

VALUES AND PRINCIPLES OF STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN DEMOCRATIC DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

Natalia SEMENIUC, PhD student

<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-1547-3785>

“Ion Creangă” State Pedagogical University of Chişinău

Abstract. The values and principles of student participation in democratic decision-making processes constitute the axiological and conceptual foundation of genuine participation of children in the educational environment. Values, such as respect for individuality, shared responsibility, respect, trust and autonomy, express the normative guidelines that support the involvement of students in decision-making. The principles of participation – respect for students’ dignity, authentic listening, shared responsibility, mutual trust, decision-making autonomy – operationalize these values in concrete educational practices. Thus, the values provide the ethical and guiding framework, and the principles guide their application in decision-making processes, ensuring real, meaningful and responsible participation of students in school life.

Key words: value, principle, participation of students.

VALORI ŞI PRINCIPII ALE PARTICIPĂRII ELEVULUI ÎN PROCESELE DECIZIONALE DEMOCRATICE

Rezumat. Valorile şi principiile participării elevului în procesele decizionale democratice constituie fundamentul axiologic şi conceptual al participării autentice a copiilor în mediul educaţional. Valorile, precum respectul pentru individualitate, responsabilitatea partajată, încrederea şi autonomia , exprimă orientările normative care susţin implicarea elevilor în luarea deciziilor. Principiile participării – respectării demnităţii elevului, ascultării autentice, responsabilităţii partajate, încrederii reciproce, autonomiei decizionale – operaționalizează aceste valori în practici educaționale concrete. Astfel, valorile oferă cadrul etic şi orientativ, iar principiile ghidează aplicarea lor în procesele decizionale, asigurând o participare reală, semnificativă şi responsabilă a elevilor în viaţa şcolii.

Cuvinte-cheie: valoare, principiu, participarea elevilor.

Introduction

In the paradigm of contemporary education, student participation in democratic decision-making processes represents not only a fundamental right - as enshrined in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child [17] - but also an essential pedagogical tool for the development of the student's personality. Modern educational approaches regard the student as an active subject of the educational process, capable of contributing to the construction of their own developmental trajectory. From this perspective, involving students in decision-making becomes a vital mechanism for fostering *autonomy*, *responsibility*, and *personal identity*.

Within the specialized literature, participation is analysed through its close link to the development of personal and social values that shape personality. Research highlights that the educational process must be geared toward personality development by

cultivating values and recognizing the student's *subjectivity*. The principle of subjectivity entails developing the student's capacity to: become conscious of their own identity, evaluate their own actions and advocate for their opinions responsibly within their social and educational environment [1].

Methodological Framework

The methodology adopts a qualitative, conceptual-analytical approach, grounded in an analysis of student participation within the context of the educational system in the Republic of Moldova, structured around two fundamental dimensions: the axiological dimension - the values promoted through the curriculum - and the normative-legal dimension - the principles established by the Code of Education. The research analysed the National Curriculum Reference Framework [12], identifying participation not merely as a method but as a cross-cutting value. The implementation of participation is legally supported by the fundamental principles of education, as stipulated in the Code of Education of the Republic of Moldova [13]. By combining these two sources, the research demonstrates that participation in schools in the Republic of Moldova is evolving from a simple consultative exercise into a pedagogically embraced value and a legally binding principle. Thus, curricular values provide the ethical “substance,” while the Code of Education provides the “form” and the implementation mechanisms necessary for democratic school governance.

Furthermore, the study is grounded in a rigorous examination of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, particularly Article 12, and of international standards defining the child’s right to be heard and to have their views taken into account. The analysis of the values and principles of participation also focused on theoretical models of participation, namely R. Hart’s and L. Lundy’s models, which allowed for the correlation of levels of participation with its values and principles.

Achieved results

The starting point of this analysis is the Convention on the Rights of the Child [17], the international treaty that brought about a paradigm shift from viewing the child as an object of protection to viewing the child as a subject of rights. At the center of the investigation is Article 12, which enshrines the child’s right to freely express their views on any matter affecting them, with their views being taken into account in accordance with their age and maturity. General Comment No. 12 (2009) clarifies that participation is not a one-time event, but a continuous process that requires the exchange of information and dialogue between children and adults [16].

