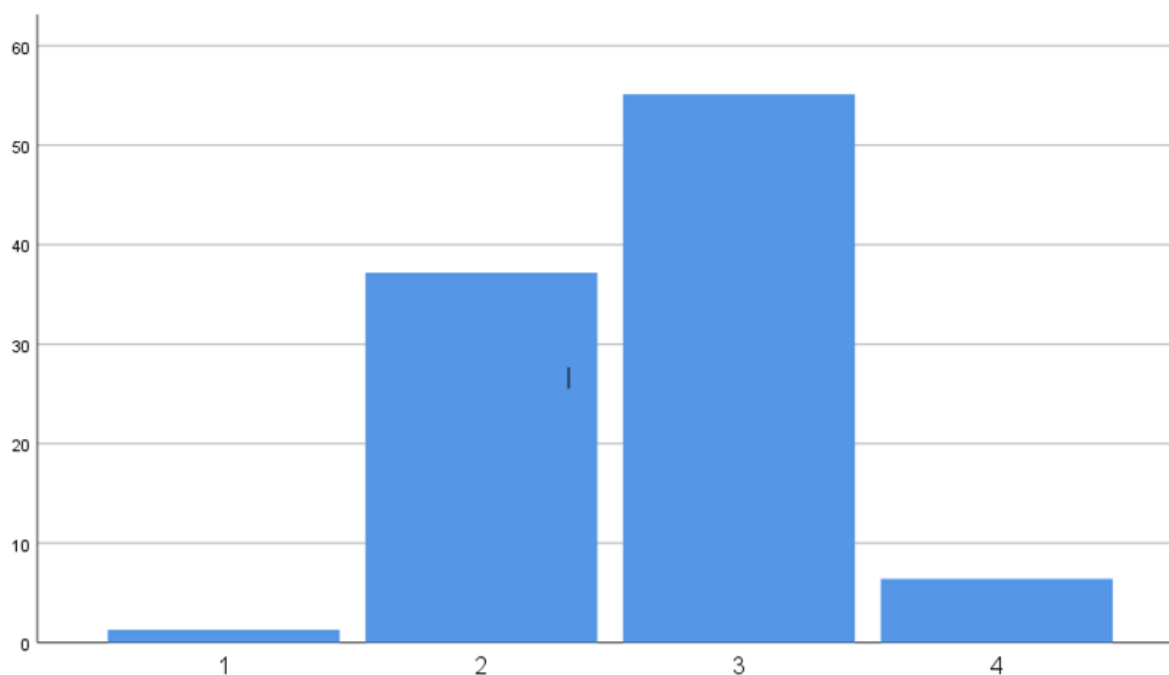
Teachers report various activities aimed at making students aware of diversity issues, such as: meetings with associations and experts; lectures related to the topic; conferences; inclusive projects; civic education meetings; meetings on digital well-being; and activities designed and implemented by special needs teachers, that help classmates better understand the difficulties faced by pupils with disabilities.

b. Students' attitude towards disability

Teachers were asked if students in peer relationships adopt an attitude of recognition and acceptance towards diversity. In general, their answers placed around an average score (mean=2.77, standard deviation=0.66) with 55.13% of respondents sitting at a value of 3 on the Likert scale (Table 8 and Graph 7).

Likert scale	Frequency	Percentage
1	1	1,3%
2	25	32,1%
3	43	55,1%
4	9	11,5%

Table 8: Frequencies and percentages of the question: ‘Thinking about the relationships between students, you could observe that: Students have an attitude of recognition and acceptance of diversity’.



Graph 7: Percentage distribution of answers related to the question: ‘Thinking about the relationships between students, you could observe that: Students have an attitude of recognition and acceptance of diversity’.

Teachers generally observed a fairly widespread attitude of openness and acceptance of diversity among their students, even if they found differences between the different schooling curricula<sup>1</sup>. In fact, students experiencing conditions of educational risk often converge in one area of the school, creating an increase in the concentration of students suffering difficulties or feeling disengaged in the same classroom. This situation contributes to a stratified distribution of students across the school and creates vicious circles that can compound teaching and learning challenges.

