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Dimensions of student participation: participatory action research in a teacher education context

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Citation

Smit, B. H. J. (2023, September 6). *Dimensions of student participation: participatory action research in a teacher education context*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3638573>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Chapter 1

General introduction

“Never underestimate what it is that young people can tell us!”

Susan Groundwater-Smith (interviewed by Kelly, 2015)

Chapter 1 – General introduction

This dissertation concerns an exploration of enabling student participation in decision-making processes through forms of teacher-student partnerships in educational research. By this, it seeks to support the development of democratic approaches and practices in schools and to investigate ways to interest and prepare prospective teachers for such collaborative practices. Therefore, the studies reported in this dissertation implemented and investigated the combination of three constituting aspects: teacher research, teacher education, and student participation, into a participatory action research (PAR) project by pre-service teachers (PSTs) and their school students. In this dissertation, conducting PAR has been employed as a method to encourage student participation and steer pre-service teachers towards adopting a participatory approach to education.

Combined, the studies aim to shed light on actual practices of research collaboration of pre-service teachers and their students and on conditions in teacher education contexts that affect unfolding and developing participatory practices. Describing such practices and the conditions that promote them is expected to help schools and teacher education institutes to implement or further develop student participation in decision-making processes.

Teacher research

It has often been observed that the outcomes of educational research do not automatically lead to their implementation in teaching and learning practices. Reasons for this include the impracticality of the recommendations for specific local contexts, the lack of coherence with existing ways of working, the distance between researchers and practitioners in interpreting educational issues under investigation, and the relative unfamiliarity of practitioners with educational research and its scientific results, and researchers with school practices. In other words, a so-called gap between theory and practice (e.g. Admiraal et al., 2016; Bendtsen et al., 2021; Korthagen, 2010). This alleged theory-practice gap spurred the idea that research should not only be conducted by academic researchers but should involve education practitioners or should have teachers conduct their own research. Zwart et al. (2015, p. 133 [original in Dutch]) mention three goals of such research by teachers:

- 1) directly changing and underpinning their own teaching and school practices (e.g. designing education, evaluating teaching, and supporting innovations in school),
- 2) the professionalization of teachers (e.g., giving voice to teachers in changes in education), and
- 3) generating knowledge about teaching practice (what works for whom, when and why).

In the last decades, teacher research has become acknowledged as a valuable form of research and as an integral part of the teaching profession, both as a valid way of knowledge construction about education and as a transformative professional development activity for teachers (Zeichner, 2003). In line with these goals, action research was identified and promoted as a well-suited research approach for (critically) investigating the teaching and learning practice and as an approach to teacher professional development (e.g. Moreira, 2009; Ponte et al., 2004; Rönnerman et al., 2008; West, 2011). Action research approaches imply systematically investigating issues within an educator's own practice context, including the perspectives of all stakeholders, and mostly also in collaboration with them.

In action research, the process of identifying a problem, creating a plan, implementing solutions, and monitoring progress is used to promote change and establish mechanisms for improvement. This concept of mechanisms for improvement is also reflected in the 'Interconnected model of professional growth' (IMTPG) proposed by Clarke and Hollingsworth (2002), which suggests that teachers' views and attitudes, as well as their practices and the outcomes of those practices, can change as a result of various experiences, including those initiated by external sources such as research projects or academic researchers. This model, IMTPG, served as one of the foundations for the idea of introducing and investigating PAR in the TEd program (reported in this dissertation). Practicing PAR would supposedly elicit transformation in teachers' thinking and acting towards student participation and democratic approaches; a conjecture and goal that is also supported by various researchers (e.g. Bendtsen et al., 2021; Hardy et al., 2015; Mitchell et al., 2009; Rutten, 2021; Saiz-Linares et al., 2019).