To assess the validity of participation in relation to the principles set forth in the Code of Education and the values outlined in the National Curriculum Reference

Framework, two theoretical models are used: R. Hart's Ladder of Participation, which allows for a clear distinction between "non-participation" (manipulation, window-dressing, or symbolic participation) and "authentic participation." Using this model facilitates the identification of thresholds of student involvement, ranging from simple consultation to student-initiated projects, in which decisions are shared with adults [7]. The model highlights that students' genuine involvement in decision-making contributes to the development of a sense of competence and the strengthening of personal identity: higher levels involve collaboration between students and adults in decision-making, which fosters the development of autonomy and self-confidence.

To put the concept of student participation into practice and highlight its key values and principles, this study draws on L. Lundy's Model, which is based on four interdependent elements: (1) students must have a guaranteed opportunity to express their opinions, meaning they need space; (2) students must be helped to express their opinions appropriately - a voice; (3) their opinions must be heard by someone with decision-making power - they need an audience; and their opinions must be genuinely taken into account - influence [9]. Correlating these models with the values of participation demonstrates that authentic participation cannot exist in the absence of a school culture that values transparency, mutual respect, and shared responsibility. Thus, theoretical models provide the necessary framework to assess whether the declarative principles in normative acts are translated into educational practices that generate real impact.

While at the international level, the models of R. Hart and L. Lundy provide the mechanical structure of participation, the study coordinated by V. Andritchii provides the operational substance in the context of the Republic of Moldova. It is demonstrated that values such as transparency, equity, and accountability are not merely ethical ideals but constitute performance indicators of educational management [1]. Thus, the implementation of professional standards in education requires a shift in the axiological paradigm: from a school that "instructs" passive students to a school that "collaborates" with active citizens.

In line with the above, according to the guidelines set forth by the National Curriculum Reference Framework, the educational process is grounded in a paradigm of responsible participation. This normative document defines the value framework necessary to transform the student into an active social actor, capable of influencing decision-making processes through reasoned and effective interventions, thereby strengthening the democratic culture of the school community. Student participation in the decision-making process contributes to the formation of their personality by cultivating fundamental values such as respect for individuality, shared responsibility, respect, trust, and autonomy. These values constitute the foundations for the development of an autonomous personality capable of active engagement in social life.

Respect for individuality recognizes the student as a unique individual with their own experiences, interests, and perspectives. Within the educational process, respect for individuality implies accepting the child as the subject of their own learning and development. Pedagogically, this approach contributes to the development of self-awareness and the student's ability to formulate their own opinions. By participating in decision-making processes - whether establishing classroom rules, organizing school activities, or engaging in community projects - students learn to express their points of view and assume their roles as active agents within the educational environment.

In the context of student participation, respect must be understood through a dual dimension: respect for the child's intrinsic dignity and respect for their evolving capacity to contribute to social life. G. Lansdown refers to this as “respect for the child’s agency” - the recognition that students possess unique expertise regarding their own lives and the school environment, which must be valued on equal terms with that of adults [8].

In the same vein, L. Lundy argues that offering a child the opportunity to speak without granting them the respect of listening to and analysing their opinion constitutes a violation of Article 12 of the CRC (Convention on the Rights of the Child). Here, respect manifests as an obligation on the part of the adult to provide feedback and demonstrate how the student's contribution has shaped the final decision [9]. J. Dewey maintained that when students feel respected by teachers and school leadership, they internalize respect for the institution and their peers, thereby creating a “virtuous circle” of relational ethics [6].

Shared responsibility associated with child participation involves engaging students in decision-making processes that help them understand the relationship between freedom of choice and the consequences of the decisions made. Thus, participation becomes an educational context where students learn to take responsibility for their own actions and their impact on others. Education is not merely a transfer of information, but a process of character formation through action. When a student “participates,” they cease to be a spectator of their own education and become an actor responsible for the climate and outcomes of their collective.

