



Understanding Students Classroom Participation and Political Self-Efficacy through Classroom Observations in 5 different countries

A Gender-Focused Analysis of Student Engagement in WP3



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1. Introduction

This Final Report for Work Package 3 (WP3) of the G-EPIC project builds directly upon the Joint Report published in January 2024, significantly deepening and expanding the analytical insights initially developed. While the previous Joint Report served as a foundational document aimed primarily at synthesizing previous research studies within WP2 and formulating preliminary hypotheses to guide subsequent experimental (WP4) and intervention-based (WP5) studies, this Final Report offers refined, comprehensive, and thematically structured analysis, taking into account critical findings that have emerged from these completed studies.

In contrast to the earlier report, detailed accounts of previous research literature are largely omitted here, with only concise summaries of essential insights included to maintain continuity and clarity. The main purpose of the current document is to concentrate specifically on those themes identified through preliminary results from WP4 and WP5 as crucially important for gaining deeper understanding and facilitating targeted interventions.

Prior research has conclusively demonstrated the fundamental role of an open classroom climate for student engagement, highlighting that active participation significantly enhances both learning outcomes—by fostering deeper knowledge and competencies—and students' political self-efficacy, along with their sense of belonging and relevance within educational domains. Recognizing this critical link, the central research questions guiding the deeper WP3 analyses addressed precisely the factors contributing to students' development of political self-efficacy, as well as the barriers that hinder their active engagement, particularly for girls from disadvantaged backgrounds. The analyses focused explicitly on three key categories of factors—individual traits, social (group) dynamics, and pedagogical approaches.

Throughout these analyses, substantial attention was dedicated to examining the alignment and divergence of perspectives among various stakeholders, particularly the degree of congruence between teachers' and students' views on classroom behaviors and their reflective awareness of ongoing interactions. By exploring these dynamics, WP3 aimed to identify actionable insights and practical strategies for educators to support and enhance political engagement among all students, particularly addressing gendered and intersectional inequalities.

The Final Report is structured to guide readers logically from an initial contextual framework through methodological considerations and analytical findings. After this Introduction, a brief summary of previous research findings is provided to set the stage. The report then outlines the methodology used for data collection and analysis in WP3. Next, it presents a brief overview of the overall results from each research instrument used. This is followed by an in-depth discussion of the main findings focused explicitly on individual, social, and pedagogical factors. To provide deeper insights, specific case studies of students with varied levels of political self-efficacy and classroom discussion participation are presented. Finally, the report concludes with a summary and actionable recommendations designed to inform educational practice and policy. References are included at the end of the document.

In summary, this Final Report represents a culmination and deepening of the G-EPIC project's ongoing research efforts, providing a nuanced and comprehensive understanding that directly informs effective and inclusive educational practices, ensuring that girls and all students from diverse backgrounds have equitable opportunities to develop robust political self-efficacy and meaningful engagement with political processes.

2. Conceptual Background of WP3

This section outlines the theoretical foundations and empirical evidence underpinning the objectives and outcomes of Work Package 3 (WP3). Based on a thorough review of existing literature, we examine dominant conceptual frameworks and findings related to political self-efficacy (PSE), gender and intersectional disparities in political engagement, and the role of educational environments in shaping students' civic dispositions. A comprehensive empirical analysis of this project's findings is available in Deliverable 3.2 *Joint Report of WP2 and WP3*.

Political Self-Efficacy (PSE)

Political Self-Efficacy (PSE) refers to an individual's belief in their capacity to comprehend and influence political affairs. It serves as a critical determinant of whether and how individuals engage in civic life, vote, participate in discussions, or take part in collective actions (Beaumont, 2010; Hattie et al., 2008). PSE is not only an outcome of political learning but also a predictor of future engagement, forming a feedback loop: students who feel more efficacious are more likely to engage politically, which in turn reinforces their sense of competence and agency.

According to Hattie et al. (2009), self-efficacy is linked not only to performance and persistence in academic domains but also to broader social outcomes, including civic responsibility and collective efficacy. Political self-efficacy in particular fosters a belief that one's actions matter in democratic processes, increasing the likelihood of participation throughout life.

Schools have a vital role in fostering PSE by embedding civic content into the curriculum, enabling deliberative pedagogies, and providing real-world opportunities for participation. Campbell (2008) emphasizes that school-based political discussion directly enhances political interest and efficacy, especially when the classroom climate is open and respectful. Manning and Edwards (2014) further highlight that experiential learning, including participation in student councils or community projects, increases both civic knowledge and self-efficacy.

Hoskins (2024) expands on this by pointing out that democratic education must go beyond knowledge transmission. Active pedagogical methodologies—such as simulations, debates, and peer teaching—are essential for enabling students to see themselves as political actors. These practices make political concepts tangible and accessible, especially for students who might otherwise feel alienated from political discourse.

Gender and Political Engagement in Educational Settings

Substantial research has documented gender gaps in political engagement, with females often reporting lower confidence in their political abilities, reduced interest in political careers, and lower participation in political discussions (Fox & Lawless, 2014; Schafer & Gilbert, 2024). These gaps are not merely reflections of personal preferences but are shaped by deeply ingrained gender norms that associate political leadership and assertiveness with masculinity.

Many studies stress the pervasive influence of gender stereotypes in shaping expectations and behaviours (Hoskins & Carrasco, 2025; Bos et al, 2022; Schneider et al., 2016). From a young age, students absorb messages about who is “naturally suited” for political roles. These messages are reinforced by media, curricula, peer interactions, and—importantly—teacher behaviours. Even well-intentioned educators may unknowingly perpetuate unequal participation by calling more frequently on male students during political debates or expecting them to take on leadership roles (Hattie et al., 2008).

Intersectionality further complicates the landscape. Girls from immigrant or minority backgrounds may face double or triple forms of exclusion—due to ethnicity, language, or social class—compounding their political marginalization. Many authors (Alexander et al., 2024; Hyer et al., 2008) emphasize that addressing gender inequality in education requires an intersectional lens that considers how multiple identities interact to create unique barriers.

Moreover, the internalization of these barriers influences students' political interest alongside efficacy. Political interest, although closely related to self-efficacy, is distinct: it reflects a student's curiosity and desire to follow political news or participate in civic dialogue. Research shows that gendered socialization often suppresses political interest in girls by framing political topics as abstract or conflict-driven—both culturally coded as masculine.

Classroom Participation and Political Discussions

Open political discussions in classrooms have been identified as one of the strongest predictors of both political interest and self-efficacy among students (Campbell, 2008; Alexander et al., 2024). Hattie et al. (2009) affirm that environments where students are encouraged to express opinions and engage in meaningful dialogue support not only cognitive development but also self-concept and motivation.

Yet classroom dynamics frequently reflect societal inequities. Boys tend to dominate discussions, especially when competition and assertiveness are emphasized (Fox & Lawless, 2014; Schafer & Gilbert, 2024). These gendered participation patterns are influenced by both teacher facilitation and peer norms, which may discourage girls from voicing political opinions, particularly in mixed-gender settings.

The classrooms often become microcosms of societal power structures. Without deliberate efforts to structure inclusive discussions, educators may unintentionally reproduce the gender hierarchies they seek to dismantle (Hoskins, 2024). Strategies such as rotating speaking opportunities, using small-group formats, and assigning roles can help balance participation and empower underrepresented students.

While progress has been made in some countries toward closing gender gaps in political engagement, cultural and historical factors shape the speed and depth of this change. Denmark, for instance, has adopted progressive education policies that actively promote gender equality and civic inclusion. In contrast, countries like the Czech Republic have been slower to embrace such reforms due to enduring biological essentialist views that frame gender differences as natural and immutable¹ (Hoskins & Carrasco, 2025). These cultural narratives affect both teacher expectations and policy implementation, shaping the landscape in which political education occurs.

Factors Influencing Student Participation

In addition to gender and classroom climate, individual and structural factors significantly shape students' engagement with political content. Personality traits like extroversion increase the likelihood of participation in discussions, as more outgoing students feel confident sharing opinions (Hattie et al., 2008). However, this dynamic may exclude introverted students, whose silence may be misinterpreted as disinterest rather than a need for alternative participation formats.

Students' family background also plays a crucial role. Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to encounter political conversations at home, see parents involved in civic life, and access resources that promote civic learning (Shala & Grajcevcic, 2018; Cicognani et al., 2012). These advantages create disparities in political readiness that schools must recognize and counterbalance.

Peer dynamics in the classroom also matter. Students who are socially central in peer networks often dominate discussions, while socially marginalized students may hesitate to contribute, even when they have valuable insights. These patterns reinforce existing inequalities and reduce the diversity of voices in political dialogue.

¹ For more details see Rapport WP1

An *open classroom climate* – characterized by respect, tolerance, and encouragement of diverse viewpoints – is essential to mitigating these inequalities. As Campbell (2008), Godfrey and Grayman (2014), or Alexander et al. (2024) demonstrate, such climates enhance political self-efficacy and engagement for all students, particularly those from less privileged backgrounds. They foster not only individual development but also a collective sense of political community and shared responsibility.

Teacher support is a crucial enabling factor. Educators who model inclusive practices, actively challenge stereotypes, and create emotionally safe environments contribute directly to students' civic growth. Effective teaching strategies – such as cooperative learning, guided discussions, and experiential activities – can help level the playing field and ensure that all students have a voice.

Yet, literature also highlights that many teachers feel underprepared to engage with political topics or to address sensitive issues like gender and race (Hoskins & Carrasco, 2025; Arens & Watermann, 2017). This points to the need for comprehensive teacher training that equips educators with both the knowledge and pedagogical tools to create inclusive civic learning environments.

WP3 Rationale

Despite growing awareness of gender and intersectional disparities in political engagement, educational research has yet to fully explain why some classrooms succeed in promoting equity while others perpetuate exclusion. While much is known about the general impact of gender stereotypes and classroom climate, fewer studies have systematically explored how specific pedagogical practices, teacher attitudes, and institutional contexts interact to shape students' political self-efficacy and interest.

Moreover, cross-national variability complicates our understanding. Progressive countries like Denmark demonstrate how inclusive practices and proactive policy frameworks can foster equitable engagement, while other contexts, such as the Czech Republic, continue to struggle with entrenched gender norms and resistance to equality initiatives (Alexander et al., 2024; Mayer & Schmidt, 2004). These differences call for context-sensitive research and tailored educational interventions.

WP3 aims to address these gaps by identifying *classroom-level variables* that influence political participation across different national and cultural settings. The project investigates not only the presence of political discussions but also their structure, inclusivity, and emotional climate. By examining these variables, WP3 contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how political self-efficacy is developed and distributed among diverse student populations.

Ultimately, this work supports educators and policymakers in designing strategies that promote democratic participation for all students – regardless of gender, ethnicity, or social background. Through the lens of equity and inclusion, WP3 offers actionable insights into how schools can prepare young people to be engaged, informed, and empowered citizens in increasingly diverse democratic societies.

3. Methods

The project aimed to comprehensively explore the dynamics of political self-efficacy and participation in classroom political discussions using a mixed-methods research design. The primary objectives of the WP3 study are to examine how an open classroom climate is experienced differently by students based on their gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic backgrounds, and understanding how these differences may lead to inequalities in learning engagement within specific classroom dynamics and result in different levels of political self-efficacy. Additionally, the study aimed to explore the alignment between observed teaching practices and students' self-reported experiences of classroom discussions. Ultimately, the insights gained from this study served to inform and refine hypotheses for subsequent experimental (WP4) and intervention-focused studies (WP5), as well as contribute directly to outputs designed for wider dissemination, including practical resources such as a Teacher Training Toolkit (WP5).

Initially, student questionnaires were employed to provide descriptive insights into students' self-perceptions of their political efficacy and experience with classroom discussions. However, the core of the research was qualitative, relying extensively on classroom observations, detailed interviews with teachers, and student focus groups. This qualitative approach facilitated an in-depth understanding of how various factors - including gender, classroom climate, teacher support, and disadvantaged background - shape political engagement and self-efficacy.

The quantitative data primarily served to contextualize and illustrate patterns across the sample and background information, whereas the qualitative data provided nuanced and detailed insights into the complex interplay between students' experiences and classroom interactions. Recognizing the inherent complexity and contradictions of classroom realities, this study explicitly compared the perspectives of teachers, students, and diverse student groups. This comparative approach aimed to uncover the variety of barriers students face in fully engaging in political discussions and to identify effective mechanisms for overcoming these barriers.

All research instruments used in this study were specifically developed for the G-EPIC project. However, for the students' questionnaire some items used in previous international studies (ie ICCS, PISA) were applied to increase the comparability. The qualitative instruments were inspired by previous research (Tzankova et al., 2021; Kosberg, 2024 e.g.) in a more open way. All instruments were originally designed in English and then carefully translated and culturally adapted into the national languages of the participating countries to ensure their appropriateness and effectiveness across different contexts.

3.1. Research Sample

The study included a total of 418 students from five countries: Germany, Denmark, the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic, and Belgium. The distribution of respondents varied across national contexts, with the Czech Republic having the largest sample (N = 137), followed by Denmark (N = 98), Belgium (N = 99), Germany (N = 67), and the UK with the smallest sample (N = 17). Gender representation in the sample was relatively balanced, with 176 boys and 211 girls, though national variations were evident. Notably, the UK sample consisted exclusively of female students, which may influence the interpretation of gender-related findings. For more details see Table 1. Additionally, a small proportion of responses were missing across all countries (N = 31). While the sample provides a diverse cross-national perspective, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The differences in sample sizes, the presence of an all-female UK cohort, and the variations in national education systems may introduce contextual differences that cannot be fully accounted for through statistical adjustments. These factors should be considered when interpreting the findings, particularly regarding PSE, engagement in political discussions, and classroom dynamics.

Table 1: Research sample Students' Survey

Country	Number of classes	Number of students	% of students in whole sample	% of females in country sample	% missing information of gender- country sample
Czech Republic	7	137	33%	48%	12%
Belgium	5	99	24%	46%	2%
Denmark	5	98	23%	47%	7%
Germany	3	67	16%	55%	9%
United Kingdom	3	17	4%	100%	0%
Total	23	418	100%	51%	7%

In each participating class, students who provided informed consent completed pre- and post-questionnaires. Additionally, classroom dynamics were systematically observed during lessons, and detailed interviews with teachers were conducted, followed by focus groups with selected student groups. Teacher interviews provided essential insights into instructional practices, classroom management strategies, and teachers' perceptions of student engagement in political discussions. Table 2 presents the detailed structure of the teacher sample involved in the study, the structure of the observation sample is provided in Table 3, and finally, the structure of the student focus group sample is displayed in Table 4.

Table 2: Research sample Teachers' Interviews

Teacher ID code	Country	Gender	Age range in years	Length of practice (n years)
CZ1	Czech Republic	F	20-30	3
CZ2	Czech Republic	F	35-40	10
CZ3	Czech Republic	M	20-30	2
CZ4	Czech Republic	F	20-30	4
CZ5	Czech Republic	F	45-49	24
DK1	Denmark	F	30-40	10
DK2	Denmark	F	40-50	20
DK3	Denmark	M	40-50	30
DK4	Denmark	F	50-60	13
DK5	Denmark	M	40-50	12
DK7	Denmark	M	30-40	11
UK1	UK	F	18-24	1
UK2	UK	M	25-29	3
UK3	UK	M	45-49	20
GER1	Germany	F	25-35	6
GER2	Germany	F	35-40	11
BE1	Belgium	M	30-35	6

Table 3: Research sample Classroom Observations

Country	Number of Classes	Number of students			Data source		
		F	M	Other	Direct observation template	Direct observation fieldnotes	Video recordings
UK	9	176	0	0	YES	YES	2 classes*
BE	5	44	51	0	YES	YES	5 classes*
CZ	7	62	64	5	YES	YES	6 classes
DK	9	150	131	4	YES	NO	9 classes
GE	3	-	-	-	YES	NO	NO

*Note: Although classroom recordings were conducted in the United Kingdom and Belgium, only researchers' qualitative fieldnotes were used for analytical purposes.

Table 4. Research sample students focus groups

Country	N of students focus groups	Student Focus group IDs	N students	N girls in country sample	N boys in country sample	N non-binary students	N students with Ethnic minority - Immigrant background
CZ	6	CZ.S.1; CZ.S.2; CZ.S.3; CZ.S.4; CZ.S.5; CZ.S.6	35	20	15	0	5
BE	5	BEL.S.1.1; BEL.S.2.1; BEL.S.3.1; BEL.S.1.2; BEL.S.2.2	21	11	10	0	8
DE	9	DK.S.1; DK.S.2; DK.S.3; DK.S.4; DK.S.5; DK.S.6; DK.S.7; DK.S.8; DK.S.9	60	29	29	1	16
UK	2	UK.1; UK.2	7	7	0	0	6
Total	22		122	67	54	1	35

Note: In the quotes in subsequent sections, the students' focus groups are indicated by the country, the type of respondent (S for student) and identifier of the focus group accordingly to D3.1 WP3 Qualitative Database (e.g. CZ.S.5 for the fifth focus group of students in the Czech Republic).

3.2. Instruments

WP3 obtains an in-depth insight into classroom dynamics through the following mixed-methods:

- A student survey with a short structured checklist, given to students at the outset of the research
- A student exit survey, given to students at the end of the data collection
- Researchers' field notes from Year 9 classroom observations
- Students' focus groups with the most active and less active students during the classroom observations
- Teachers' interviews

Student Questionnaires

Students completed two questionnaires - one administered before the observed lesson (entry questionnaire) and one following the lesson (exit questionnaire). The entry questionnaire covered three key areas: (a) Socio-demographic and personal background, (b) Political self-efficacy, citizenship indices, and interest in politics, (c) Attitudes toward school, learning experiences, and academic performance. The questionnaire was designed to take 15 minutes to complete, however by some students, especially disadvantaged students, took double time or even more to answer to the questionnaire. It was an important experience for the following working packages which use the students questionnaires as well.

Although the questionnaires were designed specifically for this research project, their structure and items were based on established international surveys such as ICCS, PISA, PIRLS, and EUCL. The questions targeted background information; macro-social, socio-demographic, school-related, and individual factors influencing student political engagement, citizenship attitudes, and self-efficacy in political discussions.

Originally developed in English, the questionnaire underwent careful translation and cultural adaptation into each participating country's national language. Adaptations included changes in checklists for student self-identification (e.g., nationality, ethnicity, family language, religion), aligning with national contexts. Some items were omitted in certain national versions due to local sensitivities or constraints. A qualitative pilot study helped validate the structure and content of the questionnaire before its wide-scale use. In Belgium, the survey was administered digitally via laptops and smartphones; in other countries, students completed it with pen and paper.

All collected data were transcribed into a unified datafile, followed by a thorough process of cleaning, recoding, and subsequent statistical analysis. The quantitative data primarily serve a descriptive function, offering an overview of the sample rather than producing generalizable conclusions. Indeed, the participating schools selected themselves to a large degree and cannot be considered as representative for all schools in each of the countries. Nevertheless, these findings help to contextualize the study by illustrating the patterns in students' self-perceptions. As a consequence

they were interpreted concerning the qualitative evidence, which provided a more nuanced understanding of student participation and teacher-student interactions.

Following the observed lesson, students participated in an exit questionnaire designed to compare the observed class session with their typical learning experience. This short questionnaire (lasting about 5–10 minutes) focused on assessing whether the observed instructional methods and classroom discussions aligned with students' regular classroom environments. It explored perceived levels of engagement, content familiarity, and the degree of openness during discussions.

Similar to the entry questionnaire, the exit survey was originally designed in English, pilot tested, and then translated into national languages. Collected responses were transcribed, cleaned, recoded, and analysed to support triangulation with observational and interview data.

All collected questionnaire data were transcribed into a unified matrix, systematically cleaned, recorded, and subjected to quantitative statistical analysis. This process ensured consistency and allowed for meaningful comparisons across different national and educational contexts.

Classroom Observations

A minimum of two lessons was observed in each of the designated classrooms. Teachers were asked to carry out their regular teaching plans on any topic relevant to the subject matter of the G-EPIC study (e.g., Civics, History, Social Sciences), using their standard instructional methods, including a classroom discussion.

