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Running head: PARTICIPATION AND SOCIO-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Does participation benefit children's socio-emotional development? Positive associations between children's participation and self-concept, through children's perceptions



Abstract

Participation, a fundamental right of all children, is described as an indicator of early childhood education (ECE) settings' quality, and as an investment in children's development and well-being. Teachers and children influence each other, within interactions that shape participatory processes. In this study, we examined associations between ECE teachers' participation practices (i.e., both self-reported and observed), observed teacher-child interactions, and children's socio-emotional outcomes (i.e., self-concept and social skills), mediated by children's perceptions of their own participation. Participated in this study 336 children (163 boys), aged between 42 and 76 months ($M = 60.14$, $SD = 7.86$), from 58 ECE classrooms in the Lisbon area, Portugal, and their lead teachers. Our findings suggest positive associations between observed participation practices and children's self-concept, mediated by children's perceptions of participation. To our knowledge, this study represents the first empirical attempt to address the mechanisms by which participation practices are associated with children's developmental outcomes, valuing children's subjective experiences of participation, and accounting for different informants and levels of analysis. The main findings and study implications for research, practice, and policymaking are discussed.

Keywords: right to participate, participation, early childhood education, teachers' practices, teacher-child interactions quality, children's perceptions

Does participation benefit children’s socio-emotional development? Positive associations between children’s participation and self-concept, through children’s perceptions

The importance of respect and consideration for children as rights holders and active agents has been recognized by most states, through the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC; United Nations General Assembly, 1989). Specifically, Article 12 of the CRC asserts that every child capable of forming a view must be assured the right to express it and to have it considered, in accordance with his/her age and maturity. Importantly, children’s right to participate is recommended from the earliest ages (Council of Europe, 2017), namely in ECE settings (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006). Indeed, from an early age, children have views and unique perspectives on what surrounds them, as well as increasing autonomy and self-regulation (e.g., Lansdown, 2005). Relatedly, ECE settings are fundamental microsystems for children’s development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), where children spend large amounts of time (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2019), and where adults play an important role in creating opportunities for participation (Gal, 2017). Child participation has, thus, been described as an important dimension of ECE settings’ quality (Sheridan, 2007), with the literature proposing several benefits of participation for adults, institutions, communities, and society in general, and for children themselves (e.g., Sinclair, 2004). Building on this rationale, in the current study, we investigated unexamined associations between teachers’ participation practices, ECE quality, children’s perceptions of participation, and children’s socio-emotional development.

Teachers’ Participation Practices and ECE quality

ECE teachers are described as gatekeepers, as they ensure children's access to participation experiences (Authors, 2022; Gal, 2017). Although scarce, extant research on children's right to participate in ECE has mostly investigated ECE teachers' ideas about this right (e.g., Koran & Avci, 2017; Leinonen & Venninen, 2012), with practices receiving less attention (Authors, 2019). It is therefore relevant to further investigate ECE teachers' practices supporting children's participation in this field.

So far, the few studies on teacher's participation practices suggested the importance of teacher-child interactions, characterized by sensitive attitudes (e.g., Pettersson, 2015) and active listening (e.g., Alasuutari, 2014). Practices supporting children's participation may encompass the shared definition of rules (Salminen, 2013), documentation of activities, presentations of children's work (Knauf, 2017; Pettersson, 2015), or joint resolution of peer disputes (Mashford-Scott & Church, 2011). In turn, practices restricting children's participation can involve, for instance, the planning or definition of rules by the teacher, without any space left for children's consultation, collaboration, or initiative (e.g., Alasuutari, 2014).

In a previous study, we found positive associations between teachers' practices, ECE settings' quality, and children's perceived participation in ECE. More specifically, the association between teachers' perceived practices and children's perceptions of participation was mediated by observed participation practices and observed process quality (Authors, 2020). On the one hand, this study highlighted the interdependence of subjective (e.g., self-reported participation practices, perceived participation by children) and objective (e.g., independently observed participation practices) features of ECE classrooms, and how both are relevant to inform the understanding of the conditions needed to promote children's participation in these contexts (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). On the other hand, these findings are consistent with research linking

the right to participate and ECE settings' quality, considering both structural (e.g., materials and physical environment) and process features (e.g., teacher-child interactions characterized by emotional support) (e.g., Authors, 2020; Sheridan, 2007; Sheridan & Samuelsson, 2001).

Although ECE quality is multidimensional (Tobin, 2005), structural quality is described as influencing process quality and, in turn, child outcomes (Anders, 2015; Moser et al., 2017; Pianta et al., 2008). Nonetheless, teacher-child interactions are particularly relevant to ECE process quality, as they reflect the quality of the child's experience and are thought to influence child development more directly (Mashburn et al., 2008; Raikes et al., 2023, UNESCO, 2006). Consistently, recent meta-analyses have suggested the important role of teacher-child interactions for children's development (e.g., von Suchodoletz et al., 2023). Further, previous research has suggested, for instance, that variations in the quality of teacher-child interactions are associated with different conditions and opportunities for children's participation (Bae, 2012), and that teachers in high-quality ECE settings (i.e., characterized by a warm and open atmosphere in which children are respected, encouraged to express themselves, to be active, to take initiative and to participate, being listened to) tend to develop practices centered on children's voices, and interests, thus promoting their participation (e.g., Sheridan & Samuelsson, 2001).

