



The Whole-School Approach and Transformative Learning: The Case of a Portuguese School

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In the 21st century, there has been an increase in political and academic orientations pointing to the need for school education to follow a transforming pedagogy that will enable it to fulfil its social contract. Along with this idea, there has also been a growing recognition that educational interventions should consider the school as a whole and the different agents that are part of it. With these ideas as a reference, a study was conducted using documentary analysis to identify how a Portuguese school considers these guidelines when planning and evaluating its activities. The school activity plan and the evaluation report were analysed using the whole school approach (WSA) analytical framework. The concepts of transformative pedagogy and the WSA impact how schools organise their activities and involve students in analyzing real-life situations, influencing processes in which students learn to make decisions that can contribute to sustainability.

Keywords: whole-school approach, transformative learning, youth participation, transformative pedagogy, learning, Portugal

INTRODUCTION

In line with international recommendations (Council of Europe, 2015; European Union, 2018), educational policies in the Portuguese education system have set out the importance of the school curriculum, including scenarios in which students can experience ways of participating in society and where they can develop decision-making skills (Order No. 6478/2017). This approach is aligned with the goals set by the

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2030 Agenda (United Nations, 2015a, 2015b), particularly with goal 4, which acknowledges education as a fundamental human right and the basis to ensure the realization of other rights. The UNESCO Report (2022) states that this requires a new social contract for education “that helps us build peaceful, just, and sustainable futures for all” (p. 3). It also requires organizational processes and curriculum development aligned with the whole-school approach (WSA; UNESCO, 2017; Tnay *et al.*, 2022) when it proposes analysing the school institution’s entire structure and educational dimensions, recognizing the importance of the relationships with the contexts in which it operates and the movement towards continuous improvement.

Based on this framework, this article presents a study to identify youth participation in a Portuguese school concerning the characteristics of a WSA and the possibilities of this participation corresponding to transformative learning (Hodge, 2019; Leite *et al.*, 2022). The structure of the study was designed to answer the following research questions: (1) In what ways did the students participate in the activities carried out by the school? (2) How did the teachers and the students evaluate these activities? (3) What aspects can contribute to a culture of student participation that promotes transformative learning in the school context?

The answers to these questions were obtained from the content analysis of documents produced by a school selected for the study and interpreted by reference to the WSA and transformative learning concepts. Following this orientation, after giving an account of the theoretical framework used, the article systematizes the methodology followed in the study, the results achieved, and its discussion and conclusions.

Theoretical Framework

Education systems that meet the conditions of a WSA (UNESCO, 2017) are considered inclusive when they include dynamics that promote a quality teaching and learning environment and encourage different educational agents, not only students and teachers but also families and communities, to participate (Farrel *et al.*, 2023; Flecha & Soler, 2013; Khun-inkeeree *et al.*, 2021). They also show that young people have a voice that needs to be recognized, understood, and integrated (Cook-Sather, 2020; Fielding, 2011). This view acknowledges the recognition of student agency (Melo *et al.*, 2022; Santos & Leite, 2020) and the capacity to enable young people to be represented or even recognize areas of participation themselves (Barros *et al.*, 2022; Cook-Sather, 2020). Traditionally, schools have been structured around the *pupil’s job* (Perrenoud, 1995) as a passive recipient of knowledge, with the teacher as the primary decision-maker in the classroom. However, this model has come under scrutiny as research has shown that it can be ineffective in engaging students and promoting deep learning (Gipps *et al.*, 2000; Sampaio & Leite, 2015). Additionally, in line with a transformative pedagogy approach (Coutts, 2019; Crowley & Moxon, 2018; Dorji *et al.*, 2020; Leite *et al.*, 2022), there has been an evolution from an idea of the *pupil’s job* to the idea of the pupil as an agent in school decision-making (Fielding, 2011; Thomson & Gunter, 2006).

