



# Students' Participation in School and its Relationship with Antisocial Behavior, Academic Performance and Adolescent Well-Being

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## Abstract

Student participation has been associated with positive student outcomes, such as civic development, an active public life, and prosocial behaviors. However, the impact of student participation in other areas of student development remains unexplored. Here, we hypothesized that students' participation in the functioning of schools might also improve academic performance, prevent antisocial behaviors, and improve the subjective well-being of adolescents. We used structural equation modeling to test these ideas with data from a cross-sectional questionnaire study ( $N = 791$ ) in Santiago, Chile. Student participation –which we further separated into the perception of being listened to by school authorities and having some power to define norms of co-existence in school– was predictive of higher academic achievement and lower levels of antisocial behavior, which in turn predicted higher student life satisfaction. These results are particularly relevant to the design and evaluation of interventions and education policies, providing a compelling argument for the necessity of promoting student engagement and real participation in the school community.

**Keywords** Student participation · Subjective well-being · Antisocial behavior · Adolescence · Life satisfaction

Students' participation is a topic of great interest in international educational research (Ascorra et al. 2016; García-Pérez and Montero 2017). This topic is an essential part of

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the debate about the transformations required for schools to become more democratic environments. Participation is one of the principles that lead to a democratic social organization, and a universal right (García-Pérez and Montero 2017; Susinos and Rodríguez-Hoyos 2011). It is essential for the exercise of citizenship, allowing members of society to express their interests to their government (Schlozman et al. 1999; Castillo et al. 2014) and to consider themselves co-responsible for the “common good” (Bonhomme et al. 2015). Consequently, our study aimed to examine the relationship between student participation and subjective well-being, assessing the role of two mediating factors: antisocial behavior and academic performance.

## 1 Student Participation

The participation of students plays a crucial role in a successful civic education in school. It allows the exercise of critical civic competencies, such as deliberative dialogue and joint decision-making (Ascorra et al. 2016; Thomson 2007), as well as the acquisition of democratic values and contents (Alivernini and Manganelli 2011). Importantly, student participation involves a set of processes where students are actively involved at their schools (García-Pérez and Montero 2017) and take part in the decisions that affect them (Apple and Beane 2005; Hart 1992).

School participation also occurs at different levels (Susinos and Ceballos 2012). Indeed, García-Pérez and Montero (2017) suggest it can be divided into three: dialogue, decision-making, and action. Each of these can be acquired to different degrees, ranging from superficial forms to self-management experiences. In the first, students' participation is restricted to isolated actions and clear limits established by adults. In the latter, students have a real influence on the center's organization (Susinos and Ceballos 2012).

Several authors have reported the positive effects of students' participation (Alivernini and Manganelli 2011; Covacevic 2013; Cox, Jaramillo and Reimers 2005; Martínez and Cumsille 2015; Torney-Purta and Amadeo 2011). Research suggests that providing open spaces for students' participation—such as school councils or student centers—enables the exercise of joint deliberation and the ability to reach consensus and self-governance (Covacevic 2013; Cox et al. 2005; Torney-Purta and Amadeo 2011). In this regard, evidence shows that a critical experience that stimulates participation in civic life is to influence school organization (Martínez and Cumsille 2015; Mager and Nowak 2012; Torney-Purta 2002). Studies also demonstrate that the value of students' participation granted by the institutions has a significant effect on learning about civic and democratic principles (Alivernini and Manganelli 2011). Based on this, indicators that inform about the perceived influence of students in aspects of school organization and the institution's importance to student voices can provide relevant information about student participation in schools.

Few studies have examined the relationship between student participation and subjective well-being, and only one study investigated the relationship between these variables in Chile, finding a positive relation between them in students with and without sensory and motor disabilities (Galarce, Pérez-Salas, and Sirlopú, 2020). Even though participation is a vital aspect of youth development, few studies have considered a relationship with antisocial behavior, well-being, and academic performance.