Children form their perceptions about the education settings they attend, and the opportunities for participation they experience, based on the experiences provided by their teachers (Oliveira-Formosinho & Lino, 2008). Hence, more research on these associations is warranted, namely on how ECE teachers' practices and ECE settings' quality (e.g., emotional support) are associated with children's perceptions about their participation (e.g., Authors, 2020; Smith, 2002).

Children' Perceptions About Their Participation and ECE quality

Evidence on children's perceptions about their participation in ECE is still limited (Authors, 2017). Possibly due to methodological issues (e.g., scarcity of measures), children's ideas and experiences have been less heard and considered, when compared to adults' ideas and practices (Authors, 2019; James, 2007). Even so, available studies suggested that children perceive participation classrooms as those in which they can freely engage with different activities, materials, and areas, without having to ask for ECE professionals' permission, or as those in which they can refuse adults' proposals (Sandseter & Seland, 2016). Not asking for permission, being able to refuse adults' proposals, or even refusing to participate, have thus been described as important aspects to consider when respecting children's right to participate (Alderson & Montgomery, 1996). Additionally, when comparing participation and non-participation classrooms, children perceive participation classrooms as the ones they like the most, and where they expect to have more opportunities to make choices (Authors, 2017).

Research has also suggested variations in children's conceptions of participation, as a function of ECE settings' quality (Sheridan & Samuelsson, 2001). Specifically, children attending high-quality ECE settings perceive more opportunities to experience participation and to exert influence (Sheridan, 2007). Moreover, in these classrooms, children recognize teachers' alignment with their interests, considering that teachers give them responsibility to do what they like (Sheridan & Samuelsson, 2001). Importantly, perceiving opportunities to exert influence and to be considered in decision-making matters for children's perceptions of fairness and social justice (e.g., Hammack, 2018).

Previous research has reported gender effects on children's perceptions about their rights. Studies with older children (i.e., 10 and 11 years old) suggest that girls report more positive perceptions of their participation rights than boys (Lloyd & Emerson, 2017), but research with preschool-aged children did not report any gender or age differences (Authors, 2017). In addition, little is known about the associations between children's perceptions about their participation and their developmental outcomes, and about the role of children's perceptions in the relation between teachers' participation practices and children's socio-emotional development. This is a key aspect that requires further investigation, as the benefits from participation, intrinsically linked to children's experiences and perceptions, have been widely proposed in the literature, even though evidence is lacking (Sinclair, 2004).

Potential benefits for children's socio-emotional development

Participation is described as benefiting children (Hart, 1992). Literature suggests that promoting children's participation benefits their self-esteem, cognitive and social skills, as well as their respect for others (Hart, 1992; Kirby & Bryson, 2002; Sinclair, 2004). Other general benefits have been proposed, such as improvements in communication, cooperation, or self-control (Kirby et al., 2003; Sinclair, 2004). However, evidence on how participation specifically benefits younger children, in ECE contexts, is limited.

So far, research has documented positive associations between young children's perceptions of their opportunities to participate and their subjective well-being, with children reporting they liked more and felt happier in ECE classrooms where they experienced participation (Sandseter & Seland, 2016). Relatedly, research has suggested that children describe participation classrooms as those in which they expect to feel better and to have more fun (Authors, 2017). Other studies suggested increases in

children's confidence, communication, cooperation, and negotiation skills (Nah & Lee, 2016), or in self-regulation, as a function of different levels of participation (Kangas et al., 2015). Benefits for children's socio-emotional development are dependent on experiencing opportunities to enroll in activities that foster shared discussions and development of rules, cooperation, and mutual agreements between equals, which typically occur in environments enabling child participation (Hart, 1992).

Consistent with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), opportunities for children to set goals, take initiative, and participate in decision-making, allow them to feel more autonomous, competent, and experience a sense of belonging (Trevisan, 2016; Wyness, 2006). Further, research has described children's self-determination and influence as important indicators of child participation in ECE, with the potential to enhance children's wellbeing, involvement, sense of belonging (Sandberg & Eriksson, 2010), and self-esteem (Leinonen et al., 2014).

Relatedly, Honneth's theory of recognition (1995) foresees three types of recognition mediated through relationships (Marshal et al., 2020), which are central to the development of an autonomous identity: self-confidence (i.e., established within caring relations and interactions characterized by emotional support and trust), self-respect (i.e., achieving full recognition as citizens and active members of society, entitled to rights), and self-esteem (i.e., being valued by the community, through collectively shared values and goals). This is closely aligned with the assumption that participatory environments and practices (Hart, 1992) and high-quality teacher-child interactions (Pianta et al., 2008) are crucial for children's development (e.g., Coplan & Prakash, 2003), both at an individual (e.g., identity) and a more interpersonal (e.g., social) level (Marshal et al., 2020). Considering the participation benefits proposed in the literature, self-concept and social skills emerge as two relevant but unexamined

socio-emotional developmental outcomes that merit investigation (Mayall, 2000; Sinclair, 2004).