One of the fundamental principles of transformative pedagogy is the importance of dialogue and critical reflection. Students are encouraged to engage in meaningful discussions and critically reflect on their experiences and perspectives. By doing so,

students can develop a deeper understanding of the social, economic, and political systems that shape their lives and can begin to challenge and transform these systems. This student-centered approach values students' experiences and perspectives and encourages them to actively participate in their learning and the transformation of society (Gaard et al., 2017; Bell & Lygo-Baker, 2019). The UNESCO Report (2017) mentions that it corresponds to learner-centered learning approaches toward transformative action. This approach, emphasizing dialogue, critical reflection, student agency, transformative pedagogy, and learning, promotes a more participatory and inclusive approach to education. To this end, a culture of youth participation inside schools is essential to foster transformative learning (Hodge, 2019; Leite et al., 2022), as young people's active participation in decision-making processes, dialogue, and engagement on issues that affect their lives can lead to a range of empowering dimensions and meaningful learning.

Both transformative pedagogy and transformative learning share a commitment to social justice, equity, and personal and social empowerment through education (Fraser, 2009; Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 2000; Sampaio & Leite, 2020; Taylor, 2007). When students participate in decision-making, they develop a sense of ownership and action over their lives, society, and the world. In this way, students' participation in decision-making processes enables them to critically analyse issues and consider different perspectives that support transformative proposals for their living situation. That is why developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills, allowing the students to approach complex real-world challenges reflectively and innovatively (Brookfield, 2017; Gruenewald, 2003), is so essential for transformative learning.

These ideas have been developed in line with the concept of a WSA (UNESCO, 2017), which refers to an educational strategy or philosophy that emphasizes the holistic development and well-being of all aspects of a school community, including students, teachers, staff, parents, and the wider community (Slade & Griffith, 2013). It recognizes that education is not just limited to academic achievement but also encompasses social, emotional, physical, and mental health (Tnay *et al.*, 2022). In this sense, the WSA and transformative pedagogies are not only recognized as critical drives for education for sustainable development (L. Hargreaves, 2008) but also as a necessary way of "rethinking the curriculum, campus operations, organizational culture, student participation, leadership and management, community relationships and research" (UNESCO, 2017, p. 53).

A WSA involves integrating several dimensions and stakeholders within the school system to work together towards common goals, such as promoting positive student outcomes, creating a safe and inclusive learning environment, fostering healthy relationships, enhancing teacher well-being, and engaging parents and the community in the educational process. It involves a comprehensive and coordinated effort to address the diverse needs of all school community members. Therefore, a WSA that includes scenarios that promote active participation and decision-making skills in the curriculum is a powerful tool for empowering students in their social responsibility (Mezirow, 2000; UNESCO, 2017).

This approach emphasizes the importance of addressing education's curricular, psychosocial, and community dimensions in an integrated and organized way. The curricular dimension of the WSA involves designing and implementing a curriculum that is relevant, meaningful, and engaging for students and that promotes the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for academic success and for life in the 21st century (A. Hargreaves, 2007; UNESCO, 2017). This involves the formal and informal and hidden curricula that shape students' values, beliefs, and behaviours (Alsubaie, 2015; Apple, 2004). The WSA's psychosocial dimension highlights the importance of promoting students' social, emotional, and mental health and their sense of belonging and connectedness to the school community. This perspective includes creating a positive and supportive learning environment that fosters positive relationships, resilience, and a sense of agency and empowerment among students (Maxwell et al., 2017; Melo et al., 2022; Wang & Degol, 2016). The community dimension of the WSA involves addressing the wider community's needs and promoting active and meaningful engagement between the school and the community and its institutions (Hargreaves, 2007; UNESCO, 2017). In other words, recognizing the school as a hub of community life involves parents, community organizations, and other stakeholders in planning, implementing, and evaluating education programmes and activities (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Slade & Griffith, 2013). In this sense, the WSA can help promote a school culture that values and fosters inclusion and equity, which is crucial for schools to provide students with transformative learning that prepares them to be agents of change in their communities. This justifies its use as an analysis grid in the empirical component of the study to which this article refers.

METHOD

Setting the Context

The school selected for the study is in northern Portugal. It is a public school in the third cycle of primary education (seventh to ninth grade) and secondary education (10th to 12th grade). Students are between the ages of 12 and 18. In 2021, the school population comprised 1801 students and 194 teachers. The student's parents mostly hold academic qualifications from the second and third cycles of primary education, corresponding to completing the sixth and ninth grades, respectively. This characteristic indicates that they have low levels of education, particularly considering that in Portugal, the compulsory education level has been raised to the 12th grade since 2009 (under Decree 85/2009). In addition, the school was selected for the study because it has won prizes and labels awarded in activities and projects related to community involvement.