## 2 Antisocial Behavior

Antisocial behavior can be defined as a set of behaviors that infringe on the pre-established norms of co-existence (Farrington 2005; Silva dos Santos et al. 2019). However, a precise definition has suffered changes and has evolved. Furthermore, this definition can be ambiguous without reference standards. Indeed, the damage against the environment –properties and people–, transgressing social rules and expectations are also considered among antisocial behaviors (De la Peña 2010; Dishion and Patterson 2006; Farrington 2005). In general, antisocial behaviors appear during childhood and adolescence (Eleni and Giotsa 2018; Silva dos Santos et al. 2019), and can be manifested as a wide range of actions including aggression, theft, vandalism, pyromania and the damage of public and private property, among others (Hawkins et al. 1992; Hein and Barrientos 2004). These behaviors can occur in different contexts: within the family, in the community, or in educational institutions. Within schools, it is often viewed as a manifestation of school violence (Furlong et al. 2003) and may be directed against other students and other members of the school community, including peers, teachers or staff (Cohen et al. 2015; Espelage et al. 2013; Varela et al. 2019). It can also involve the damage to school premises, school absenteeism, or dropout (Espelage et al. 2013; Garaigordobil 2005).

As noted, the definition of antisocial behavior will depend on the limits set by a particular socio-cultural and political context, such as an educational institution within a democratic nation. These limits establish the border of what is considered either “socially acceptable” or outside the norm and going beyond what’s acceptable. The study of these issues delivers concepts and definitions of what is considered right/wrong, prosocial/antisocial, and these concepts and definitions respond to specific social norms, and are in constant evolution. Hence, reaching a consensus definition does not limit the understanding of individual behaviors due to structural and social changes. As the socio-cultural and political context varies, the understanding of antisocial behavior may change concomitantly.

Studies demonstrate that frequent antisocial behavior in the school context can lead to rejection by other students and even teachers, leading to social isolation (Plazas et al. 2010), which in turn can diminish the interest in student participation. This behavior pattern can also lead to the generation of labeling on students, such as “problematic student” or “the aggressor.” Therefore, antisocial behavior may have direct consequences on students’ social relations in the context of their educational institution, their relationship with authorities, and conflict resolution with peers and teachers. All of these could equally affect academic performance (Ezpeleta et al. 2005), whether due to lack of support or interest, increasing the likelihood of school failure.

Previous studies have demonstrated a link between a high frequency of behavioral alterations and depressive symptoms, particularly in adolescents (Beyers and Loeber 2003). Indeed, the double failure hypothesis model by Patterson and Stoolmiller (1991) indicates that interpersonal conflicts and the lack of social skills, including those caused by antisocial school behavior, can promote environment rejection of adolescents and a series of adaptive failures according to their age and educational level. This also reduces positive reinforcement and support from significant others to cope with stressful life events, increasing adolescents’ vulnerability for the development of mental health problems, such as feelings of worthlessness and depression.

One of our primary goals is to provide evidence on the relationship between antisocial behavior and the detriment of subjective well-being. We also seek to identify factors that could improve subjective well-being. There is an increasing interest in factors related to these behaviors, and more evidence from empirical studies is needed. Specifically, we are interested in the relationship between students' participation and the reduction of antisocial behaviors and how these factors can have positive effects on students' subjective well-being.

### 3 Subjective Well-Being

Subjective well-being refers to the way people feel about their own life. This includes a cognitive and emotional self-assessment of their existence (Diener et al. 2003). The cognitive dimension corresponds to life satisfaction, and the emotional dimension considers personal feelings and moods (Huebner 2004; Petito and Cummins 2000). These dimensions incorporate a general assessment and evaluations of different areas of daily existence such as friends and social relations, family, the community, and the school (Huebner 1994, 2004). Studies demonstrate that life satisfaction is positively associated with physical and mental health, positive interpersonal relationships, and educational and professional achievement (Park 2004; Varela et al. 2018).

During adolescence, life satisfaction has a crucial role, related to healthy development (Alfaro et al. 2016a; Paxton et al. 2006; Varela et al. 2018) and lower levels of internalization and externalization problems (Gilman and Huebner 2006; Proctor et al. 2009; Suldo and Huebner 2006). Adolescents that report low levels of life satisfaction also tend to suffer from psychological problems such as depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation, and low self-esteem, as well as behavioral and social issues, like violent behavior, substance abuse, suicidal attempts, and problems in their relationships (Furr and Funder 1998; Suldo and Huebner 2006; Valois et al. 2004). Moreover, higher levels of life satisfaction are associated with better functioning in school, fewer psychological symptoms, and less risky behaviors such as violent conduct, substance abuse, and sexual victimization (Gilman and Huebner 2006; Proctor et al. 2009; Suldo and Huebner 2006).

