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"We have a say in the matter": students' voices in school self-evaluation

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School self-evaluation processes are recognized as central instruments of democratic school management and self-regulation, with significant potential to promote continuous improvement in educational quality. Within the field of educational administration, research on how student participation can be integrated into and transform these processes—thereby granting them a more democratic and emancipatory character—remains limited. This article analyzes and discusses the role of participation and student voice in the construction of school self-evaluation practices. It draws on a documentary and interpretive analysis and is complemented by qualitative data from a broader study on student participation in school governance, particularly in administrative and management bodies. The analysis of self-evaluation reports from four Portuguese schools, along with interviews with principals and teachers and focus groups with students, enabled exploration of how student participation is recognized, encouraged, and incorporated into internal evaluation processes. The results reveal different levels and types of participation, ranging from occasional consultations to active involvement in decision-making, highlighting persistent tensions between regulation-driven and accountability-oriented self-evaluation practices and more democratic, emancipatory forms of engagement. When students are heard and their perspectives valued within the school's governance and organizational practices, self-evaluation can take on a more formative, collaborative, and transformative meaning while simultaneously reinforcing collective commitment. In this sense, school self-evaluation with student participation emerges as a potentially central space for the democratic development of schools, closely linked to school improvement and student emancipation through a shared process of reflection and action.

KEYWORDS
school autonomy, school democracy, school democratic governance, school self-evaluation, student participation

1 Introduction

The contemporary school should be understood as a complex organization, intersected by political, administrative, cultural, and pedagogical dimensions. From this *kaleidoscopic* perspective (Ferreira, 2007), the field of educational administration is not limited to overseeing the execution of rules or procedures. Instead, it seeks to problematize a school's organizational grammar within a space of interaction among actors, in their power relations and experiences of democratic school governance, where school goals and priorities, external pressures, and internal aspirations for participation and autonomy converge (Barroso, 1996b; Correia, 2010; Ferreira, 2012;

Lima 1992). This perspective enables an understanding of schools not merely as managerial and bureaucratic structures, but as social and political organizations shaped by tensions between formal regulation and emancipatory processes.

In this context of increasing organizational and social complexity, school autonomy has become a key feature of educational policies over recent decades. However, the implementation of autonomy policies has not followed a linear or uniform process. Rather, the ways in which autonomy is enacted in school practices reveal an ambivalent dynamic: While autonomy may create opportunities for student participation and democratic school governance, it may also reinforced mechanisms of regulation, accountability, and control (Afonso, 2010a; Barroso, 1996a, 2017; Ferreira, 2004, 2012, 2017).

School evaluation, encompassing both external evaluation and internal self-evaluation processes, has emerged as one of the primary mechanisms of this reconfiguration. On the one hand, evaluation is presented as a tool for organizational self-regulation—for schools to monitor, reflect on, and improve their own practices—while promoting continuous improvement and democratic responsibility. On the other hand, it responds to logics of performativity and accountability that intensify organizational oversight (Afonso, 2010a; Bolívar, 2014).

The expansion of these mechanisms must be understood within a broader context of socio-economic and political transformations, marked by the economic crisis of the 1970s, the scarcity of public resources, and growing demands for transparency and accountability to society (Figueiredo and Góis, 1995). In this framework, the autonomy granted to schools has been accompanied by strengthened monitoring and accountability mechanisms, configuring a regulatory regime that simultaneously legitimizes and constrains organizational action (Afonso, 2010a).

Historically, the understanding of institutions was strongly influenced by the Weberian bureaucratic model (Weber, 1978), centered on formal rationality, process predictability, and the primacy of rules. In the school context, this model emphasized "the importance of abstract rules and formal structures, of planning and decision-making processes, the consistency of objectives, and the predictive nature of actions" (Lima, 1998, p. 66). For much of the twentieth century, this framework shaped how schools were conceptualized and organized, privileging hierarchical structures and centralized governance mechanisms.

Gradually, other theories and organizational models have complicated this reading, opening space for understanding the school as simultaneously political, cultural, and democratic (Barroso, 2001; Costa, 1996; Ferreira, 2012; Lima, 1992). Within this framework, participation and autonomy emerge as essential dimensions of organizational functioning. As Figueiredo and Góis (1995) emphasize, it became necessary to mitigate the dichotomy between those who plan and those who execute, expand spaces of freedom, and encourage critical participation from various actors.

Despite this paradoxical *continuum*, the implementation of genuinely participatory practices in schools' everyday life remains permeated by multiple tensions and constraints. These include school governance practices, such as the persistent centralization of political decision-making and limits on school autonomy (Barroso, 1996a), as well as social challenges associated with the massification of education and the expansion of the social functions assigned to schools (Stoer, 1986; 2002), situated within broader dynamics of policy regulation, performativity, and ideological control in education systems (Apple, 2011; Ball, 2000; 2009). Added to this are political, cultural, digital, and ecological pressures (Saura et al., 2024), which strongly shape contemporary youth experiences—from political polarization and misinformation on social media to civic and environmental mobilizations led by young people both inside and outside school settings (Menezes et al., 2012; Pais, 2014; Pais and Ferreira, 2010; Sousa and Ferreira, 2024b).

