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‘Schools Can Do So Much More!’— Perspectives on Democracy and Education From Youth in Challenging Contexts Across Europe

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the perspectives on democracy and education of young people aged 16 to 18 growing up in challenging contexts across six EU member states: Austria, Croatia, Finland, France, Ireland and the Netherlands. Fifty-one participants took part in focus groups; these participants included young people from the outer borders of the European Union, metropolitan areas and those with experiences of legal trouble, substitute care or gender stereotyping. Analysis of their responses provides unique insights into how these young people—who may be considered doubly marginalized within contemporary representative democracies—perceive democracy in general and within schools. Results indicate that their understanding of democracy entails three core principles: freedom of choice and expression, equality of opportunity and collaboration. Across all settings, participants do not perceive formal education as a context in which everyday democracy takes place, which in turn clearly affects their democratic voice and agency.

1 | Introduction

This study examines the perspectives on democracy of young people aged 16 to 18 growing up in challenging contexts in six EU member states. Exploration of their perspectives is important as, in addition to the general challenges of youth representation, they often face additional barriers for democratic engagement and obstacles for having their voices heard. The paper offers unique comparative perspectives of school-aged young people growing up in harsh socioeconomic and/or personal circumstances, those living at the borders of the EU or those facing stereotypes. To amplify these voices, this paper explores and compares their understanding of democracy, their perspectives on opportunities for fostering democratic competence within their education and their willingness and capacity to participate in democratic life.

1.1 | Conceptual Framework

Academic research on the relationship between youth and democracy offers divergent perspectives. A dominant position suggests that young people are increasingly distancing themselves from democratic institutions, exhibiting diminishing trust and declining interest and participation in political life (Bessant et al. 2016; Furlong and Cartmel 2012; García-Albacete 2014; Henn and Foard 2014; Kitanova 2020; Lawless and Fox 2015; Suni and Mietola 2023; Weiss 2020). Given that young people are expected to assume active roles in the democratic life of their communities, their disengagement, lack of motivation and agency could be perceived as a major obstacle for democracy (Bečević and Dahlstedt 2022; Celis et al. 2021; Foa and Mounk 2016; Furlong and Cartmel 2007). In contrast, other authors reject this somewhat pessimistic view,

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highlighting that young people's interests and participation have merely changed, shifting to other forms of activities that still contribute to the democratic life of their communities (Marsh et al. 2006; O'Toole 2015; Sloam 2016; Sloam and Henn 2019; Grassi et al. 2024). From this perspective, political disengagement should not necessarily be interpreted as political apathy or a rejection of politics. Hay (2007), for instance, argues that declining engagement may reflect disenchantment with conventional forms of politics and political institutions rather than a complete loss of political interests and concerns. Dalton (2008) distinguishes between duty-based and engaged citizenship. Duty-based citizenship, more characteristic of older generations, encompasses traditional civic responsibilities such as obeying laws, paying taxes and voting. Engaged citizenship, in contrast more common among youth, involves non-electoral activities like protesting and volunteering, emphasizes understanding others through solidarity and connection and includes monitoring government actions. Van Deth (2014) explains this shift as a move from 'institutional' modes (voting, political party membership...) to 'non-institutional' modes (protesting, political consumption...) of participation.

Research indicates that personal and social conditions young people live in affect their relationship to democracy. Economic hardship and unemployment contribute to youth dissatisfaction with democracy (Foa et al. 2020). Socioeconomic inequalities also influence participation, as representative democracies often favour middle- and upper-class individuals. Compared to more affluent peers, young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to exhibit democratic agency (Ellison et al. 2020). Across Europe, unstable labour markets and limited intergenerational mobility exacerbate this issue, fostering uncertainty and weakening young people's sense of belonging within political and social institutions (Giugni and Grasso 2021). Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds often struggle for recognition as legitimate political actors, especially racialized and ethnic minority youth, who encounter additional obstacles to voice and representation (Sunı and Mietola 2023).

Closely associated to the Dalton's concept of 'engaged citizen' is the idea of 'everyday democracy'. Wolfe et al. (2017) suggests that citizenship encapsulates more than voting during elections or turnout at various public meetings. McKerrow (2010, 79) postulates that the core of democracy lies in 'the ability of citizens to speak their mind on matters that influence how they live'. Thus, we take the definition of everyday democracy from Wolfe et al. (2017, 169) as 'active engagement in a particular community for the purpose of influencing public life'. Everyday democratic practices correlate with increased life satisfaction, social trust and greater social inclusion and equality (Skidmore and Bound 2008). Consequently, fostering democratic capacities and actively promoting these practices in communities, schools and workplaces is essential. Schools are communities where upper-secondary students could experience everyday democracy by voicing their opinions on various aspects of education and actively engaging in the life of educational institutions. This is particularly important as education is often perceived as a mechanism for fostering democratic competences among youth (Quintelier 2010). This can

be achieved directly by instruction on democracy and its principles through school curriculum in subjects such as citizenship education. However, as Rinnooy Kan et al. (2024) argue, schools can also be seen as 'practice grounds' for development of democratic competences through daily experiences both within and outside of the classroom. Their views echo John Dewey's ideas (1903) on the importance of lived experiences in learning and promoting democratic concept of school in order for students to learn with and from others. Building on this understanding of schools as spaces for democratic learning, Jerome and Kisby (2026) emphasize the important capacity of schools to act as civic educators and argue that schools should be understood as key civic spaces. From this perspective, schools are not merely settings in which young people acquire knowledge about democracy, but civic environments in which they can develop democratic competences through participation, interaction and everyday experiences of collective life. Numerous research efforts indicate that adolescents practice and develop citizenship through social interactions with others (Biesta and Lawy 2006; Lawy and Biesta 2006; Torney-Purta and Amadeo 2011). Quintelier and Van Deth (2014) suggest that students experience of democratic principles support development of democratic competence.