Subjective well-being during childhood and adolescence can be affected by multiple factors depending on the context in which they occur. Among these, schools have particular relevance given the time students spend in this setting and the important life experiences they have inside them (Alfaro et al. 2016b; Danielsen et al. 2009; Eccles and Roeser 2010). Significant relationships with peers and teachers are developed within school space, and these can become relevant sources of support and well-being (Deci and Ryan 2002; Ryan and Deci 2009). Recent studies also emphasize the role of school experiences on children and adolescents' well-being (Alfaro et al. 2016b; Huebner et al. 2014). In Chile, Varela et al. (2018) examined the relationship between school violence and life satisfaction, and analyzed potential underlying mechanisms for this association. The authors found an indirect negative association between being a victim of school violence and life satisfaction; which was mediated by school satisfaction. Also, the school climate was negatively associated with involvement in school violence, suggesting that a positive school climate may prevent school violence by increasing students' satisfaction in school (Varela et al. 2018).

Previous studies have evaluated school participation, antisocial behavior, and subjective well-being independently, but the relations between these variables as a whole has not yet been examined. Based on the literature review outlined above, we believe that students' participation in school can play a pivotal role in promoting well-being (beyond the benefits for civic education explored in other studies). Such participation should ideally include both being listened to by authorities and also having actual influence in defining the norms of co-existence within school communities. The influence of student's participation on well-being is surely complex and may include several psychosocial mechanisms, but in this study we will evaluate two in particular: reducing antisocial behaviors and improving academic performance.

## 4 Method

### 4.1 Participants and Procedure

A total of 791 adolescents from six urban schools in Santiago de Chile voluntarily participated in the study. The average age was 13.57 years, and 46.06% were female (11 students self-categorized as other). Data were obtained using self-reported surveys applied by psychologists in the classrooms over the period May–August 2018. The ethics committee at *Universidad del Desarrollo* approved the study, which used nodded and voluntary participation of the adolescent participants, active consent from schools and passive consent from parents or guardians.

### 4.2 Measures

Age and sex were used as control variables. Age (continuous variable) was obtained from participants' self-reported responses. Gender was treated as a dichotomous variable and also obtained from participant self-reports.

### 4.3 Student Life Satisfaction Scale

Subjective well-being was measured using the Student Life Satisfaction Scale (SLSS) questionnaire, created by Huebner (1991) and further validated for children and young people in Chile (Alfaro et al. 2016c). We used a version of this scale based on four items, considering a life-evaluation in a general, context-free manner (Huebner, 2004). This measure used a five-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = "Strongly Disagree" to 5 = "Strongly Agree") asking about the level of agreement with different assessments of life satisfaction. Some examples are: "I like my life", "I have what I want in life". A higher score indicates greater life satisfaction. Cronbach's alpha was  $\alpha = .70$ .

### 4.4 Antisocial Behaviors

This variable captures adolescent self reports involving a variety of violent behaviors such as damaging school furniture, carrying drugs and weapons. The scale is based on the 4th National Survey of Violence in the School Environment (ENVAE), developed by the Chilean Ministries of Education and Interior. It comprises seven items using a

five-point scale that ask how often they have been involved in such situations within the school (from 1 = “Never” to 5 = “Every day”). A higher score indicates greater self-report of these antisocial behaviors by adolescents. Cronbach’s alpha was  $\alpha = .80$ .

#### 4.5 Academic Achievement

This variable was obtained from participants’ self-reports of their previous year’s grade point average, using a categorized scale (from 1 = “Less than 4.5” to 6 = “Between 6.5 and 7.0”). Chilean schools use a 1.0 to 7.0 grading system, where higher grades indicate higher academic performance, and 4.0 is the lowest passing grade. Grades lower than 4.5 are fairly rare, and thus only one category was used to report them (in our sample, only 30 students reported grades lower than 4.5).

