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Deposited in *Repositório ISCTE-IUL*:

2021-01-15

Deposited version:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Correia, N., Aguiar, C. & Amaro, F. (2021). Children's participation in early childhood education: a theoretical overview. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*. N/A

Further information on publisher's website:

[10.1177/1463949120981789](https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949120981789)

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Children's participation in early childhood education: A theoretical overview

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This work was funded by Portuguese National Funds, via FCT - Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, through research grants awarded to the first [SFRH/BD/96012/2013]. It is a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor in Psychology by the first author. The manuscript has been written in the scope of a PhD project entitled “Children's right to participate in early childhood education settings: From rights to empirical evidence”, which was authorized by ISCTE-IUL Ethics' Committee (Committee's communication 12/2015), and by the Portuguese National Commission for Data protection (Authorization no. 5182/2016)

Abstract

Children's right to participate in all matters and decisions affecting them has gained recognition in society. Its promotion is recommended from an early age - namely in early childhood education (ECE) settings - and described as benefiting children, adults, and the community in general. Given the complex and polysemic meaning of participation, different conceptualizations, models, and perspectives have emerged. In this article, the authors provide a theoretical overview, describing relevant models, concepts and contributions from distinct perspectives and fields of knowledge - sociological, educational, developmental and sociocultural - as well as contributions from social policy. This overview is particularly relevant to inform research and practice about children's participation within ECE.

Keywords: Children's right to participate, Early childhood education, Participation, Quality, Rights

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Introduction

Participation, a fundamental right of all children, has gained recognition in different areas of knowledge, and increased visibility in society (Burger, 2018). Children's participation in all matters and decisions affecting them - in the family, school, health care, local community or at the political level - is acknowledged as a complex process, embedded in cultural, social, and significant relational contexts (Lansdown, 2005). Further, it can and should be implemented in education services, such as early childhood education (ECE) settings, which are described as fundamental microsystems for children's development (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, and Taggart, 2010). In these settings, children must be able to express their ideas, preferences, and choices regarding, for instance, where, when, or with whom to play (Authors, 2019).

Participation provides the basis for other rights and for citizenship, enhancing children's socio-cognitive development and wellbeing, and benefiting the communities in which children live (Hart, 1992; Hart and Brando, 2018; Kirby, Lanyon, Cronin, and Sinclair, 2003). Despite its relevance, participation lacks its own theoretical framework, and has been informed by distinct fields of knowledge, with different theories and models being used interrelatedly (Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010).

Child participation thus remains a subject of discussion and multiple interpretations, which is a deterrent of its implementation. Therefore, this article aims to provide an integrative theoretical framework, describing relevant models, concepts, and how different areas of knowledge contribute to the study of children's participation in ECE. Specifically, and since child participation cuts across various disciplines, we describe contributions from sociological, educational, developmental, sociocultural, and social policy perspectives. This

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article thus offers a comprehensive theoretical overview regarding child participation in ECE, outlining its relevance and supporting its study and implementation.

1.1. Children's right to participate: Growing recognition

Children's right to participate is considered an essential element of human rights-based societies (Burger, 2018). Participation is a complex process, dependent on children's agency, but also on features of the family, community, and education contexts (Hart, 1992). If fully implemented, participation is the basis for one of the biggest transformations towards a culture of respect for children's rights – the commitment to values and principles of democracy and citizenship, and to children's competences to contribute towards their own wellbeing (Lansdown, Jimerson, and Shahroozi, 2014). However, children seem to be one of the last groups in society to be granted access to rights, particularly to the right to participate, which has often been overshadowed by children's right to protection from abuse and harm (Franklin, 2002).

Over time, there have been major changes in the status and space occupied by children in society, accompanied by a shift from protectionist to participation paradigms. In effect, while two centuries ago children were seen as dependent on adults and subject to their control, during the last century they were seen as in need of protection (i.e., protectionist paradigm). More recently, children came to be considered social actors and rights-holders, with voice and competence to participate in decision-making processes affecting them (i.e., participation paradigm) (Thomas, 2007).

Given the relatively recent recognition of children's participation, there is no solid and distinctive theoretical background on this topic, and research and practice on children's participation have been informed by a vast range of theoretical frameworks. For instance, the reconceptualization of children and childhood was in part driven by sociology, particularly

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the new sociology of childhood (Corsaro, 2005; James and Prout, 1997), and advocacy allowed the discourse on children's rights to spread.

Nonetheless, it was the nearly universally accepted Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) that largely contributed to the deconstruction of protectionist paradigms of childhood, and the emergence of more complex images of children.

1.1.1. The Convention on the Rights of the Child

In this section, we tackle the important role of the CRC. Established in 1989, the CRC is arguably the most ground-breaking human rights document of international law, and a crucial milestone in framing and guiding the nature, scope, and implementation of children's participation rights, in diverse social spheres. Encompassing provision, protection, and participation rights, the CRC defined the rights granted to children to improve their lives, considering them of public and political concern (Habashi, Wright and Hathcoat, 2012).

Article 12 of the CRC states two major components: children's right to express their own views, and the right to be heard and taken seriously. Hence, children capable of forming their own views are entitled to freely express them, in all matters affecting them. Children's right to participate is important from birth onwards. Therefore, Article 12 must be applied to children of all ages (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, UNCRC, 2005, 2009).

Further, the CRC asserts countries' and adults' responsibility to listen to children's views and to facilitate their participation, giving due weight to children's perspectives, according to their age and maturity (Lansdown et al., 2014; UNCRC, 2005). Thus, age and maturity should be considered together with other variables such as the social context in

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which children live, the nature and complexity of decisions, and adult support throughout the process (Tomás, 2007).

Accordingly, the onus rests with adults to create the necessary time and space to listen to children (Lansdown et al., 2014). The promotion of a culture of participation, where all actors respect, develop, and experience participatory approaches, is thus crucial for the implementation of children's rights. Moreover, children's rights cannot be fulfilled by discarding adults' voices and knowledge, but rather by using them for guidance and support (Kanyal, 2014).

To experience the right of free expression and voice, children need to have access to conditions and opportunities to express their perspectives and choices, with appropriate support and information to understand the process, in a space with the potential for them to be heard (Lundy, 2007). Notions of access (i.e., opportunities to express one's views), and standing (i.e., legitimacy, respect, and consideration for individual perspectives) are fundamental for children to exert influence and have their perspectives considered (Senecah, 2004). Relatedly, children may experience different levels of access and opportunity to integrate (or withdraw from) a collective situation, express their voice, or influence the course of events (Vieira, 2017). Participation is, therefore, frequently described in terms of levels or stages, and diverse models of participation have been proposed.

