

## Children's Right to Participate in Early Childhood care and Education settings and relative innovatory supportive digital tools for ECCE professionals' development

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### Abstract

Young children's participation is key to developing a culture of human rights, democracy, and rule of law and according to Council of Europe (2017) and United Nations (2005). In these terms, children's right to participate is described as a key aspect in the framework of educational quality, and the positive relationship between children's right to participate and early childhood care and education (ECCE) quality is already documented. Although this concept is not new to ECCE professionals, its application seems to remain a challenge within everyday activities. It is thus important for ECCE professionals to reflect on this right and on the practices towards its promotion, in order to be able to supply high quality education. The paper presents the innovatory attempts regarding the digital tools developed within the PARTICIPA Erasmus+ project (Professional development tools supporting participation rights in early childhood education) aiming to involve three target

group -directors, teachers and teachers' assistants- working in all types of early childhood care and education settings, so that have a digital space to reflect about children's right to participate and its implementation. More specifically, the paper presents (a) a training program targeting the ECCE settings' professionals provided through a massive open online course (MOOC) in 5 languages and disseminated in an online learning platform, focusing on the theoretical and practical aspects of children's right to participate (i.e., state of the art, relevant pedagogical practices), (b) toolkits (i.e., validated self-assessment questionnaires) for ECCE directors and teachers and teacher assistants supported by discrete qualitative studies.

**Keywords:** children's right to participate, Early Childhood Care and Education, supportive digital tools, professionals' development.

## 1. Introduction

Participation is a fundamental right of all children (Burger, 2018). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC; United Nations, 1989) set the legal framework for recognizing children as rights-holders and, more specifically, entitled to the right to participate. According to the CRC, children have the right to express themselves in all matters pertaining to them, from the family to the community context. Thus, participation is described as a complex process, embedded in cultural, social and relational contexts (Lansdown, 2005).

Children's participation and decision-making in society must be protected and encouraged from an early age (Council of Europe, 2017; United Nations, 2005). As such, participation must be implemented in education settings, namely in early childhood education and care (ECEC), as these are fundamental microsystems for children's development (Sylva et al., 2010). Notably, participation has been progressively described as an important criterion for ECEC quality (e.g., Sheridan, 2007).

Participation has been informed by diverse fields of knowledge (e.g., sociology of childhood, social policy, education), and various theories and models (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010). This profusion of theories and models, together with important aspects such as professionals' beliefs, curriculum guidelines, or institutional norms, values, and objectives, have been deterrents to the effective implementation of children's participation in ECEC (Samuelsson et al., 2006).

Importantly, professional development initiatives and reflexive practices (e.g., Mesquita-Pires, 2012; Nah & Lee, 2016) are described as facilitators of change towards the promotion of children's participation. Therefore, this paper aims to offer a short overview of PARTICIPA, an innovative Erasmus+ program proposing digital tools for professional development - a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) and self-assessment tools -, to support ECEC teachers, assistants, and coordinators in promoting children's right to participate from the youngest ages.

## 2. Children's right to participate: Growing recognition and the critical role of key organizations

Children's participation, an essential element of human-rights-based societies, has gained recognition in society and in research. Participation is dependent on children's agency and competences, and on features of the family, community, and education contexts (Burger, 2018; Hart, 1992; Lansdown et al., 2014). Unfortunately, children seem to be one of the last groups in society to be granted access to rights, and more particularly to participation rights (Franklin, 2002). Nonetheless, over time, and largely determined by the CRC (United Nations, 1989), there have been major changes in the status and space occupied by children in society, accompanied by a shift from a protectionist (i.e., children as dependent on adults, subject to their control, and in need of protection) to participation paradigms (i.e., children as social actors and rights holders, with interests, voice, and competence to participate in decision-making) (Thomas, 2007).

Ratified almost universally, the CRC was crucial for framing and guiding the nature, scope, and implementation of children's participation rights in diverse social spheres. Article 12 is particularly important, as it states children's right to express their own views, but also their right to have them considered. Importantly, the CRC does not set a minimum age, nor does it limit the contexts in which children can express their views and have them heard. Instead, children's participation is recommended from an early age and, therefore, considered indispensable for creating a positive social climate in ECEC settings, with adults described as crucial to support children's participation, through the adoption of child-centered practices (Council of Europe, 2017; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005, 2009).

This right has been legislated at the European level, in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (European Union, 2012). In the European Union, the promotion of children's participation in decision making is considered a reflection of investments in children and in their well-being (European Commission, 2013). Therefore, it has been recommended that all member states of the European Union implement mechanisms towards the promotion of children's participation in all decision-making processes affecting their lives, going beyond mere children's consultation, and invest in capacity building for practitioners (European Commission, 2015).

