Article

Teenagers' participation in the public life in Italy: Insights for education from a web survey

Stefania Chimenti[a], **Sabina Licursi**[b], **Emanuela Pascuzzi**[c]

[a]University of Calabria, Rende, Italy [b]University of Calabria, Rende, Italy [c]University of Calabria, Rende, Italy

Purpose: The essay wonders about forms and ways of participation in the public sphere of adolescents. The investigated practices include individual and collective participation in different contexts (in the community, at school, among peers), in physical or web presence.

Design/ methodology/ approach: A web survey was carried out involving about 1,300 adolescents (14-17 years old) in five Italian urban contexts, different in size and geographical location.

Findings: Cognitive and actionable findings regarding adolescents' participation.

Research limitations/ implications: Self-completed questionnaire, involvement of adolescents not attending project partner schools, not statistically representative samples but good enough for our particular purpose.

Practical implications: Empirical evidence a) provide deep knowledge of adolescents, b) identify constructive approaches to promote participatory skills and full and conscious involvement in community life, c) are useful for local project partners and other operators involved in adolescents' education promoting community-based interventions for well-being and preventing the disadvantaged situation in young people, and d) will represent the basis of local research training workshops.

Corresponding author:
Emanuela Pascuzzi, via Ponte Pietro Bucci Cubo 18B, 87036 Rende, Italy. E-Mail: emanuela.pascuzzi@unical.it

Declaration of conflicts of interests: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

1 PARTICIPATORY SKILLS ARE LEARNED

The quality of democracies, as well social living, depends on the level and type of citizens' participation in society and in political processes (Putnam *et al.*, 2004; Martín & van Deth, 2007; National Council for the Social Studies, 2017; Lawson & Epstein, 2019; Kiess, 2022). Nevertheless, the ways and forms of participation are neither immutable nor indifferent to contextual conditions. For adults as for adolescents, the participation in social and political life of the community, in its local, national, and global dimensions, is influenced by the characteristics of social milieu, by the participatory skills acquired during socialisation, in the family and elsewhere, and by the material and immaterial resources available (Almond & Verba, 1963). It is, therefore, also linked to social inequalities and poverty in a complex cause-effect relationship. As known, social inequalities might be reflected in different degrees of participation in the social and political life of a community, especially among the youngest, underling a strict association between poverty and low participation (Biorcio & Vitale, 2016).

The civic component is part of the framework of social identity development, which might be defined as the meaning of being citizens and, therefore, part of a community (Flanagan & Faison, 2001). Democratic values and rules are learned in a lifelong process (Biesta, 2011; Schulz *et al.*, 2018). However, the 'impressionable or formative years' between childhood and adulthood are considered crucial in improving citizens' political attitudes and behaviours (Jennings & Niemi, 1981; Neundorf & Smets, 2017). Furthermore, several studies show that participation in adolescence is related to civic engagement in adulthood (Verba *et al.*, 1995; Niemi & Junn, 2000; Barber *et al.*, 2005; Zaff *et al.*, 2008; Marzana *et al.*, 2014).

Adolescents seek and need the support of actors such as family, school, and peers for their formation as democratic citizens (Garelli *et al.*, 2006; Biesta, 2011). They learn through observation and experience in social spaces where others act and interact (Kiess, 2022). Modelling, namely observing meaningful models, is a way of recognising and internalising social rules; involvement and direct experience enable the development of the ability to act morally, and coherently with recognised social principles. On the educational side, involvement in civic activities provides access to the knowledge, skills, and values indispensable to exercise the role of conscious and active citizens in political life and to offer opportunities for encounters among individuals and different cultures, strengthening social bonds and solidarity links (Almond & Verba, 1963; Putnam, 1993 and 2000; Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2014; Biorcio & Vitale, 2016). Taking part in the life of one's community or taking an interest in issues of the common good contribute to reinforcing adolescents' self-confidence (Damon, 2001).

In this study, the focus is on participation in the public life of adolescents. Therefore, two participation forms are considered: civil and manifest participation.
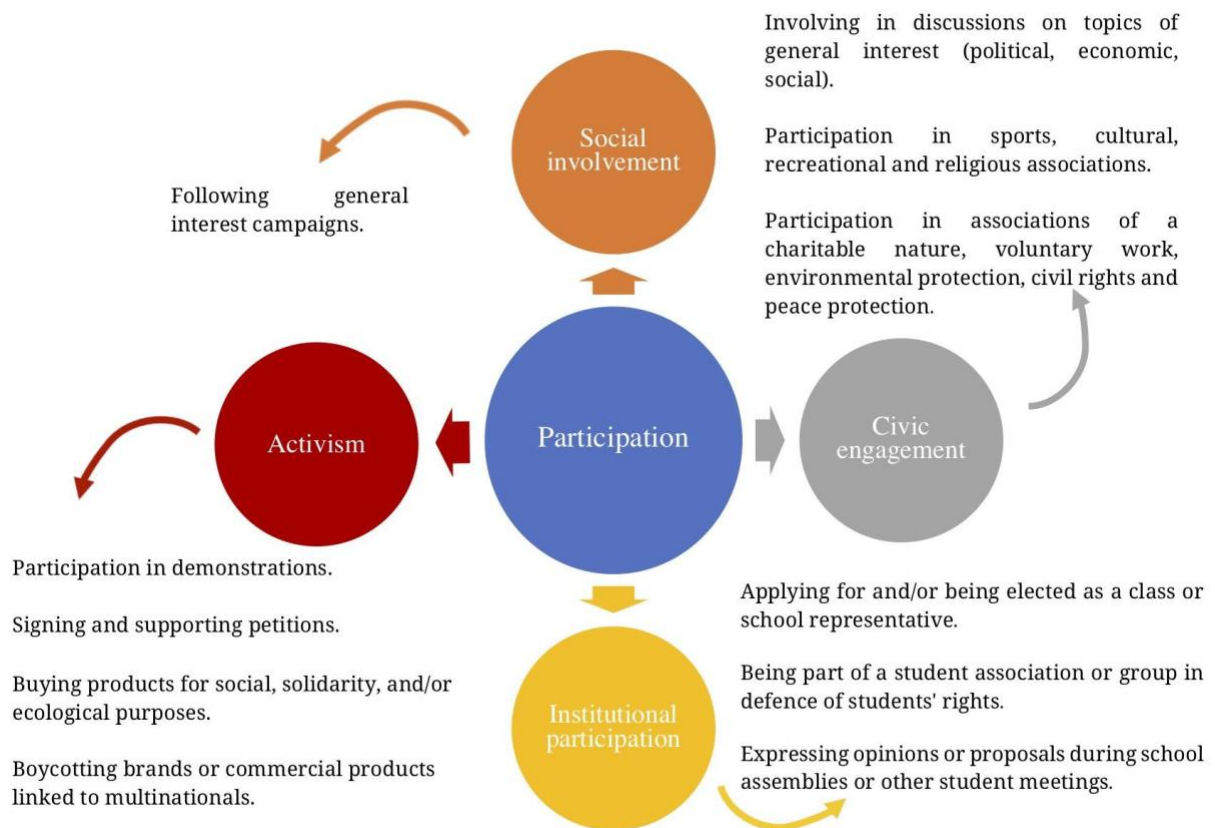
Civil participation refers to a latent form of political participation, such as different actions and activities in the public sphere, not directly aimed at influencing the people in power or achieving a political result, that entails involvement in society and current

affairs. "People of all ages and from all walks of life engage socially in a number of ways, formally outside of the political domain, but nevertheless in ways that may have political consequences" (Ekman & Amnå, 2009, 288).