The study used a documentary analysis (Bowen, 2009; Yin, 2014) of the school's plan of activities (PA) and Evaluation Report (ER). The 2021/2022 PA aimed to achieve a mission aligned with strategies for active participation, namely by creating contexts of sharing and collaboration and exchanging ideas on current issues. In its structure, the PA presents a list of activities and projects to be carried out throughout the school year, organised into three dimensions - Curricular (A), Psychosocial (B), and Community (C) - which together embody the objectives of the Educational Project. The ER presents the assessment of the activities made through a digital questionnaire sent by e-mail to all

teachers and students at the school, answered by 63 teachers (40% of the population) and 95 students (8%). The teachers' questionnaire had four sections (i.e., Identification of the teacher(s) responsible for the activity, Interveners/Target audience, Evaluation of the activity considering the link with the School's Educational Project, Alternative activity for students who didn't take part). It was composed of 18 closed questions (i.e., Identification of the activity, articulation with the School Library, impact of the activity on the objectives defined in the School's Pedagogical Project, Evaluation of the results) and 18 open questions (i.e., Description of the activity(ies) carried out, Indication of relevant aspects and constraints, Alternative activity for students who didn't take part). There were two evaluation scales, a quantitative one from 0 to 5, where 5 is the highest value and a qualitative one from Insufficient to Very Good. As for the students' questionnaire, which the class representative answered after listening to colleagues, it consisted of two sections: one identifying the class, the activity, and the subjects involved, and another assessing the activity (i.e. interest, organisation, time management) as well as the contribution to their learning in the issues involved, and positive and negative aspects. It consisted of 7 closed questions and seven open questions. Data from the PA and the RA questionnaire's open answers were analysed through content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) with the predefined categories: curricular, psychosocial, and community. These categories were selected because they are the articulating element of the activities developed with the school's educational project. According to the PA (p. 94), the definition of the categories is: "Curricular dimension: approaching the contents of each area of knowledge, associating them with situations and problems present in the student's daily life; psychosocial dimension: guaranteeing a stimulating school climate that provides cooperative learning activities geared towards the integration and exchange of knowledge; community dimension: constituting a resource for the community." At the same time, these categories align with the theoretical framework of the WSA.

After selecting the documents, data was imported to NVivo (Version 12). The content analysis followed these steps: pre-analysis, exploration of the information in the papers; treatment of results – codification and categorization of the relevant information, inference, and interpretation.

FINDINGS

The study results are presented according to the research questions, i.e., how students participated in the activities carried out at school, how teachers and students evaluated these activities, and what aspects contribute to promoting transformative learning.

In What Ways Did the Students Participate in the Activities Carried Out by the School?

The PA activities are organized in three dimensions – Curricular, Psychosocial, and Community – to improve academic success and inclusion. It includes several activities, such as sports tournaments, cultural events, and educational projects that rely on collaboration practices. The PA activities were aimed at students and/or the academic community, led by teachers (79%), students (10%), and other school community members.

The activities promoted by students and teachers are systematized in Figure 1, which shows these activities concerning the agents in charge of their promotion and their presence in the PA.