Thus, school autonomy does not constitute a stabilized state, but rather exists in a state of *ongoing crisis* (Ferreira, 2012), continuously tensioned by dynamics that limit and reconfigure school action (Ferreira, 2012; 2017). In this scenario, marked by tensions between external regulation, organizational autonomy, and challenges in day-to-day school governance, it becomes particularly relevant to question *who* participates in defining the meanings of school evaluation and under what conditions such participation acquires democratic significance. It is with this horizon that the present article seeks to understand how school (self-)evaluation processes incorporate—or silence—student voices, who claim that "*We have a say in the matter*" (a statement from a student at School B_GDF2), and to what extent these processes can constitute participatory practices with democratic and emancipatory potential.

2 School (self-)evaluation: from regulation to participation

In Portugal, legislation concerning school evaluation (Portugal, 2002) establishes a dual evaluation system, combining external evaluation conducted by the General Inspectorate of Education and Science (IGEC) with mandatory self-evaluation at each school. This framework aims to promote educational quality, support school improvement, strengthen accountability, and foster organizational development. Defined dimensions include the educational project, school management and organization, the educational environment, community participation, and student outcomes (Article 6, Portugal, 2002). This legal framework reinforces the centrality of self-evaluation while also situating it within a regulated context in which schools respond to pre-established, centrally defined benchmarks and expectations.

In a context of increasing complexity, educational evaluation alternates between more objective perspectives, centered on quantification, measurement, and the production of comparable indicators, and more subjective perspectives, which value the experiences of individuals, situated knowledge, and the meanings constructed through internal school processes and interactions among actors (Afonso, 2010a; Bolívar, 2014). This tension is not merely technical; it is profoundly political and epistemological. What counts as "evidence"? Who defines the criteria of "quality"? For what purposes is evaluation conducted?

Within schools, evaluation simultaneously fulfills functions of regulation, control, improvement, and, potentially, emancipation, guiding internal school decisions or supporting public policies and

comparisons (Figueiredo, 2023). Traditionally, a distinction is made between *normative and external evaluation*, oriented toward the control of the educational system, and *criterion-based and internal evaluation*, aimed at diagnosing and improving the school itself, often associated with self-evaluation and conducted through school-level routines, collective reflection, and participatory analysis (Carvalho and Folgado, 2017; Figueiredo and Góis, 1995; Hofman et al., 2009).

However, this distinction, although conceptually well-studied, does not eliminate the ambiguities that permeate evaluation processes. When self-evaluation is developed within a firmly structured normative framework and combined with external evaluation mechanisms, to what extent does it remain an autonomous exercise of internal reflection? Is it primarily an instrument of self-regulation, or an internalized form of external regulation?

School self-evaluation (SSE), in discursive terms, emerges as an instrument for organizational self-regulation and continuous improvement, allowing the school to identify needs, analyze its performance, and plan development actions. Not only are quantified academic results and rates of (non)achievement considered, but also the educational environment, school organization, and community participation (Bolívar, 2014; Hofman et al., 2009).

Internationally, its importance has been recognized in recommendations by the European Parliament and the Council of Europe, which encourage Member States to promote self-evaluation as a process of organizational learning and school improvement (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015; Mouraz et al., 2024).

Although mandatory, SSE implementation has been heterogeneous, reflecting different organizational traditions, levels of professional training, and available resources (Afonso, 2010b; Carvalho and Folgado, 2017; Oliveira, 2016). In many contexts, SSE tends to balance two complementary pressures: internal school improvement and accountability to the state. Some schools prioritize monitoring results and success indicators; others seek to integrate the collection of perceptions on school climate and student and parent satisfaction, promoting broader reflective processes (Mouraz et al., 2024).

Nonetheless, numerous studies highlight a recurrent tension between SSE's participatory intent and its practical implementation. Although there is a widespread perception that self-evaluation should involve the educational community, the process often remains concentrated within formally designated teams—frequently appointed by the school leadership—and is not widely understood by other school actors (Carvalho and Ferreira, 2020; Carvalho and Folgado, 2017). This concentration can limit collective appropriation and reduce the transformative potential of the process. When most of the community is unaware of the criteria, procedures, or team members, what kind of participation is possible? When self-evaluation is primarily oriented toward external evaluation, responding to pre-formatted benchmarks, does it become a collaborative instrument or remain essentially regulatory?

