

Active participation in the current context of higher education

La participación activa en el contexto actual de la educación superior

Participação ativa no contexto atual do ensino superior

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Abstract

Introduction: The problem addressed in this article refers to the insufficient level of active participation by students, which has been evident in the international context in the field of higher education. **Objective:** To place this issue in the Chilean national context, investigating the levels of active participation present in a sample of third-year students studying special education at the Catholic University of the Most Holy Conception. **Methodology:** To achieve the proposed goal, the “Class Participation Factors Questionnaire” was administered, and systematic observation and interviews with teachers were conducted. **Results:** The results revealed the presence of a mixed teaching methodology among teachers, as well as a lack of knowledge among students and a positive self-perception of participation. **Conclusions:** It was concluded that there is a need to improve the factors linked to active participation, as the results obtained reveal areas for improvement in this regard.

Keywords: Active learning; Education; Educational participation; Students¹.

Resumen

Introducción: El problema que se aborda en el presente artículo hace alusión al insuficiente nivel de participación activa, por parte de los estudiantes, que se ha evidenciado en el contexto internacional en el ámbito de la educación superior. **Objetivo:** Situar dicha problemática en el contexto nacional chileno, indagando en los niveles de participación activa presentes en una muestra de estudiantes correspondiente al tercer año de pedagogía en educación diferencial de la Universidad Católica de la Santísima Concepción. **Metodología:** Para alcanzar el fin propuesto se aplicó el “Cuestionario de factores de la participación en clase”, la observación sistemática y entrevistas a docentes; **Resultados:** los resultados dieron cuenta de la presencia de una metodología mixta de enseñanza en los docentes, así como una falta de conocimientos en los estudiantes y una autopercepción de participación con tendencia positiva. **Conclusiones:** Se concluye la presencia de una necesidad de mejora de los factores vinculados a la participación activa, toda vez que los resultados obtenidos dan cuenta de elementos posibles de perfeccionar en cuanto a esta.

Keywords: Active learning; Education; Educational participation; Students.

Resumo

Introdução: O problema abordado neste artigo refere-se ao nível insuficiente de participação ativa dos estudantes, que se tem verificado no contexto internacional no âmbito do ensino superior. **Objetivo :** Situar essa problemática no contexto nacional chileno, investigando os níveis de participação ativa presentes em uma amostra de estudantes do terceiro ano de pedagogia em educação diferenciada da Universidade Católica da Santíssima Conceição. **Metodologia:** Para atingir o objetivo proposto, aplicou-se o “Questionário de fatores de participação em sala de aula”, observação sistemática e entrevistas com professores; **Resultados:** os resultados revelaram a presença de uma metodologia mista de ensino por parte dos professores, bem como uma falta de conhecimento por parte dos alunos e uma autopercepção de participação com tendência positiva. **Conclusões:** Conclui-se pela necessidade de melhorar os fatores relacionados à participação ativa, uma vez que os resultados obtidos revelam elementos que podem ser aperfeiçoados nesse aspecto.

Palavras-chave: Aprendizagem ativa; Educação; Participação educacional; Alunos

¹ The key terms have been retrieved from the Thesaurus of the University of Barcelona.

¿Cómo citar este artículo?

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1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, the importance of active participation in the educational context has been increasingly highlighted, since it fosters a sense of community that enhances learning, even among students themselves (Guzmán Frías et al., 2024). This aligns with other studies that, for example, have identified an increase in students' self-perception of learning when active participation is encouraged (Swan & Shih, 2005). In addition to this, new studies have emerged that focus on describing the current landscape of higher education regarding participation. In this context, we can find authors such as Velazco and Rolón (2024), who state that “one of the most recurrent cases in classrooms is the low level of student participation during classes” (p. 2575), or Galván and Siado (2021), who mention that “students are not encouraged to engage in active and participatory education” (p. 965).

It is important to note that active participation is usually understood as a spontaneous or voluntary involvement, commonly accompanied by knowledge that provides students with the confidence to take part during the development of a given class (Aldana et al., 2017). Thus, a student with a high level of active participation will be one who consistently engages in classroom interactions related to the topics being addressed (Aldana et al., 2017).

Based on the foregoing, the aim of this article is to situate the current international landscape of active participation within the Chilean national context by examining the levels of participation observed in a sample of third-year students enrolled in the Special Education teacher education program at the Universidad Católica de la Santísima Concepción. The data obtained are further complemented by information gathered from faculty members belonging to the aforementioned traditional university.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK / REFERENCE FRAMEWORK

The current landscape of higher education reveals difficulties regarding students' active participation in class, since classes tend to be structured around a methodology focused on the teacher's delivery of content rather than on the students' active engagement.