Children's self-concept

Self-concept, a psychological variable, is particularly important in the earliest ages, as it refers to a sense of self linked to perceptions of competence and acceptance, in diverse domains (e.g., cognitive competence and peer acceptance) (Beck et al., 2005; Harter & Pike, 1984; Mata et al., 2008). Importantly, younger children (i.e., under the age of 8) are also able to express a general self-concept (Marsh et al., 1991). Overtime, self-concept becomes more complex, realistic, and multidimensional, gradually encompassing perceptions of worth, later related with self-esteem, including an evaluative component (Marsh et al., 1991).

Caring and supportive relationships respecting children's rights are basic conditions for children's self-concept development (O'Brien & Maynooth, 2013; Brown & Murphy, 2011). However, to our knowledge, no studies have focused on the role of participation practices or process quality on children's self-concept, although research has, for example, documented associations between developmentally appropriate practices and children's self-concept (e.g., Jambunathan, 2012). In addition, research has documented mixed findings regarding the associations (i.e., either positive or negative) between self-concept and children's age (Ackerman & Dozier, 2005; Mantzicopoulos, 2004; Pinto et al., 2015) and gender (e.g., Bird & Reese, 2006; Mantzicopoulos, 2004; Pinto et al., 2015), and positive associations with verbal achievement (e.g., Marsh et al., 2002).

Children's social skills

Social skills refer to learned behaviors enabling children to interact successfully with others. They are crucial for children's social adjustment, as they help children

maintain successful interactions with peers, communicate, negotiate play activities, and experience positive feelings (e.g., Gresham & Elliot, 1990). Social skills thus encompass domains such as cooperation (i.e., helping others, sharing, following rules), assertiveness (i.e., initiation, such as introducing oneself and asking questions), and self-control (i.e., behaviors requiring children to respond appropriately to others' action) (Gresham & Elliott, 1990, 2007). Importantly, experiences fulfilling children's needs for autonomy, competence, and belonging are considered important for children's prosocial behaviors and for the establishment of positive, cooperative relationships (St-Amand et al., 2017).

Previous research on the predictors of social skills has reported positive effects of exposure to high-quality ECE classrooms (e.g., Curby et al., 2013), namely for children from low-income backgrounds (e.g., Burchinal et al., 2010). Also, studies investigating social skills have typically controlled for children's age (i.e., progression in social competence with age) and gender (i.e., boys generally scoring lower on social competence than girls) (e.g., Fialho & Aguiar, 2017; LaFreniere & Dumas, 1996), while others suggested variance in social skills as a function of language or verbal competence (e.g., Stephens et al., 2023). Importantly, despite the conceptual and empirical links between autonomy support and children's social skills development (e.g., Joussemet et al., 2005; Su-Russell & Russell, 2021), and the limited research, for instance, on the associations between child-centered classrooms and children's prosocial behaviors (e.g., Reio et al., 2002), to our knowledge, no studies have focused on the role of teachers' participation practices on children's social skills, nor investigated links between ECE teacher's practices, ECE quality, children's perceptions of participation, and children's developmental outcomes.

The current study

In this study, we investigated the associations between ECE teachers' participation practices and ECE process quality, at the classroom level, and the individual developmental outcomes of self-concept and social skills, at the child level. More specifically, we investigated if these associations were mediated by children's perceptions of participation, thus valuing children's perspectives (James, 2007).

By pursuing these goals, we aimed to overcome multiple gaps in research about child participation and, importantly, about its benefits for children, which, to date, have been proposed mostly at a conceptual level. This study considered different informants (i.e., teachers, children, independent observers) and multiple levels of analysis (e.g., reported and observed practices, individual perceptions), thus offering a comprehensive overview of how participation can influence child development.

Specifically, we expected self-reported ECE teachers' participation practices to be positively associated with children's socio-emotional development (e.g., self-concept and social skills), mediated by children's perceptions of participation (H1). Similarly, we expected observed ECE teachers' participation practices to be positively associated with children's socio-emotional development (e.g., self-concept and social skills), mediated by children's perceptions of participation (H2). In addition, we expected observed process quality to be positively associated with children's socio-emotional development (i.e., self-concept and social skills), mediated by children's perceptions of participation (H3). Children's self-concept and social skills were measured at two different data points – Time 1 (T1) and Time 3 (T3). Considering extant research, we also controlled for children's sex, age, verbal competence, and mother's education, when investigating the proposed associations. Hypotheses are outlined in Fig. 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Method

The Portuguese ECE context

Portugal, a southwestern European country, ratified the CRC in 1990. Over the last 30 years, several investments were made in ECE, currently available from age 3 until the age of compulsory education (i.e., 6 years by September 15th) (Law No. 4/97). Although optional, universal access to ECE in Portugal is mandated from the age of 4 (Law No. 65/2015), with current ECE enrolment exceeding 90%, and children generally attending ECE centers for at least five hours per day, five days a week (Direção-Geral de Estatísticas da Educação e Ciência, 2019; OCDE, 2020). Since 1997, a Masters' degree is the minimum qualification required to ECE teachers (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019). Nevertheless, professionals who completed their studies before this date (i.e., holding a Bachelor) remain in the ECE workforce.