Despite these tensions, it is important to recognize that SSE can assume different configurations. When anchored in dialogic, transparent, and participatory dynamics, it can become a space for shared responsibility, organizational learning, and collective sense-making, approaching an emancipatory rationality (Bolívar, 2014; Carvalho, 2024; Ferreira, 2012). It is precisely within this tension—between regulation and emancipation, between conformity and critical reflection—that the issue of participation by different school actors, and particularly by students, rises. If SSE is intended as a process of school improvement, can it afford to disregard the voices of those who experience it daily?

2.1 Student participation in SSE

Despite the centrality of community participation in SSE discourse, research has predominantly focused on teachers' and management teams' actions, relegating students' roles to the background. Contributions from the sociology of childhood and education reaffirm children and young people as social actors with the capacity to interpret and evaluate, and with the desire to transform the contexts in which they live (Fernandes, 2009; Sarmento, 2022; Sarmento et al., 2007). This perspective is also aligned with approaches based on children's rights that recognize participation as a fundamental right rather than merely a pedagogical strategy. In particular, Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child establishes children's right to express their views freely in matters affecting them and to have those views taken seriously (United Nations, 1989; Lundy, 2007).

Similarly, studies on youth emphasize the students' potential for critical, interventive, and advocacy-oriented action within their schools, showing that their participation can take organized, reflective, and politically meaningful forms when recognized (Sousa, 2025; Sousa and Ferreira, 2025b, 2025c).

If we recognize this possibility and capacity in both theoretical and practical terms, why does student participation continue to occupy a peripheral position in school evaluation processes? What rationalities sustain this dissociation between discursive recognition and actual participation?

Rudduck and Flutter (2004) warn of the tendency to view students as in a state of "quarantine" during compulsory schooling—suspended between childhood and adulthood, in a condition of incomplete citizenship. This representation contributes to their exclusion from decision-making and critical reflection processes concerning the school. Within this framework, the traditional evaluation model predominantly focuses on the teaching staff and school management, silencing or marginalizing student voices in evaluation processes, when they could, in fact, become the primary agents of change and improvement in schools. Recognizing students as legitimate actors in school evaluation processes is essential for strengthening school democracy and fostering more inclusive and democratic forms of school governance.

From a pedagogical perspective, student voice is not limited to expressing opinions about rules or behaviors; it involves meaningful participation in defining objectives, analyzing educational practices, and making decisions regarding school operations (Bron and Laan, 2019; Cook-Sather, 2006; 2018; Fielding, 2004; Hart, 1992). In this regard, Hart's (1992) *Ladder of Participation* remains a useful framework for distinguishing between symbolic forms of participation and more meaningful experiences based on shared decision-making.

From this perspective, student voice constitutes a fundamental dimension of democratic school governance, as it enables students to participate actively in shaping the educational environment and influencing decisions that affect their daily school lives. Listening to students allows for a deeper understanding of the factors that facilitate or hinder learning and contributes to more informed decision-making (Rudduck and Flutter, 2004). Ignoring this dimension implies losing opportunities to promote truly formative and emancipatory evaluation (Dewey, 1916).

In this context, the concept of *participatory evaluation* (Cousins and Earl, 1992; 2005), involving all actors and conducted *with* them (Figueiredo, 2023), assumes particular relevance. This model entails collaboration among different school actors—teachers, principals, students, and the wider educational community—combining specialized knowledge with lived experience. However, the formal expansion of participation alone does not guarantee its transformative character. When student involvement is limited to completing pre-defined questionnaires or serving symbolic roles in formal bodies, can it be considered genuine participation, or merely legitimization of decisions which have already been made?

Research also highlights the risk of *ritualization* in participatory processes, where the presence of educational actors does not necessarily translate into real influence over decisions (Carvalho and Folgado, 2017). In such cases, participation tends to be staged and confined to narrowly defined arenas, with limited scope for choice and decision-making. A central question arises: Can SSE be considered emancipatory if students do not participate in defining the evaluative questions, interpreting results, and constructing actions for improvement?

Assuming student participation as a structuring axis of self-evaluation requires shifting the focus from a predominantly technical logic to a political and ethical logic, in which evaluation is understood as a practical democratic process and as a constitutive element of school democracy and democratic school governance. It entails questioning *who* defines the problems to be assessed, which voices are considered legitimate sources of knowledge, and which experiences are recognized as "evidence" in the evaluation process. It also involves rethinking the instruments, procedures, and routines through which the school organizes self-evaluation, ensuring that the evaluation is grounded in concrete school practices. Within this horizon, the discussion on SSE and participation gains particular relevance, calling for reflection on the conditions that allow—or constrain—the hearing and recognition of diverse voices in everyday school life.