Teacher education and Participatory Action Research

Since most pre-service students enter teacher education with little or no experience in social or educational research, and even less in action research, it is a prerequisite to educate and support teachers in conducting such research, either as part of professional development activities, for graduate teachers, or in initial TEd programs, for pre-service teachers. However, as will be elaborated on below, educational research commonly suffers from a missing perspective – that of the students, as 'consequential stakeholders', on relevant issues around teaching and learning in schools (Groundwater-Smith, 2005). Excluding their views and ideas from teacher research implies less fitting transformations of school practices, and less motivation and engagement of students in educational development (Cook-Sather, 2020; Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007; Thomson & Gunter, 2006). Still, collaborating with school students in research is not a natural or cultured habitus of most teachers and requires preparation, for example, by letting teachers experience research collaborations in practice – via conducting PAR projects and TEd courses or programs – to understand how that can take shape and how valuable that can be for teaching and learning and for contributing to a democratic culture in schools.

In the studies for this dissertation, PAR has been introduced into a TEd program as one of the possible *means* to elicit or enable school students to participate in decision-making processes, as PAR is not only a site-based approach to research but also meant to be a democratic practice in itself. PAR creates a context (a *niche*, in ecological terms) for PSTs that facilitates involving their students in researching their school practices; it enables certain – dialogical and collaborative – practices and constraints – more hierarchical, unilateral, and isolated – others. These enabling and constraining mechanisms are a substantial part of the *Theory of practice architectures* (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008; Mahon et al., 2017) in the form of arrangements in three dimensions (cultural-discursive, material-economic, social-political) that in conjunction prefigure and make possible the professional practice. Therefore, this theory has been used in our studies to describe and analyze practices of PAR by teachers and their students.

Student participation: education, schools, and scope for decision-making

In different times and places, the education of young people has been taken up in different ways. Initially, by upbringing and participating in a family or a community, and their daily work and leisure

activities but also in explicit forms of teaching and modeling of practices, e.g. in master-apprentice situations. Later, in societies of higher complexity and induced by economic, societal, and political demands, more institutional forms of education were established, and attending schools became a regular and mostly also mandatory way for young people's development. In the 19th century, the industrial revolution led to the rise of mass education and the development of public schools. Education became housed in specially designated buildings, formalized in curricula and programs, and compartmentalized in classes and groups of similar age, capacities, and interests. Teachers became professional workers; governments largely determined the structure of education, the learning objectives and the content and scope of the subject matter, and even how this education should be delivered. For young people, compulsory education became the norm and with it came following the rules, practices, lesson content, tests, and learning pace as decided upon, nationally, by governments, and, locally, by the schools and teachers. With a predominant focus on a 'factory model' of standardized curricula and rote learning, student influence on their education was limited. In short, the scope for participation in decision-making in the practices of those stakeholders directly involved in the teaching-learning process was restricted, not only for teachers but especially for the young people attending the schools.

Even though such a standardized model might seem logical from the policy perspective of efficiency and practicality in educating large groups of young people, it is at odds with the goal of preparing them for independent adult lives and responsible and active participation in society, which is generally aimed for in Western democratic countries. Limiting the participation of children in decision-making about their own lives also reflects a way of thinking about young people as a separate category of human beings with a lightweight set of general human civil and political rights (Quennerstedt, 2010).

In the last decades, a resurgence of the perspective on student involvement in education and research can be traced (Cook-Sather, 2006) towards the awareness that students should be invited and enabled to express their views and to be taken seriously by adults and be responded to. This aligns with the view that for building and sustaining a democratic society, education should not be just learning about democracy and citizenship, but should enable young people to practice a democratic way of life, also in school (Print et al., 2002). It should be connected to the real-life experiences of students, as applied learning instead of a theoretical exercise (Wilson, 2000), and as an integral part of everyday critically reflexive practice (Jones & Hall, 2021). An increase in student participation in formal education bodies, such as school councils, emerged. However, as Wilson also underlines, limiting the notion of student participation to formal bodies is a misconception of authentic participation, because 'important forms of participation do occur in school contexts, especially in classrooms' (2000, p. 26) and schools should provide suitable environments for holistic opportunities for participation.

