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Early childhood education professionals' beliefs and attitudes about children's right to participation: A quantitative study in Portugal

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Abstract

Children's participation is recommended from the earliest age, namely in early childhood education (ECE). This quantitative study aimed to investigate ECE professionals' beliefs and attitudes towards this child right. Participants were 247 ECE professionals from ECE settings in Portugal, namely 186 teachers, 31 assistants, and 30 coordinators, with ages ranging from 21 to 65 years old (M = 45.47, SD = 10.33). Exploratory findings suggested positive associations between ECE professionals' beliefs and attitudes, their participation practices, and their modernity beliefs, as well as with professionals' age and years of experience. Differences were found between ECE professionals' beliefs and attitudes, as a function of their professional role. Main findings and implications, particularly the relevance of professional development initiatives, focusing on professionals' beliefs and attitudes, are discussed.

Key Words: Children's Right to Participation, Professionals' Beliefs and Attitudes, ECE Professionals, Early Childhood Education settings

SDG Keywords: SDG 4: Quality Education

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Children's participation, as stated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, particularly in Article 12, is described as children's right to express themselves freely, having their perspectives considered, and influencing decision-making pertaining to them (United Nations 1989). Child participation, not merely understood as children expressing their views but as meaningful opportunities to influence decisions affecting everyday experiences, is encouraged from a young age, particularly in early childhood education (ECE) settings (United Nations 2005).

The promotion of child participation requires recognizing children as active agents and rights holders, competent to form and express their perspectives (Corsaro 2005; Council of Europe 2012). Child participation is thus key in fostering the quality of ECE and children's self-determination and well-being (Ryan and Deci 2000). However, child participation it is not fully embedded in many ECE settings, and various barriers to its promotion have been documented, namely in Portugal, including bureaucracy and insufficient awareness of how to promote child participation (Authors 2020a; Koran and Avcı 2017; Thornberg and Elvstrand 2012).

Several models of participation converge on the importance of professionals in ensuring opportunities and conditions for child participation (e.g., Lundy 2007; Shier 2001). The Lundy model, in particular, emphasizes the interrelated dimensions of space, voice, audience, and influence, providing a useful framework to analyse how professionals conceive and create enabling conditions for children's participation. Within the ecological model of participation, professionals are described as *gatekeepers* (Gal 2017). Therefore, it is important to investigate ECE professionals' beliefs (i.e.,

cognitive assumptions) and attitudes (i.e., emotional and behavioural dispositions) regarding this child right (Alderson 2000). Understanding such beliefs and attitudes is important, as beliefs may provide a foundation for attitudes, and together they are likely to underpin professionals' participation practices (i.e., enacted behaviours and interactions) (Fives and Buehl 2012). Such an understanding can provide insights into current strengths and potential areas for improvement in fostering participatory environments in ECE, while also informing international discussions on the topic (Lansdown 2006). Considering the different types of ECE professionals and the setting-level collaboration needed to promote child participation (Authors 2022a; Heikka 2014), in this study, we investigated ECE teachers, assistants, and coordinators' beliefs and attitudes about child participation.

Practices Fostering Children's Participation in ECE

European preschool-aged children spend considerable time in ECE settings (European Commission 2019). In Portugal, over 95% of 4 and 5-year-olds currently attend ECE (Eurydice/European Commission 2025), a fundamental microsystem for children's development and for the promotion of democratic competences (Bronfenbrenner 2005).

High-quality interactions, communication, and participation are essential to high-quality ECE (National Association for the Education of Young Children 2009). Participation, an important criterion of pedagogical quality, has been positively associated with process and structural quality. While process quality generally refers to the quality of teacher-child interactions – responsive, emotionally supportive, and reciprocal adult-child interactions that foster children's autonomy, agency, communication, and involvement –, structural quality encompasses ECE settings' regulatable features and characteristics (Authors 2020b; Ree and Emilson 2020;

Sheridan 2007). For instance, ECE settings characterized by horizontal interactions, fostering children's participation, are described as having higher quality (Sheridan, 2007). Positive associations have also been documented between ECE settings' quality and children's opportunities to influence decision-making (Sheridan 2007). Studies in Portugal and other European countries have documented positive associations between emotional support, a dimension of process quality, and children's own perceptions of their participation (Authors 2020), highlighting the importance of sensitive and respectful attitudes, characterized by trust in children's capacities (Mesquita-Pires 2012; Kosher and Gross-Manos, 2023; Salminen 2013).

Listening to children, fostering dialogue, or building shared rules, are examples of strategies fostering children's participation (Aksoy Kumru 2024; Alasuutari 2014). Importantly, children express themselves in different ways, revealing diverse competences, interests, and needs; thus, pedagogical strategies and practices must be adjusted to children and their circumstances (Authors 2022a; Holla Sivertsen and Bjørgen 2026; Lundy 2007).