In order to present the situation that has unfolded in recent years with respect to active participation, it is essential to first address the different perspectives that deal with the conceptualization and/or implications of this concept, which are outlined below.

THEORIES OF ACTIVE LEARNING

Within the theories of active learning, we find authors such as Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky—the former introducing the topic of cognitive development, while the latter delved into the conceptualization of social learning. Piaget pointed out the importance of the student's interaction with their environment, whereas Vygotsky emphasized both cultural elements and social interaction itself as key factors in learning (Télez et al., 2007). These approaches highlight the importance, within the learning process, of not focusing on the passive incorporation of knowledge by the student through what is taught by the teacher, but rather on the integration of knowledge through students' participation, mainly with their peers, which constitutes active participation (González & Valderrama, 2024).



CONSTRUCTIVIST THEORY

From this theory, a key aspect in the generation of learning is the experiences that the learner undergoes within the environment in which they often interact. In other words, it is these experiences that generate learning, combined with the reflection that also arises from them (Tatalović & Tomljenović, 2020). Based on what Tatalović and Tomljenović (2020) point out, some ways of acquiring knowledge from a constructivist perspective would grant students freedom in the choice of topics, thereby “increasing their active participation in learning through the process of knowledge construction” (p. 28).

THEORY OF ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

This theory addresses the series of cognitive changes experienced by individuals involved in a process of active participation. Specifically, it refers to a sequence of stages within the theory: an initial stage in which the person actively engages in an activity; a second stage, when the acquisition of skills and knowledge takes place as a result of active involvement; a third stage, which involves reflecting on what was acquired in the previous step; and finally, a fourth stage, characterized by the emergence of new cognitions, ultimately resulting in a change in behavior (Greene, 2013).

All the previously mentioned theories convey the importance, within the educational field, of students actively engaging in the processes of knowledge generation as a way to consolidate their own learning.

CONTEXTUALIZATION OF ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

With regard to the current state of higher education, Fernández and Alcaraz (2016) point out that “there is hardly any participation at the university and almost no critical thinking” (p. 213). In the same context, according to Moliní and Sánchez (2019), “there are professors who consider students’ interventions to be of little interest and a waste of time” (p. 217). In addition to what has just been mentioned concerning the university setting, Herrera (2016) notes:

Even though participation in the university context is recognized as a key element for advancing in terms of the quality of education, international research has shown that, in general, educational systems have not succeeded in fostering participation within institutions (p. 45).

Focusing mainly on online classes, there are studies that address the issue of active participation in this modality. In this regard, for example, Flores-Fernández and Durán Riquelme (2022) state that “it has been shown that there is low interaction during synchronous classes, both between students and teachers, and among the students themselves” (p. 129). Returning to the broader focus on classes in general, regardless of their modality, Velazco and Rolón (2024) affirm that:

One of the most recurrent issues in classrooms is the low level of student participation during lessons. However, this problem is generally of little concern within institutions, as it is expected that, over time, students will gain the confidence to demonstrate their knowledge and skills and gradually overcome the fear of failure during the learning process (p. 2575).

In addition to what has just been mentioned, we also find authors such as Galván and Siado (2021),



who state that:

The educational process has been affected by traditional, rote, and routine intellectual practices, possibly because students are not encouraged toward an active and participatory education, but rather a repetitive one. In other words, students are prompted to acquire knowledge blindly, which undermines a process that should be entirely dynamic in order to achieve a high academic level (p. 965).

Authors such as Komatsuzaki et al. (2023) state that “students often fail to engage in effective social interactions” (p. 1), suggesting that even in some instances of higher education, while active participation may be encouraged, consistent and meaningful social interaction that benefits students’ development is often not facilitated. Regarding the teacher’s role in active participation, Abebe Abera et al. (2020) notes that “there is a strong tendency among higher education instructors to take on their students’ tasks and responsibilities” (p. 352), rather than encouraging the students themselves to carry them out.

Based on all the aforementioned points, this article seeks to situate the current issue highlighted in the literature regarding active participation within the national context of Chile. The purpose of this is to ensure that the information gathered serves as evidence of the cross-cutting nature of the problem in different contexts, while also providing a foundation for future research and interventions aimed at fostering such participation—bearing in mind that there are studies supporting active participation in education as a means for developing both self-efficacy and technical skills (Bueno et al., 2025).