More recently, the European Commission (2021) has launched a new Strategy on the Rights of the Child, becoming committed to undertake actions to empower children to be active citizens and members of democratic societies, and to strengthen expertise and practice on child participation among Commission staff and the staff of EU agencies. Taken together, these initiatives and legal instruments have been important to assure the establishment of links between international and national levels, either defining or fostering the promotion of children's right to participate.

### **3. Conceptualizing the right to participate**

Participation is a multidimensional and polysemantic construct - often understood as involvement, influence, agency, or democracy - that can be conceptualized and exercised in different ways (e.g., Clark, 2005; Shier, 2001; Sinclair, 2004). Understanding children's participation involves considering dimensions such as the level of participation (i.e., the degree of power sharing between the adult and the child), the decisions (i.e., type and focus of decision-making), the nature of the activity (i.e., type, duration), and children involved (i.e., which competences, interests, and characteristics) (Sinclair, 2004).

Participation is frequently described in terms of levels or stages, and diverse models of participation have been proposed. Hart proposed one of the most influential models of participation, suggesting the existence of eight levels of participation, three of which referring to experiences of non-participation (Hart, 1992). Despite influential, Hart's (1992) ladder received criticism (Horwath et al., 2011) and new models emerged suggesting non-hierarchical structures of participation (Treseder, 1997) or different degrees of commitment to the process of empowering children (Shier, 2001).

Moreover, to experience participation, children need to have access to conditions and opportunities to express their perspectives and choices, with appropriate support and information, in a space with the potential for them to be heard and to have their perspectives respected and legitimated (Lundy, 2007). For this reason, Lundy drew the attention of policymakers and practitioners to the distinct, though interrelated, elements of space, voice, audience, and influence (see Figure 1):

- **Space** is based on the premise that children must be given a safe and inclusive space in which they are encouraged to express their views; this is a prerequisite for their meaningful participation in

decision-making. Moreover, the existence of space implies that adults “(...) take proactive steps to encourage children to express their views; that is, to invite and encourage their input rather than simply acting as a recipient of views if children happen to provide them” (Lundy, 2007, p. 934).

- **Voice** involves encouraging children to express their views. Importantly, the right to express their views “is not dependent upon their capacity to express a mature view; it is dependent only on their ability to form a view, mature or not” (Lundy, 2007, p. 935). Thus, sufficient time to understand relevant issues and access to child-friendly documentation and information are important prerequisites to meaningful and effective child participation.
- **Audience** assumes that children’s views must be listened to by someone with the responsibility to make decisions. In fact, “children have a right to have their views listened to (not just heard) by those involved in the decision-making processes” (Lundy, 2007, p. 936). This suggests the need to “(...) ensure children at least have a ‘right of audience’, an opportunity to communicate views to an identifiable individual or body with the responsibility to listen” (Lundy, 2007; p. 937).
- **Influence** means that children’s views must be acted upon, as appropriate. Specifically, the model proposes that “(...) at some point, attention needs to focus on the extent of influence; what constitutes the ‘due’ in the ‘due weight’.” (Lundy, 2007, p. 937). Lundy adds that the “(...) challenge is to find ways of ensuring that adults not only listen to children but that they take children’s views seriously. Even if this is not always possible, children must be told how their views were considered and whether they had any influence or not.

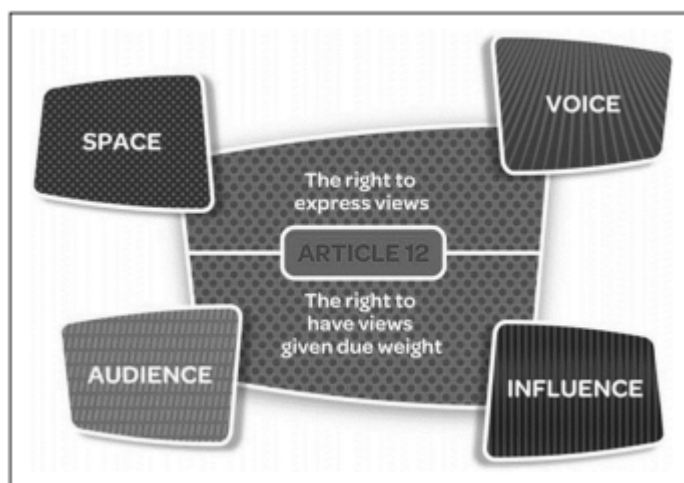


Figure 1 Lundy's (2007) model of participation. Retrieved from the Irish Government National Child and Youth Participation Strategy (2015–2020), based on “Voice” is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child’.