Lesson observations were conducted using either in-person observations or video recordings. The video recordings were made in Denmark and Belgium, and were in each case followed by analysis based on a meticulously designed observation chart. In cases where video recording was not permitted due to privacy, ethical considerations or consent constraints (the UK, Czechia and Germany), the researchers relied on detailed observation charts and accompanying field notes through in-person observations.

In classrooms where video recording was used, particular attention was given to ethical considerations. A camera mounted on a tripod and microphones were installed before the start of the lesson, positioned at the back of the classroom to minimize the visibility and potential influence of technical equipment on student behaviour. This camera placement also ensured student anonymity, as pupils were filmed exclusively from behind. Only teachers faced the camera. Prior to filming, each teacher was asked to reorganize the seating arrangement as needed, so that students without consent to participate could remain present and actively engaged without appearing in the video—even from behind. Nevertheless, it was not technically possible to avoid capturing students' voices.

All observation data were transcribed into a uniform datafile to standardize as much as possible, and then subjected to a rigorous process of cleaning, recoding, and analysis using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The researchers concentrated on capturing a range of classroom features, including overall dynamics, patterns of participation, and instances of student engagement or disengagement.

The primary strength of the video-recording method lies in its ability to document classroom activity in comprehensive detail and within full contextual scope. This enables the creation of a rich and multifaceted dataset that supports more in-depth, broader, and in some respects more precise analyses than direct observation alone. Video data facilitate the collection of not only broad, qualitative impressions but also specific, quantifiable insights—such as simultaneous student and teacher behaviours, the exact frequency of particular actions, the semantic content of speech, and the syntactic structure of spoken language.

To effectively analyse the video data, a specialized observation template was developed for transcription purposes. This template differs from the one used for direct observations (see Annex at the end of the document).

Teacher Interviews

Teachers were interviewed both before and after the classroom observations. The pre-observation interview focused on broader aspects of their educational approach and experience, including:

- Objectives, curriculum content, and teaching methods concerning political self-efficacy and citizenship education,
- Attitudes and perceived biases related to gender, ethnicity, and socio-cultural backgrounds,
- Observations of student engagement, with particular attention to gendered participation in civics and political topics.

During the initial interview, teachers were also asked to identify the most and least active male and female students in their classroom, who were then purposively selected for additional observation and eventual inclusion in focus groups. After the lesson, a follow-up interview was conducted to reflect on the specific observed lesson. Teachers were asked to comment on how the lesson unfolded, how it aligned with their typical teaching style, and to reflect on specific classroom moments.

The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and when required, translated into English. Analysis of the transcripts used thematic analysis techniques (REF), allowing researchers to capture both common patterns and idiosyncratic insights into how political self-efficacy is fostered or hindered in educational contexts.

Focus Groups with Selected Students

Following classroom observations, focus groups were conducted with a purposive sample of students in the UK, Czechia, Belgium, and Denmark (N=22). Each group typically involved 4 to 6 students exhibiting varied levels of classroom participation. Students were selected to ensure representation across gender and engagement levels—for example, both the most vocal and most silent male and female students were included.

The focus groups aimed to explore students' reflections on their involvement in classroom discussions, their perspectives on political issues, and the barriers or enablers they experienced in engaging with such topics. The discussions were conducted in private, confidential settings within the school to ensure participants felt comfortable expressing their views.

Researchers used structured guidelines to moderate the sessions, ensuring consistency across national contexts. The focus groups were recorded, transcribed,

translated into English, and subjected to thematic analysis. Researchers noted that students' behaviour in focus groups often mirrored their classroom participation: active students tended to dominate the discussion, while less active students remained, as expected, in the background. Additionally, participation levels were influenced by peer familiarity—groups composed of friends generally exhibited more open and dynamic exchanges, while groups of less familiar peers engaged less.

The qualitative insights of the focus groups added depth to the observational and survey data, revealing the layered and complex nature of political engagement and self-efficacy within classroom settings. Combined, these tools allowed WP3 to develop a detailed, context-sensitive understanding of how political self-efficacy is shaped within diverse educational environments.

3.3. Analyses

The research conducted within Work Package 3 (WP3) was exploratory, aimed at capturing a nuanced understanding of political efficacy among students, particularly girls, across participating countries. Specifically, it sought to investigate how students perceive and engage with politics, how political themes are integrated into school environments, and how teachers foster or hinder an open classroom climate—one in which diverse opinions can be freely expressed and discussed (Campbell, 2008; Hattie et al., 2008; Godfrey & Grayman, 2014).

To address these aims, research objectives and guiding questions were developed, grounded in a review of relevant literature and informed by initial empirical insights. These objectives guided the design and focus of subsequent qualitative data collection and analysis. The primary analytic method employed was thematic analysis, a widely used approach in qualitative research that enables the identification and interpretation of recurring themes and patterns within data sets (Caulfield, 2023). Thematic analysis is particularly well-suited for capturing participants' perceptions, experiences, and underlying meanings within complex social contexts.

Our analytic process followed a combined inductive–deductive approach. Initial thematic domains were informed by prior literature and used to structure interviews,

focus groups, and classroom observations. However, these pre-determined areas were then complemented by inductive coding, whereby themes emerged organically through close engagement with the data. This allowed for a dynamic and reflexive process of abstraction, ensuring that final thematic categories remained closely aligned with the research questions and responsive to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The main thematic areas identified for in-depth analysis included:

- Classroom climate, with an emphasis on features of an open and inclusive classroom environment;
- Student activity and involvement, particularly differences in engagement by gender and other individual student characteristics;
- Teacher approaches to supporting student participation, including attitudes and practices that either foster or hinder engagement;
- Specific pedagogical methods employed to encourage active student involvement in political discussions; and
- Barriers to student participation, including perceived or observed reasons for student passivity or disengagement.

These themes formed the analytical backbone of WP3, enabling a rich, multi-perspective examination of the social, individual, and institutional factors shaping students' political efficacy and engagement in classroom settings.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

The research on gender gaps in political self-efficacy and classroom discussion on politics was conducted in accordance with vigorous ethical standards, with careful attention to the rights, safety, and dignity of all participants, particularly minors².

The selection of participating classes was based on multiple recruitment channels. In some cases, the initial contact was established through prior collaboration or professional familiarity between researchers and educators. The willingness of teachers and the approval of school leadership were necessary preconditions for any classroom to be included in the research. Unsurprisingly, the schools and teachers who agreed to participate were generally those with a personal and/or professional interest in themes of gender equality and political education. This self-selection likely resulted in the inclusion of a teaching staff that is more open to gender equality and change, a factor that is acknowledged and taken into account in the interpretation of the findings, but also to state that despite this progressiveness, barriers in political participation in the classroom still exist.

Informed Consent and Participant Rights

Participation in the study was strictly voluntary, informed consent being obtained from all relevant parties: school principals/headteachers, teachers, parents, and the students themselves. The research, through its processes and consent forms shown respect for withdrawal, emphasizing that individuals opting out were “respectfully omitted”. The consent forms clearly explained the purpose and structure of the research activities, procedures for data handling, and the potential for dissemination of findings. These documents were designed in line with both national legal requirements and the shared ethical framework established at the project level. This framework was supervised and approved by the project’s ethics supervisor and ensured full compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)

² The protocol was submitted and amended by the Ethical Committee of the VUB, and reviewed by the ethical reviewers of the project G-Epic.

applicable in each participating country and institution (e.g., UK Data Protection Act 2018; UKRI, 2025).

In the participating classrooms where a significant proportion of students or parents declined participation and therefore were not included in the analysis, the entire class did not enter the project. In cases where only a small number of individuals opted out, those students were respectfully omitted from all data-gathering activities. Under no circumstances were individuals or institutions identified in the research outputs. All data were fully anonymized/pseudonymised, and the analyses were conducted using pseudonymous participant codes. No identifying information was stored together with the research data.

Culturally Sensitive Data Collection

Special attention was devoted to the development of culturally sensitive data collection instruments. This included refining questionnaire items, interview protocols, and observation criteria to avoid bias and ensure respectful engagement with sensitive topics such as gender identity, ethnicity, and religion. Members of the research team engaged in discussions about national and cultural specificities to develop wording that met the research objectives without reinforcing stereotypes or marginalizing any participants.

Data Security and Management

A critical element of the ethical framework was the secure storage and management of all collected data. All anonymized datasets were stored exclusively on protected, access-restricted platforms. Raw data was not shared. Each national team used its own secure institutional repository that complied with local data protection laws. In addition to this, a centralized, encrypted storage system was maintained by the project lead Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), which served as the shared data infrastructure for the entire project. Access to this platform was granted only to authorized members of the research consortium and governed by strict protocols regarding data handling, modification, and export. These technical measures ensured

that all data – both qualitative and quantitative – were handled in a way that safeguarded participants' privacy and prevented unauthorized use.

Interpretive Understanding and Research Philosophy

Finally, the ethical philosophy of the research was guided by a commitment to interpretive understanding rather than judgment. The research questions were not aimed at identifying failures or assigning blame to individual actors. Instead, they sought to explore the complexity of school environments and the multifaceted barriers that students experience from different positionalities. In this sense, the research was designed to give voice to a diverse range of stakeholders – including students, teachers, and school leaders – without framing them as either victims or culprits, but rather as participants in a shared and evolving social reality.

4. Results

4.1. Students' questionnaires

4.1.1. Descriptive quantitative results on political self-efficacy

Based on the analysis of the descriptive statistics of the overall questionnaire sample, results suggest that while self-efficacy levels appear relatively stable across gender, national backgrounds, and ethnicity, actual participation in political discussions is influenced by broader contextual factors. Language proficiency and the inclusivity of classroom discussions are particularly important. Students with sufficient language proficiency (fluent and self-confident in the language used at school) are more likely to engage, while those with linguistic barriers, despite having similar self-efficacy beliefs, participate less. These findings emphasize the need for more inclusive classroom practices that encourage diverse voices and reduce linguistic barriers to participation.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics of the questionnaire sample

Country	N	Valid % Girls	Missing	PSE scale (Mean)	PSE scale (SD)	Skewness	Kurtosis
Germany	67	60.7%	6	0.67	0.5	-0.1	2
Denmark	98	50.5%	7	0.72	0.6	0	2.1
UK	17	100.0%	0	0.69	0.4	0.2	1.9
CZ	137	54.5%	16	0.75	0.7	-0.2	2.3
Belgium	99	53.6%	2	0.68	0.3	0.1	2
TOTAL	418	54.5%	31				

Political Self-Efficacy (PSE) scores across different countries reveal slight variations in student perception of their ability to engage in political discussions. The overall PSE mean scores remain relatively consistent, ranging from 0.7 to 0.8, suggesting that students across different national contexts share comparable levels of confidence in their political engagement. However, subtle national patterns (with no statistical significance but relevant in a qualitative way) emerge when considering standard deviation, variance, and distribution characteristics. The PSE scale outcomes suggest that both girls and boys scored similarly, with girls showing slightly lower results, though the difference was not statistically significant. This indicates that, at least in self-assessment, female students feel just as capable of engaging in political discussions as their male counterparts. However, when comparing self-reported confidence with observed classroom behaviour, a noticeable gap emerges—while girls express similar political self-efficacy, their actual participation in discussions is lower. This discrepancy suggests that external factors, such as stereotypes, classroom dynamics, teacher interactions, and the overall discussion environment, play a significant role in shaping participation rather than self-perceived ability alone.

Regarding national differences, no statistically significant gaps emerged in PSE scores. However, minority background and language use at school were crucial factors in students' perceived engagement. Students from minority ethnic backgrounds, particularly those with migration histories, reported a greater sense of difference in the classroom, which correlated with lower participation rates. The strongest factor influencing PSE outcomes was language proficiency—students who were less comfortable using the national language in school settings tended to score lower on political self-efficacy and reported feeling more excluded from discussions. Linguistic self-esteem was particularly low among students who spoke a different first language at home, and this was reflected in their lower participation in class debates.

The Czech Republic exhibited the highest average PSE score (0.8), though it also had the highest standard deviation (0.7), indicating greater variability in students' self-perceived political efficacy. This suggests a broader spectrum of confidence levels among Czech students, potentially influenced by differences in classroom experiences, political discourse exposure, or socio-cultural factors shaping engagement. Germany (0.7), Denmark (0.7), and the UK (0.7) demonstrated

relatively similar PSE scores, though the UK sample was notably smaller, consisting only of female respondents, which may limit broader generalizability. Belgium (0.7) reported the lowest variance (0.3), indicating that Belgian students' PSE levels were more uniform and less dispersed across the sample. In terms of gender distribution, most countries exhibited a fairly balanced male-to-female ratio among respondents. However, the UK dataset consisted entirely of female participants, which may have influenced its results. Across all countries, no substantial gender-based disparities emerged in PSE scores, reinforcing the idea that boys and girls perceive their political engagement capabilities similarly. Nonetheless, observational data suggest that while girls self-report comparable levels of PSE, their actual classroom participation remains lower—a pattern requiring further exploration. Skewness and kurtosis measures indicate that PSE distributions are relatively symmetrical across countries, with minimal skewness (ranging from -0.2 to 0.2). The highest kurtosis value was observed in the Czech Republic (2.3), suggesting a more peaked distribution with fewer extreme values, while other countries maintained similar kurtosis values around 2.0.

Students' self-reported feelings of difference based on race, ethnicity, and nationality reveal that while most do not strongly perceive themselves as distinct from their peers ($M = 2.5$, $SD = 0.6$), those from minority or migrant backgrounds may experience greater social differentiation. Perceived difference was lowest for skin colour ($M = 1.2$, $SD = 0.9$) and race ($M = 1.2$, $SD = 0.9$), but higher for ethnic background ($M = 2.3$, $SD = 1.6$) and nationality ($M = 1.4$, $SD = 0.9$), suggesting that cultural and linguistic factors play a more significant role in shaping students' sense of belonging. Language self-esteem ($M = 1.4$, $SD = 0.8$) and confidence in speaking the national language during class ($M = 1.4$, $SD = 0.8$) were generally high but exhibited positive skewness, indicating that a subset of students may struggle with language-related barriers. While girls and boys reported similar Political Self-Efficacy (PSE) scores, observational data (see in qualitative results below) suggests that girls participate less in discussions, potentially due to greater sensitivity to classroom climate, teacher encouragement, and recognition. Similarly, students with lower language confidence may be less likely to engage in classroom discussions, underscoring the importance of inclusive teaching strategies that foster active participation for all students, regardless of background.

These findings suggest that national differences in PSE are relatively minor, with students across different contexts demonstrating similar confidence levels. However, given the observed disparities in classroom participation—especially among female students and those from minority backgrounds—it is essential to examine how national education systems and pedagogical approaches shape actual engagement in political discussions. Additionally, the influence of language proficiency and socio-cultural attitudes toward political discourse should be further analysed to understand the extent to which structural and contextual factors shape students' willingness to participate in classroom debates. The findings presented in this study should be interpreted with caution due to the non-representative nature of the sample, which is significantly skewed toward respondents from the Czech Republic (N = 137), while other countries, such as the UK (N = 17), have significantly smaller and contextually specific samples (in the UK-case, for example, a girls-only school). The substantial differences in educational systems across participating countries—Denmark, Germany, the UK, Belgium, and the Czech Republic—introduce additional variability that cannot be fully accounted for through statistical analysis alone. Factors such as differing curricular emphases on civic or political education, classroom dynamics, and institutional approaches to student engagement likely influence students' political self-efficacy and participation in ways that are not directly comparable across contexts. Given these limitations, the results of the quantitative analysis should not be generalized. Any cross-national comparison must be made with an awareness of these structural and contextual differences. As mentioned above, this data provides additional information on the particularities of the samples selected in each of the participating countries. As such, they provide insights into the self-selection of the participating schools and attend to the particular character of each of the samples.

4.1.2. Meaning of politics - qualitative analysis on open-ended item

For understanding the observed students' political engagement in classroom discussions, it is crucial to understand how they conceptualize the term *politics*. This understanding shapes their willingness and ability to participate in political discourse. Students' interpretations, as seen in the open question of the students' questionnaire, influence not only how they engage with political content but also their sense of political self-efficacy—the belief that they can understand and influence political

processes. That is why the students' survey examined what students mean by using the term *politics*.

The analysis focused on students' responses to the open-ended question, "What does politics mean to you?", gathered from eighth-grade students across five countries. Using qualitative content analysis, the main themes in their answers were identified, followed by the development of categories reflecting students' perceptions of politics. Additionally, the analysis considered the presence of explicitly stated attitudes—positive, negative, or neutral—towards politics.

Fourteen primary categories were identified, differing in both their prevalence and thematic focus (see table 6). Three dominant themes emerged: State and Government, Society and the World, and Democracy and Human Rights. These categories collectively suggest that many students conceptualize politics primarily through its formal, institutional dimensions. Politics is frequently associated with entities such as the state, nation, or country, and with positions of political power, including presidents, parliaments, and governments. This framing emphasizes politics as the organization and governance of society at the national or international level, rather than at the local or civic level.

Table 6. Frequency of categories in students' answers.

Category	Frequency
State and Government	77
Social and The World Affairs	71
Democracy and Human Rights	70
Communication and Discussion	55
Power and Governance	44
Disinterest and Ignorance	37
Negativity, Frustration	29
Conflicts and Problems	26
Laws and Rules	23
Economics and Finance	17
Positivity	16
Concrete Political Personalities	14
Future and Development	10
Information and Media	6

The third most frequent theme—Democracy and Human Rights—reflected students' references to elections, freedom of speech, and democratic principles. These ideas were tightly interwoven with perceptions of political institutions and public governance, indicating a view of politics as a matter of collective public affairs rather than personal, community-based engagement. Notably absent from the data were references to civic engagement at the local level, including community activism, participation in student assemblies, or involvement in school-level democratic practices.

Some students framed politics as a domain of discussion, communication, and negotiation, indicating a more consensual view—one that perceives politics as a means of resolving societal problems through dialogue and cooperation. This was notably more frequent than definitions that emphasized conflict, competition, or opposition. Although some responses mentioned issues such as war or international disputes, these did not significantly shift the overall consensus-oriented understanding of politics. This suggests that students are more likely to perceive political processes as mechanisms for achieving agreement rather than arenas of ideological confrontation.

Another recurring theme was power and authority, which students often connected to political figures. However, these associations were relatively infrequent, and references to individual politicians or specific political events were rare. More commonly, students referred to abstract concepts such as rule, control, or superiority—ideas more closely aligned with political philosophy than with concrete political practice.

Categories relating to law, justice, or economics—including associations with the legal system, courts, finance, or taxation—were mentioned less frequently. These responses hint at a more technically oriented understanding of politics but lacked further elaboration due to the brevity of the responses. Similarly, themes related to the environment, the future, and media and information appeared only sporadically.

Importantly, the dataset revealed a strong emotional dimension in students' attitudes toward politics. Negative attitudes and expressions of disinterest, skepticism, or distrust were far more common than positive evaluations. Many students expressed apathy or reported not knowing what politics is, often associating it with boredom or irrelevance. This lack of engagement was interpreted as a distinct category,

potentially reflecting a combination of genuine disinterest, lack of confidence to articulate views, or aversion to the learning activity itself.

Where negative attitudes were explicitly stated, students used emotionally charged language such as “disgust,” “lies,” “confusion,” “fear,” “chaos,” and “nonsense.” These responses point to a deep frustration or alienation from political discourse. In contrast, positive descriptions—using terms like “good,” “useful,” or “beneficial”—were significantly less common and rarely expressed with similar intensity. Interestingly, students’ negative perceptions tended to be linked more with abstract or systemic aspects of politics (e.g., its complexity, inaccessibility, or lack of clarity) than with concrete political actors or scandals.

Overall, the findings suggest that students’ understandings of politics are heavily shaped by institutional and formal models, while their attitudes often reflect distance, skepticism, or a sense of disempowerment. The absence of references to civic participation or local engagement highlights a potential disconnect between students’ lived experiences and their conceptualizations of politics—an insight with important implications for civic education and youth engagement strategies.