1.1.2. Models of participation

Focusing on how distinct models provide ways of conceptualising child participation, it is noteworthy that one of the most influential models of participation is Hart's ladder of participation (Hart, 1992). This model was built on Arnstein's (1969) classic model of participation, which described participation as taking place through some degree of power sharing and redistribution. Within Hart's ladder of participation, children's participation

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becomes increasingly meaningful as it moves from a level of manipulation (e.g., being informed by the ECE teacher about a new project or activity, but having no understanding of how it will happen, or how to contribute), up to a child-initiated level, involving shared decisions with adults (e.g., proposing and discussing with the ECE teacher how to prepare an activity that will be organised in the ECE setting).

Although consisting of eight levels, the first three - manipulation, decoration, and tokenism - are not considered truly participatory. The subsequent five levels are described based on the activity children are engaged in, and on the degree to which their participatory and decision-making skills and opportunities have evolved – from being assigned but informed, to initiating activities or projects, sharing decisions with adults.

Despite contributing to a global movement for participation, Hart's ladder received criticism, for instance for proposing a hierarchy in which each level is quantitatively higher than the previous (Horwath, Hodgkiss, Kalyva and Spyrou, 2011). Subsequently, new models emerged (e.g., Kirby, Lanyon, Cronin, & Sinclair, 2003; Shier, 2001; Treseder, 1997). For instance, Treseder (1997) proposed a five-level model of participation, based on Hart's ladder, but introducing two significant changes: (a) moving away from a hierarchy, and (b) considering that children need to be empowered adequately in order to fully participate. This typology suggests that different conditions must be met for children's participation to be achieved: to have access to relevant information and to those in power (e.g., to be informed about existing options, by the ECE teacher), to have effective choices between different options (e.g., different activities to choose from, or different materials available), and to be supported by a trusted person (e.g., an ECE professional) (Treseder, 1997).

Similarly, Shier (2001) proposed a five-level model of participation, named pathways to participation - from children being listened to, to children sharing power and responsibility for decision-making. This model was innovative in suggesting three stages of commitment to

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participation: openings (e.g., when ECE professionals are committed to the promotion of participation), opportunities (e.g., when the necessary conditions to promote participation in the ECE setting are met), and obligations (e.g., when opportunities become an agreed policy of the ECE setting), again emphasizing adults' role.

Kirby et al (2003) developed a four-level non-hierarchical model, in which no level is considered better than the other. Therefore, this model proposed to analyse if children's views are taken into consideration (e.g., children's preferences about play), if children are involved in decision-making processes (e.g., materials to be acquired to the new playground area in the ECE setting), if they share power and responsibility within the decision-making process (e.g., children voting and being responsible for registering and implementing their decisions in the ECE classroom), and if they make autonomous decisions (e.g., choosing what activities to engage in, in the ECE classroom). In this model, context, activities, decisions, and participants determine the appropriate level of participation.

Aiming to move the concept of children's participation further and support its implementation, Lundy (2007) proposed a model based on the relationship between key four elements that follow a rational chronological order: space (e.g., ensuring the ECE setting constitutes a safe, inclusive space for children to express their views), voice (e.g., facilitating the expression of children's views on issues that are relevant for them), audience (e.g., ensuring children's views are communicated to someone in the ECE setting with responsibility to listen), and influence (e.g., ensuring children's views are taken seriously and acted upon, where appropriate, and are embedded within decision making in the ECE setting). Within this model, children first have the right to express their views, then their views are given due weight, and finally children are informed of the extent of their influence, before the process starts again. This model, which emphasizes the importance of a discursive space for children to express and develop their perspectives, has been prominently endorsed

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by policy makers, seeking to help organisations and professionals promote the participation of young children.

Similarly, Tomás (2007) described four dimensions that influence the implementation and experience of children's participation: arenas (public and private contexts), scopes (full, circumstantial or continuous, organized or spontaneous, permanent or ephemeral), purposes (the extent to which advocacy and dissemination of children's participation is promoted), and conditions for participation (recognition of child participation, competences, and means to promote it). Instead of occurring automatically, participation is described as a gradual process requiring time and learning opportunities for children to know and understand power relations (Tomás, 2007).

The existence of different models of children's participation reflects the growing interest in involving children in decision-making (Sinclair, 2004). Still, sometimes it is not clear to what extent children's participation should be promoted, nor to what extent it is meaningful and impactful. Therefore, participation levels should be carefully considered, and not taken in a strict hierarchical order, with the risk of becoming too rigid (Kanyal and Gibbs, 2014).

Importantly, the multidimensional character of participation should be noted, as well as the complex and diverse aspects influencing children's right to participate, from individuals to contexts (Vieira, 2017). Consideration for these complex, multi-layered aspects should contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of participation processes.

1.1.3. Adjacent concepts

The existence of different conceptualizations, and the complex and polysemic meaning of participation, requires considering the notions of power, agency, autonomy, involvement, and citizenship, described hereafter. These notions are particularly important to

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understand children's participation, and the paradigm shift responsible for considering children's constructive roles in society (Burger, 2018).

In effect, the debate on children's participation is grounded in notions of power and empowerment, particularly addressed by the field of sociology, and in relation to children's voice and competence (Thomas, 2007). Within psychology, empowerment has been defined as a construct linking individual strengths and competences, which contribute to increase individuals' degree of autonomy, enabling them to represent their interests in a responsible and self-determined way (Rappaport, 1995). Relatedly, participation enables and empowers children to represent their views and interests, influence decision-making processes, and take some degree of control over their lives (Hart, 1992; Herbots and Put, 2015; Menezes, 2003; Thomas, 2007).