Extensively used in policy and in practice, this model has the potential to be applied to the work with children, across distinct fields and contexts. Nonetheless, to our knowledge, it has not been applied to ECEC, nor to professional development initiatives with ECEC professionals. Thus, the tools developed within the PARTICIPA project will be structured taking into account the Lundy model of participation.

#### 4. The right to participate in ECEC settings

Participation is most meaningful when it is rooted in children’s everyday lives (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010) and since the earliest ages (Council of Europe, 2017). Therefore, there is broad consensus towards the importance of considering children's perspectives in ECEC (e.g., Bae, 2009; Clark & Moss, 2005; Emilson, 2007; Sheridan & Samuelsson, 2001). For instance, children must be able to express their views, preferences, and

choices regarding, for instance, where, when, or with whom to play (Correia et al., 2019); and the assessment of ECEC settings' quality must consider multiple perspectives, namely children's views and experiences (Katz, 2006).

Further, children's right to participate is described as key to frame ECEC daily practice and overall quality (e.g., Moser et al., 2017; Sheridan, 2007; Sheridan & Samuelsson, 2001). Based on this, there is growing interest in how adults can effectively support shared decision-making processes in which children are actively engaged (NAYEC, 2009; Sandberg & Eriksson, 2010; Venninen et al., 2014). In effect, participation in ECEC can be promoted in many ways, through processes such as active listening, consulting children, or giving them the opportunity to initiate and propose their own products or ideas (e.g., Pascal & Bertram, 2009). Nonetheless, sometimes, professionals encounter barriers (e.g., adult-child ratios, workload, and school structures characterized by adult power) to the meaningful implementation of children's right to participate in ECEC (e.g., Koran & Avcı, 2017; Venninen et al., 2014).

Importantly, children's participation in ECEC takes place in the context of relationships and interactions established between children and ECEC professionals, such as ECEC teachers, whose role is crucial (Broström et al., 2015). Thus, to exert their right to participate, children must be capable of making their own decisions within relationships with significant adults that empower them as agents and rights holders (Corsaro, 2005; Lansdown, 2005). Furthermore, research has suggested that teachers' practices promoting a positive climate in the ECEC classroom, through positive relationships, affect, communication, and respect, are positively associated with children's perceptions of their own experiences of participation (Correia et al., 2020).

These distinct agents, roles, and interactions shape children's experiences of participation in ECEC and illustrate the complexity of participatory interactions, suggesting different levels of analysis, from individual values to practices and actions (Vieira, 2017). Together, they contribute to children's participation experiences, with potential benefits for children (e.g., Ebrahim, 2011).

## **5. Potential effects of the right to participate**

Potential child-level benefits of children's participation include increases in children's self-esteem, self-efficacy, communication, negotiation, conflict resolution, and decision-making skills (e.g., Hart, 1992; Sinclair, 2004). The development of citizenship has also been proposed as an outcome of children's participation (Pascal & Bertram, 2009). Notably, participation is considered a key investment in children's wellbeing (e.g., Bradshaw & Mayhew, 2005; European Commission, 2013).

Furthermore, participation improves the organization and functioning of organizations, such as ECEC centres, and enables adults' respect for children's ideas, interests, and needs. (e.g., Hart, 1992). Improved organizational competence in listening to children's and professionals' voices should result in increased levels of perceived procedural justice thus increasing leadership legitimacy (Emler & Reicher, 2005).

Taking into consideration the individual, contextual, and organizational factors pertinent to the implementation of practices supporting children's right to participate in ECEC, and aiming at contributing to long-term improvements in ECEC classroom and centre quality, a multilevel professional development approach targeting ECEC teachers, assistants, and coordinators was designed. Our rationale was that teachers would not be able to address all the factors and barriers that influence children's participation by themselves; assistants also spend a considerable amount of time with children and play a crucial role in supporting and generalizing pedagogical approaches and coordinators are in the position to support teachers' autonomy in

implementing their visions regarding children's participation while mobilizing the necessary organizational resources to ensure their applicability.

Thus, PARTICIPA aims to empower ECEC teachers, assistants, and coordinators': (1) knowledge on children's right to participation; (2) positive attitudes regarding the design, implementation, and monitoring of practices that promote children's participation; (3) ability to identify, design, implement, and monitor practices enhancing children's right to participate; and (4) ability to work together, at multiple configurations of the ECEC centre, to identify, use, and sustain the individual and organizational resources needed to support children's participation.