#### 4.6 Participation

To measure student participation, we used two items from the 4th National Survey of Violence in the School Environment (ENVAE), developed by the Chilean Ministries of Education and Interior. This measure was constructed on the basis of two observed variables. One of them asks about the following statement: “Students’ opinion is considered by the school in order to modify the rules of coexistence” (label: Rules of Coexistence); and the second reads: “School authorities (e. g. principal, inspector) listen to the ideas proposed by students” (label: Listen Students). Both statements were scored using a five-point Likert scale based on the degree of agreement or disagreement (from 1 = “Strongly Disagree” to 5 = “Strongly Agree”). A higher value indicates a perception of greater participation in the educational institution.

### 5 Results

Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics for all the variables in the study, and the zero-order correlations are available in Table 2. Our main analyses were done in Mplus (Muthén and Muthén 2017), using the default treatment for missing data (FIML; e.g. Enders 2001); the lowest covariance coverage in our data was 91.8%, with 96.6% on average (SD = 1.5%). In order to account for the non-normality of the data, we used robust maximum likelihood estimation (MLR; e.g. Li 2016). When defining our model, we included listening to students and rules of co-existence as the main predictors, academic achievement and antisocial behavior as mediators, and student life satisfaction as the dependent variable. The model also includes age and gender as statistical controls, which were allowed to correlate with our main predictors and included themselves as predictors of the mediators and student life satisfaction. This model provided a good fit to the data;  $\chi^2(84) = 137.7$ ,  $p < .001$ , CFI = .97, TLI = .96, RMSEA = .028, 90% CI [.020, .037], SRMR = .03. In order to further improve our estimation of the effects related to antisocial behavior, we defined its indicators as count variables, thus using a poisson regression in their prediction by the latent variable (e.g. Cox et al. 2009). This is particularly appropriate for variables involving the frequency of (unlikely) events, as is the case with the indicators of antisocial behavior (Huang and Cornell 2012).

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Skew</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>N</i>
Age	13.57	1.21	.48	11–17	750
Gender	.46	.50	.15	0–1	775
Academic Achievement	3.66	1.17	–.25	1–6	772
Rules of Coexistence	3.35	1.08	–.33	1–5	785
Listen to Students	3.57	1.04	–.56	1–5	789
Antisocial Behavior	1.11	.30	6.74	1–5	779
SLSS	3.02	.80	–.98	0–4	778

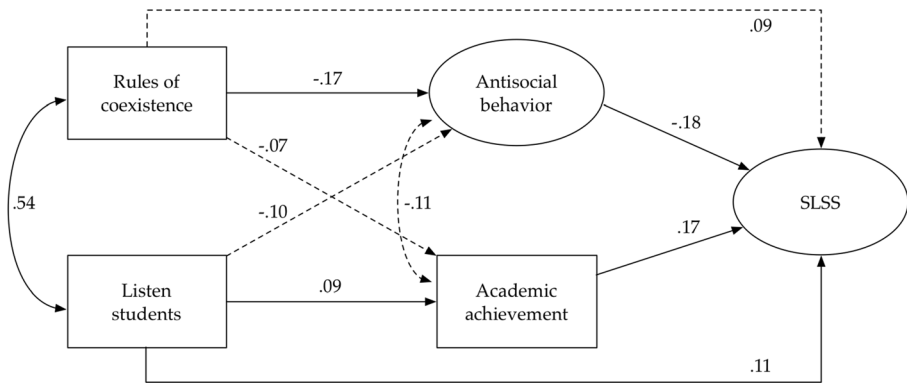
The standardized results for this final model are shown in Fig. 1 and were in general consistent with our hypotheses, supporting the idea that listening to students and letting them have a voice in defining rules of co-existence might influence student well-being in different ways. In the case of listening to students, this variable was a significant predictor of academic achievement ( $\beta = .09$ ,  $p = .034$ ), but had only a marginally significant effect on antisocial behavior ( $\beta = -.10$ ,  $p = .09$ ). In turn, rules of co-existence was a significant predictor of antisocial behavior ( $\beta = -.17$ ,  $p = .005$ ), but not of academic achievement ( $\beta = -.08$ ,  $p = .11$ ). As expected, both antisocial behavior and academic achievement were relevant predictors of student life satisfaction ( $\beta = -.18$ ,  $p = .001$  and  $\beta = .17$ ,  $p < .001$ , respectively).

