

Children'S Voices in Primary Classroom Decision-Making: Navigating Majority Rule, Inclusion, and Teacher Authority

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Abstract

Student participation in classroom decision-making raises questions about whose views count when majority preferences limit some children's involvement and opportunities to disagree depend on relationships with peers and teachers. This study explored children's perspectives, reasoning, and imagined actions when majority decisions intersect with inclusion and teacher authority. An exploratory qualitative design using a vignette was employed in one fourth-grade class at an urban public primary school in Bogor, Indonesia. Participants included 34 students aged 9–10 who completed an open-ended questionnaire, four students purposively selected for semi-structured interviews based on variation in their responses, and one classroom teacher. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, distinguishing hypothetical responses from students' reported experiences and the teacher's accounts of practice. Three themes were developed: changing activities or helping children adapt to enable participation; expressing disagreement amid anticipated rejection and concerns about relationships; and considering students' proposals within the teacher's decision-making authority. Students proposed different ways to include peers, but articulating alternatives did not necessarily entail willingness to pursue them. Their accounts incorporated anticipated peer responses, concern for others' feelings, and perceived limits on action. The teacher reported instances of student influence while retaining final authority. These findings show how reasoning attentive to inclusion can coexist with acceptance of collective decisions and reluctance to express disagreement. Classroom decision-making should provide opportunities to elicit affected students' perspectives and discuss the reasons underlying decisions. Further observational research is needed to examine how children's expressed reasoning relates to participation in practice.

Keywords: Children's Voices, Democratic Agency, Classroom Decision-Making, Inclusion, Civic Education in Elementary School

Abstrak

Partisipasi siswa dalam pengambilan keputusan kelas menghadirkan persoalan ketika pilihan mayoritas membatasi keterlibatan sebagian anak dan kesempatan menyampaikan keberatan berada dalam hubungan dengan teman serta kewenangan guru. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengeksplorasi pandangan, alasan, dan tindakan yang dibayangkan siswa ketika menghadapi ketegangan antara keputusan mayoritas, inklusi, dan otoritas guru. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain eksploratif berbasis skenario pada satu kelas IV di sebuah sekolah dasar negeri perkotaan Bogor. Partisipan mencakup 34 siswa berusia 9–10 tahun yang mengisi angket terbuka, empat siswa yang dipilih secara purposif berdasarkan variasi respons untuk wawancara semiterstruktur, dan seorang guru kelas. Data dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik reflektif dengan mempertahankan perbedaan antara respons hipotetis, pengalaman siswa, dan praktik yang dilaporkan guru. Analisis menghasilkan tiga tema: mengubah kegiatan atau menyesuaikan anak agar tetap terlibat; keberatan di antara risiko penolakan dan keinginan menjaga hubungan; serta pertimbangan usulan siswa dalam kewenangan keputusan guru. Siswa mengemukakan beragam alternatif untuk mendukung keterlibatan teman, tetapi alternatif tersebut belum selalu disertai kesediaan yang dinyatakan untuk memperjuangkannya. Dalam menjelaskan kemungkinan tindakan, anak mempertimbangkan penerimaan teman, perasaan orang lain, dan batas tindakan yang dirasakan. Guru melaporkan adanya pengaruh usulan siswa, sementara keputusan akhir tetap berada dalam kewenangannya. Temuan memperjelas bahwa alasan yang memperhatikan inklusi dapat berdampingan dengan penerimaan keputusan dan keengganan menyampaikan keberatan. Penelitian ini menyarankan pengembangan proses keputusan kelas yang menggali pandangan pihak terdampak dan memberi kesempatan siswa menanggapi alasan keputusan. Penelitian lanjutan melalui pengamatan diperlukan untuk menelaah hubungan antara alasan yang dikemukakan dan tindakan partisipasi aktual.

Kata Kunci: Suara Anak, Agensi Demokratis, Pengambilan Keputusan Kelas, Inklusi, Pendidikan Kewarganegaraan Sekolah Dasar

Introduction

Democratic education in primary schools is defined by the extent to which children's views and interests are considered within classroom life. Research on student voice ([Cook-Sather, 2020](#); [Holquist et al., 2023](#)) demonstrates that opportunities to express opinions are closely linked to agency, especially when children receive recognition and contribute to educational processes. Nevertheless, [Gillett-Swan & Baroutsis \(2024\)](#) argue that collecting opinions alone does not ensure meaningful engagement. This concern is particularly relevant for citizenship education, as activities such as speaking and voting may be interpreted as evidence of democracy, even when the perspectives, objections, and needs of some students are overlooked. Consequently, evaluating the quality of participation requires examining how children perceive the influence of their voices in collective decision-making.