3 Methodological procedure

Building on a broader investigation into student participation in the democratic administration and governance of schools (Sousa, 2025; Sousa and Ferreira, 2024a, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c), this article presents a qualitative subset, combining a documentary analysis of the self-evaluation reports from four Portuguese public schools (two schools in the north of Portugal, one in the center, and one in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area) with empirical data from focus group discussions with students and semi-structured interviews with school principals and teachers. Through the integration of these data sources, the study seeks to understand the different modes of student involvement in SSE processes, exploring and discussing the tensions between instrumental and formative logics of self-evaluation and the possibilities for enhancing the democratic potential of these mechanisms.

The selection of these schools followed a purposive sampling strategy, guided by the study's objectives and with the aim of capturing diverse expressions of student participation in school life. Schools were identified based on a prior national mapping, institutional contacts, and educational networks, with the following selection criteria: (1) the existence of practices that promoted student voice, autonomy, and participation; (2) geographic diversity; and (3) organizational and pedagogical diversity, considering school size and structure (grouped and non-grouped), their educational projects, and potential participation in programs aimed at promoting equity and innovation, such as Priority Educational Intervention Territories (TEIP) or the Pilot Project for Pedagogical Innovation (PPIP), both established under Portuguese national education policy.

In this case study (Cohen et al., 2018; Stake, 1998; Yin, 2014), multiple techniques were employed to capture participants' perceptions and their interactions within daily school life. Seven focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with students, alongside four semi-structured interviews with the principals of the respective schools and 12 interviews with teachers engaged in various projects or activities with students.

A total of 51 secondary school students participated in seven focus group discussions conducted across four public schools. Although three of the participating schools offer educational provision from preschool to secondary education, this study focused exclusively on students enrolled in secondary education (Grades 10–12).

Participants were aged 15 years and older, with the majority attending Grade 12. The sample comprised 30 female and 21 male students enrolled in different academic courses, including science and technology, languages and humanities, socioeconomic sciences, and visual arts.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, with the support of school principals and teachers. The selection sought to ensure diversity in terms of age, gender, school year, academic course, and levels of involvement in school life. Accordingly, some FGDs included students who were actively engaged in student representative bodies or other school participation initiatives, while others involved students with limited or no formal participation experience. This strategy aimed to capture diverse perspectives and experiences regarding student participation and school self-evaluation processes.

Participation was voluntary, and all students received detailed information about the aims and procedures of the study. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants and, when required, from their parents or legal guardians.

In addition, key documents from the four schools were analyzed, including self-evaluation reports, innovation and monitoring plans produced over the last three academic years. The documentary analysis focused on three principal axes:

- Structures and instruments of self-evaluation implemented;

TABLE 1 School profiles.

School	Organizational structure	Location	Student population
A	School cluster	Northern Portugal, urban area	1,234 students (preschool to secondary)
B	School cluster, TEIP	Northern Portugal, peri-urban area	843 students (preschool to secondary)
C	School cluster, TEIP	Central Portugal, urban area	3,040 students (preschool to secondary)
D	Non-clustered school	Lisbon Metropolitan Area, urban center	1,677 students (secondary education)

- Strategies for promoting student participation in self-evaluation;
- Processes and procedures for coordination between teachers, students, and other school actors.

This focus allowed for the identification of patterns of participation, formal mechanisms for student involvement, and areas with potential to build upon participatory and democratic processes.

Documentary data, interview transcripts, and focus group discussions were analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Bardin, 2011; Cohen et al., 2018), conducted by the first author and coded in NVivo (Version 15). An initial set of analytical categories was informed by the study objectives and the literature on school self-evaluation, student participation, and democratic school governance. Throughout the analytical process, these categories were iteratively refined, expanded, and reorganized in response to the empirical material, allowing both anticipated and emerging themes to be incorporated. Data triangulation across documents, interviews, and focus groups enabled the identification of patterns, similarities, and differences in the organization of SSE processes and forms of student participation across the four schools. This process resulted in the refinement of three overarching analytical dimensions that structure the presentation of the findings: (i) the structure and organization of SSE mechanisms, (ii) typologies of student participation, and (iii) the recognition of student participation in school self-evaluation processes.

For context, a summary of the four participating schools is presented (Table 1), including their organizational structure, geographic location, and student population size.

All procedures in this study were conducted in accordance with ethical principles for research in school contexts.[1] Participants were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their contributions and informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Anonymization was maintained throughout all stages, with the real names of schools, students, teachers, and principals replaced by codes or pseudonyms. Whenever possible, results and reflections were shared with the schools, including the submission of an interim report (Sousa and Ferreira, 2025a).

[1]The study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of FPCEUP and authorization from MIME (School Survey Monitoring, Ministry of Education, Portugal), complying with national and European data protection legislation (EU Regulation 2016/679; Law No. 58/2019).