However, significant research evidence suggests that schools are not efficient in fostering democratic competencies for all students. The 'civic opportunity gap', postulated by Kahne and Middaugh (2008), indicates that students in privileged educational and personal settings are offered more opportunities to practise everyday democracy compared to those in less privileged schools. These differences in opportunities can then be reflected in varying forms of democratic and political engagement, with those who have fewer opportunities inclining towards more passive democratic positions (Kahne et al. 2013). Flanagan and Levine (2010) and Youniss et al. (2002) argue that these unequal civic opportunities during the transition to adulthood have lasting effects on political identity and participation, with marginalized youth disproportionately routed away from civic-skill-building experiences. Hoskins and Janmaat (2019) are even more critical, stating that schools frequently increase already existing variance in democratic knowledge and participation. Some authors are very critical of the common discourse around youth participation and politics as being very adult-determined and conceptually narrow (Bessant 2004; Taft 2006). Kennelly (2023) offers an important critique of mainstream schooling and citizenship education as sites of exclusion, especially for marginalized groups.

1.2 | Present Study

This study investigates the perspectives on democracy held by upper-secondary students who are growing up in challenging contexts across Europe. It specifically aims to provide answers to the following two research questions:

- How do young people aged 16 to 18 growing up in challenging contexts in six EU member states understand democracy and how do they relate to it?
- What is their experience of schools as everyday democratic contexts for fostering democratic competence?

2 | Methods

The present study employed a qualitative research methodology, using a phenomenological approach (Creswell and Poht 2018) to allow for an in-depth investigation of diverse perspectives on democracy among upper-secondary students across a range of challenging contexts. This approach enabled the identification of both commonalities and variations in these perspectives within and across contexts. We find it as an imperative to include authentic voices of youth as research efforts are often restrained by academic concepts imposed by researchers and used methodologies. Frankenberger and Buhr (2020) suggest the complex nature of understanding democracy is often not captured by quantitative methodologies. They further argue that this understanding is diverse and intrinsically related to other concepts and experiences of individuals (Frankenberger and Buhr 2020). The limitations of this study stem from its reliance on a series of one-off conversations with hard-to-reach participants. Furthermore, in its ambition to cover a diversity of perspectives, this paper necessarily jeopardizes the possibility of capturing the nuances of challenges each group faces in their contexts. Future qualitative research should aim to incorporate longitudinal, comparative qualitative designs over prolonged time periods, allowing for a more in-depth recognition and exploration of the mechanisms behind experienced inequalities.

2.1 | Participants

Focusing on youth from the outer borders of the European Union, metropolitan areas as well as those with experiences of legal trouble, substitute care or those faced with gender stereotyping provides unique insights into how democracy in general and in schools are perceived by young people who may be considered doubly marginalized within contemporary representative democracies. First, because they are young—already facing the barriers to representation outlined above—and second, because their environments and socio-economic contexts impose additional constraints on their opportunities for democratic participation. Groups, locations and the number of participants in focus groups are presented in Table 1.

Finland: Young people in Oulu who have been placed in substitute care by authorities due to concerns regarding their well-being, safety or development were selected. Substitute care is a last-resort measure within the Finnish child protection system, implemented when supportive measures within the family or open care services are insufficient to ensure a young person's welfare. Participants attend different upper-secondary schools. This group was chosen to allow exploration of the perspectives and experiences of young people living in substitute care.

France: Upper-secondary students from lyceum in Villeneuve-la-Garenne were selected to reflect the social and cultural diversity of their local community, which includes a large proportion of residents with migrant or migrant-background identities. As students growing up in a socially and culturally diverse suburban environment, participants offer first-hand perspectives on the opportunities and challenges shaping youth engagement in France. Although situated near some of the wealthier suburbs of western Paris, the municipality itself has one of

TABLE 1 | Groups, locations and the number of participants in focus groups.

Group	Location	No. of participants
Youth living in substitute care (Foster home)	Oulu, Finland	9
Youth in Parisian suburbs	Villeneuve-la-Garenne, France	12
Youth in rural settings involved in the crime prevention project	County Kildare, Ireland	12
Youth who have been in contact with the law with a risk of recurrence	Rotterdam, The Netherlands	3
Female teenage STEM students	Leonding, Austria	8
Youth at the borders of the European Union	Ilok, Croatia	7

the lowest median household incomes in the region. Selection of this group allowed for capturing youth perspectives from a socio-economically disadvantaged suburban context within the wider Parisian metropolitan region.