The right of children to be heard serves as a foundation for analyzing the relationship between opportunities to express opinions and the responses they receive. [Lundy \(2007\)](#) identified four interconnected elements: space, voice, audience, and influence, emphasizing that opportunities for expression must be matched by genuine consideration of children's perspectives. The implementation of this framework in schools depends on the purpose of engagement, the scope of decisions, and the attitudes of adults who facilitate participation ([Long & Grant, 2024](#); [Perry-Hazan & Somech, 2023](#)). This approach clarifies the conditions under which children's voices are acknowledged. Furthermore, assessing the democratic quality of engagement requires attention to the reasoning children use when decisions have varying consequences for themselves and

others.

Routine classroom decisions often reflect citizenship issues that are directly relevant to children's lived experiences. [Baytaş & Schroeder \(2021\)](#) argue, through an analysis of children's literature, that active participation in community life is fundamental to citizenship education from the earliest grades. Within school settings, the selection of activities raises similar questions regarding participation, conflict resolution, and the reconsideration of decisions. Studies in primary education ([Männistö & Moate, 2024](#); [Murphy et al., 2025](#)) reveal a persistent tension between the principle of democratic participation and the actual opportunities afforded to students. This tension is particularly evident when majority decisions restrict the involvement of certain peers, while teachers maintain ultimate decision-making authority.

Majority support alone does not establish the democratic legitimacy of a classroom decision when some children's opportunities to participate are constrained. [Gutmann's \(1999\)](#) principles of nonrepression and nondiscrimination place limits on democratic authority by protecting rational deliberation and access to adequate education. Drawing on these principles, [Schroeder \(2017\)](#) emphasizes that democratic education cannot be reduced to majority rule. Applied to classroom decision-making, this perspective raises the question of how children weigh voting outcomes against their classmates' opportunities to participate. Research on student voice and inclusion ([Messiou et al., 2025](#); [Mitra & Serriere, 2012](#)) highlights the value of involving children in identifying shared concerns and barriers to participation. Examining their reasons for accepting a decision, expressing disagreement, or proposing alternatives can therefore illuminate how they negotiate the tension between majority preferences and their peers' needs.

In this study, democratic agency is defined as children's capacity to take a stance and propose actions on shared issues while considering others' perspectives. [Mitra & Serriere \(2012\)](#) associate the experience of student voice with the development of agency and the confidence to contribute to the social environment. [Manyukhina \(2025\)](#) extends this focus by situating agency within the interplay of educational structures, daily practices, and children's experiences. Within this framework, the courage to speak up is considered an aspect of engagement that must be interpreted alongside the reasons and proposed actions. This study analyzes the articulation of agency through children's consideration of majority decisions, inclusion, and teacher authority, without conflating imagined actions with actual behavior.

Teacher responses are a critical component of the experience children use to assess the feasibility of expressing dissenting views. [Mascadri et al. \(2021\)](#) found that the experience of feeling heard can occur within exchanges that remain essentially monologic; thus, the sense of receiving attention must be distinguished from the opportunity to develop opinions through dialogue. [Cardiff et al. \(2024\)](#) emphasize the importance of teachers' learning processes in facilitating student voice. Both studies highlight the relationship between the experience of receiving feedback and the likelihood that a child will voice, adjust, or withhold objections. Even opinions that do not influence a decision require examination in terms of the explanation provided and the child's interpretation of that response.

Teacher authority should be understood in relation to the pedagogical responsibilities associated with child engagement. In early childhood education, [Lundy et al. \(2024\)](#) discuss the right to be heard in connection with adults' professional responsibilities. Additional studies ([Karlsen & Ohna, 2021](#); [Mayes et al., 2021](#); [Santos et al.,](#)

2024) demonstrate that acknowledging student views requires reflection, professional negotiation, and institutional support. [Messiou et al. \(2025\)](#) further illustrate the potential for transforming primary schools through collaboration with students. Therefore, the teacher's perspective is essential for understanding the considerations involved in opening, limiting, or reviewing decisions. These explanations should be considered alongside children's experiences to ensure that differing interpretations of participation remain visible.

How children judge a collective decision may differ from what they feel able to say or propose in the classroom. Research on inclusion in Indonesian primary schools and student involvement in school change ([Andriana & Evans, 2020](#); [Messiou et al., 2025](#)) provides a basis for examining adult responses and children's roles in identifying barriers to participation. [Perry-Hazan & Somech's \(2023\)](#) integrative model connects the rationales, dimensions, and outcomes of student participation within school organizational cultures. Building on this contextual understanding, the present study examines how children's judgments about majority decisions and inclusion relate to their perceived opportunities to express disagreement and receive a response. Attention to participation quality and to differing student-teacher perspectives ([Geurts et al., 2024](#); [Gillett-Swan & Baroutsis, 2024](#)) informs this examination. By reading children's responses to a shared dilemma alongside their reported participation experiences and the teacher's account, the study offers a situated explanation of the alignment and tensions between what children consider an appropriate decision and what they perceive as possible to question or change.