Furthermore, in ECE, multilevel and cooperative efforts seem to be needed to maximise the identification, use, and sustainability of resources and practices, towards effective and meaningful promotion of children's participation (Authors 2022a; Lundy 2007). As such, including all ECE professionals - namely assistants, teachers, and coordinators - in initiatives to jointly reflect on, prioritize, and promote child participation is likely a necessary condition to consistently enact children's right to participation in ECE settings. Importantly, the implementation of children' right to participation seems to be dependent on professionals' previous experiences, motivation, beliefs, and attitudes (Authors 2020a). Therefore, investigating professionals' beliefs and attitudes can contribute to deeper insights into the factors influencing ECE

professionals' participation practices. However, limited quantitative research investigated ECE professionals' beliefs and attitudes regarding children's participation, or the associations between professionals' beliefs and attitudes and their participation practices.

ECE Professionals' Beliefs and Attitudes

ECE professionals' beliefs and attitudes are portrayals of their cultural and community knowledge and may set the foundation for their practices (Sakellariou and Rentzou 2011). Therefore, positive beliefs and attitudes regarding children's participation may be key for its promotion in ECE (Ozturk and Doganay 2017; Turnšek and Pekkarinen 2009). However, limited research has addressed these associations, partly due to the strong reliance on qualitative studies and to the lack of quantitative studies (Banko-Bal and Guler-Yildiz, 2021).

Nevertheless, research has shown positive associations between child-centred beliefs and teachers' practices, namely between modern beliefs focusing on children's evolving competences and autonomy, and developmentally appropriate practices encompassing strategies and activities tailored to children's age, needs, and interests (Fives and Buehl 2012; La Paro et al. 2009). Indeed, professionals can hold more traditional beliefs, focusing on decision-making by the adult, or more modern beliefs, focusing on children's competences and autonomy (Lansdown 2001; Banko-Bal and Guler-Yildiz 2021). The latter, aligned with child-centred perspectives, are more attuned with child participation (Justice et al 2008). However, ECE professionals may hold beliefs that hinder child participation, namely endorsement of participation myths that children cannot contribute to decision-making, or that giving children a voice may weaken adults' power (Lundy 2007). Relatedly, participation is inherently connected to power relations and power redistribution in ECE settings, as adults traditionally retain

authority over routines, decision-making, and opportunities for expression and choice (Gallagher, 2008). Promoting child participation therefore requires critical reflection on how institutional structures and professionals' beliefs shape whose voices are heard and acted upon (Banko-Bal and Guler-Yildiz, 2021).

Research suggests that professionals holding positive attitudes towards children's agency, competence, and participation, tend to promote constructive environments in which communication, negotiation, and children's expression and responsibility are encouraged (Luís, Andrade, and Santos 2015), thus contributing to better instructional and classroom quality (La Paro et al. 2009). Positive attitudes regarding the provision of diverse materials, organized in a child-friendly way, also contribute to child participation in ECE (Mesquita-Pires 2012). Further, professionals' sensitive attitude – showing awareness of and responsiveness to children's needs and interests – is considered crucial to foster positive environments that allow children to use their voice, given the provision of adequate information and support (Lundy 2007; Salminen 2013).

The link between professionals' beliefs and attitudes and their practices, particularly participation practices, may not be linear. For instance, ECE professionals may report socio-constructivist beliefs, supporting horizontal pedagogical practices, but rely on more directive and instructive practices, engaging in more vertical relationships with children (Fives and Buehl 2012; Kangas 2016). Similarly, ECE professionals may report positive attitudes towards child participation, but not always be able to demonstrate full consideration for children's perspectives (Howe and Cowell 2005). Indeed, ECE professionals deal with regulations, laws, established procedures, goals, or guidelines that can influence their practices and the promotion of child participation (Gal 2017).

Research has suggested that older, more experienced adults tend to have more positive attitudes towards children's rights, recognizing the need to respect, protect, and promote them (Merey 2013; Peterson-Badali, Ruck, and Ridley 2003). In a study conducted in Portugal, younger and less experienced ECE professionals focused more on their role and responsibility in promoting children's participation, which may favour participation practices, while older and more experienced professionals focused more on the obstacles and barriers to the promotion of child participation in ECE (Authors 2020a). These findings suggest that age and professional experience need to be addressed when examining professionals' beliefs and attitudes.

Acknowledging the importance of professionals' beliefs and attitudes for the promotion of children's participation (Fives and Buehl 2012) and considering the distinct, complementary roles of different professionals (Authors 2022a), it is relevant to investigate ECE teachers, assistants, and coordinators' beliefs and attitudes about child participation in ECE. Research is also needed on the associations between ECE professionals' beliefs and attitudes, their participation practices, modernity beliefs, and individual characteristics (Ozturk and Doganay 2017).