4 Results

A comparative analysis of the four schools revealed distinct organizational patterns in the implementation of SSE and in the ways student participation is incorporated into evaluation processes. Although all schools incorporate mechanisms for information gathering and monitoring, notable differences emerged regarding the degree of formalization of SSE structures, the composition of the teams responsible for self-evaluation, the evaluation mechanisms and procedures adopted, and the ways in which student perspectives are integrated into monitoring and decision-making processes.

The results are organized around three analytical dimensions: (i) the structure and organization of self-evaluation processes, (ii) forms of student participation in SSE, and (iii) the recognition of students' contributions and their integration into school improvement processes. These dimensions provide a comparative framework for identifying recurring patterns, similarities, and differences across the four schools, enabling comparison beyond the specific characteristics of each case.

Table 2 summarizes the main dimensions used to compare SSE organization and student participation across the four schools.

As summarized in Table 2, the four schools display different levels of SSE formalization and distinct organizational approaches to student participation. Schools A and B rely on more consolidated structures, characterized by dedicated teams, regular monitoring procedures, and the involvement of multiple stakeholders. By contrast, Schools C and D organize SSE through more limited or *ad hoc* mechanisms, often linked to specific projects, inclusion measures, or satisfaction indicators. These contrasting configurations provide the basis for the comparative analysis developed in the following sections, which examines how different organizational arrangements shape the forms of student participation and, in turn, influence the democratic potential of SSE and democratic school governance.

4.1 Structure and organization of SSE mechanisms

Comparison across the four schools revealed two broad patterns in the organization of SSE. Schools A and B adopted more institutionalized models, characterized by dedicated self-evaluation structures, regular monitoring procedures, and the involvement of multiple stakeholders. By contrast, Schools C and D relied on more fragmented and project-based approaches, in which self-evaluation was embedded in specific initiatives rather than organized through continuous evaluation cycles.

TABLE 2 Levels of formalization of self-evaluation in schools.

School	Formal self-evaluation structures	Student participation in self-evaluation	Evaluation mechanisms and procedures
A	Self-evaluation team (SET)	Representation in the extended SET, student assemblies, and projects	Quality questionnaires; internal reports
B	Quality observatory team	Representation in the well-being observatory, student council, class delegates, student ombudsperson	Questionnaires, discussion panels, and internal reports
C	EMAEI, innovation plans, without evaluative cycles	Student/delegate assemblies; self-evaluation of the innovation plan and inclusion measures (EMAEI)	Questionnaires and indicators of learning outcomes quality
D	No formal self-evaluation cycles	Satisfaction questionnaires, participatory culture in processes	Satisfaction Index, "happiness" metric

Despite sharing a high degree of formalization, Schools A and B operationalize SSE differently. Whereas School A adopts a more centralized model, structured around a dedicated Self-Evaluation Team (SET) with clearly defined responsibilities, School B follows a more distributed and integrated approach, combining the representation of multiple stakeholders, multidisciplinary teams, and digital monitoring tools explicitly connected to organizational decision-making. These contrasting arrangements illustrate that institutionalized SSE may be organized through different governance models rather than a single standardized structure.

In School A, the SET comprises a core and an extended team, defining clear responsibilities for planning, data collection, and analysis, and communicating results to the school community.

School B organizes SSE through the *Quality Observatory Team*, composed of teaching staff and including representation from non-teaching personnel and students. This team operates transversally across the three domains of external evaluation—outcomes, educational service delivery, and leadership and management—and incorporates multidisciplinary teams that continuously organize data collection and analysis, particularly through a dedicated digital platform that disseminates the information collected. Beyond this formal operation, school documents highlight the use of panels as discussion spaces between "top and middle leadership", where "pedagogical and organizational options are debated, allowing everyone to express opinions that influence decisions" (SSE Report_School B).

Thus, formalization does not correspond to a single organizational model, but may be enacted through either centralized or more distributed arrangements.

By contrast, Schools C and D illustrate a less institutionalized approach to SSE, more strongly associated with specific projects, inclusion measures, and leadership initiatives than with continuous evaluation structures. Although both schools share this broader organizational pattern, they operationalize it in different ways. School C embeds self-evaluation within innovation and inclusion initiatives, whereas School D relies on a narrower monitoring model centred on satisfaction indicators and informal participatory practices.

School C primarily organizes SSE through the EMAEI (Multidisciplinary Team for Inclusive Education Support), monitoring inclusion measures and differentiated learning, but with loosely formalized cycles. Analysis of the school's key documents shows the importance of the Innovation Plan, which includes self-evaluation processes at the end of each school year, evaluating the implementation of planned measures and the development of objectives. It relies on student questionnaires and indicators of learning outcomes quality such as success rates, autonomy skills, communication and critical thinking, problem-solving, or complex task performance (Innovation Plan_School C).

