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Supporting Child Participation: Narratives of Portuguese ECEC Professionals on Conditions and Effective Practices

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ABSTRACT

Children's right to participate is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and embedded in Portuguese early childhood education and care (ECEC) curriculum policies. Nevertheless, constraints and barriers to the fulfillment of this right have been identified. Drawing on the Lundy Model, this study aimed to analyze the narratives of ECEC professionals, namely coordinators, teachers, and assistants, regarding participatory practices and conditions perceived as influencing children's participation. Findings from focus group interviews conducted with 25 professionals revealed that the four dimensions of Lundy's model (Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence) were present in professionals' narratives. Moreover, key enabling conducive conditions related to leadership and setting conditions, professional development, and participatory environment were identified. Findings also revealed that distinctive professional backgrounds and roles accounted for variability in professionals' narratives on participation practices and conditions. Implications are drawn on the need to target professional development initiatives involving all ECEC staff as a core contribution to close the gap between rhetoric and the practical implementation of children's participation rights.

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The right to have a view about the world and one's own life, to express it freely, and to have it considered in decision-making, is a fundamental driver of children's rights (United Nations [UN], 1989). This right is considered an indicator of a nation's respect for children as individuals, creating opportunities for them to influence decisions in their social environment and society at large (Liebel & Saadi, 2012). Nevertheless, discrepancies in child participation are still commonly observed, even in democratic countries across Europe (Janta et al., 2021). Barriers to participation include the absence of a legislative framework that defines participation as a fundamental child right, adult perceptions of children as incapable of decision-making, and professionals' perceived inability to create conditions for child participation (Gal, 2015; Quennerstedt, 2025; Waters-Davies et al., 2024).

As Lundy (2007) emphasized, "voice is not enough" to fully realize the principle enshrined in Article 12 of the UN (1989). This principle must be recognized as a legally binding obligation rather than merely a guideline or preference (Gal, 2015; Johnson Harbach, 2025). It requires not only acknowledging children's right to be heard and taken seriously, regardless of adult permission (Welty & Lundy, 2013), but also creating conditions that actively facilitate their participation and influence in decision-making (Council of Europe, 2012, 2021). This requires providing appropriate

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resources, information, and support tailored to children's age and circumstances (Council of Europe, 2012, 2021). These principles define ethical requirements for child participation, by specifying how participatory environments and processes should be designed and conducted (i.e., being transparent, relevant, child-friendly, inclusive, safe, and accountable), by clarifying the conditions under which children's participation should occur (i.e., ensuring it is voluntary and grounded in respect) and by emphasizing the responsibilities of adults (i.e., being adequately trained to support participatory processes and practices) (Gottschalk & Borhan, 2023). As widely recognized in the literature, participation must become a core aspect of our relationship with children (e.g., Ree & Emilson, 2020; Sinclair, 2006).

Participation, development, and early childhood education and care contexts

Children's participation right has garnered increasing recognition across diverse domains, including education (Correia, Aguiar, et al., 2023; Lundy, 2019; McCafferty & Garcia, 2023). Involving children in decision-making processes is described as bringing numerous benefits to individuals, educational contexts, and communities (Gottschalk & Borhan, 2023; Kosher, 2023; Lansdown, 2005; Mentha et al., 2015; Murray, 2019; Sinclair, 2006). Research indicates that experiencing the right to participation fosters a sense of belonging, promotes citizenship (Encina & Berger, 2021; Foster-Fishman et al., 2009; Lundy, 2007), and strengthens the ability to engage in a democratic society by teaching children about the rights and perspectives of others, as well as the importance of negotiation and communication (Hart, 1992). Promoting children's participation rights in everyday experiences from an early age is a prerequisite for children to exercise these rights and develop a culture of participation in their closest life contexts, particularly within family and educational contexts (Correia, Aguiar, et al., 2023; Gal, 2017). Moreover, recent findings revealed a positive association between teacher's observed participatory practices and children's self-concept, a relationship mediated by children's perceptions of participation (Correia, Carvalho, et al., 2023).