Ireland: Young people from County Kildare involved in a project aimed at preventing youth involvement in anti-social or criminal behaviour were selected. The project, based in Newbridge and serving young people from the wider Curragh and Newbridge area, provides structured activities, mentorship and support for personal development to divert young people from entering the formal criminal justice system by encouraging reflection on behaviour, strengthening civic responsibility and supporting positive life choices. Located within commuting distance of Dublin, County Kildare has experienced rapid population growth over the past decades, placing increasing pressure on local infrastructure, housing and community services. This group, attending different schools, was selected to enable exploration of young people growing up in socially and economically challenging contexts.

The Netherlands: Young people living in Rotterdam who have previously been in contact with the justice system and are considered at risk of reoffending were selected. The participants are enrolled in entry-level VET programme, which represents the initial level of the Dutch secondary vocational education system and focuses on basic assistant training. Alongside their formal education, the young people participate in a programme designed to strengthen self-confidence, responsibility and entrepreneurial skills. This group was selected to include perspectives of vulnerable urban youth who are often underrepresented in research on civic engagement and democratic participation.

Austria: Female upper-secondary STEM students from Leonding, near Linz, were selected. This region is economically developed, with a strong industrial and technological sector. This group was chosen due to existing gender inequalities in Austria's labour market, particularly in STEM-related occupations and by the country's comparatively high gender pay gap within the EU. Inclusion of this group allowed for the exploration of high-achieving girls facing stereotypes and limitations in their surroundings.

Croatia: Upper-secondary students living in Ilok and nearby villages along the EU's borders were selected. Ilok, the easternmost settlement in Croatia, is located in Slavonia, an area facing demographic decline and economic challenges. The town borders Serbia across the Danube River and has a population of around 5000. This group was selected to provide insight into how local isolation, cross-border proximity and regional socio-economic challenges shape young people's perspectives on democracy.

2.2 | Data Collection

Between January and March 2024, research team members from the Critical ChangeLab project partners conducted focus groups with students. Focus groups were used to explore the diverse perspectives that upper-secondary students hold on democracy, allowing participants to articulate, compare and reflect on their views through interaction with peers. The group setting encouraged participants to share their perspective and made it possible to identify similarities, disagreements and points of consensus, while enabling the efficient data collection. In most settings, participants were already familiar with one another, which could facilitate the open discussion and make it easier for participants to express their views.

Participant recruitment was conducted in cooperation with local organizations—such as schools or NGOs—experienced in working with the specific youth groups involved. All participants provided written informed consent, and where requested (in line with national legal frameworks and research ethics requirements), consent was also obtained from their legal guardians. Participants received standardized information on the research project, including data protection details and consent procedures. The semi-structured protocol, devised by all consortium partners, allowed participants to elaborate on their views and enabled the discussion to expand towards issues they considered relevant. Focus groups averaged 50 min in duration. The study received authorization from the Croatian Ministry of Science and Education and ethical approval of the Ethics committee of the Institute of Social Research in Zagreb (no. 01/2024).

2.3 | Data Analysis

Among other themes, the focus group protocol explored students' understanding of democracy, their experiences with democracy in their daily lives and in schools and their personal relationship to democracy. Coding and analysis were guided

by Braun and Clarke's (2022) guidelines for reflexive thematic analysis. The focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed in their original languages. Each project partner was responsible for de-identifying personal data and preparing anonymized transcripts, based on common guidelines developed within the project consortium. All transcriptions were subsequently translated to English by consortium partners and deposited in a common database. Data were managed by the authors using NVivo software (QRC 2018). After initial familiarization with the data through multiple readings of the transcripts, the focus group data were coded in an iterative process that combined deductive and inductive approaches to developing codes and themes. Initial codes were generated mainly deductively, based on focus group topics and concepts identified in the literature describing young people's perspectives on democracy (e.g., political disengagement, institutional and non-institutional modes of political participation). In the subsequent waves of the search for patterns or themes, a more data-driven, inductive approach to coding was adopted to allow for an open exploration of students' perspectives and to capture their understandings of the meaning of democracy and participation. Throughout the coding process, the authors engaged in several reflective discussions to reflect on similarities and differences in coding approach and understandings of individual focus group excerpts. The process of sorting codes into the themes involved revisits to the original transcripts and the examination of consistency of coding within and between participants' inputs from different contexts. The final thematic map that was developed for the purposes of the study is shown in Figure 1.

3 | Results

3.1 | Understanding of Democracy

Participants' understanding of democracy varied considerably both within and between contexts, ranging from a complete lack of knowledge to a more elaborate comprehension of democratic principles. Surprisingly, some participants were completely unfamiliar with the concept of democracy. For example, when asked to explain their perspectives on democracy, a young person from Rotterdam responded:

■ I actually have no idea.
(P1, Rotterdam, The Netherlands)

Another participant from the same location echoed this unfamiliarity:

■ Something about our country, but I don't know exactly.
(P2, Rotterdam, The Netherlands)

Focus group participants in County Kildare voiced similar perspectives:

■ I don't even know what it means.
(P9, County Kildare, Ireland)

Reinforced by others from the same community:

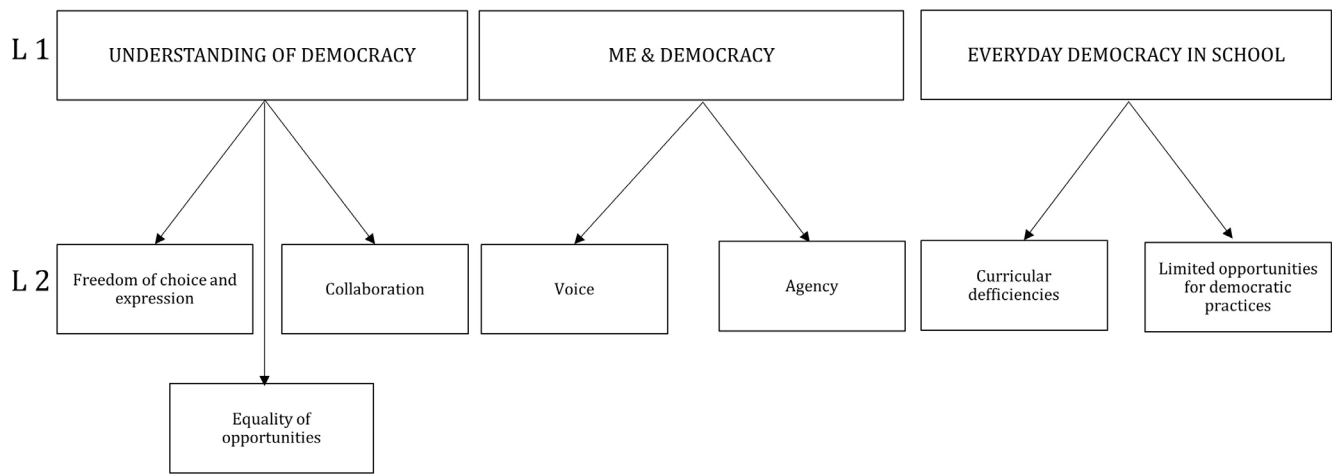


FIGURE 1 | Thematic map—analytical framework of the study.

I know of... I know the word, but I don't know the meaning.

(P1, County Kildare, Ireland)

And,

Yeah, I've heard it before. Is that like, the population or something?

(P5, County Kildare, Ireland)

One Oulu participant attributed her unfamiliarity with the concept of democracy to a lack of personal effort:

The only thing that comes to mind about democracy is the parliament, and right now our parliament is a bit in chaos. I don't know what democracy means. I wasn't awake.

(P2, Oulu, Finland)

Despite this unfamiliarity among some, most participants across the six communities expressed their understanding of democracy around three core principles: freedom of choice and expression, equality of opportunity and collaboration.

3.1.1 | Freedom of Choice and Expression

Freedom of choice and expression emerged as a central democratic principle emphasized by young people in various contexts. This position was often expressed succinctly, as illustrated by a Dutch participant:

An opinion or something that you can say.
(P2, Rotterdam, The Netherlands)

Similarly, a participant from a foster home in Oulu stated:

Democracy is freedom of choice.
(P5, Oulu, Finland)

A participant from the border town of Ilok offered a slightly more detailed perspective:

Well, maybe democracy is like, for example, freedom. Mostly freedom of choice, freedom to vote, and things like that.

(P1, Ilok, Croatia)

In other instances, freedom of choice and expression were more explicitly linked with the political system. A participant from Villeneuve-le-Garenne explained:

It's true that democracy for me is very important, pluralism, because if we're looking at the opposite of democracy—totalitarian regimes where there are restrictions on freedoms, freedom of expression, and there's only one party in power, and only one party in the country.

(P1, Villeneuve-le-Garenne, France)

This perspective contrasts personal freedoms as democratic principles with the restrictions of totalitarian regimes. An Austrian participant added another dimension to this idea:

Just being able to say, yes, I think democracy is in danger, is already a part of democracy, because you have freedom of opinion, the freedom to say something that is a bit different from the typical opinions.

(P3, Leonding, Austria)

In some instances, even the research process itself was perceived as an exercise of personal freedom.

... whereas here we can hold meetings like this, talk, criticise the mayor, the councillors, the state, the institutions freely.

(P2, Villeneuve-le-Garenne, France)

The democratic principle of freedom of choice and expression was often linked to equality of opportunity as another fundamental democratic pillar.

3.1.2 | Equality of Opportunity

The idea that democracy embodies equality of opportunity emerged in several locations. Responses on this democratic principle were usually straightforward, as illustrated by the words of Croatian participants:

And maybe that we should all have equal opportunities and chances. And that everyone is equal, not that someone is better than others or...

(P3, Ilok, Croatia)

Perspectives from the participants from Leonding further elaborated on this principle:

When you are together now in a country as a people, everyone has a choice, everyone can decide. Regardless of gender or educational status or whatever.

(P5, Leonding, Austria)

This statement connected equality of opportunity to freedom of choice and the idea that democracy often entails collaboration. This perspective of individual viewpoints converging was present among individuals in all locations.

3.1.3 | Collaboration

The concept of collaboration as a core democratic principle is captured in the words of a participant from Oulu:

Isn't democracy like, one person doesn't decide everything, but many people decide together what the outcome is?

(P3, Oulu, Finland)

A similar perspective emerged in County Kildare:

But you can't do it on your own. You can't put out that decision there by yourself; you need numbers of people, because yeah, a group of people [is needed] to actually do [it].