From a pedagogical perspective, participation fosters the development of *personal autonomy*. Students involved in decision-making processes acquire skills in analysis, argumentation, and decision-making - competencies essential for the development of an independent personality. R. Ryan and E. Deci (2000) define autonomy as one of the three fundamental psychological needs (alongside competence and relatedness). In the context of participation, when students feel that their actions are self-initiated rather than externally controlled, their level of engagement increases exponentially. A school that promotes autonomy as a value of participation transforms extrinsic motivation

(participating for “grades” or “praise”) into *intrinsic motivation* (participating out of civic conviction) [5].

Research in the field of children's rights emphasizes that participation contributes to children's ability to reflect critically on social reality and to formulate solutions for issues that affect them. L. Lundy suggests that to have a real “influence,” a child needs an autonomous space for thought, protected from adult influence or manipulation, so that the expressed opinion truly belongs to them [9].

According to A. Bandura’s theory, the sense of *self-efficacy* is closely linked to the student's confidence in their ability to effect change. A school culture that invests trust in students strengthens their conviction that their voice is relevant. Trust granted by adults acts as a catalyst for assuming responsibility; the student becomes an ethical partner when they feel viewed as a capable and trustworthy individual [2]. Researchers A. Bryk and B. Schneider (2002) introduced the concept of “*relational trust*” as a driver for school improvement. In the context of participation, trust involves reducing the power asymmetry between adult and student [4]. When managers demonstrate confidence in students' discernment, a safe space for expression is created [1]. This “*vulnerable trust*” - where the adult accepts not having absolute control - is what allows for authentic participation.

An analysis of the Code of Education of the Republic of Moldova demonstrates that student participation has evolved from a symbolic practice into a legal imperative. The principles of *beneficiary-centeredness* and *transparency* provide the foundation upon which student self-governance structures are built. Consequently, the creation of an educational environment where the student is a partner in managing school processes is not merely permitted but mandated, thereby ensuring the transition toward democratic school governance.

Student participation in decision-making processes implies recognizing their status as *subjects of educational rights* and the legitimacy of their involvement in decisions affecting school life. Students are treated as partners in the educational process, rather than mere beneficiaries of decisions. In this context, the *principle of respecting student dignity* is essential. N. Noddings emphasizes that respect for dignity is constructed through relationships. In a participatory environment, managers and teaching staff demonstrate respect for dignity through active listening, honest feedback, and the creation of a climate of psychological safety [10]. A student feels dignified when they know that their opinion - even if critical - is treated with seriousness and professionalism.

Respecting dignity prohibits the use of children for public relations or ceremonial purposes. Inviting a student to speak at an event without providing the space to express their own opinion, or without explaining the impact of their contribution, is an affront to their dignity, as it transforms the child into a “decorative object” [7].

The *principle of authentic listening* emphasizes that student participation involves not only the expression of opinions but also their integration into the deliberative process and the decisions adopted at the institutional level. Student opinions are taken into account and can influence the final decision. Authentic listening requires acknowledging that the student possesses a specific form of knowledge - manifested through expertise in their own life and the quality of their education - which the adult lacks. L. Lundy emphasizes that the right to be heard imposes a correlative obligation on the adult to give “due weight” to the expressed opinion. Listening is incomplete without honest feedback explaining to the student how their opinion influenced the final outcome.

The “*pedagogy of listening*”, theorized by C. Rinaldi, defines listening as an active verb, not a passive one. It is an openness toward the “other” [14], a sensitivity to understanding the messages conveyed by students beyond mere words. In educational management, this translates into a culture where students' questions are more valuable than their conformity. On R. Hart's Ladder of Participation, authentic listening is what allows for moving beyond the first three rungs (manipulation, decoration, and tokenism). When managers and teachers “listen actively,” they create a safe space where the student can express critical opinions without fear [7]. This listening is “authentic” because the adult is willing to change their position or decision as a result of the dialogue with the student.