Although children's rights are generally addressed in ECE teachers' initial education, it has recently been argued that teachers training needs to be more aligned with new perspectives on children's agency, specifically addressing children's participation rights and how to support them (e.g., Sarmiento, 2021). Importantly, the Portuguese Curriculum Guidelines for Preschool Education (Lopes da Silva et al., 2016) explicitly recognize children as subjects and agents within the educational process (e.g., recognizing the need to listen to children and consider their perspectives, ensuring their participation in decision-making, planning and evaluation), emphasizing the importance of positive interactions, stimulating conditions, and positive practices that foster their socio-emotional development. Further, in addition to the Framework Law for Preschool Education (Law No. 4/97), and the specific (Decree-Law No. 241, 2001) and general

profiles of ECE teachers (Decree Law No. 240, 2001), Portugal adopted a National Strategy for Children's Rights (Resolution No. 112/2020), which foresees several strategies, projects, and initiatives to promote children's participation, in various spheres of society. Also, the Portuguese National Council of Education recommended listening to and considering children's voice in education contexts, supporting interaction, participation, and positive development (Recommendation No. 2/2021).

Participants

Participants were 336 children (163 boys), aged between 42 and 76 months ($M = 60.14$, $SD = 7.86$), from 58 ECE classrooms in the Lisbon area, Portugal, in southwestern Europe. Mothers had between 2 and 24 years of education ($M = 14.24$, $SD = 3.83$), with information missing for 2.4% of mothers.

Participants also included 58 ECE teachers (all female), with an age range between 26 and 60 years old ($M = 43.07$, $SD = 8.45$). Professional experience ranged from 2 to 39 years ($M = 18.99$, $SD = 8.28$), and teachers were responsible for groups composed of 8 to 27 children ($M = 20.87$, $SD = 4.09$). Most participating classrooms (75.6%) served mixed-aged groups (i.e., children aged 3 to 6 years old). All teachers had at least a higher-education degree in ECE or equivalent, with 12.5% holding a Masters' degree and 19.6% a specialization course (e.g., early intervention, special education).

Participating ECE teachers were responsible for 58 ECE classrooms from 24 ECE centers located in the Lisbon metropolitan area, randomly selected. Classrooms were predominantly from the public sector (48.2%), but also from private for-profit (27.7%) or non-profit centers (24.1%), to ensure representativeness of the national ECE network (Direcção-Geral de Estatísticas da Educação e Ciência, 2019). The Lisbon metropolitan area, encompassing urban and semi-urban areas, is considered non-interior

and corresponds to nearly a third (36.7%) of the Portuguese population (Pinto et al., 2014).

Measures

Teachers' perceived participation practices. Teacher's perceptions of their practices to promote children's participation were assessed with BLINDED, composed by 26 items, and rated on a 5-point scale (0 = *not typical* to 5 = *extremely typical*). Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) were conducted in a previous study with the same sample (see Authors, 2020), to identify and confirm the factorial structure of the scale, revealing an acceptable model fit. The initial structure resulted in 18 items organized in two factors that were used in this study - Children's Expression and Responsibility (12 items; factor loadings between .48 and .78, $\alpha = .84$), referring to teachers' practices contributing to the implementation of children's participation (e.g., "children choose their play"), and Decision-Making by the Adult (six items; factor loadings between .62 and .79, $\alpha = .78$), reflecting teacher practices restricting children's participation (e.g., "I set the rules that children must follow").

Observed teachers' participation practices. Teacher's implementation of participation practices was assessed with BLINDED, an observation measure composed of 13 items, and rated on a 5-point scale (0 = *not typical* to 5 = *extremely typical*). It is composed of 10 items organized in two factors, with an acceptable model fit (see Authors, 2020) - Children's Choice (5 items; factor loadings between .62 and .93, $\alpha = .92$), reflecting observed practices to promote children's choice and initiative (e.g., "children choose the peers with whom they want to play", "children choose the activities and play in which they want to participate") and Observed Conditions for Participation (5 items; factor loadings between .55 and .78; $\alpha = .74$), referring to the

conditions supporting participation (e.g., “problems are debated in group, so that children find their own solutions”, “exposed works and materials are at the child level and reach”).

Observed process quality. Classrooms’ process quality was assessed with the Classroom Assessment Scoring System, Pre-K version (CLASS; Pianta et al., 2008). CLASS is comprised by 10 dimensions, coded on a 7-point scale (1-2 = *low quality*, 3-5 = *middle quality*, and 6-7 = *high quality*). A CFA from a previous study with the same sample (see Authors, 2020) confirmed the original structure and ensured a good model fit. Therefore, three domains were used: Emotional Support ($\alpha = .89$), comprising Positive climate, Negative climate (reversed), Teacher sensitivity, and Regard for student perspectives; Classroom Organization ($\alpha = .60$, and mean inter-item correlation = .35, within the recommended range .15 – .50; Clark & Watson, 1995), including Behavior management, Productivity, and Instructional learning formats; Instructional Support ($\alpha = .94$), including Concept development, Quality of feedback, and Language modelling.