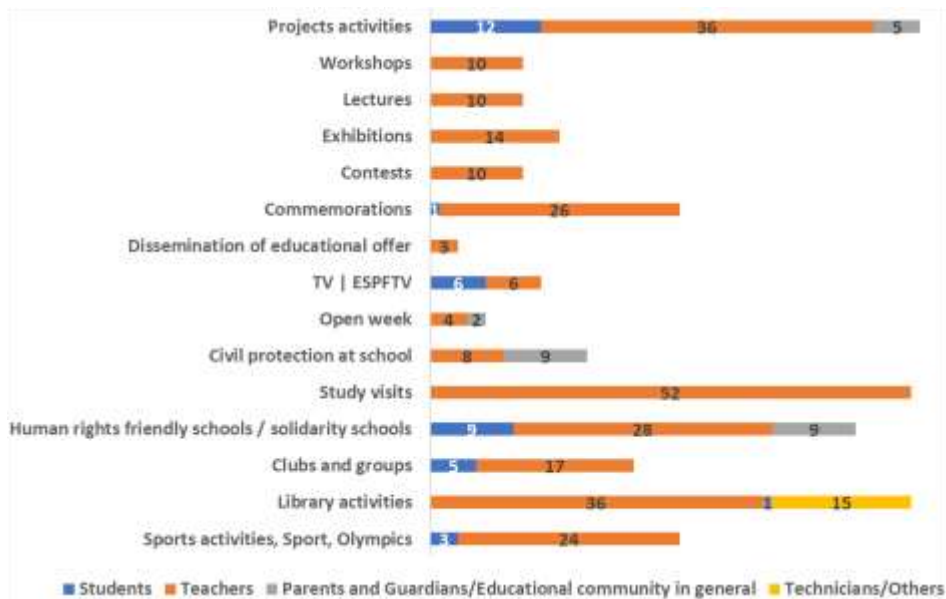


Figure 1
Activities included in the PA and those responsible for carrying them out

The most mentioned activities are sports, exhibitions, commemorations, competitions, dissemination of the educational offer, school field trips, and outdoor classes. The school also promotes several activities via optional attendance in clubs. For example, the “Be a Citizen Club”, the “Volunteering Club”, and “ESPFTV – the school television”, among others. In addition, in some projects, students are encouraged to participate both within the school and at a local, national, and international level, such as school sports, EMRC ZONE solidarity schools, human rights-friendly schools, eTwinning, and Erasmus Plus. There are also activities developed in the school library related to curricular content, where students can access various learning resources.

Most of the school activities have a good level of participation by students, who actively organize, facilitate, promote, and produce them. For example, during Open Week, the students use the biology, physics, and chemistry laboratories to conduct experiments and other works and exhibitions for the community. Another example is the participation of students in competitions with written or multimedia works. Another example is the project “Our Book”, which results from the involvement of students through poetic texts, prose, drawings, photographs, and others, which involve the whole community.

How did the teachers and the students evaluate these activities?

According to the ER, the activities were assessed using a survey by teachers responsible for each activity and students who participated. Of the 95 answers, 91 (95%) consider that the activities met the proposed goals (rated 4 and 5 on a scale from 1 to 5). The aspects considered relevant and those to be improved were expressed with open responses by both teachers and students.

The most relevant aspects mentioned as teachers' concerns were: opportunities for interaction, cooperation, and collaboration (17 references, 40%); behavior and attitude development (11 references, 26%); curricular content, knowledge acquisition, and scientific culture (nine references, 21%); and aspects related to inclusion and participation (six references, 14%).

The cooperation among all stakeholders is mentioned by the teachers as a constant practice throughout the planning and implementation of the activities. The coordinated work was highlighted between the school library, the classroom, the mathematics and experimental sciences department, and the live science club. Participation in international projects was also mentioned, as were the partnerships with companies, the community, institutions, and the municipality.

The behaviors and attitudes were related to dealing with anxiety, developing study and work habits, time management, critical thinking and autonomy, and closer interpersonal relationships. Regarding knowledge acquisition, learning the English language, the links between disciplines, the safe use of the internet, and the development of a scientific culture at school were also mentioned. Among other relevant aspects reinforcing the school's inclusive culture were the opportunity to learn for all, valuing diversity, equity, and respect for differences.

As for the aspects to improve in undertaking the activities, teachers mainly mentioned time management (10 references, 40%), the lack of teachers' and students' participation (seven references, 28%), and the lack of money and materials to carry out the activities (three references, 12%).

Other aspects were mentioned with only one reference, such as too many students enrolled in one activity, lack of links between them, weather conditions, and a shortage of information for teachers about a particular activity implemented at school.

The teachers' perceptions regarding the activities are systematised in Figure 2.