3. METHODOLOGY

In order to examine active participation within the context of Chilean higher education, a sample composed of both faculty members and students from the School of Special Education Pedagogy at the Universidad Católica de la Santísima Concepción was used. A qualitative approach was applied, characterized by the exploration, understanding, and analysis of the beliefs, representations, and motives that guide individuals (Arbesú & Ramírez, 2019). Regarding the scope of the research, it is descriptive in nature, since the aim is to describe the subjective representations of a group of individuals concerning a specific phenomenon (Ramos, 2020). Within the methodology employed, different instruments were used, namely interviews, systematic observation, and the classroom participation factors questionnaire, which are detailed below.

The study began with the use of the interview technique, defined by Sáez (2017) as “a technique that establishes an intentional dialogue between the researcher and the subject under study, with the aim of obtaining data and information” (p. 77). This was carried out with four faculty members, under the assumption that, given their direct contact with students in the classroom, they could provide more accurate information regarding students’ active participation in the context of the classes taught.

To conduct the interview, a previously designed script was used, which is presented below (Table 1).



Table 1.
Script of the semi-structured interview applied to the faculty members.

Category	Subcategory	Questions
1. Teaching practice.	1.1. Teaching methodology.	1.1.1. What types of methodologies do you use to conduct your classes? 1.1.2. What kind of behavior do you seek to foster in students through these methodologies?
	1.2. Teacher projection regarding academic outcomes.	1.2.1. What types of teaching actions do you feel might be generating difficulties with respect to the expected learning outcomes in students? 1.2.2. What types of academic performance outcomes do you expect from students?
2. Instructor perception.	2.1. Perceptions about students.	2.1.1. What is your opinion regarding the students' reaction to your teaching methodology? 2.1.2. In terms of classroom participation, what is your opinion regarding students' performance?
	2.2. Classroom student behavior.	2.2.1. In the context of the classes conducted, is there interaction among students regarding the content covered in them? 2.2.2. Is there repeated interaction between you and the students in class regarding the content covered?

Note. Table showing the questions designed to be asked of faculty members in order to explore aspects related to active participation. Source: Author's own elaboration.

In addition to the use of the interview, which underwent a process of expert validation, non-participant observation was also employed, which according to Campos et al. (2012):

This refers to an observation carried out by external agents who have no involvement in the events; therefore, there is no relationship with the subjects in the setting. One is merely a spectator of what occurs, and the researcher limits themselves to taking notes of what happens in order to achieve their aims (p. 53).

This was applied to students, in the context of their engagement with topics related to special educational needs.

To record the information obtained through non-participant observation, an anecdotal record was used, which, according to Sáez (2017), describes “unforeseen behaviors or situations that draw the researcher’s attention and are pertinent and relevant to the study” (p. 76).

Finally, with the aforementioned students, the Classroom Participation Factors Questionnaire was administered, a multiple-choice instrument consisting of 14 items (Rueda et al., 2017), which are detailed below.

Table 2.
Numbering of items from the Classroom Participation Factors Questionnaire

Numbering	Item
1	I speak fluently and with a good tone of voice.
2	I remember what I have to say when speaking about a topic.
3	I feel relaxed and move naturally.
4	I am skilled at expressing my ideas.
5	I observe and address all my classmates.
6	My classmates respect the comments I make in class.

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Numbering	Item
7	The teacher is respectful of the comments I make in class.
8	I have experienced teasing from my classmates.
9	My group is so large that I cannot participate because others have already said what I was going to say.
10	The teacher makes me feel embarrassed when I say something incorrect.
11	I read the material assigned for discussion in the corresponding class.
12	I understand the readings assigned to me in class.
13	I miss opportunities to participate because I do not prepare for class.
14	I find it difficult to understand the materials.

Note. The table shows the number assigned to each item that makes up the Classroom Participation Factors Questionnaire. Source: Author's own elaboration.

With regard to the data analysis plan, in the case of the information collected through the interview, a cross-matrix was used to verify whether the data obtained showed similarities or divergences in the responses to the different questions posed to the faculty members, which were related to active participation.

With regard to the observation, the analysis was carried out based on a comparison of the active participation observed in two classes of the course Psychopedagogical Assessment in Learning Disorders III, using anecdotal records as a means of documenting situations relevant to the study.

Regarding the Classroom Participation Factors Questionnaire, the analysis was based on a comparison between the central issue under investigation—related to the low level of active participation—and the results obtained from the students' responses to the same instrument.

4. RESULTS

Below is a table corresponding to a cross-tabulation matrix, which displays the similarities and divergences identified from the information collected through the interviews conducted with different faculty members.