Children’s perceived participation. Children’s perceptions of their participation were assessed with BLINDED, a structured interview involving the presentation of two images and accompanying narratives (i.e., participation and non-participation) (see Authors, 2017). We used two questions assessing children’s perceptions of their participation, by eliciting comparison with the child’s own classroom (“which classroom is most similar to yours?”) and teacher (“which teacher is most similar to yours?”), coded in terms of absence vs. presence ($0 = non-participation$, $1 = participation$). In this study, a dummy variable was computed (i.e., considering that $1 = participation$, whenever at least one of the two questions was coded as 1).

Children's self-concept. Children's self-concept was assessed with the Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance for Young Children (PSPCSA; Harter, & Pike, 1984; Mata et al., 2008). This measure is an extension of Harter's Perceived Competence Scale for Children (1983), translated and adapted to the Portuguese population by Mata et al. (2008). The scale has 24 items, rated on a 4-point scale (1 = *Few competence or acceptance* to 4 = *High competence or acceptance*), with separate versions for boys and girls. PSPCSA reflects children's self-perceptions of competence (i.e., cognitive – e.g., “this child is good at puzzles” - and physical competence – e.g., “this child is good at climbing”) and acceptance (i.e., peer – e.g., “this child has lots of friends to play with” and maternal acceptance – e.g., “this child's mom smiles”). Cronbach alphas for the global self-concept scale, used in this study, were .86 (T1) and .85 (T3).

Children's social skills. Children's social skills were assessed based on teachers' reports, with the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS; Gresham & Elliott, 1990). In this study, we used the Portuguese adaptation, specifically assessing the social skills domain. For the purpose, we used 30 items rated on a 3-point scale, used to describe the frequency of children's typical behavior (0 = *Never*, 1 = *Sometimes*, 2 = *Very Often*) 10 items referring to cooperation, 10 referring to assertiveness, and 10 referring to self-control. Items referring to cooperation include aspects such as helping others, sharing materials, and respecting rules (e.g., “cooperates with peers without encouragement from the teacher”). Items referring to assertiveness include initiating behaviors such as asking others for information, introducing oneself, and responding to the actions of others (e.g., “invites others to join in activities”). Items referring to self-control include behaviors emerging in conflict situations, or behaviors such as taking turns and compromising (e.g., “responds appropriately when pushed or hit by other

children”). In this study, the Cronbach alpha for social skills (i.e., composite scale) was = .91 (both in T1 and T3).

Children’s verbal competence. Children’s verbal competence was assessed with the Portuguese version of the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test– Revised (PPVT– R; Dunn, 1986), which has been used in various studies (e.g., Cadima et al., 2016). To the purpose, sets of four pictures were presented to each child, who was asked to point to the picture matching the word read aloud by the researcher. In this study, raw scores were used (i.e., obtaining a direct score, by subtracting the errors to the highest item answered by the child). Higher scores indicate higher levels of receptive vocabulary.

Demographic data. Teachers were given a questionnaire and asked to report on their age, sex, education and additional training, teaching experience, classroom size, type of group, and type of setting. They were also asked to report on children's age and sex. Mothers reported on their own education.

Procedure

This study was conducted within a broader research project, BLINDED, which received approval from the National Data Protection Commission and BLINDED Institutional Review Board. In each classroom, teachers and parents provided written consent, and all children provided verbal assent. We followed the same procedures as in a previous study (see Authors, 2020).

This study is based on data collected across three points (i.e., T1, T2, and T3). Children’s outcomes (e.g., self-concept and social skills) were assessed both in T1 (November - January) and T3 (June - July). Teachers’ reports of participation practices, observed participation practices, observed process quality, and children’s perceived participation, were collected at T2 (February to June).

As reported in the previous study (see Authors, 2020), in each classroom, six typically developing children were selected, based on age and gender. We aimed to interview three boys and three girls in each classroom, aged preferably 4 to 6 years old, although in some cases it was not possible to strictly apply these criteria. Interviews with children were conducted individually, in a private room in the ECE setting, lasting from 15 to 20 min. Assessments of self-concept were also conducted with children individually, lasting around 20 to 30 minutes.

Teachers were asked to report on their participation practices and children's social skills, by filling in the respective questionnaires. Observations of participation practices and classroom process quality were conducted by two observers during a typical morning. Procedures and reliability checks (i.e., in 25% of classrooms, resulting in good intraclass coefficient correlations for both measures) were the same as those reported by Authors (2020).

Data analysis

Self-reported ECE teachers' participation practices, observed ECE teachers' participation practices, and observed process quality were Level-2 predictors. The variable children's perceptions of participation was a Level-1 mediator. Estimates of children's socio-emotional development (e.g., self-concept and social skills) were Level-1 outcomes. Thus, hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 were supported by models that include a 2-1-1 mediation, and a multilevel mediation analysis was conducted.