School D has a restricted mechanism that centralizes information in a digital repository, limiting self-evaluation to the *Satisfaction Index* and, to some extent, restricting the possibility of more systematic monitoring. In fact, the External Evaluation Report (produced by the IGEC) immediately highlights that "no structured and monitored evaluation cycles are established based on objectives, indicators, and targets."

These differences are also reflected in how SSE structures are perceived and experienced by students. Beyond the organizational structures identified in school documents, evidence from interviews and focus group discussions suggests that the existence of formal mechanisms does not necessarily mean that these are visible or meaningful to students. Some students report limited knowledge of how existing structures operate: "there is not much information" (School C_GDF1) or "I still do not really know what it is" (School D_GDF1). These accounts suggest that the visibility and legitimacy of SSE structures are determined not solely by their formal existence but also by how they are communicated and experienced in everyday school life.

Taken together, the findings suggest that differences in SSE organization are not simply differences in procedural complexity. Rather, they reflect distinct conceptions of self-evaluation: one based on institutionalized monitoring and formal governance structures, and another relying more heavily on project-based practices and organizational culture. These organizational differences shape not only how evidence is collected and used, but also the role attributed to students within SSE processes. While more institutionalized models create structured opportunities for participation, less formalized arrangements depend more heavily on school culture, leadership, and local initiatives to sustain student involvement. Consequently, the democratic potential of SSE appears to depend not simply on the existence of evaluation structures, but on how these structures position students as contributors to organizational learning and school improvement.

4.2 Typologies of student participation in SSE

Student participation in SSE processes takes different forms across the four schools analyzed, reflecting varying levels of

formalization, openness to dialogue, and integration of student perspectives into monitoring and decision-making processes, with implications for democratic school governance. The analysis considered multiple forms of participation, including representation in self-evaluation teams, participation in student councils and assemblies, responses to questionnaires, involvement in school projects and innovation initiatives, monitoring activities, and informal participation emerging from students' own agency and everyday interactions.

Schools A and B share a common pattern of integrating students into formal SSE structures through representative and consultative mechanisms embedded in systematic monitoring processes. However, they differ in the degree to which participation extends beyond data collection towards deliberative dialogue and organizational learning.

In School A, students participate in the extended SET, with two student representatives included to ensure the "heterogeneity of group members." Perception data are gathered through so-called "quality questionnaires," which include both closed and open-ended questions and are administered in the classroom. Additionally, the Self-Evaluation Report highlights student participation in general assemblies, where students can submit proposals regarding school spaces, evaluation practices, and inclusion measures. The report notes that these dynamics reinforce "a sense of belonging and community among students" (Self-Evaluation Report, School A).

Empirical data support this participatory dimension, describing the assemblies as spaces for spontaneous expression: "There, it is really their spontaneous voice. They express desire, need, problems, whatever it is" (School A_Teacher Manuela). As emphasized by the school principal, active listening can even generate unexpected solutions: "Sometimes they come up with solutions to problems for which we do not have an answer" (School A_Principal). These findings suggest that formally structured participation can create conditions for more meaningful and potentially emancipatory forms of engagement.

In School B, student participation occurs within the "monitoring circuit" organized by the *Quality Observatory*—where students are represented—through individual and group interviews, monitoring panels open to the entire school community, and self-evaluation surveys for students, teaching staff, non-teaching staff, and parents. Beyond this direct and formalized participation, students also engage through the student association, class representatives (participating in first-term class councils), and the s*tudent ombudsman* (a teacher representing students in the pedagogical council), fostering connections between leadership, teachers, students, and the Quality Observatory Team, so that students feel "pedagogical action is something done with them" (School B_Principal).

Schools A and B therefore illustrate two distinct ways of institutionalizing student participation. While both rely on representative structures and systematic consultation, School A places greater emphasis on deliberative spaces such as assemblies, whereas School B embeds participation within a broader monitoring architecture connected to school governance. Thus, participation moves beyond simple consultation through different organizational pathways.

Schools C and D illustrate a second participatory pattern in which student involvement is less dependent on formal SSE structures and more closely associated with everyday school practices, projects, and relationships. In these schools, participation is less systematically embedded in evaluation cycles, but may nevertheless influence school life through more informal mechanisms.

In School C, participation occurs through student assemblies (elementary level), class representative assemblies (middle and high school levels), self-evaluation processes associated with the Innovation Plan, and monitoring of inclusion measures through EMAEI. Although these moments are not organized into structured evaluation cycles, narratives reveal a co-construction logic. As one student notes: "We have many clubs and lots of activities that let us build bonds (…) not just learning to get a grade, but learning to feel satisfied with what we learn" (School C_GDF1). The principal reinforces this idea by stating, "There are proposals in co-construction" (School C_Principal). This dynamic aligns with collaborative forms of participation, distancing itself from merely consultative or decorative formats.

