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The Level of School Participation of Children in the Transylvanian Territory: An Exploratory Analysis Within a Whole School Approach Framework

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Abstract: *School is not only a setting for disciplinary knowledge transmission but also a formative environment in which children practice civic values, develop social responsibility, and engage in everyday forms of participation. Research at the European level indicates that although children demonstrate growing awareness of their rights, their involvement in decisions affecting school life remains limited, as highlighted in The Europe Kids Want initiative (2019). Similar trends appear in Romania, where the Youth Barometer Survey (2022) reports persistently low levels of civic engagement among students. This study explores the school participation of primary pupils in the Transylvanian territory through the conceptual lens of the Whole School Approach (WSA). A 13-item questionnaire was administered in 2025 to 1,893 pupils aged 8–10, investigating their perceptions of rule usefulness, conflict-resolution practices, and opportunities for dialogue in classroom and school contexts. The analysis focuses on how pupils' everyday experiences reflect school-wide patterns of participation and the extent to which these experiences align with the core dimensions of a democratic WSA environment. Findings offer an exploratory overview of children's views on rule adherence, self-regulation during interpersonal conflicts, and the degree to which they feel their voices are heard at school. By situating these insights within a WSA framework, the study highlights participation gaps experienced by young pupils in Transylvania and underscores the importance of coherent, school-wide strategies aimed at strengthening meaningful student engagement in democratic school life.*

Keywords: *school participation; Whole School Approach (WSA); student voice and agency; civic engagement in education; Romanian primary education.*

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The school as a place of citizenship and democracy

School as a space for democratic experimentation and civic formation has long been a central theme in educational theory. Contemporary perspectives consistently highlight that schools do not merely transmit knowledge and disciplinary content; they also function as lived environments in which children practice cooperation, negotiation, rule-following, and collective responsibility. In this sense, schooling represents an irreplaceable context for forming informed, active, and responsible citizens who are capable of participating meaningfully in democratic life.

Classic authors such as John Dewey remain foundational to this discourse. Dewey (1916) argued that a democratic society and a democratic form of education stand in a mutually constitutive relationship: citizens learn democracy by experiencing it. For Dewey, school should not only prepare children for democratic participation but should itself be a democratic space — a "daily laboratory" where students exercise voice, practice deliberation, and learn to approach disagreement. Practical examples such as student councils, peer mediation programs, shared rule-making, or classroom discussions in which students co-construct meaning embody this vision of school as a micro-democratic community.

This conceptualization has been revitalized by contemporary scholars such as Biesta (2017, 2022), who reframes schooling as a public space of encounter. Rather than viewing education solely as knowledge transmission, Biesta emphasizes that schools must function as pluralistic arenas where students experience diversity of perspectives, engage in responsible dialogue, and learn the civic virtue of dealing constructively with dissent. Democracy, in this sense, is not an abstract curricular objective but a practice enacted through daily interactions among students, teachers, and the broader school community.

These theoretical perspectives are strongly echoed in European and global policy discourses. The Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC) articulates a comprehensive set of values, skills, attitudes, and knowledge areas that schools are expected to cultivate. UNESCO's Global Citizenship Education (GCED) agenda similarly advances a holistic vision of democratic schooling, encouraging educational systems to embed democratic values across governance, curriculum, assessment, school climate, and community engagement. These frameworks converge on the idea that democratic culture cannot be confined to isolated instructional moments; instead, it must permeate the entire school ecosystem.

Research evidence reinforces this integrated perspective. OECD (2023) analyses show that meaningful student participation in school decision-making is positively associated with cooperation, communication skills, self-efficacy, and civic awareness. The Eurydice/PrEval Network Report (2024) further stresses that citizenship education is most effective when embedded into a coherent participatory school culture rather than addressed through sporadic, project-based initiatives. These findings shift the focus from "where civic knowledge is taught" toward "how the school environment itself expresses democracy."

In light of these arguments, current educational thinking increasingly frames the school as a "democratic ecosystem", where every day routines — from rule-making and leadership structures to classroom dialogue and peer relations — function as civic experiences. Within this model, class discussions, co-created rules, collaborative learning, and student representation in school governance are no longer supplemental activities but structural mechanisms through which democratic values are enacted.

In an increasingly interconnected and diverse world, schools are therefore expected to assume a broader role that extends far beyond content delivery. They function as living gyms of democracy, where students learn to articulate their views, respect differences, negotiate conflicts, and contribute to collective decisions. Adopting a Whole School Approach (WSA) further strengthens this role by ensuring that democratic participation is embedded consistently across policies, pedagogical practices, school culture, and engagement with families and the wider community. Ultimately, schools that cultivate such environments help young generations develop the civic competences, ethical dispositions, and social awareness needed to participate actively and responsibly in democratic societies.

EU legislation on school and social participation of girls and boys

Within the framework of the level of school participation of children in the Transylvanian territory, it is essential to examine the extent to which European legislation supports children's participation in both school and broader social life. While the previous section addressed the school as a lived space of democratic practice, the present section focuses specifically on the legal and policy architecture that underpins participation rights across Europe.

Children's right to be heard is not merely a pedagogical aspiration but a legally protected principle. Article 12 of the United Nations (1989) guarantees minors the right to express their views in all matters affecting them, with appropriate consideration given to age and maturity. Building on this foundation, the European Union has progressively developed strategies aimed

at strengthening children's voices within educational systems and public decision-making. The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (European Commission, 2021) frames participation as both a right and a democratic necessity, describing children as "agents of change" whose involvement in policies must shift from symbolic consultation to substantive co-design.