The findings from the open-ended questionnaire responses align closely with the insights gained through focus group discussions (see below), reinforcing the consistency and depth of students’ perspectives. This convergence of data sources highlights shared patterns in how adolescents conceptualize and engage with politics, suggesting that the themes identified are both robust and meaningful. The complementary nature of these methods strengthens the interpretation of students’ political understanding and sets the stage for a more nuanced presentation of observation results in section 4.3.

4.2. Participation of female students in classroom discussions and its context: evidence from direct observations and video recordings

Despite the fact that girls and boys report similar levels of political self-efficacy in the questionnaires, lesson observations by researchers reveal that girls actually participate less than boys in real-time classroom discussions and that their way of participating is to some extent different from the participation of boys. In order to shed light on the patterns of female students' participation in discussions, we focused on three potentially relevant factors as identified in chapter 2 – students' behaviour, teachers' practices, and classroom characteristics – and included three levels of analysis – individuals, interactions between individuals, and group dynamics.

Bringing all these pieces together led to the identification of three main areas of interest: (1) students' active participation in the discussion and teacher's participation-supportive practices, (2) students' discussion-related interactions and teacher's interaction-supportive techniques, and finally (3) classroom climate and teacher's classroom-management strategies.

The analysis revealed that it is not a single factor but rather an interplay of several outstanding factors that allows us to unfold the complex multileveled motivation system leading female students – but also students in general – to either actively take part in a classroom discussion or stay silent. The presented results are based on the qualitative analysis and descriptive statistics of the data collected through direct observations, documented using a predesigned template and freestyle fieldnotes, and video recordings.

4.2.1. Students' active participation in the discussion and teacher's participation-supportive practices

Students' active participation in the discussion

Participating in a discussion requires being active, involved, and engaged, which manifests mainly and primarily through oral expression of thoughts in public. Proactive verbal expression (e.g., presenting opinions without being asked, spontaneously communicating toward other students, asking the teacher a question)

is less frequent in female students (M=9.9; SD=6.3) than male students (M=12.0; SD=8.2). As shown in Table 7, this gender-related difference is mainly observed in the Czech Republic and Denmark. Danish students seem to be the most active, both boys and girls. The significantly least active students, both girls and boys, are from Belgium.

Table 7. Proactive verbal entries produced by the students from the subsample (most active/passive boy/girl) during the observed lesson. Average numbers of occurrences (Standarddeviation).

	Mean (SD)	Female	Male
UK		10.75 (8.83)	-
Belgium		1.67 (0.47)	1.60 (1.36)
CZ		9 (3.89)	11.86 (5.05)
Denmark		11.53 (4.54)	15.53 (7.69)
TOTAL		9.91 (6.25)	12.00 (8.17)

Data source: direct-observation template. *: Germany is not presented in the table due to lack of data

All collected observations and video recordings indicate that there are *active and passive* students in each class. However, their proportion varies so that, in some classes, it was more difficult to find representative active students. For instance, in two (out of five) Belgian classes, specifically, no active girl could even be identified, so that data on *the most active girl* are missing for these two classes. Another example comes from the United Kingdom. Based on the frequency of their verbal entries (Table 1), British female students seem to be very active. However, considering that the data were collected in all-girls schools with exclusively female-student classes, the mean number doesn't seem that high anymore, especially in comparison to Denmark. Indeed, direct-observation field notes indicate that students/girls were very quiet, demonstrating low participation even when they possessed the correct academic answers, according to researchers' field notes. Researchers observed very low energy in the classrooms and only short discussions.

Direct observations, fieldnotes, and video recordings also indicate that active students are active throughout the whole class while passive students remain passive. For instance, Belgium reports that it is often the same students who raise their hands, while other students seem reluctant to speak up during the whole discussion, only quietly sharing their thoughts if they really must. The results correspond to the opinions of teachers obtained during the interviews. Teachers

pointed out that for some students, their involvement and activity in teaching corresponds to their personality, therefore passive and shy students need to be activated by the teacher, otherwise the students will remain passive (see the chapter Personality factors below). Even though teachers were aware of this, observations show that they did not always actually apply this during the lesson.

Participating in a discussion implies not only presenting facts (i.e. evidence-based, objective and indisputable knowledge), but also and most importantly sharing opinions (i.e. experience-based, subjective and disputable beliefs). Surprisingly, only one third of students' contributions could be qualified as opinions or experiences (35% in Denmark; 36% in the Czech Republic), while the other two thirds consist of purely factual information. This result is also in line with Belgian and British qualitative field notes indicating that the observed discussions were mostly based on repetition of internalized and memorized information provided by the teacher, with an important lack of critical thoughts or personal statements, resembling more a learning-check/Q&A session than an actual *discussion*. Table 8 shows the data in relation to gender. Girls bring more facts to the discussion than opinions. Boys show a similar but slightly less pronounced tendency, especially in Denmark. When a student shares an opinion/experience, it is more likely to be a boy in Denmark but a girl in the Czech Republic.

A standardized protocol was developed to code the video-recorded classroom observations across all participating countries (see Appendix). To ensure its consistency and usability, the protocol was piloted in two countries. Due to the time-intensive nature of this analytical approach and the scope of the current report, we focus here solely on data from the Czech Republic and Denmark. The analysis of video recordings from Belgium is ongoing and will be included in a forthcoming article submitted to a peer-reviewed scientific journal.

Table 8. Type of information provided in the verbal entries produced by the students from the subsample (most active/passive boy/girl) during the observed lesson; percentages of occurrences.

	Denmark	Czech Republic
Fact/Knowledge Female -	32%	37%
Fact/Knowledge Male	33%	26%
Opinion/Experience Female	10%	25%
Opinion/Experience Male	25%	12%
TOTAL	100%	100%

Data source: direct-observation template.

Since expressing thoughts implies using primarily linguistic tools, it would be relevant to consider students' vocabulary and the syntactic complexity of their speech as indicators of the level of language mastery. For our analysis, we focused on the syntax. Students' verbal entries – produced spontaneously or in response to the teacher's intervention – were categorised into four groups based on the degree of their structural complexity ranging from *Non-sentential utterances* (the lowest level) to *One complex sentence minimum* (the highest level).

In Denmark, the total of 212 verbal entries were recorded, out of which 72% included two or more simple sentences or one compound sentence, 22% contained at least one complex sentence, 5% consisted of a single simple sentence, and finally 1% represented non-sentential utterances. In the Czech Republic, a total of 138 verbal entries were collected, out of which 38% contained at least one complex sentence, 30% represented non-sentential utterances, 20% consisted of a single simple sentence, and finally 12% included two or more simple sentences or one compound sentence. Based on these data, Danish students produce primarily simple/compound sentences, other structures occurring considerably less, while in the speech produced by Czech students, the different patterns are more equally represented. The lowest level of the syntactic complexity – non-sentential utterances – characterizes almost every third verbal entry in the Czech corpus, while it is almost absent in the Danish corpus. The highest level of syntactic complexity – one complex sentence minimum – is almost twice as present in the Czech sample as in the Danish sample.

In Table 9, the collected data are summarised by gender. It is noticeable that in the video-recording setting, the number of verbal entries produced by Czech girls was proportionally larger (girls: 91; boys: 47) than the number of verbal entries produced

by Danish girls (girls: 84; boys: 128), so that Czech girls actually spoke – proactively or after being activated by the teacher – more often than Czech boys did. When considering the four categories of the syntactical patterns, the difference between Czech male and female students is omnipresent, with the exception of the “2+ *Simple* or 1x *Compound*” category, where it considerably decreases. Similarly, the difference between Danish male and female students is constant across syntactical patterns with the exception of the marginal category of *Non-sentential utterances*, where it completely disappears.

Table 9. Syntactic complexity of the verbal entries produced by the students from the subsample (most active/passive boy/girl) during the observed lesson; percentages of occurrences.

		Denmark	Czech Republic
Non-sentential utterance	- Female	<1%	21%
Non-sentential utterance	- Male	<1%	8%
1x Simple sentence	- Female	<1%	15%
1x Simple sentence	- Male	5%	5%
2+ Simple or or 1 Compound	- Female	30%	7%
2+ Simple or or 1 Compound	- Male	42%	6%
1 Complex sentence at least	- Female	9%	23%
1 Complex sentence at least	- Male	13%	15%
TOTAL		100%	100%

Data source: direct-observation template.

Since expression/communication cannot be reduced to a pure use of words but it also manifests, to some non-negligible extent, through non-lexical aspects of speech and non-verbal aspects accompanying or replacing speech, the picture would be incomplete without a description of these other modalities. Displaying attention and participation through paralanguage and body language (e.g. smiling, nodding head, laughing) is only slightly more frequent in female students ($M=5.5$; $SD=2.8$) than in male students ($M=5.2$; $SD=2.6$). Table 10 shows this variable being rather inconsistently distributed across countries. Nevertheless, Belgium is the only country where the frequency of para-/non-verbal entries is more important than the frequency of verbal entries.

Table 10. Non-verbal expressions produced by the students from the subsample (most active/passive boy/girl) during the observed lesson. Average numbers of occurrences (Standarddeviation).

Mean (SD)	Female	Male
UK	5.38 (3.9)	-
Belgium	5.33 (4.5)	7.6 (4.03)
CZ	4.14 (1.64)	4.23 (2.05)
Denmark	6.2 (1.47)	4.73 (1.53)
TOTAL	5.49 (2.78)	5.15 (2.60)

Data source: direct-observation template. *: Germany is not presented in the table due to lack of data

Teacher's participation-supportive practices

The analysis of the role of the teacher and the level of pedagogical support s/he provides brought interesting results. In general, female students ($M=7.4$; $SD=5.5$) receive less teacher's support (e.g. asking questions to individual students, providing feedback or any kind of support) than male students ($M=11.1$; $SD=8.9$). As documented in Table 11, this phenomenon is present across comparison-relevant countries, the gap being the least apparent in Czech Republic. Considering female-student data only, the UK scores the highest, but since there is no concurrence with the other gender, this finding is not unexpected. In contrast, the finding that Belgian teachers provide both male and female students with a lot of attention (even more than their Danish and Czech counterparts) is interesting since Belgian students are, as shown earlier in Table 7, the least active discussion participants. Such a contrast suggests that teachers' effort is not reflected in students' participation. Another interesting result comes from Denmark, where the lowest level of pedagogical support toward girls does not translate into a lower participation; on the contrary, Danish female students are more active than female students in other countries (Table 7).

Table 11. Teacher's support provided to the students from the subsample (most active/passive boy/girl) during the observed lesson. Average numbers of occurrences (Standard deviation).

Mean (SD)	Female	Male
UK	10.75 (7.87)	-
Belgium	8.00 (4.97)	12.40 (9.52)
CZ	7.60 (4.66)	8.43 (6.70)
Denmark	5.33 (5.33)	11.87 (9.30)
TOTAL	7.36 (5.48)	11.07 (8.89)

Data source: direct-observation template. Germany is not presented in the table due to a lack of data.

A further investigation of the pedagogical strategies leads to consideration of two principal categories of pedagogical support: (1) instrumental/cognitive support (e.g. using appropriate cognitive pressure necessary for implementing the curriculum as well as for cognitive and language development, explaining concepts and presenting different sides of a problem, encouraging students to learn new concepts and skills as well as to make their minds, reinforcing adequate learning behaviour) and (2) emotional support (e.g. promoting positive and welcoming climate, providing

reassurance and encouragement, reinforcing oral participation, involving quiet and non-engaged students, asking learning questions to individual students directly, encouraging students to express their opinions and to discuss with people having different views). For the following analyses, gender categories were not considered, allowing us to focus on the broader context of the classroom as a whole.

Table 12 presents the main part of the data related to what can be described as instrumental/cognitive support. It refers to the guidance, explanations, or scaffolding provided by the teacher to help students understand the topic being discussed. This type of support is provided many times during the lesson, but not most of the time, which corresponds to only slightly higher values in the given range ($M=2.7$; $SD=0.7$; scale ranging from 1=*Not at all* to 4=*Most of the time*). British, Belgian, and Danish scores are similar and lower than the Czech and German ones. The quality of the observed instrumental/cognitive support was evaluated as slightly higher ($M=5.1$; $SD=1.3$; scale ranging from 1=*Lowest quality* to 4=*Highest quality*). British and Czech scores are the closest and lowest, while the Danish score is by far the highest in the available sample. We should note that the frequency and the quality of instrumental/cognitive support are independent dimensions: the level of one does not predict the level of the other.

Table 12. Providing instrumental/cognitive support by the teacher during the lesson. Frequency: mean scores ranging from 1=*Not at all* to 4=*Most of the time*. Quality: mean scores ranging from 1=*Lowest quality* to 7=*Highest quality*. Average numbers of occurrences (Standarddeviation).

	Mean (SD)	Frequency	Quality
UK		2.58 (0.99)	4.56 (1.64)
Belgium		2.65 (0.56)	4.80 (1.60)
CZ		3.00 (0.48)	4.50 (0.86)
Denmark		2.63 (0.58)	5.60 (0.88)
Germany		3.00 (0.27)	(no data available)
TOTAL		2.72 (0.68)	5.08 (1.34)

Data source: direct-observation template.

The main part of the data related to emotional support is displayed in Table 13. Emotional support by the teacher during classroom discussion involves creating a respectful and trusting atmosphere by listening attentively, acknowledging students' contributions, and responding with empathy, to encourage them to engage actively and confidently present their opinions. This type of support is also provided by

teachers, but not often during the lesson, which corresponds to scores close to the middle of the range (M=2.4; SD=0.7; scale ranging from 1=*Not at all* to 4=*Most of the time*). In comparison with instrumental/cognitive support, the frequency is lower (in general as well as across countries), and there is more variance in the national scores. Belgian, Czech, and Danish scores are all close to each other, while the German score is the highest, and the British score is the lowest. The quality of the observed emotional support was evaluated as slightly higher (M=5.2; SD=1.4; scale ranging from 1=*Lowest quality* to 4=*Highest quality*), which makes it similar to instrumental/cognitive support. However, the cross-country variance is considerably larger here. Belgian and Czech scores are similar, the Danish and German scores are considerably higher, whilst the UK score is the lowest. In contrast to instrumental/cognitive support, the frequency and quality of emotional support seem to be related to each other.

Table 13. Providing emotional support by the teacher during the lesson. Frequency: mean scores 'ranging from 1=*Not at all* to 4=*Most of the time*. Quality: mean scores ranging from 1=*Lowest quality* to 7=*Highest quality*. Average numbers of occurrences (Standarddeviation).

	Mean (SD)	Frequency	Quality
UK		2.18 (0.79)	3.67 (1.56)
Belgium		2.52 (0.79)	5.00 (0.89)
CZ		2.49 (0.41)	5.14 (1.25)
Denmark		2.45 (0.35)	5.80 (0.54)
Germany		2.90 (1.07)	6.67 (0.47)
TOTAL		2.44 (0.65)	5.15 (1.39)

Data source: direct-observation template.

The comparison of the results related to pedagogical support provided by the teacher (Tables 11-13) and the results describing actual participation of students in discussions (Table 7) reveals some degree of variation and discrepancy. Indeed, the teachers' motivating and activating strategies seem to play a certain role in the activation of the students, but do not fully explain students' – both male and female – active-participation rates. Direct-observation field notes from Belgium and the United Kingdom are in line with these findings reporting that while some students act more when the teacher provides more support, students who are active/passive, typically remain active/passive independently of the teacher's encouragement.

An alternative perspective is brought up by video recordings from the Czech Republic and Denmark that allowed us to precisely capture non-verbal aspects of teachers' support (e.g. gaze orientation, eye contact, location and body orientation, and movement through the classroom). The observations are summarized in Table 14. Teachers' body language and space occupation indicate that, despite some degree of variation, the distribution of teachers' presence, attention and readiness/willingness to communicate is mostly equally distributed between girls and boys. Interestingly, when considering not the student's gender but how active/passive the student is, it seems that, despite some variation again, teachers tend to be more present for, attentive to, and ready/willing to communicate with active students rather than passive ones.

Table 14. Teachers' non-verbal communication depending on the student's profile; percentages of classes.

	Denmark	Czech Republic
Boys equal to Girls	63%	100%
Boys more than Girls	12%	0%
Girls more than Boys	25%	0%
Active equal to Passive	44%	17%
Active more than Passive	50%	83%
Passive more than Active	6%	0%
TOTAL	100%	100%

Data source: direct-observation template.

If, in addition to these two particular observations, we also consider the globally established evidence – presented in the first section of the text – that boys are more active discussion participants than girls are, the question can be raised whether it is student's *gender per se* that makes the difference, or it is rather student's *activity*. In other words, teachers might *seem* to be oriented toward boys rather than girls because they are actually more oriented toward active students rather than passive students and, indeed, active students are more often boys than girls. However, in the case when a student is active, the teacher pays more attention to the student rather independently on the student's gender. Such a perspective would provide a more global framework allowing us (1) to explain not only the low participation of passive girls but also the low participation of passive boys and (2) to interpret the low participation of passive girls not only through comparison to boys but also

independently of such a comparison, which would be particularly useful in case of British data collected in exclusively all-female classes.

Indeed, direct-observation field notes reveal a kind of vicious circle hidden in teachers' student-activation patterns: active students obtain more teachers' attention/support, which encourages them in their activity. In contrast, students who are passive gain less teacher's attention/support, which does not encourage them to become more active. For instance, in the Czech Republic, we have frequently seen teachers interacting more with the students who often/always raise their hands or spontaneously take the floor, not paying much attention to the students who do not manifest, independently of their gender, or even ethnicity or special educational needs. In all kinds of observed configurations – active/passive male/female with/without SEN from visible ethnic minority/majority –, the teachers systematically interacted with active students. Similarly, in Belgium, the impression is that the observed teachers preferred active students who they frequently give the turn to speak, while the quietest and shy students are left alone. However, in some classes, this personal preference is pushed even further so that the teacher gives the turn to speak to *still the same* active students, even if other active students have their hands raised too.

4.2.2. Students' discussion-related interactions and teacher's interaction-supportive techniques

Participating in a classroom discussion implies interacting, not only with the teacher but also, and most importantly, with other students. Direct observations and video recordings collected across all the countries clearly show that student-to-teacher communication largely dominates over student-to-student communication, which ranges from rare to nonexistent.

In Denmark, only 9% of students' expressions were addressed to another student, 91% being addressed to the teacher. In the Czech Republic, the proportion is similar (Speaking to another student: 5%; Speaking to the teacher: 95%). Table 15 displays the data in relation to gender. Girls talk almost exclusively to the teacher. Boys show a similar but slightly less pronounced tendency. When a student talks to another student, it is more likely to be a boy; this statement is considerably stronger for Denmark than for the Czech Republic. It suggests that boys might be more self-

confident in discussing with peers without moderation by the teacher, while girls might need more moderation by the teacher.

Table 15. Expressions addressed to students/teachers produced by the students from the subsample (most active/passive boy/girl) during the observed lesson; percentages of occurrences

	Denmark	Czech Republic
Speech addressed to the teacher - Female speakers	42%	59%
Speech addressed to the teacher - Male speakers	49%	35%
Speech addressed to another student - Female speakers	1%	2%
Speech addressed to another student - Male speakers	8%	3%
TOTAL	100%	100%

Data source: video recordings.

The frequency of between-student discussion-related interactions (e.g. student communicating towards another student or receiving a reaction from another student) involving – as a message sender or receiver, female students ($M=7.3$; $SD=5.4$) is even lower than already low interactions involving male students ($M=9.3$; $SD=6.2$). As shown in Table 16, this gender-related difference is mainly due to the Czech Republic and Denmark. On one hand, Danish students seem to be the most interactive, both boys and girls, but on the other hand, the gap between the genders is the largest one in our sample. Speaking of which, this gender-related gap is also related to the findings from the video analysis described above. The significantly least number of between-student interactions was observed in Belgium, the only country where girls scored higher than boys. It is important to note that the overall score for girls may be partially influenced by the composition of the British sample, which included only female respondents. Given the absence of boys in this national subset, the aggregated female score may be slightly elevated. Without the inclusion of the UK data, the overall score for girls might have been even lower.

Table 16. Between-student interactions involving the students from the subsample (most active/passive boy/girl) during the observed lesson. Average numbers of occurrences (Standard deviation).