From a Foucauldian perspective, power is described as something that is exercised and exists through action (Foucault, 2003; Gallagher, 2008). Relatedly, empowering children involves resources and strategies, in order to pursue individual and collective objectives (Gallagher, 2008). However, historically, children have been considered as less able to decide and act than adults, due to power systems created and prolonged through generational structures (Bühler-Niederberger, 2010). As such, the promotion of children's participation requires some degree of redistribution and appropriation of power, simultaneously communicational and relational (Vieira, 2017), to enhance children's social status and to avoid unbalanced power relationships and practices (Freire, 2019). Participation thus requires intentionality and power, which circulates among diverse actors, assuming diverse forms (Foucault, 2003; Gallagher, 2008). However, children's participation is often presented as unnecessary or a step too far, when compared to provision or protection rights, as it challenges adult authority and established power relationships. Notably, ensuring power

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redistribution guarantees that children are heard and included in important decisions, assuring meaningful participation and respecting their agency (Matthews, 2003).

Relatedly, discussions on children's participation are also connected with the notion of agency, which takes place in the context of social relationships and interdependency, more specifically in decentralized practices in which children participate (Hanson, 2016). To participate, children must be considered persons with agency, entitled to respect, and whose voices must be heard and considered (Percy-Smith, 2016). Particularly used in advocacy discourses, children's agency is defined as the capacity to set goals, reflect, and act responsibly to effect change, influencing what happens, and to make autonomous choices (Hanson, 2016; OECD, 2019). Agency is also related with identity construction, positive sense of self and self-efficacy, and positive sense of purpose and of being a learner (Luff and Martin, 2014). To have children's agency respected, participation rights need to be premised on an understanding of children as equal members of society, with their own concerns and agendas, entitled to influence decision-making affecting them (Lundy, 2007).

By considering children's active role and capacity to make choices, participation is also related to a sense of autonomy. In effect, participation is grounded in children's need to gradually gain autonomy, understood as self-government and self-direction, and independent status in society (Castle, 2004; Lansdown, 2005). Prior research stressed the importance of supporting children's autonomy in educational settings, describing it as the degree to which adults acknowledge children's perspectives and promote their active, self-regulated participation and engagement in decision-making, balancing children's needs and teaching practices (Castle, 2004). Further, by valuing individual autonomy, participation represents the commitment to children's dignity, which is linked to the possibility of making choices, and to the principles of recognition and self-worth (Hicks, 2013; Honneth, 1995; Nussbaum, 2011).

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Autonomy is also connected with children's involvement, which can be understood as the extent to which children are concentrated, absorbed, and engaged in activities (Laevers and Declercq, 2018). Participation is frequently defined as children's involvement in decision-making processes, an essential element of citizenship (Ennew, 2008; Sheridan and Samuelsson, 2001).

Citizenship involves the individual feelings of belonging to a community, the daily experiences entailing the exercise of one's rights and duties, and the social relations that are established. Therefore, the full exercise of citizenship is also understood as a participatory citizenship (Menezes, 2003). Recognizing children as citizens, with visibility and protagonism to participate in society, requires framing citizenship within a logic of rights, duties, responsibilities, and participation, contributing to the construction of individual and collective identities (Jans, 2004). Notably, analysing children's participation requires considering that children were not entitled to full citizenship for years (Cockburn, 2013), which was largely dependent, for instance, on children being considered as fragile and needing protection, rather than competent and active beings.

When children are respected as active citizens, with the understanding, skills, and commitment needed within different social contexts, they experience and deepen their sense of democracy (Menezes, 2003). However, the promotion of children's participation requires not only considering children as active citizens, but also how citizenship can be adapted to children (Jans, 2004; Kirby et al., 2003). Supporting children's participation is thus essential to nurture citizenship over the long term, contributing to progressively embed values of democracy in children's approach to life (Lansdown, 2005).

These important concepts have supported the reconceptualization of childhood and have contributed to give children's participation a central position in a wide variety of disciplines such as law, sociology, educational sciences, or social policy.

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1.2. Early childhood education: One context, different perspectives

Despite the multiple definitions of participation, it is consensual that it is most meaningful when it is rooted in children's everyday lives (Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010). Children's participation can be implemented in education services, such as ECE, which is a fundamental microsystem, consequential for children, and in certain conditions (e.g., high process quality), beneficial for their development and wellbeing (Sylva et al., 2010). Even though children's right to participate is encouraged from an early age (Hart, 1992; Lansdown, 2005), few studies have addressed participation specifically within ECE, with existing evidence emerging mostly from northern European countries (Authors, 2019; Sheridan, 2007; Sheridan and Samuelsson, 2001).

From an educational and relational viewpoint, child participation in ECE takes place within relationships with ECE professionals, and occurs by empowering children, and developing a shared understanding about their needs, experiences, and perspectives (Kanyal, 2014). Importantly, different perspectives can be addressed when considering children's participation within this specific setting. Below, we describe the contributions from sociological, educational, developmental, and sociocultural perspectives, and also from social policy.

1.2.1. Sociological perspective

From the standpoint of sociology, particularly the new sociology of childhood, everyday life in school settings is one of the crucial domains of children's participation (Sarmiento, Fernandes and Tomás, 2007). Further, children's participation and active role in the process of their own learning must be encouraged in diverse areas and activities within

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the ECE setting, making use of child-centred participatory approaches (Clark and Moss, 2001; Thomas, 2007).

This perspective is consistent with capacity building approaches (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 2004). These approaches highlight children's knowledge, skills, and capacity to express their perspectives and voices, participating in decision-making and shaping their own environments with adults' support (Hart and Brando, 2018; Lundy, 2007). A capability approach and participation can thus complement and reinforce each other (i.e., the capability approach provides guiding principles for participation, such as ownership, accountability, and empowerment, and participation provides the methods for making the capability approach operational), ensuring that democratic principles are respected and become the foundation for sustainable development (Hammock, 2019).

Though arising from sociology of childhood, principles of children as competent, active, agentic, and co-constructors of reality, spread through distinct areas within psychology (Kanyal, 2014). Consequently, distinct areas of psychology play a major role in understanding and contributing to the recognition of children's right to participate, especially in reference to children's evolving competences to exert influence and identity (Christie, Tint, Wagner and Winter, 2008).

1.2.2. Developmental perspective

The CRC (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) focuses on the rights of the child from a developmental perspective, presenting participation and autonomy as key processes in child development, and stating that all children, independently of their characteristics, should be offered conditions that promote their dignity, self-reliance, and active participation in the community. The notion of children's evolving competences, simultaneously a developmental and participatory concept, is central for recognising children as active agents in their own lives (Lansdown, 2005).