Current study

Even though children's participation in ECE is associated with the quality of practices and interactions, little is known about how professionals' beliefs and attitudes may support or constrain these practices, particularly across different professional roles. Therefore, in this study we investigated ECE professionals' beliefs and attitudes about children's participation within centre-based ECE in Portugal.

In Portugal, existing guidelines and legislation explicitly recognize children as active agents within the educational process (Decree-Law No. 240/2001; Law No. 4/97; Lopes da Silva et al. 2016). Further, the National Strategy for Children's Rights

(Resolution No. 112/2020) foresees strategies, projects, and initiatives fostering the promotion of children's participation, in various spheres of society. In addition, the Portuguese National Council of Education recommended listening to and considering children's voice in education contexts (Recommendation No. 2/2021).

ECE, under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, Science, and Innovation, is not mandatory in Portugal (Law No. 4/97), but universal entitlement is ensured by law from the age of 3 (Law No. 65/2015; Law No. 22/2025). ECE includes public (supported by the state), private for-profit (primarily supported by the family), and private non-profit settings (state-supported agreements, ensuring adjustments to families' income level). The Portuguese ECE sector is characterised by a substantial presence of both public and private non-profit provision, reflecting the historical role of public and social solidarity institutions in granting access to ECE, while private for-profit settings represent a smaller segment of the system. The current workforce is predominantly female and tends to be relatively aged (Pinto et al. 2014). A university level qualification is required for ECE teachers and coordinators, but not for assistants, who tend to have lower levels of formal education and professional training (European Commission 2019). ECE teachers are usually responsible for pedagogical planning, classroom management, and daily activities. Coordinators oversee organisational and pedagogical aspects, being responsible for staff coordination, supervision, and management of services and resources. Assistants usually support teachers in daily routines and classroom functioning, while interacting directly with children throughout the day.

As child participation research has predominantly relied on qualitative methods (Authors 2019), this study adopted a quantitative approach and aimed to investigate (i) associations between ECE professionals' beliefs and attitudes, perceived participation

practices, and modernity beliefs; (ii) associations between professionals' beliefs and attitudes and sociodemographic variables (age, years of experience); and (iii) differences in professionals' beliefs and attitudes, by professional role (ECE teachers, assistants, and coordinators).

We expected ECE professionals' beliefs and attitudes favourable to children's participation to be positively associated with practices promoting children's participation (H1) and modernity beliefs (H2). We also expected ECE professionals' beliefs and attitudes favourable to participation to be positively associated with their age and years of experience (H3). Finally, we expected differences in teachers, assistants, and coordinators' beliefs and attitudes, with teachers holding beliefs and attitudes more favourable to children's participation (H4).

Method

Participants

Participants were 247 ECE professionals, namely 186 teachers (75.3%), 31 assistants (12.6%), and 30 coordinators (12.1%). Professionals' age ranged from 21 to 65 years old (M = 45.47, SD = 10.33), 98.4% were female, and 75.9% had more than 10 years of experience in ECE. Regarding teachers, 108 had a bachelor's degree (58.1%), 50 had a master's degree (26.9%), and the remaining (15%) had other education (e.g., postgraduations). Regarding coordinators, 22 had a bachelor's degree (73.3%). Among assistants, 22 had a high-school diploma (71%). In this sample, 43.7% of ECE professionals worked in public settings, 18.2% worked in private for-profit settings, and 38.1% worked in private non-profit settings.

Instruments

ECE professionals' beliefs and attitudes. Professionals' beliefs and attitudes regarding children's right to participation were assessed with the Beliefs and Attitudes

Towards Participation Questionnaire, composed of 27 items rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *Completely Disagree* to 5 = *Completely Agree*). This preliminary measure was developed within a research project focusing on child participation in ECE (BLINDED) and was examined in a previous study (BLINDED). Item development was informed by existing literature and research (e.g., Ozturk and Doganay 2017); items were reviewed by researchers with expertise in ECE and children's participation, who assessed clarity, relevance, and conceptual adequacy. An exploratory factor analysis (EFA, principal axis factoring) was conducted with *Oblimin* rotation and Kaiser normalization to examine the structure of the measure. A step-by-step approach was followed: items with communalities below .20, no loadings above .30, or substantial cross-loadings were removed sequentially. Factor retention was guided by eigenvalues above 1, conceptual interpretability, and the requirement that each factor included at least three items with loadings above .40. This procedure led to the exclusion of six items and an initial four-factor solution with 21 items. Two additional items were removed from Factor 1 because they were conceptually less aligned with the remaining items and presented the lowest loadings. The final four-factor solution included 19 items and explained 53% of the variance. Sampling adequacy was high (KMO = .91), and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant, supporting the suitability of data for factor analysis (Pallant 2005). The final factors were: Professional Development and Contextual Support for Participation (8 items; factor loadings between .53 and .81; α = .88; e.g., "I find it important to invest in professional development regarding children's participation"), Professionals' Knowledge and Competence (4 items; factor loadings between .47 and .89, α = .82 e.g., "I feel I know enough about the benefits of children's participation"), Children's Competences and Decision-Making (4 items; factor loadings between .54 and .64, α = .79; e.g., "I believe preschool-aged children have competences to

participate in issues affecting them"), and Feasible Implementation of Participation (3 items; factor loadings between .47 and .67, α = .66; e.g., "I find it easy to support children's participation in ECE").