### 3.4 Discussion

The use of the indicators identified in the Framework for Participation and the discussion on the data collected with the teachers, provided an opportunity to activate a process of reflection and tease out the critical points and strengths of the school in terms of participatory practices, and consequently relaunch learning experimentation.

The results highlight how in order to renew teaching, it is essential to rethink learning environments: the design of the space is fundamental for promoting a specific conceptualisation of schooling, which in order to be inclusive and promote participation, have move away from classroom environments designed for transmissive teaching (Malaguzzi, 2010; Biondi *et al.*, 2016; Santoianni, 2017).

It also emerged that the theme of collaboration, both between teachers and between students, is widely recognized as central for promoting participation and inclusion, but concurrently highlights critical issues. First of all, finding space and time dedicated to discussion and for planning activities, was recognized by the teachers as being fundamental for disseminating good practices and shared teaching methodologies. The lack of a defined space for sharing has, as a consequence, limited the circulation of ideas and experiences, as well as created difficulties for sharing resources and skills among

<sup>1</sup> The school is characterized by three different curricula: agricultural, economic, industrial.

colleagues. The training path of teachers should be built through a continuous transformative and reflective process, where it is possible to find space for discussion and profound sharing (Boffo, 2012).

The reflections from the teachers focused in particular on the methodologies they adopted in their classrooms, to encourage collaborative learning and to stimulate complex thought processes in students. The diffusion of cooperative learning activities within the school has brought about critical issues and difficulties, which were shared in the discussion and have highlighted the need for change. The teachers identified issues to be addressed with respect to topics concerning: the management of group dynamics, teaching strategies useful for supporting metacognitive processes, and evaluation processes.

These themes must take into account the differences that teachers observe in the different school curricula: they notice a certain stratification in the composition of their classes in relation to school outcomes. The literature demonstrates that if the dynamics present in the class tend towards affiliating with peers who present the same educational risk, then the risk of school failure can increase over time (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011; Borgatti *et al.*, 2018). For example, in classrooms with large numbers of disengaged students, young opportunities to form positive peer relationships that can support involvement in schooling are reduced. It is therefore necessary to consider the relational opportunities available to children at school, so that they can better access stimulating activities, be valued even if they are not among the best students, experience cooperative contexts, and be supported by experiencing different modes of interaction (Grimaldi, 2011).

The results obtained through the use of the indicators were disseminated to all school staff, with the aim of sharing them widely in the school community. The issues that were identified as priorities will be developed and deepened in the next phase of this project: the next goal is to design experimental pathways initiated in some classes and subsequently disseminated within the school, in order to share good practices that are innovative but also effective.

#### 4. Conclusion

To understand complex processes such as those relating to inclusion and participation, it is essential to use tools that can provide an answer to the variety of dynamics that can lead to the achievement of these objectives. In fact, schools are complex organizational systems in which the interweaving of cultural, environmental and relational factors can determine outcomes that are very different from the pre-established ones (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Vygotskij, 1987; Bruner, 2000).

This study of school culture, in its conceptual sense, has explored participation in the school community, understood as a fundamental aspect of inclusion and school success. 'Participation' in fact does not mean only having access to education but implies learning, through collaboration, relationship building with others and active involvement. Being able to obtain positive school results is on the one hand essential in terms of inclusion, but to achieve this goal also requires that the culture within the school is directed towards promoting participation (Booth, Ainscow, 2002, 2014; Black-Hawkins, 2010).

The use of a tool such as the Framework for Participation provides an opportunity to collect data and evidence understanding of the school context in a more objective way. This process made it possible to identify clear critical elements, which can be more easily recognized and shared through investigations that follow a structured methodology.

Although the Framework was born as a research tool, it has also proved useful for supporting some of the interests or concerns shared by teachers, who considered it a useful object of reflection, thanks also to the flexibility in which it can be applied. The comparison and discussion initiated amongst the teachers was particularly useful in bringing out their beliefs and values regarding the school context. This process of collecting, sharing and jointly reflecting on data is a fundamentally exploratory process, but also essential for improving school contexts. The knowledge developed can become a lever for change if well documented and widely disseminated. In fact, if the final objective is not only to analyze the context, but also to experiment with new practices that increase inclusivity and participatory learning, then it is essential we share the results with the entire school community and involve all those who are part of the learning community in a broad and transversal way.

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