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Further, children's participation is coherent with theories of development integrating personal change, contextual, representational, and regulation models (Sameroff, 2010; Sameroff and Fiese, 1990). In effect, children's individual characteristics and competences change over time, progressively evolving, while children become increasingly more involved in a variety of social and cultural settings. For this reason, children's development is the product of the dynamic and active interactions they establish within these contexts (e.g., with peers and teachers), which allow them to develop social representations, to expand their self-regulation, and to be able to take responsibility for their own actions and wellbeing (Sameroff, 2010), experiencing progressive levels of responsibility (Rogoff, 2003). As children develop their competences, there is less need for protection and there is an increased capacity to participate in decision-making processes affecting them (Lansdown, 2005).

Viewing child development as shaped by social systems and structures, and driven by proximal processes, is consistent with Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework and the interrelated concepts of process, person, context, and time (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Applied to child participation, this approach identifies children's ability to participate as an adaptable concept, and describes professionals' role as gatekeepers, as well as the importance of a comprehensive regulatory regime of participation as embedded in a socio-political landscape (Gal, 2017). Further, it considers interactions taking place between micro, meso, exo, and macro systems, providing a multi-layered system of variables influencing child participation.

At the individual and interpersonal level, several socio-cognitive benefits have been proposed for children, such as increases in self-esteem, self-efficacy, motivation, communication, negotiation, conflict resolution, and decision-making skills (Kirby et al., 2003; Sinclair, 2004). Participation also offers opportunities for children from diverse backgrounds to build a sense of belonging, responsibility, caring, and sensitivity (Lansdown,

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2005). By balancing different rights, as a function of children's best interests, participation contributes for children's wellbeing (Hart and Brando, 2018). Further, potential benefits are also expected for ECE teachers (Nah and Lee, 2016) and for improved organization and functioning of communities (Hart, 1992).

1.2.3. Educational perspective

From an educational perspective, it is pivotal to investigate interactional processes, as well as knowledge structures (i.e., conceptions, perceptions, expectations), behaviours, and practices influencing the promotion of children's participation in ECE (Koran and Avci, 2017). It is consensual that teacher-child relationships characterized by warmth, respect, mutual esteem, solidarity and recognition, implying consideration for children's voice and developing competences, do foster children's participation (Salminen, 2013). Moreover, ECE teachers' ideas about children's participation seem to influence their own purposes and practices towards the promotion of children participation, which can be realised in diverse ways (e.g., documentation practices, councils, negotiation and dialogue) (Authors, 2020; Kanyal, 2014; Niemi, 2019; Oliveira-Formosinho and Formosinho, 2012).

Progressively, discussions about ECE settings' quality have been extended to include children's participation. Specifically, children's participation, influencing decisions referring to them, has been described as key to ECE quality (Sheridan and Samuelsson, 2001; Sheridan, 2007).

Although pedagogical quality can be viewed in a variety of ways, it broadly refers to a multidimensional concept, and aims at promoting children's wellbeing and positive development (Layzer and Goodson, 2006). A common distinction is made between structural (i.e., aspects related to legislation, policy, and funding) and process quality (i.e., proximal processes shaping children's everyday experiences, such as teacher-child interactions) (Pianta

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et al., 2005). Even though structural features are described as important preconditions for process quality, it seems consensual that high-quality teacher-child interactions are fundamental for children's development and learning (Downer, Sabol, and Hamre, 2010). Further, high-quality ECE settings are described as those in which children's rights, specifically children's right to participate, have been incorporated into practitioners' beliefs, discourse, and practices (Lansdown, 2006).

Regarding pedagogic approaches, different lenses might help understand participation in ECE. Diverse pedagogical models (e.g., HighScope, Reggio Emilia) value a pedagogy of participation, highlighting children's active role, and capacity to learn by doing and participating, through the creation of pedagogical environments in which interactions and relationships sustain joint activities (Oliveira-Formosinho and Formosinho 2012).

Furthermore, in ECE settings, understanding children's motivation is key to educate children to become self-directed and lifelong learners (Ryan and Deci, 2017). One of the most influential motivational theories, extensively applied to diverse fields including education, is self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000). This broad framework is particularly pertinent within the study of participation rights, also described as self-determination rights, as children are broadly recognized as self-determined, autonomous social actors, with evolving competences. Specifically, by exerting their right to be heard, children may satisfy their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and belonging. In effect, if children's autonomy is respected and supported, they experience some control over their own life, becoming able to regulate actions and to feel competent (Noom, Deković and Meeus, 2001). Motivated participation requires a safe environment, where children receive support to experience opportunities to make choices and decisions, acquiring knowledge and competences that foster their self-determination (Ziemes and Gutzwiller-Helfenfiner, 2019). Moreover, self-determination refers to the combination of attitudes and

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competences allowing children to set goals for themselves, and to take the initiative to reach them.

Interestingly, when referring to their experiences of participation, children mention the possibility to experience a sense of belonging (Wyness, 2012), which is consistent with the self-determination need for relatedness and connectedness with others (Deci and Ryan, 2000). At the contextual level, self-determination theory also focuses on the needs and intentions of different actors (Williams and Deci, 1996), helping to analyse the dynamics of teacher-child interactions. Teachers' practices guided by children's interests and decisions are associated with children's higher intrinsic motivation and wellbeing (Williams and Deci, 1996).

This evidence has practical implications for ECE professionals' significant role in promoting participatory environments (Ziemes and Gutzwiller-Helfenfiner, 2019), which are largely influenced by the sociocultural context. Relatedly, in 2008, the American Psychological Association, through its school division (Division 16 ([School Psychology] Social Justice and Child Rights Working Group, 2013), established a social justice and child rights working group. Specifically, this group aims to facilitate reflection and professional development on the promotion of children's rights and social justice.

1.2.4. Sociocultural perspective

Given the vital role of social structures and culture, children's participation must be analysed from a sociocultural perspective, meaning that it should not be analysed as individual, linear or straightforward, but rather as socially constructed (Komulainen, 2007).

Research has documented the influence of cultural values and expectations on children's participation in the community, suggesting, for instance differences in boys' and girls' experiences and levels of participation (Engel-Yeger, Jarus and Law, 2007; Percy-

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Smith and Thomas, 2010). Notably, aspects such as the sociocultural context, the people with whom children interact, individual's perceptions, or cultural-historical traditions, must be equally considered, as they all shape children's experiences of participation (Rogoff, 2003).