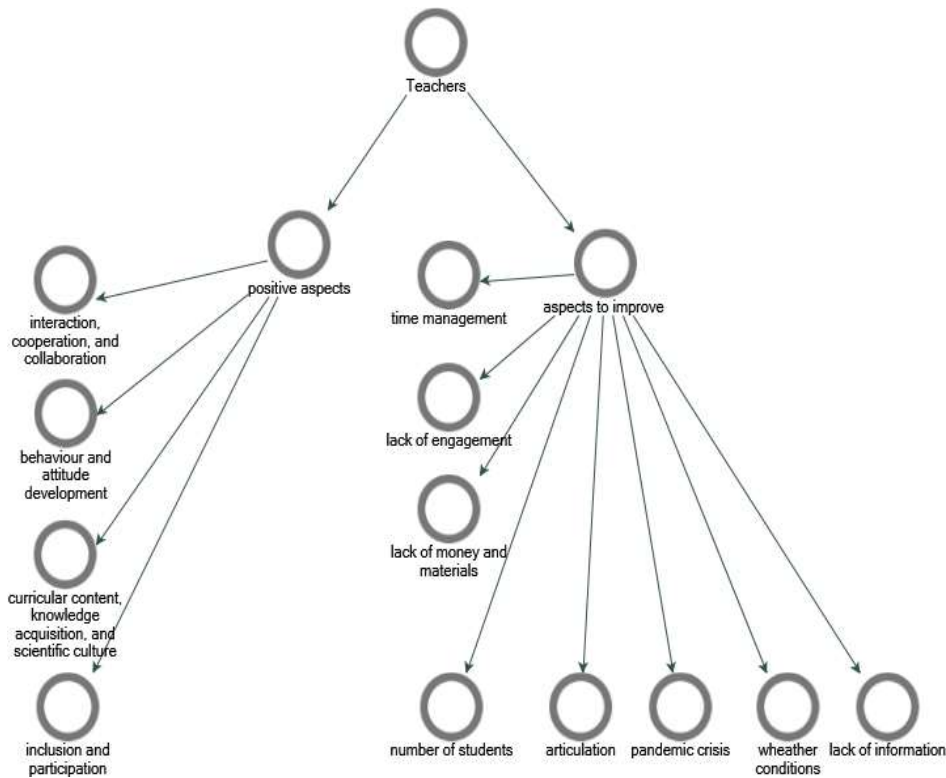


Figure 2

Teachers' evaluation regarding the activities (source: NVIVO)

As far as the students are concerned, the most relevant aspects related to the activities were: interaction, cooperation, and collaboration among students, between groups, community, and people of other nationalities (16 references, 30%); curricular contents, information, and learning, especially in the areas of sports, English language, Portuguese and mathematics (11 references, 21%); the opportunity to develop diverse, dynamic, interactive and playful activities (10 references, 19%); development of behaviors and attitudes, such as creativity, controlling anxiety, motivation, involvement and entrepreneurship (nine references, 17%); the opportunity to get to know new places and landscapes (five references, 9%); recognition of merit and the school's purchase of eco-points (both with one reference, 2%).

Regarding aspects to be improved from the student's point of view, only the time management issue was mentioned (three references), followed by the constraints due to COVID-19 (one reference) and the desire to expand on an issue addressed by an external guest during a workshop (one reference).

The students' perceptions regarding the activities are systematised in figure 3.

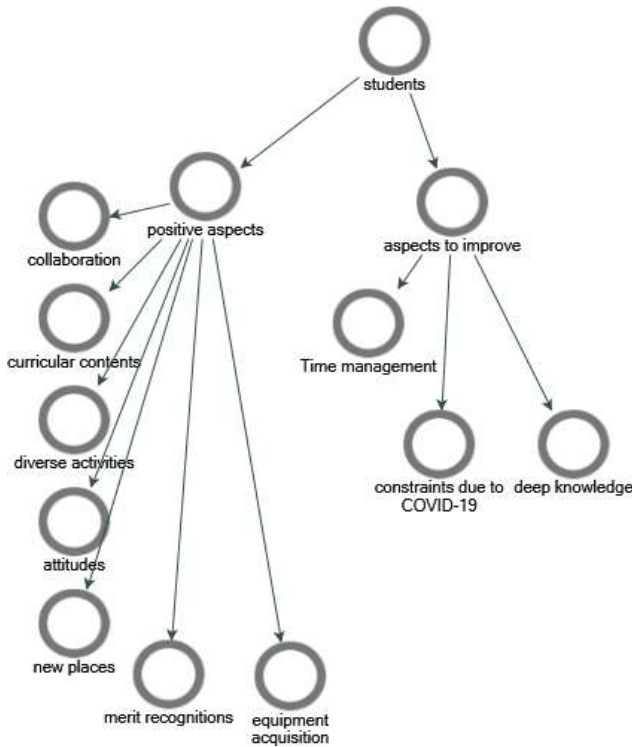


Figure 3
Students’ evaluation regarding the activities (source: NVIVO)

What Aspects Can Contribute to a Culture of Student Participation that Promotes Transformative Learning in the School Context?