(P6, County Kildare, Ireland)

This view was echoed in the Dutch focus group, relating it to everyday activities:

Democracy? Yes. Um, it's like, you can all decide what happens. So, if I say we should sit in a circle, then I ask who agrees? Then you say no, we can sit in a square or something, like that. And then the majority decides.

(P4, Rotterdam, The Netherlands)

In other instances, collaboration was linked more directly to agency for change within the political sphere, illustrated by this excerpt from Leonding:

The people decide, so to speak, instead of a political power, or the president or something.

(P5, Leonding, Austria)

The following explanation from France elaborates further, scrutinizing political decisions based on a perceived lack of democratic legitimacy. This stems from Article 49.3 of the French constitution, which allows parliament to pass laws without a vote, thus circumventing what is understood as a collaborative political process:

... in France, well, democracy isn't really respected, So if I take the example of the 49.3, eh, this opposition, for example, to laws that aren't voted for by the people, which then go through the Senate, the National Assembly, etc., and which are supposed to pass, and which just because of the opposition, um, of the politicians in power, don't pass, so, um, for me, that's not democracy.

(P7, Villeneuve-le-Garenne, France)

Participants' understanding of democracy, though varied in depth and argumentation, was intrinsically related to their relationship with democratic principles and how they conceptualized their own citizenship.

3.2 | Me and Democracy

The analysis of young people's personal relationship to democracy revealed two core features: voice, defined as their 'active participation in deliberation about decisions and events' (Thomson 2011) and agency, defined as their 'capability to influence one's functioning and the course of events by one's actions' (Bandura 2001).

3.2.1 | Voice

In several locations, analyses suggested some of the participants fundamentally link the issue of voice to the legal voting age of 18, as illustrated by this excerpt from County Kildare:

No, I actually don't think we should (vote). 18 is fine, because that's when you're an adult and you're more mature.

(P4)

Another participant added:

... and there's too many immature people to be honest.

(P2, County Kildare, Ireland)

Similar views emerged in focus groups in Rotterdam, as evidenced by this excerpt:

P3: Vote after 18, right, then you can only vote after 18. So I think only after 18 is really true.

I: You can express your opinion regardless.

P3: After 18 and stuff. You can only vote after 18.
(Rotterdam, The Netherlands)

These views suggest a conceptualization of citizenship as primarily a voting duty, as argued by Dalton (2008). In some cases, the perception that youth voice is constrained by formal voting age regulations was linked to a belief that young people lack the maturity to meaningfully influence political decisions, as illustrated by the following quote from a participant in France:

I also think that young people in, well at least in Villeneuve, don't know enough about politics. As he said, I was surprised to learn from the AP that they didn't know the difference between left and right, and all that.

(P3, Villeneuve-le-Garenne, France)

These excerpts suggest a self-imposed lack of autonomy in voicing perspectives and influencing their lives. However, a more dominant perspective emerged in participants' responses, signalling that they are not asked to voice their views, as reported by a Croatian participant:

Well, for example, I feel like young people still aren't asked for their opinion. Like, I'm 18 now and I can vote, but still, no one asks for my opinion because they think I'm inexperienced and still immature, so... I don't know. They don't ask for young people's opinions. And it's supposed to be democracy.

(P1, Ilok, Croatia)

Even more often, participants felt that when they voiced their views, they would not be listened to, as a participant from Leonding stated:

For example, if I find myself in a situation to discuss a political issue or something else, most people just say you're too young to understand. Come back in eight years and we can talk about it then. You're just too young for that.

(P2, Leonding, Austria)

The perception of not being heard or asked for input places participants in a passive position, which can reduce their likelihood of considering how their stance might influence their immediate and broader environments.

3.2.2 | Agency

The perception that their opinions were not solicited, or that their voices were ignored or belittled when voiced, clearly affected participants' sense of agency. This is evidenced in the following exchange from Croatia:

P1: Well, you should act, but I know a lot of people who do, and in the end, nothing happens, at the end of the day. It would have to go to someone higher up in power, not to us who are like nobody.

P2: They don't consider anyone.

P1: The city doesn't really listen, and so on.
(Ilok, Croatia)

The notion of 'being nobody' indicates very low levels of self-belief and, consequently, a reduced capacity for an individual or a group to exercise agency within a political context (Haggard and Tsakiris 2009). In many locations, participants expressed the conviction that little would change even with increased agency, as one Austrian participant explained:

P4: Yes, but what do you want to change specifically? You can't change the thought process of sixteen-year-old boys or a teacher who perhaps grew up in a different time and has a different way of thinking. You can't change people.

I: Ok, so you also have the feeling that it's no use.

P4: Yes. That's probably why there's no motivation. Nothing will change anyway.
(Leonding, Austria)

The idea that actions do not necessarily lead to change was also evident in Croatia, where a participant described their experience with city officials' consultations with youth:

Well, the more I went, the more I realized it was, how should I say, useless. I mean, we go there, we gather, ideas are proposed, but... you come and say what bothers you, what bothers these people, what bothers 20 people, and it's not just those 20 people, those 20 people know another 50 who feel the same, and nothing changes, no one takes action. It just seems pointless right now.
(P4, Ilok, Croatia)

This idea was echoed by Irish participants:

Do you get me? It doesn't really matter, like. Even though we're talking about this today, I bet you in the next year, it's going to be the same thing, like.
(P1, County Kildare, Ireland)

Participants expressed bleak perspectives on youth agency and shared experiences that suggest a limited ability to change existing personal or social constraints (Giddens 1984). Their responses identified several barriers preventing youth from taking a more active role in their lives, including a perception of low self-efficacy. For example, an Irish participant stated:

Because if I had a chance to vote when I was 12, I would not have no clue, I'd sit in the corner and cry and just vote.