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is widely regarded as a privileged context for cultivating child-friendly and inclusive environments and supporting young children's participation (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2024). This is due to the significant amount of time that millions of children worldwide spend in ECEC settings, as well as the opportunities they offer to foster pedagogical practices and interactions that emphasize active listening, respect for children's rights, and the promotion of children's participation (Eurydice, 2019). In high-quality ECEC, children's right to participation is recognized as a vital component of systemic quality, inclusive environments, and overall well-being (e.g., Correia, Carvalho, Fialho, et al., 2020; Beatson et al., 2022; Bratsch-Hines et al., 2020; European Commission, 2018; Moser et al., 2017; Sheridan, 2007; Sheridan & Samuelsson, 2001; Vandell et al., 2010; von Suchodoletz et al., 2023). Despite this, promoting participation remains a complex endeavor as there are many factors determining how this participation is fostered in practice. Pedagogical staff (all professionals working in ECEC who are directly involved in pedagogical tasks) may encounter difficulties in recognizing the various ways young children express their views and preferences, such as through play (Löfdahl & Hägglund, 2007). The way children express their views may not always conform to adult-derived criteria, often depending on linguistic competence (McLeod, 2011). Moreover, attitudinal barriers of some educators, holding a deficit view of childhood, or rooted in the image of the teacher as a powerful authority figure, seem to silence children's voices (Robinson & Taylor, 2013). Consequently, it is imperative to enhance teacher education and professional development (PD), focusing on fostering participation, integrating participatory approaches into curricula, and establishing conducive conditions (Council of Europe, 2012). Building and implementing a shared vision of the importance of children's participation rights requires continuous PD, teamwork, reflection, and intentional planning and monitoring (Correia, Aguiar, Taelman, et al., 2023). Previous studies also have identified the social environment; the availability of human and material resources; and organizational, bureaucratic, and educational barriers as key conditions influencing the promotion of children's participation in ECEC

(e.g., Correia, Carvalho, Durães, et al., 2020). Understanding these conditions is critical for actively fostering meaningful participation.

Despite its significance, research on children's participation often leans toward a greater focus on ideas (e.g., teachers' conceptions regarding participation) than on practices and practical strategies for promoting children's participation (e.g., Correia et al., 2019). Recently, Barros et al. (2024) examined children's participation in ECEC contexts in four European countries (e.g., Belgium, Greece, Poland, and Portugal). The study aimed to understand how ECEC professionals, including teachers and those with management or supervisory roles, such as pedagogical coordinators, describe their practices for ensuring that children have opportunities to express their views, be heard, and participate in shared decision-making on matters that affect them. Drawing on Lundy's Model (2007), which conceptualizes children's participation as requiring space, voice, audience, and influence, the study highlighted positive practices across the four dimensions, with a greater emphasis on those related to the social space for participation (Barros et al., 2024). However, conditions for participation were not examined. Despite the relevance of involving all professionals in the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of a participatory environment (Correia et al., 2022), another important gap in research concerns the predominant focus on the narratives of teachers and professionals assigned to pedagogical management roles. Thus, the role and perspectives of ECEC assistants have been neglected in the literature, even though these "invisible workers" play a critical role in supporting teachers, children, and families in the development in ECEC settings, namely by contributing to children's holistic development, well-being, and safety; by supporting the organization of educational facilities; and by ensuring the smooth implementation of activities (Decree-Law No. 184/2004, 2004). A competent ECEC system, however, requires close collaboration among professionals, teams, and institutions (Peeters et al., 2018). This assumption is aligned with the European-level recognition of the importance of a skilled workforce, as highlighted in the revised priorities for strategic cooperation in education and training (European Commission, 2016). A study conducted in Finland by Weckström et al. (2020), involving 21 ECEC professionals, including two directors, 13 child assistants, and six teachers, highlighted four key conditions necessary for fostering a culture of participation: (1) a collectively agreed-upon understanding of the child's role, (2) a shared comprehension of professional development, (3) effective leadership, and (4) a "we-narrative" that fosters a comprehensive and ongoing culture of participation. The concept of the "we-narrative" prompts a profound reflection on the implications for pedagogical discourse and practices. It underscores the importance of collective listening, the conditions established for free expression, and the impactful nature of children's perspectives.

To foster a truly participatory environment, research should incorporate the perspectives of all professionals (including assistants), considering their insights regarding participation practices and the conditions for such practices. Additionally, further research is needed to examine the conditions identified by the ECEC workforce as critical for enhancing children's participation, considering both barriers and opportunities for improvement.

Theoretical framework for participation and conditions for participation

Participation is a multidimensional concept, with various authors emphasizing its importance across multiple levels of decision-making (e.g., information, consultation, or initiation/shared decision-making) (e.g., Hart, 1992). In ECEC contexts, the Lundy Model (2007) constitutes a relevant framework, garnering significant support from policymakers aiming to foster active participation among young children (Correia, Aguiar, et al., 2023; Lundy et al., 2024). The Lundy Model conceptualizes children's right to participation through four interrelated dimensions: Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence (Lundy, 2007; Welty & Lundy, 2013). The Space dimension includes practices that foster the development of a safe environment that encourages children to share their perspectives and engage in meaningful participation. This dimension stresses the importance of adults actively establishing and maintaining these inclusive spaces, promoting respectful and trusting interactions (Lundy, 2007; Welty & Lundy, 2013). The Voice dimension encompasses practices that encourage children to