Drawing on the typology of Ekman and Amnå (2009), the present study identified the following: (i) *social involvement*, namely attention and interest in political and social issues, which includes the feeling or awareness of being a member of society, of being part of a political context, and which transforms in a particular sensitivity towards specific issues of collective importance; (ii) *civic engagement*, which conventionally refers to citizens' activities that aim to influence circumstances in society that is of relevance to others and in non-familiar context (not in family or close friends) (Adler & Goggin, 2005), i.e., discussing politics, following political issues, donating money, recycling for environmental reasons, doing voluntary work to help others, getting organised to solve local problems or to improve conditions for certain groups in society. These actions find their main manifestation in associative contexts expressly oriented towards the common good (es. rights defence). Additional aggregating contexts, such as recreational, sporting, or cultural organisations and religious groups, are also fertile breeding grounds. Civic engagement also could be interpreted into observable behaviour, which retains the characteristic of being 'latent' compared to the direct influence on decisions of institutional legislative and governmental bodies.

Other more manifest forms of engagement allow adolescents to acquire and exercise the ability to speak up, mediate conflict situations and express their opinions in physical and virtual spaces (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Martín & van Deth, 2007; Raniolo, 2008; Marta *et al.*, 2021). These adolescents' manifest participation practices include *i)* forms of institutional participation, i.e. actions or activities of adolescents that in some way take place in institutional contexts and/or are directed towards influencing the outcomes of decision-making processes that have an impact on their lives (e.g. serving as a class or school representatives, being part of a student group, speaking at scholastic assemblies); *ii)* forms of activism, i.e. actions aimed at influencing political decisions and the choices of citizens (e.g. taking part in demonstrations, signing petitions, exercising critical consumption).

Following this taxonomy, we propose a summary of adolescents' participation forms in Figure 1, investigated by our research, using, as indicators, the practices referred to in correspondence with each of them.

Figure 1. The map of adolescents' participation

Involving in discussions on topics of general interest (political, economic, social).

Participation in sports, cultural, recreational and religious associations.

Participation in associations of a charitable nature, voluntary work, environmental protection, civil rights and peace protection.

Following general interest campaigns.

Participation in demonstrations.

Signing and supporting petitions.

Buying products for social, solidarity, and/or ecological purposes.

Boycotting brands or commercial products linked to multinationals.

Social involvement

Participation

Activism

Civic engagement

Institutional participation

Applying for and/or being elected as a class or school representative.

Being part of a student association or group in defence of students' rights.

Expressing opinions or proposals during school assemblies or other student meetings.

The main purpose of this study is, therefore, to investigate the forms and practices of participation of Italian adolescents, as experienced within the family, at school, among peers, and in other contexts (e.g. on the Internet), to identify the interests of adolescents towards collective issues, and to define how they approach public debate in school and society, and how they involve themselves in group experiences. The research also provides an opportunity for those who work with or educate adolescents to gain insights into their interests and willingness to get involved.

2   DATA AND METHOD

First of all, it is important not to overlook the specificity of this phase of the life cycle, in which, on the one hand, there is a high propensity to establish relationships with peers and to get involved in new experiences, even if often not formalized; on the other hand, some practices (e.g., voting, joining political parties) remain inaccessible or of little appeal (Crocetti *et al.*, 2012; Flanagan *et al.*, 2009; Metzger & Smetana, 2010). It is also necessary to place ourselves in the adolescents' biographical position and consider that they are individuals in training, with an identity not yet structured and defined, plausibly influenced (directly or indirectly) both by the world of significant adults (parents and teachers) and by the participatory opportunities concretely available in the territories of

residence. To know their propensity to participate and the practices most frequently experienced, we chose to directly address the adolescents, through a web survey (Callegaro *et al.*, 2015) conducted in five Italian urban contexts, belonging to five Italian cities, from the North to the South of the country: Pordenone (Friuli Venezia Giulia), Ancona (Marche), L'Aquila (Abruzzo), Municipio VI of Rome (Lazio), Trebisacce (Calabria). These were involved in the RIPARTIRE (Rinnovare la partecipazione per innovare la rete educativa, Renovate participation to innovate the educational network) project, whose activities were aimed at fighting educational poverty through the promotion of civic and social skills and the involvement of young people. The project was funded by Impresa sociale Con I bambini[1] and led by ActionAid Italia.

The web survey was based on an agile and child-friendly questionnaire, self-completed on the LimeSurvey platform of the University of Calabria (Wolf *et al.*, 2016). This tool was specifically designed for the research aims (see Fig.1). However, it was discussed with local partners and tested on a group of 286 students 14-17 years old in two upper secondary schools (not included in the research sample). The questionnaire was a shared work with the other project partners, experts in the world of adolescents but not in social research. Although the research tool has some limitations, the final questionnaire represented an acceptable compromise between the methodological rigour required of surveys and the cognitive needs of organisations working with adolescents in educational pathways.

The questionnaire collected information on a) the meanings, forms, and practices of public participation by adolescents; b) young people's perception of participatory self-efficacy; c) orientations of participation learned in the family and other socialising contexts (socialisation background); d) spaces (physical/virtual) and roles they consider significant for the exercise of participation. In addition, data were recorded on basic socio-demographic aspects (gender, age, education, etc.), family background (parents' education and employment), and respondents' perceptions of their own family's economic condition. Finally, some questions were directed to investigate the impact of Covid-19 emergence on socialisation. In this contribution, we will use the results linked to the main question of this paper[2].

It was not easy to involve all students in individual school classes because the survey took place during one of the most critical periods of the pandemic (in the Spring 2021) in which the students were attending school by distance learning (called in Italian, 'Didattica a Distanza, DAD'). In order to facilitate the composition of a staged sample (Stuart, 1984; Di Franco, 2010) and to carry out the web survey in the five territories, the adopted procedure was the following: entire classes (grades 10, 11, 12 and 13) of 23 local high schools (RIPARTIRE partners and others) were invited to fill out the questionnaire, by either the lead teachers (one per city) or by the researchers through their personal networks, when the first action had not reached the minimum number of local sample. The sample had a size of 1,293 respondents with an age range of 14-17 years. It was not statistically representative and had no claim to generalise results. However, the sample size ensures substantive representativeness per gender, age and type of school education

(lyceum vs. technical and vocational).

The sample was composed of 57.3% of girls and 40.8% of boys, while 1.9% of the respondents preferred not to specify their gender. Regarding the composition by age, the sample consisted of 22.5% of 14-year-olds, 18.9% of 15-year-olds, 22.5% of 16-year-olds and 36.1% of 17-year-olds.

On the academic courses, 36.8% attended lyceum, 36.7% technical-vocational school and 26.5% institute with a mixed address (e.g. comprehensive institute with lyceum and technical-vocational school).

Finally, to focus attention on specific aspects dealt with in the web survey, six focus groups were carried out (one per city, exceptionally two in Trebisacce). The focus groups were useful for 1) observing expectations and hopes more closely and, above all, 2) focusing on the influence exerted on young people by school stakeholders (teachers and students) and parents.

The local partners were involved in the creation of a list of maximum of ten adolescents per city, aged 16-17, from different classes. The adolescents were contacted and engaged by the researchers. The participants in the six focus groups were 34 (15 girls and 19 boys). The meetings were held remotely with the use of a web platform.

3 FINDINGS

3.1   Social involvement

By investigating civic attention as a form of public participation, we get to know if and how adolescents show sensitivity to themes and issues relevant to the community and collective well-being. The measure of involvement in campaigns of general interest also assumes a prospective indication. A kind degree of attention to issues such as the protection and development of the community and the environment might be a sign of current and future civil participation and lay the groundwork for citizenship development (Marta & Marzana, 2021).