(P12, County Kildare, Ireland)

Others mentioned educational circumstances, such as this excerpt from Leonding indicating school tasks and obligations as a major obstacle:

Yes, I'd also like to find out about other things, but it's difficult because you don't have much time because of school and so on, and if you go to a demonstration, that takes up a lot of time again, so it's a bit difficult.

(P8, Leonding, Austria)

Education was not the only barrier for development of agency. Several participants mentioned difficult personal situations, as evidenced by the following excerpt from Oulu:

I feel like too many young people have a survival mentality... Like, it always feels like you have to survive. If mental health services here are really bad or, well, really full and slow-moving, then if you're young and your life is really tough and, frankly, going badly, then at least I don't feel like thinking about bigger issues, especially influencing and joining them, because you just have to survive your situation.

(P3, Oulu, Finland)

This notion of personal circumstances hindering a more active role in social and political life was echoed by an Austrian participant:

I think we are so overwhelmed with our own problems, our personal problems now. Personally, I just don't have the motivation or the time to sit down and find out about something else.

(P3, Leonding, Austria)

The influence of a wider social context emerged as a barrier in an Irish focus group, where agency was clearly connected to social class issues, as this excerpt suggests:

P12: ...because I just feel like posh people have to do it.

P3: I think they care more about actually what's going on more than anyone would...

P4: Maybe more people are worried about other things than voting. Like there's more important things like

money, paying bills, paying this and that, than going to vote.

(County Kildare, Ireland)

This exchange of opinions from Ireland supports the idea that individuals facing social and economic hardship are less likely to actively participate in democratic processes (Ellison et al. 2020). These perspectives suggest that agency in political life becomes a privilege reserved for the more affluent.

This sense of helplessness and despair of some participants was juxtaposed by another emerging perspective indicating a more active role in influencing political decision-making, as evidenced in this statement from a participant in France:

Yes, because I think that if, um, there are more politically active young people who are really interested in politics, um, who want to vote, who want to change something, then maybe that's how we'll really change things.

(P2, Villeneuve-le-Garenne, France)

This idea of being active relates to the engaged citizenship as evidenced in participants' words from Croatia:

I mean, for example, I feel like my vote doesn't count for anything, and one person might feel the same, then two, then three, and that adds up to half a million people who think the same way and decide not to vote because they think their vote doesn't matter. I mean, I'm not saying... it's not like I follow politics or anything, but before the elections or something, I could look into it, like, how to say, educate myself on what they...

(P3, Ilok, Croatia)

A similar sentiment was echoed in Austria:

Yes, so basically, if everyone thought, okay, my individual vote is not important anyway and then 100 people suddenly think that, and those who have an opinion—not a worse opinion, but one that you don't agree with—they'll go [vote], then your opinion is outnumbered. So, a single vote already has value.

(P4, Leonding, Austria)

While these perspectives remain within Dalton's concept of 'duty citizenship,' they indicate the presence of individual self-awareness and collective action as a means of influencing political life. Regardless of their positions regarding voice and agency, participants' educational experiences in all contexts suggest that school is not a place where everyday democracy is sufficiently practiced.

3.3 | Everyday Democracy in Schools

Across all six locations, participants generally felt that schools are inadequately developing young people's democratic

competence. They also suggested that there are few opportunities to practice everyday democracy within educational settings. These often strongly negative views centred around two main pillars: a lack of emphasis on democratic competence in the curriculum and limited everyday opportunities to foster democratic competence in school.

3.3.1 | Curricular Deficiencies

In most cases, participants recognized the lack of explicit instruction on democracy in their education, as illustrated by this excerpt from County Kildare:

If they wanted young people to be more aware of it, then they should do that, because in school, they don't talk about these things.

(P4, County Kildare, Ireland)

A similar sentiment was expressed in Leonding among high achieving female students:

Maybe if you integrate it more into school... So, I don't know, as part of a subject, since you sit in class anyway, maybe something like that.

(P6, Leonding, Austria)

Participants also suggested that school systems often prioritize core subjects, relegating teaching and learning about democracy to a secondary concern. A participant attending lyceum in Villeneuve-le-Garenne stated:

I generally have the impression that we focus too much on becoming an engineer, but not on life – life after school. So, for example, as he was saying, on everything like politics, that we're going to have to vote on...

(P6, Villeneuve-le-Garenne, France)

Another participant in the same location echoed this point:

Er, if we're told more about politics etc. at school, it's true that we would have ended up with something better, but otherwise, er, I think that in the basic courses we don't talk about it enough, we're not informed enough about it, which prevents us from participating.

(P5, Villeneuve-le-Garenne, France)

In Ireland, calls were also made for schools to focus more on real-life contexts, including democratic competence.