To avoid conflate between-group and within-group effects when performing 2-1-1 models, the proposal by Zhang et al. (2009) was adopted. For that the class-mean children's perceptions of participation (M_j) was included at level 2. As the mediator variable was binary, the effect a was estimated using a multilevel model with logistic regression. The outcome variables were quantitative, so effect b was estimated using a

multilevel model with linear regression. Given that the coefficients a and b were obtained by different statistical methods, they were standardized before estimating the indirect effect (ab). Confidence interval bounds for the indirect effect were estimated using the Monte Carlo Method for Assessing Mediation (MCMAM). A 95% confidence interval was derived based on 20 000 simulated extracts from the distributions for parameters a and b (Preacher & Selig, 2012; Bauer et al. 2006). The indirect effect is significant when the confidence interval does not contain zero.

All multilevel regressions were conducted using children's sex, age, verbal competence, and mother's education as control variables. Outcome measures at T1 were also controlled for each model.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Means, standard deviations, and reliabilities of study variables are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Associations among study variables are presented in Table 2. Significant associations corresponded to small to moderate effect sizes (Cohen, 2016) and were globally in line with the theoretically expected pattern of relationships. For instance, the dimensions of observed participation practices (i.e., Observed Children's Choice, Observed Conditions for Participation) were positively correlated with children's perceived participation, and with dimensions of process quality (e.g., Emotional Support, Classroom Organization). Children's Expression and Responsibility (i.e., a dimension of perceived participation practices) was positively correlated with children's

social skills, with Observed Conditions for Participation, and with Classroom Organization. Decision making by the adult (i.e., another dimension of perceived participation practices), as expected, was negatively correlated with Children's Expression and Responsibility, with dimensions of observed participation practices, and with dimensions of observed process quality. Significant associations were also found, for instance, between children's sex and children's social skills. Contrary to our expectations, the outcome self-concept was negatively correlated with Emotional Support, and was not correlated with participation practices, either perceived or observed. Also, we did not find any significant correlations, for instance, between Teachers' Perceived Participation Practices and Children's Perceived Participation, nor between Observed Teachers' Participation Practices and children's social skills.

Insert Table 2 about here

To confirm that a multilevel mediation analysis was appropriate, the intra-class correlation (ICC) was calculated for socio-emotional outcomes (e.g., self-concept and social skills). The results showed an ICC = .08 (LRT (1) = 4.13, $p = .042$) for self-concept and an ICC = .332 (LRT (1) = 56.86, $p < .001$) for social skills. Thus, the results were suitable for the use of multilevel modelling.

Hypothesis 1 predicted self-reported ECE teachers' participation practices to be positively associated with children's socio-emotional development (e.g., self-concept and social skills), mediated by children's perceptions of participation. Parameter estimates for a and b were first obtained. After accounting for all the control variables, the estimates for effect a were not significant and for effect b were marginally

significant or not significant for both outcomes (Table 3). Consequently, the indirect effect was not tested, and Hypothesis 1 was not supported.

Hypothesis 2 posited observed ECE teachers' participation practices to be positively associated with children's socio-emotional development (e.g., self-concept and social skills), mediated by children's perceptions of participation. The results showed that, after considering the control variables, all the estimates for effects a and b were significant (Table 4). A positive indirect effect between each dimension of observed participation practices (Observed Children's Choice and Observed Conditions for Participation) and the outcome children's self-concept through children's perceptions of participation was obtained ($B = 7.75$, and $B = 7.39$, respectively, Table 4). For both indirect effects, the zero was not included in the 95% confidence intervals (95% CI = 6.68, 8.67 and 95% CI = 6.07, 8.76, respectively, Table 4). As only significant indirect effects of observed ECE teachers' participation practices on self-concept were found, Hypothesis 2 was partially supported.

Regarding Hypothesis 3, we expected observed process quality to be positively associated with children's socio-emotional development (i.e., self-concept and social skills), mediated by children's perceptions of participation. The multilevel mediation was tested, producing the results presented in Table 5. After taking into account the control variables, the estimates for effects a and b were not significant for both outcomes. As there was no significant association between observed process quality and children's perceptions of participation, and no significant association between the mediator and children's socio-emotional development (self-concept and social skills) the indirect effect was not tested, and Hypothesis 3 was not supported.

Discussion

In this study, conducted in a southwestern European country, we investigated unexamined associations between ECE teachers' participation practices, ECE process quality, and children's socio-emotional development, focusing on children's self-concept and social skills. Importantly, we focused on the mediating role of children's perceptions of their participation in the proposed associations. Only our hypothesis on the positive associations between observed participation practices and children's self-concept, mediated by children's perceptions of participation, was confirmed.

Self-reported ECE teachers' participation practices, children's perceptions of participation, and children's socio-emotional development

We did not find indirect associations between self-reported ECE teachers' participation practices and children's socio-emotional development (i.e., self-concept and social skills), through children's perceptions of participation (H1). Possibly, by focusing on teacher reports of children's expression and responsibility (e.g., planning, setting goals and rules) and decision-making by the adult (e.g., defining schedules, activity plans, and classroom spaces), the measure used to assess perceived participation practices may not have captured aspects that are perceived by children as salient and meaningful participation experiences and/or aspects that directly translate into increased opportunities for activities that empower children and are likely to sustain socio-emotional development (e.g., children's choice of peers and materials).