Table 3
Cross-tabulation matrix

Category	Subcategory	Cross-tabulation by actors
Teaching practice	Teaching methodology	<p>Similarities: In all the interviews, a willingness on the part of the faculty to encourage students' participation can be observed in different ways.</p> <p>Divergences: While in the first three interviews content is reinforced through group work, in the last one no use of group work was identified in response to the initial questions posed to the teacher, with participation being based primarily on interactions that take place during a traditional lecture-style class.</p>
	Teacher projection regarding academic outcomes.	<p>Similarities: In the four interviews, the faculty members expressed the expectation that students should acquire learning from the subject matter, placing less importance on the grade itself and more on the content to be assimilated.</p>

Category	Subcategory	Cross-tabulation by actors
Instructor perception.	Perceptions about students.	<p>Divergences: In half of the interviews, the teachers attribute the problems that may arise regarding the expected learning outcomes to factors inherent to teaching, while in the other half they attribute these same problems to elements inherent to the students.</p> <hr/> <p>Similarities: The teachers agree that there is some degree of participation within the class.</p> <p>Divergences: Some teachers report a higher degree of student participation than others. A large part of the faculty attributes the difficulties in student participation that may arise to different factors.</p> <hr/> <p>Similarities: The majority of faculty members agree that there is some degree of interaction among students regarding the class content.</p> <p>Divergences: The degree of interaction among students regarding the course content varies depending on the teacher's way of conducting the class. The degree and manner of interaction between educators and students vary among different teachers.</p>
	Classroom student behavior.	<p>Similarities: The majority of faculty members agree that there is some degree of interaction among students regarding the class content.</p> <p>Divergences: The degree of interaction among students regarding the course content varies depending on the teacher's way of conducting the class. The degree and manner of interaction between educators and students vary among different teachers.</p>

Note. Table showing both the similarities and the divergences in the information collected through each interview, in relation to each subcategory. Source: Author's own elaboration.

From Table 3, it can be inferred that the teachers tend to conduct their classes using a mixed methodology, combining both theoretical lessons and classes that involve students' active participation. It can also be observed that some teachers attribute active participation either to factors inherent to the teaching approach or to the disposition that the student may show when participating.

With regard to the observation conducted, the following tables present the information collected through anecdotal records taken in two observed online classes, focused on active participation among Special Education Pedagogy students.

Table 4.
Anecdotal record of the first class.

Date: September 11, 2024	Time: 2:20 PM
Place: Faculty of Education, UCSC.	
Subjects: Special Education Pedagogy students.	
Context: Class focused on understanding multidisciplinary work in addressing special educational needs.	
Incident: Problems in active participation were observed among some students, correlated with a lack of knowledge regarding the topic indicated by the teacher. In addition, the absence of a portion of the students from the class participation instance was also noted.	

Note. The table presents the relevant background information collected from the first observation of a class conducted with third-year Special Education students at the Universidad Católica de la Santísima Concepción. Source: Author's own elaboration.

From what is presented in Table 4, difficulties are observed among the students regarding the topic to be addressed in class. In addition, the absence of some students from the practical activity conducted by the teacher, which had been agreed upon in advance, is also noted.

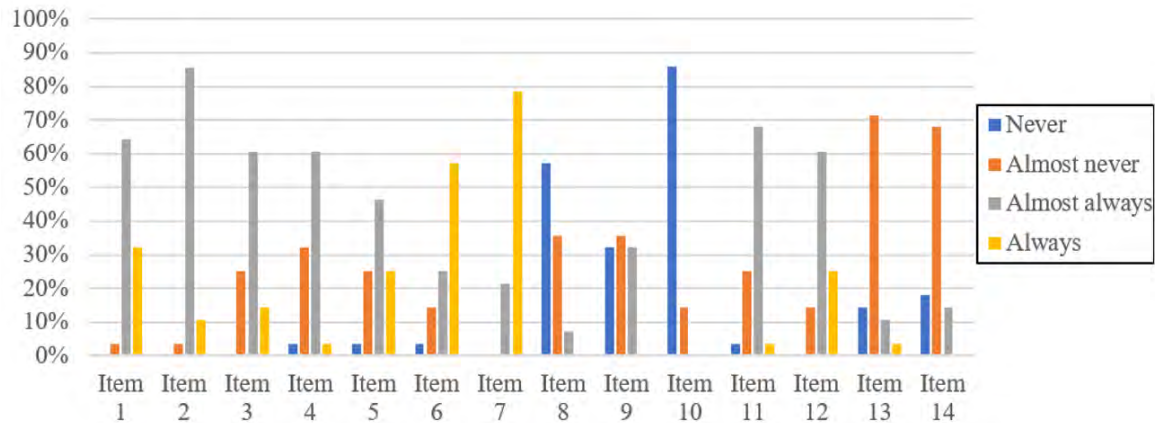
Table 5.*Anecdotal record of the second class.*

Date: September 25, 2024	Time: 2:35 PM
Location: Faculty of Education, UCSC.	
Participants: Special Education Pedagogy students.	
Context: Class focused on understanding multidisciplinary work in addressing special educational needs.	
Incident: Greater active participation of the students can be observed based on what was planned by the teacher; however, at the same time, a lack of psychological knowledge regarding the content to be addressed through the multidisciplinary role-playing carried out by the students is evident. Difficulties are noted in the understanding of content related to Autism Spectrum Disorder and Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder.	