In order to meet the abovementioned goals, the PARTICIPA project developed two (free, open) professional development resources: (1) a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on children's right to participate in ECEC, targeting teachers, assistants, and coordinators; and (2) self-assessment tools designed to support professionals (i.e., teacher, assistant, and coordinator's version).

## 6. A MOOC on children's right

A Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) was designed and subsequently developed, to support professionals in building competences needed for the provision of high-quality ECEC. A MOOC is a cost-effective method for supporting the learning of both small and great numbers of ECEC professionals and will allow the provision of affordable (i.e., free), flexible (i.e., self-paced and accessible both at home and at the ECEC centre), inclusive (i.e., open to all; delivered in multiple languages), and interactive professional development. As ECEC staff often struggle to find time and necessary funding for engaging in professional development opportunities, a MOOC tailored to the specificities of ECEC, can be considered as a promising approach.

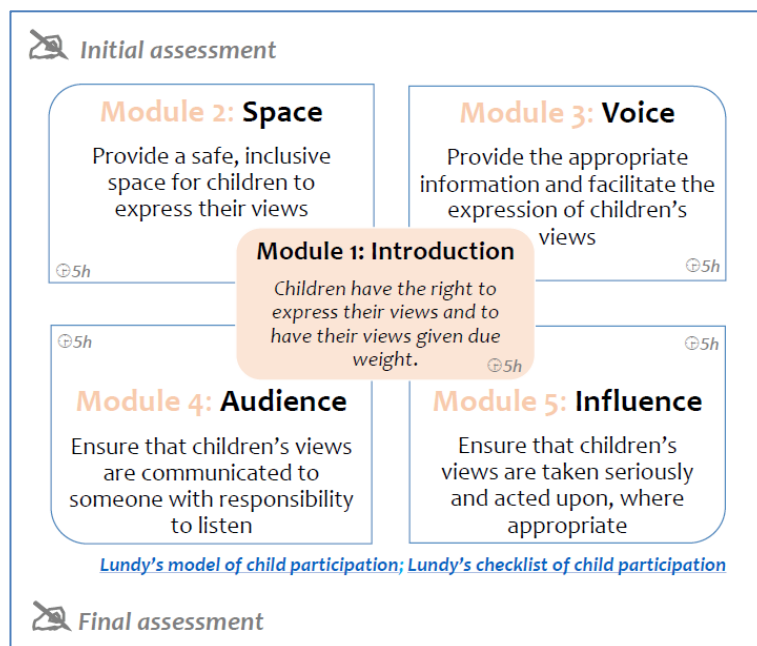


Figure 2 The structural organization of the MOOC.

Special care and effort was given to the setting up the requirements of the course and to its instructional design. Starting from developing a prototype version of the course in English, we reached a number of agreements on the instructional methodology, the approach, structure of the course, its content, duration, etc. Based on these, a modular course consisting of five modules was designed (see Figure 2). Prior to these, the MOOC

provides some general information regarding its scope and purpose, the target audience, practical aspects, namely, the duration (8 weeks), the workload (approx. 5 hours per week), the technical requirements, its level (3) according to EQF (see <https://europa.eu/europass/en/description-eight-eqf-levels>) and the certification a participant could obtain. Additionally, a course outline is available both in short and in detail. Moreover, an announcement forum and a discussion forum for the participants to share their experience and exchange ideas during the course are available.

Each module consists of a short description, the learning objectives and some keywords. It is structured in sections that include the learning material (in video and textual form), the activities, and library resources. Every module concludes with a quiz, that the participants need to successfully complete by obtaining a passing grade of 60% to proceed to the next module.

At the end of each module, participants are invited to participate in the Big Challenge, a project where they can apply participatory practices, collaborate with each other, exchange their ideas, and develop an in-depth understanding of the content of the course, by connecting theory and practice. Participants may choose a project among several options provided or select a project of their own thus improving improve their participation practices.

Throughout the duration of the course, participants have access to a MOOC glossary containing definitions selected or adapted from other sources matching the intentions and context of the MOOC, a common folder acting as a resource center, and the outline of the Big Challenge with options, activities, and tasks, per module.

To begin the course, participants need to complete a questionnaire sharing information about their prior knowledge regarding children' rights to participate. Participants are asked to indicate the level that best describes their current knowledge with the use of 20 statements on a scale from 1 to 5. Participants are asked to fill in the same questionnaire after they have finished the course, as a prerequisite to obtain their certificate of successful participation.