express their views in multiple ways, regardless of their age and maturity. Adults are encouraged to support children in forming and articulating their opinions, ensuring their competence and dignity are respected (Correia et al., 2022; Gallagher et al., 2017; Welty & Lundy, 2013). The Audience dimension involves practices that ensure children's perspectives are considered by decision-makers, thus emphasizing the crucial role of adults in ensuring clear communication, actively listening to children's views, and facilitating their engagement in various decision-making contexts (Correia et al., 2022; Correia, Aguiar, Taelman, et al., 2023; Lundy, 2007). Finally, the Influence dimension includes practices that ensure children's views have a tangible impact on decisions. Adults should inform children about how their opinions influence outcomes and involve them in decision-making processes, from daily activities to policy formation (Correia et al., 2022; Lundy, 2007; Shier, 2001). According to the Lundy Model (2007), Space and Voice are initial stages that support Audience and Influence.

The current study

The primary aim of this study was to analyze the narratives of ECEC professionals – including coordinators, teachers, and assistants – regarding participatory practices and the key conditions for children's participation. More specifically, the study sought to capture professionals' perspectives on effective participatory practices in ECEC settings, the primary conditions that facilitate children's meaningful participation, as well as the barriers and challenges that may impede it.

This research seeks to examine the narratives surrounding practices and how professionals in different roles perceive and articulate the quality of these practices, an area that has been largely overlooked. Portugal provides a particularly significant context for this study for two main reasons. First, children's participation is acknowledged in key educational policy documents, such as the National Strategy for Children's Rights 2021–2024 (Council of Ministers Resolution No. 112/2020), the Curricular Guidelines for Preschool Education (Lopes da Silva et al., 2016), and the professional profiles of ECEC teachers (Decree-Law No 241/2001, (2001a); Decree-Law No. 240/2001, 2001b). Second, very limited research is available on (1) how existing policies and general guidelines on children's participation are operationalized or implemented in Portuguese ECEC settings and (2) on the perspectives of ECEC pedagogical staff regarding the conditions needed for supporting participatory practices in these settings.

Method

This study was conducted under the scope of a larger project aiming to enhance knowledge, attitudes, skills, and practices toward the promotion of child participation in ECEC (Erasmus+ project "PARTICIPA – Professional Development Tools Supporting Participation Rights in Early Childhood Education" - 2019-1-PT01- KA202-060950). The method was described according to the COREQ (Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research) guidelines, which include detailed reporting on aspects such as the research team and reflexivity, the study design (e.g., sampling methods and data collection techniques), and the analysis process (e.g., coding and derivation of themes) (Tong et al., 2007). The detailed analysis, including the operationalization of the Lundy model for ECEC and a proposed framework for participation practices, was presented in a previous article (Barros et al., 2024).

Participants

A convenience sample of 25 professionals working in ECEC settings in Portugal participated in the study. At the time, participants held roles as coordinators ($n = 8$), teachers ($n = 10$), and assistants ($n = 7$). They were organized into three distinct focus groups based on their respective pedagogical roles. The selection criteria focused on ECEC settings that were recognized by peers or the professional community as having

Table 1. Frequencies of categories and subcategories in coordinators, teachers and assistants focus groups.

	Coord.	Teachers	Assistants	Total
	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)
Space	5 (18.5)	18 (30)	9 (27.3)	32 (26.7)
Social space	3 (11.1)	14 (23.3)	8 (24.2)	25 (20.8)
Physical space	2 (7.4)	4 (6.7)	1 (3.0)	7 (5.8)
Voice	5 (18.5)	15 (25.0)	6 (18.2)	26 (21.7)
Provide information	0	1 (1.7)	0	1 (0.8)
Identify relevant topics	2 (7.4)	2 (3.3)	1 (3.0)	5 (4.2)
(Multiple) forms of expression	2 (7.4)	4 (6.7)	0	6 (5.0)
Build capacity	1 (3.7)	8 (13.3)	5 (15.2)	14 (11.7)
Audience	6 (22.2)	14 (23.3)	5 (15.1)	25 (20.1)
Active listening	5 (18.5)	6 (10.0)	3 (9.1)	14 (11.7)
Process for communicating	1 (3.7)	8 (13.3)	2 (6.1)	11 (9.2)
Influence	11 (40.7)	13 (21.7)	13(39.4)	37 (30.8)
Due weight	6 (22.2)	13 (21.7)	11(33.3)	30 (25)
Plan (shared decisions)	0	0	1 (3.0)	1 (0.8)
Monitoring	4 (14.8)	0	0	4 (3.3)
Provide feedback	1 (3.7)	0	1 (3.0)	2 (1.7)
Total[1]	27 (22.5)	60 (50)	33 (27.5)	f = 120

Notes. *f* = frequency. [1]Column totals were calculated by adding frequencies across professionals; corresponding percentages were obtained by dividing the number of units coded in that category or subcategory by the total number of units coded in all focus groups.

well-established participatory practices. All participants were female, with ages ranging between 23 and 65 ($M = 46.9$, $SD = 11.8$). There were differences in both age and years of experience between coordinators and teachers/assistants (see Table 1). The professionals worked in ECEC settings within institutions located in both suburban/rural ($n = 5$) and urban ($n = 6$) areas in the North of Portugal, nine of which comprised multiple educational levels.