This study investigates how fourth-grade students articulate democratic agency in classroom decision-making at an urban public primary school in Bogor, Indonesia. It examines their views, reasoning, and proposed actions in response to a scenario involving tensions among majority preferences, inclusion, and teacher authority. It further explores how these judgments relate to students' perceived opportunities to express disagreement and seek reconsideration, drawing on their reported participation experiences and the classroom teacher's account. Through this analysis, the study seeks to clarify how children negotiate the relationship between what they consider an appropriate collective decision and what they feel able to question or change within the classroom.

Research Method

A qualitative approach with a scenario-based exploratory design was employed to examine the views, reasoning, and imagined actions of children when majority decisions conflict with inclusion needs and teacher authority. The research took place in a fourth-grade class at an urban public primary school in Bogor in August 2026. The school was selected for its research access and willingness to facilitate data collection. The fourth-grade class was in the second year of Phase B, a stage focused on learning about rules, rights, and obligations as members of the school community, which are directly relevant to the study's dilemma ([Sinaga et al., 2025](#)). The participants comprised 34 students aged 9–10 from the same class, including 22 males and 12 females, all of whom participated with parental or guardian consent and their own assent. Four students, including 2 males and 2 females, were purposively selected for interviews based on the diversity of their questionnaire responses and the reasoning that required further exploration. The classroom teacher was interviewed to provide a pedagogical perspective on classroom participation.

Data collection involved open-ended, scenario-based questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The "Deciding on Class Activities" scenario presented a situation in

which a soccer match was chosen by the majority, some students objected to participation, and the teacher required a prompt decision. The scenario-based questions addressed proposed actions and underlying reasons, considerations of majority preferences and peers' needs, and decisions from the teacher's perspective during disagreement. A fourth question explored personal experiences of making proposals. The scenario and accompanying questions were piloted with 10 children of a similar age who were not included in the main sample of 34 students. The pilot assessed comprehensibility and informed one revision to the classroom activity proposed in the scenario before the main data collection. The questionnaire enabled students to articulate their views in their own words. Upon completion, responses were reviewed to select four interviewees, whose individual answers served as starting points for follow-up questions exploring their reasoning and related experiences.

The instruments drew on space, voice, audience, and influence as sensitizing concepts for participation ([Lundy, 2007](#)), alongside attention to majority rule, inclusion, and authority. These concepts directed attention to opportunities for expression, support for articulating views, responses from others, and perceived influence on decisions, without prescribing the eventual thematic structure. The student interview guide examined reasoning behind actions, responses to disagreement, experiences in expressing opinions, perceived influence, and opportunities or barriers to participation. The teacher interview guide focused on classroom decision-making practices, responses to proposals, considerations of inclusion, and pedagogical boundaries. Questionnaires were completed individually over 20 minutes without the teacher present. Student interviews were conducted individually for 15 minutes per student, and teacher interviews lasted 20 minutes. All interviews were recorded with participant consent, supplemented by notes, and transcribed.

Data analysis was conducted using [Braun & Clarke \(2022\)](#) reflexive thematic analysis, with Microsoft Excel employed for data management. The process included familiarization through repeated reading, systematic examination and coding of relevant data segments, development of initial themes, review of themes against excerpts and the full dataset, definition and naming of themes, and writing the interpretation. Individual responses could be assigned multiple codes. The analysis was iterative, allowing for modifications to codes and themes. Concepts of participation and agency informed the interpretation, without restricting coding to predetermined categories.

Data were distinguished by content and source. Responses to the first three questionnaire questions provided insight into reasoning and imagined actions, whereas the fourth question and relevant student interview segments were treated as accounts of personal experience. The teacher interview provided accounts of classroom practices and pedagogical considerations. Participant codes maintained the connection between questionnaire and interview data. Student and teacher perspectives were compared to identify alignment, differences, and tensions. Re-reading, examination of divergent responses, reflective memos, and documentation of changes to codes and themes contributed to the refinement of the interpretation. The researcher had no prior personal connection to the school or participants. The researcher's background in primary citizenship education provided an interpretive orientation toward democratic participation and inclusion, potentially foregrounding opportunities to question decisions. Reflexivity involved considering how this orientation shaped the interpretation of children's agreement, objections, and deference to authority. Themes were developed across

questions and data sources according to patterns of meaning rather than response frequency or a one-to-one correspondence between questions and themes.

Written permission was obtained from the school, and parental or guardian consent was secured through consent forms. Teachers provided verbal consent, and children's willingness to participate was confirmed both verbally and via a statement on the questionnaire. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality, the right to skip questions or withdraw, and assurance that participation would not affect their grades. School and participant identities were anonymized using codes. Data were stored on Google Drive in folders shared only with designated researcher accounts, with public link access disabled. Audio recordings and consent forms were stored separately from coded transcripts. The use of commercial cloud storage, including potential cross-border data storage, was reviewed against institutional guidance. Research data will be retained until three months after publication and subsequently deleted.