I dunno... Like in my opinion, I think school should teach the basic, the like, the important things of living, which is money, tax, housing, and all, right, all that.

(P12, County Kildare, Ireland)

The French case was particularly interesting because participants take a 'Moral and Civic Education Programme (EMC)' which aims to enable students to develop a clear awareness of their rights and duties, understand the concept of the public good and learn to live together in a pluralist society. Despite the subject's place within the curriculum and its clear goals of fostering democratic competence in schools, participants' perspectives suggest that its status and delivery hinder the accomplishment of these goals, as explained by a focus group participant:

In reality we don't really have any EMC because we know that the teachers prefer to finish the syllabus, so we don't really have the time, and in reality, even half an hour a week isn't enough in any case. We're so overbooked by the programme that we can't do too much.

(P4, Villeneuve-le-Garenne, France)

Another perspective signals that even when a subject specifically focuses on fostering democratic principles, its implementation has shortcomings:

Yes but then we were talking about EMC but even in EMC we, I have the impression that we don't learn that many things, we are taught I don't know any more but for example some things about values or the city etc. but as much as that about how to be an active citizen and what to do afterwards.

(P7, Villeneuve-le-Garenne, France)

In the Austrian case, participants reported the school's unwillingness to engage with political topics. This became evident to participants only upon their initiative in light of upcoming elections.

... I've just realised that our school, for example, doesn't encourage people to take a political stance or inform themselves about it in general, for example we did a school project. We interviewed every party, the party leaders, on the subject of the environment. So, we showed the different views of the parties... We were planning to implement the voting booth ['Wahlkabine', former Austrian initiative that connects individual's opinions to positions of political parties]. That was the idea. It was rejected. It was, well, the site no longer exists and we wanted to redo it, so to speak, while remaining politically neutral, purely for information purposes. And it was rejected because it's politics.

(P7, Leonding, Austria)

Participants' perspectives further indicated that teaching and learning processes and organization of schooling do not encourage students to express their opinions or collaboratively make decisions within the educational setting, arguably the core elements of everyday democracy.

3.3.2 | Limited Opportunities to Foster Democratic Competence in School

Across contexts, the prevailing perspective was that school staff insufficiently encourage young people to voice their opinions. As one Croatian participant stated:

And some (teachers) think we're only there to listen to what they say and that we don't really have the right to our own opinion.

(P3, Ilok, Croatia)

This lack of welcome for students' expression of opinions and ideas, a precondition of democratic practices, was also evident in the following focus group excerpt from Finland:

I: What about at school? It is important to everyone. Do your opinions matter?

P3: Yes.

P2: Not in all matters, at least.

P1: Not at our school, at least.

P5: No. Nothing. The teacher says, do this, and if not, it's detention. It's very much like that.

(Oulu, Finland)

The majority of participants in Oulu did not perceive school as a context where their views and opinions mattered, a sentiment echoed across all contexts. Participants from Ireland were particularly critical of the opportunities for students to express themselves, as one participant explained:

... and they let you like... say you're in third year, right? They'd let like any young one, like they don't like leave, they'd let them leave school because they don't... because they can stick up for themselves. They don't like it when you when you stick up for yourself.

(P1, County Kildare, Ireland)

Similar sentiments regarding the educational process not welcoming the expression of opinions were evident in Rotterdam, as illustrated in the following interaction:

I: Do you say that to the school? (express your opinion)

P3: No, never said anything, but nobody has ever said anything. I'm doing well, so why would I say anything now?

(Rotterdam, The Netherlands)

Even in different educational and personal circumstances, a participant from Ilok suggested a similar sentiment, further

implying that expressing an opinion in educational setting may lead to personal consequences:

Yes. Like 'Tell me if something's wrong' but then you know that if you say it, it won't turn out well for you.

(P1, Ilok, Croatia)

On some occasions, participants reported positive classroom experiences that contributed to their sense of participation, as reported by a participant from Oulu:

But at least for me, well, I'm in vocational school in the media field, so we have a lot of influence. There are three groups of us, we're quite mixed up, doing these things in different groups, and the mix is shuffled a lot. We can immediately influence if something comes to mind, then you can pull the teacher's sleeve and say, hey, I think it would be better if we did it this way. Or maybe like this. And they ask us a lot about our opinions. And in many projects, they say, okay, we've given this introduction and guidance, now the job is in your hands. You have roles like cameraman, director, actors, soundman, all of these. We do a lot of the work ourselves and decide what we do, what tasks, how, schedules. At least in our school, you can decide and influence a lot of things. This shows schools can do so much more.

(P3, Oulu, Finland)

This excerpt indicates how more democratic teaching and learning practices, emphasizing student voice and responsibility, can reinforce feelings of agency and self-efficacy.