Within this sociocultural perspective, notions of apprenticeship, guided participation, and participatory appropriation are particularly relevant to understand child participation. In effect, by integrating and participating in culturally framed activities at the community level (i.e., apprenticeship), guided by cultural and social values and supported by adults (i.e., guided participation), children are able to learn and develop, gradually participating more, with greater authority, and becoming more active and critical (i.e., participatory appropriation) (Kanyal, 2014; Rogoff, 1995). Vygotsky's (2012) sociocultural perspective reconceptualized the role of culture as part of proximal developmental processes, suggesting that children's social and cultural knowledge evolves as children actively engage with their environments.

Socially constructed, participation is influenced by practices, values, and behaviours imposed by family, community, and broader structures. Thus, children's and teachers' voices, as well as practices, need to be analysed as being shaped by social processes (Komulainen, 2007). Relatedly, participation contributes to build a sense of social justice (Hammack, 2018), and children learn about justice and fairness when standing up for themselves and participating in problem-solving, which can make a difference, even at younger ages. Research has shown that children from an early age become aware of questions related to democracy and justice (Helwig, 2006), and are more willing to accept group decisions in which they have had a voice (Grocke, Rossano and Tomasello, 2018). Also, socio-psychological research on perceived procedural justice suggests that participating and having voice is crucial to judgments of fairness (Folger, 1977).

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Creating the opportunity for children's right to be heard within education settings requires a significant cultural change at all levels of the educational system. Importantly, pedagogical quality and participatory processes developing through interactions also need to consider norms, values, traditions, cultural and contextual specificities, as well as the heritage of society (Sheridan, 2007). Lastly, participation has implications for society as a whole and, by participating, children exert influence over their own community, contributing to an increasing community awareness of this right (Lansdown, 2005).

1.2.5. Social policy perspective

Children constitute the human capital of a society. Therefore, promoting their development and wellbeing is an investment in the future (European Commission, 2013). This perspective is accepted particularly within the field of social policy, which plays an important role in recognising participation as an essential entitlement of children, assuring the establishment of links between international and national initiatives responsible for protecting children's participation rights.

Within the international context, the Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child (League of Nations, 1924) constituted a historic document in discussing children's wellbeing and recognising and affirming, for the first time, the existence of rights specific to children, as well as adults' responsibility towards them. However, it was not legally binding, and in the same way as the Declaration on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly, 1959), that preceded the CRC, it did not address children's right to participate.

Participation was only recognised as a fundamental right and a general principle, by the CRC (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). Therefore, from a political standpoint, it provided the legal framework for this right, with governments being responsible for its implementation, and for the promotion of democratic school environments. Particularly,

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when applied to the educational field, it has implications for curricula and ECE professionals' roles and practices. For instance, participation challenges dominant discourses and traditional roles of practitioners, who need to reconceptualise children as competent social actors and active participants (MacNaughton, Huges and Smith, 2007).

General Comment No. 7 drew attention to a rights-based approach in the early years, suggesting that the realization of child rights in early childhood should be monitored (UNCRC, 2005). General Comment No. 12 (UNCRC, 2009) reinforced children's right to be heard, referring to participation as including information sharing and dialogue between children and adults. It also referred to children's participation as indispensable for the creation of a positive social climate in educational settings, particularly in the classroom (UNCRC, 2009).

UNICEF has been decisive to the implementation of children's rights, and children's right to participate. For instance, the Child-Friendly Cities initiative aims to contribute to the realization of children's rights, mobilizing countries and municipalities to include children in various participatory processes, particularly in the construction of cities (UNICEF, 2004). Likewise, children's right to participate is a crucial principle within the Rights Respecting Schools initiative, which provides a framework for encouraging adults and school settings to create a participation environment (UNICEF, 2010).

Particularly at the European level, various initiatives have been implemented to ensure children's participation rights are supported and protected. Notably, children's participation rights are described as the most difficult rights to implement, in part due to cultural aspects resulting from a tradition of silence, a lack of social participation, and power issues embedded in intergenerational relationships, but also due to some barriers that might hinder children's participation, such as the misconception that children's participation requires that the final decision belongs to them (Lundy, 2007). Nonetheless, in the last

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decades, discourses have consistently described participation as crucial for children to develop individual and social competences indispensable for their interactions and life in society. This has been particularly salient in northern European countries, where participation is a core value within ECE policies and curricula (e.g., Sheridan, 2007).

Still at the European level, the Council of Europe places children's right to participate at the core of children's rights' agenda, considering it a key strategic objective to the promotion of children's rights, and a cross cutting approach (Council of Europe, 2012). The European Convention on the Exercise of Children's Rights (Council of Europe, 2000) aims to protect the best interests of children, proposing procedures allowing them to exercise their rights, either themselves, or through other persons or bodies. In addition, the right to be heard in all settings, including schools, at both national and European level, has been recommended for all children under the age of 18 (Council of Europe, 2012).

Similarly, the European Union has recommended that all member states implement mechanisms towards the promotion of children's participation in decision-making processes affecting their lives, going beyond mere children's consultation, through capacity building for practitioners (European Commission, 2015). One of the most relevant and explicit initiatives refers to the Recommendation to invest in children to break the cycle of disadvantage, which postulates the need to put in place mechanisms to foster children's participation in decision-making affecting them, since the early ages (European Commission, 2013).

Further, both the Proposal for Key Principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (European Commission, 2014), and the European Framework of Quality and Wellbeing Indicators (Moser et al., 2017) prioritize participation as a key principle of high-quality ECE. Both documents propose children's active, meaningful participation in the life of ECE settings, recognizing and valuing participation as key to achieve high-quality. Recently, also the Council Recommendation on High-Quality Early

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Childhood Education and Care Systems stated that ECE settings need to be child-centred, based on children's participation and interest in learning, providing choice of activities and objects for learning in safe, nurturing, and caring environments (European Union, 2019).

In Europe, particular emphasis has been placed on policy initiatives, stressing the crucial role of participation rights for all children, targeting children's participation in education and other contexts, as well as in professional development. In the near future, the observance of children's rights and wellbeing must be prioritized, drawing implications into children's everyday life (Kanyal and Gibbs, 2014).

The overview of perspectives described above, aiming to inform the discussion and promotion of children's participation within ECE, is summarized in Figure 6.