Results

An analysis of written responses from 34 students, as well as interviews with four students and a teacher, identified three themes: how students consider majority decisions and peer involvement, the likelihood of voicing objections, and the status of proposals within the teacher's decision-making process. The findings indicate that an alternative considered appropriate is not always the one a student will advocate for. Scenario-based responses were employed to investigate students' reasoning and anticipated actions, while interviews provided further explanation and insight into student experiences and teacher-reported practices.

Adapting Activities to Maintain Students' Engagement

Challenges some students encounter in participating in soccer have been addressed through multiple adjustments. Certain students suggested modifying the activity, whereas others retained the original activity by providing assistance or assigning support roles to their peers. These approaches differ in their focus, whether on the class activity itself, the range of available options, the abilities of the child, or the specific roles that could be undertaken.

Table 1 Student-Envisioned Adjustments to Facilitate Engagement

Response Category	Description of Adjustment	Data Source
Substitution of Shared Activity	Selecting an alternative activity that a peer experiencing difficulty with soccer can participate in	Questionnaire S02; Questionnaire S28
Provision of Parallel Activities	Offering multiple activities to allow students to select one for participation	Questionnaire S12; Questionnaire S31
Facilitation of Game Mastery	Coaching or assisting a peer to enable participation in soccer	Questionnaire S17; Interview S25
Provision of a Supporting Role	Involving a peer in a non-playing capacity, such as a spectator or cheerleader	Questionnaire S14; Questionnaire S34

Note: S indicates the student code.

The modification of activities arises from the necessity to offer diverse options while preserving group cohesion. S31 proposes two games to ensure that all students remain engaged in the activities.

"If I were Dika, what I would do is play both so everyone can follow one" (Questionnaire S31).

The proposal accommodates differing preferences without requiring the entire class to participate in the same game. S28, however, identifies limitations in offering parallel options, noting that if only a few students select an alternative game, the resulting group may be too small. As a result, S28 suggests rotating activities for the entire class. Both students value peer engagement but differ in how they prioritize togetherness, either by supporting activities based on individual choice or by maintaining a single activity for all participants. These considerations align with the rationale for upholding previously made decisions. For S14, majority support justifies continuing with soccer:

"If I were Dika, I would choose soccer because many people have chosen soccer; therefore, the choice is soccer." (Questionnaire S14,)

During the interview, S25 explained their choice by stating that *"the whole class had already agreed on it."* This statement demonstrates S25's perception of the decision within the scenario rather than evidence of unanimous agreement. S14 and S25 offered different grounds for maintaining the chosen activity: S14 referred to the number of votes, whereas S25 treated the outcome as a collective commitment. In both accounts, the decision remained the starting point for considering how other classmates could participate. S14 proposed that students unable to join the activity could watch and offer support, while S25 suggested assistance from classmates with the necessary skills. Their proposals thus sought to accommodate peers within the existing decision rather than reopen the choice of activity. S25 elaborated:

"Those who cannot yet play soccer should first be taught by friends who know how to play." (S25 Interview)

These differences demonstrate that "involvement" carries multiple interpretations in the students' responses. Serving as a supporter enables participation through presence, whereas learning to play creates the opportunity to become an active participant. In both proposals, the core activity remained unchanged, with modifications directed toward children experiencing difficulties. Therefore, consideration of peers can lead to different decisions about what should be modified and who should adapt.

Objections: Balancing the Risk of Rejection and the Preservation of Relationships

The ability to propose alternatives in the questionnaire did not always correspond with a willingness to advocate for those alternatives when rejection was anticipated. Student responses highlighted concerns about others and relationships with teachers. Participation in an activity for these reasons did not necessarily indicate agreement with the decision. For example, S05 anticipated that suggesting a different activity would be rejected and therefore envisioned continuing with soccer:

"If I were Dika, I would still play in the soccer match, because even if I suggested playing something else, my classmates would still refuse." (Questionnaire S05)

When asked to imagine the scenario from the teacher's perspective, S05 proposed an alternative game to accommodate students who were unable to play soccer. This contrast suggests that, although alternatives were considered, the willingness to propose them as a student was limited by anticipated peer reactions. During the interview, S05 further connected the reluctance to advocate for an alternative to concerns about the feelings of

students who had already chosen soccer:

"Because if I insisted, the friends who had already chosen soccer would definitely be disappointed." (Interview S05)

S05 offered two reasons for accepting the chosen activity: expecting classmates to reject an alternative and avoiding disappointment among those who had selected soccer. The first appeared in the written questionnaire, whereas the second emerged when the interviewer framed acceptance as taking rejection graciously and asked why S05 would not insist. Concern for peers' feelings was therefore an explanation offered within a prompted discussion. Read together, the accounts suggest that maintaining the decision could involve both anticipating resistance and preserving relationships.