Large-scale consultations reinforce this need. The Europe Kids Want (Eurochild & UNICEF, 2019), which gathered more than 38,000 opinions from children and adolescents across 23 countries, revealed strong concerns about the future, limited confidence in schools' ability to prepare them for life, and a perceived lack of adult responsiveness. Nearly half of respondents (47.2%) reported that adults seldom listen to their views on matters affecting their communities. The follow-up report, Our Europe, Our Rights, Our Future (2021), reiterated the call for institutional mechanisms that treat children as equal partners in policy dialogues—including proposals for a Children's EU Parliament as a formal venue for child participation.

These priorities are mirrored in two EU flagship initiatives: the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (2021) and the European Child Guarantee. A distinctive feature of these documents is the use of child-friendly formats created through participatory co-design with children themselves. Such approaches are grounded in long-standing pedagogical evidence showing that children adhere more strongly to rules they have helped create, as co-design strengthens ownership, understanding, and civic responsibility.

The Whole School Approach (WSA) provides a practical mechanism for translating these policy commitments into school environments. Rather than limiting children's participation to isolated activities or specific civics classes, the WSA embeds democratic engagement across all levels of school life—from governance structures to classroom interactions. Student councils, peer mediation programmes, shared rule-making, and community-based projects become structural mechanisms through which democratic culture is enacted daily. OECD (2023) analyses indicate that such forms of participation enhance cooperation, communication, and self-efficacy—competences strongly associated with long-term civic engagement. The Eurydice/PrEval Network (2024) similarly emphasizes that participation flourishes only within a coherent, value-driven school culture, while the School Education Gateway (2025) highlights that whole-school approaches strengthen learning outcomes and community cohesion.

Despite these policy frameworks, participation gaps remain. Ongoing consultations show that children's voices are still insufficiently represented across Europe. In Romania, these challenges carry particular weight. The Youth Barometer (2022) reveals limited civic engagement among Romanian

youth, suggesting that participatory mechanisms in schools remain underdeveloped. In this context, aligning Romanian school practices with European strategies becomes especially urgent.

Promising examples already exist. Experimental initiatives coordinated by Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, involving thousands of pupils, hundreds of teachers, and multiple partner schools, demonstrate that participatory practices can be successfully integrated into school culture. These programmes show that Romanian schools can translate European commitments into meaningful democratic experiences, reinforcing both civic competences and institutional trust. Such initiatives exemplify how WSA principles can be operationalized in practice, offering concrete pathways for strengthening children's participation in Transylvanian schools and beyond.

Civic involvement of pupils and young people in Romania

In a rapidly changing and increasingly interconnected world, contemporary societies require citizens who are informed, responsible, and capable of constructive engagement in democratic life. Civic involvement is not an innate disposition but a learned and cultivated competency, developed through educational experiences that encourage active participation, deliberation, and a sense of responsibility toward the community. Child-centred pedagogical approaches remain central to this process, recognizing children not only as learners but also as agents who can influence and contribute to the world around them.

In Romania, civic engagement among children and young people faces a dual challenge. On the one hand, the educational system has only partially succeeded in embedding civic responsibility as an ordinary and expected dimension of school life. Civic education often remains confined to formal curricular content rather than being enacted through participatory practices. On the other hand, many adolescents display reluctance to express their rights or participate in public discourse—whether related to environmental concerns, infrastructure needs, or the quality of education. Fear of public exposure, limited confidence in institutions, and a lack of opportunities for authentic participation continue to undermine young people's engagement.

These difficulties are mirrored within schools. Despite the existence of civic education as a curricular subject, opportunities for students to engage in meaningful participatory activities—such as electoral simulations, structured debates, meetings with local authorities, or student representation in decision-making processes—remain sporadic. Many kindergartens, primary schools, and high schools lack systematic projects that offer pupils direct insight into the functioning of local governance or public institutions. As

noted by Cucoş (2014), the integration of democratic values into students' perspectives requires coordinated action from teachers, parents, and institutional authorities, indicating that participation cannot be cultivated in isolation.

Learning environments outside the classroom can provide essential support in this regard. Extracurricular activities, volunteering, service-learning, and interdisciplinary community projects help students understand that citizenship is a lived experience grounded in everyday life. These initiatives foster a democratic mindset, environmental awareness, empathy, and an understanding of social responsibility. Encounters with local decision-makers and involvement in community-based projects allow pupils to see themselves as potential contributors to positive change.

Nevertheless, empirical data suggest that many young Romanians remain unfamiliar with basic civic tools such as public consultations, participatory budgeting, petitions, or local governance processes. The Romanian Youth Barometer (IRES, 2022) reports that half of young people aged 18–29 have never signed a petition, three out of five have never volunteered, and nearly 70% have never participated in protests. Furthermore, eight in ten respondents report no involvement in civic actions organized by NGOs or civic groups. Such statistics point to structural weaknesses in cultivating participation both within schools and across communities.