1.3. Implications for research and practice

We provided a theoretical overview of children's participation within ECE. Considering the vast range of perspectives, summarising child participation with a single definition, framework, or unified theory may be reductionist, given its complexity (Herbots and Put, 2015). We therefore acknowledge the relevance of considering the intersection between diverse perspectives and areas of knowledge: from a sociological standpoint, to educational, developmental, and sociocultural perspectives, and social policy. This integrative perspective is particularly relevant to inform research and practice towards the promotion of children's participation in ECE.

At the research level, it seems relevant to bridge gaps between theory and empirical evidence. Considering multiple perspectives, methods, informants, and levels of analysis would contribute to a fuller understanding of children's participation in ECE. Also, as younger children are described as facing barriers to their participation (Franklin, 2002), it seems relevant to investigate knowledge structures, practices and processes towards the

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promotion of child participation, as well as participation outcomes, for children and adults (Lansdown et al., 2014). Regarding practice, this theoretical overview is relevant to sensitize and support the ECE community and society in general, acknowledging the multitude of individual and contextual factors influencing children's participation in ECE.

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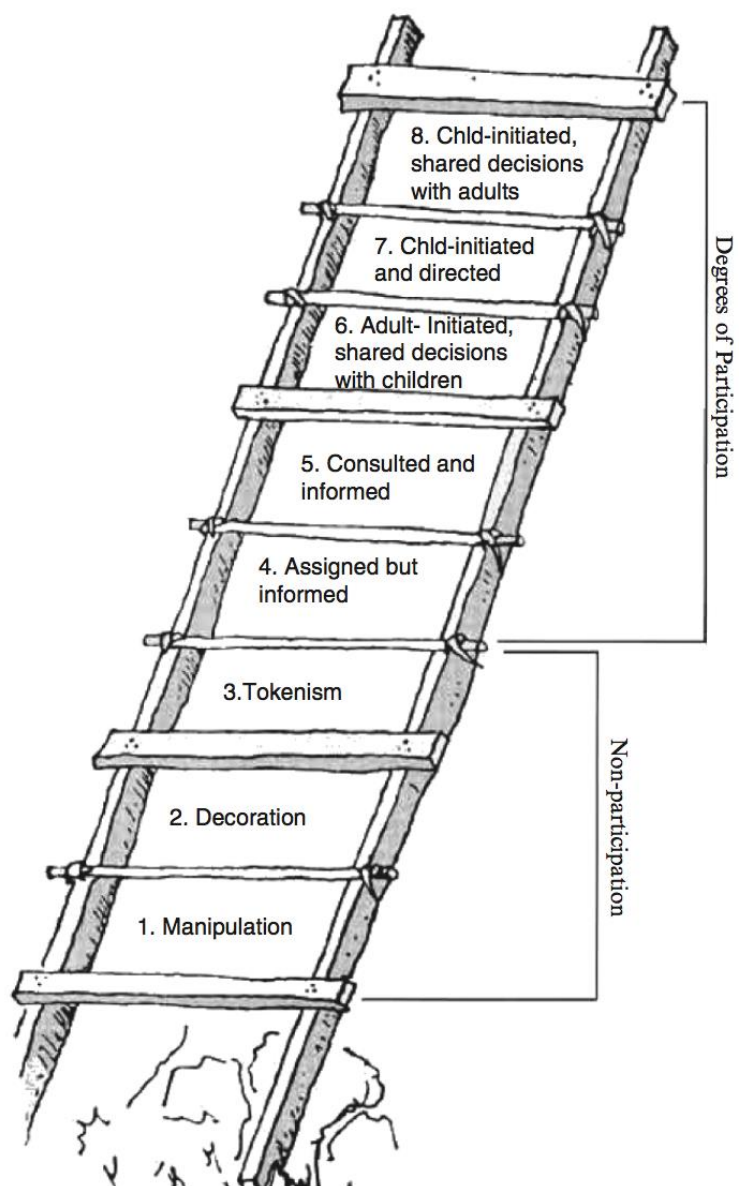
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Figure 1. Hart's ladder of participation. Taken from "[Children's Participation. From tokenism to citizenship](#)", UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, 1992. Reproduced with permission.