Overall, both listening to students and rules of co-existence had a statistically significant total effect on student life satisfaction, part of which was indeed mediated by either antisocial behavior or academic achievement. In the case of listening to students, the total effect on student life satisfaction was  $\beta = .14$ ,  $p = .006$ , which was composed by a statistically significant specific indirect effect via academic achievement ( $\beta = .02$ ,  $p = .048$ ), a non-significant specific indirect effect via antisocial behavior ( $\beta = .02$ ,  $p = .11$ ) and a statistically significant direct (or residual) effect ( $\beta = .11$ ,  $p = .03$ ). In the case of rules of co-existence, the total effect on student life satisfaction was  $\beta = .11$ ,  $p = .026$ , which was composed by a marginally significant specific indirect effect via antisocial behavior ( $\beta = .03$ ,  $p = .052$ ), a non-significant specific indirect effect via academic achievement ( $\beta = -.01$ ,  $p = .12$ ) and a marginally significant direct

**Table 2** Zero-order correlations

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Age (1)	–						
Gender (2)	–.06	–					
Academic Achievement (3)	–.18***	.05	–				
Rules of Coexistence (4)	–.08*	–.07*	–.007	–			
Listen to Students (5)	–.07	–.06	–.07	.54***	–		
Antisocial Behavior (6)	.10**	–.08*	–.10**	–.17***	–.13***	–	
SLSS (7)	–.07*	–.15***	.18***	.17***	.15***	–.14***	–

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$



**Fig. 1** Student participation and life satisfaction: SEM Results. *Note:* SLSS: Student Life Satisfaction Scale. Dotted lines indicate results that are not statistically significant ( $p > .05$ ). The model also controlled for gender and age (not pictured) as predictors of SLSS as well as the mediators

(or residual) effect ( $\beta = .09$ ,  $p = .068$ ). The model explained 4.1% of the variance in academic achievement, 13.2% of the variance of antisocial behavior, and 14.8% of the variance in student life satisfaction.

## 6 Discussion

The current study provides evidence supporting the role of students' participation in schools on life satisfaction. Our results also support the idea that this positive effect of participation may be explained by two relevant factors in school experience: getting students involved in the modification of school norms may prevent adverse outcomes such as antisocial behaviors; and that encouraging the perception that they are listened to by authority figures may promote academic performance. Therefore, our study adds to the growing evidence advocating for greater levels of student participation in schools (Alivernini and Manganelli 2011; Covacevic 2013; Cox et al. 2005; Dewey 1916; Martínez and Cumsille 2015; Torney-Purta and Amadeo 2011). However, not any form of participation lead to positive results (Ferreira et al. 2012). Our findings suggest that when students report feeling listened to by school authorities, they tend to have better grades, but not necessarily less antisocial behavior. Conversely, when students' opinions are considered to modify school co-existence norms, they tend to report less antisocial behavior, but not necessarily better grades. These results provide some initial evidence supporting the idea that different ways of stimulating student participation can have different outcomes, and future studies could certainly explore the specific forms of participation that can be most beneficial for students and the community using more developed multidimensional measures than the one available in our study.

Moreover, our results can be explained considering the Social Development Model (Catalano et al. 2004). This model points out that for individuals to socialize the values, beliefs, and behavior patterns of their social units, some conditions must be met. One of them is providing opportunities for student involvement and participation in the socializing unit. In this way, it is possible to hypothesize that the forms of participation studied here can promote the development of behaviors and attitudes aligned with the schools' institutional values and the inhibition of antisocial conduct. Moreover, other



studies have pointed to the school as a protective factor against high-risk behaviors in adolescents (Kim et al. 2016), again highlighting the role of providing opportunities for active student participation (Catalano and Hawkins 1996; Torres and Varela 2013).

In addition, other studies have demonstrated a positive association between school participation and academic performance (for a review, see Mager and Nowak 2012). An explanation for this relationship is that it may be mediated by factors such as an open class environment that considers diverse voices and values the particularities of each student in order to promote learning. In this respect, Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) point out that participation in the school council affects the school ethos and the relationships between adults and students, which students consider an important contributor to meaningful learning. Our results are also consistent with previous research that has shown how school contexts can account for emotional and social satisfaction of students, which is related to better school performance (Catalano et al. 2004; Hawkins et al. 1999; Malecki and Elliot 2002).