Next came the implementation of the course by means of integrating learning material into a Moodle LMS platform (<https://moodle.com/>). The course is structured using "topics format" where each page (module) is divided into sub-topics (reading material, video, activity, module evaluation and library resources). An additional topic also appeared in each module for purposes of better organization of the Big Challenge.

Following the evaluation of the course layout and the content by several users, the educational material was updated based on the users' comments and the final version was translated into Portuguese, Dutch, Polish, and Greek. Then, different versions of the MOOC were implemented, one for every language. Participants can opt for the language they wish to use (the international version and the national that corresponds to their country), using a drop-down menu available at the top of their browser.

In Figure 3 one can see an outline of the English version of the course, available at <https://child-participation.eu/platform/>. At area 1, on the left, we can see the topics of the course, i.e., the units wrapping the related learning objects., some general information, the five modules, and the two topics that participants have to visit before and after the modules. Area 2, at the top center, includes global resources that are available to all participants, no matter their nationality. This also holds for the useful information and the calendar appearing in Area 3 on the right. Area 4, at the center, also contains the Course modules and its learning units, according to the language a participant has selected from the drop-down menu in Area 5. All participants,

except for the managers of the course, are grouped based on their nationality so that they can view the appropriate learning material.

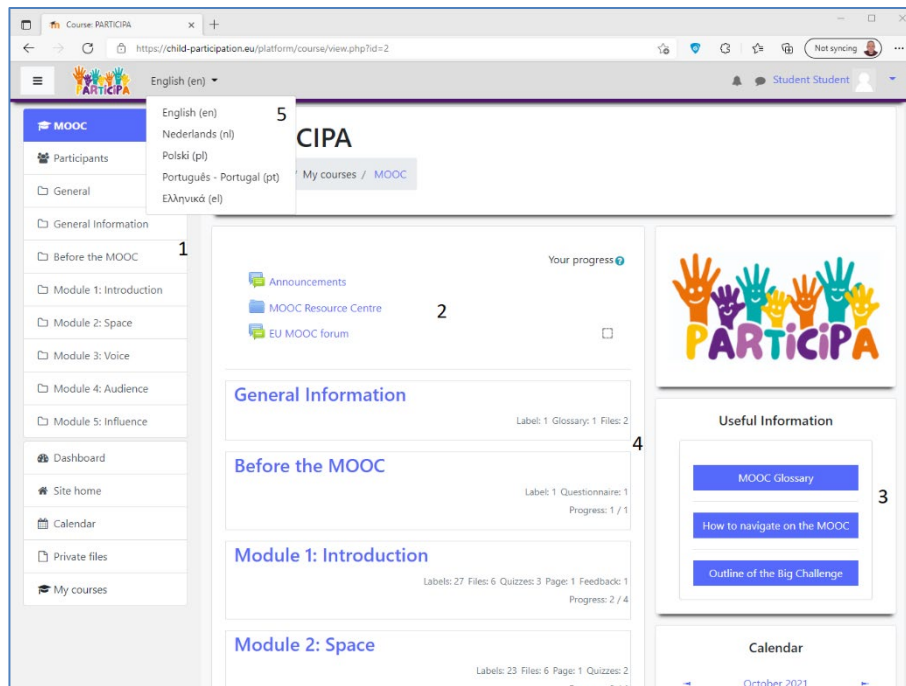


Figure 3 The outline of the English version of the MOOC

The general information topic offers information about the scope and the target audience of the course, as well as the prior knowledge that one must have to participate. Some practical aspects are also discussed, along with the course outline and detailed information regarding the structure of each module. At the end of the topic, the glossary, a guide of how to navigate on the MOOC, the outline of the Big Challenge and a national discussion forum are available (see Figure 4).

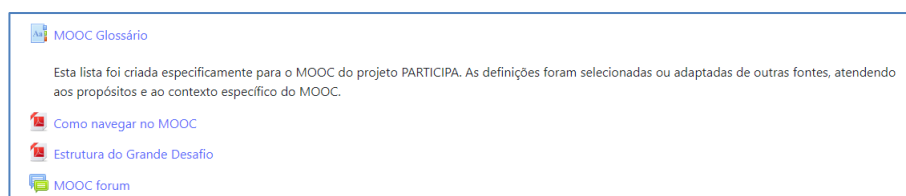


Figure 4 Resources of the General Information topic of the MOOC, in Portuguese

Prior to the first module, participants must fill in a questionnaire with information about their existing knowledge on children's rights to participate (see Figure 5).