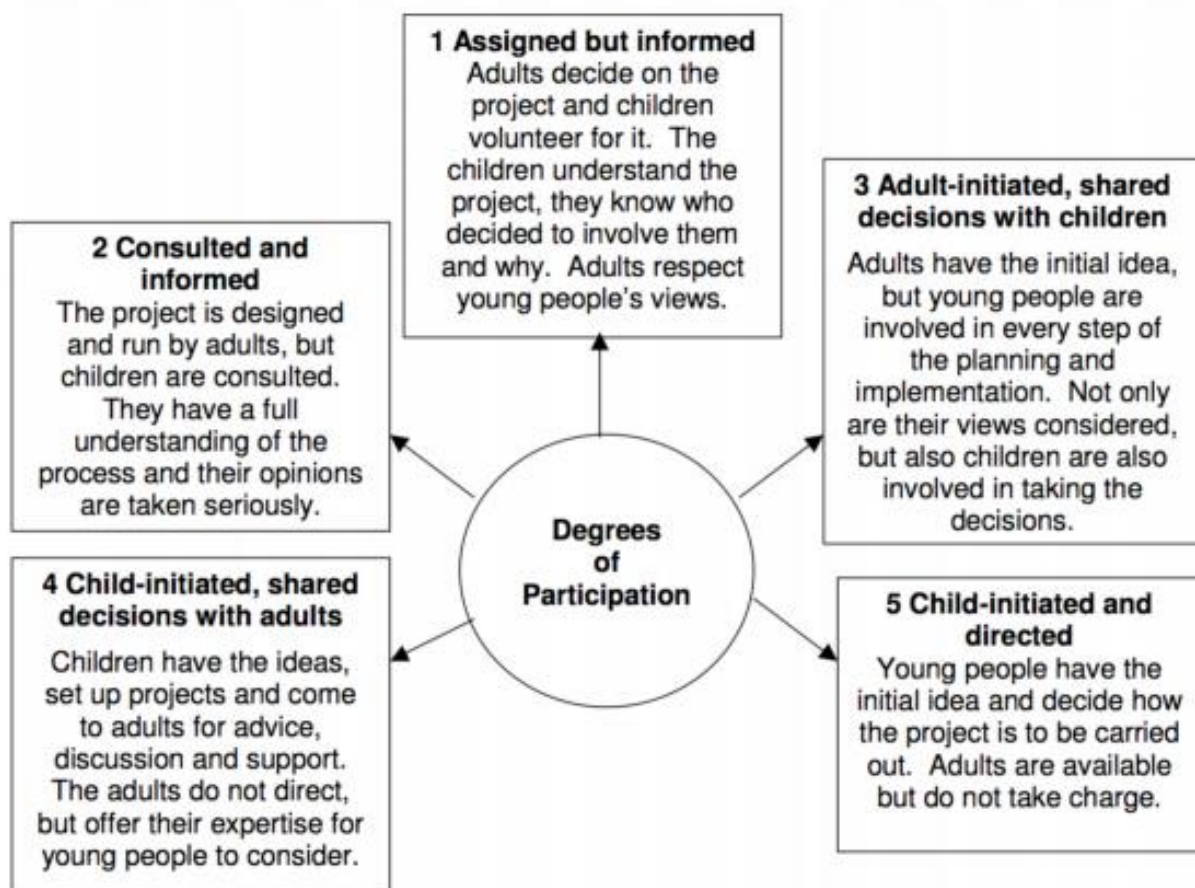
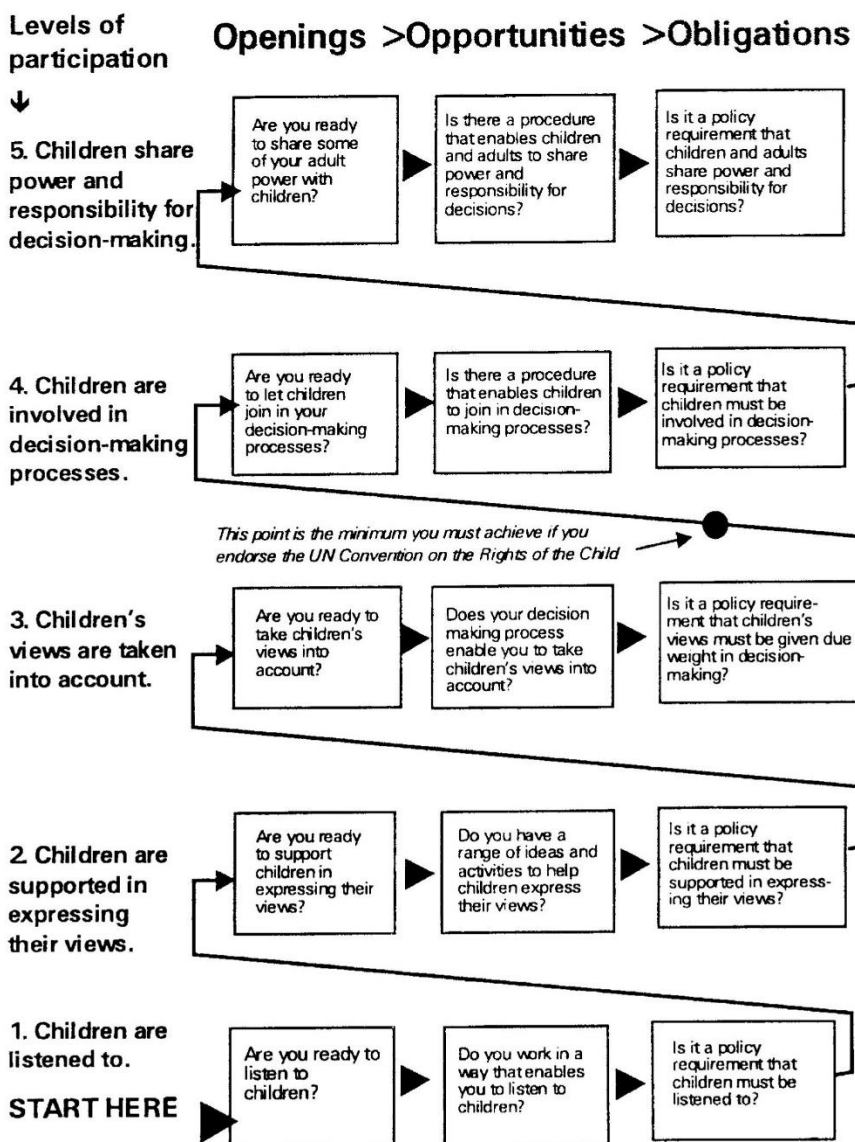


Figure 2. Treseder's model of participation. Taken from "Empowering children and young people: Promoting involvement in decision-making", published by Save the Children, 1997.

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Figure 3. Shier's model of participation. Taken from "Pathways to participation: Openings, opportunities and obligations", www.harryshier.net/, published by John Wiley & Sons, 2001.

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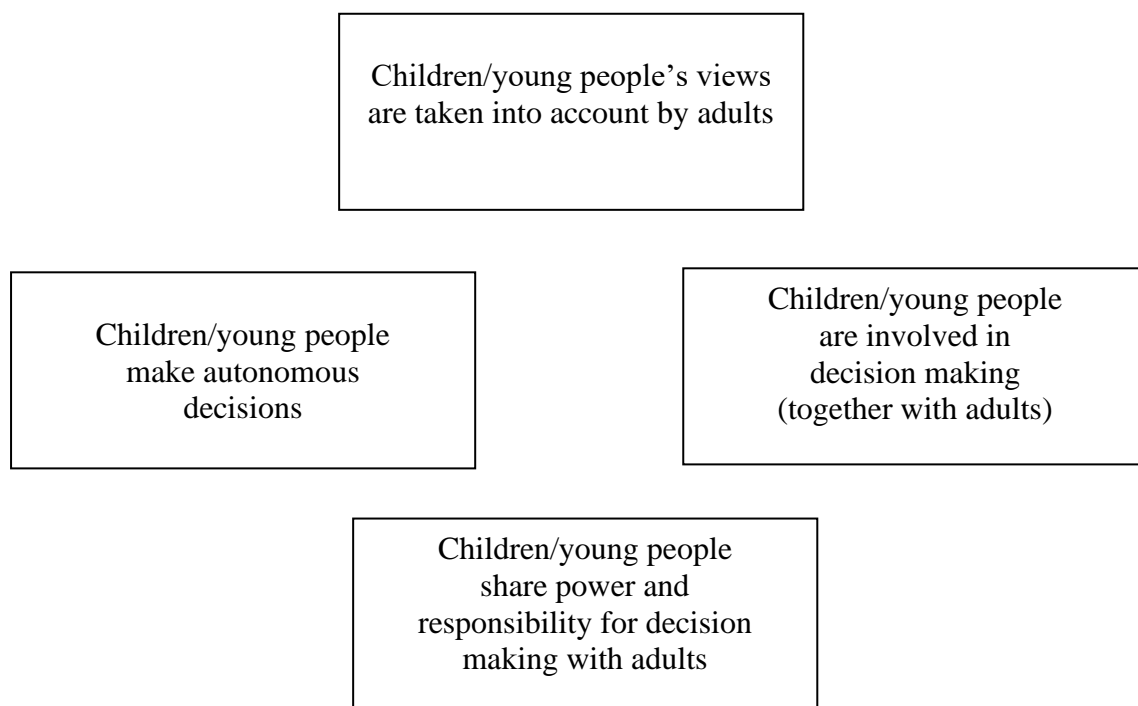