The web survey investigates adolescents' interest in general campaigns. For instance, it refers to the campaigns for environmental protection and the fight against climate change, carried out by organised movements on a global scale, such as Friday for Future, and also by local initiatives (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. Adolescents following general interest campaigns by gender and in total
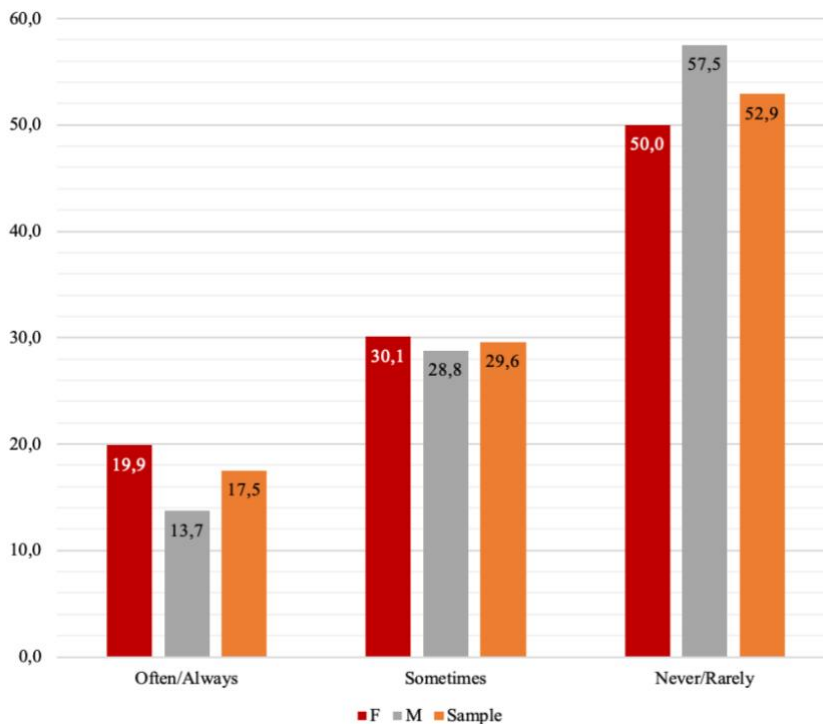
Slightly more than 17 out of 100 adolescents pay attention to general interest issues, following 'often/always' campaigns. This trend traces the average Italian figure recorded by the ICCS (2016)[3] in Italy.

Girls are more careful about general interest campaigns than boys. One in five girls participates 'often/always' in general interest campaigns compared to 14% of boys. Greater sensitivity to general interest issues appears among adolescents with highly educated parents. Among those who 'often/always' participate in general interest campaigns, 62% have at least one parent with a college degree.

The percentage of those who have 'sometimes' taken an interest in campaigns of general interest is 29.6%.

The environmental issue, taken as an example of the general interest campaign, was also investigated through a 'story' (Finch, 1987; Marradi, 2005), a method that favours the identification of the interviewee with a 'typical' situation[4]. Adolescents read the short story in Table 1 and identify with the protagonist, expressing a choice.

Table 1. Luca and the tanker

Last summer, Luca was on holiday in Ischia with his parents, the seawater changed colour. He learns that a boat has lost 200 tons of fuel and that the current has brought part of it to the coast. The holiday is ruined. It will take weeks to have a crystal-clear sea again. Local people organise a demonstration in the square to protest against the pollution of the sea. It seems to happen in similar events, i.e. spills from boats or discharges of toxic substances by sewage pipes.

If you were in Luca's situation, what would you do?	
I would find out more about what happened. I care about environmental pollution.	34,8%
I would ask my parents to continue our holiday in another place, now the summer in Ischia is compromised.	26,9%
I would take part in the demonstration organised by the local people, I'm sure my parents would like to take part too.	17,8%
I would undertake to spread the news of what had happened through the social network to bring the issue to the institutions' attention and public opinion.	15,5%
I would go to the square and demonstrate together with the residents of the island, although my parents would certainly be against it.	5,0%

The response items correspond to a reaction of interest and involvement are more than 70% of the adolescents. The most immediate and frequent action would be to find information to find out more about the event. Still, in the informative and communicative sphere, 15,5% of respondents would commit themselves to spreading the news of what happened through social networks in order to bring the issue to the attention of institutions and public opinion. While 17.8% would be willing to take part in a street demonstration organised by local people with their parents (only 5% would do so against their parents' position). About 27% would not get involved in the event and would look for a solution to compromise their holiday there.

Also, during the focus group discussions, the topic of sustainability and respect for the environment was taken up several times. The interviewed teenagers expressed or shared concern about the planet' health and the consequences for the quality of life and, in some cases, expressed interest in building a possible change. On this issue, in particular, there seems to be a widespread conviction that the way in which individuals act affects the lives of all, and, consequently, there seems to be a fairly strong motivation to want to do one's part.

The interest, moreover, is expressed in two dimensions: global and local. People are paying attention both to the worldwide problem of the climate emergency and the local level, closer to their own experience: urban decency, waste disposal, and protection of public spaces.

3.2 Informing about and doing with and for. Two forms of civic engagement

Adolescents might develop a prosperous and stable civic profile through discussion, debate, and engagement in diverse and socially-oriented activities. Civic engagement

contributes to the construction of the self as a citizen, and positive role models (of adults or peers) and experience in and with groups play an essential role in defining engagement (Bobek *et al.*, 2009; Pancer, 2015; Marta & Marzana, 2021).

Forms of civic engagement are linked to aspects of adolescents' social identity, their sense of belonging to their community, their perception of the effectiveness of their actions in the public sphere, and their orientations on democratic functioning. The following forms of civic engagement have a fundamental role: the offer of participation opportunities at the local level or accessible through connection to virtual environments, the material opportunities and supports available to adolescents (e.g., access to the network, exclusive use of devices, parents' availability to reach association place) (Dudley & Gitelson, 2002; Marzana *et al.*, 2014; Marta *et al.*, 2021).

The web survey identified two forms of civic engagement: *informing* and *doing*.

Civic engagement as *informing* on issues of general interest includes the following practices:

1) staying informed about important national and international events (e.g. reading newspapers, following the news);

2) participating in discussion or expressing one's opinion in groups on social networks on social, environmental, political campaigns or issues and/or national or international news, through comments, sharing on one's social profile news, photos, and videos;

3) creating a blog/vlog on a topic of general interest (music, raising awareness for a social cause, etc.).

Starting from the first of these practices (Fig. 3), the data show that the adolescents who are interested in what happens around them, informing themselves 'often/always' from newspapers and/or TV, are 56% of the sample.

Figure 3. Civic engagement as *informing* of adolescents (% of total)
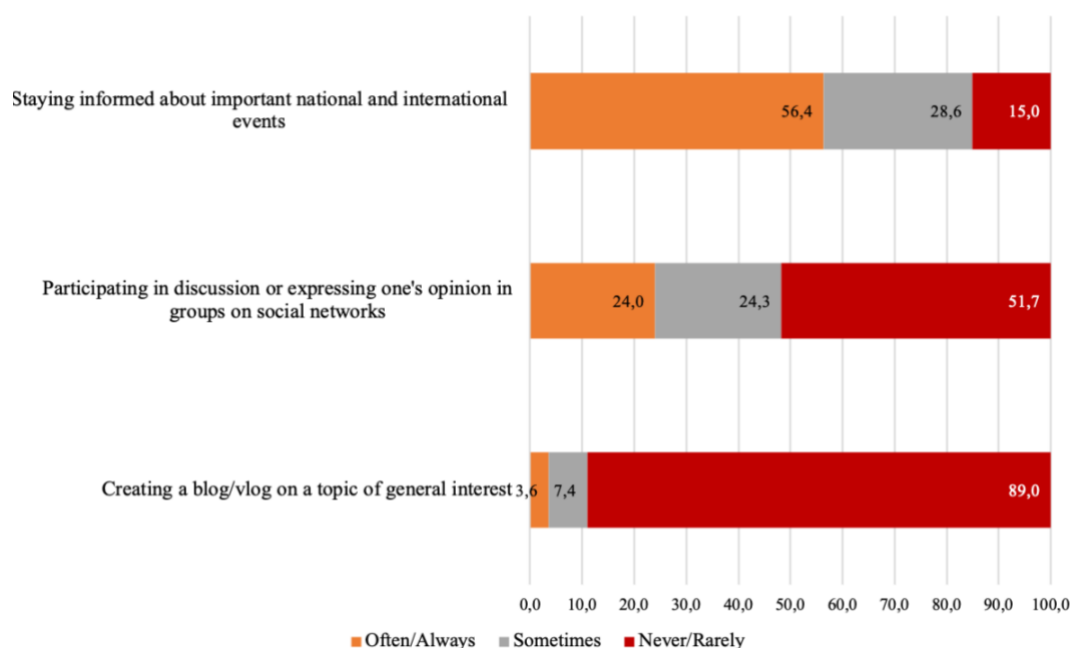
Nearly 60% of girls say they get information 'often/always', whereas the part of boys is just over 50%. Those who inform themselves often or always also show a more mature civic profile. A considerable amount of the boys and girls (63.1%) who feel they have their political orientation is continuously informed, compared to 56.4% of the sample. And a similar trend is registered for the 65% who believe in the effectiveness of their commitment to the public choices of the national government, against the average trend of 56.4% of respondents.