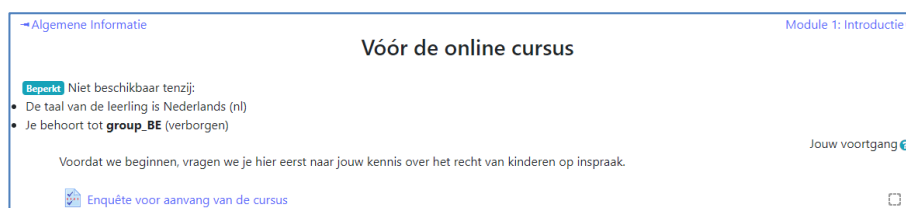


Figure 5 Questionnaire with information about children's right to participate, before starting the MOOC, in Dutch.



Modules are organized into sections containing reading material, videos, activities. In the end, the module evaluation and library resources are available, along with the Big Challenge section. In Figure 6 an example on a module of the English version of the course is provided. One can see the reading material, the video and the activities in each section. The module ends with the evaluation section, the Big Challenge, and the library resources (see Figure 7).

Figure 6 An example of the learning objects of a module of the MOOC, in English.

Figure 7 An example of the learning objects of a module of the MOOC, in English (cont. ).

Following the final module, the same questionnaire is repeated, as a prerequisite for the certificate of attendance (see Figure 8).

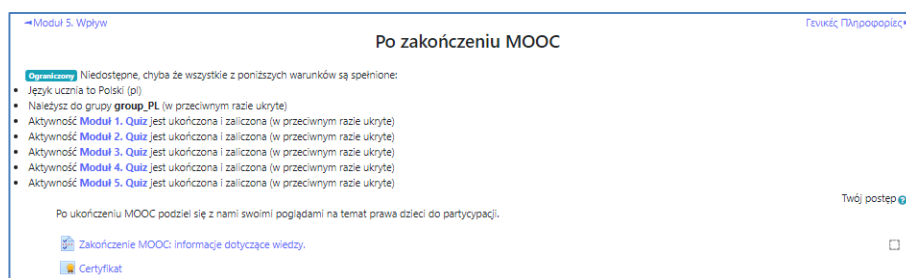


Figure 8 Questionnaire with information about children's right to participate, after finishing the MOOC, in Polish.

## 7. A self-assessment tool for supporting professionals

The PARTICIPA project consortium has elaborated a self-assessment tool for ECEC professionals to support high-quality ECEC through the implementation of children's right to participate. Two versions aim to support teachers and assistants in delivering high quality ECEC through participatory practices at the classroom level. A third version aims to support coordinators in enhancing participatory practices based on organizational resources and supports.

The self-assessment tool is an independent but complementary professional development resource to the PARTICIPA Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on children's right to participate in ECEC, targeting teachers, assistants, and coordinators. The self-assessment tool is available free of charge via web.

This self-assessment tool is designed to support participants in enhancing participatory practices, based on their organization's resources. It was inspired by the testimonies of ECEC teachers, assistants and coordinators/managers from Greece, Poland, Belgium, and Portugal about the way they mould child participation in their settings. Children's participation was conceptualized following the Lundy model (Lundy, 2007).

### 7.1 Structure of the self-assessment tool

All items in the self-assessment concern practices with respect to promoting children's participation. The goals of these practices can be fulfilled through the use of a variety of strategies. The extent to which stakeholders already implement these practices is an indication of the extent to which children can participate in their setting. The items are structured around the five dimensions mentioned above: participative space, children's voice, audience of children's perspectives, influence, and contextual support for participation. Each dimension contains a number of questions that the participant must answer. Professionals who complete the online version receive personalized feedback.

*Let us get to know you and your job:* At the beginning of the questionnaire the participant is asked to answer some questions about his personal background and his previous work experience. Participation in this part of the questionnaire is not mandatory and if the participant does not wish to answer, he can continue to the next parts of the survey. The answers of this dimension will be used for demographic analysis.

**1. Participative space:** In a participative space, children are comfortable with themselves and feel free to express their perspectives. Professionals can create a participative space by having a respectful attitude towards children and adults in the centre and by promoting respect among children. In addition, in a participative space, they should enable children to act autonomously, for example to be able to create

opportunities for children to freely choose activities or access materials. To promote children's participation, it is important to be aware and responsive to children's needs, emotions, interests, and difficulties. To that end, the participant must answer 6 questions (teacher version, teacher assistant version, coordinator version) in a 4-point Likert scale (1: not at all to 4: to a large extent). Based on the participant's responses an average score is calculated regarding the dimension which corresponds to the specific feedback about the attention he gives to practices enhancing the participative space in his classroom.