In School D, formal participation is focused on the application of the *Satisfaction Index*, using questionnaires administered to a randomly selected sample of five students from each class, prioritizing perception indicators such as agreement with statements like "School is a place where it is pleasant to be," to obtain a "happiness metric" (Satisfaction Index Report, School D). However, empirical data reveal the presence of informal participation practices and student influence, particularly in project implementation and daily school organization, where students' voices "really matter and contribute (…) to students' requests" (School D_Teacher Paula). Thus, a disconnection is observed between the existing formal mechanism and broader cultural participation dynamics, which are not explicitly reflected in structured SSE mechanisms.

Across the four schools, the findings suggest that differences in student participation are not limited to the degree of formalization of SSE mechanisms. Rather, they reflect different understandings of students' roles within self-evaluation processes. In more institutionalized models, participation is primarily embedded in representative and consultative structures that support systematic monitoring. In less formalized contexts, participation depends more heavily on everyday relationships, project-based initiatives, and students' own agency. These contrasting approaches illustrate that the democratic potential of SSE is shaped not only by the opportunities available for participation but also by the ways schools conceptualize students as contributors to evaluation, organizational learning, and school improvement.

4.3 Recognition of student participation in evaluation processes

A comparative analysis of the four schools shows that student participation in SSE goes beyond mere opportunities for expression and fundamentally depends on the extent to which student contributions are recognized, valued, and integrated into decision-making processes. Across the four schools, recognition of student participation follows two contrasting patterns. On the one hand, schools with more formalized SSE structures provide institutional opportunities for students to express their views, although these do not necessarily translate into influence over

decision-making. On the other hand, schools with less institutionalized SSE mechanisms rely more heavily on informal relationships, leadership openness, and students' own initiative to ensure that their voices are acknowledged.

Schools A and B illustrate the first pattern. In both schools, formal SSE structures provide institutional opportunities for participation. However, students question the extent to which their contributions influence final decisions. In School A, students perceive that their participation can lead to tangible effects: "they listen to us and change things for us" (School A_FGD1), highlighting that the recognition of student voice relies not only on the existence of formal structures but also on the school leadership's genuine openness to implementing changes. By contrast, students in School B point to the limits of this recognition: "Even when we give our opinion, it may be respected, but nothing will change. Because, whether we like it or not, the one who decides these things is the principal, and if they consider it good for the school, it will not change just because students say so" (School B_FGD1). These contrasting perceptions suggest that formal SSE structures create opportunities for students to express their views but do not necessarily guarantee deliberative influence over school policies and practices.

A different pattern emerges in Schools C and D. In these schools, formal participation is more limited and often restricted to perception-gathering instruments, such as questionnaires or satisfaction indices. Nevertheless, interviews and focus group discussions indicate that students' voices may still shape projects and everyday school decisions through informal organizational practices and culturally embedded listening mechanisms. Students themselves demonstrate a clear awareness of the distinction between *having a voice* and *being heard*: "Giving students a voice is as much the students' role as it is the teachers', the adults', the Ministry's. You cannot give students a voice if that voice is not actually listened to (…) it is more difficult, perhaps, to hear them and genuinely make a conscious effort to implement their suggestions" (School C_FGD1).

Likewise, one student from School D explains that participation requires initiative and negotiation: "you really have to knock on the door and say we want to do this and we are doing this. And we have an opinion. And I disagree with yours. Well, then we reach an agreement here" (School D_FGD1). Another student emphasizes that the school leader "wants to do things and listen to students, and so it gives students autonomy" (School D_FGD1). Together, these accounts suggest that recognition of student participation depends less on formal SSE structures than on everyday relationships, leadership openness, and students' own agency. Although such informal practices may create meaningful opportunities for influence, they remain contingent on specific actors and organizational cultures.

Across the four schools, recognition of student participation emerges as a multidimensional process shaped by the interaction between:

- Formal structures that integrate participation and self-evaluation;
- A school culture that values students' contributions as resources for decision-making and improvement;
- Adult attitudes and practices, including active listening and openness to negotiation;
- Student autonomy and initiative, which requires students to assert themselves and claim space for action.

A persistent tension thus emerges between the existence of formal participation mechanisms and the (im)possibility for students to be recognized as active agents in shaping school policies and practices. Participation simultaneously functions as an instrument of regulation and as a space for civic engagement and emancipation, always contingent on structural, cultural, and pedagogical conditions. These findings suggest that democratic school governance depends not only on creating formal opportunities for participation but also on recognizing students as legitimate partners whose contributions inform organizational learning, school improvement, and institutional decision-making.