On the other hand, the adolescents who declare to keep themselves informed 'sometimes' are almost 1 out of 3 interviewees.

And 15% of the interviewees 'never' or 'rarely' inform themselves.

Another form of civic engagement might be attributed to participating in discussions on social networks about social, environmental, political campaigns or issues and/or national or international news and/or expressing one's opinion through comments, and sharing on one's social profiles.

This type of engagement requires a higher degree of involvement than keeping informed. It is unsurprising that the share of respondents who practice it assiduously is smaller, about a quarter of the sample (Fig. 3). However, a similar proportion of respondents declare they used this type of civic engagement 'sometimes', suggesting a familiarity with the participatory practice. While more than half of the sample said they had done so 'rarely or never'.

Digital discussion arenas appear to be little frequented by the teenagers in the research, who instead seem to prefer smaller discussion circles. In fact, the web survey shows that the relationship with peers is a relevant element for activating the participation process. Almost half of the sample declares that friends are the figures who contribute ('very much') to define their way of being in society and being interested in what happens in the world. Moreover, during the focus groups, it emerged clearly that the classroom group (even if penalised by the pandemic period), the peer group, and the group of friends represent the informal contexts in which people tend to express their ideas more spontaneously. The exchange of opinions on major global issues often occurs among peers, talking to friends or classmates. On these occasions, references to more local issues concerning the life of one's city and country also emerge. The time shared with peers is the one that, when explored, significantly highlights adolescents' attention themes.

Talking about political issues 'to get an idea' is an activity that expresses, on the one hand, interest in specific topics and, on the other, the need to discuss them to form political visions of and about society.

At the same time, there emerges an understanding among adolescents that conversation with others may contribute not only to an awareness of the value of their commitment, but also to breaking down prejudices about situations and conditions that are distant from their daily lives for effective cultural change and improvement.

Among the ways of expressing their voice, the teenagers were asked if and how often they have engaged and are engaged in doing so by creating a blog/vlog on a topic of general

interest (music, raising awareness of a social cause, etc.). Creating and maintaining a blog means filling it with content, which requires a high degree of involvement and commitment. Not surprisingly, 89% of teenagers answer that they 'never' or 'rarely' did it. Only 7.4% did it 'sometimes' and 3.6% did it 'assiduously'.

Usually, the activities linked to the first form of associationism are more explicitly oriented towards promoting the well-being of others. In addition, among these experiences, voluntary work allows people to experiment and explore aspects of their own identity, participate with others, and reflect on issues of values and regulations.

Figure 4. Civic engagement as *doing* of adolescents (% of total)
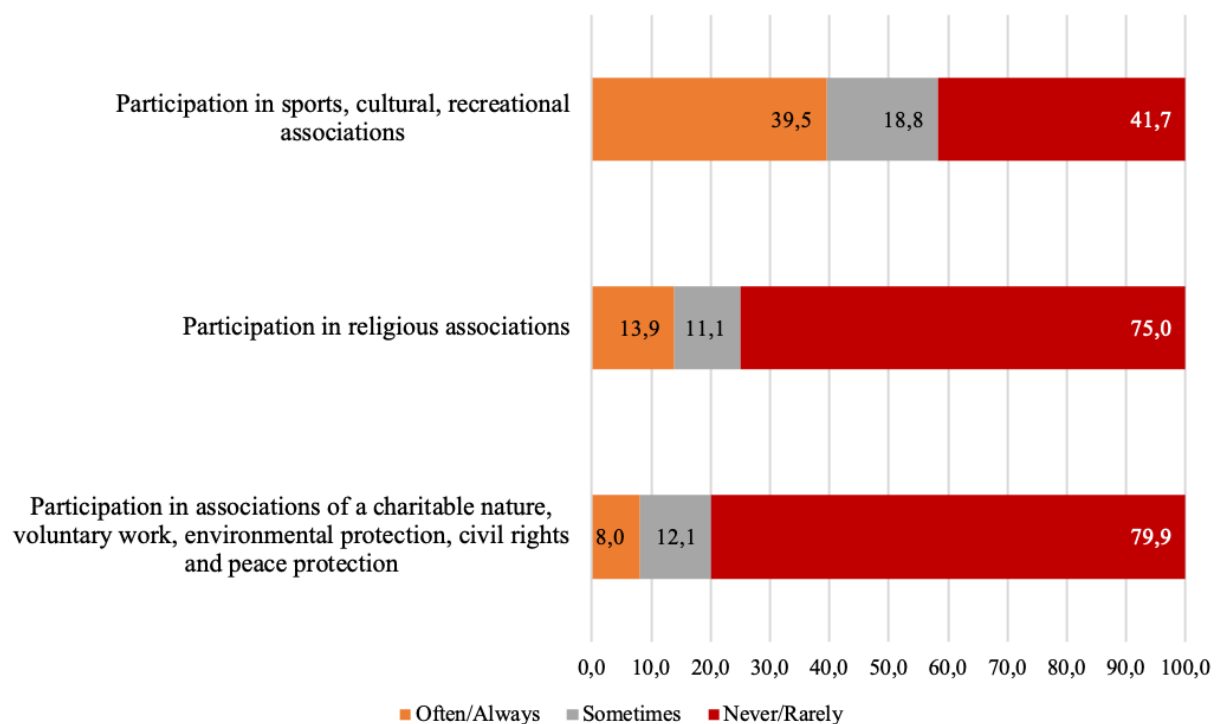
The adolescents' responses suggest – unsurprisingly – that their engagement is more occasional than stable.

A minor part of them (8%) are frequently involved in welfare, voluntary work, environmental protection, civil rights, and peace organisations.

Slightly more than 10 out of 100 adolescents have participated 'sometimes' in similar organisations. Almost 80% say they have 'never' or 'rarely' done so. The trend is similar to data reported by the ICCS (2016), and ISTAT (Istituto nazionale di Statistica; data on aspects of adolescents' daily lives also show a similar picture).

The shift from informing and discussing issues of collective importance to taking part with and for others may be favoured by intermediate experiences of involvement that are more oriented towards the social needs of adolescents. These certainly include associative practices in the fields of sport, culture, recreation, and religion. In various studies conducted on adolescents (see Weiss & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2009; D'Angelo & Gozzoli, 2020), it has been shown that sporting activities, in particular, foster young people's ability to relate to others both in the peer group and in the adult world, thus allowing them the

opportunity to experiment with forms of participation in the wider community and also acquiring the necessary soft skills. They can therefore foster the development of a sense of community belonging and forms of responsible coexistence, thus contributing promoting a civic profile of adolescents. Having and pursuing a common goal, interacting with others, and having the perception of being part of a network might create useful situations to test the effectiveness of one's actions and thus promote a sense of self-confidence, drawing motivation and strength from it.

The engagement to recreational associations by adolescents divides the sample. Almost 40% of the interviewees often or always get involved in sports, cultural or recreational activities, and a similar quota (41.7%) does not participate. The tendency to join in such associations is quite similar to the results of the ICCS (2016).

The remaining 19% of the respondents declared to have participated 'sometimes' in these activities.

Among the associative contexts considered there were religious groups. The data show that, on average, 1 out of 4 teenagers participates in activities in religious associative context, either assiduously or sporadically. The data is similar to what emerges on a national scale from the mentioned ISTAT survey. Within these groups, there are often opportunities to meet the needs of marginal categories or groups with specific needs, offering adolescents the chance to put themselves to the test in actions of solidarity.