Similar limitations on imagined action were observed with S31. During the interview, S31 suggested approaching the teacher to make this possible but, when asked about the proposal not being selected, responded, *"If it's not allowed, then what can you do?"* (Interview S31). The interviewer subsequently introduced the term *pasrah* (resigning oneself to the outcome) before S31 added, *"I didn't think of any other way"* (Interview S31). This exchange indicates that S31 did not articulate a further response to refusal; it does not establish resignation as a stable characteristic.

When discussing experiences of speaking to teachers, S31 identified approaching G01, the classroom teacher interviewed for this study, as a situation involving hesitation. S31 described G01 as stern. The interviewer then explicitly linked this description with reluctance to speak and requested an example:

"Could we just play ball, Ma'am? But I'm afraid of getting scolded." (S31 Interview)

S31's account shows how the anticipated response of a particular teacher entered the student's consideration of whether to make a request. It expresses apprehension rather than establishing that G01 reprimanded the student for that request. S02, the fourth interview participant alongside S05, S25, and S31, also referred to shyness and politeness when discussing objections to teachers (Interview S02). However, the interviewer repeatedly framed the exchange around wanting to protest but not daring to do so, including asking why S02 did not dare to protest. The response, *"Because I'm shy and it's impolite to the teacher,"* must therefore be read within that framing (Interview S02). In the same exchange, S02 described asking, *"Ma'am, what does this mean?"* about a difficult task (Interview S02). Seeking clarification and challenging a decision served different purposes in this account; willingness to do the former did not establish willingness to do the latter.

Accepted proposals provided a counterpoint to these accounts of hesitation. Although S05 wrote "never" in response to the questionnaire item about previous experiences, the student later recalled suggesting that teammates pray before a match and receiving their agreement (Interview S05). The discrepancy was retained because the available data do not establish why this example was absent from the written response. S05 also expressed fear of being shouted at while clarifying that this did not always happen (Interview S05). Because shouting had already been introduced in an earlier interviewer prompt, this account was not treated as independent confirmation of the written expectation of rejection. Across these responses, anticipated resistance coexisted with reported acceptance, suggesting that students' expressed willingness to pursue a proposal varied with the situation and the reactions they expected.

Student Proposals Within the Framework of Teacher Decision-Making

Opportunities to propose changes remained closely tied to the teacher's authority over classroom decisions. T01 described using questions and options to help students articulate their ideas, while observing that only a minority were willing to present arguments. These expressed views informed decisions that ultimately remained with the teacher. This account provides the main basis for the analysis that follows, with student responses offering complementary perspectives on teacher authority; the range of sources is therefore narrower than in the preceding sections. T01 explained:

"So, the decision remains with me, while taking into account suggestions from students who disagree; usually, I provide reasons why we didn't adopt a particular suggestion—things like that." (Interview with T01)

In this account, opportunities to propose changes did not entail shared authority over the final decision. G01 described considering suggestions in relation to the situation and the purpose of the activity and explaining why some were not adopted. Table 2 distinguishes illustrative examples of task allocation from a specific incident in which the teacher reported changing a decision.

Table 2 Teacher-Reported Considerations and Responses to Student Proposals

Issue or proposal	Teacher's stated consideration	Explanation of follow-up actions taken	Nature of the account
Request to mop rather than sweep during classroom cleaning	The student's preference and reported familiarity with mopping at home	Allowed the requested change of task	Illustrative example
Request to erase the board	The student's height and ability to reach the upper part of the board	Assigned board erasing to a taller student and another task to the requesting student	Illustrative example
Request to postpone the mathematics assignment deadline from Friday to Monday	Students needed to memorize an exercise routine for Friday's physical education lesson; the teacher also considered the limited time after Thursday's late dismissal	Changed the submission deadline to Monday	Specific reported incident

Notes: All information presented is derived from teacher interviews (T01).

These accounts show variation in the teacher's responses: a proposal could be accommodated, redirected, or lead to reconsideration of an earlier decision. Their common feature was the teacher's assessment of its suitability. However, the cleaning examples concerned individual task preferences and perceived physical suitability, while the deadline incident concerned competing demands on students' time. None directly reproduced the vignette's conflict between majority preferences and classmates' opportunities to participate. They therefore contextualize how T01 described considering student input, rather than establish how the teacher would resolve the inclusion dilemma.

Teacher authority also appeared in S25's written response to the vignette, which stated that Dika should follow the teacher's rules despite disagreeing (Questionnaire S25, Q1). This response places the teacher's decision above the student's preferred alternative. Read alongside T01's account, it identifies teacher authority as a point of connection between the sources. Nevertheless, S25's imagined response and T01's reported practices concern different situations and do not corroborate the same event.