In this context, fostering civic engagement must begin early. When children encounter participatory mechanisms throughout schooling—student councils, peer mediation, shared rule-making, service-learning projects, and community partnerships—they are more likely to develop the confidence and dispositions needed for sustained civic involvement later in life. The Whole School Approach (WSA), long promoted at the European level, provides a coherent framework for embedding participation at every level of schooling. By integrating academic, structural, and extracurricular dimensions with strong community collaboration, WSA can help Romanian schools counter existing participation gaps. If participation becomes a lived, school-wide experience rather than an isolated activity, the school can fulfil its mission of preparing competent citizens capable of contributing to democratic renewal.

Citizenship competences in the Romanian context

The development of citizenship competences from an early age has become a defining priority for contemporary democratic societies. Research consistently shows that civic learning should not be postponed until adolescence but should begin in early childhood education and continue throughout primary schooling. Children possess a remarkable capacity to

observe and interpret both positive and negative aspects of community life—ranging from neglected public spaces to environmental issues—demonstrating that civic awareness is present long before the teenage years.

For civic competences to be effectively cultivated, educational experiences must be continuous, coherent, and systematically organized. Citizenship is not formed through occasional initiatives or ceremonial events; rather, it emerges through a sustained accumulation of participatory encounters across the years of schooling. In this sense, schools play a crucial role not only as environments for knowledge transmission but also as institutions that model and reproduce democratic culture. The pedagogical climate, organizational ethos, and the capacity of teachers to embody democratic values become as important as curriculum content itself.

International research increasingly demonstrates that every school subject can contribute to the formation of citizenship competences. Collaborative learning, critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving are embedded across the curriculum and support the development of civic dispositions. Evidence from PISA studies confirms strong associations between collaborative problem-solving and core literacies: science literacy ($r = .77$), reading literacy ($r = .74$), and mathematics literacy ($r = .70$). These correlations underscore the interdisciplinary nature of citizenship competences, which draw simultaneously on cognitive, social, and ethical dimensions. Recent global challenges—such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the war in Ukraine—have further illustrated that solidarity, resilience, digital literacy, and critical evaluation of information cannot be separated from civic readiness.

In Romania, citizenship education is formally integrated into the curriculum, yet its implementation remains uneven. Social and civic dimensions are present across multiple learning areas but are not always brought together into a coherent framework. Ideally, citizenship education should encompass knowledge with a value orientation, action competences, and transformative capacities that prepare students to participate responsibly in a pluralistic democracy. Although families transmit essential ethical values and basic forms of social knowledge, these cannot replace the structured and intentional learning experiences provided by educational institutions. Schools thus have the dual mission of supporting individual development and cultivating informed, reflective, and socially responsible citizens.

Achieving this mission requires sustained attention to the quality of educational processes. Teachers play a decisive role: through classroom management, dialogic interaction, and the creation of democratic learning environments, they set the foundation for civic competence development.

Learning activities should unfold within educational settings that balance structured curricular expectations with opportunities for deliberation, cooperation, and voice. The Whole School Approach (WSA) offers a coherent framework for embedding these practices at all levels of the institution, ensuring that civic competence development is not confined to isolated activities but becomes a systemic, school-wide endeavour.

The Romanian context illustrates both opportunities and challenges. Schools can function as genuine laboratories of democracy where values, skills, and dispositions are cultivated in an integrative manner. Yet this requires coherence, sustained staff development, institutional support, and a broader shift in educational culture that recognizes the centrality of civic education. Without early and structured exposure to participatory practices, it becomes difficult to form a generation of citizens ready to engage with the complexities of democratic life in the twenty-first century.

Detecting the level of participation of Romanian children: methodology

Participants

The study included 1,893 primary school pupils aged 8 to 10 years, recruited from schools that agreed to participate in the research. The decision to focus on this age group reflects the importance of early educational experiences in shaping civic dispositions and participatory behaviours.

Participants were selected through a non-probability, convenience sampling strategy. Primary schools were contacted through existing collaborations with school inspectorates and local partners, and participation was contingent on institutional approval, parental consent, and pupils' verbal assent. Although the initial intention was to achieve territorial balance across Romania, the final sample distribution was strongly shaped by school availability and administrative feasibility.

The regional distribution of the sample was markedly uneven: 95% of pupils were from Transylvania, 4.7% from Muntenia, and only 0.3% from Moldavia. This concentration reflects the geographical accessibility of collaborating schools at the time of data collection and the voluntary nature of institutional participation. Consequently, the findings cannot be generalized to the entire Romanian territory and should be interpreted as reflecting the perspectives of a predominantly Transylvanian sample.

Despite this regional imbalance, the large sample size provides meaningful descriptive insight into children's experiences of participation and democratic practices within school settings. These characteristics position the

study as an exploratory investigation rather than a representative national assessment.

Instruments

To investigate children's perceptions of their involvement in school life, a structured exploratory questionnaire was developed specifically for this study, as outlined in the research plan approved within the CERV-Child 2025 programme. The instrument comprised 13 items grouped into three conceptual clusters—Rules, Conflict, and Speaking Turn—reflecting the multidimensional nature of participation within a Whole School Approach (WSA) framework. The questionnaire included both multiple-choice items and open-ended prompts, allowing for the collection of quantifiable data as well as children's self-expressed perspectives.

The development of the questionnaire followed an iterative process grounded in existing frameworks on democratic participation, civic competences, and child agency (Council of Europe, 2025; UNESCO, 2021). Initial items were drafted by the research team, then reviewed by four experts in primary education, civic education, and child participation from Romania and Italy. This expert validation process ensured content relevance, age appropriateness, and conceptual alignment with the WSA model. Minor revisions were made based on expert feedback, such as simplifying item wording and clarifying response options.