	Mean (SD)	Frequency	Quality
UK		8.88 (8.27)	(no data)
Belgium		1.00 (0.82)	0.80 (0.75)
CZ		5.57 (3.58)	7.29 (4.06)
Denmark		8.60 (2.85)	13.13 (5.57)
TOTAL		7.33 (5.35)	9.33 (6.21)

Data source: direct-observation template. Germany is not presented in the table due to lack of data

Discussion-related feedback from other students is very minimal or absent. The United Kingdom and the Czech Republic report in their direct-observation field notes that when it occurs, students are more prone to respond nonverbally, nodding their head, smiling, laughing, or gesturing. Direct-observation field notes from Belgium and the United Kingdom, as well as video recordings from Denmark, show that if the reaction is verbal, it typically consists of a brief agreement, in contrast to brief or elaborated disagreements captured in Czech video recordings.

In relation to these findings, we further investigated whether and how interactions among students are encouraged by the teachers. For this analysis, gender categories were not considered. Table 17 summarizes the results. National mean scores capturing the frequency of moments where the teacher stimulates interaction and cooperation between their students are mostly situated in the lower values of the range (M=2.2; SD=0.8; the scale ranging from 1=*Not at all* to 4=*Most of the time*). The best score was obtained by Germany, and the lowest scores were found in Belgium and Denmark.

Table 17. Encouragement of between-student interactions by the teacher during the observed lesson; mean scores ranging from 1=*Not at all* to 4=*Most of the time*. Average numbers of occurrences (Standard deviation).

	Mean (SD)	Frequency
UK		2.67 (0.70)
Belgium		1.90 (0.80)
CZ		2.21 (0.59)
Denmark		1.80 (0.44)
Germany		3.17 (0.62)
TOTAL		2.19 (0.75)

Data source: direct-observation template.

The interpretation of these results requires a deeper analysis. First, when considering national scores in a global scope, descriptive quantitative data presented in Tables 16 and 17 indicate that the level of encouragement from the teacher mostly corresponds to the level of actual interactions between the students. For instance, Belgium scores low in both teachers' strategies and students' behaviour, Czech teachers-related score as well as student-related score are close to the middle of the range, and finally, both scores in the United Kingdom are situated very high. These results suggest that teachers' strategies are indeed reflected in students' behaviours. However, one country – Denmark – shows a striking discrepancy between the level of interaction encouragement (the lowest score) and the level of actual interactions (the second highest score). This being said, some discrepancies are brought up by other countries as well (source: direct-observation template and fieldnotes). For example, in Belgium, the data show that although students whose teachers are engaged in collaboration encouragement are more interactive than students whose teachers are not, their interactions remain disproportionately low. A similar situation is pictured by the United Kingdom: despite highly invested teachers, students are not interacting much. These findings suggest that although the teacher's approach has an important role in influencing interaction and collaboration among students, the teacher is not the only factor impacting students' behaviour.

Since the observed discussions resembled more question-and-answer (Q&A) between the teacher and the students, we wondered whether an actual student-to-student dialogue even happens during the whole class, for example, in the form of a small-group activity. In line with the 'Think-Pair-Share' framework, discussing a topic first in a small group facilitates subsequent participation in the whole-class discussion. Table 18 shows that small-group activities took place in most of the

classes (69%). Important differences emerged between countries. While British and German students worked in small groups in every lesson, Belgian students did not have that opportunity at all. This difference reflects the previously mentioned cross-country difference in the frequency of teachers' encouragement of students' interactions provided during the global discussion (Table 17), suggesting that when a teacher encourages interactions between students in large-scale discussions, he/she also does so in small-scale discussions; and vice versa.

Table 18. Classes where a small-group activity was prepared by the teacher during the observed lesson; percentages of classes.

	Mean (SD)	Frequency
UK		100%
Belgium		0%
CZ		86%
Denmark		60%
Germany		100%
TOTAL		69%

Data source: direct-observation template.

4.2.3. Classroom climate and teachers' classroom-management strategies

Participating in a classroom discussion is related to the classroom climate and the overall atmosphere during the lesson. One of the relevant descriptors to be considered is related to the spatial configuration of the classroom and the distribution of students across the space. The most typical classroom consists of several rows of school desks for 1-2 students (51%). The second most observed layout, including several working centres particularly suitable for group activities (28%), was mainly found in Denmark, where it was also the predominant layout. In contrast, organization of school desks into a circle or U-shape – the most inclusive and inviting setting for whole-classroom discussions – only occurred twice in the whole sample, once in Germany and once in Denmark (data source: direct-observation template). While some teachers rearrange the space to make it more suitable for the given activity (e.g. United Kingdom, data source: direct-observation field notes), other teachers do not bother (e.g. the Czech Republic, data source: video recordings). Video recordings from the Czech Republic and Denmark clearly show that male and female students

were equally distributed across the space of the classroom, so that no visible spatial/physical separation was observed. In direct-observation field notes, Belgium reports that girls and boys were mingled in some classes but more or less separated in other classes. Considering those observations jointly with the fact that there is a cross-country difference between Danish highly active and Belgian rather passive students, mentioned earlier in this present chapter, the spatial configuration of the classroom and distribution of students across the space seem to play a role in students' participation as well as between-student interaction.

Classroom climate is also closely related to students' behaviour, documented mainly in direct-observation field notes and video recordings. Most classes were adequately quiet and orderly so that the lesson/discussion could take place correctly, in some cases, slightly or mildly disruptive behaviour and/or disciplinary issues were noted. Most typically, students were observed to chat with each other regarding issues that were unrelated to the topic or to the classroom (e.g. the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic, and Belgium). In some classes, a restrictive number of students were orally overactive so that they dominated the discussion. While Belgium mentions mostly boys, the Czech Republic, depending on the class, observed dominant boys as well as dominant girls.

The significance of friendship networks and classroom hierarchies to self-efficacy was noted as well. For instance, the United Kingdom describes the impression that the silence of some students could be motivated not necessarily by lack of knowledge or lack of interest but rather by the fear/apprehension of the reaction from other students (e.g., being laughed at), which was confirmed later in the focus groups. In line with UK findings, Belgian researchers observed that sometimes when a student made an "obvious mistake", other students reacted in a judgemental way, which could create a generally discouraging effect for a potential next speaker, especially when we consider the age of the observed students (the specificities of social and emotional dynamics in early adolescence) or different personality profiles (e.g. level of self-efficacy or sensitivity). In Belgium, some classes, boys – not girls – often participate more spontaneously, screaming their answers throughout the classroom or asking direct and critical questions. However, the students were never openly fighting or disrespecting others.

Speaking of which, a speech analysis focused on explicit markers of respect vs. non-respect of the plurality/relativity of opinions (e.g. "I understand your point of view

but...” vs. “How can anyone think that...?!”) was conducted on video-recorded data. The results show that the students are quite often disrespectful to the ideas of their peers. In the Czech Republic, explicit non-respect was marginal (8%) in contrast to Denmark, where the proportion of explicit non-respect was more important (65%) than the proportion of explicit respect (35%). As detailed in Table 19, Danish boys are prone to express non-respect rather than respect, in contrast to Czech boys, who mostly express respect. All Czech girls exclusively expressed respect; Danish girls do not appear in these data.

Table 19: **Explicit verbal respect/non-respect of plurality/relativity of opinions** produced by the students from the subsample (most active/passive boy/girl) during the observed lesson; percentages of occurrences. Data source: video recordings.

	Denmark	Czech Republic
Explicit Respect - Female speakers	0%	54%
Explicit Respect - Male speakers	34%	38%
Explicit Non-Respect - Female speakers	0%	0%
Explicit Non-Respect - Male speakers	65%	8%
TOTAL	100%	100%

Data source: video recordings.

Direct-observation fieldnotes from Belgium support these findings, pointing out that girls were more nuanced in their ideas compared to boys, who just stated their opinions, without a filter. All these findings considered jointly suggest (1) that judgmental and non-respectful atmosphere could provide an explanation to the low proportion of sharing particularly personal opinions and experiences, perceived as are “riskier” than presenting “safe” objective facts, and (2) that, when such an atmosphere is present in the classroom, it is mostly due to male students.

Actually, to present an opinion/experience can be “safe” if that opinion/experience is shared by a majority, or at least by several persons. The true question resides in presenting *minority* opinions, or even *controversial* ones, since people in general are uncomfortable with being “the only one” on one side of the discussion. This aspect was also a subject of our investigation, the results being provided in Table 20. Students do express opinions in class, even when they are different from most of the other students but not often. On average, these opinions occur 2-3 times per 45 min (M=2.6; SD=1.1; scale ranging from 1=*Never* to 4=*Often or more than 5 times per 45*

min). The scores in Denmark, the Czech Republic, and Belgium are close to each other and above the mean score. The scores of the two remaining countries are situated under the mean value, Germany being much lower than the United Kingdom. Observation field notes provide an insight into the similarities as well as differences between Belgium and the Czech Republic, whose students present a similar quantity of opinions, concerning the type of presented opinions. Both countries note that students who like to speak their minds are ready to share their opinions, even controversial opinions, but sensitive personal statements are almost non-existent in Belgian classes, while they occur in Czech classes.

Table 20. Minority opinions produced by the students from the subsample (most active/passive boy/girl) during the observed lesson; mean scores ranging from 1=*Never* to 4=*Often or more than 5 times per 45 min*.

	Mean (SD)	Frequency
UK		2.00 (0.94)
Belgium		2.80 (1.17)
CZ		2.86 (0.83)
Denmark		3.00 (0.89)
Germany		1.33 (0.47)
TOTAL		2.60 (1.06)

Data source: direct-observation template.

The next aspect of the general atmosphere relates to the way of the overall treatment of female students in the classroom during the lesson. We found that students communicate with other girls and boys in the classroom mostly at the same level and in the same way ($M=3.2$; $SD=0.7$), although their communication is less gender-balanced in comparison to teachers' communication ($M=3.5$; $SD=0.6$). The analysis of national scores – documented in Table 21 – reveals that students' behaviours varies in function of the behaviour of their teachers, suggesting that students and teachers are aligned in the way they communicate with boys/girls; even though students are systematically more prone than teachers to a less equal treatment of the two genders. The leader in gender-equal communication is Germany, followed by the Czech Republic, Denmark, with Belgium in the last position. However, even the lowest mean score in this variable attains higher values in the given range.

Table 21. Quantitatively and qualitatively balanced communication toward girls vs. boys during the lesson; mean scores ranging from 1=*Not at all* to 4=*Most of the time*.

	Mean (SD)	Teachers	Students
UK		(not applicable)	(not applicable)
Belgium		2.80 (0.40)	2.60 (0.80)
CZ		3.71 (0.70)	3.29 (0.88)
Denmark		3.53 (0.50)	3.27 (0.44)
Germany		4.00 (0.00)	3.67 (0.47)
TOTAL		3.50 (0.62)	3.20 (0.70)

Data source: direct-observation template.

Direct-observation field notes from Belgium describe the nature of the differences between girls and boys in the way of connecting with other students and provide evidence of students' preferences for the same gender. Girls typically interact with others by helping them (e.g., helping them to formulate an answer when they are lost), and they offer their help to other girls. In contrast, boys typically seem to fire each other up to participate in the classroom discussion. It was also observed that both girls and boys tend to interact more with those who sit around them, which, considering the relation between physical proximity and interpersonal proximity, brings us back to the importance of the classroom layout and the spatial distribution of students in the classroom.

In order to get a better understanding of the overall atmosphere, this study not only included the classroom context but also tried to describe the situational context. However, no particular event that would considerably disrupt or corrupt the class happened during the observed lessons. On the other hand, the topic chosen by the teacher for the discussion could have impacted the students' participation. Indeed, direct-observation field notes from the United Kingdom note a general lack of engagement and students often commenting "how boring" political topics were for students, even in civic lessons that had to do with gender equality, which is supposed to be a relevant topic for literally *every* student in exclusively female-student classes.

This being said, visible ethnic minorities *did* demonstrate significant engagement overall, particularly concerning the discussion topics like News, Media, Islamophobia, LGBTQI+ issues, Sexism, and Gender-based violence. This finding suggests that the level of personal interest and engagement in the given topic influences the level of participation in a discussion about this particular topic.

Another example of a possible impact of the situational context on the lessons, from Czech Republic, shows that students' activity in the context of direct versus recorded observation slightly shifted so that some students became more active, while others lowered their activity, which might be explained – among all possible situational factors – by the presence of the camera and its different impact on different personalities.

Finally, our last analysis focuses on the role of the teacher, asking whether and how teachers approach organization of the whole classroom and management of students' behaviour during the lesson (e.g. setting and reminding rules, requiring disciplined behaviour, requiring a show of hands to speak, efficiently organizing learning activities, managing time and students' attention, encouraging respectful atmosphere, managing disruptive behaviours, shutting down orally over-active students). As displayed in Table 22, organizing and managing occur many times during the lesson but not most of the time, which corresponds to only slightly higher values in the given range ($M=2.7$; $SD=0.9$; the scale ranging from 1=*Not at all* to 4=*Most of the time*). There is also an important cross-country variation. The quality of the observed organization and management is evaluated as higher ($M=5.5$; $SD=1.2$; the scale ranging from 1=*Lowest quality* to 4=*Highest quality*). The analysis of national scores and their variance shows a close relation between the frequency and the quality, so that the higher the level of one, the higher the level of the other. Thus, considering these two aspects individually or jointly, Belgian and Czech scores are similar and close to the mean value, Danish score is considerably higher, German score is the highest, and finally, British score is the lowest.

Table 22. Teacher's organization and management during the lesson. Frequency: mean scores ranging from 1=*Not at all* to 4=*Most of the time*. Quality: mean scores per class ranging from 1=*Lowest quality* to 7=*Highest quality*.

	Mean (SD)	Frequency	Quality
UK		1.86 (0.50)	5.00 (1.89)
Belgium		2.85 (0.41)	5.57 (0.49)
CZ		2.46 (0.76)	5.53 (1.05)
Denmark		3.12 (0.78)	5.80 (0.62)
Germany		3.56 (0.63)	6.33 (0.94)
TOTAL		2.71 (0.86)	5.46 (1.17)

Data source: direct-observation template.

To sum up, disciplining students to make them respect the rules is one of the conditions and constitutive elements of the open classroom climate (see above chapter 2), in the same sense as supporting students is in view of getting them more involved. Wondering whether the use of managing/restrictive pedagogical strategies on one hand is actually in line with the application of supportive/encouraging pedagogical strategies on the other hand, we compared the scores that the teachers obtained in the frequency and the quality of organization and management with their scores in the frequency and the quality of provided emotional support (see earlier, Table 7). The analysis revealed a positive relation between these two variables, suggesting that the more 'open', welcoming, and encouraging the learning environment is, the more disciplined and respectful the classroom climate it requires. Therefore, in order to create and maintain optimal conditions in terms of an inviting as well as safe space for classroom discussions, teachers need to provide both support and management.

This being said, not only too little but also too much regulation can discourage students from participation in classroom discussions. Direct-observation field notes from the Czech Republic, United Kingdom, and Belgium indicate that the classes, while still open, are predominantly structured by the teacher, which does not significantly promote the initiation of discussion or students' engagement. Belgium points out that teachers' dominant position is due to a strict Belgian classroom culture but there are also interpersonal differences that make some teachers more controlling while others adopt a more lenient management style.

4.3. Results on political discussions barriers

4.3.1. Factors associated with Girls' Participation in Political Discussions (analysis on focus groups & teachers' interview data)

The low engagement in political discussions among girls is based on several fundamental areas, according to the results of qualitative analyses. In identifying these areas, we based our analysis on the results of interviews with teachers, focus groups with students, and records from direct observations of researchers in classrooms. We present our findings in the following chapter. Below, we discuss the key factors behind girls' engagement in political discussion according to our results.

Several key factors, such as language proficiency, measured through students' self-assessed ability to speak the national language during class (Q.8), showed no statistically significant difference across gender groups, suggesting that boys and girls feel similarly confident using the national language in school settings. However, a significant variation emerged between countries ($p=.006$). These differences suggest that national educational contexts and possibly instructional approaches influence how confidently students engage with classroom language. Importantly, this reinforces the earlier observation that language-related barriers—rather than gender alone—seem to play a role in shaping students' participation and political self-efficacy in classroom discussions.

Our theoretical model of Political Self-Efficacy (PSE) examined how students perceive their ability to engage with political systems, shaped by three interconnected indicators: psychological, behavioural, and environmental factors. The first indicator highlights the interplay between students' feelings of difference (e.g., based on identity) and their interest in political topics, which can either hinder or motivate political engagement. The second focuses on future-oriented behaviours and school-based participation, emphasizing how involvement in school initiatives fosters confidence in influencing political systems. The third addresses the school environment, particularly teacher support and school climate, as critical to nurturing political efficacy. The model's validity is tested through exploratory factor analysis using promax rotation, revealing three factors corresponding to these dimensions.

Empirical data and classroom observations further illuminate how these factors collectively shape PSE among students.

Interest in politics - global focus groups analysis

Interest in politics is an important prerequisite for students' activity in political discussions as our results from the questionnaires showed. It is, of course, necessary for students to have basic information about politics in order to be able to discuss and present their opinions. We assume that boys and girls receive the same information in the school environment and in most cases, they also have the opportunity to express their interest in politics and public affairs in a similar way. Although the differences in PSE results were not significant in our sample (please see above), both teachers and students mentioned the different activities of girls and boys in political discussions. As seen in some countries, qualitative observations such as the UK fieldnotes, very often, the classroom lacks political discourse, significant curriculum directives towards political participation and discussions in the classroom, and specific pedagogical techniques or activities towards this end.

When it comes to descriptive statistical data Interest in PSE topics (Q.20 in the questionnaire) displayed variability, with mean scores spanning 2.2 to 3.1 and modest SDs (0.5–0.6), suggesting balanced distributions. A slight positive skewness indicated a tendency toward higher levels of interest. Belief in better future (Q.21) was generally low, as demonstrated by a mean score of 1.7 for one group.

Based on the country-level analysis of classroom participation and school activity involvement (Q21 and Q22), several patterns emerge that expand upon the descriptive quantitative findings on PSE. Students in Belgium reported the highest average frequency of PSE-related classroom activities ($M = 1.9$, $SD = 0.6$), followed by the UK ($M = 1.8$, $SD = 0.4$) and Germany ($M = 1.8$, $SD = 0.6$). In contrast, the Czech Republic had the lowest mean score ($M = 1.5$, $SD = 0.5$), indicating less frequent exposure to classroom activities related to political self-efficacy. These differences show that national context influences the extent to which students encounter participatory opportunities in the classroom.

Despite these national differences in classroom activities. Mean scores for general participation in school activities (Q22) were relatively consistent across countries,

ranging from $M = 2.3$ in Germany to $M = 2.4$ in Belgium, suggesting a shared pattern of moderate involvement. The data therefore point to meaningful national gaps in the educational implementation of political self-efficacy, but not in student participation more broadly.

These findings further support the earlier conclusion that structural and curricular contexts are key to understanding student engagement—particularly the presence and quality of PSE-related activities in class. While PSE beliefs may be stable, the national variation in how political discussions are facilitated in classrooms is a critical determinant of student experience and engagement. Factor loadings provide insight into the relationships between variables and underlying constructs.

Insights derived from the focus group interview data ($N=22$) offer a qualitative understanding of the limitations in students' perceptions and comprehension of the concept of 'politics'. This factor consequently results in their diminished interest in the subject. The students' limited understanding of politics often stems from a lack of exposure to diverse political perspectives and real-world applications.

- *"I think most young people are interested in politics but they don't want to participate in them. Many people make fun of citizenship, they call me boring and that stuff, the chaps, the really popular people. They judge you, 'you're such a nerd' they say." (focus group code: UK.S.2)*

This gap in knowledge leads to a perception of politics as an abstract and irrelevant subject, disconnected from their daily lives. Consequently, students struggle to engage with political topics, hindering their ability to develop critical thinking skills and participate meaningfully in civic discourse.