Importantly, this may also reflect the complex interplay between beliefs and practices, the specificities of the ECE context, and children's outcomes (e.g., Sigel & McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 2002). For instance, teachers may not always have the opportunity to ensure an alignment between their beliefs about child participation and their practices (e.g., Wilcox-Herzog, 2002).

Moreover, when assessing teachers' participation practices with a self-reported measure, the possible effect of social desirability on teachers' responses should not be discarded. However, the statistically significant associations between ECE teachers self-reported practices and the independent observation of classroom process quality argue against this notion. This reinforces the importance of combining different approaches to assess teachers' practices of participation in a more comprehensive way (Gaete et al., 2018).

Observed ECE teachers' participation practices, children's perceptions of participation, and children's socio-emotional development

Our hypothesis on the positive associations between observed participation practices and children's socio-emotional development, mediated by children's perceptions of participation (H2), was confirmed for children's self-concept but not for social skills. Specifically, both increased Observed Children's Choice and Observed Conditions for Participation were associated with increased Children's Perceived Participation, which in turn was associated with increases in children's self-concept (after accounting for initial levels of self-concept).

This finding suggests that participation practices referring to children's choice and ensuring conditions for participation, conducive to facilitating children's proposals, freedom of movements, and autonomous choice of peers, materials, and activities, in a safe and inclusive space, may be perceived by children as salient and meaningful opportunities for participation. Such opportunities may be more consequential to children's self-concept development than perceived participation practices referring to children's expression and responsibility, and to decision-making by the adult (Kennan et al., 2018).

Observed children's choice, regarded as a higher-level form of children's participation (Johnson, 2017; Lundy, 2007), has been previously described as relevant to understand the associations between teachers' practices and children's perceived participation (Authors, 2020). This study adds to prior research, by suggesting the relevance of observed children's choice for children's self-concept development, through children's perceptions of participation. Accordingly, when children can choose the activities and play in which they want to participate, where, with whom or with what materials to play/work, and/or when they can make proposals to adults, they perceive more opportunities to participate, and subsequently report higher self-concept.

Further, this study adds that when children have access to increased conditions for participation, namely an inclusive physical and social space, where they are given the opportunity to express their views in multiple ways, and when they have the opportunity to debate problems in group, to access diverse materials placed at their level and reach, or are given responsibility for daily tasks, they also perceive more opportunities to participate and, subsequently, report higher self-concept.

Importantly, these mediation effects highlight a potential mechanism (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) by which observed participation practices are associated with children's self-concept, through children's subjective experiences of participation. Such subjective experiences, which have been mostly absent from studies focusing on ECE (Mashford-Scott et al., 2012) and on children's participation (Authors, 2019), have the potential to better inform about the outcomes of participation experiences (Dockett & Perry 2003), from children's first-hand perspective (Moss et al., 2005). In addition, these significant effects were found for observed participation practices, assessed by independent observers, which may account for less social desirability bias than self-reported participation practices (Gaete et al., 2018).

According to previous evidence, when children's participation and their voices and interests are supported, with adequate conditions and opportunities to make choices, they seem to experience and perceive some degree of control over their own life, feeling more autonomous and competent (Noom et al., 2001), which is consistent with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Therefore, respecting children and ensuring they experience and perceive opportunities to participate, is likely to help them develop perceptions of competence or adequacy in diverse domains (Harter, 1999; Lansdown et al., 2014).

Despite documenting benefits for children's self-concept, our findings do not support the hypothesis that observed participation practices foster the development of children's social skills (Sinclair, 2004), via their perceived participation. On the one hand, although participation can provide the opportunities and conditions for the expression of children's views, negotiation, and perceived shared decision-making, it may not necessarily improve children's social skills, which involve the ability to communicate effectively, develop and maintain relationships, and positively navigate social situations (e.g., Gresham & Elliott, 2007), and may therefore require a combination of other experiences and intentional practices by ECE teachers (e.g., Jaggy et al., 2023). Also, the relatively short time frame between measurements may have prevented the identification of significant changes in children's social skills, which may require sustained and consistent support from ECE teachers over an extended period (e.g., Jaggy et al., 2023).

On the other hand, these findings may also relate to the nature of the measures used. For instance, our study relied on teachers' reports to assess children's social skills (e.g., perceptions of children's prosocial behaviors); however, it may be important to consider incorporating alternative assessment methods (e.g., children's self-reports or

independent observations), to provide a more comprehensive understanding of these skills. Also, because our measure captures teachers' perceptions of children's social skills based on their observations in multiple occasions and not specific counts of prosocial behaviors, it may be less likely to capture changes in children's skills, from T1 to T3. Similarly, it may be worth considering improving the observation measure of participation practices, towards including items referring to a more authentic consideration of children's participation and autonomy (e.g., effective participation in decision-making, approaching a responsible adult, receiving feedback regarding the implementation of decisions in which they took part), and the measure assessing children's perspectives about participation as well.