A formal pilot study was not conducted due to timeline constraints within the project; however, teachers from participating schools reviewed the questionnaire for readability and suitability, and no major issues of comprehension were reported. This represents a methodological limitation addressed in the discussion section.

The first cluster explored pupils' understanding of school rules and their attitudes toward rule compliance. Items such as "Do you think rules are useful?" and "When rules exist, they should be followed because…" assessed children's normative reasoning and sense of responsibility. These items captured both present-oriented attitudes and early anticipations of future civic behaviour, linking rule adherence to foundational aspects of democratic culture.

The second cluster focused on children's perceptions of interpersonal conflict and self-regulation. Prompts such as "When you are fighting with someone, do you feel the need to…?" examined pupils' awareness of emotional responses, conflict resolution strategies, and the ability to negotiate within social tensions. This cluster reflects core components of civic competence, including emotional regulation, cooperation, and constructive dialogue.

The third cluster examined expressive agency and voice. Items such as "Do you think having the floor in a class discussion is…?" and "Do you think having the opportunity to speak in a conversation is a right?" assessed students' perceptions of participation as a communicative right. These items addressed children's sense of agency, recognition of the right to be heard, and their views on equitable turn-taking in classroom communication.

The questionnaire's mixed format—with both closed-ended and open-ended items—allowed for a richer understanding of participation. Closed items generated descriptive data suitable for exploratory statistical analysis, while open-ended responses provided qualitative insights into children's lived experiences and reasoning.

Given that the clusters consisted of single or few items addressing distinct constructs, internal consistency metrics such as Cronbach's alpha could not be meaningfully calculated. This analytical constraint is acknowledged as a limitation, consistent with the exploratory nature of the research design. The instrument was designed to capture a holistic picture of children's participation experiences, spanning normative, relational, and expressive dimensions central to the Whole School Approach.

Procedure

Data collection took place between March and May 2025, during regular school hours. The administration of the questionnaire was conducted in collaboration with class teachers and trained facilitators, who introduced the activity and ensured that all ethical requirements were met. Participation was voluntary, and only pupils whose parents had provided written consent and who themselves offered verbal assent were included in the study. All responses were anonymous, and pupils were informed that they could withdraw at any point without any negative consequences.

The questionnaire was administered in familiar classroom environments to maximise comfort and reduce potential anxiety, thereby increasing the likelihood of authentic responses. Facilitators read each item aloud to ensure comprehension, providing clarification, when necessary, particularly for open-ended questions where pupils were reassured that there were no "wrong" answers and that personal perspectives were valued. The average completion time was approximately 25 minutes. Pupils completed the items in writing, with teachers offering additional time when needed to avoid time pressure.

The administration protocol was standardised across participating schools to maintain consistency. Facilitators received prior training on ethical communication with children, confidentiality procedures, and neutral delivery of items to avoid influencing responses.

The purpose of this exploratory data collection was twofold. First, it sought to obtain an initial overview of children's perceptions regarding participation, voice, conflict management, and rule adherence within school settings. Second, it aimed to identify potential areas in which schools could strengthen participatory practices in accordance with the Whole School Approach (WSA). The results of this initial study also informed subsequent phases of the CERV-Child 2025 project, contributing to the refinement of educational instruments designed to promote civic engagement in primary education.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed a mixed-methods exploratory strategy, combining descriptive quantitative analysis with inductive qualitative coding of open-ended responses.

The closed-ended items were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) to provide an overview of children's perceptions across the three clusters: Rules, Conflict, and Speaking Turn. Given the exploratory nature of the study, the primary aim of the quantitative analysis was to map general tendencies rather than to test theoretical models.

To examine whether perspectives differed across subgroups, a set of chi-square (χ^2) tests was conducted to explore associations between key categorical variables such as grade level (3rd vs. 4th grade) and selected participation indicators (e.g., belief in the usefulness of rules, preferred conflict-resolution strategies, and endorsement of speaking as a right). Statistical significance was assessed at $p < .05$, and Cramér's V was used as an effect size indicator. These analyses provided additional depth to the descriptive findings, in line with the recommendations of the reviewer.

Internal consistency indices such as Cronbach's alpha were not computed because the clusters consisted of single or few items addressing distinct constructs, making such metrics inappropriate for this dataset. All quantitative analyses were performed manually and with standard statistical software.

Results

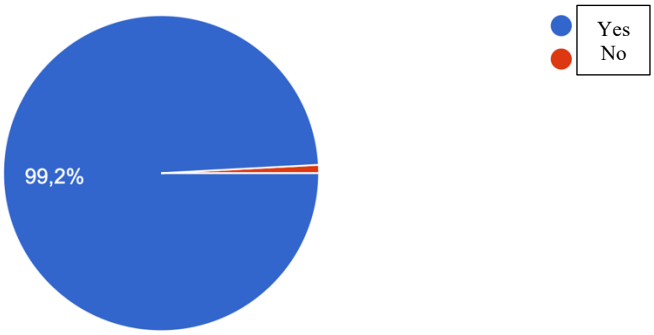
The results of this exploratory study are presented in three subsections corresponding to the conceptual clusters of the questionnaire: Rules, Conflict, and Speaking Turn. These clusters reflect complementary dimensions of children's participation experiences in school—normative understanding, interpersonal dynamics, and expressive agency—and provide a comprehensive overview of the ways in which pupils engage with democratic practices in everyday school life.