Still, realizing actual student participation in decision-making in the classroom and the school more broadly can be a complex and challenging process. It requires a shift in the traditional teacher-centered approach to education and the implementation of new pedagogical methods that prioritize student engagement and agency. As stated by Cook-Sather (2006, p. 363): " 'Student voice', in its most profound and radical form, calls for a cultural shift that opens up spaces and minds not only to the sound but also to the presence and power of students." This can be difficult for teachers who may

have been trained in traditional teaching methods and may not have the skills, resources, or inclination to incorporate student participation into their lessons. Additionally, changing classroom practices towards increased student involvement in decision-making can also be hindered by factors such as lack of support from school administration, limited resources, and resistance from students, parents, and colleagues. To effectively enable student participation, teachers must be provided with ongoing professional development, resources, and support to help them implement new practices and strategies. In addition, it also requires a change in the mindset of teachers and students who have been accustomed to a traditional teacher-centric approach leading to re-think their roles in the classroom and support increased ownership of student learning. Such changes take time and require a consistent effort from teachers, students, and school leaders to build a culture of participation in the classroom (Kirby et al., 2003; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006).

“Inviting students to be participants and agents in research on educational practice challenges deep-seated social and cultural assumptions about the capacity of young people and children to discern and analyse effective approaches to teaching and learning.” (Cook-Sather, 2014, p. 133)

Children’s rights

Today, the role of pedagogy continues to evolve, with a focus on fostering creativity, critical thinking, and self-directed learning, and on providing inclusive and equitable education for all children. We see this development reflected in the creation of the Declaration of human rights and subsequently also, specifically, the rights of the child (UN Convention of the Rights of the Child) (Evans, 2016; OHCHR, 1989). Even though this declaration includes the rights of children to be heard and to have a say in decisions concerning their life, student participation in decision-making in education and educational research has remained for the most part, scarce and superficial.

A rights-based perspective on student participation may frame the obligations for adults, but it is only effectively realized if combined with “... genuine respect for all parties involved and intentional structures to support collective action by adults and young people, which includes student empowerment, ...” (Cook-Sather, 2014, p. 134). Views and experiences of students should be taken seriously, they have to be treated as active participants, and claims should be acted upon in practice (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). Involving students in decision-making is not an optional affair or a handy way to rapidly adapt school to changing circumstances and demands. The UN-CRC ratification sets specific demands, as Lundy (2007, p. 931) formulates:

“The practice of actively involving pupils in decision making should not be portrayed as an option which is in the gift of adults but a legal imperative which is the right of the child.”

Therefore, Lundy (2007, p. 933) states that conceptualising Article 12 of the UN-CRC, which implies giving due weight to children’s views, builds on four chronologically interrelated elements:

- Space: Children must be given the opportunity to express a view
- Voice: Children must be facilitated to express their views
- Audience: The view must be listened to
- Influence: The view must be acted upon, as appropriate.

Participation in research

A parallel development in educational research in previous decades that aligns with Lundy's four elements is the shift from research *on* students to research *with* students (Cook-Sather, 2002; Fielding, 2004; Fine et al., 2007; Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015; Mitra, 2006). It repositions teachers and students into partnerships in educational research and reform (Cook-Sather, 2014, 2018), based on the conviction 'that young people have unique perspectives on learning, teaching, and schooling [...]' (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 359). The actual form this can take is dependent on the age, capacities, and preferences of the young people, and might range from inclusive and participatory approaches to a revision of roles, structures, and processes in research. Students can become the primary actors in the research, that is, as subjects instead of objects (Honerød Hoveid & Hoveid, 2007), in a process of dialogue with all stakeholders (Bragg, 2010; Edwards-Groves & Hoare, 2012; Fielding, 2004) and with mutual recognition (Honneth, 2012) of participants as capable and responsible persons in learning and researching. Inevitably, issues of power and hierarchy between adults and young people will remain in these forms of partnerships in educational research (Gore, 1996; Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010; Hawkins, 2015). Perceived or anticipated changes in status and power might be stressful for both teachers and students. Overcoming felt barriers to such changes needs an environment that supports participants feeling empowered to take risks (Le Fevre, 2014) and 'to conceptualise themselves, to act, and to interact differently than what many are used to in more hierarchical and distanced research relationships' (Cook-Sather, 2014, p. 135).