Table 1

ECE professionals' perceived participation practices. Professionals' perceptions of their participation practices were assessed with the Perceived Participation Practices Questionnaire (Authors 2020b), assessed on a 5-point scale (1 = *not typical* to 5 = *extremely typical*). Previous exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis suggested an acceptable model fit, indicating that the instrument's structure accurately represents the underlying theoretical constructs (see Authors 2020b). The measure is composed of 18 items, organised in two factors - Children's Expression and Responsibility (12 items, α = .93), referring to practices supporting children's participation (e.g., "Children make proposals of activities and play to the adults") and Decision-Making by the Adult (6 items, α = .83), referring to practices restricting children's participation (e.g., "I set the rules that children must follow"). Factors were moderately and negatively correlated (r = -.48) (Cohen 2016).

ECE professionals' modernity beliefs. Professionals' beliefs about children were assessed with the Modernity Scale (Schaefer and Edgerton 1985; Justice et al. 2008), comprising items referring to adult-centred (e.g., "Children must be carefully trained early in life, or their natural impulses make them unmanageable") or child-centred beliefs (e.g., "Children should be allowed to disagree if they feel their own ideas are better"). A short version was used (Mashburn et al. 2006), comprising 16 items rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *completely disagree* to 5 = *completely agree*). One item did not

refer to beliefs and attitudes about children ("Since parents have no special formation in education, they should not question ECE professionals' teaching methods") and was removed, resulting in a final version of 15 items ($\alpha = .83$).

Demographics. Professionals were asked to report on their age, gender, education, additional training, teaching experience, group size, type of group, and type of setting.

Procedure

This study was conducted within a broader research project (BLINDED). Data were collected online with Qualtrics XM, through a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. Importantly, voluntary participation and the anonymous nature of data collection were emphasized in all recruitment efforts. Ethical standards were met, namely prior approval from Ethics Committee at (BLINDED), participants' informed consent, anonymized participation, and appropriate data collection (i.e., no personal data collected, including IP addresses and geolocation) and storage (i.e., files protected with passwords, only accessible to the researchers) (Bertram et al. 2015; Lyndon 2023). Participants were also informed that study findings aimed to contribute to deepening knowledge in this field. The questionnaire included diverse sections: (i) informed consent, informing about anonymity and confidentiality, general aims and volunteer nature of the study, absence of anticipated risks, data storage, researcher contacts (i.e., for requesting information about main findings), (ii) sociodemographic questionnaire, (iii) professionals' beliefs and attitudes, (iv) participation practices, (v) modernity beliefs, and (vi) debriefing. Completion took about 30 minutes.

Data analyses

Data analyses were conducted in SPSS, version 28. Descriptive statistics (e.g., means, standard deviations) and internal consistency were calculated for all

scales/factors. *Pearson* correlations were tested between the four factors of professionals' beliefs and attitudes and the remaining study variables - professionals' participation practices, modernity beliefs, age and years of professional experience. ANOVAs were performed to examine differences in professionals' beliefs and attitudes, considering the four factors of Participation Beliefs and Attitudes, based on professional role. Homogeneity of variances was examined using Levene's tests. When this assumption was violated, Welch's ANOVA was used. Effect sizes for standard ANOVA comparisons were reported using partial eta squared (ηp^2), and Tukey post-hoc tests were conducted for significant group differences. Multiple regression analyses were also conducted to examine whether type of professional (dummy-coded, with teachers as the reference category), age, years of experience, and modernity beliefs predicted each factor of professionals' beliefs and attitudes. Given the association between age and professional experience, separate models were tested in including either age or years of experience. Predictors were included simultaneously in each model.

Results

Descriptive statistics and associations

Means, standard deviations, and associations among variables are presented in Table 2. For perceived participation practices, scores ranged from 1 to 5 for both factors, Children's Expression and Responsibility ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.67$) and Decision-Making by the Adult ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 0.65$). Regarding professionals' modernity beliefs, reported values ranged from 2 to 5 ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.53$).

We found significant, positive associations between the four factors of professionals' beliefs and attitudes and perceived participation practices focusing on Children's Expression and Responsibility, as well as with ECE professionals' modernity

beliefs. Globally, effect sizes were moderate to large, although we found a small association between professionals' Knowledge and Competence, and modernity beliefs. The four factors on professionals' beliefs and attitudes were also associated, though negatively, with perceived participation practices' focusing on Decision-Making by the Adult, with most effect sizes ranging from small to moderate. Table 2 also presents significant positive associations between Feasible Implementation of Participation, and participants' age and years of experience.