Descriptive statistics were used to map general response patterns across the 1,893 participating pupils. To explore potential differences between subgroups, chi-square tests were conducted for selected items, comparing pupils in Grade 3 and Grade 4 on key participation indicators such as attitudes toward rules, preferred conflict-management strategies, and the perception of speaking as a right. These analyses offer preliminary insights into developmental trends and school-level variations in participatory dispositions.

The integration of both quantitative and qualitative findings allows for an in-depth interpretation of children's views. While closed-ended items identify broad tendencies, open-ended responses illuminate pupils' reasoning, motivations, and the meanings they attach to participation within their everyday school environments.

The graphical part of the questionnaire provides data on the total sample of 1,893 subjects that participated in the research. The gender analysis of the subjects showed that 882 were male (46.6%), and 1,011 were female (53.4%). Furthermore, the analysis by the level of schooling showed that 954 students (50.4%) were enrolled in the third grade of primary school, while 939 students were enrolled in the fourth grade of primary school (49.6%). All these data offer a very sound basis for data analysis concerning the differences at the various levels of human development of these subjects.

Figure a. Item: Do you think rules are useful?



Analysis of the first cluster of items relating to Rules emphasizes the important part rules have in the life of the child. The high level of agreement with the statement "Do you think rules are useful?" can be seen from Figure A. Almost the whole sample replied positively to it (n = 1,887 or 99.2%). This shows that the pupils at such a stage of development have long since internalized that rules form an integral part of schooling.

In response to being asked to ensure that these positive answers were justified, the most frequent answers from the children were those concerned with the relational aspect of rules. Over half of the sample (51.5%) said rules enabled them to "get along well together." The next most frequent answers were those concerned with the regulative role of rules. 46.3% of the sample said they "knew what I must not do." The smallest category of answer concerned the anticipatory role of rules. Just 2.2% of the sample said that rules enabled them to "expect what to expect from others." Although such answers were relatively infrequent, they were very important as they showed an understanding of the role of rules in providing a sense of predictability and trust that comes from shared knowledge of these rules.

Although the incidence of negative answers remained very low, it is important to analyze the motivations behind them. For those who found rules not helpful, 4.1% thought that "rules are not needed," 7.3% said that "they do not say the right things," and the remaining 88.5% had the overriding thought that they "already knew how they should behave." These types of answers may convey that for these particular minors, the concept of rules has not been internalized as a community agreement but as unnecessary or irrelevant to the minors' understanding of personal conduct.

Additional light has been shed by the subsequent item "When there are rules, they should be respected because.". The great majority of pupils (90.5%) replied that rules serve them "to understand what they can or cannot do in everyday life", which shows a very practical approach to rules. The next smaller but still relevant group of pupils (8.5%) suggested that rules should be kept to "not get punished" or "because adults say so", reflecting a more heteronomous approach. The marginal group of 1% suggested only "because adults say so", thus supporting the notion that while rules may be accepted in principle, the underlying motivations for these rules may fail to be critically assessed. Interestingly enough, 161 pupils were attached to the answer that relates rules simply to punishment, thus suggesting that for these pupils the concept of rules is still tied to obedience to avoid punishment. This finding further emphasizes the need to develop a critical understanding of rules' motivations and functions as opposed to subordinating them to externally administered discipline.

Finally, items that enquired into the future perspective of rules showed that the majority of children expect rules to remain an integral part of life as adults. The overall majority of 93.6% agreed that "rules will be there even when I grow up," reflecting an understanding of the idea that rules remain an irreversible part of society. The next smaller but still important proportion of 5.1% expected to become active promoters of rule-making by stating that "I will make them." This finding rings true in highlighting an emerging sense of

agency and citizenship, reflecting that some of these pupils already anticipate having a role to play in shaping the rules of society. Again, very few pupils indeed (1.4%) expected "there will be no rules," reflecting either a misunderstanding of the question or an aspiration towards an overly ideal life. In total, these initial items confirm that the primary schoolchildren of Romania perceive rules as being at once both necessary and positive towards society. At the same time as being thus viewed as both positive and necessary towards society at once, they remain nonetheless tainted by some of the pupils as being connected with both negative reinforcement and obsolescence at the same time. The future-oriented data provides an important reflection of an emerging sense of citizenship around the need for rules as an irreversible part of life.

The second set of items, relating to Conflict, yielded valuable findings on the topic of interpersonal conflicts and the approach that children adopt. When asked to complete the item 'In your opinion, fighting with someone…', the large majority of the students showed an understanding of the ethics of behaving in a certain manner within a social context. Over half of the students (59.7%) were of the view that 'you shouldn't do it,' reflecting an early adoption of these moral principles against violence and towards co-operative engagement. At the same time, 34.3% of the respondents viewed conflict as a natural course of events that follows from differing views. Their answer to the item 'In your opinion, fighting with someone…' showed that 'it happens when we disagree,' reflecting an appreciation that conflict as such may well be a normal and inevitable part of life. Just 6.7% showed a non-confrontation approach towards conflict by stating 'it happens when others do not understand what I want,' possibly from a deficiency in dialogue capabilities and a less compromising attitude towards co-operative engagement.