5 Discussion

The documentary and empirical analyses of the four schools revealed significant tensions between the formalization of SSE and students' participation and deliberative power. Even in contexts with formally consolidated structures, such as Schools A and B, participation does not always lead to concrete decisions, reflecting the levels of participation described by Hart (1992) and the distinction between *symbolic voice* and *voice with agency* (Bron and Veugelers, 2014). In this sense, active listening by teachers and school leaders is not always accompanied by action, illustrating that "being heard" does not necessarily translate into meaningful influence over school decision-making. This finding suggests that formal participatory structures constitute a necessary but insufficient condition for democratic participation within SSE.

On the other hand, *episodic* participation, observed in Schools C and D, is characterized by limited moments, often reduced to surveys or satisfaction indicators, without integration into continuous evaluation cycles. This limitation may compromise the potential for developing students' civic competencies and autonomy, highlighting the importance of structured mechanisms that not only gather perceptions but also embed students' contributions into iterative cycles of planning, action, and organizational learning that sustain democratic governance beyond episodic consultation.

However, the data suggest that school culture can help offset the absence of formal structures when participation is understood only as a formal requirement. In School D, for instance, students' informal involvement in projects and daily school organization demonstrates that a culture of participation, listening, and valuing student voice creates alternative avenues for influencing decisions, even without formalized mechanisms of self-evaluation. This distinction resonates with theoretical discussions on participation culture, agency, and empowerment, indicating that effective participation depends simultaneously on structural conditions and the tacit commitments of the school community as well as on the ways in which self-evaluation is enacted in everyday practices rather than confined to formal documentation (Carvalho and Folgado, 2017; Ferreira, 2012, 2013; Rudduck and Flutter, 2004; Sousa, 2025; Sousa and Ferreira, 2025b, 2025c).

The results further highlight the persistent tension between regulation and emancipatory experiences within SSE processes. Student participation functions, on the one hand, as an instrument for monitoring and legitimizing school practices; on the other hand, it constitutes a space for democratic engagement and personal development, allowing students to perceive their voice as a right—as one student put it, "We have a say in the matter" (School B_FGD2)—aligning with concepts of pedagogy of voice and school democracy (Sousa, 2025). This ambivalence reinforces the need to question: To what extent does SSE serve school management more than it serves students' democratic and emancipatory educational experience? Moreover, under what organizational conditions can SSE move from a compliance-oriented exercise to a participatory and transformative process?

This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that different organizational configurations of SSE generate different forms of student participation, recognition, and influence. Rather than being determined solely by the existence of formal participatory structures, the democratic potential of SSE emerges from the interaction between organizational arrangements, school culture, leadership practices, and the extent to which students are recognized as legitimate contributors to school improvement. These findings suggest that the organization of SSE itself shapes the conditions under which student participation becomes meaningful rather than merely procedural. Under these conditions, SSE can be understood not merely as an accountability mechanism (Afonso, 2010a; Bolívar, 2014) but as a constitutive dimension of democratic school governance.

6 Conclusion

This study examined how student participation is incorporated into SSE across four Portuguese schools, focusing on the relationship between organizational arrangements, participation, and democratic school governance. The comparative analysis revealed that schools differ not only in the degree of SSE formalization but also in how student participation is organized, recognized, and translated into school improvement processes. These findings highlight that the democratic potential of SSE depends less on the existence of formal participatory mechanisms than on how they are enacted within everyday school practices.

By comparing four contrasting organizational contexts, this study extends previous research by demonstrating that different SSE configurations generate distinct forms of student participation, recognition, and influence. Rather than conceptualizing student participation as a homogeneous practice, the study shows that its democratic value emerges from the interaction between organizational structures, leadership, school culture, and students' recognition as legitimate contributors to evaluation and decision-making. In this way, the study contributes to current debates by conceptualizing SSE as an organizational process that can either reinforce accountability or foster democratic governance.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that strengthening democratic school governance requires moving beyond compliance-oriented models of SSE towards approaches that position students as active partners in organizational learning and school improvement. This implies creating not only formal opportunities for participation but also organizational cultures and leadership practices that ensure students' perspectives are genuinely considered throughout evaluation and decision-making processes.

Although multiple sources of evidence were combined, this study is based on four case studies conducted within the Portuguese educational context; therefore, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable. Moreover, the study captures student participation at a particular moment in time and cannot account for longer-term organizational changes. Future research could examine how these organizational patterns evolve over time through longitudinal studies, explore similar processes across different national contexts, and investigate how different SSE models influence students' civic learning, democratic engagement, and school improvement.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because the data are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to Elisabete Ferreira, elisabete@fpce.up.pt.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Ethics Committee of Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, University of Porto. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardians/next of kin.

Author contributions

IS: Formal analysis, Project administration, Methodology, Validation, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Software, Investigation, Conceptualization, Resources. EF: Conceptualization, Supervision, Resources, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition.

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Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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The author(s) declared that generative AI was not used in the creation of this manuscript.

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