Another key finding of our study is that the two forms of students' participation are related to higher life satisfaction levels. This finding confirms previous reports suggesting that life satisfaction is related to student participation and school achievement (Alfaro et al. 2016b; Athay et al. 2012). Besides, these results are consistent with findings that indicate that emotionally available teachers that are open to dialogue are predictors of students' emotional well-being (Berger et al. 2009). In our case, this relationship is mediated by antisocial behavior and academic achievement. Still, it seems that schools that provide students with opportunities to become involved and feel listened by adults allow healthy outcomes (Catalano et al. 2004; Schaps and Solomon 2003; Rovis et al. 2016).

Nevertheless, if students are to achieve their maximum potential in terms of academic and behavioral expectations, several other factors need to be present (Rovis et al. 2016). Indeed, a rich school environment demands several factors in constant interaction, not limited to isolated actions in a poorly receptive environment. Evidently, this has implications for effective interventions, where we believe it is critical to further develop programs that gradually transform the reality of educational contexts, always towards a more democratic space.

Another contribution of the present study is that it highlights the importance of studying subjective well-being in childhood and adolescence. Several authors have mentioned the relevance of counting with evidence about life satisfaction of children and adolescents for an informed design, implementation and evaluation of social and educational programs (Alfaro et al. 2016b, Proctor et al. 2011; Valois et al. 2004; Veenhoven 2002). As we increase our understanding of the factors that influence students' well-being, we can engage in effective actions to improve it, measuring the impact of the implemented strategies, and taking the appropriate actions if they do not give the expected results. A point that is important to remark here is that one dimension relevant for child and adolescent well-being corresponds to school satisfaction (Alfaro et al. 2016a; Athay et al. 2012). Several studies show that experiences of satisfaction in a school context are related to global life satisfaction reported by students (Tomy and Cummins 2011; Kerr et al. 2011; do Santos et al. 2013). Our study did not include a measure of global life satisfaction, and exploring these effects on the many dimensions of student well-being might greatly improve our understanding of these processes. Considering the practical implications that our results may have, it is essential to

highlight the relevance of studying the different aspects of school participation and their relationship with adaptive/non-adaptive development. Within these aspects, we find academic performance and antisocial behaviors. With this knowledge, it becomes possible to focus practical efforts on promoting well-being in the school context. Our results show that the action of listening to students contributes to their improved academic performance. In turn, higher academic performance is related to greater life satisfaction in school. From the above, it can be inferred that providing spaces for participation in schools is not only a right but also an opportunity for development.

Moreover, our results suggest that listening to students decreases antisocial behavior problems, which is associated with higher life satisfaction in school. Therefore, a critical aspect that educators, social workers, psychologists, and policy-makers should consider is that in order to reduce behavioral problems in schools, it is necessary to involve students themselves in addressing the problem, such as making them participants in the development of rules of co-existence. These results can guide various educational agents to promote and manage student participation, directing it towards specific objectives that will provide better development opportunities in schools and address behavioral issues in schools as a community.

In sum, our study developed a model to understand the relations among students' participation, academic performance, antisocial behaviors, and subjective well-being. However, our study has limitations that may restrict the scope of our findings. First, students' participation in our study was measured as a function of just two items. As outlined above, further research is needed using more comprehensive measurement of participation. This is why our results should be interpreted with caution, keeping in mind previous studies on this topic, particularly those that refer to the two types of participation and their different mechanisms in the prediction of life satisfaction. A second limitation of the study is the use of self-report data, which can be biased by social desirability. Future studies may include the report of other educational or family other informants to complement our measures.

Finally, we also wish to emphasize the limitation inherent in using a cross-sectional design when studying adolescent development, a period of life which is defined by significant social, psychological, and biological changes (Crone et al. 2016; Foulkes and Blakemore 2018). Future longitudinal studies should evaluate the existence of changes over time in the relationship between antisocial behaviors, life satisfaction, student participation, and academic performance, which may indeed be multidirectional (e.g. life satisfaction is likely to predict antisocial behaviors over time, as well as the reverse) Developing interventions to increase student participation and evaluating its effects is also an important avenue to disentangle these causal relationships. Despite these limitations, we believe our study represents a relevant addition to the literature on student participation, by providing evidence for the importance of students' participation in the school, and how it relates to academic achievement, antisocial behavior, and –most importantly– adolescent well-being.

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### **Compliance with Ethical Standards**

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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