Note. The table presents the relevant background information collected from a second observation of a class conducted with third-year Special Education students at the Universidad Católica de la Santísima Concepción. Source: Author's own elaboration.

From what is presented in Table 5, greater active participation can be observed among the students who did attend the educational session; however, at the same time, a lack of knowledge regarding the content addressed is also detected.

With regard to the Active Participation Factors Questionnaire, the following results were obtained.

Figure 1.*Presence of classroom participation factors based on surveyed students.*

Note. Frequency of each classroom participation factor, with each represented by an item, based on the results obtained through the questionnaire administered to students of the course Psychopedagogical Assessment in Learning Disorders III. Source: Author's own elaboration.

In the graph just presented, it can be observed—contrary to what might be expected based on the findings of the previously mentioned studies—that most factors tend to yield a positive score in the sample of 28 students to whom the questionnaire was administered. However, an exception is found in some items that reflected greater difficulties among students regarding active participation, such as “My group is so large that I cannot participate because others have already said what I was going to say,” where more than 30% of the students stated that this happened to them almost always, and “I read the

material assigned for discussion in the corresponding class,” where approximately 25% reported that they almost never do so.

5. DISCUSSION

Based on the information obtained through interviews, records, and the previously mentioned questionnaire, it is possible to state that the educational reality in the Chilean context, in some programs offered by traditional universities, differs from the international landscape. Specifically, in the Special Education program, a mixed methodology prevails, combining both theoretical and practical elements, which contrasts with the current literature that generally points to the predominance of a methodology characterized by teacher-centered exposition at the expense of student-centered practice. However, this does not imply that there are no aspects to be improved in terms of greater involvement from some students, who, for example, are limited in their participation despite the opportunities provided by teachers in the classroom context. In this respect, it can be argued that the problem lies both in the techniques used by teachers to facilitate participation and in the predominance that some of them may give to an expository approach rather than a practical one, within the framework of the mixed methodology implemented.

It can be stated that although there is a presence of practical components in some university programs in Chile, this is still in a process of transition, as there continues to be a predominance of lecture-based teaching, similar to the international context. Furthermore, practical work remains merely a supplementary resource to expository teaching in university classrooms within the educational reality of the aforementioned country.

It is worth mentioning that the greatest correlation with the literature was observed in the aspect of the online classes analyzed, where, although there was some degree of participation, it was quite limited, as a large portion of students showed little or no participation. Participation was restricted to a small segment of the observed sample, who interacted more actively in the classroom, both with teachers and with other students.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the data collected through the instruments used, active participation among Special Education Pedagogy students at the Universidad Católica de la Santísima Concepción, an educational institution in the Republic of Chile, is present to varying degrees depending both on the teacher conducting the class and on the individual characteristics of the student. Participation is reinforced to the extent that students feel confident in the teaching–learning process. The main problems identified with respect to students’ active participation in class are related to the way the teacher conducts the lesson, and specifically to the extent of the teacher’s openness to participatory learning.

When comparing the perspective of teachers on active participation with that of students, a tendency can be observed among students to perceive greater active participation than that reported by some teachers. However, this perception of participation would correspond only to a segment of the students in the course Psychopedagogical Assessment in Learning Disorders III at the Universidad Católica de



la Santísima Concepción. Regarding the results of the administered questionnaire, it is important to note that, although no negative trend in participation was found, this does not imply that there are no aspects that need to be reinforced in order to continue improving active participation.

To conclude, based on the diagnosis carried out, it can be stated that the methodology employed by the faculty members of the Faculty of Education at the Universidad Católica de la Santísima Concepción is predominantly mixed, insofar as it combines both content exposition and the creation of opportunities for participation among and with students. For this reason, it remains to be investigated what effects, in terms of student learning, might result from conducting classes focused solely on the acquisition of content through practice.

Conflicts of Interest

The article presented does not involve any conflicts of interest that could generate undesirable effects for the publishing journal.



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