The *principle of shared responsibility* involves assuming accountability for decisions made collectively, based on a transparent deliberative process between students and teaching staff. Students participate not only in formulating opinions but also in implementing decisions. A. Bandura argues that shared responsibility is linked to the concept of “*collective agency*”. When students take part in making a decision, they cease to be mere spectators of their own education [3]. This sharing of decision-making power generates a moral responsibility toward upholding that decision, as it is no longer perceived as an external command, but as a self-imposed commitment.

Authentic participation occurs within an institutional climate based on cooperation, mutual respect, and openness between students and staff. The *principle of mutual trust* represents the relational foundation of participation. Teachers and managers create a safe environment for expressing opinions and initiating actions. A. Bryk and B. Schneider have demonstrated that trust is the primary variable determining the success of school reforms. Mutual trust comprises four elements: *respect, personal competence, integrity, and benevolence* [4]. These elements constitute the moral infrastructure upon which authentic participation rests. Without this foundation, democratic school structures remain “forms without substance,” incapable of producing real change in organizational culture. M. Tschannen-Moran explores trust as a willingness to be vulnerable to others. In a school setting, this means managers trust that students can manage budgets or

activities, while students trust that they can make mistakes in the process without facing authoritarian sanctions [15]. This is the bedrock of what we call “*democratic school governance*”.

The *principle of decisional autonomy* involves the possibility for students to influence decisions and initiate actions within the school governance framework. Students are provided with real spaces for initiative and co-decision. This principle represents the most advanced stage of student participation, marking the transition from being “consulted” to becoming an “*agent of change*”. This implies the student's capacity and freedom to make informed choices, initiate actions, and take responsibility for the outcomes without restrictive adult tutelage. According to the *Self-Determination Theory* developed by R. Ryan and E. Deci, autonomy is one of the three fundamental human needs. In the context of participation, decisional autonomy does not mean isolation, but rather the sense that one’s actions are authentic and self-initiated. When a school offers students the space to decide, they develop a much stronger *intrinsic motivation* for learning and civic engagement. Decisional autonomy in school is the “laboratory”, in which students' transition to moral maturity takes place. Through the right to decide, the student learns that rules are not imposed dogmas, but contractual agreements between members of a community that can be renegotiated through dialogue [11].

The link between the *values of participation* and the *principles governing it* is one of cause and effect: values represent the ethical foundation (“why we do it”), while principles represent the operational mechanism (“how we do it”). Figure 1 illustrates the interconnection between values, principles, and the final outcome achieved.