Incorporating the participation of school students in decision-making processes in schools through action research also presents challenges for current teacher education practices, which typically do not involve their adult students in decision-making on educational issues. Experiencing having a voice, being listened to, and having an influence on decisions regarding their learning conditions can exemplify for PSTs how this can be realized in schools. To address the lack of such experiences, on the one hand, student-teachers as learners could also be more included in the development of the TEEd program and research about TEEd practice, and, on the other hand, as future teachers, they can experience this themselves by conducting participatory research on their teaching practice (Zeichner et al., 2015). Consequently, the implementation of student participation in teacher education and school practice through action research leads to interventions and mechanisms at two levels (see Figure 1):

1. *Modeling*: Within the teacher education program, teacher educators and PSTs work together to design the program and incorporate action research methods (the blue box on the left-hand side of Figure 1).
2. *Enacting*: In school practice, PSTs and their school students actively participate in action research on relevant educational issues (the blue box on the right-hand side of Figure 1).

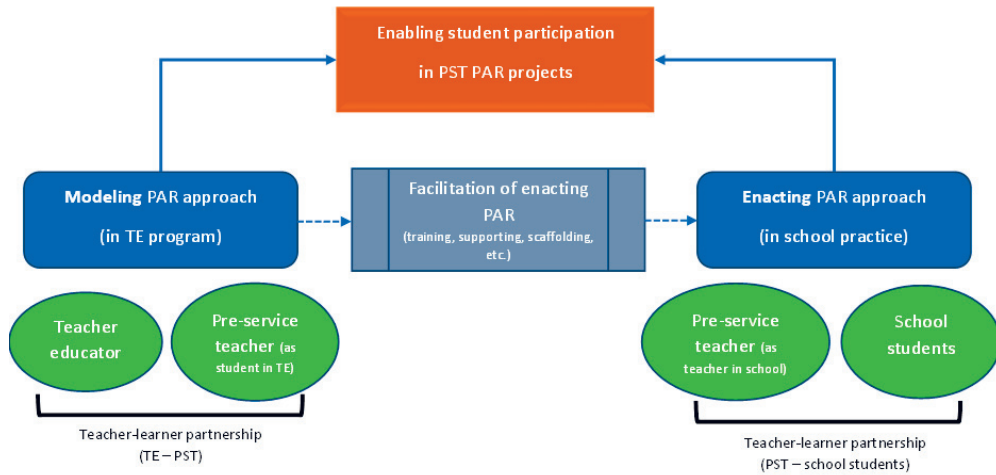


Figure 1. Enabling student participation in PST PAR projects

In such a model, a PST operates in two parallel teacher-learner partnerships (the green ovals in Figure 1): as a student-teacher with the teacher educator (on the left-hand side), and as a teacher with the school students (on the right-hand side). During the TEd program, enacting the participatory approach is facilitated by teacher educators, expert staff, and school mentors (represented in the middle, grey-blue box in Figure 1) in various ways, e.g. by training PSTs in educational action research; supporting and advising them in ways to valuably and meaningfully involve their students in their research projects; scaffolding PSTs in conducting their PAR projects towards independent participatory practices.

Currently, a comprehensive teacher education program in the Netherlands that focuses on preparing PSTs for incorporating student participation through action research does not yet exist. Research on how to set up such a program is limited, and ultimately, the program would need to be tailored to local conditions.