**2. Children's voice:** All children have a voice. However, sometimes professionals need to make additional effort to ensure that children can express their voice. Enabling children's voice requires that they communicate in a child-friendly way, so that children sufficiently understand the topic at hand. In addition, they need to actively identify the topics in which children find most relevant to participate. To enable all children to participate, professionals should facilitate multiple forms for children to express their perspectives, interests, and preferences. They can also support the development of children's skills and attitudes that help them express their perspectives. To that end, the participant must answer 9 questions in the teacher version, 7 questions in the teacher assistant version and 7 questions in the coordinator version in a 4-point Likert scale (1: not at all to 4: to a large extent). Based on the participant's responses an average score is calculated regarding the dimension which corresponds to a specific feedback about the ways for he uses to strengthen children's voice in his classroom.

**3. Audience of children's perspectives:** Audience refers to the people who need to listen to children's perspectives. When children express their views but these views are not addressed to the right person, it is possible that they will never be known, considered, and implemented. An effective way to promote children's participation is to inform the children regarding which people are responsible for making which decisions. In addition, professionals can give children opportunities to communicate their perspectives to the people who are responsible for the topic at hand. They can also make sure there is a process for communicating children's perspectives (e.g., a periodical meeting). In sum, 'audience' means that children's perspectives, needs, interests, and expectations are listened to and given due weight. To that end, the participant must answer 7 questions (teacher version, teacher assistant version, coordinator version) in a 4-point Likert scale (1: not at all to 4: to a large extent). Based on the participant's responses an average score is calculated regarding the dimension which corresponds to a specific feedback about practices that helps them to ensure an audience for the children.

**4. Influence:** Professionals need to ensure that children's perspectives are acted upon, as appropriate. To achieve that, they may plan, organize, and monitor children's participation in decision-making. No matter how young they are, children's participation in decision making should be effective and meaningful. In some cases, children may be consulted. In other cases, they may collaborate with adults or take the lead. ECEC teachers must provide feedback regarding how children's perspectives have been used and how they have influenced the decisions. To that end, the participant must answer 9 questions in the teacher version, 8 questions in the teacher assistant version and 9 questions in the coordinator version in a 4-point Likert scale (1: not at all to 4: to a large extent). Based on the participant's responses an average score is calculated regarding the dimension which corresponds to a specific feedback about practices that enhance children's influence on their environment.

**5. Contextual support for participation:** In a participative community, all professionals support children's participation and optimize their practices in close collaboration with each other. Moreover, children's families, visitors, and the local community are invited and encouraged to support children's right to participate. This

dimension is divided into 2 sub-dimensions. The first one concerns professionalization and collaboration within the team and the second one is about communication with the children's families and the wider community. Only for the coordinator version does a third sub-dimension exist, called "my own practices to promote the participation of my team" where the participant has to answer 5 questions in a 4-point Likert scale (1: not at all to 4: to a large extent). For the first sub-dimension the participant must answer 4 questions in the teacher version, 5 questions in the teacher assistant version and 6 questions in the coordinator version in a 4-point Likert scale (1: not at all to 4: to a large extent) and for the second one they must answer 5 questions in the teacher version, 4 questions in the teacher assistant version and 4 questions in the coordinator assistant version in a 4-point Likert scale (1: not at all to 4: to a large extent). The survey calculates an average score of each sub-dimension which corresponds to a specific feedback about a) experiences of professionalization and collaboration within the team and b) involvement of the families and the wider community, towards enhancing children participation and experiences.

**Feedback Report:** At the end of the survey the participant receives an automatically generated feedback report following its submission, based on the answers they provided by completing the self-assessment tool. This report displays the average of the answers that the participant gave in each dimension in a graphical way and the personalized feedback below (see Figure 9). The participant is able to download the report in pdf format. They also have the opportunity to download a clean printable version of the self-assessment tool if they wish to complete the survey offline.