Observed process quality, children's perceptions of participation, and children's self-concept and social skills

Our hypothesis on the positive associations between observed process quality and children's socio-emotional development (i.e., self-concept and social skills), through children's perceptions of participation (H3), was not confirmed. This was not expected, as process quality domains are supported by a solid body of theory (e.g., attachment theory, self-determination theory) and by research linking them to participation practices (e.g., Salminen, 2013), experiences (e.g., Authors, 2020), and children's outcomes (Burchinal et al., 2010; Capella et al., 2016; Slot, 2018; Soininen et al., 2023).

It is noteworthy that recent systematic reviews and meta-analyses have documented weak associations between frequently studied process quality indicators and child outcomes (McMullen et al., 2020; Perlman et al., 2016). For instance, small associations have been found between instructional support and social skills, and lack of associations with other process quality domains have been reported (Perlman et al.,

2016). Thus, more research is needed, particularly accounting for the multidimensionality of ECE quality and for less studied indicators of quality that may be relevant for improving ECE environments, in a way that supports child development (e.g., implementation of age-appropriate curricula, investment in professional development) (McMullen et al., 2020; Slot, 2018). Also, it should be considered that specific thresholds of quality may need to be met, to impact child development. In our study, low observed levels of instructional support, for instance, may have prevented us from finding significant associations, while also suggesting that this is an area that merits quality improvement.

Importantly, we aimed to examine the mediating effect of children's perceptions of participation in the relationship between ECE quality and child outcomes. However, our findings did not support previous research suggesting associations between process quality, namely emotional support, and children's perceptions of participation (Authors, 2020). We assessed children's perceptions of participation with a measure comprising only two single items. As such, more investment is needed in the development of measures to investigate and effectively capture children's perspectives about participation. For instance, other aspects may be considered when assessing children's perceptions of participation (e.g., does the ECE teacher decide what you should do, can you choose not to participate, can you decide where to play/go?), to allow a broader understanding of children's experiences of participation (e.g., considering different levels of participation) and how they can impact children's development (Sivertsen & Moe, 2022).

Limitations and future research

When interpreting the current findings, several limitations must be considered. We acknowledge the small size of our sample, which limits statistical power. In

addition, ECE teachers participating in this study were exclusively women, reflecting the limited male representation in the ECE workforce, in Portugal and in Europe in general (e.g., Peeters, 2007). Participating children were aged between 42 and 76 months, and we recognize the importance of investigating perceptions and experiences of children with other ages (e.g., both younger and older children, considering diverse forms of expression, and activities and routines), investigating other outcomes (e.g., self-esteem, social acceptance), and extending to other contexts (e.g., primary school, family) and intervenients (e.g., parents). Our study was conducted in the Lisbon area (i.e., south, non-interior, urban/semi-urban region), therefore it is important to consider more diverse geographical areas (e.g., within the country; comparative studies). The same coders (i.e., not independent) were responsible for observing participation practices and process quality, meaning that potentially shared variance must be accounted for. Furthermore, although we considered how participation practices and perceptions may impact children's development over time (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Vieira, 2017), when mediated by children's perceptions of participation, more time between measurements should be ensured. Longitudinal studies following children's development over more extended periods of time are thus warranted to assess the sustained effects of participation practices on child development. Future research should also invest in developing measures to observe children's experiences of participation. In effect and considering that only one of our initial hypotheses was partially confirmed, our findings, in general, point to the need for further development of measures, aiming to capture important experiences and mechanisms underlying the promotion of child participation.

Conclusion

Taken together, our findings suggest that opportunities for children's choice and conditions for children to participate in their everyday activities and decisions in the ECE classroom may positively impact their self-concept, leading to an increased sense of competence and acceptance, through children's perceived opportunities to participate. As such, this study supports the idea that children's participation rights can play an important role in the image children have of themselves (Honneth, 1995), which can be an important aspect of children's wellbeing (Fisher, 2014).

Further, our findings suggest the relevance of observed children's choice and observed conditions for participation (e.g., Authors, 2022; Lundy, 2007), as well as of children's perceptions about their own participation. Children's subjective experiences of participation may therefore constitute an important mechanism to understand how participation benefits children's self-concept. This finding reinforces the importance of adopting a bottom-up perspective to further understand child participation (Harcourt & Hägglund, 2013; Katz, 1992), and suggests that evidence based on children's experiences may be key to inform practice and policymaking (Harcourt & Hägglund, 2013). Therefore, pedagogical, and curricular approaches, professional development, and promising initiatives and programs targeting children's participation in ECE may benefit from including children as informants, co-researchers, or co-creators (Lundy et al., 2011; Patton et al., 2023). Additionally, alongside the image of children as active agents and rights holders, there is an image of ECE professionals, and teachers specifically, as gatekeepers, with the important role of guaranteeing opportunities for child participation (Gal, 2017). Hence, our findings suggest that children's perspectives should be considered (Pascal & Bertram, 2009).

While shedding light on the significance of participation, our findings also point to the importance of ensuring the quality of measurement in studies addressing this

topic. Ensuring robust, valid measures to assess participation practices, children's perceptions and experiences of participation, and children's developmental outcomes, emerges as a critical aspect that warrants further examination in future research.

ACCEPTED

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