The follow-up items provide insight into the strategies that the children associate with the conflict situation. The disproportionate share of respondents showed reliance on maladaptive strategies such as the use of strength (2.8%) as a method of being understood or by "raising your voice" (4.8%). The advocates of avoidance strategies include those who would "withdraw without expressing feelings" (9.7%), and those who would "go away from the interlocutor" (34.3%). Interestingly enough, the largest share of the respondents (48.4%) chose "none of the above." This finding aptly illustrates the limitations of the options as well as the willingness of the groups to dissociate from the aggressive/avoidant responding.

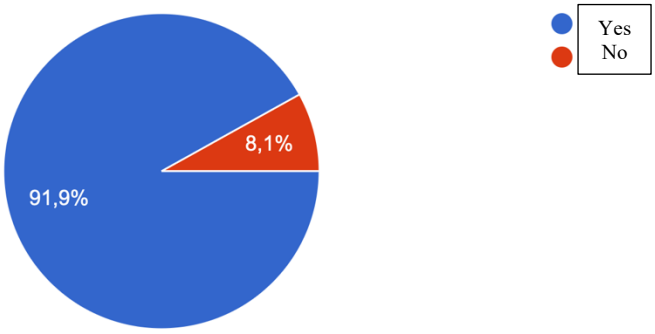
Additional clarity came from the open question "How do you control yourself in a conflict?" For those who said that they control themselves by using these methods, assertive statements were most prominent. The respondents often included such statements as "I calm down by breathing. I

control myself. I talk to them through non-violent dialogue." These answers were categorized during data analysis and express the notion that children already have effective strategies for managing emotions and communication. In contrast to those who had effective solutions for controlling themselves in a conflict, the answers from those who said that they had problems controlling themselves were indicative of difficulties in managing emotions. "I cry. I'm scared of what others may think. I'll do what my parents told me not to do."

The most outstanding finding from this group of findings regards knowing an appropriate response when in conflict. Almost the total population of pupils (91.9%) agreed to knowing what to do when having a fight with another person, against 8.1% who responded negatively. As seen in Figure B above, this finding shows that pupils feel as though they can resolve the matter on their own.

Individually and cumulatively, these outcomes indicate that the Romanian children in the initial years of primary schooling manifest a promising level of ethics awareness and understanding of the underlying factors of conflict. Despite the majority of them using avoidance and maladaptive strategies, it appears that a substantial number of pupils express positive strategies for both self-control and dialogue. The coexistence of these two levels of competence—that of children developing capacity for conflict management and that of those having difficulties with controlling emotions—indicates the requirement for educational interventions within the Whole School Approach.

Figure b. Item: Do you know how to control yourself when you are fighting with someone?



The third set of items, organized around the theme of Speaking Turn, shed the lightest on the role of speaking as an act of participation of children at school. These items viewed speaking not as a communicative act alone but as an opportunity based on citizenship—to express views, to share views among fellow citizens and authorities, and to feel recognition within the

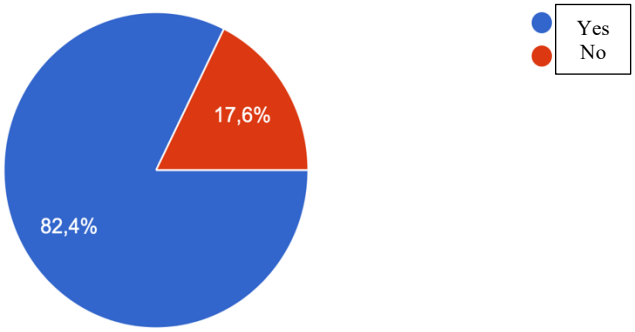
collective. In these items, it appears that the children assess their opportunity to express views.

The first statement, "Having to wait for your turn to speak is something that…", provides evidence of a near-universal understanding of turn-taking as a rule that needs to be followed by 92.2% of respondents. This not only shows an understanding of dialogue rules but also readiness to communicate within a structure that provides for a sense of justice and reciprocity. Still, there were some who were less constructive in their views on it. For instance, 1.4% found it to be an "empty moment", 3.1% found it to be "a rule that I don't understand", and 3.2% found it to be a moment of "annoyance." Though these remain in the margin, it nevertheless emphasizes that it has not been internalized by some students that dialogue may often seem frustrating or empty.

The next item – "Do you think having the floor in a class discussion or conversation is a space…", – helps to gain a better understanding of the students' participatory ethos. The great majority of students viewed it as a "space to participate" (85.5%), thus highlighting an awareness of speech as an opportunity for engagement, hearing, as well as the exchange of individual opinions within the educational environment. The mention of "a space to defend" by a relatively few students (4.8%), or better still "a space to conquer" by 1.8%, may convey educational settings within which student voices' expression opportunities come across as somehow challenged or inadequately assured. Finally, it should be noted that 7.9% of students viewed it as "a space to avoid," an aspect that may depict certain feelings of reluctance or distaste as well as perhaps negative encounters within public speaking. All these answers should be viewed closely and with added careful consideration – perhaps students avoid it due to feelings of embarrassment and timidity or in certain cultures due to a predilection against child voices.