- *"Government [...] the MP's and stuff" (focus groups ID code: UK.S.1).*
- *"Politics is to have discussions with each other and the making of laws"; "For me politics is to govern a country, to make all the laws to rule on everything in a country" (focus groups ID code: BEL. S.2)*
- *"A group of people who somehow run the state... Politics are the people we elected, or rather our parents elected, to represent us" (focus groups ID code: CZ.S.6)*

- *"I just think of the Parliament right away. I don't know if it's a good or bad answer, but it's the first thing that comes to mind. Politics, it's about our Prime Minister, and so on."* (focus groups ID code: DK.S. 3)

Students often perceive politics as a distant and unengaging subject, primarily associated with adult concerns and high-level governmental operations. This perception creates a significant barrier to political participation in the classroom.

- *"Old people. It's for old people."* (focus groups ID code: DK.S.8)
- *"They (young people) feel that politics doesn't concern them. (focus group ID code: CZ.S.5)*
- *"I do talk about politics with my peers, but not all the time because I want to be a kid around them. I cannot talk about politics with them because they come from different backgrounds. And politics is quite an adults topic. [...]. I am only fourteen!"* (focus group code: UK.S.2)

The notion that politics is "boring" or "not interesting" stems from a limited understanding of its scope and relevance to their daily lives. In line with open-ended questionnaire answers (4.1.2) and classroom observations' results (4.2.3), many students fail to recognize the pervasive nature of politics in various aspects of society, including education, local community issues, and social interactions.

- *"I am not interested in politics [...] it's boring isn't it"; I'm interested in politics but some of the topics are not interesting."* (focus group code: UK.S.1)
- *"I find it kind of boring."; "Keeping up with all the things happening on TV. It's not always that I'm super interested in it."* (focus groups ID code: DK.S. 3)
- *"Most young people I know are not interested in politics. A lot of people don't even discuss it in school either, they don't discuss it in school. If I want to talk about politics, I have a hard time finding a peer who wants to talk about it, so I tend to talk about politics with older people." ; "It's hard to talk about politics with your peers. Nobody wants to talk about it. "* (focus group code: CZ.S.4)

It is frequently observed that students predominantly associate politics and political discourse with higher levels of governance, such as Members of Parliament and government officials. Politics and citizenship issues are often perceived as an 'adult-dominated' domain; from the students' perspective, 'politics' are not connected to their immediate daily lives, interests, or responsibilities. That is a lesson learnt that WP4

(pedagogical experiments based on counter narratives and think-pair-share) and WP5 (co-constructed, 5-lesson intervention) aimed to tackle in the next steps of the G-EPIC project.

- *"It's about making decisions, and we can't vote yet" (focus groups ID code: DK.S.9)*
- *"Students/youngsters are not eighteen yet, so they can't vote. They can't change anything. They can't do anything about it." (focus group ID code: CZ.S.5)*
- *"With politics, it is not that I don't like anything. But I am not really interested. There are a lot of discussions with a lot of opinions. There are a lot of issues in the world. I don't watch the news regularly. I am not that interested" (#1). (focus group code: BEL. S. 2. 1)*
- *"I really think that politics is not fun. Because every time I discuss this with one of my parents or [...] it always ends up with them being angry at each other." (focus group code: BEL. S. 2. 1)*

In addition to the deficiencies in the national curricula concerning politics and citizenship, a preliminary explanation for this phenomenon is that students aged 13-15 are disenfranchised, which may lead them to perceive a lack of agency in influencing political matters and decisions, unlike adults.

- *"For when you're older, you know, when you can vote". (focus group ID code: DK.S.7)*

The disenfranchisement of students aged 13-15 may contribute significantly to their perceived lack of agency in political matters. Without the right to vote or participate directly in formal political processes, these young individuals may feel disconnected from the decision-making mechanisms that shape their communities and nation. This sense of powerlessness could potentially lead to disengagement or apathy towards political issues, even as they recognize the importance of politics in shaping citizens' lives.

- *"[...] but we are only fourteen-year-olds and we are expected to know about politics. I am overwhelmed with the school workload, and to know all this stuff." (focus group ID: UK.S.2)*

- *"Maybe you just like to have fun with your friends and play all the time, and then you're not that interested in politics" (focus group ID: DK.S.9)*
- *"Think you get away from it a bit, because it's not exactly the most exciting thing at our age. Because we can't really have anything to do with it and such. After all, we can only vote for a long time." (focus group ID: DK.S.4)*

However, despite their inability to vote, these young people demonstrate a nuanced understanding of politics as a domain that affects everyday life. This awareness suggests that there is potential for greater political engagement among this age group if given appropriate channels and opportunities. Nevertheless, and in line with observations' results (4.2.3) these young individuals frequently articulated their understanding of 'politics' as a sphere related to decisions impacting citizens' lives. Educational interventions (WP5) could play a crucial role in bridging this gap by providing platforms for empowering girls' political participation in the classroom. Such experiences could help cultivate a sense of civic responsibility and political efficacy among students, potentially leading to more active citizenship as they approach voting age.

- *"Discussions"; "Rules", "having laws", "Very nice clothes." (About political discussions in the classroom); (Politics is) "The structure of society as well." (focus group ID: DK.S.1)*
- *"(Politics is) Choices we make to ensure that the society and economy work better in a country or continent." (focus group ID: BEL.S. 2.2)*

The students' focus groups also captured factors that contribute to low levels of students' interest in politics. Politics is seen as a 'boring' and 'unexciting' domain, rather than relevant to students. As students are not voters themselves, they often express that they feel formal ways of 'politics' are not relatable to their interests and realities. By connecting politics with voting and the formal levels of governing and political decision-making at the state level or even a bad atmosphere when discussing politics, students feel that they do not "really have anything to do with it (politics)".

This disconnect between students and politics is further exacerbated by a lack of accessible information tailored to their age group and interests. Many students feel overwhelmed by the complexity of political issues and struggle to see how these matters directly impact their daily lives. Additionally, the absence of youth

representation in political discourse and decision-making processes reinforces the perception that politics is a domain reserved for older generations, further alienating young people from engaging in civic participation.

- *“(Politics/politicians are) people who make decisions for the country... it is very boring.” (focus group ID code: BE.S.4)*
- *“Think you get away from it (politics) a bit, because it's not exactly the most exciting thing at our age. Because we can't really have anything to do with it and such. After all, we can only vote after a long time from now.” (focus group ID code: DK.S.4)*
- *“Politics is boring [...] There is a lot of fighting.” (focus group ID code: BE.S.1).*
- *“it's really boring” “If we can't vote, it doesn't matter.” (focus group ID code: DK.S.7)*

Teachers also expressed the opinion that politics is too distant for students of this age. Although it is part of the curriculum, students often do not connect the information they receive at school with their everyday lives, they do not connect civic and formal politics. Some teachers stated that they try to include activities in different grades that bring politics closer to public affairs (visiting the Chamber of Deputies, following the activities of local politicians), but it still seems that politics is distant for students and they are not interested in political topics.

- *“As I said, we organize excursions to the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. We have a pupil parliament. We have simulations of real elections. I think it's important for democracy that young people take an interest in political events and are active.” (CZ5)*
- *“I try, but if I were to present it as a topic, that's not possible. It shouldn't be a topic for a final exam. But it's generally the case for almost all subjects in primary school. We forget to ask about the student's life world.” (DK7)*
- *“And then of course, we talk about what kind of organization it is. Because the school is also a political organization in one way or another, and we make a lot of use of the student council here at the school.” (DK3)*
- *“I support structures like the class council: from 6th grade onwards, each class holds a weekly class council where students, holding various roles, discuss their topics of interest. In each council meeting there is a moderator, a secretary and a timekeeper. Some have more roles.” (GER2)*

- *“That’s what I try and encourage them to do, with citizenship as well it’s about learning the political system and how they might face like discrimination or any kind of disadvantage. So, it’s really important for them to understand that and know what they can do about it as well.” (UK1)*

The connection between politics and democratic values in educational settings varies significantly across different countries and cultural contexts. For instance, in Denmark, students demonstrate a more nuanced understanding of this relationship, recognizing that political discourse extends beyond formal governmental structures and into everyday interactions. This understanding allows students to perceive politics as an integral part of their educational experience, acknowledging that classroom discussions and extracurricular activities can serve as platforms for practicing democratic principles.

- *“(Politics is) Democracy.” (focus groups ID codes: DK.S.4 & DK.S.5)*

This broader interpretation of politics allows students to engage with democratic values more actively in their daily lives. They understand that the skills of respectful dialogue, critical thinking, leadership, and collaborative decision-making learned in the classroom are directly applicable to civic and political participation.

- *“(Politics is) Different opinions and other people’s opinions.” (focus group ID code: DK.S.5)*
- *“I find politics very interesting [...] obviously leadership roles [...] I might sign up for the future” (focus group ID code: UK.S.2)*

Furthermore, it is important that students recognize that political engagement is not limited to voting or formal political processes but includes non-formal ways of participation such as community involvement, debate clubs, student councils, and other forms of civic engagement both within and outside the school environment (some of those areas that the WP5 intervention highlighted). This holistic approach to understanding politics and democracy in education can contribute to a more engaged and politically aware student population.

Family background and family interest in politics

Family as an environmental factor influencing a student's attitude towards school, their involvement in lessons and interest in public affairs was mentioned primarily by teachers. Students also expressed their views in focus groups on whether they discuss politics with their parents at home, whether they obtain information from their parents, and whether their family encourages them to participate in civic politics in the future.

- *"If parents are very political and often talk about it, then I think your upbringing is very political. You know, even when you grow up, you'll probably talk about it and seem very interested." (focus group ID code: DK. S. 3)*
- *"I like to discuss politics. My brother is studying at the university to be a lawyer and we discuss politics together."; "When I see it on TV, I sometimes discuss it with my parents, but only sometimes." (focus group ID code: CZ.S.2)*
- *"Well, I think that young people are interested. I discuss it with my parents on every day basis." (focus group ID code: CZ.S.2)*
- *"is the family, what are the habits in that family, and how do the people within the family behave towards each other." (focus group ID code: CZ.S.6)*
- *"We do talk about it (politics) often at home about things that recently happened"; "(We do talk about it (politics)) With family, only sometimes, but I don't really" (focus group ID code: BEL.S.1.1)*

During the focus groups, students' reflections linked family background, socioeconomic status (SES), social class, and ethnicity to an individual's political interest. Students recognized that family dynamics and socioeconomic factors play a significant role in shaping political engagement. They observed that families with higher SES and educational levels tend to have more political discussions and encourage political participation in the classroom. Furthermore, cultural and ethnic backgrounds were seen as influencing political views and the level of involvement in political processes:

- *"I think people who have more complex backgrounds... They're more interested in politics because they want to find out more about themselves and like their past so it's a way of finding out more about themselves through politics." (focus group ID code: UK.S.1)*

- *"Generally, I think it's people who come from a higher social class or whose parents have a higher education who are more likely to be interested in politics." (focus group ID code: DK.S.2)*
- *"If parents are very political and often talk about it, then I think your upbringing is very political. You know, even when you grow up, you'll probably talk about it and seem very interested." (focus group ID code: DK.S.3)*
- *"People who want to control [...] Rich and high." (focus group ID code: DK.S.7)*
- *"Those with more money are more interested. you can be influenced by your family and that can influence whether you are interested in politics or not." (focus group ID code: DK.S.9)*
- *"Parents' education influences interest in politics a lot. I have educated parents and they are very interested in politics. They discuss a lot with me, they explain a lot of things, they ask my opinion." (focus group ID code: CZ.S.4)*
- *"It's because my parents are very interested in politics, watching the news, and discussing politics, so they dragged me into it. I got interested in it, too. My parents argue about who's the better politician and stuff." (focus group ID code: CZ.S.5)*

In line with teachers' interview data, students in the focus groups mentioned the role that family/migrant background factors connected to SES can partake in shaping students' interest.

- *"It's hard to express a thought in a foreign language, and to be afraid of being ridiculed... Or they're just afraid that if they say something, others won't even understand them. " (Focus group ID: CZ.S.4)*

Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds often have access to more resources, experiences (such as educational environments) that can spark their knowledge and interest in various subjects. Conversely, students from lower-income families may face barriers to knowledge and exploring certain interests due to financial constraints or limited exposure. These disparities in opportunities can significantly influence students' political self-efficacy, highlighting the need for educational interventions that address socioeconomic inequalities.

- *"You can be influenced by your family and that can influence whether you are interested in politics or not." (focus group code: DK.S.9)*
- *"I like learning about politics, my dad loves politics... it's like a fun way to speak to him and talk to him and bond" (focus group code: UK.S.2).*
- *"My grandpa is interested in politics... When we visit him, we always discuss politics." (focus group ID code: CZ.S.2)*

Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds tend to have greater exposure to political discussions and resources. This increased access to information and engagement with political topics often leads to a higher level of interest in politics among students. Conversely, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may face barriers to political engagement, such as limited access to educational resources, provisions or time constraints due to parents' work obligations.

- *"Generally, I think it's people who come from a higher social class or whose parents have a higher education who are more likely to be interested in politics." (focus group ID code: DK. S. 2).*

Teachers from all participating countries mention the importance of the influence of the family environment on a child's participation in school. We can state that SES is a key factor according to teachers. However, their opinions on other risks in the family environment differ in individual countries based on experiences with the variability of students and their families. Teachers from Denmark and Germany pointed out ethnicity and minority background:

- *"Well, if it's about participation, I think the group that struggles a bit academically is maybe boys with a Muslim background." (DK5)*
- *"Yes, so it becomes very clear that for some who have a minority ethnic background, the family cannot help with homework at home to the same extent as other parents." (DK2)*
- *"Yes, then, it is clear that the resourceful ethnic Danish students are clearly the ones who are most active, in second place, if you can arrange it like that, then comes the ethnic Danes who may not have so many resources. And then finally those with other ethnic backgrounds." (DK3)*
- *"We do have some boys, especially with ethnic minority backgrounds, who do not take primary school very seriously." (DK8)*

- *For me disadvantaged pupils are those who cannot be supported at home in their schooling for example due to limited financial resources or limited knowledge of German from their parents. These pupils would benefit from support programmes/intervention programmes.” (GER1)*
- *“Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, students with parents who don't speak German.” (GER2)*

We encounter teachers' views that, in addition to socioeconomic background, it is important whether parents devote enough time to children, whether they help them with homework, and whether they regulate the time children spend on electronic devices.

- *“I think students with a more difficult socioeconomic background... students where it's more difficult economically...” “Students who are left to their own devices at home or students who have a difficult home situation have an insanely difficult time in a school context.”(B1)*
- *“So it is obvious that the support you can get from home matters and plays a large role for how students can perform.” (DK2)*
- *“Yes, a group of students who have a difficult home life, where they perhaps don't have contact with one parent or feel abandoned by one parent.” (DK4)*

Some teachers in the Czech Republic even expressed that:

- *“Yes, as we can see it in school, everything depends on family background. So, as we see it, academic achievement, ability to express one's own opinion and general awareness about politics, society, and also history is built on family background.” (CZ1)*

In their opinion, the teacher then has only limited possibilities in teaching the student. Here we address the interesting question of the teacher's perception of responsibility for the student's learning (development of the child's abilities). We can look at it in different ways: the teacher either reflects realistically on his/her experience at school, or we can see it as a resignation, or it is possible to explain it as a coping strategy of the teachers which help them to maintain their teacher self-concept even if they fail

to engage certain students. It would certainly be an interesting topic for future research.

- *“Girls that have to take a lot of responsibility at home because of low SES, they do not have the energy or focus to concentrate on academic matters in school.”(DK8)*
- *“For me disadvantaged pupils are those who cannot be supported at home in their schooling for example due to limited financial resources or limited knowledge of German from their parents. These pupils would benefit from support programmes/intervention programmes.” (GER1)*
- *“Well, even though we have great families around our school, you can still see the difference. I can recognise if the family is supporting, if they spend time with their children. Families with low social security or families where parents do not speak Czech are also a problem. We have that now with Ukrainian students.”Their families are not able to help children with homework, it is hard to communicate with them and to explain what kind of cooperation we need from them.” (CZ2)*
- *“It is difficult for children whose parents do not cooperate with the school, do not support their children, and do not see their children's education as a priority. [...] I think the children of low-educated parents who don't instill in their children that education is important need the most help. The parents don't support them in their studies, they don't debate with them, they don't help them when the child doesn't know what to do with their homework.” (CZ4)*

Teachers also understand the family as an important factor in the development of a child's personality. Family influence can also be seen in the student's personality - self-concept, self-esteem, and confidence in their own abilities (Krauss, Orth, & Robins, 2020; Elshanum, 2024; Pace, & Passanisi, 2018). Low self-esteem can be compounded by SES in cases where the child feels inadequate due to their family background. However, we must not forget about students' personality traits such as introversion. Some students will always be more passive because they do not like attention, they do not like to express themselves in front of others, regardless of the atmosphere in the classroom, students' relationships, or the teacher's guidance.

Therefore, we describe the personality factors separately, even though it is also part of sensitivity to the classroom climate (see below).

Personality factors

The personality of a student is perceived as a relatively stable factor indicating the student's activity, but not always the school results. There are students who are less active in school work and discussions because their abilities are at a lower level or they do not have enough information (or a general overview of the topic).

To better understand individual differences in students' political self-efficacy (PSE), we analysed five self-report items reflecting students' self-perceived political confidence and knowledge. These items captured dimensions such as perceived political knowledge, ability to understand political issues, willingness to express opinions, and belief in future political engagement.

Across the sample, students generally expressed moderate to strong confidence in their political abilities. The item "I have political opinions worth listening to" (Q15.d) yielded the highest mean agreement ($M = 1.8$, $SD = 0.8$), suggesting that students feel their perspectives hold value in political discourse. Similarly, students indicated a relatively strong belief that they "can understand most political issues easily" (Q15.c; $M = 1.9$, $SD = 0.7$) and "know more about politics than most people their age" (Q15.a; $M = 2.0$, $SD = 0.8$), reflecting a moderately positive self-assessment of political competence.

When it comes to political participation, students showed slightly lower confidence in their future political involvement. The item "As an adult I will be able to take part in political discussion" (Q15.e) had a mean score of 2.1 ($SD = 0.8$), indicating some uncertainty about future political engagement. The lowest confidence was observed in students' self-perceived capacity to contribute meaningfully during political discussions, with "When political issues or problems are being discussed, I usually have something to say" (Q15.b) rated at $M = 2.1$ ($SD = 0.8$). This suggests a possible gap between students' internal sense of political efficacy and their communicative assertiveness in group settings.

Taken together, these findings based on quantitative data analysis point to a relatively confident but varied self-perception of political capability among students. While students generally view themselves as knowledgeable and opinionated, a subset appears less assured when it comes to actively engaging in political discussions. This aligns with broader findings on classroom participation, where personal confidence does not always translate into observable engagement—particularly for students who may face social, linguistic, or educational barriers.

According to teachers, students with special educational needs are often less active than others. This may be related to the fear of failure, but it can also be challenging for them to react quickly enough and express their opinions, as they sometimes need more time to process information. The students' willingness to communicate plays a crucial role as well as we could see during the observation.

- *“Well, obviously the SEN, so my main role, I do work with the SEN children, so even if I'm sitting there and we've worked through questions...” “They still feel the shyness, they almost shut down and go, ‘no I can't read my answer’. Then separate from SEN, those that have slightly lower ability because if they've struggled with it and they're not 100% sure that they're right, again they're not going to want to.” (UK2)*
- *“When you think you have something to say that belongs to the discussion. But there are also many students that have an opinion but don't share it. [...] because they think their opinion is wrong” (focus group ID code: DK. S. 4)*
- *“Some students just don't engage at all. Not just in discussions, but in general, they just don't enjoy it. They're not interested at all. It's about their overall attitude towards school. They're just not interested in school; they don't want to be involved.” (focus group ID code: CZ.S.5)*
- *“Some topics may be uncomfortable for somebody, they don't want to talk about it or they just don't discuss because they are not interested in the topic. It's off-topic. And some people don't want to give their opinion because they will be condemned for it. Then again, sometimes I feel like I don't know anything about the topic, don't have enough information, or don't even have a clear opinion on it, so I'd rather leave it to others.; “I think it doesn't matter if someone is a boy or a girl. It depends on the character if someone is an introvert or an extrovert.” (focus group ID code: CZ.S.6)*

- *“I am an introvert so I cannot talk in front of that many people.” (focus group ID code: CZ.S.2)*
- *“I better listen, because if I hear this many opinions, etc. If I am confident (of my answer) then I talked but I listen first to give a good answer.” (focus group ID code: BE.S.2.1)*

On the other hand, in schools we also meet students with good grades, excellent test results, who are rather quiet and passive when it comes to class discussions because of their personality traits as mentioned above in observations, section 4.2.1.