The PA activities were analysed within the activities ‘curricular’, ‘psychosocial’ and ‘community’ WSA dimensions of the activities.

The curricular dimension was related to the capacity to approach the contents of each knowledge area, associating them with situations and problems present in students’ daily lives. The following activities, for example, fall within the curricular dimension: in the subject of Portuguese, the Creative Writing Contest, the elaboration of the School Book, including students and families’ participation with texts, drawings, and photographs; the Reading Contest, the holding of special events, participation in projects/initiatives of the School Libraries Network; and the National Reading Plan (PNL) 2027, such as writing and reading in Portuguese; and also the promotion of values and skills essential for students’ education and active participation and awareness of global issues.

The psychosocial dimension was related to ensuring a stimulating school climate that provides cooperative learning activities oriented towards integrating and exchanging

knowledge. Regarding the psychosocial dimension, the activities identified are diverse and primarily developed in a coordinated and transversal way. Still, some activities are designed in a disciplinary way, such as fostering healthy life habits and promoting a culture of responsibility (e.g., the activity of the biology and geology disciplinary area). Other activities are conducted by the Psychology and Guidance Service to support students' decision-making in choosing their school path.

The community dimension included the idea that the school is a resource for the community, and advantage is taken of it. The school engages with several external stakeholders, public, private, and solidarity institutions.

Figure 4 shows examples of PA activities that were classified in each category of analysis.

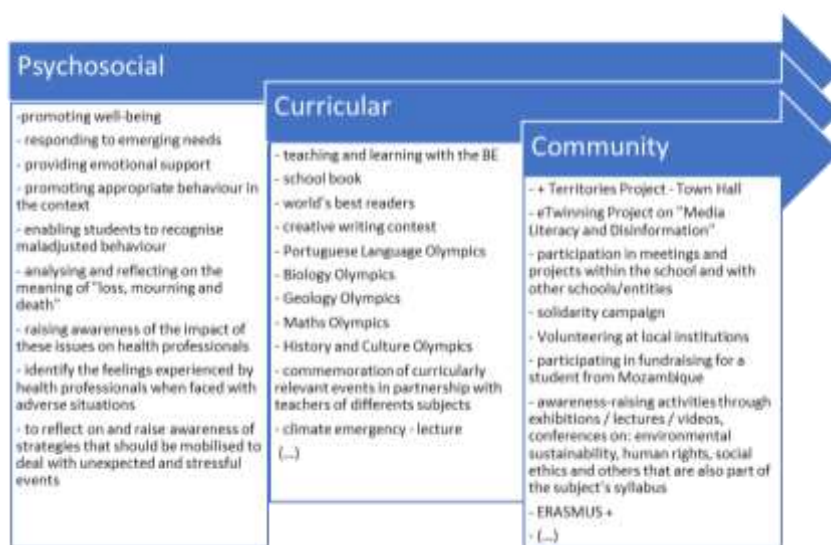


Figure 4
Examples of AP activities organised into "psychosocial", "curricular" and "community" categories

The external visibility of the activities undertaken by the school enabled it to obtain a series of labels, namely: national and European labels in several eTwinning projects; Eco-School; Healthy School; Digital Safety; School without Bullying; National Commission for the Promotion of the Rights and Protection of Children and Young People; Healthy School – Good Practices in Psychological Health, Educational Success, and Inclusion. The school also received the following awards and prizes: the Gandhi project; the Pilar Moreno project; Masks Theatre Group; and App for Good.

The Nvivo's cluster analysis by word similarity shows the cross-cutting nature of the psychosocial dimension and the proximity between the curricular and community dimensions (figure 5).