Figure 4. Kirby et al. model of participation. Adapted from "Building a Culture of Participation", published by the National Children's Bureau, 2003. Reproduced with permission, under Crown copyright/[UK Open Government Licence](https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3/).

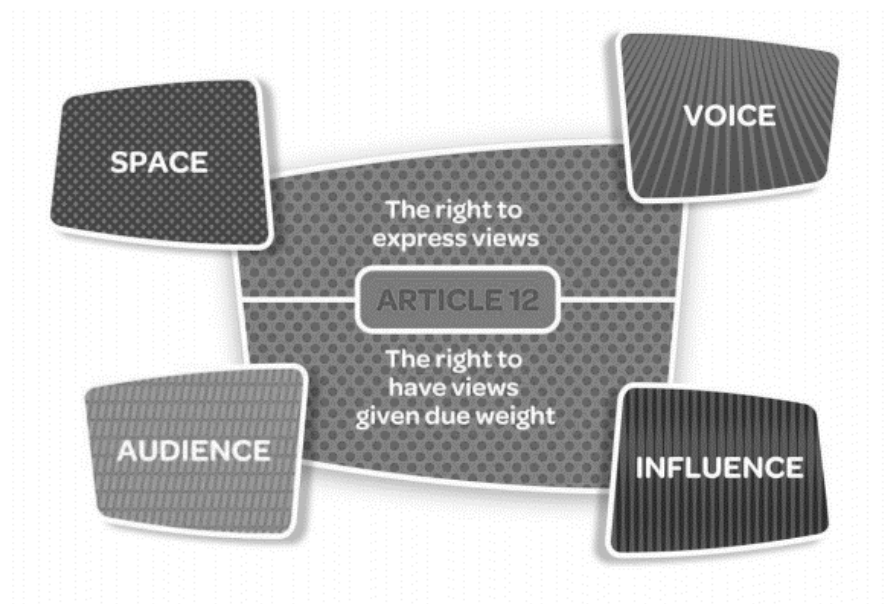


Figure 5. Lundy model of participation. Adapted from the [Irish Government National Child and Youth Participation Strategy \(2015-2020\)](#), based on [“Voice’ is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child”](#), British Educational Research Journal. Reproduced with permission.

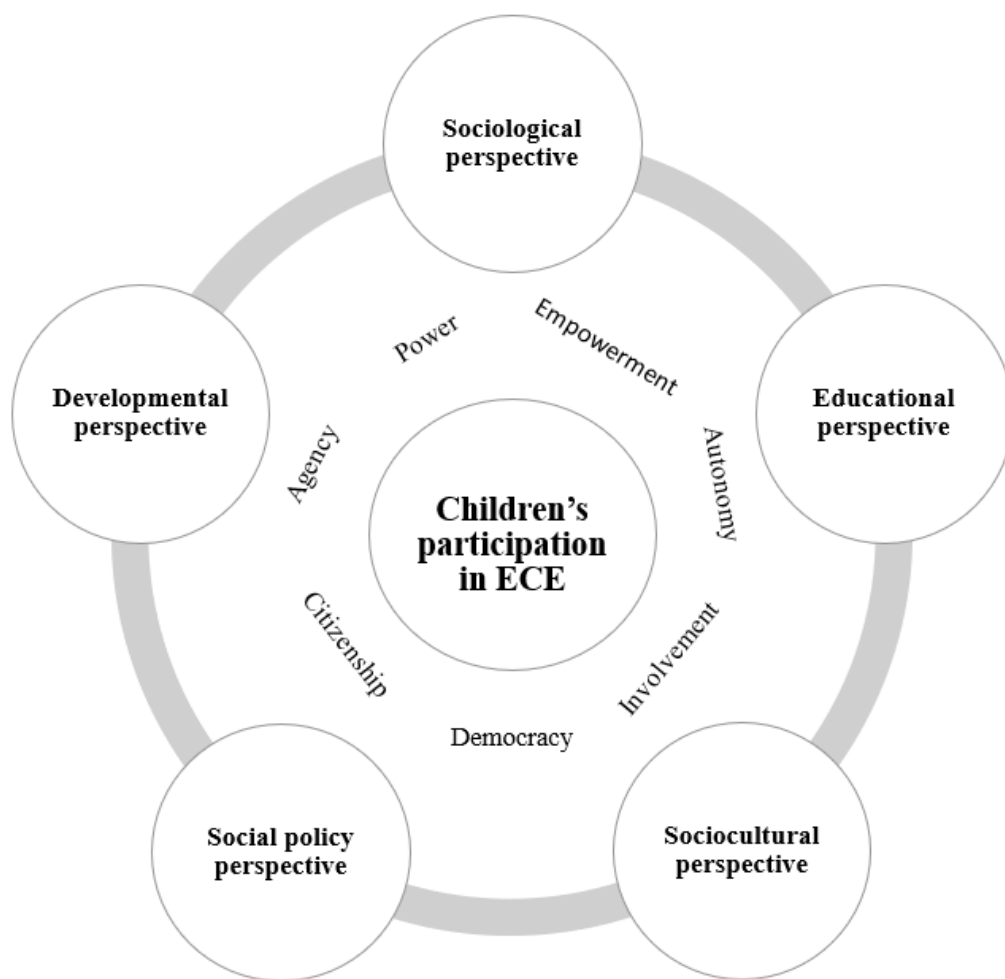


Figure 6. A theoretical overview of children's participation within ECE