- *“There could also be a group with low self-esteem, and that certainly plays a role as well.” (DK4)*
- *“We have a group of girls in our class who hardly ever participate in discussions. They are smart, they have good grades, but they are quiet. Unless I call them out or they have a presentation to give, they don't participate on their own.” (CZ 1)*

Gender as a factor affecting political participation in the classroom

Although teachers were more likely to agree that family background and personality were key factors, many of them also mentioned gender as a factor. For example, they expressed that girls prefer smaller group activities or that it is harder for them to speak in front of the whole class. Those pedagogies that were highlighted from WP3 results were tested in WP4 experiments and were adopted in the lesson planning in the WP5 intervention. Teachers felt that girls sometimes find it difficult to say their opinion in a mixed classroom with boys who are louder and more assertive (observations section 4.2.3). This was also mentioned by teachers from British schools who worked in all-girls classes and cited it as an argument for why families chose such a school. On the other hand, teachers also pointed out girls with an immigrant background, school can be seen as an environment where they can freely express their opinions. However, teachers believe that a combination of personality traits, family environment, and gender is crucial for school performance and school involvement.

- *“British working class girls are very often not active or engaged.[...] “The thing that I have really noticed is the lack of confidence among many girls and boys. And if we're talking about the demographic and socioeconomic differences. I found that the girls in the poorer demographic/economics grouping are rather shy. (UK3)*
- *“It's often the girls who are a bit quiet, and are afraid of what people will think, if you've said something wrong, and it's going to be on Snapchat tomorrow or something?” “But I think it's also about the fact that if you're in a group where you're safe, it doesn't matter so much if something you said is wrong.” (DK1)*
- *“Yes, because it's related to their culture. Boys are often seen as princes who are spoiled and need to be more disciplined at school because there are certain expectations for them. Girls, on the other hand, are often seen as hardworking and eager to do well.” (DK4)*
- *“A group of students who struggle more with equal access and active participation, primarily Danish girls. The issue isn't predominantly linked to ethnicity but rather reflects the girls' nervousness, anxiety, and fear to speak up in class, particularly in subjects like social studies and during political discussions.” (DK6)*
- *“Yes, there's a group that stands out, and it's girls. And it's not so much about their ethnicity, but it's actually mostly Danish girls. It's nervousness, anxiety, and being afraid to speak up. They stand out. [...] They know very well that I won't force them to speak, for example. They know that; they don't come into my class and feel anxious.” (DK7)*
- *“Also some girls can struggle to see their chance in the future. I, myself, am interested in gender issues, so I bring up the topic quite often.” [...] There are girls in this classroom who are not active, but they are good students with good grades, they can perform great in tests. I think it is their personality, they are rather shy and quiet. (CZ1)*

How gender and intersectional stereotypes affect political participation

Upbringing, low representation, and gender stereotypes according to students that hinder political interest and participation. These factors contribute to a cycle of underrepresentation, where women are less likely to see themselves as potential

political leaders. As a result, fewer girls picture themselves pursuing careers in politics or engaging in political activities, perpetuating the existing gender imbalance.

- *"Like all of the superior powers, they're all white. There's not many women up in the leadership either but even if there are, they're still white." (focus group code: UK. S. 2)*

An interesting finding emerged from the interviews and focus groups. Students and teachers are often unaware of the influence of social stereotypes on their actions, even though they describe them in interviews. Identifying possible gender stereotypes and becoming aware of their impacts on society became part of the basis for the preparation of educational materials in WP4 and WP5.

- *"Women aren't brought up to be as interested and then I think men are"*
- *"And then I think women are turned down or like they don't want to be interested in politics anymore because of people in high courts and stuff... There are less females there so they decide this isn't the place for us and they decide that it's not for them even if they are interested in it." (focus group code: UK. S. 1)*
- *"There are many who don't take female politicians seriously because they think it's nonsense that they're part of the governing system." "Some sexualize women more than men." (focus group code: DK.S.5)*

Intersectional factors (gender/ethnicity/race), sexism, and political participation are topics that concern students and potentially keep them away from participating in political discussions. This disengagement may stem from a perceived lack of representation or fear of marginalization within political spaces inside or outside of the classroom. As a result, students who identify with multiple intersectional identities might feel excluded or affected in terms of their political participation:

- *"In a sexist way as well, parents nowadays, especially in ethnic minorities, are more in favour towards boys speaking out than girls'. ;"When it comes to my other cousins, especially my boy cousins, my family is like, 'ok, so you can go into politics'. On the contrary, for me it's like... I can be a nurse etc. That so it's just quite like gender defined kind of a thing.[...] we have to educate boys because no one else is educating them and it's kind of like annoying"; "These*

attitudes contribute to school [...] minorities are more likely to not say that much especially if you are a girl because of what your parents or grandparents teach you at home." (focus group code: UK. S. 2)

- *"If you come from another country you have less opportunities to get into politics..."; "That is also with girls that they have less opportunities, or at least that used to be, in politics than men. [...] you have the gender stereotypes [...] you are taught that you can't do that, you are a girl you can't go into politics."* (focus group code: BEL.S.2.2)

Participation and risk aversion as affected by students' gender

Furthermore, girls tend to avoid any possible conflicts a political discussion might cause in the classroom, and averse taking the risk of participating in political discussions in front of the classroom (Schneider et al., 2016). This reluctance to engage in political discourse may stem from societal expectations of certain dynamics where boys play a dominant role in political discussions ("it works like that") and gender norms and structures that discourage girls from developing interest in expressing political opinions.

- *"They (boys) do (have a leading role in discussions), it works like that."* (focus group code: CZ.S.1)
- *"When they get older, not so many women are interested in it."* (focus group code: DK.S.9)
- *"When we say something in the other classes, when a girl says something, the boys would react and say 'Oh no that is not true'. Then I think to myself, okay no I won't say anything anymore."* (focus group ID: BEL.S.1)
- *"Boys sometimes talk more in discussions and dare to speak up more than some girls [...] most of the boys talk more often [...] They (boys) always want to be right, but then we (girls) say more things and they are quiet all of the sudden. (focus group code:BEL.2.S.2)*
- *"They (girls) sort of hang back a bit and are afraid of what the boys will do or what they will say or come after them. I don't know, but, you know, they're a bit more cautious. (focus group ID: DK.S.1)*
- *"Boys are not really thinking about what they say. In that way, they don't understand what could go wrong with it. Whereas girls think a bit more about*

what they say because we say things straightforwardly." (focus group ID: DK.S.1)

- *"It took us girls much longer to say something compared to the boys. Yeah, like 30 seconds, and they jumped right in." (focus group ID: DK.S.1)*
- *"It seems like girls are a bit afraid to express their opinion because they might judge wrongly." (focus group ID: DK.S.1)*
- *(active boy) It just seems to me that sometimes girls are ashamed to say something. Not afraid, but ashamed. Boys are more open in our class, more into the discussion.; (active girl): I think even girls are afraid sometimes. Because in the beginning, when we had our teacher, our first year, I was afraid of him too. A lot of people were afraid of him because he looks so stern. (focus group ID: CZ.S.4)*

However and in line with observations results (section 4.2.1.), girls can have an interest in socio-political matters, and are thought to be able to articulate their view. Factors as gendered stereotypes as well as the classroom climate, can make them more silent or passive:

- *Girls are much more interested in politics, they are more interested in public affairs. They're much more interested in the world around them. [...] They're much more likely to discuss politics (focus group code: CZ.S.6)*

On the contrary, boys appear to be more vocal in the classroom, taking more often the risk to participate and take more space in political discussions in the classroom. Girls appear to retain a more 'passive' attitude doing more listening than participating in political discussion.

- *"I prefer to listen to other people." (focus group code: BEL.S.1)*
- *"I like to hear the opinions of other people." (focus group code: BEL.S.2)*
- *"Yes I can [talk as much] but I am also a person who wants to participate in lessons.; With boys where you dare to speak up then they won't laugh at you, but with other boys they will laugh at you." (focus group ID code: BE.S.1.3)*

This gender disparity in classroom participation may have long-term implications for civic engagement and political involvement. Research suggests that early experiences with political discourse can shape future attitudes and behaviors (García-Albacete & Hoskins, 2024).

- *"Girls say much less.", "they (boys) like to speak their mind", "we (boys) want to have our say.", "because we want to express our opinions.", "We would like to decide." (consequent answers of students regarding boys' participation, focus group ID: DK.S.7)*
- *"The boys sometimes talk more in discussions and dare to speak up more than some girls [...] most of the boys talk more often [...] They (boys) always want to be right, but then we (girls) say more things, they are quiet all of the sudden." (focus group code: BE.S.5)*
- *"They (boys) do (have a leading role in discussions), it works like that." (focus group code: CZ.S.1)*
- *"It just seems to me that sometimes girls are ashamed to say something. Not afraid, but ashamed. Boys are more open in our class, more into the discussion." (focus group code: CZ.S.4).*
- *"When we talk about issues, I think of climate change (as a more female-friendly issue) and the male-dominated politics, like the government and finances. It's toxic masculinity. [...] I feel like as well men can be sexist but women can be sexist too they'll be girls out there being rude to other girls. This might be coming back to race, it can really affect people in the classroom too"; "If boys do care about feminism then people are like oh you're gay"; [...] Stereotypes affect you in the country-context; in the classroom, outside of the classroom. Personally, I think stereotypes affect me quite much, like 100%, as well as my participation in the classroom. I don't want to stand out or be judged (if I speak/participate). If I am too quiet, they will just call me emo (laughs)*

In addition, topics related to politics, gender, and race, are often seen by students as challenging discussion points inside the classroom. Those topics as seen as they can cause debates, arguments, and confrontations, therefore they are depicted as unpleasant and unwanted discussion points by students.

- *"It can be a bit dangerous to discuss gender and equality." [...] "Skin colour (too)." (focus group ID: DK.S.7)*
- *"Some topics may be uncomfortable for somebody, they don't want to talk about it or they just don't discuss because they are not interested in the topic. It's off-topic. And some people don't want to give their opinion because they will be condemned for it." (focus group code: CZ.S.4)*

Classroom climate

Classroom climate is again a topic that unites teachers across countries. Most of them state that a positive and accepting classroom climate is an essential foundation for education (as it also emerged from the observation). It creates conditions for learning, supports student engagement and has a positive impact on learning outcomes. Teachers stated that the school climate should be safe for students to participate and not to fear giving incorrect answers. Teachers explain in different ways what, in their opinion, the classroom climate is based on. They mention the students' interest in the topic or the relationships between students in the classroom. According to them, the activities that the teacher offers are also important; if the activities are fun, it positively affects the classroom climate and social interaction between students.

The interviews also revealed that girls are more sensitive to the class climate. As the teachers mentioned, not all girls, but a large group of them, are influenced by the class climate. They stated that girls do not feel the need to assert themselves, they are more afraid to express their opinion because they do not know in advance the reaction of others. In some classes, students react to each other disrespectfully or even mock each other, which completely silences shy students.

The classroom atmosphere is a key factor, as can be seen from the teachers' statements below.

- *“The most important thing is that at the end of the lesson they have achieved the set goals. I personally find it important that this happens in a, how should I put it, relaxed atmosphere. But with very clearly agreed rules. Everything must remain on a certain level. With sufficient respect for each other, but I do want that to happen in a light-hearted, almost cheerful way where there can be laughter, where there can be fun.” (B1)*
- *“Yes, the atmosphere is very important to me. I have to say that sometimes all I work on during a class is activating certain students. In some classes I have to create a safe environment for everyone because there are students who are very dominant. Atmosphere can affect the discussion, it can influence whether students will participate or not. A safe, accepting atmosphere is very important.*

I am currently struggling with some of my students to be considerate of others. There are a few children in my class who need to be disciplined constantly because otherwise their classmates would not feel safe to express their opinions.”” (CZ2)

- *“It starts with a positive and friendly atmosphere. Without that, it wouldn’t make sense. I also try to pass on some knowledge and facts to the students and at the same time teach them to discuss and think critically. But what I consider absolutely essential is not to lose some playfulness, some lightness of being. School is sometimes taken very seriously and playfulness disappears. I think that’s a shame. Playfulness is very important.” (CZ5)*

Students can demonstrate enthusiasm for engaging in class discussions, particularly when the subject matter aligns with their interests. This is especially evident in topics related to politics, where students feel that they possess knowledge and hold strong opinions. Their eagerness to participate stems from a desire to share their perspectives, challenge ideas, and learn from their peers. Such discussions can foster critical thinking, enhance communication skills, and deepen understanding of complex issues.

- *We discuss a lot in civics and also in history. In other subjects we don't and in some subjects if we say our opinion it's wrong. (focus group code: CZ.S.1)*

However, the effectiveness of class discussions can be hindered by poor organization, environment and time management. When discussions lack structure or clear objectives, they may become chaotic, leading to tangential conversations that deviate from the intended learning outcomes. Additionally, prolonged discussions can become tedious for some students, potentially causing disengagement or frustration. For example, students in different focus groups in Belgium mentioned:

- *"To give my opinion I do like that. But to have a discussion, it can sometimes go too far, that it becomes unstoppable"(focus group code: BEL.S.1.1)*
- *"Teachers should not let it be chaotic. Let everyone talk and finish their sentences, do not stop them when they are talking." (focus group code: BEL.S.1.2)*

- *"In our conversations or discussions we never talk about politics. [...] People interrupt each other to give their opinion. [...] A lot of people have a lot of opinions. That is not always nice"; (focus group code: BEL.S.2.2)*

To address these concerns, WP5 intervention tried to provide lesson plans with a balance between allowing for open dialogue and maintaining a focused, time-efficient discussion format. Implementing strategies such as setting clear discussion goals, using guided questions, and employing time limits for specific topics can help create more productive and engaging class discussions.

- *"There are only a few times we are allowed to make a decision in class." (focus group ID: DK.S.4)*

The lack of participation in political discussions can be seen as the cause of a 'negative' or 'restricted' (as opposed to open) classroom climate (in line observations results in section 4.2.3). Students experience political discussions as potential negative events. Therefore, students prefer to be averse to the risk of participating in discussions in order to avoid negative emotions/experiences inside and outside of the classroom.

- *"Politics should be taught and discussed in school, but not that much. It should explain what politics is, how it works. We should know when there are problems, who solves them. But we shouldn't discuss what our political views are." (focus group ID code: CZ.S.5)*
- *"Well we don't have a lot of class discussions, but if it does happen it is not really positive" (focus group code: BEL..S.1.2)*

Perceived teacher's personality and approach, besides interest in the discussed topic often contributes in participating in discussions:

- *"It also depends on the personality of the teacher. The older teachers have very conservative views and that makes the discussion difficult. With a lot of teachers, it's not a real discussion. They tell us something and that's it. That's the only truth. I don't think that's the way politics should be discussed at school.[...]even the conservative person allows open discussion. It seems to me that it's harder for the conservative people to admit a different opinion. And here at school, often the older people are conservative and they don't allow*

discussion. As if they were stuck in the previous regime, this is allowed, this is not allowed... The young people are better for us, they understand us more.” (focus group ID code: CZ.S.4)

- *“But it depends on the teacher, as we said. And it depends on the people (students). Some people want to discuss, others don’t. Some don’t get involved as much. It also depends a lot on the topic.”* (focus group ID code: CZ.S.6)

This risk aversion can lead to a self-perpetuating silence, where fewer students engage in political discussions, further reinforcing the perception of discussions as potentially harmful. As a result, the classroom environment may become increasingly stagnant and depoliticized, with limited opportunities for diverse perspectives to be shared and challenged.

- *“Sometimes I don’t want to take part in a discussion, because sometimes it can get a bit negative.”* (focus group code: DK.S. 9)

This fear of social ostracism and ridicule can significantly hinder students' willingness to engage in political discussions or express their opinions openly. As a result, many students may choose to remain silent or conform to perceived majority views, even if they hold differing perspectives (in line observations results in sections 4.2.1 and 4.2.3). This self-censorship not only limits the diversity of ideas and classroom discussion within educational settings, but also potentially stunts the development of critical thinking skills, citizenship and civic engagement among young people.

- *“I don’t want to stand out or be judged”* (focus group code: UK.S.2)
- *“We don’t have a lot of class discussions, but if it does happen it is not really positive”* (focus group code: BE.S.4)
- *“That is what stops you. The thing about being afraid of what others think.”* *“there is a group of boys who comment on almost everything that is said in class”; “It may well be that they think it’s funny, but it may well be that for the person who says it, it’s not funny.”* *“There are some boys who really want their way. They can’t take it when some others have different views. They go on and on and on. It’s quite annoying because they know that they’re not right. It creates a slightly bad atmosphere.”* (focus group ID: DK.S. 4).

- *“A lot depends on the collective. For example, if the leader of the class is someone who ridicules other classmates, the others are afraid to speak up. Because that leader knows that others will join in, that others will then mock that person. Then some students are afraid to speak up.”(focus group ID: CZ.S.1)*

As noted in classrooms in Belgium for example, teachers' jokes towards the classroom and specific students most often served to: a) Stimulate reflection of the students in the answers that they gave the teacher in the discussion; b) Correct or discipline students' behavior; c) Ensure a positive atmosphere in the classroom through laughter. Disengagement in political discussions often occurs from students' perception of teaching practices as not accepting the expression of their political opinions or not fostering an open classroom climate. For students, the feeling of being safe and accepted to express their opinion is quite important. This comes back to democratic values of dialogue of different opinions, a common technique of an open-classroom climate.

Political discussions can indeed have positive aspects, particularly when they foster peer and community-based learning through the respectful exchange of diverse opinions. This type of dialogue allows students to learn from each other, broaden their perspectives, challenge their own assumptions, and gain a deeper understanding of complex issues. By engaging with differing viewpoints in a constructive manner, students can develop critical thinking skills, empathy, and the ability to articulate their own positions more effectively.

- *“I think it is nice to hear other peoples' opinions and different opinions”; “I like it because [inaudible] because there are conversations with each other.”; “We get to know more about each other's opinions and not just to accept what other people say [...] it is important because it is related to our future.” (focus group code: BEL.S.1)*
- *“it's really cool to hear other people's opinions and how they differ from your own opinions.” “you hear your friends' opinions or your classmates', and then you just know that maybe they think the same or something else. Better ideas, something different.” (focus group code: DK.S.1)*

When students feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and listening to peers, it creates in the classroom an environment conducive to collaborative problem-solving and informed decision-making. Additionally, such interactions can help bridge ideological divides, reduce polarization, and foster to students a sense of shared responsibility for addressing societal challenges.

- *"What helps me is when there's no fear of being wrong and there's always like a right answer" (focus group code: UK.S.1)*
- *"When the atmosphere is good, we can talk to each other. And also depending on the topic that we are talking about, if I found it interesting." "If my friends actively participate in the discussion, that is cooler to participate because then I might also participate. But it also depends on if I know the topic well."; "you are more open to discuss things if you see that your friends are participating as well. Then you dare to say more things [...] (you have) more motivation to say more things" (focus group code: BEL.S.1.2 & BEL.S.2.2)*
- *"If the teacher supports us to express our opinion, I like it. Also if I like the topic." (focus group code: CZ.S.2).*
- *"It helps a lot if we feel that we can really express our opinion, that the teacher is interested, that they won't ridicule or criticize our opinion. When we see that he is trying to support us and that he is interested in our opinion." (focus group code: CZ.S.4)*

Behavioural problems in the classroom

According to both teachers and students, the classroom atmosphere is also linked to student behavior. In some cases, it can even be particular students who disrupt the learning process, leading to other student passivity. Teachers also often mentioned that it is their job to ensure a safe classroom atmosphere, which for them means disciplining disruptive and overly dominant students. On the other hand, it is important to support students in being able and willing to express their opinions. Students should not feel that the teacher is too restrictive or that he is not interested in their opinions, this is evident from the focus group analyses.