4 | Discussion and Conclusion

Analyses of perspectives of young people growing up in challenging contexts across six EU member states indicate a complex interaction between their understanding of and relationship with democracy, and how they view schools as settings fostering their democratic competence. There was significant variability in how young people understand and articulate what democracy is for them. Although European citizens nearing or reaching the age of majority, some participants were completely unaware of the concept. However, most participants across contexts conceptualized democracy around principles of freedom of choice and expression, equality of opportunity and collaboration. Participants' elaborations and language differed significantly across locations. Some offered elaborate statements connecting their understanding of democracy to political life, while others described their comprehension of democratic principles succinctly. Despite these differences, participants in all contexts held positive sentiments about these principles, confirming the notion that young people generally have an affirmative stance towards democracy (Grassi et al. 2024). Importantly, regardless of the challenges young people face, there were no negative sentiments towards democracy. Further analysis revealed that

these positive sentiments towards personal freedoms, equality and unity did not necessarily translate into a positive relationship with democracy. Specifically, participants sometimes conceptualized their citizenship only in terms of duties such as voting (Dalton 2008), often emphasizing the immaturity of their peers. Some even willingly rejected the idea of autonomy in deliberation about decisions and events (Thomson 2011).

Analyses revealed a prominent perception among participants of not being heard or asked for their opinions, confirming the relationship between young people's personal and social conditions and their relationship to democracy (Ellison et al. 2020; Foa et al. 2020; Giugni and Grasso 2021; Suni and Mietola 2023). This directly influenced their sense of agency in all its aspects, clearly affecting their readiness to partake in social and political life. Analyses identified several barriers to increased agency, both within participants and in their surroundings. Some participants indicated lower levels of self-efficacy, while others mentioned difficult personal situations. Educational obligations characteristic of their age also made their agency less pronounced. Finally, excerpts from Ireland clearly indicated class differences in opportunities for agency among participants, confirming Ellison et al.'s (2020) findings that young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to exhibit democratic agency. Lower levels of self-efficacy and perceived barriers to agency were reciprocally related to participants' perception of their immediate surroundings as fixed contexts. Lower self-efficacy and perceived barriers contributed to the idea that activation would not lead to change, and vice versa. Alongside this critical stance on upper-secondary students' agency, a more positive position emerged, echoing the same democratic principles that formed participants' understanding of democracy. Regardless of the nature and levels of their voices and agency, the majority of participants remained in the realm of duty-based citizenship, whereas some exhibited characteristics of critical and engaged citizens (Dalton 2008).

Across all locations, participants generally perceived their schools as inadequate environments for developing democratic competence. Many reported a lack of explicit instruction on democracy in their education, and most felt that teaching and learning about democracy was not prioritized within educational systems. French participants indicated that even when a subject on democracy existed, its delivery and position within the system diminished its potential impact. The Austrian case suggested that schools may actively avoid political and controversial topics.

More prominently, participants questioned whether schools could even be described as democratic institutions that practice everyday democracy and thus could not be considered communities where students' active engagement is welcomed (Wolfe et al. 2017). In all contexts, participants indicated that they were rarely asked for their opinions or listened to. Some even hinted that they felt they would be sanctioned if they voiced their views. This sense of exclusion and disregard echoes Kahne et al.'s (2013) observation that unequal civic opportunities for deprived students tend to steer them towards more passive democratic positions and resonates with Hoskins and Janmaat's (2019) more critical claim that schools frequently

exacerbate existing variance in democratic knowledge and participation rather than levelling it. This study suggests that, for these young people, schools are not practicing grounds for the development of democratic competences through daily experiences both within and outside of the classroom (Rinnooy Kan et al. 2024).

These findings suggest that educational systems should focus on both direct instruction on democracy and on making schools places where democracy is practiced through the everyday interactions of students, teachers, staff and the wider community, cultivated as what Dewey (1903) would call a lived experience. Schools can be considered democratic based on their approach to relationships, decision-making and daily operations (Biesta 2011, 2015). From this viewpoint, a school's democratic capacity reflects its ability to leverage knowledge and resources to provide students with opportunities to develop their own democratic skills, shape their learning environment and practice expressing their opinions (Gibson 2006; Rinnooy Kan et al. 2024). This is particularly important in early and late adolescence, as these are crucial phases for the development of democratic attitudes (Eckstein et al. 2012) as it is precisely during this period that unequal civic opportunities carry lasting consequences for political identity and participation, with marginalized youth disproportionately routed away from civic-skill-building experiences (Flanagan and Levine 2010; Youniss et al. 2002). Finally, evidence across the European Union suggests that making schools places characterized by everyday democracy is imperative for those living in challenging personal and social circumstances. As one participant stated, 'schools can do so much more' to foster democratic competence, not only for these students, but for all.

Author Contributions

Boris Jokić: conceptualization, investigation, funding acquisition, writing – original draft, methodology, validation, writing – review and editing, visualization. **Nikola Baketa:** conceptualization, investigation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing, visualization, validation, methodology. **Zrinka Ristić Dedić:** conceptualization, investigation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing, visualization, validation, methodology.

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Ethics Statement

The research received authorization from the following instances: Ministry of Science and Education and approval of the Ethics Committee of the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb (no. 01/2024).

Consent

Participation in the focus groups required informed consent from all participants and, where applicable according to national legislation, from their legal guardians. Participants were provided with standardized information about the research project, including details related to data protection and the procedures for giving consent to participate.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions. The dataset consists of qualitative materials (audio recordings, transcripts, field notes and photographs) collected under conditions of informed consent that guarantee participants' privacy and anonymity. In accordance with GDPR and the terms of consent, the data are securely stored at the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb and are not available for public sharing. Fully anonymized materials may be made available in research archives where possible.

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