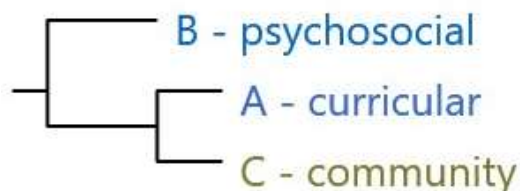


Figure 5
Cluster analysis by word similarity (source: NVIVO)

DISCUSSION

The study focused on how a Portuguese school implemented the WSA, as defined by UNESCO (2017), to promote transformative learning. Analysis of the school's PA and the ER, based on a theoretical framework that conceptualizes WSA and transformative pedagogy, provided answers to the questions related to the student's participation in the activities (question 1), assessment of the activities (question 2) and the contribution to the promotion of transformative learning (question 3).

Regarding the students' participation, despite the number and diversity of the activities proposed by teachers, it was clear that the students had an active role in defining the tasks and had the freedom to choose which to engage in, allowing them to decide on representation and participation, as argued by Cook-Sather (2020). Furthermore, and as stated in other studies (Maxwell et al., 2017; Melo et al., 2022; Santos & Leite, 2020; Wang & Degol, 2016), participating in the activities encouraged students to consider the broader social, economic, and environmental implications of their actions, recognizing and developing their sense of agency and empowerment.

The assessment of the activities revealed that adopting learner-centered approaches, which prioritize dialogue, collaboration, and reflection, played a crucial role in facilitating the development of critical thinking skills among students (Brookfield, 2017; Gruenewald, 2003; Leite et al., 2022). Integrating curricular, psychosocial, and community dimensions enabled students to work towards common goals such as inclusion and participation (Barros et al., 2022). Thus, the educational process goes beyond the classroom and actively engages with the broader community. Students are encouraged to explore real-world issues and challenges (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Slade & Griffith, 2013), allowing them to connect their learning to practical situations and develop a deeper understanding of the world around them.

The transformative learning potential is related to community engagement to address social justice (Sampaio & Leite, 2020), promote sustainable practices, and advocate for positive change. This is aligned with Hodge's (2019) recognition of the transformative potential of formal knowledge, also argued by Leite et al. (2022). For example, the activities conducted in the school library are essential in creating an inclusive, participatory, and transformative educational environment. They provide access to a wide range of information, promoting collaboration activities like book clubs, study

groups, research projects, and literacy events. Through these activities, students can interact and exchange ideas, value diversity and critical thinking, engage in debates and critical information analysis, and reflect on social issues.

Given the example of this school, it can be stated that school culture may have an impact on students' participation and improve the conditions for transformative learning (Alsubaie, 2015; A. Hargreaves, 2007; Maxwell et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2017; Wang & Degol, 2016), in line with the WSA.

CONCLUSION

The present study concludes that how schools organize their activities can impact students' learning, interaction with the community, and development of decision-making skills, allowing them to intervene in society in general, i.e., it can promote transformative learning. As was argued, this student participation perspective is also in line with a WSA. As this article expressed, transformative pedagogies create a learning environment that encourages critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving, allowing the students to approach complex, real-world challenges reflectively and innovatively. This approach challenges students to think beyond the traditional classroom and apply their learning to real-world situations. At the same time, when students are actively involved in the learning process and have opportunities to decide how their education is delivered, they are more likely to feel engaged and motivated. This scenario can lead to a more collaborative and inclusive learning environment where students are encouraged to share their perspectives and ideas. By involving students in decision-making processes and giving them a voice, schools can foster a culture of openness and innovation that can help drive transformative change.

In this way, transformative learning and a WSA are necessary to prepare students for a changing world and promote sustainable development. So, considering that a WSA and transformative pedagogies drive education for sustainable development, it is essential to expand on aspects related to curriculum development and the school culture so that the involvement of students and the relationships with the community are increasingly valued.

From this perspective, the study showed the importance of school cultures when they rely on the collaboration of students, teachers, administrators, parents, and stakeholders, i.e., the whole school community. However, it is essential to undertake studies focused on different school contexts and cultures to understand better how schools can attain transformative learning. These studies can give an overview of how the WSA is being implemented.

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