3.3   Institutional participation (at school)

The more conventional channels of participation, to which adolescents have access, are reduced precisely because of formal opportunities: adolescents are still under parental responsibility, the right to vote is acquired in Italy at 18 years old, and public arenas of confrontation are often limited to a few young people or even exclusionary.

Nevertheless, some more conventional forms of experimentation with participation may also be found in the adolescent period, especially in the scholastic context, where teenagers spend much of their time.

The focus on participatory practices experienced at school and the reconstruction of the interviewees' experiences allow for drawing an idea of the opportunities the school institution offers for learning the rules of democratic participation. In addition, school is the context in which adolescents from different family and cultural backgrounds meet each other daily and for several hours a day: at school, they interact with adults (teachers, headmaster, support staff) and peers; at school, conflicts arise and options for mediating them appear, at school, they learn about competition, exchange, cooperating and planning individual and collective goals together. School is a training ground for life and maybe a space to exercise participation and the democratic method (Biesta, 2011).

Among the participatory experiences that could be tried out in the school context, the following have been identified:

a) applying for and/or being elected as a class or school representative;

b) being part of a student association or group in defence of students' rights;

c) expressing opinions or proposals during school assemblies or other student meetings.

One of the first experience in a place of socialisation such as a school is student representation – applying for election and/or being elected as a class or school representative. Through these experiences, the adolescents may become aware of the exercise of participation and representation of general interest, as well as accustoming young people to confrontation and dialogue with others (especially with the older generation). It may also be seen as a sign of motivation and sensitivity to the common interest and, at the same time, indicates a willingness to be involved in a role that requires self-confidence and a sense of responsibility.

The part of the interviewed adolescent who got involved in this experience is not low (Fig. 5).

Figure 5. Forms of participation at school experienced by adolescents (% of total)
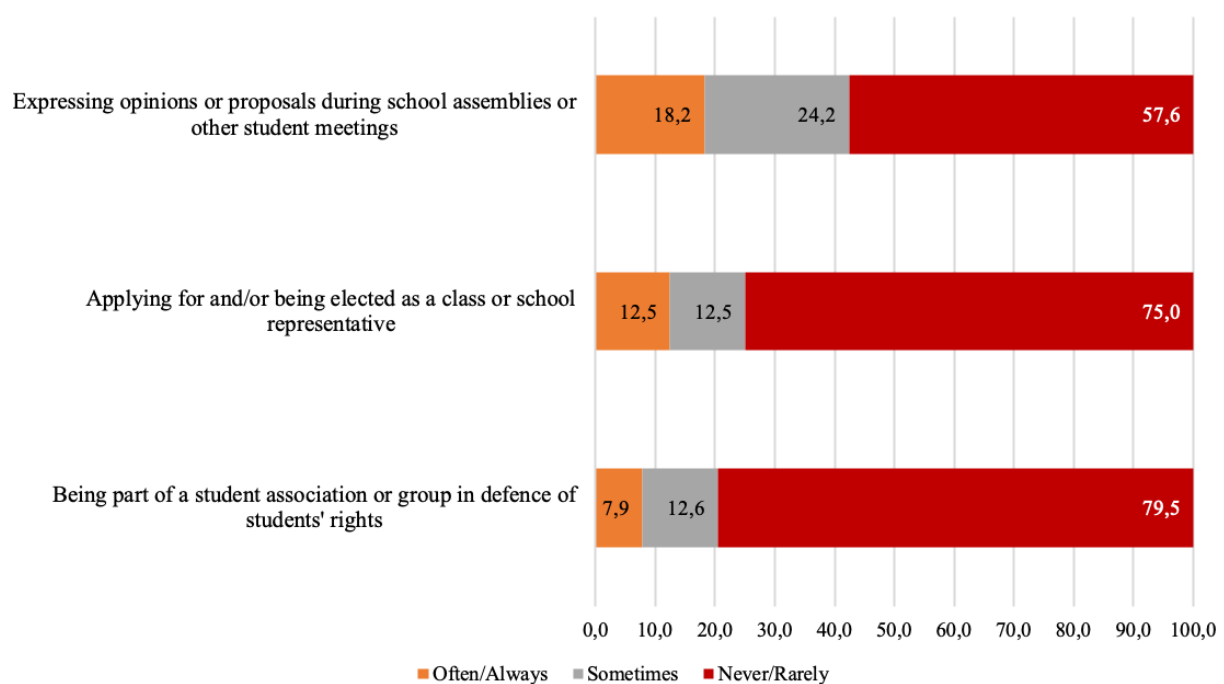
Overall, one respondent in four has had the experience, 12.5% frequently, i.e. by proposing themselves several times and taking on the role, and a similar proportion by getting involved occasionally.

The second indicator of manifest participation by adolescents is membership in student associations or groups in defence of students' rights (Fig. 5).

The web survey showed that 1 out of 5 teenagers have experience in this kind of association: just under 8% declare stable membership, and the 12.6% affirm occasional participation. The Toniolo Institute's survey (2021) estimates a few percentage points more widespread participation among young people in Italy.

More boys than girls participate ('often/always' 9.5% against 6.7%).

Almost 80% of the adolescents interviewed have no experience in student associations.

It is clear from the focus groups that institutional participation at school in teenagers' experience is oriented towards advancing collective demands related to school life and promoting (not always successfully) awareness-raising actions on general issues, including the defense of rights.

The last indicator referring to institutional participation in the school environment is the active involvement during the school assembly or other student meetings (Fig. 5). The exercise of voice during institutional meetings or in any case in environments closely linked to the scholastic context, expressing one's own opinions or making proposals, is declared by about 43% of those interviewed: for 18.4% of them it is a frequent mode of action and for 24.4% more irregular.

Those who participate the least are the 14-year-olds (15% against the sample value of 18.2%). The data could be read considering they attend the first year of upper secondary school.

Almost 58% of the sample does not take the floor in the scholastic assemblies.

The young people interviewed who do not get involved in school assemblies, and other student meetings appear more discouraged than others regarding the effectiveness of their actions (64% compared to 57.6% of the sample). And among those who do not get involved in these events, no particular relations with the student community may be found: 65% do not feel 'at all' or feel 'little' as a student of their school compared to 57.6% of the sample.

The dimension of the school assemblies could also discourage participation. The teenagers who took part in the focus groups, who were often easy-going, involved in associations, or engaged in school activities as a class and school representatives, confirmed some of the results of the web survey. There is little participation during school assemblies, while it increases during class assemblies where there is more interaction or during student occupations.

3.4 Activism

Among the activism experiences, we may trace some experiments in active citizenship and democratic participation (Hart, 1992; Leone, 2011). The following forms of activism have been found in the extracurricular context (Fig. 6):

a) participation in demonstrations in the streets or at school;

b) signing and supporting petitions;

c) conscious and critical consumption, such as buying products for social, solidarity, and/or ecological purposes and boycotting brands or commercial products linked to multinationals.

Some forms of activism chosen are addressed towards protest (participation in demonstration, boycotting). In contrast, others may be considered more constructive (as referring to practice promoting hopeful developments, for instance, supporting petitions and/or buying products for solidarity purposes).