The last question within this group simply asked whether the act of speaking out in class was viewed as a right. As seen in "Figure C," an overwhelming majority of 82.4% replied that "speaking is a right." Clearly, these students see the value of speech as part of the norms within the institution in order to be part of it. Interestingly enough, 17.6% of the respondents did not place that same value on speech. Clearly, these students realize that speech may be only a privilege and not a right. This question raises important queries as to the relevance of realizing the value of the "right to be heard as recognized by Article 12 of the UN convention on the Rights of the Child.".

Figure c. Item: Do you think having the chance to speak in a conversation is a right?



The data in the Speaking Turn cluster emerges as evidence of both the positive developments and difficulties experienced in the development of democratic participation at the primary school level. Although the majority of students express commitment to the notion of turn-taking as a value of worth, as a form of participation, and as a right, there also appears to be a substantial minority who express ambivalence towards it or outright resentment. As part of the Whole School Approach, it appears necessary to create an environment that not only provides these students with the chance to speak but also an opportunity to create cultures of speech that recognize the value of every contribution as an addition to the Learning Community rather than a subtraction.

Across all three clusters examined: rules, conflict, and speaking rurn—the comparative analysis between third- and fourth-grade pupils revealed a striking degree of similarity. For instance, the belief that rules are useful was almost unanimous in both groups (98.8% in Grade 3 and 99.5% in Grade 4), and the chi-square test confirmed the absence of any grade-level difference ($\chi^2(1) = 1.50$, $p = .221$). The reasons offered for respecting rules also followed the same pattern, whether pupils referred to understanding what they can or cannot do (chosen by 90.5% of the full sample), to avoiding punishment, or simply to adult authority; here, too, the comparison between grades did not yield a significant association ($\chi^2(2) = 2.17$, $p = .338$). Likewise, children's future-oriented views—most notably the conviction expressed by 93.6% of the respondents that rules will still exist when they are adults—showed no difference between grades ($\chi^2(2) = 2.89$, $p = .236$). A similar alignment appeared in the Conflict cluster. Both grades distributed almost identically across the three interpretations of conflict—whether "you shouldn't do it" (≈60%), "it happens when we disagree" (≈34%), or "it happens when others do not understand what I want" (≈7%)—with no statistically significant

distinction ($\chi^2(2) = 3.44$, $p = .179$). Grade-level comparisons of preferred conflict-management strategies were equally stable: whether pupils reported withdrawing (34.3%), suppressing feelings (9.7%), raising their voice (4.8%), using physical force (2.8%), or rejecting the predefined options altogether (48.4%), the distribution remained consistent across the two grades ($\chi^2(5) = 4.89$, $p = .429$). Self-reported self-control during conflict followed the same trajectory, with over nine out of ten children affirming that they knew how to manage themselves, again with no grade-level association ($\chi^2(1) = 1.16$, $p = .281$). Only in a single area—a seemingly minor but meaningful aspect of classroom life—did a borderline difference appear: pupils' reactions to waiting their turn to speak. While 92.2% of the total sample accepted turn-taking as something they wished to respect, the distribution between alternative views differed just enough to produce a marginal result ($\chi^2(3) = 7.82$, $p = .050$). Even so, the way pupils conceptualized having the floor in class—as a space to participate (85.5%), to avoid (7.9%), to defend (4.8%), or to "conquer" (1.8%)—did not vary between grades ($\chi^2(3) = 1.36$, $p = .724$). The same was true for the view that speaking is a right, endorsed by 82.4% of the sample, with no significant age-group difference ($\chi^2(1) = 0.89$, $p = .345$).

These associations suggest that third- and fourth-grade pupils in this Transylvanian sample advance along very similar developmental trajectories in how they relate to school rules, manage interpersonal tensions, and perceive their voice within the classroom—differences in these domains appear only marginal and do not cluster systematically by age.

Discussions and conclusion

Our results provide a close look at Romanian primary school students' understanding of rules, conflict, and the right to speech—three everyday entry points into democratic participation at school. Several patterns stand out. First, the almost universal agreement that rules are "useful," together with the strong emphasis pupils place on getting along well with each other, suggests that rules are already internalized not as external constraints but as shared tools that sustain predictability, cooperation, and fairness. This view echoes classical pedagogical insights according to which norms of collective life become meaningful when they are co-constructed and anchored in shared purposes rather than in external authority (Dewey, 1930, 2016; Bocoş & Jucan, 2008; Ciolan, 2008).

Second, when it comes to conflict, most pupils reported knowing what they should do in difficult interpersonal situations and spontaneously mentioned strategies that involve emotional regulation—breathing, calming down, and using non-violent dialogue. Others tended to avoid conflict

altogether or associated rules exclusively with sanctions. These mixed patterns align with contemporary understandings of socio-emotional development, which underscore that conflict is not only a moral space but also a pedagogical opportunity: children learn to negotiate disagreement, regulate impulses, and articulate needs through guided practice and relational scaffolding (Fenwick-Smith et al., 2018; Bocoş & Chiş, 2012).

Third, the Speaking Turn findings show both promise and fragility. While a large majority view turn-taking as fair and speech as a right, a significant minority still interpret discussion spaces as something to "defend," "conquer," or avoid altogether. Such ambivalence echoes European-level findings indicating that although children appreciate participation as a right, they often experience adult-dominated environments in which their contributions are inconsistently valued (Eurochild, 2020; Europe Kids Want, 2019; European Commission, 2021; UNICEF, 2021).