Table 2

Differences on professionals' beliefs and attitudes by professional role

Levene's tests indicated that the homogeneity of variances assumption was met for Professionals' Knowledge and Competence, $F(2, 244) = 0.52$, $p = .597$, Children's Competences and Decision-Making, $F(2, 244) = 0.82$, $p = .441$, and Feasible Implementation of Participation, $F(2, 244) = 0.14$, $p = .871$, but not for Professional Development and Contextual Support for Participation, $F(2, 244) = 5.79$, $p = .003$. Therefore, Welch's ANOVA was used for this factor. Our findings showed no statistically significant mean differences in professionals' beliefs and attitudes, as a function of professional role, for Professionals' Development and Contextual Support for Participation, Welch's $F(2,49.08) = 1.16$, $p = .324$ ($\eta p^2 = .012$); Professionals' Knowledge and Competence, $F(2,244) = 0.06$, $p = .945$, $\eta p^2 < .001$; or Feasible Implementation of Participation, $F(2,244) = 1.76$, $p = .175$, $\eta p^2 = .014$. However, significant differences were found for Children's Competences and Decision-Making, $F(2,244) = 5.95$, $p = .003$, $\eta p^2 = .046$, with Tukey post-hoc tests indicating that assistants ($M = 4.12$, $SD = .62$) scored lower than teachers ($M = 4.49$, $SD = .52$) and

marginally lower than coordinators (M = 4.45, SD = .67) (Tukey posthoc test: p = .002, p = .051, respectively).

Multiple regressions examining the predictors of professionals' beliefs and attitudes

The multiple regression models were significant for Professional Development and Contextual Support for Participation, $F(4, 215) = 14.75$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .215$; Children's Competences and Decision-Making, $F(4, 215) = 20.19$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .273$; and Feasible Implementation of Participation, $F(4, 215) = 6.97$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .115$, but not for Professionals' Knowledge and Competence, $F(4, 215) = 1.35$, $p = .251$, $R^2 = .025$. Age was not significantly associated with any factor, and models including years of experience explained slightly more variance. Modernity beliefs were positively associated with all four factors: Professional Development and Contextual Support for Participation, $\beta = .453$, $p < .001$; Professionals' Knowledge and Competence, $\beta = .156$, $p = .029$; Children's Competences and Decision-Making, $\beta = .508$, $p < .001$; and Feasible Implementation of Participation, $\beta = .317$, $p < .001$. Coordinators scored lower than teachers on Professional Development and Contextual Support for Participation, $\beta = -.149$, $p = .017$, and years of experience negatively predicted Children's Competences and Decision-Making, $\beta = -.152$, $p = .012$. Assistants did not differ significantly from teachers after accounting for other predictors.

Discussion

This study investigated ECE professionals' beliefs and attitudes regarding children's right to participation. Further, we investigated associations with self-reported participation practices, modernity beliefs, and sociodemographic variables.

Factors of ECE professionals' beliefs and attitudes

We identified four factors of ECE professionals' beliefs and attitudes, strongly aligned with previous literature (e.g., Authors 2022a; Fives and Buehl 2012; Sakellariou and Rentzou 2011). The first factor, Professional Development and Contextual Support for Participation, relates to beliefs on the relevance of professional development and shared reflections, collaboration, and contextual support, to build a participation community and sustain a culture of participation (Authors 2022a). Research suggests that continuous professional development is essential for high-quality practices fostering child participation (Tarman 2012). Training and information on children's rights can help professionals re-signify their beliefs and attitudes, increasing their awareness and commitment to meaningful participation (Authors 2022a; Redmond et al. 2015).

The second factor relates to beliefs on Professionals' Knowledge and Competence. Lack of knowledge about participation is often identified as an obstacle to its promotion (Bae 2009). Strengthening ECE professionals' knowledge on what participation means, its forms and levels, existing barriers and how to overcome them, may be essential in ECE settings (Authors 2020a). Enhanced knowledge of children's right to participation can also foster competences such as active listening, which may in turn support more effective participation practices (Egert, Fukkink, and Eckhardt 2018). This factor aligns with the broader consensus that ECE quality, and ultimately children and families' wellbeing, depend on informed and competent professionals (Peeters, Sharmahd, and Budginaite 2018).

The third factor, Children's Competences and Decision-Making, captures the recognition of children's competence to participate in decisions affecting them. This recognition requires adults to value children's agency and competence to influence situations. Promoting children's voices in ECE through multiple and meaningful forms

of expression further entails respecting their competence, dignity, and responsibility (Gallagher et al. 2017; Lansdown 2005).