Figure 6. Forms of activism experienced by adolescents (% of total)
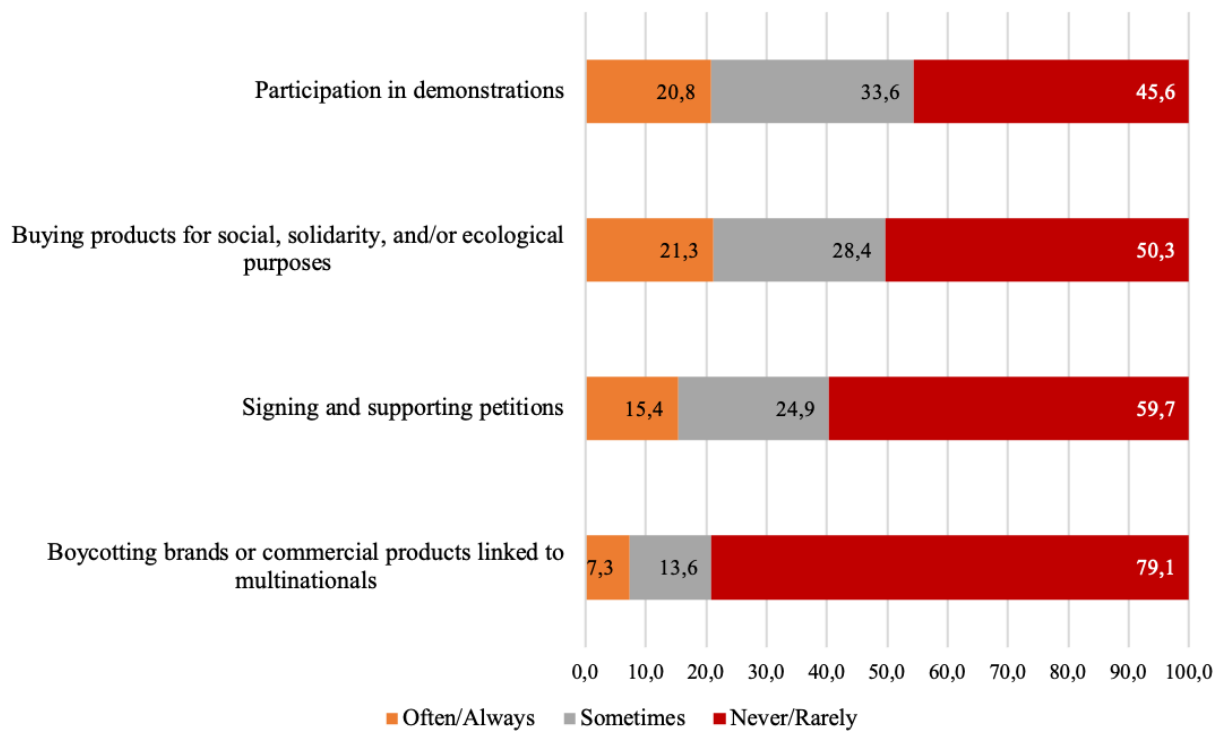
The form most experienced by boys and girls is participation in demonstrations. One-fifth of the sample stated that they participate in demonstrations in the streets or at school 'often/always'.

Seventeen-year-olds (23%) are slightly more active with this intensity than the others, girls (22.1% compared to 19.2% of boys).

Another type of involvement for the general interest is signing and supporting petitions. Among the examples presented to the interviewed teenagers, there were generally school, environmental, and social justice issues. Over 15% of the sample engage 'often/always' in supporting and signing petitions. A quarter of respondents say they do so 'sometimes'. In general, girls get more involved than boys (26.3% vs. 22.9%). Almost 60% of teenagers have 'never' supported (or have 'rarely' supported) a petition on issues of general interest.

In general, it is the 14-year-olds who support petitions the least: 64% of them 'never' did so against 59.7% of the sample.

The last indicator is related to conscious and critical consumption (the choice to buy products for social, solidarity, and/or ecological purposes) and boycotting commercial brands and products. These constitute two different modes of political consumerism, which, according to scholars, is the deliberate purchase or avoidance of products, goods, or services for political reasons, such as encouraging change in corporate behaviours and in the society. In many Western countries, this is the most widespread form of political participation, second only to voting (Van Deth, 2012). *Buy*cotting is the term used to refer to the practice of rewarding companies for favourable behaviour, while *boy*cotting consists in restricting purchasing habits to punish companies for undesirable behaviour (Copeland, 2014).

On the one hand, the consumption for social, solidarity, and ecological purposes is practiced by 21.3% of respondents 'often or always' and 28.4% 'sometimes'.

The interviewees who practice solidarity-based consumption assiduously declared, in 75% of the cases, that they live in economically "tranquil family contexts" (families that manage to save money at the end of the month), probably confirming that this practice is widespread among those who have access to generally higher market segments[5].

On the other hand, boycotts of commercial brands and products (such as McDonald's, Coca-Cola, or multinational products) are not very common. Only 14% say they have done it 'sometimes'. And the part of teenagers who do it more systematically is even lower at 7.2% of the respondents.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Observing and learning about adolescents' sensitivities and participatory practices feeds the wealth of knowledge about the idea of participation of young people.

Moreover, the empirical evidence about participatory practices provides valuable indications for those involved in education, with different roles, in the family, in schools, and in community groups.

The research aimed to explore the meaning and forms of participation in the public life of adolescents in the five Italian urban contexts. The analytical dimensions identified (civic attention, civic engagement, institutional participation, and activism) were investigated by web survey, measuring different modalities/activities to give an account of the complexity and richness of taking part, but also of encouraging the experimentation of more inclusive practices and the empowerment of adolescents by adults.

Although the collected data should be read and interpreted in the light of the specific phase of life that adolescence represents, as well as of the real opportunities for participation present in the contexts of life of the interviewees and the motivational and material supports available to teenagers, the research may offer some evidence from which to draw operational indications for educators.

The research points out that the active and visible participation of adolescents is often weak: many of them do not participate at all or participate with low intensity, especially when involvement requires taking part in collective actions. However, there is no general lack of interest in society, nor is there complete apathy: some of them participate, and knowing more about their characteristics and levels of involvement might also provide important indications as to what action could be taken to broaden the range of adolescents who take part in social life and/or are interested in collective issues.

In general, girls tend to participate more than boys, with the propensity to take part increasing slightly with age. On the one hand, this data encourages a more in-depth study of gender-oriented socialisation models (a contribution in this direction is that of Gordon, 2008). On the other hand, it confirms the appropriateness of approaches that look at adolescence as a period of life in which a stable and mature identity is gradually defined.

The collected data on social involvement allows capturing the interest and sensitivity

of adolescents towards certain themes and issues relevant to the collective well-being, such as those for the protection of the environment and the fight against climate change, which often lead to the development of sensitivity on a global scale but might incite specific interests on local issues. It is also a question widespread in many school projects and community initiatives. Planet health is an issue of cross-generational interest and sometimes acts as a link between adolescents and adults, even outside school. The strong sensitivity towards this macro-issue could promote more opportunities for adolescents to become involved in other issues (e.g. those closely linked to environmental sustainability, such as poverty in certain regions of the world, exploitation of natural wealth, equality, and fairness in access to life opportunities) and for involvement in more structured and organised activities. It testifies to the ability of adolescents to focus their attention on the issues that most strongly mark the future world. Adults with educational roles should have a task of animation and accompaniment in defining opportunities for community work.

Investigating civic engagement has allowed us to understand whether and to what extent adolescents are involved as actors of change, considering them as current political agents rather than as merely citizens-in-the-making who develop into engaged citizens only when they become adults (Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Youniss *et al.*, 2002). The data show a greater propensity to get involved in discussions on topics of general interest, especially by keeping informed about what is happening in the world and discussing or expressing one's opinion on social networks concerning social, political, and collective issues. The informational and communicative sphere thus marks a significant presence of adolescents, a result certainly favoured by the widespread use of technologies and ICT tools. Young people are constantly connected (Clark, 2005) and generally enthusiastic and creative adopters of the internet (Livingstone, 2007). The web can generate a new public space, connect citizens, and connect civil society with public decision-makers. Communication takes place without intermediaries and allows sharing experiences, objectives, and competencies based on which it is possible to structure a common action. However, the risks associated with abuse or problematic Internet use among adolescents are well known (Ortega-Ruipérez *et al.*, 2021).

Furthermore, the predominance of commercial rather than public sector content gives cause for concern (Montgomery, 2001). To promote youth civic engagement, as Livingstone and colleagues (2007) argued, there is little evidence that the internet draws in those not already engaged. The Web cannot be considered 'the answer' to young people's disengagement. However, it may help to develop skills and literacies required for engagement within a varied learning opportunities framework, which includes digital citizenship education (Bowyer & Kahne, 2020).