Therefore, this dissertation concerns how to understand and facilitate PSTs' participative educational research in the TEd context so that they feel equipped and motivated to do this with their school students.

Context and outline of the dissertation

This dissertation is based on the premise that enabling student participation, in the sense that students are involved in decisions that affect them in their school lives, is valuable and should be pursued for various motives. One of these motives is a rights-based motive following from the Convention on the Rights of the Child (OHCHR, 1989, 2009) and the World Declaration of Education for All (UNESCO, 1990). Moreover, student and teacher learning are identified as other important motives for intensive student participation practices. Such participatory practices are scarce in education and educational research. Therefore, further development and research into these issues are considered needed to enable and foster student participation in schools.

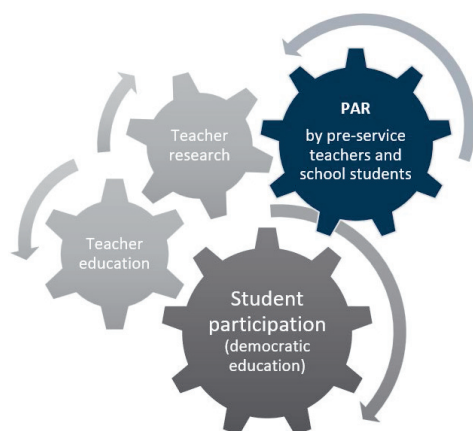


Figure 2. Constituting aspects of the research focus on PST PAR projects

The four studies in this dissertation all focus on PAR by (pre-service) teachers and their school students based on three constituting aspects: student participation in decision-making processes, teacher research into educational practices at school, and teacher education preparing for participatory approaches in education and research (see Figure 2). The goal of introducing PAR, then, is to facilitate connections and collaboration with school students as the ‘consequential stakeholders’ in education. It takes the perspective of the participation of young people as active agents in investigating the conditions of their learning.

The dissertation studies were conducted in two separate projects: the first one, as an exploratory study, in the context of a master’s course for pre-service and in-service teachers in primary and secondary education; the second one, as a series of three consecutive studies, in the context of a post-graduate teacher education program for secondary education.

The general aim of this dissertation is to contribute to the understanding of enabling democratic approaches in education, and, more specifically for this dissertation, to the participation of students in decision-making processes in schools. Starting from this perspective, the studies described in Chapters 2 to 5 pertain to both *teaching* and *teacher learning*. Concerning teaching, the studies provide insight into conditions for *conducting* research in schools, by teachers and students collaboratively, in the form of PAR; and, concerning teacher learning, they provide insight into how to *prepare* teachers and

students for collaboratively examining and developing their educational practice using a PAR approach. See Table 1 for a schematic overview of the studies in this dissertation.

The first project (sub-study 1)

In the first project (**Chapter 2**), we explore the concept of student participation and the way this can be incorporated into educational practice based on experiences in a project with students and teachers in primary schools and secondary vocational schools. In this research project, 'Students and Teachers as Co-researchers' (2009–2011)¹, teams of school students, their teachers, and local educators collaboratively investigated what enabled or constrained student learning in external educational settings, such as a museum or library. The goal was to have students conduct their own inquiries to inform recommendations for educational change (e.g. Thomson & Gunter, 2006). The question was how to design such a strategy to gain experience with student participation and support student participation/PAR in TEd in the Netherlands. The participants enacted a cycle of action research, aimed at formulating and presenting recommendations for improvements in the external practice, a process in which the students acted as co-researchers. The project included activities at two levels: 1) 10 research teams encompassing primary or secondary school students aged 6-16, their school teacher, and an external educator conducted research on student learning in external educational settings like museums or libraries; 2) facilitators and researchers from Utrecht University of Applied Sciences and the participating teachers examined the best approach to design the participation strategy and how to facilitate it effectively.