The fourth factor, Feasible Implementation of Participation included only three items, namely reverse-worded items, and showed modest internal consistency, requiring further investigation. Nevertheless, this factor refers to professionals' beliefs and attitudes regarding the feasibility and implementation of children's participation in ECE. According to previous studies, professionals perceiving greater autonomy and support from the school community may find it easier to adopt strategies supporting children's ideas, actions, and participation in decision-making (Reeve 2009; Authors 2020a). While professionals holding beliefs regarding children's participation as feasible or easy to implement may overlook existing obstacles, they may also feel more motivated to promote it (Authors 2020a). Variation in these four factors of ECE professionals' beliefs and attitudes may offer useful insights in future studies on the conditions that enable children's participation in ECE.

These factors may also be interpreted considering the Lundy's (2007) model, particularly regarding the conditions required for meaningful participation in ECE. For instance, Professional Development and Contextual Support for Participation relates to the creation of participatory spaces and supportive conditions, while Children's Competences and Decision-Making reflects the recognition of children's agency and multiple voices. Likewise, Professionals' Knowledge and Competence and Feasible Implementation of Participation may be linked with adults' capacity to listen, support, and act upon children's perspectives.

Associations between self-reported ECE professionals' beliefs and attitudes, participation practices, and modernity beliefs

The first hypothesis, on the positive association between ECE professionals' beliefs and attitudes towards child participation and their perceived participation practices (H1), was confirmed. Specifically, professionals holding beliefs and attitudes favourable to child participation reported more practices supporting Children's Expression and Responsibility. These practices focused on opportunities for children to express themselves, choose their peers and play, or participate in the definition of goals and planning (with moderate to large effect sizes). Conversely, professionals' beliefs and attitudes favourable to children's participation were negatively associated with practices focusing on Decision-Making by the Adult, including restricting children's participation and focusing on definition of rules, schedule, or decisions, by adults (with moderate to low effect sizes). This finding is consistent with previous studies (Authors 2020b) and contributes to the literature on the associations between professionals' beliefs and attitudes and their perceived practices (Fives and Buel 2012).

The second hypothesis, that ECE professionals' beliefs and attitudes about children's participation were positively associated with modernity beliefs (H2), was also confirmed. Specifically, the four factors referring to ECE professionals' beliefs and attitudes were positively associated with child-centred beliefs, suggesting that professionals who endorsed beliefs and attitudes towards child participation more strongly were also more likely to have more progressive or modern perspectives about children. Therefore, professionals' beliefs and attitudes favourable to child participation are associated with more democratic beliefs that children must be given initiative, opportunities to choose, and that ECE professionals' role is to be sensitive and responsive to children's interests and needs (Hur, Buettner, and Jeon 2015; Schaefer and Edgerton 1985). The regression findings reinforce that child-centred, modernity beliefs may be particularly important for understanding professionals' participation-

related beliefs and attitudes, as they were positively associated with each of the four factors, after accounting for age/experience, and professional role. Taken together, these findings point to the importance of fostering reflective shifts in professionals' attitudes towards the promotion of children's participation in ECE, moving beyond adult-centred assumptions towards the recognition of children's agency, competences, and participation rights.

Associations between self-reported ECE professionals' beliefs and attitudes and sociodemographic variables

The third hypothesis, that ECE professionals' beliefs and attitudes favourable to participation would be positively associated with their age and years of experience (H3), was partially confirmed. Based on zero-order correlations, only Feasible Implementation of Participation was significantly associated with professionals' age and years of experience, suggesting a small tendency for older and more experienced professionals to perceive the implementation of children's participation as more feasible. Although these associations were small and limited to one dimension of the scale, this finding is in line with evidence linking professionals' beliefs and attitudes and their individual characteristics (Fives and Buehl 2012). However, these findings should be interpreted cautiously, particularly because age was not significantly associated with any factor in the multiple regression models, and years of experience was only negatively associated with Children's Competences and Decision-Making, after accounting for other variables. Taken together, these results suggest that age and years of experience may play a limited role in professionals' beliefs and attitudes towards participation, particularly when broader child-centred, modernity beliefs are considered. The negative association between years of experience and Children's

Competences and Decision-Making further suggests that experience alone may not necessarily translate into stronger beliefs regarding children's competence to participate.

Differences in self-reported beliefs and attitudes as a function of professional role

The fourth hypothesis, on potential differences between ECE teachers, assistants, and coordinators' beliefs and attitudes, suggesting that teachers would hold beliefs and attitudes more favourable to children's participation (H4), was partially confirmed. Indeed, we only found differences in professionals' beliefs and attitudes towards Children's Competences and Decision-Making. Specifically, ECE assistants presented lower scores on beliefs and attitudes related with children's competence to participate in decision-making, when compared to the other types of professionals, with teachers presenting higher scores.