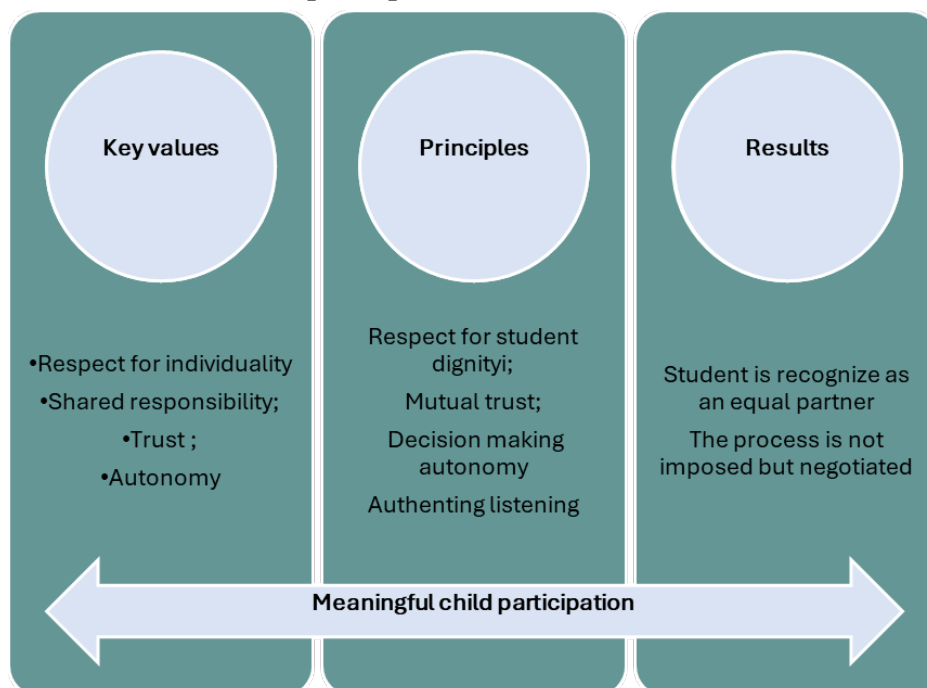


Figure 1. The interconnection between the values and principles of student participation

Conclusions

Child participation in the decision-making process represents a complex educational mechanism that contributes to the formation of the student's personality by cultivating fundamental values. Respect for individuality, responsibility, integrity, and cooperation constitute the essential elements of this process. Through active involvement in making decisions that affect them, students develop their personal identity, autonomy, and social competencies, becoming responsible actors in their own development and within the community they belong to.

Thus, promoting child participation within the educational environment is not merely an obligation derived from the respect for children's rights, but also an essential pedagogical strategy for fostering an autonomous and responsible personality, actively engaged in social life.

Bibliography

1. ANDRIȚCHI, V. et al. *Managementul educațional și standardele profesionale în educație*. Chișinău: Institutul de Științe ale Educației, 2023. ISBN 978-9975-48-212-7.
2. BANDURA, A. *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*. New York: W.H. Freeman, 1997. ISBN 978-0-7167-2850-4.
3. BANDURA, A. Social Cognitive Theory: An Agentic Perspective. In: *Annual Review of Psychology*. 2001, vol. 52, no. 1, p. 1-26. ISSN 0066-4308.
4. BRYK, A. S., SCHNEIDER, B. *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement*. NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002. ISBN 978-0-87154-192-5.
5. DECI, E. L., RYAN, R. M. The "What" and "Why" of Goal Pursuits: Human Needs and the Self-Determination of Behavior. In: *Psychological Inquiry*. 2000, vol. 11, no. 4, p. 227-268. ISSN 1047-840X.
6. DEWEY, J. *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York: Macmillan, 1916.
7. HART, R. *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship*. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 1992.
8. LANSDOWN, G. *Every Child's Right to be Heard: A Resource Guide on the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment No. 12*. London: Save the Children UK / UNICEF, 2011. ISBN 978-1-84187-154-7.
9. LUNDY, L. "Voice" is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal*. 2007, vol. 33, no. 6, p. 927-942. ISSN 0141-1926.
10. NODDINGS, N. *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013. ISBN 978-0-520-27573-7.

11. PIAGET, J. *The Moral Judgment of the Child*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1932.
12. Ministerul Educației și Cercetării. *Cadrul de Referință al Curriculumului Național*. Aprobare prin Ordinul Ministerului Educației și Cercetării nr. 1272 din 23 iulie 2025. Chișinău: MEC, 2025.
13. Parlamentul RM. *Codul Educației al Republicii Moldova nr. 152 din 17.07.2014*. Monitorul Oficial al Republicii Moldova, nr. 319-324, art. 634. Chișinău, 2014 [cu modificările și completările ulterioare, inclusiv versiunea actualizată la 2026].
14. RINALDI, C. In Dialogue with Reggio Emilia: Listening, Researching and Learning. London: Routledge, 2006. ISBN 978-0-415-34504-0.
15. TSCHANNEN-MORAN, M. Trust Matters: Leadership for Successful Schools. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014. ISBN 978-1-118-83437-4.
16. UN COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD (CRC). General Comment No. 12: The right of the child to be heard. Geneva: United Nations, 2009. CRC/C/GC/12.
17. UNITED NATIONS (UN). Convention on the Rights of the Child. Treaty Series, vol. 1577. New York: United Nations, 1989.

Received / *Recepționat*: 24.04.2026

Accepted / *Acceptat*: 29.06.2026

Email: vioandritch@gmail.com