- *"It's, I think their fear of being ridiculed by peers is very strong." (UK2)*

- *"If it is a group discussion, it really depends on who they are sitting with. And when it's a class discussion, it's often the students who already think it's a bit difficult to be in the classroom, i.e. those who are a bit afraid of what others might think, don't have many friends, and they don't necessarily all come from the same place."* (DK1)
- *"Yes, I think there are more girls who are very conscious of how they behave and express themselves, saying things like "Oh, that's embarrassing."(DK 4)*
- *"Many girls just accept feeling oppressed. In some classes, there are boys who dominate not because they excel academically, but because they can be disruptive."* (DK5)

For students, some teachers aim mostly to discipline the classroom instead of fostering conversations, and in instances teachers are perceived as showing favoritism according to specific students' characteristics (students' good performance, race, gender).

- *"Sometimes teachers lack respect, you know. You know how they play favourites and stuff"; "Some teachers need to be humbled like we're not little puppets you can control, we're actually human beings."; "Most of the teachers just want us to sit in silence and get on with the work, we barely hold discussions [...] Teachers, they will never understand! Because of their age, they will think kids are dumb, they treat us like puppets. Teachers want to discipline students. Teachers influence you, it's the little things and comments they say that encourage you and have an impact on you. "* (focus group code: UK. S. 2)
- *"They, the teachers, don't think so, they think we are too young, they don't care about our opinions, but I think it is important to discuss our opinions at school."* (focus group code: CZ.S.5)

Teachers' communication styles and classroom management approaches can significantly impact students' engagement and learning experiences. When teachers prioritize maintaining strict order over facilitating meaningful discussions, it can create an environment where students feel less valued and less inclined to participate actively. Furthermore, perceived favoritism based on academic performance or other factors can lead to feelings of exclusion and demotivation among students who do not receive preferential treatment.

- *"Teachers don't like us to discuss things with them." (focus group code: CZ.T.1)*
- *"Some teachers need to be humbled like we're not little puppets you can control we're actually human beings."; "Sometimes teachers lack respect, you know. You know how they play favourites and stuff"; "I feel race and ethnic background affect a lot of things." (focus group code: UK.S.2)*

Open classroom climate/safe environment

A sizeable number of teachers in our sample were not familiar with the meaning of an open classroom climate. Teachers from the UK and Denmark declared that they use the concept. However, after the open classroom climate framework was explained, the rest of the teachers (Belgium, Germany and Czech Republic) stated that they work with similar principles, these principles are part of their approach to teaching. The teachers reflect that creating a respectful atmosphere is an important part of teaching. They pointed out the support for student's autonomy by providing various tasks for students to choose from and respect for their opinions.

Students frequently express reluctance to actively participate in classroom discussions, citing a lack of interest in political topics or a preference for discussing such matters in smaller groups rather than in a larger classroom setting. Students' hesitancy to engage in classroom discussions on political topics stems from various factors. Some may feel intimidated by the complexity of political issues or fear expressing opinions that differ from their peers. Others might perceive political discussions as potentially contentious or divisive, preferring to avoid potential conflicts in an academic setting. Additionally, the formal nature of a classroom environment can inhibit spontaneous expression, particularly on sensitive subjects.

- *"Many people tend to speak more when they're in smaller groups compared to speaking in front of the whole class." (focus group ID code: DK.S.5)*

According to students' perceptions from the focus group data, small groups of students and moderated discussions are a preferred teaching technique among students, as well as an encouraging open-classroom environment to express their views and opinions. Even though the concepts of open-classroom climate and think-

pair-share, or counter-narrative activities and discussion, aren't known to students, their answers indicate that those methods can work to enforce their participation in the classroom. Overall, there seems to be an agreement amongst the students that when the group is smaller, or friends participate in the discussion, it enforces their participation in the discussion as well.

- *"I just think it's more comfortable to talk in small groups. People can hear you and see you, and you can address everyone and so on". (focus group ID: DK.S.2)*
- *"Only with friends do I really have discussions." (focus groups ID code: BEL. S. 1. 2)*
- *"With a friend you hear one opinion, and in a classroom, you hear multiple opinions, and you might have more fear that other people will react badly to your opinion." (focus group ID: BEL. S.1.2)*

The preference for discussing political matters in smaller, more intimate groups reflects a desire for a safer, more comfortable space to explore ideas. In these settings, students may feel more at ease expressing their views, asking questions, and engaging in deeper, more nuanced conversations on topics they find relevant to their interests. This preference also highlights the importance of creating a supportive classroom atmosphere that encourages open dialogue and respectful exchange of ideas.

- *"It depends... on the topic. Because for some topics I am not interested but other things I am". "When you have a different opinion, I am always afraid that I would say something what would hurt or upset my friend. If we are talking about sensitive topics, like religion, then I am scared to hurt my friends [...]" (focus group ID: BEL.S.1.1)*

Small group discussions or alternative formats to foster greater participation and help students develop confidence in articulating their thoughts on political topics. This tendency is particularly pronounced among female students, who often feel more at ease listening rather than engaging in discussions. Particularly, students in the Czech Republic indicated that the level of participation is influenced by the classroom atmosphere and the perceived relevance or interest of the discussion topic to the students.

- *"We'd certainly like to have more discussions. Even in other subjects. Like history." (focus group ID code: CZ.S.5)*
- *"We don't discuss much there" (focus group ID code: CZ.S.5)*
- *"They (teachers) don't very often discuss with us, they lecturing us..." (focus group ID code: CZ.S.1)*

Students' qualitative data from the focus groups also highlight the importance of emotional support in their political participation in the classroom; the open classroom approach, in principle, fosters. A respectful and supportive environment potentially allows students to feel comfortable expressing their opinions and challenging ideas without fear of judgment or reprisal.

- *"When the teacher is enthusiastic about what we are doing. Then it becomes more like, yes okay, I actually want to answer your question". (focus group ID: DK.S.2)*
- *"When the answer can be open, you don't feel as much pressure to be exactly right." (focus group ID: DK.S.3)*
- *"Many people tend to speak more when they're in smaller groups compared to speaking in front of the whole class." (focus group ID: DK.S.5)*

Furthermore, emotional support from teachers and peers can boost students' confidence in their ability to participate in political discourse, ultimately leading to more active and informed civic engagement.

- *"The teacher could also be more patient. They could talk to one student at a time and ask questions and have the patience to talk to the whole class and hear what everyone is saying. Maybe try to help everyone to understand. They have to make it interesting for everyone and take everyone seriously." (focus group ID: DK.S.9)*
- *"I like it when the teacher accepts my opinion. I like to argue with other classmates." (focus group code: CZ.S.1)*
- *"If the teacher has to do something, in any case, so that you have to take the political aspect, and then you can express your opinion, and the teacher should kind of support the student who may find it difficult, whether she knows she has a hard time or he has a hard time." (focus group code: DK.S.1)*

Students exhibit a pronounced interest in engaging in class discussions, particularly when the topics involve political matters, where they demonstrate both knowledge and strong opinions.

- *"(I like) discussing something that everyone is interested in, and not just something where you have to find the right answer." (focus group code: DK.S.9)*

However, it is frequently observed that the classroom environment tends to be depoliticized. Although political discussions occur regularly, as indicated by observational data, there is a perception that such discussions can sometimes be excessively time-consuming.

- *"Maybe you do that through creating a good atmosphere by getting the students to discuss things? [...] So I try as much as possible to do a whole lot of different things and get a lot of video involved. [...] And then I walk around between the groups to hear, okay, how far have you come, and I might try to ask some slightly different questions if I can see a group that is struggling a bit. In that way, I can also ensure that it is not just one person who is talking, but hopefully several in the group who are talking." (DK1)*
- *"We can say here that the whole group has the same view of the open classroom climate. Overall, we believe that children do their best. And we try to meet the child's curiosity, where it is. And then we have a very active student council, so we also work with democracy at school. (DK2)*
- *"They know very well (that I won't force them to speak, for example. They know that; they don't come into my class and feel anxious." (DK6)*
- *"That the students can speak openly and do things openly and yes, I do try to provide them with an open atmosphere, I think. (B1)*

Perceived support from teachers

During the qualitative data analysis, we came to the conclusion that although the teachers identified discussion as an important method that they use regularly, discussions that fulfilled the general definition did not always take place. Often, it was more a sequence of interactions between the teacher and individual students or student groups, the rules of argumentation were not followed, or the discussion did

not aim at the set goal. Although teachers stated that the opportunity to express their ideas, listen to others' opinions and interactive exchange of views (not just two-way exchanges or reactions to teacher suggestions) were very important to them, we encountered the fact that they did not engage some students during the lessons (see the observation chapter, page 13). Thus, even if they expressed that they were aware of the importance of supporting passive students, this was not evident during the lessons. Of course, we cannot generalize, as teacher support varies between countries and between individual teachers. However, the difference between declared and actual practice was interesting. At the same time, support from the teacher was also crucial for the students. Students understood that the feeling that the teacher was interested in their opinions, that the teacher listened to them, and gave them some importance was crucial for their participation in the lesson/discussion. Students considered the teacher's creation of a safe environment to be self-evident, as his role is to give everyone an equal opportunity and to direct overly disruptive students.

- *"If the teacher has to do something, in any case, so that you have to take the political aspect, and then you can express your opinion, and the teacher should kind of support the student who may find it difficult, whether she knows she has a hard time or he has a hard time." (focus group code: DK.S.1)*
- *"Maybe if the teacher took those who don't have their hands up. I also think it will do a lot if those comments they stopped, I think people will invite more." (focus group code: DK.S.4)*
- *"The teacher could also be more patient. They could talk to one student at a time and ask questions and have the patience to talk to the whole class and hear what everyone is saying. Maybe try to help everyone to understand. They have to make it interesting for everyone and take everyone seriously." (focus group code: DK.S.9)*
- *"I like when teacher accepts my opinion. I like to argue with other classmates."; "When the teacher doesn't accept my opinion." (focus group code: CZ.S. 1)*
- *"It helps a lot if we feel that we can really express our opinion, that the teacher is interested, that they won't ridicule or criticize our opinion. When we see that he is trying to support us and that he is interested in our opinion." "But we have a pretty good team. And the (civics) teacher is really open, so even the shy ones express their opinion. Plus, we do it every class, so they're used to it. But*

this only happens in class with the teacher. In fact, those are the only classes where we discuss." (focus group code: CZ.S. 4)

Teacher's ability to discipline students (creating safe learning environment)

As mentioned above, teachers are aware that it is their responsibility to create conditions for students to learn. Teachers themselves repeatedly mentioned how important a safe environment is. It is important to note that even if teachers believe that they are actively working on a good classroom climate, students do not always agree with them or feel that the environment is not safe for all students in the classroom. Interesting from this perspective were some of the researchers' observations, mentioning that the atmosphere in the observed lesson was at odds with what the teacher was talking about. Thus, even if the teacher emphasized the importance of a receptive and supportive atmosphere, the researchers did not notice it during the observed lessons.

- *"I try to create a sense of security. If you say something, you should feel that the others aren't ganging up on you." (DK5)*
- *"It starts with a positive and friendly atmosphere. Without that, it wouldn't make sense." (CZ5)*

Motivation is certainly an important part of the learning process, and if the teacher can work with it well, there is greater student engagement. Interviews with teachers show that motivation in adolescent students is often related to grades and performance. The choice of topic to be discussed in class can also be decisive, as can specific activities that are popular with students. Teachers often mentioned discussions as the basic method of teaching political topics. They added that they then choose interactive methods where students can work in pairs or groups, or activities that include online quizzes and applications.

- *"For me, motivations are crucial; I need to make sure that at some point, they can find something they can identify with and something they can grasp academically. Something where they don't feel left out." (DK7)*
- *"I give everything I have in terms of motivation and knowledge. I pull out everything possible to give them some kind of emotional reaction. I am telling a terrible story. Haven't you read about that? Well, then we'll talk a little about that." (DK8)*
- *"I try to motivate them by trying to arouse their real interest in the topic." (CZ3)*

- *"A positive atmosphere is important. I try to choose topics that they would enjoy." (CZ4)*

Teacher's ability to activate/engage students

Teachers described different methods they chose to activate passive students. They consider individualized approaches, creating space for students to succeed, or checking whether students have enough information, or whether they understand the assignment, as important. Some teachers emphasized good knowledge of a particular class or students. They mentioned that sometimes only direct calling on students is effective, since otherwise (due to the various factors mentioned above) they will not engage.

- *"I think that's very important to try to get them to answer a question which would then hopefully is correct, you know, and then congratulate them on their attempt or their effort... that would help to build up their confidence." (UK3)*
- *"As I said, an individual approach is important. Every pupil needs something different and it doesn't matter if they are a boy or a girl. There are aggressive boys and aggressive girls, there are sensitive boys and sensitive girls. Everyone needs a slightly different approach depending on their character and their specific situation." (CZ5)*
- *"Like hot seating, it's clear someone sits in the seat and you ask questions. It's not complicated so they're not going to be nervous about doing it but I think it does help their participation and then especially if it's like a class activity or paired up or group work, that gets them to talk more. [...] I think something really simple that is 'pair share' is good because then they can think on their own... [...] I like to prompt questions to get them thinking..." (UK1)*
- *The different sort of methods I use... personally, I prefer the talk and talk method. So, I would provide a PowerPoint for them. So it would start off with a think-pair-share teaching method where the students would pair up, or work in groups on a particular task. And then there we would set a limit of a few minutes (ex. three minutes) to think-pair-share. Subsequent (resulting) to that would be a classroom discussion based on what they have, what they have thought about what they've discussed. (UK3)*

- *"But I would like to have more discussions (group work), but I just think that when they do group work, it often becomes, I find it becomes less productive in terms of what gets done. Too often. If they have 45 minutes to do something, I have the feeling that, who is it then, that actually gets things done in the groups? And to what extent? So, I don't have much group work in my lessons."* (DK5)
- *"Try to do things so that they have some individual work, and some group-work, and then some new group-work, both in small groups and larger groups, and something where they have to go from one group to another group. And sometimes we work online, then we run some courses online. So I try to play with them all the time. It must be a little creative."* (DK8)
- *"I want them to express their opinion, I tell them that all the answers are correct, in some classes we work in groups because they are passive. [...] Sometimes I give the passive students a leadership role."* (CZ1)
- *"I try to pass on some knowledge and facts to the students, while teaching them to discuss and think critically. But what I consider absolutely essential is not to lose some playfulness, some lightness of being. School is sometimes taken very seriously and playfulness disappears. I think that's a shame. Playfulness is very important."* (CZ5)

As can be seen from the teachers' statements, they are able to talk about specific methods and approaches with which they try to create a positive, accepting atmosphere in the classroom, as they believe it is an essential part of effective learning. Some methods proved to be cross-cutting (used by most teachers, for example, discussions), some corresponded to the educational framework of the country, the education and experience of the teachers, or to the specific characteristics of the class and students. Teachers mentioned their effort for building an open classroom climate, engagement of all students, and a fair and equal approach to all students. However, it is necessary to mention here that we did not always record the declared approaches and methods during the observation, and in some cases, students reflected a different approach from the teacher than that stated by the teachers themselves. This finding was discussed and included in the preparation of materials for WP4 and WP5. The teacher and his/her approach is certainly a factor influencing student engagement in the lesson.

5. Summary and discussion of the results

Each data source—student questionnaires, classroom observations, teacher interviews, and student focus groups—offered valuable insights into different aspects of students' engagement in classroom discussions about politics. Given the complexity of social reality, these perspectives do not always align neatly. Inconsistencies and paradoxes frequently emerge across the data, reflecting the multifaceted nature of classroom dynamics and student experiences. Identifying and understanding these contradictions is essential for uncovering the hidden barriers to student learning and participation. This chapter presents a summary of each individual analysis, followed by a cross-analysis that synthesizes the findings and situates them within the context of existing literature.

5.1. Summary of the surveys

The analysis of the descriptive statistics from the student questionnaires reveals that Political Self-Efficacy (PSE) levels are relatively stable across gender, national, and ethnic backgrounds. Students in all five countries reported comparable levels of confidence in their political engagement abilities, with average PSE scores ranging from 0.7 to 0.8. However, while self-reported confidence appeared similar, actual participation in political discussions was more variable and influenced by broader contextual factors such as classroom climate and language proficiency. Particularly, students with high confidence in using the language of instruction were more likely to actively engage in discussions. Conversely, students who faced linguistic barriers—especially those from minority or migrant backgrounds—reported lower participation rates despite similar PSE scores. These results underscore the importance of inclusive pedagogical strategies that account for linguistic diversity and actively encourage all students to contribute to classroom discussions.

Gender differences in PSE scores were minimal and not statistically significant, with both boys and girls reporting comparable levels of political self-confidence. Nonetheless, observational data revealed a consistent gap between perceived self-

efficacy and actual participation, especially among girls. Although female students felt equally capable of engaging in political discourse, they were less likely to contribute during class discussions. This discrepancy suggests that external classroom dynamics—such as teacher-student interactions, peer influence, and perceived receptiveness of the classroom environment—play a critical role in shaping actual participation beyond self-assessed competence. National patterns further support this complexity: for instance, the Czech Republic reported the highest average PSE score but also the greatest variability, indicating a wide range of individual experiences. In contrast, Belgium exhibited the lowest variance, suggesting a more homogeneous distribution of confidence levels among students.

While no statistically significant cross-national differences emerged in the PSE data, language proficiency and perceived cultural or ethnic differences played a more prominent role in influencing participation. Students with a different home language or immigrant background frequently expressed lower confidence in speaking during lessons, even when they reported average or above-average PSE scores. This linguistic self-esteem gap was evident across all contexts and particularly influenced engagement during politically charged discussions. Importantly, students' perceived social and cultural difference, especially regarding ethnic background and nationality, was associated with a stronger sense of exclusion from classroom dialogues. While most students did not strongly perceive themselves as different based on race or skin colour, those who did identify as culturally or linguistically different were less likely to participate. These findings point to the multifaceted nature of political engagement in schools and highlight the need to address both structural and interpersonal barriers to ensure equitable participation. Given the limitations of the sample size, especially the overrepresentation of Czech students and the unique composition of the UK group, these findings should be interpreted with caution. However, they offer valuable direction for further qualitative inquiry and targeted intervention design.

5.2. Summary of the observations

The analysis of direct observations and video recordings of classroom discussions revealed quantitative and qualitative differences in the participation of male and female students. The following paragraphs summarize the main cross-country findings related to three observed areas: (1) students' active participation in the discussion and teachers' participation-supportive practices, (2) students' discussion-related interactions and teachers' interaction-supportive techniques, and (3) classroom climate and teachers' classroom-management strategies.

Girls enter the discussion less frequently than boys; they rather remain silent and/or express their attention non-verbally. Despite no particular gender-related differences in the complexity of produced sentences, when formulating thoughts and opinions, girls are less direct and more nuanced than boys in choosing their words. Teachers do not provide as much stimulation and encouragement to girls as to boys. From the whole-class perspective, the amount and the quality of the teacher's support are reflected in students' active participation; however, not necessarily in the participation of all students. The observations indicate an overall preference of the teachers for active students who, therefore, benefit from the teacher's support even more, while passive students are often ignored. Since female students are typically less active than male students, they are also more often victims of this vicious circle than boys.

Although discussion-related interactions between students are very rare in general, those involving girls are even rarer. While girls interact with others by helping them to express their thoughts, boys tend to provide a new stimulus (a question or a challenging idea) or feedback. Intra-gender communication is preferred by both male and female students. The low student-to-student interactions are, at least partially, related to the level of the teacher's encouragement of such interactions which is also mostly low, and definitely lower than the levels of pedagogical encouragement in other domains, namely in instrumental/cognitive or emotional support.