These differences can be considered in light of structural differences in qualification pathways, professional status, role expectations, and access to professional development opportunities within the ECE workforce (Peeters, Sharmahd and Budginaitė 2016). ECE assistants presented lower levels of education, when compared to teachers and coordinators, which is consistent with the qualification levels required for this group of professionals, in Europe (Cramer and Cappella 2019). As such, assistants in particular may benefit from professional development initiatives specifically focusing on children's development, namely on children's competences and needs, and children's rights, addressing notions of agency, participation, and participation myths. Focusing on high-quality practices encompassing positive, sensitive adult-child interactions and fostering participation may be also useful to help assistants identify and mobilize resources needed to promote child participation (Authors 2019; Ward and Wilcox-Herzog 2019).

This finding is also consistent with studies noting that assistants represent a large segment of the ECE workforce that may have been neglected, resulting in gaps in their knowledge, professional support, and workplace experiences (Cramer and Cappella 2019). Assistants or auxiliary staff work directly with children and play an important role in supporting higher-qualified core practitioners (van Laere, Peeters, and Vandenbroeck 2012). Therefore, it is important to create coherent pathways towards the qualification and continuous professional development of ECE assistants, ensuring on-the-job supports such as training, networks, or communities of practice (Cramer and Cappella 2019; Peeters, Sharmahd and Budginaitė 2016).

Nevertheless, this difference should be interpreted with caution, as professional role no longer showed a significant assistant-teacher difference in the multiple regression models, when accounting for modernity beliefs and years of experience. This finding suggests that differences in beliefs about children's competences and decision-making may be partly accounted for by broader child-centred beliefs rather than by professional role alone.

Further, the regression analyses also suggested that coordinators scored lower than teachers on Professional Development and Contextual Support for Participation. Although this finding was not observed in the ANOVA and should be interpreted cautiously, it may suggest that coordinators' leadership responsibilities may also shape how they perceive the need for professional development and contextual support. Future studies with larger and more balanced samples should further examine how coordinators' organisational roles relate to participation-related beliefs and attitudes. Importantly, considering the importance of ensuring a multilevel approach to the promotion of child participation and recommendations for strengthening the entire ECE workforce, all ECE professionals should be targeted by professional development

initiatives, fostering both individual and shared reflections. In effect, promoting participation does not only refer to opportunities for children to express themselves, but it also requires critical reflection on professionals' beliefs and attitudes towards the recognition of children's agency, competence, viewing them as legitimate contributors to everyday decision-making (Cramer and Cappella 2019).

Moreover, professional development can be tailored to different professional roles – for teachers, by focusing on translating participation principles into pedagogical planning and classroom decision-making; for assistants, by strengthening knowledge about children's rights, competences, and participation practices in daily routines; and for coordinators, by supporting pedagogical leadership and the creation of organizational conditions that sustain participation across the setting. These adjusted approaches may also inform workforce policy, continuous professional development provision, and ECE quality frameworks, by highlighting the need to recognise participation as a shared professional responsibility. In effect, joint efforts and collaborative reflection among ECE teachers, assistants, and coordinators are fundamental to align goals, strategies, practices, and to the development of professional cultures that foster more democratic approaches to decision-making, ensuring child participation becomes a reality in ECE settings (Authors 2022a).

Study limitations and future recommendations

We acknowledge the limited number of ECE assistants and coordinators in comparison to ECE teachers, the non-representativeness of our sample in relation to the broader ECE workforce, and the fact that sample size did not meet the requirements for conducting a confirmatory factor analysis of the beliefs and attitudes scale, which should be considered preliminary. Therefore, caution is required in interpreting some findings and future research with larger samples is needed to investigate measurement

invariance for different groups and to clarity the independent contribution of professional role, age, and experience. Further, this study included ECE professionals from mainland Portugal, and more geographical areas should be considered in subsequent studies. In addition, we relied solely on professionals' self-report; therefore, common method bias and social desirability may have influenced the scores and associations among variables. Future studies should include, for instance, observation measures, as well as other informants and additional variables, such as children's perceived participation. In this study, data were collected online, and conducting a complementary qualitative study was not feasible. However, qualitative research could be valuable for gaining deeper insights into the beliefs and attitudes of ECE professionals.

Main contributions and conclusion

This study informed about ECE professionals' beliefs and attitudes about children's right to participation. In a context where child participation has predominantly been studied through qualitative methods and new instruments are needed to further investigate the promotion of this right, the present study provides initial psychometric evidence regarding the multidimensional structure of professionals' beliefs and attitudes towards children's participation. Specifically, four factors of professionals' beliefs and attitudes were identified through an exploratory quantitative research tool. Importantly, findings suggested positive associations between ECE professionals' beliefs and attitudes favourable to child participation, specific participation practices, and modernity beliefs, thus broadening understandings of participation as a multidimensional and relational construct shaped by beliefs, attitudes, structural conditions, and professional cultures. In addition, findings suggested potential

differences as a function of professional role, particularly regarding ECE assistants' lower endorsement of children's competences and decision-making, and coordinators' lower scores on professional development and contextual support for participation. Despite the caution noted above, these findings may inform professional development initiatives tailored to different ECE professional roles.