These results resonate strongly with recent scholarship on democratic schooling and student voice. Studies show that children's perspectives are not merely decorative but foundational for building inclusive school cultures; when voice is systematically included, classroom routines, relationships, and expectations shift in more equitable directions (Messiou et al., 2025; O'Brien et al., 2024). The strong endorsement of rules in our sample is consistent with evidence showing that shared norms—especially when co-built with students—enhance belonging, predictability, and mutual regard (Messiou et al., 2025; Heid et al., 2023) In a similar vein, our conflict findings parallel research on schoolwide citizenship and SEL initiatives, which show that pupils who engage in structured reflection and restorative practices become more capable of perspective-taking, calm problem-solving, and dialogic repair—all essential dispositions for democratic life (Fenwick-Smith et al., 2018).

The speaking-turn findings also mirror international results: primary-aged children typically wish to participate and view participation as a right, yet fear of ridicule or negative judgment can silence a notable minority (O'Brien et al., 2024). Research in early childhood education has shown that even simple, carefully mediated interventions—picture-book dialogues, structured turn-taking, rotating facilitators—reinforce the idea of speaking as both a right and a shared responsibility (Akyol, 2024). Our data indicate a similar pattern: willingness exists, but confidence and safety vary.

A Whole School Approach (WSA) offers a coherent bridge between these micro-level insights and system-level design. European strategies—such as the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (European Commission, 2021), the Europe Kids Want consultations (2019, 2024), and the children's co-

designed recommendations to EU leaders (European Commission, 2024)—all emphasize participation as a structural principle rather than an occasional exercise. Research shows that when participation is embedded across governance, teaching, assessment, and community partnerships, what grows is not just a set of "voice moments" but genuine action competence—the felt capacity to act collectively on matters that affect one's life (Torsdottir et al., 2024).

Seen through this lens, the strong endorsement of rules among our pupils can be leveraged for deeper democratic work. When teachers and students co-construct norms, revisit them after conflicts, and explicitly link rules to shared goods such as safety, fairness, and learning time, even those pupils who see rules only as sanctions can shift toward understanding norms as collective commitments (Heid et al., 2023; Messiou et al., 2025). Similarly, our conflict findings underline the value of restorative routines and peer-mediation practices—circles, repair conversations, shared reflection—which consolidate self-regulation for the majority while offering concrete alternatives to pupils who default to avoidance or aggression (Fenwick-Smith et al., 2018).

The speaking-turn results suggest the need for low-stakes, high-frequency structures that normalize participation: think-pair-share, "no-hands" questioning, randomized contributions, rotating chairpersons, student-led conferences, and—crucially—visible follow-through. When children see that their input has tangible effects on classroom or school decisions, participation becomes credible and self-reinforcing (Messiou et al., 2025; O'Brien et al., 2024; Torsdottir et al., 2024).

These findings align with longstanding insights from democratic education: schools are not simply preparation for democratic life but are themselves laboratories of democracy, where the habits of plural, dialogic coexistence are practiced daily (Dewey, 1930, 2016; Cambi, 2017). As Ciolan (2008) and Bocoş & Jucan (2008) argue, school carries irreducible socio-cultural and political functions; its everyday interactions—how rules are set, how conflicts are managed, who gets to speak—shape children's early postures toward collective life. Our contribution is to show, with a large Romanian sample, that these democratic micro-practices already have traction, though they remain unevenly distributed.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. Despite the large sample, the respondents were overwhelmingly concentrated in one region (95% from Transylvania), which limits generalizability. The cross-sectional design captures pupils' views at one point in time, without tracing developmental trajectories. Self-report questionnaires may also introduce social desirability

bias or comprehension challenges, especially with younger respondents. Additionally, while our mixed-methods design strengthens interpretability, the qualitative depth is limited by children's writing fluency. Finally, focusing only on rules, conflict, and speaking turn covers only part of the broader participation landscape envisioned in WSA frameworks (European Commission, 2023; UNICEF, 2021).

Even with these limitations, our data suggest that Romanian primary school pupils are ready for deeper democratic engagement. They value rules as relational goods, show emerging conflict-management skills, and largely embrace voice as a right. The challenge now is to universalize these gains, especially for children who still experience uncertainty, silence, or sanction-focused interpretations. A coherent whole-school design—co-constructed norms, restorative dialogue, structured participation, and authentic responsiveness to student input—offers the clearest path to transforming early dispositions into durable civic competencies (Fenwick-Smith et al., 2018; Heid et al., 2023; Messiou et al., 2025; O'Brien et al., 2024; Torsdottir et al., 2024; Akyol, 2024; Eurochild, 2020).

Ultimately, our findings illustrate both the promise and vulnerability of democratic learning in Romanian primary schools. Children show a genuine willingness to engage with rules, dialogue, and shared decision-making, but these dispositions depend heavily on the quality and intentionality of school environments. The voices gathered here point to a clear direction: schools that take participation seriously—through co-created norms, dialogic practices, and credible opportunities for influence—have the potential to cultivate democratic citizens who feel both heard and responsible within the communities that shape them.

Statement on the Use of AI Tools | *This manuscript was prepared in accordance with the In Manifest Network Journals' policy on the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools. AI assistance (ChatGPT 5.1) was used exclusively for language editing, wording refinement, and improving the clarity and coherence of the text. All elements of the research design, data collection, statistical analysis, interpretation of results, and scientific argumentation were conducted entirely by the authors without the use of any AI-based tools. The authors retain full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the scholarly content.*

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