The position of students who remained silent was less clear. T01 described drawing on suggestions from students who voiced arguments, while acknowledging that others might follow the decision despite remaining dissatisfied. These were the teacher's interpretations of students' reactions, rather than direct accounts from those students. The theme consequently identifies a distinction between considering expressed proposals and establishing whether unspoken perspectives have been represented. The available accounts provide evidence of the former but do not establish how the latter was addressed.

Discussion

This study proves that children evaluate classroom decisions by considering both the needs of their peers and the likelihood that their own proposals will be accepted. The alternatives they suggest also depend on the position they envision themselves occupying; an option considered appropriate when adopting the role of a teacher may not be regarded as feasible from the perspective of a student. These data expand upon the relationship between reasoning and the conditions of participation, a topic previously examined by [Manyukhina \(2025\)](#) and [Mitra & Serriere \(2012\)](#). In this study, democratic agency is reflected in the ways children justify decisions, account for those affected, and acknowledge the constraints of available actions. This relationship clarifies how agency is articulated within the research context, rather than emphasizing observable behavioral changes.

Majority Legitimacy and Terms of Inclusion

Majority decisions are justified through distinct, though not entirely identical, lines of reasoning. For example, S14 points out the number of votes, whereas S25 interprets a decision as an agreement that must be upheld. This distinction indicates that children may refer either to the selection procedure or to a devotion to the outcome when evaluating collective decisions. [Gutmann \(1999\)](#) identifies nonrepression and nondiscrimination as boundaries of democratic authority, and [Schroeder \(2017\)](#) applies these principles to argue that democracy cannot be fully understood as majority rule alone. In this study, this framework is employed to question whether a decision is sufficiently justified when some peers encounter barriers to participation. The framework does not automatically categorize the choice of playing soccer as discriminatory; such a determination would require additional information about the reasons for any restrictions, the preferences of the children affected, and the prospect of revisiting the decision.

Concern for peers may coexist with a desire to maintain a preferred course of action. Approaches such as changing the activity, providing parallel options, extending support to develop playing skills, or creating roles for spectators each result in various modes of inclusion. The key distinction is who or what is expected to adapt: changing the game means modifying the collective activity, while providing training or practice enables children to participate in an unchanged activity. Observing offers a role within the activity but does not provide the same opportunities as active participation. Research on student voice and inclusive dialogue ([Messiou et al., 2025](#); [Messiou & Szelei, 2024](#)) shows the importance of involving children in identifying barriers to participation. The findings of this study deepen this discussion by showing that proposals intended to support a peer may, in practice, shift the burden of adjustment to different parties.

The inclusiveness of an alternative also depends on the position of the child who is the intended recipient of support. [Lundy \(2007\)](#) argues that a child's perspective should influence decision-making procedures that affect them. From this perspective, offering a

practice task or a supporting role does not necessarily address whether the alternative fits the preferences of a peer unable to participate. The research instruments did not specifically examine how participants determined the views of their peers before proposing a solution. Therefore, while attention to a peer's needs may be apparent, the adequacy of the proposed alternative from the perspective of the affected individual cannot be fully evaluated. The democratic challenge does not involve only upholding or altering a decision, but also ensuring an opportunity to respond to the specific form of involvement offered.

Articulating Alternatives and Negotiating Relationships

The distinction between proposing alternatives and envisioning subsequent actions should be analyzed in relation to the authority available to each participant. In their written response, S05 anticipates rejection when positioned as a student but proposes a change in activity when imagining the role of a teacher. This contrast indicates an awareness of how authority is distributed: options available to teachers are not necessarily perceived as feasible for students. These findings are consistent with [Manyukhina's \(2025\)](#) emphasis on the conditions that enable agency and clarify that variations in responses do not necessarily reflect inconsistent reasoning or a lack of courage. The participant's position is central to how a child evaluates possible courses of action.

Relational considerations also influence the decision to voice or withhold objections. S05 considers the potential for rejection and the disappointment of peers. S02 interprets protesting through the perspectives of shyness and politeness. S31 expresses concern about T01's potential reaction and an inability to envision a subsequent step after rejection. These motivations should not be reduced to a single category of "compliance." For S05, concern for peers' feelings may coexist with an assessment that acceptance is unlikely. For S02, requesting clarification of a task differs from questioning a decision. For S31, acceptance reflects the boundaries of action defined within the conversation, rather than an inherent incapacity. Preserving these distinctions ensures that participants' reasoning forms the basis for interpretation.

Indonesian literature frames politeness as an aspect of interaction rather than attributing it solely to cultural norms. [Susandi et al. \(2024\)](#), in their study of a primary school in Kediri, analyze student discourse through the lens of politeness, including how students express criticism or disagreement. This approach demonstrates that evaluating modes of communication is a significant aspect of classroom life, but it does not establish politeness as the primary reason children withhold input. [Suyatno et al. \(2022\)](#) found that secondary school students in Indonesia value teachers who are friendly and willing to listen, fostering closeness while maintaining respect. This finding provides a useful comparison, indicating that respect for teachers does not necessarily inhibit dialogue. Although differences in educational levels limit the direct applicability of these findings to the present study, they clarify that respect should not be conflated with unquestioning obedience.