In the Portuguese context, these findings are particularly relevant given the features of the ECE workforce and the coexistence of public, private for-profit, and private non-profit provision. As such, distinct professional roles, qualification pathways, and access to professional development may shape how children's participation is understood and enacted across settings. Beyond Portugal, these findings may contribute to broader European and international discussions on how ECE settings can support children's meaningful participation through workforce professionalisation, rights-based professional development, and quality frameworks that recognise participation as key to ECE quality.

Taken together, findings provide insights for practice, namely for professional development initiatives, and for policymaking. Specifically, our findings emphasize the complex, multidimensional nature of child participation, and the multiple layers and professionals that must be considered to ensure its promotion in ECE (Aksoy Kumru 2024; Authors 2021). Importantly, all ECE professionals, as *gatekeepers* of participation, must align their efforts to actualize this right in children's lives.

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Table 1

Factor Loadings of Professionals' Beliefs and Attitudes Towards Participation (N = 247)

In my classroom...	Factors			
	PDCS	PKC	CCDM	FIP
2. ... I find it important to invest in professional development regarding children's participation	.75			
3. ... I strive to acquire knowledge (e.g., courses, projects, books, articles) on children's participation in ECEC	.57			
4. ... I believe ECEC professionals should gain knowledge, skills, and attitudes to promote children's participation	.81			
5. ... I find it easy to support children's participation in ECEC				.47
6. ... I find it useful to engage in team discussions on how to promote children's participation in ECEC	.69			
9. ... I believe preschool-aged children have competences to participate in issues affecting them			.60	
10. ... I feel I know enough about the benefits of children's participation		.80		
11. ... I believe professionals should ensure children participate in decision making in ECEC			.54	
12. ... I believe preschool-aged children can have a say regarding their learning and play opportunities			.64	
15. ... I believe I can implement children's participation in my classroom/centre				.56
19. ... I feel I know enough about how to promote children's participation in ECEC		.89		
22. ... I believe the promotion of a culture of participation in ECEC needs to involve all staff members	.57			
23. ... I find it relevant to involve families and the community, in order to promote children's participation	.59			
24. ... I believe I know how to support children's participation in decision making		.47		
25. ... I find it useful to exchange participation experiences and practices with other professionals	.68			
26. ... I believe I have the skills needed to promote children's participation		.48		
27. ... I believe children's participation contributes for a democratic and rights-based culture in ECEC	.53			
14 (Inv). ... I consider preschool-aged children are still immature and should not be overwhelmed with decisions			.58	
17 (Inv). ... I find it difficult to promote children's participation in my classroom/centre				.67
Explained variance (%)	36.22	9.49	4.45	2.96

Note. Principal Axis Factoring with Oblimin Rotation and Kaiser Normalization; only factor loadings > .3 are presented. The final four-factor solution included 19 items and explained 53.12% of the variance. Items with low communalities, no salient loadings, or substantial cross-loadings were removed sequentially; no retained items presented substantial cross-loadings according to the adopted criterion.
PDCS = Professional Development and Contextual Support, PKC = Professionals' Knowledge and Competence, CCDM = Children's Competences to Participate in Decision-Making, FIP = Feasible Implementation of Participation, CER = Children's Expression and Responsibility, DMA = Decision-Making by the Adult

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and Associations among Variables (N = 247)

	M	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Beliefs and Attitudes PDCS	4.56	0.43	--							
2. Beliefs and Attitudes PKC	3.71	0.66	.36**	--						
3. Beliefs and Attitudes CCDM	4.44	0.56	.61**	.31**	--					
4. Beliefs and Attitudes FIP	3.98	0.66	.43**	.48**	.41**	--				
5. Participation practices CER	4.10	0.67	.43**	.36**	.52**	.53**	--			
6. Participation practices DMA	2.96	0.65	-.12	-.19**	-.34**	-.33**	-.48**	--		
7. Modernity Beliefs	4.05	0.53	.42**	.14*	.50**	.33**	.42**	-.42**	--	
8. Age	45.47	10.33	-.03	.06	-.04	.13*	.26**	.20**	.53	--
9. Years of experience	19.64	11.12	-.03	.00	-.05	.13*	.22**	.26**	.12	.80**

* * $p < .05$ **$p < .01$

Note: PDCS = Professional Development and Contextual Support to Participation, PKC = Professionals' Knowledge and Competence, CCDM = Children's Competences to Participate in Decision-Making, FIP = Feasible Implementation of Participation, CER = Children's Expression and Responsibility, DMA = Decision-Making by the Adult