In Chapter 2, first, the concept of student participation is explored and related to teachers' professional development. Second, the characteristics and the intensity of student participation are described along six dimensions of participation. Next, the implications for the learning and professional development of teachers who participated in the Dutch project are explored. The four domains of the *Interconnected Model of Teacher Professional Growth* (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002) serve as the structuring framework.

The project yielded useful, and mostly positive experiences concerning the involvement of the students, collaboration in research with their teachers and other stakeholders, and professional learning of the teachers. However, for reasons of practicality, equality in positions of students and teachers, and reduction of complexity for teachers, the project was conducted in external settings (museum and library). This left the question of how student participation in research, as a democratic approach to education, could be realized *within* schools and how prospective teachers could be prepared for such a participatory approach and practice, in a context of a relatively short, one-year, postgraduate program.

The consecutive project (sub-studies 2, 3, and 4)

Inspired by the promising experiences in the exploratory first project, and based on the observation that participatory practices were still scarce in schools and TEd programs in the Netherlands, a series of studies were conducted with pre-service students and teacher educators in a university teacher

¹ A project of the former Research Group of Dr Petra Ponte at the Utrecht University of Applied Sciences (in Dutch: *LAMO-project*).

education program (**Chapters 3-5**). As part of these studies, PAR by pre-service teachers and their school students was introduced as a pathway to school student participation in decision-making.

The context for these studies was the *ICLON World Teacher Program*, which involved the student cohorts 2015 and 2016, their school students at the internship schools, and the teacher educators. Within the ICLON World Teacher Program, student-teachers already conducted research (single/duo) on a relevant educational issue but the project for this dissertation included a modified version of this research, namely PAR as a prescribed approach for collaboration with school students. Since the participants (including teacher educators) had limited experience in conducting PAR, the project design included guidance in conducting such research (see Groundwater-Smith et al., 2013; Ponte, 2002, 2012; Verbeek & Ponte, 2014).

The research was conducted within a one-year postgraduate teacher education program at a Dutch university. Participants were PSTs from a specialized track focused on preparing them for teaching in bilingual and international secondary schools. The program included concurrent courses at the university and school practicum, with PSTs teaching in schools throughout the year. All PSTs in the program were required to complete a capstone research project using a PAR approach, aimed at increasing student involvement in educational decision-making and fostering teacher-student partnerships in schools.

From the beginning of the teacher education program, PSTs were gradually exposed to the concepts of teacher research and student involvement through various methods. This included reading relevant literature, completing school-based assignments to gain insight into student needs and perspectives, developing research plans that incorporated student participation, and attending university seminars on action research and PST research projects. PSTs developed research questions for their projects during their internship, in collaboration with university-based teachers, focusing on their teaching practice and relevant to their school students.

One way to involve school students in the research process is by including them in the development and formulation of research questions. As is typical in action research, the questions can be refined or added to as the project progresses. Additionally, as a part of the action research projects, PSTs were required to test out a proposed change in their teaching practice, collect data about that, in collaboration with their school students, and reflect on the results in their project reports. This reflection should include not only the impact of the change on their students but also on their professional growth as a teacher.

Study 2 / Chapter 3 – Occurrence and nature of student participation

The study reported in **Chapter 3** addresses the level and nature of school student participation in PST PAR projects. The research reports submitted by the PSTs as part of the TED program were analyzed using the *SPinSTAR matrix*, developed in this study, in which four levels of student participation were distinguished: Inform, Consult, Participate, and Collaborate, at various stages of research. The study was guided by the research questions:

- How do PSTs involve school students in their action research projects about school practice?

- At what level of student participation are school students involved in the PST action research projects, and in which stages of the research process does this occur?

This study aimed to provide insight into what research activities PSTs and their school students performed and what role they played in these activities. Their role could vary from no involvement at all to intensive, equal collaboration with the teacher. Furthermore, it was expected that the level of student participation would vary along different phases of the research project, from defining the problem to reporting results and recommendations. This study describes and clarifies the variations in student participation in PST PAR research in the one-year teacher education program context.