Independently of the type of the pedagogical support, fully describing teacher's practices is not sufficient to provide a complete picture. Participation of female students in classroom discussions is also due to the overall classroom climate. In classrooms where the layout was suitable for pair-/group- collaboration and the boys and girls were equally distributed across the space, between-student interactions were increased, even when the teacher was not very active in promoting

collaboration. In general, boys tend to be more vocal and judgemental than girls which can create a non-inviting or even discouraging atmosphere for emotionally more fragile or shy students, independently of their academic knowledge. Female students seem to be more prone to be impacted by such classroom conditions. Organization of the classroom and managing students' behaviours is therefore crucial. We observed that classes with a higher level of pedagogical encouragement are also more disciplined which suggests that both aspects are equally necessary.

5.3. Summary of the focus groups

A key finding from the global focus group analysis (N=22) is a prevalent lack of interest in politics among students aged 13-15, primarily stemming from a limited understanding of its relevance to their daily lives and a perception of it as a distant, adult-dominated domain. Students often associate politics with national-level governance and struggle to connect it with their immediate concerns, leading to characterizations of the subject as "boring" and "unexciting." This disconnect is exacerbated by their disenfranchisement as non-voters, contributing to a feeling of powerlessness and a lack of agency. Furthermore, the analysis reveals that gender stereotypes significantly impact political engagement. Girls are often socialized to be less interested in politics and face societal biases, including stereotypes according to gender, and a lack of serious consideration as political actors. In most countries, girls also tend to be more risk-averse in expressing political opinions in the classroom, often observing a male-dominated dynamic in discussions where boys are more vocal and assertive.

Beyond gender, intersectional stereotypes related to ethnicity and race also play a role in students' perceptions and willingness to participate in political discussions. Students from minority backgrounds may feel a lack of representation, further hindering their engagement. Moreover, the classroom climate itself emerges as a crucial factor. While students can be enthusiastic about political discussions on topics they find relevant, poorly managed or overly long discussions can lead to disengagement. More significantly, a "negative" or "restricted" classroom climate, where students fear judgment, ridicule, or negative repercussions for expressing their

views, fosters risk aversion and self-censorship. This is compounded by perceptions of teacher bias and a lack of open dialogue.

Conversely, students express a preference for smaller group discussions and a classroom environment characterized by safety, respect for diverse opinions, and teacher support, a result that WP4 and WP5 took on board when building their work. When students feel their contributions are valued and there is "no fear of being wrong," they are more likely to participate. Positive peer influence and engaging topics also encourage involvement. Therefore and as a result of those findings of WP3, WP5 built the G-EPIC intervention, addressing students' limited understanding of politics, challenging gender and intersectional stereotypes, and cultivating an open and inclusive classroom climate are essential steps in fostering greater political interest and participation among young people.

5.4. Summary of the teachers' interviews

Teachers, in agreement with the students, hold the opinion that politics in general is not very interesting to students and they consider it something distant that does not concern them. According to the teachers, however, it is possible to observe differences between individual students, which are mainly related to their family background. According to the teachers, family background, understood broadly, is a key aspect of students' success in school; it also affects their involvement in discussions during classes, their activity in school assignments and projects. Teachers mentioned SES, immigrant, or minority families as risky family backgrounds. At the same time, according to teachers, it is clear whether parents devote time to their children, whether they discuss political events with them at home, or whether they regulate the time that students spend on electronic devices.

Another important factor is considered by teachers to be the personality of the student. Here, they most often spoke about the student's academic background (SEN) and their temperament. Although initially most teachers did not single out gender as a factor in the difference in student involvement in political discussions, paradoxically, only teachers from Britain pointed this out, despite working in all-girls classes. When asked further, teachers from other countries also identified girls as

more passive. According to them, it is harder for girls to assert themselves in a group of students; girls are more influenced by the atmosphere in the class and hesitate to express their opinion if there are disruptive or dominant students in the class. However, teachers point out that it cannot be said that gender is decisive. According to them, it is a combination of several factors.

In most cases, teachers identified with the concept of the open classroom climate, although some were not familiar with it before the research. They declared their efforts to involve all students and stated the methods and approaches they use to do so. In general, they spoke about an individualized approach to students, the importance of creating a safe environment in the classroom, alternating work in pairs, in groups, and in the whole class. Finally, they stated that it was necessary to specifically call on some students, as otherwise they would not participate in the discussion. It is necessary to mention that we did not always record the declared approaches within the framework of direct observations of classes. Some teachers, contrary to their statements, hardly addressed passive students during classes, and did not provide individualized support to students. We therefore believe that it is important to perceive the teacher's approach as one of the aspects influencing student engagement during lessons.

5.5. Discussion of cross-methods results

The synthesis of findings from the four data sources – student questionnaires, classroom observations, teacher interviews, and student focus groups – offers a deep and multifaceted understanding of the mechanisms that influence political self-efficacy (PSE) and students' participation in political classroom discussions. While descriptive quantitative data show relatively stable levels of self-reported PSE across gender, nationality, and ethnicity, qualitative findings reveal that the translation of this self-perception into active engagement is shaped by complex, context-specific social dynamics. These findings are consistent with Hoskins (2024) and also echo insights by Levy (2013) and Wolak (2020), who emphasize that while students may feel politically efficacious, their engagement is often filtered through perceived acceptance and opportunity within classroom contexts.

WP3 data confirm the influence of three overarching groups of factors on student engagement: individual characteristics, social and relational dynamics, and pedagogical practices. Individually, students' personalities, interests, and especially family background—including parental support and exposure to political discourse—emerged as significant. These findings echo Hattie et al. (2009) and are reinforced by Cicognani et al. (2012) and Shala & Grajevci (2018), who highlight the crucial role of socioeconomic status in shaping political interest and civic participation among youth. Sieben & Lechner (2019) further stress the influence of cultural capital, such as books in the home, as predictors of educational and civic engagement. However, the analysis shows that teachers often perceive these factors as immutable, particularly in the Czech Republic, where a biologically essentialist view of gender differences was most evident. Such deterministic perceptions – also highlighted by Hoskins (2024) as a barrier to democratic education – limit teacher agency and may lead to unintentional reinforcement of student inequalities. The risk of self-fulfilling prophecies looms large in such environments: when teachers assume low engagement from certain students, they may unconsciously act in ways that perpetuate this disengagement.

On the social level, the role of peer relationships and classroom climate, especially the presence or absence of an open classroom climate (OCC), was repeatedly identified as central. As Campbell (2008), Godfrey & Grayman (2014) and Hoskins (2024) argue, OCC fosters students' willingness to express themselves and engage in political thinking. Our findings support this: classrooms with collaborative environments and balanced participation had higher levels of student engagement, especially among girls and students from minority backgrounds. This is also reflected in Oberle & Leunig (2016) and Wray-Lake et al. (2020), who demonstrate that inclusive class dynamics and respectful discourse significantly elevate participation. Girls, in particular, were more sensitive to classroom climate factors; in unsupportive or male-dominated settings, they withdrew more readily. Similarly, students facing linguistic barriers – many of whom came from immigrant backgrounds – demonstrated lower participation even when their PSE scores were average or high. These findings affirm Hoskins' call for intersectional approaches to civic education, recognizing that overlapping forms of disadvantage (e.g., gender, language, ethnicity) shape engagement opportunities. Grasso & Smith (2022) and Bos et al. (2022)

support this intersectional view, showing that political ambition and confidence are disproportionately shaped by gendered and cultural expectations.

Importantly, while not all girls were inhibited and not all boys were confident participants, intersectional disadvantage disproportionately affected girls. This reflects findings from Schafer & Gilbert (2024) and aligns with Barber & Torney-Purta (2009), who observed that girls' civic engagement is more contingent on social context than boys'. In our focus groups, some girls demonstrated high self-efficacy and strong political engagement, while some boys remained passive and disengaged. However, the presence of multiple layers of disadvantage, such as being a girl from a linguistic minority in a poorly managed class, consistently resulted in lower engagement. The implication here is that interventions should target not only gender but also its intersections with other identity markers.

The third factor shaping engagement is pedagogical: teacher support, instructional strategies, and classroom management. Classroom size and physical layout also emerged as important contextual elements influencing student engagement. This is in line with Kutsyruba et al. (2015) and Bradshaw et al. (2014), who link school climate and structural factors to student well-being and civic behavior. In smaller classrooms, where the number of active participants was manageable and student contributions could be more easily monitored, discussion tended to be more inclusive. In contrast, larger classrooms often reinforced participation disparities, with vocal students dominating and quieter voices remaining unheard. The physical arrangement of the classroom further shaped participation. Settings organized in traditional rows oriented toward the teacher tended to emphasize student-teacher communication and reduced opportunities for student-student dialogue. In contrast, circular or group-oriented seating arrangements facilitated more horizontal interaction and peer discussion, creating more space for less assertive students to contribute. These structural factors influenced not only the quantity but also the quality of interaction, especially for students from minority or disadvantaged backgrounds.

Additionally, classroom composition in terms of student diversity played a critical role. In classrooms with higher proportions of students from varied socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds, inclusive teaching practices were particularly crucial. Yet not all teachers demonstrated the competencies necessary to engage diverse learners. Some showed strong ability to scaffold discussions, validate different forms of

knowledge expression, and create safe discussion spaces. Others lacked the pedagogical skills or theoretical grounding to interpret student behavior inclusively or to motivate less confident students. Teachers' ability to reflect on the dynamics of diversity – what Hoskins (2024) refers to as critical civic reflexivity – proved to be a key variable in whether diversity became a resource or a barrier in the classroom. This echoes Eckstein et al. (2015), who emphasize the need for teachers to recognize and adapt to cultural differences to foster civic engagement among both immigrant and majority youth.

Teachers often stated their intent to include all students and foster inclusive discussions. Yet classroom observations revealed that active support was often limited to already vocal students. Quiet or marginalized students were frequently overlooked. While some teachers did attempt to diversify engagement, many lacked either the tools or the awareness to disrupt participation imbalances. This gap between intention and practice mirrors Hoskins' (2024) critique of civic education approaches that assume neutrality but overlook systemic barriers. A crucial concept for understanding these dynamics is the didactic contract – the implicit understanding between teacher and students about what counts as legitimate participation. In classrooms where students expect that only assertive contributions will be rewarded, and teachers unconsciously reinforce this, productive engagement narrows. This affects students' willingness to communicate, especially those whose social or cultural backgrounds incline them toward more cautious forms of self-expression. Pruyers & Blais (2014) reinforce this, showing how perceived expectations and stereotype threat can reduce political performance among women, even when they are well-informed.

Productive engagement in classroom discussions requires more than the ability or willingness to speak – it also requires a supportive pedagogical environment that validates diverse styles of participation. When engagement is narrowly defined through extroverted or dominant behaviors, many students are left behind. Hoskins (2024) emphasizes that for engagement to be inclusive, it must accommodate multiple forms of expression and reflect a pluralistic view of what constitutes civic competence. This also requires teachers to develop pedagogical reflexivity: the ability to reflect critically on their own practices, recognize implicit biases, and understand how their behaviors affect student engagement. Reflexivity, grounded in theoretical

knowledge and pedagogical optimism, allows educators to move beyond reactive classroom management and toward intentional, equity-oriented teaching.

Differences among national contexts also played a role. For example, in Denmark, Belgium, Germany and the UK, where Civics is a more structured, content-rich subject, girls often shared factual arguments in discussions, while boys voiced opinions. In contrast, in Czech classrooms where Civics lacks curricular, structured guidelines, we observed more expressive engagement from girls, suggesting that subject structure shapes participation norms. This variation reflects the didactic contract between teachers and students: what students perceive as expected from them and what kinds of contributions are valued. These expectations, shaped by curriculum and pedagogical culture, can reinforce or challenge gender norms, further influencing participation patterns. Notably, this variation also helps explain why gender gaps in engagement appear in some classrooms but not in others. Future research should consider four key aspects. First, the composition of the classroom, particularly students' gender-related attitudes and peer dynamics, significantly influences participation. Second, the degree to which teachers see it as their responsibility to foster engagement, not just academically, but socially and emotionally, plays a central role. Third, the extent of teachers' awareness and consistent implementation of open classroom climate principles can either support or inhibit equal participation. And finally, how political topics are framed in the curriculum – whether as fact-based, opinion-driven, or left ambiguous – strongly shapes students' sense of legitimacy in contributing to discussions. These conditions interact dynamically, often reinforcing or offsetting one another, and merit deeper exploration to inform more targeted pedagogical interventions.

Across the data, attitudes toward gender varied. In both student and teacher groups, two contrasting views were evident. One group treated gender differences as natural and immutable, often invoking essentialist logic. The other recognized the social construction of gender and acknowledged the role of stereotypes and expectations in shaping behaviour. This division has important implications for teacher training and classroom interventions. As Hoskins (2024) argues, democratic education must challenge fixed identities and create spaces where all students feel empowered to speak and participate. Educational materials and teacher training must, therefore, differentiate between these groups—equipping some with tools to rethink gender

assumptions, and others with strategies to act on their existing awareness. These implications are further supported by Bos et al. (2022) and Schneider et al. (2016), who illustrate how gendered socialization constrains political ambition and participation, particularly among girls.

The cumulative findings suggest that political self-efficacy alone is insufficient for fostering meaningful civic participation in classrooms. Political self-efficacy itself operates in a dual role: both as a condition for participation and as an outcome of effective civic education. On the one hand, students with higher self-efficacy are more likely to engage in classroom discussions, particularly when they feel their voices are welcomed and respected (Alexander et al., 2024). On the other hand, such engagement –especially in inclusive, discussion-rich environments – can further reinforce and deepen students' sense of political agency, creating a positive feedback loop. This dynamic aligns with research by Campbell (2008), Levy et al. (2016), and Hoskins (2024), which underscores the importance of dialogic teaching in developing both competencies and confidence through active participation. Therefore, fostering political self-efficacy should be seen not only as a goal but also as a process shaped through participatory experiences.

Following Hattie et al. (2009) and Hoskins (2024), we recommend the development of reflective, evidence-informed interventions that build teacher capacity to engage with diverse learners. Such interventions must not only provide practical tools for participation management but also foster critical awareness of how structural inequalities shape classroom dynamics. By supporting both belief and practice change among educators and by tailoring civic education to meet the needs of all learners, we can move closer to classrooms where political engagement is both equitable and transformative.

5.6. Recommendations for future research

Based on the findings presented, we offer a set of recommendations addressed to various stakeholders in the educational field. These recommendations aim to support the development of inclusive, equitable, and reflective civic education environments

where all students, regardless of gender, background, or personality traits, can actively participate and develop political self-efficacy.

The recommendations are understood as preliminary because most of them are related to the specific topics examined in the WP4 and WP5.

For Schools and School Leaders

- Foster a school-wide culture that values democratic discussion, critical thinking, and inclusivity. Ensure that these values are reflected in the school ethos, extracurricular activities, and teaching practices across subjects, not just in Civics or Social Studies.
- Provide professional development opportunities focused on inclusive teaching strategies, classroom climate management, and gender sensitivity. Encourage peer observation and collaborative learning among teachers to exchange good practices.
- Monitor classroom composition and engagement patterns, with attention to gender balance, linguistic diversity, and participation rates. Use this data to inform support strategies for underrepresented or less active groups.

For Teachers

- Reflect regularly on the assumptions and interactions, especially regarding who speaks, who remains silent, and how diverse expressions of knowledge are recognized.
- Intentionally structure classroom discussions to include all students by using techniques such as small-group work, rotating spokespersons, or pre-discussion writing tasks that support quieter students.
- Create and maintain open classroom climates through norms that promote respectful disagreement, encourage curiosity, and reduce fear of judgment. Set clear expectations that everyone has something valuable to contribute.

For Curriculum Authorities and Policymakers

- Review and update national curricula to ensure that civic education is not only knowledge-oriented but also participatory and skills-based. Incorporate

learning objectives related to communication, collaboration, and engagement with public issues.

- Promote gender equality and inclusion in civic education by integrating critical discussions of stereotypes, power dynamics, and systemic inequalities into curricular materials.
- Support schools in implementing inclusive pedagogies through funding, guidelines, and public policy frameworks that emphasize democratic education as a pillar of national priorities.

For Teacher Education Institutions and Universities

- Embed pedagogical reflexivity and inclusive teaching methods within teacher training programs. Trainees should learn not only about classroom management and instruction but also about identity, bias, and civic responsibility.
- Incorporate real classroom case studies and simulations in teacher education that reflect the diversity and complexity of actual school settings. These should address dynamics such as peer influence, didactic contracts, and the impact of teacher expectations.
- Encourage future teachers to view diversity not as a challenge to be managed but as a resource for richer educational experiences.

For Researchers and Academic Institutions

- Investigate further the dynamics of the didactic contract in civic education and its interaction with gender, race, and class. Pay particular attention to how different students perceive and internalize the rules of legitimate participation.
- Examine the long-term impact of open classroom climates and dialogic teaching strategies on political self-efficacy, civic identity, and democratic participation.
- Develop and evaluate interventions aimed at supporting teachers' pedagogical reflexivity and inclusive communication. Research should also explore scalable professional development models that are context-sensitive.

While these recommendations are diverse in their focus, they converge on a common aim: to cultivate classroom environments where political discussions are not only

permitted but encouraged and equitably accessible to all students. In such environments, political self-efficacy can flourish—not only as an outcome but as an everyday practice of democratic life.

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Annex – Video-recording template

Part 1: Global characteristics of the recorded classes

Classroom	Global characteristics of the recorded classes								
	Types of activities and their duration (number of minutes per type)						Spatial separation between the students in the classroom		
	Whole classroom discussion	Group/pair activity	Oral presentations by groups/pairs	Students not supposed to verbally intervene	Not clear or other	Total duration of the class	Male VS Female students 1 = Yes 2 = No 3 = Not clear or other	Minority/Disadvantaged VS Majority/No SEN or Disadvantaged students 1 = Yes 2 = No 3 = Not clear or other	Active VS Passive students 1 = Yes 2 = No 3 = Not clear or other

Teacher's gaze / eye contact / movement / location / body orientation		
Male VS Female students 1 = Towards Female students 2 = No preference 3 = Towards Male students 4 = Not clear or other	Minority/Disadvantaged VS Majority/No SEN/Disadvantaged students 1 = Towards Minority/SEN/Disadvantaged students 2 = No preference 3 = Towards Majority/No Disadvantaged/SEN students 4 = Not clear or other	Active VS Passive students 1 = Towards Passive students 2 = No preference 3 = Towards Active students 4 = Not clear or other

Part 2: Global characteristics of the recorded classes

Students (identification code of each of the 4 preselected students: Most Passive Male S., Most Passive Female S., Most Active Male S., Most Active Female S.)	Class	Opportunities/intentions to speak (number of entries per category and student)												
		Total per student	Type of expression					Who is the student talking to / intending to talk to			What is the student talking about / intending to talk about			
			Not raising their hand but got called on	Raising their hand but not got called on	Raising their hand and got called on	Speaks directly without being called on	Not clear or other	The teacher	Another student	Not clear or other	Experience	Knowledge	Opinion	Not clear or other

Students' entries during whole-classroom discussions

Verbal utterances (nu

Total per student	Syntactical/structural complexity (number of occurrences)								Markers of considering the plurality/relativity of opinions			
	Silence / „I don't know“	Non-sentential utterance	Single simple sentence	2 and more simple sentences	Single compound sentence	Single complex sentence	2 and more sentences including at least 1 complex sentence	Not clear or other	Respect explicitly expressed	Explicit lack of respect	No specific markers	Not clear or other

Reaction of the teacher							Reaction of other students						
No specific reaction	Brief agreement	Brief disagreement	Elaborated agreement	Asking the same student a question	Elaborated disagreement	Not clear or other	No specific reaction	Brief agreement	Brief disagreement	Elaborated agreement	Elaborated disagreement	Elaborated disagreement	Not clear or other

Part 3: Global characteristics of the recorded classes

Group/Pair (identification codes of the members)	Group/pair activities	
	Teacher's behaviour during the activity itself 1 = Not approaching the given group/pair 2 = Approaching the given group/pair but no intervention 3 = Approaching the given group/pair and intervention 4 = Not clear or other	Speaker(s) in each oral presentation 1 = Each member of the group/pair is speaking + student codes 2 = Speaker(s) selected/indicated by the teacher + student code(s) 3 = Speaker(s) selected by the group or self-selected + student code(s) 4 = Not clear or other