The sociocultural context can be understood through the boundaries participants perceive between expressing views, challenging authority, and maintaining relationships. For participant S31, the term *pasrah* (resigned acceptance) was introduced by the interviewer and therefore does not represent a spontaneously emerging cultural category. The participant's statement that they could not conceive of another approach is limited in scope, as they had not articulated any subsequent actions after considering the possibility of refusal. Similarly, S02's considerations regarding politeness emerged within a sequence of questions that directed the conversation toward a lack of courage to protest. These

observations raise questions about how children learn to navigate acceptable dissent without definitively attributing these patterns to particular cultural norms. This perspective establishes a basis for turning to relevant literature, which further explores how politeness and interactional norms shape children's communicative decisions in educational settings.

These findings extend [Mitra & Serriere's \(2012\)](#) work on student agency by emphasizing two distinct elements: the reasoning underlying a decision and the perceived ability to enact that reasoning. Importantly, these distinctions offer direct implications for educational practice. For example, educators who focus solely on tallying student proposals or instances of objection may overlook the complexities of how students weigh relationships, authority, and context in their responses. To foster more democratic participation, practitioners should attend to the substance of students' reasoning, their positioning within classroom hierarchies, and the relational dynamics that influence expression. Such an approach would enable teachers to design environments that not only invite contributions but also help students perceive their input as impactful, thereby supporting the development of agency in practice.

Teacher Authority and Student Influence Opportunities

Teacher authority determines both the manner in which student proposals are addressed and the extent of their influence. T01 reports considering the reasoning behind student suggestions, explaining the rationale for any rejections, and occasionally altering decisions, although the final authority remains with the teacher. The model proposed by [Perry-Hazan & Somech \(2023\)](#) situates participation within a framework that includes the rationale for engagement, the nature of the decision, the outcomes, and the school context. The findings of this study elaborate on these aspects based on reported experiences: the opportunity to propose does not equate to the authority to make a final decision, and the impact of any given proposal depends on the teacher's assessment of its viability. This account primarily reflects the teacher's perspective, while student responses provide a complementary viewpoint regarding the nature of this authority.

The nature of the decision significantly influences the extent of student input. For instance, modifying a duty roster relates to individual preferences and assignment suitability, whereas extending a mathematics assignment deadline involves considerations of time management and competing priorities. While both scenarios illustrate the potential for flexibility in T01's practice, they do not address how the teacher manages situations where a majority-supported decision may limit the participation of others. Openness to routine proposals does not necessarily extend to cases where objections affect the broader group's interests. Thus, the teacher's examples highlight the deliberative process rather than offering a definitive solution to the "soccer dilemma."

The interconnections among these findings are clarified when examined through [Lundy's \(2007\)](#) four elements. Support for forming and expressing views constitutes "voice"; the scenarios and research questions allowed students to articulate their preferences, though some follow-up questions may have inadvertently influenced responses. Articulation requires a perceived safe space, so opportunities reported by T01 should be evaluated alongside S31's concerns about navigating these situations. Regarding "audience," the teacher reports that student proposals are heard and considered, while "influence" is evident when decisions are subsequently changed. These elements explain why expressing a viewpoint does not always lead to dialogue or a change in decision. Practically, educators aiming to foster meaningful student participation should

intentionally integrate support for expression, attentive listening, and appropriate follow-up into classroom practices. Providing opportunities for students to express their views is insufficient unless accompanied by mechanisms that ensure their input is genuinely considered and, when appropriate, acted upon.

The divergence between a teacher's openness and a student's concerns underscores the significance of response quality. [Mascadri et al. \(2021\)](#) observed that students may feel heard even in interactions that are largely monologic. In this study, T01 reported providing reasons for rejecting proposals, but it remains uncertain whether students could respond to these explanations. S31's concerns regarding the same teacher indicate that formal opportunities and perceptions of security may differ between teachers and students. These findings neither demonstrate that T01 reprimanded S31 nor confirm that the teacher's approach was inherently monologic. The key analytical issue is whether the teacher's explanation concluded the decision or allowed for further discussion.

The experiences of students who remain silent during classroom decision-making are not fully addressed in this study. Although the questionnaire provided a written avenue for input, the research did not systematically identify students who typically refrain from speaking, nor did it trace how their perspectives influenced actual decisions. Blank or brief responses cannot definitively identify reluctant participants; even a response of "never" pertains only to the specific scenario in question. [Gillett-Swan & Baroutsis \(2024\)](#) emphasize the importance of considering both student and teacher perspectives, which helps clarify this distinction. The study's limitation lies in the ability to trace students' views within the decision-making process, rather than assuming that silent students lack opinions.