Study 3 / Chapter 4 - Principles for school student participation in PST research

Even though it was expected that student participation in this project would appear at various levels, we aimed at enabling more intensive levels of student participation (Participate, Collaborate), the two levels of higher school students' activity, involvement, and impact. Therefore, gaining deeper insight into enabling and constraining factors for student participation in PST research projects was the topic for the next study (**Chapter 4**). More specifically, this study focused on pre-service teachers' views of the conditions that foster their PAR practices in secondary schools and on how these conditions can inform the development of a teacher education program for a participatory approach. In line with the participatory research approach, we were primarily interested in the perspective of the PSTs on the conditions for conducting PAR in a TEd context. Consequently, the study was guided by two research questions:

- What do pre-service teachers perceive as enabling or constraining conditions for involving school students in their participatory action research?
- What principles for supporting preservice teachers' participatory action research can be derived based on these conditions?

By using the *Theory of Practice Architectures* (see Page 4) as an analytical lens, eight cases of PAR projects were studied at two interrelated sites of pre-service teachers' learning: the teacher education institute and the internship school. We expected the findings to shed light on the conditions for fostering PAR practices in a teacher education context in terms of three kinds of arrangements, i.e.: cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political. The findings of this study were used for defining guidelines for supporting participatory research practices in teacher education. Moreover, we anticipated them to be useful for assessing the viability of pre-service teachers' PAR within a teacher education program.

Study 4 / Chapter 5 - Manifestations of PST PAR principles in a teacher education program

From Study 3 (Chapter 4), a set of 17 principles for pre-service teachers' PAR in secondary education (*PST PAR principles*) was derived. This set was meant to be useful for developing future TEd programs, but also for analyzing if and how these principles were taken up or incorporated into the TEd program the PSTs in this study followed. This way, we shed light on the implementation of student participation and PAR in a teacher education program as well as on the preparation and support of preservice teachers in collaborating with their school students. Subsequently, **Chapter 5** reports on the next study that investigated the way this set of principles was manifest in the teacher educators' views and actions and in the TEd program. By mapping the perspective of the teacher educators and the actual TEd

practice on the manifestations of the set of principles that were derived from the PSTs' experiences, across three dimensions of the *Theory of practice architectures* (cultural-discursive, material-economic, social-political), we aimed to illustrate how participatory research practices were supported and what options for improvement remained.

Concluding Chapter 6

Chapter 6 provides a summary of the main findings of the four studies, including their limitations. Additionally, this chapter delves into pertinent issues regarding student participation in schools and the preparation of prospective teachers in teacher education settings. It outlines both the theoretical and practical implications of the research findings and suggests ways to encourage student participation in teacher research, both during pre-service training and beyond.

Table 1. Overview of the studies

Study	Focus	Type	Instruments	Participants	Data collection	Analysis
1 – Chapter 2	Concept of student participation. Application in collaborative research in external settings	Qualitative	Semi-structured interviews; one-minute papers; project materials; team research presentations	10 research teams, each: (student) teacher, 3-5 school students (primary/pre-vocational education), external educator	Study years 2009-2010, 2010-2011	Dimensions of participation; IMTPG model
2 – Chapter 3	Level and nature of school student participation in PST PAR projects	Mixed method	PST PAR reports	30 pre-service teachers	Study years 2015-2016, 2016-2017	SPinSTAR matrix
3 – Chapter 4	Enabling and constraining factors for student participation in PST PAR projects	Qualitative	PST interviews, PST PAR reports	8 cases / 10 pre-service teachers	Study years 2015-2016, 2016-2017	Multiple case study; Cross-case thematic analysis
4 – Chapter 5	Manifestations of PST PAR principles	Mixed method	Semi-structured interviews	5 teacher educators / 12 interviews	Study years 2015-2016, 2016-2017	Set of 17 PST PAR principles