During the focus groups, the importance of discussion (in presence and virtual) for adolescents was emphasised, especially in the peer group of friends or classmates. The exercise of speech and its circulation are tools for knowledge and in-depth examination of specific topics, but they also strengthen listening and dialogue skills. It is clear the importance given to informal and equal discussion contexts. The indication that seems to

emerge is less training or transfer of knowledge from experts and more animation of a permeable and embedded (and not disembedded) group society to strengthen the participation of adolescents. Research already suggests that peer-to-peer programs encourage civic and political youth engagement more than the standard civics classes (Shea & Harris, 2006) and that within citizenship education projects the use of high-level interpersonal skills by staff to create a positive process of participation was noticeable and effective (Davies *et al.*, 2009). From this point of view, the widespread participation in sports, cultural and recreational associations, or religious groups could also be an opportunity to encourage conditions of sociability that favour more mature civic profiles and constitute a bridge to entering more formalised occasions of civic engagement. Indeed, depending on how coaches, managers, mentors, and peers contribute to the sporting or leisure experience, this can foster the ability to build positive relationships in the group and with the adults involved. These skills provide tools for participation in the wider community (Weiss & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2009).

At school, adolescents also have the opportunity to experience direct engagement in influencing the operation of complex organisational and decision-making processes. Institutional participation at school finds expression in the exercise of voice during school assemblies or other student meetings. The moderate active participation in school assemblies seems to suggest the inadequacy of the ordinary instruments of participation, perceived with fear (because large numbers may discourage those who would have things to say, for example), but also considered ineffective with respect to the expected changes. Overall, a quarter of the sample has had the experience (more or less frequently) of standing for election or holding the role of class or school representative, experimenting with the task of bringing together interests and representing them. Lower parts of teenagers were involved in membership of student associations or groups, further confirming greater resistance to taking part in contexts involving the existence of groups and the definition of collective actions. The school space – defined as institutionally dedicated to pupils' participation – could be rediscussed and made more friendly and, at the same time, more effective concerning institutional decisions.

Finally, activism allows us to grasp adolescents' propensity to take an active role in society. Mobilising with others seems to be a protest practice that still finds the interest of both boys and girls, as more than half of the respondents have taken part in a street or school demonstration. However, only a fifth have done so assiduously. Fewer people signed petitions in support of collective interest, while those interviewed seem to be more active in choosing social, solidarity, or ecological consumption. This information indicates to those involved in education and research into adolescent participation: adopting an appropriate lens to grasp even new and innovative ways of taking part and testifying to one's position on issues that concern general interests.

REFERENCES

Adler, R. P., & Goggin, J. (2005). What do we mean by "civic engagement"?. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 3, 236–253. https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344605276792

Almond, G. A., & Verba, S. (1963) (Eds.). *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Barber, B. L., Stone, M. R., Hunt, J. E., & Eccles, J. (2005). Benefits of activity participation: The roles of identity affirmation and peer group norm sharing. In J.L. Mahoney, R.W. Larson & J.S.D. Eccles (Eds.), *Organized activities as contexts of development: Extracurricular activities, after-school and community programs* (pp. 185-210). New York: Psychology Press.

Biesta, G. J. J. (2011). *Learning Democracy in School and Society: Education, Lifelong Learning, and the Politics of Citizenship*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.

Biorcio, R. & Vitale, T. (2016). *Italia civile. Associazionismo, partecipazione e politica*. [Civil Italy. Associationism, participation and politics]. Roma: Donzelli Editore.

Bobek, D., Zaff, J., Li, Y., & Lerner, R. M. (2009). Cognitive, emotional, behavioral components of civic action: Towards an integrated measure of civic engagement. *Journal of Applied Development Psychology* (615–627), 30 (5). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2009.07.005

Bowyer, B. & Kahne, J. (2020). The digital dimensions of civic education: Assessing the effects of learning opportunities. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* (1-11), 69. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2020.101162

Callegaro, M., Lozar Manfreda, K., & Vehovar, V. (2015). *Web Survey Methodology*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Copeland, L. (2014). Conceptualizing Political Consumerism: How Citizenship Norms Differentiate Boycotting from Buycotting. *Political Studies* (172-186), 62, S1. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12067

Crocetti, E., Jahromi, P. & Meeus, W. (2012). Identity and civic engagement in adolescence. *Journal of adolescence* (521-32), 35(3). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2011.08.003

Clark, L. S. (2005). The constant contact generation: exploring teen friendship networks online. In S. Mazzarella (Ed.), *Girl Wide Web. Girls, the Internet, and the Negotiation of Identity* (pp. 203-222). New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.

Damon, W. (2001). To not fade away: Restoring civil identity among the young. In J.P. Viteritti & D. Ravitch (Eds.), *Making Good Citizens: Education and Civil Society* (pp. 122–141). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

D'Angelo, C. & Gozzoli, C. (2020). L'esperienza sportiva in adolescenza e il ruolo delle relazioni [The sport experience in adolescence and the role of relationships]. In S. Alfieri, E. Marta & P. Bignardi (Eds.). *Adolescenti e partecipazione. Indagine Generazione Z 2018-2019* [Adolescents and participation. Survey Generation Z 2018-2019] (pp. 159-184). Milano: Vita e Pensiero.

Davies, I., Flanagan, B., Hogarth S., Mountford, P. & Philpott, J. (2009). Asking questions about participation. *Education, Citizenship and Social justice* (25–39), 4 (1). https://doi.org/10.1177/1746197908099375

Di Franco, G. (2010). *Il campionamento nelle scienze umane. Teoria e pratica* [Sampling in social science. Theory and practice]. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

Dudley, R. I. & Gitelson, A. R. (2002). Political literacy, civic education, and civic engagement: A return to political socialization?. *Applied Developmental Science* (175-182), 6 (4). https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532480XADS0604_3

Ekman, J. & Amnå, E. (2009). Political participation and civic engagement: Towards a new typology. *Human Affairs* (283-300). 22 (3). https://doi.org/10.2478/s13374-012-0024-1

Finch, J. (1987). The Vignette Technique in Survey Research. *Sociology* (105-14), XXI, I. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038587021001008

Flanagan, C. A. & Faison, N. (2001). Youth Civic Development: Implications of Research for Social Policy and Programs. *Civic Engagement*. 15, 1. https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/232753342.pdf

Flanagan, C., Levine, P. & Settersten, R. (2009). *Civic engagement and the changing transition to adulthood*. Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE).

Garelli, F., Palmonari, A., & Sciolla, L. (2006). *La socializzazione flessibile. Identità e trasmissione dei valori tra i giovani* [Flexible socialisation. Identity and transmission of values among young people]. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Gordon, H.R. (2008). Gendered Paths to teenage political participation. Parental power, Civic mobility and Youth activism. *Gender & Society* (31-55), 22, 1. http://www.jstor.org/stable/27641037

Hart, R. A. (1992). Children's Participation: From tokenism to citizenship. *Innocenti Essay*, 4, International Child Development Centre.

International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (2016). *Inter–university Consortium for Political and Social Research*. https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/web/civicleads/studies/37147

Istituto Toniolo (2021). *La condizione giovanile in Italia. Rapporto Giovani 2021* [The condition of young people in Italy. Youth Report 2021]. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Jennings, M. K., & Niemi, R. (1981). *Generations and Politics: A Panel Study of Young Adults and Their Parents*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kawashima-Ginsberg, K. (2014). *Harry, Hermione, Ron and Neville. Portraits of American. Teenagers' Extracurricular Involvement, and Implications for Educational Interventions*. CIRCLE Working Paper, 80. Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). Available at: https://circle.tufts.edu/sites/default/files/2019-12/WP80_PortraitsAmericanTeenagersExtracurricularInvolvement_2014.pdf

Kiess, J. (2022). Learning by doing: The impact of experiencing democracy in education on political trust and participation. *Politics* (75-94), 42(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395721990287

Köhler, H., Weber, S., Brese, F., Schulz, W. & Carstens, R. (2018). *ICCS 2016 User Guide for the International Database*. International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). International Civic and Citizenship Education Study 2016. Available at: https://www.iea.nl/data-tools/repository/iccs

Lawson, M. L. & Epstein, S. B. (2019). Democracy Promotion: An Objective of U.S. Foreign Assistance. *CRS Report. Congressional Research Service*. Available at: https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R44858.pdf

Leone, L. (2011). *Forme in trasformazione della partecipazione. Rapporto di ricerca sui processi partecipativi dei giovani e sui loro effetti* [Changing forms of participation.