This study contributes by examining how decision evaluation, opportunities to make proposals, and the ability to raise objections are perceived differently based on individual roles and specific issues. [Andriana & Evans \(2020\)](#) investigated adult responses to student voices concerning inclusion in Indonesian primary schools. The present study extends this analysis by exploring the reasoning behind dilemmas encountered during participatory experiences, demonstrating that a commitment to inclusion can coexist with expectations of rejection and recognition of teacher authority. In relation to [Perry-Hazan & Somech's \(2023\)](#) model, these findings offer empirical insight into how children interpret participation conditions at the classroom level. Although the study does not comprehensively test the model or establish causality, it identifies key aspects for further examination when evaluating participation opportunities from children's perspectives.

In the context of civic education in primary schools, it is essential that the expression of student views is connected to a responsive process that students can recognize. [Messiou & Szelei \(2024\)](#) highlight the necessity of dialogue to move beyond superficial forms of "voice" inclusion. Unlike written responses collected through questionnaires, contributions made during classroom instruction can be incorporated into ongoing decision-making: teachers solicit students' views, discuss relevant considerations, and then allow students to indicate whether the response addresses their concerns. Anonymous inputs may be addressed collectively, with students given the option to clarify further without revealing their identities. While anonymity can benefit some students, it may also hinder understanding of individual needs. The effectiveness of this approach should be assessed by examining whose perspectives are acknowledged and how these inputs influence subsequent discussions.

The interpretive scope of this study is constrained by its focus on a single classroom, four student interviews, one teacher interview, and varying source breadth across themes.

Scenario responses reflect hypothetical actions, while interviews provide insight into actual experiences and practices. The physical and competitive aspects of soccer may have foregrounded considerations such as skill level, personal preference, or social status. Although a pilot study with ten children (outside the main sample) and subsequent revisions refined the research instruments, the specific characteristics of the activity remain a notable factor. Additionally, the perspectives of peers who were intended recipients of assistance were not directly examined, leaving their responses to proposed alternatives unknown.

The impact of leading questions depends on the specific claims being addressed. Variations in S05's responses are derived from questionnaire data, whereas explanations related to politeness (S02), a friend's disappointment (S05's interview), and subsequent actions (S31) must be interpreted within the context of preceding questions. Employing terms such as "resignation," "outcry," or "wholehearted acceptance" may clarify explanations regarding obstacles or degrees of acceptance. This distinction does not suggest that written data are inherently more reliable, but rather highlights the basis and limitations of each interpretation. Future research could compare dilemmas across various activities and combine observations of decision-making with post-event interviews using open-ended questions. This approach would facilitate exploration of the relationships among rationales, proposals, responses, and changes in decision-making, including cases where a child remains silent.

Conclusion

This study investigates how fourth-grade students articulate democratic agency as they navigate tensions among majority decisions, the need for inclusion, and teacher authority. The findings indicate that students employ various strategies to support peer involvement, including modifying activities and assisting classmates. When considering alternative courses of action, students weigh potential rejection, peer relationships, and perceived constraints. The teacher acknowledges the influence of student proposals, although final decisions remain under teacher authority. This research demonstrates that students' reasons for involving peers can coexist with acceptance of group decisions and reluctance to voice objections. The results clarify the distinction between the alternatives students can conceptualize and the actions they anticipate taking. The interpretation is limited by the focus on a single class, the restricted depth of interviews, and reliance on hypothetical responses and self-reported experiences rather than direct observation. Future research should incorporate classroom observation and subsequent interviews to examine the relationship between students' reasoning and actual behavior, responses to objections, and the participation of students who do not openly express their views.

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AI Acknowledgment

The authors declare that they used Grammarly to improve the manuscript's

grammar, punctuation, and language clarity. Despite using AI, the authors affirm that they are the sole authors of this article and are fully responsible for its content, as outlined in the COPE recommendations.

Participant Consent

This research was conducted based on informed consent from all participants. Participants received an explanation of the purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits of the research, as well as their right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

V.P.S. conceptualized the study, developed the theoretical framework and research design, led the data analysis, and drafted the manuscript. N.F.H. contributed to instrument development, methodological refinement, and interpretation of the findings. A.D. conducted the data collection and contributed to data organization and preparation for analysis. K.F. contributed to the literature review, discussion of the findings, and substantive manuscript revision. D.N.J. contributed to data preparation, interpretation of the findings, and critical manuscript revision. All authors confirm that they have read and approved the final version of this manuscript. The percentage contributions to the research and manuscript preparation are as follows: V.P.S.: 40%, N.F.H.: 20%, A.D.: 15%, K.F.: 15%, and D.N.J.: 10%.

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