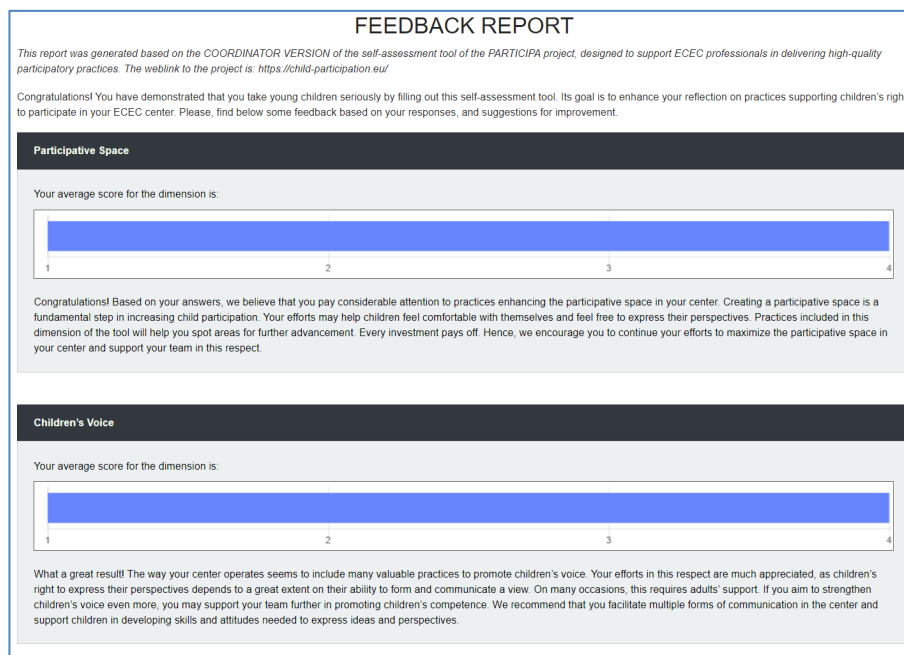


Figure 9: Feedback report sample

At the end of the survey the participant receives a feedback report which is automatically generated after the submission, based on the answers he gave by completing the self-assessment tool. This report displays in a graphical way the average of the answers that the participant gave in each dimension and the personalized feedback below (see figure 4). The participant can download the report in pdf format. He also has the capability to download a clean printable version of the self-assessment tool if he wishes to complete the survey offline.

**Survey tool technical details:** For the development and supply of the survey tool an open-source platform called LimeSurvey (<https://www.limesurvey.org/>) was used. The system was built under the common

infrastructure of the digital tools of the project. The questionnaire is available to the public in the form of a web application (through browsers and devices).

A strong management panel for the administrators to manage the surveys is provided. In this panel the owners of the survey can monitor either in real time or not the answers of the participants. The participants' answers can be exported in many formats for further statistical analysis using all statistical tools available.

The aim of this tool is to encourage and support professionals' reflections. They may complete the tool individually or with colleagues from the center they work. Statements included in the tool may serve them as an inspiration or starting point for discussion. By using this self-assessment, someone demonstrates the intention to improve his practices with respect to promoting children's participation.

## **8. Conclusions**

Children have the right to participate in all matters affecting them, freely expressing their opinion and having it respected and considered. Young children's participation is key to developing a culture of human rights, democracy, and rule of law. Therefore, young people's active participation and decision-making in society must be protected and encouraged from an early age. Even though children's right to participate is key to education quality, its implementation in early childhood education (ECE) remains a challenge. To support high-quality ECEC through the implementation of children's right to participate, we propose a multilevel professional development approach. At the research level, it seems relevant to bridge the gaps between theory and empirical evidence. Considering multiple perspectives, methods, informants and levels of analysis contributes to a fuller understanding of children's participation in ECEC.

By providing ECEC professionals with learning, reflection, and self-assessment tools to support the implementation of children's right to participate, we aim to contribute to individual and organizational change towards participation, thus increasing the well-being of children and professionals. During the project, we will develop three independent but complementary professional development tools focusing on ECEC staff's knowledge, attitudes, and practices (i.e., competence) regarding children's right to participate: (1) a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on children's right to participate in ECE, targeting teachers, assistants, and coordinators/managers; (2) a self-assessment tool designed to support teachers and assistants in delivering high-quality ECE through participatory practices at the classroom level; and (3) a self-assessment tool designed to support coordinators/managers in enhancing participatory practices based on organizational resources and supports.

In addition to designing and implementing the learning, reflection, and self-assessment tools (that correspond to our intellectual outputs), we will conduct an examination of their feasibility by focusing on their acceptability, demand, implementation, practicality, adaptation, integration, expansion, and efficacy (Bowen et al., 2009; Orsmond & Cohn, 2015). The examination of these feasibility dimensions involves gathering input from end users (i.e., ECE teachers, assistants, and coordination/management professionals) and collection of in-depth information (including classroom observations). This is an important phase of iterative development of innovative tools/interventions, providing information on any revisions needed to bring the use of the tools to scale, maximizing their implementation and sustainability. Based on this feasibility analysis, upon project completion we will be able to both share innovative professional development tools and provide information on how to use them in an effective and sustainable manner.

## 9. Acknowledgement

Authors were partially supported by Erasmus+ Programme PARTICIPA (Grant Agreement No. 2019-1-PT01-KA202-060950).

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