Research report on youth participation processes and their effects]. Roma: Arciragazzi and Studio CEVAS.

Livingstone, S. (2007). Interactivity and participation on the internet: A critical appraisal of the online invitation to young people. In P. Dahlgren (Ed.), *Young Citizens and New Media: Strategies for learning democratic engagement* (pp. 103-124). London: Routledge.

Livingstone, S., Couldry, N., & Markham, T. (2007). Youthful steps towards civic participation: Does the internet help? In B. Loader (Ed.). *Young Citizens in the Digital Age: Political Engagement, Young People and New Media* (pp. 21-34). London: Routledge.

Marradi, A. (2005). *Raccontar storie: un nuovo metodo per indagare sui valori delle persone* [Telling story: a new method to investigate people's values]. Roma: Carocci.

Marta, E., Bignardi, P. & Alfieri, S. (Eds.) (2021). *Adolescenti e partecipazione. Indagine Generazione Z 2019–2020* [Teenagers and participation. Generation Z survey 2019-2020]. Milano: Vita e Pensiero.

Marta, E. & Marzana, D. (2021). "Costruire cittadinanza". La partecipazione prosociale. [Building citizenship. Pro-social participation]. In E. Marta, P. Bignardi & S. Alfieri (Eds.) (2021), *Adolescenti e partecipazione. Indagine Generazione Z 2019–2020* [Teenagers and participation. Generation Z survey 2019-2020] (pp. 17-35). Milano: Vita e Pensiero.

Martín, I. & van Deth, J. W. (2007). Political Involvement. In J. W. van Deth, J. R. Montero & A. Westholm (Eds.), *Citizenship and Involvement in European Democracies: A Comparative Analysis* (pp. 303–333). London: Routledge.

Marzana, D., Vecina, M. L., Marta, E. & Chacón, F. (2014). Memory of the quality of group experiences during childhood and adolescence in predicting volunteerism in young adults. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* (1-17), 25 (4). https://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11266-014-9504-8

Metzger, A. & Smetana, J. G. (2010). Social cognitive development and adolescent civic engagement. In L. R. Sherrod, J. Torney-Purta, & C. A. Flanagan (Eds.), *Handbook of research on civic engagement in youth* (pp. 221–248). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Montgomery, K. (2001). The new on-line children's consumer culture. In D. Singer & J. Singer (Eds.), *Handbook of Children and the Media* (pp. 635-650). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

National Council for the Social Studies (2017). *College, Career, and Civic Life. C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standard*s. National Council for the Social Studies. https://www.socialstudies.org/c3

Neundorf, A. & Smets, K. (2017). Political Socialization and the Making of Citizens. In *Oxford Handbooks Online in Political Science*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935307.013.98

Niemi, R. & Junn, J. (2000). *Civic education: What makes students learn*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Ortega-Ruipérez, B., Castellanos Sánchez, A. & Marcano, B. (2021). Risks in Adolescent Adjustment by Internet Exposure: Evidence From PISA. *Frontiers in Psychology* (1-13). https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.763759

Pancer, S. M. (2015). *The psychology of citizenship and civic engagement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Putnam, R. D. (1993). *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton: Princeton Press.

Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Putnam, R. D., Feldstein, L. M., & Cohen, D. (2004). *Better together: restoring the American community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Raniolo, F. (2008). *La partecipazione politica* [Political participation]. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Shea, D. M. & Harris, R. (2006). Why Bother? Because Peer-To-Peer Programs Can Mobilize Young Voters. *Political Science and Politics* (341-345), 39, 2. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096506060550

Schulz, A., Müller, P., Schemer, C., Wirz, D., Wettstein, M. & Wirth, W. (2018). Measuring Populist Attitudes on Three Dimensions. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* (316–326), 30. https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edw037

Stuart, A. (1984). *The Ideas of Sampling*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Van Deth, J. W. (2012). Is Creative Participation Good for Democracy?. In M. Micheletti & A. McFarland (Eds.), C*reativeParticipation: Responsibility-Taking in the Political World* (pp. 148-172). Boulder, CO: Paradigm.

Verba, S., Schlozman, K. L. & Brady, H. (1995). *Voice and equality: Civic voluntarism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Weiss, M. R., & Wiese-Bjornstal, D. M. (2009). Promoting positive youth development through physical activity. *President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports Research Digest* (1-8), 10.

Wolf, C., Joye, D., Smith, T. W., & Fu, Y. (2016). *The SAGE Handbook of survey Methodology*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Youniss, J., Bales S., Christmas-Best, V., Diversi, M., McLaughlin, M. & Silbereisen, R. (2002). Youth civic engagement in the twenty-first century. *Journal of Research on Adolescence* (121-48), 12 (1). https://doi.org/10.1111/1532-7795.00027

Zaff, J. F., Malanchuk, O. & Eccles, J. S. (2008). Predicting positive citizenship from adolescence to young adulthood: The effects of a civic context. *Applied Development Science* (38-53), 12 (1). https://doi.org/10.1080/10888690801910567

ENDNOTES

[1] Con I Bambini is a non-profit organisation founded in June 2016 to realise programs from the "National Fund Against Educational Poverty In Children and Youth".

For further information, visit the following websites https://www.conibambini.org/en/ and https://percorsiconibambini.it/ripartire/scheda-progetto/

[2] The data presented in Figs. 2-6 are collected by the same question (with a Likert scale), used to record the frequency of different activities among adolescents. The question is: "Thinking before the pandemic, in which of the following activities did you happen to participate?". There were five response modes: always, often, sometimes, rarely, and never.
The unique question, with the same scale for the different items, depends on two reasons: 1) to facilitate adolescents to fill out the questionnaire; and 2) by the verification on other surveys, such as the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement in the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (henceforth, ICCS), it is often adopted a Likert scale with response alternatives on a time-frequency scale (Köhler *et al.*, 2018).

[3] Our survey results were compared with the ICCS (2016), processing the available data from the IEA Data Repository referring to the Italian sample (n=3,450). The extrapolated sub-sample consisted of 380 cases of 14-17-year-old respondents. The following variables are considered: "using the internet to find information about political or social issues", "an environmental action group or organisation", "a Human Rights organisation", "a voluntary group doing something to help the community", and "a sports team".

[4] The story is a particular instrument of social research that allowing to identify with the protagonist and investigating the adherence or non-adherence to a 'complex' position expressed by a combination of one or more statements. Marradi (2005, 29) explains that: "the story is an episode constructed and presented in order to stimulate a reaction of the interviewee, inducing him/her to take a position on the subject and thus reveal his/her value options in a more complete and less guarded way than he/she usually does when answering a direct question".

[5] The economic situation in the family was based on an assessment by the young interviewee. The response categories were:1) it is calm because it manages to save and invest something, 2) it is calm because it manages to save something, 3) it is difficult because it spends everything it earns, 4) it is difficult because it spends everything it earns and additionally uses its savings, 5) it is tense because it struggles to make ends meet.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Stefania Chimenti, Ph.D., is post-doc and contract lecturer in Social and Education policies at the Department of Political and Social Sciences, University of Calabria. Her main research areas include: school-to-work transition, youth participation, poverty and inner areas.

Sabina Licursi, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Sociology at the Department of Political and Social Sciences, University of Calabria. Her main research areas include: solidarity, socialization and poverty, inner areas.

Emanuela Pascuzzi, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the Department of Cultures, Education and Society, University of Calabria. Her works are in the areas of community based participatory research, civic engagement, social care and education, and poverty.