Regarding level of education, 80% of participants had higher education degrees (44% had a bachelor and 36% a master's degree), 16% had a high school degree (12 years of schooling), and 4% had a middle school degree (9 years of schooling). Specifically, 14.3% of assistants had 9 years of school, 57.1% had 12 years of schooling, and 28.6% had a bachelor's degree. For teachers, 70% had a bachelor's degree and 30% had a master's degree. For coordinators, 28.6% had a bachelor's degree and 71.4% had a master's degree. Ethical standards and procedures for research involving human participants were adhered to, with all participants providing written consent. Additionally, GDPR regulations were fully observed.

Procedure

Focus groups were conducted in presence in June 2019. Each session ranged from 45 to 90 minutes. To ensure anonymity, the three focus groups were anonymized during transcription, and audio recordings were deleted after transcription. The focus groups were conducted and analyzed in Portuguese. The translation of excerpts into English was performed solely during the preparation of the manuscript. Each focus group was facilitated by two experienced researchers from the field of educational psychology who specialize in qualitative data collection methods. The FOCUS GROUP GUIDE (Appendix A) included questions related to: (1) opportunities created for child participation in ECEC, (2) facilitators and barriers to implement child participation practices, and (3) conditions for participation. Prior to each focus group, the study's purpose and ethical procedures were introduced and clarified.

Data analysis

In this study, we employed a directed content analysis approach (e.g., Bardin, 2011; Cropley, 2019; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to analyze the transcripts collected from the focus groups. This analytical

method involved identifying key concepts – referred to as initial codes – which served as a coding framework for the entire dataset. The analysis consisted of two coding phases. Initially, a deductive coding process was developed based on Lundy's (2007) conceptual model of participation, which encompasses four dimensions: Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence. Specifically, the Space dimension was divided into social space and physical space; the Voice dimension included subcategories such as providing information, identifying relevant topics, multiple forms of expression, and capacity building; the Audience dimension addressed active listening and communication processes; and the Influence dimension covered due weight, shared decision-making, monitoring, and providing feedback.

Given the absence of a structured model for analyzing and evaluating the conditions that support participation rights in ECEC contexts, a second phase of analysis was conducted using inductive coding. This phase identified 11 key conditions based on recent research from the Erasmus+ project "PARTICIPA" (Barros et al., 2024): Structural dimensions, Leadership, Professional Autonomy, Continuous Professional Development, Network, Initial Professional Education, Experience in ECEC, Pedagogical Orientation, Team Collaboration, Shared Decision-Making, and Communication with Families and the Community. These conditions were subsequently organized into three major categories: (1) Leadership and Setting Conditions, referring to the structural factors that influence professionals' capacity to promote children's participation, including structural variables such as infrastructure and group size, as well as staff working conditions like salary and workload. It also encompasses the role and influence of leadership and, relatedly, professionals' autonomy in their daily practices. The conditions included under this category are Structural Dimensions, Leadership, and Professional Autonomy. (2) Professional Development, encompassing all aspects related to the role of professional development in adopting participatory practices. It includes professionals' initial education and continuous professional development (PD) opportunities, capturing their perspectives on how PD facilitates or constrains child participatory practices. This category also considers the influence of pedagogical orientation – defined as the guiding principles and approaches shaping educational practices, including views on participation rights – as well as opportunities for professional networking and prior experience in ECEC. The conditions grouped here are Continuous Professional Development, Network, Initial Professional Education, Experience in ECEC, and Pedagogical Orientation. (3) Participatory Environment, referring to conditions related to creating and sustaining a participative environment. It includes collaboration practices within the professional team and shared decision-making that uphold members' right to participate. Furthermore, this category extends to families and the community, emphasizing conditions such as positive relationships and encouragement of involvement, and their impact on the implementation of child participation practices. The conditions under this category are Team Collaboration, Shared Decision-Making, and Communication with Families and Community.

This article will present transcription excerpts to substantiate the data coding and analysis process. Two researchers independently conducted the analyses for each focus group, with a total of three coders involved in the process. Coders used a shared coding framework, following the definitions provided in a detailed codebook. After independent coding, the two researchers responsible for coding each focus group convened to discuss any disagreements until a consensus was reached (Barros et al., 2024). Descriptive statistics, including frequency counts, were calculated using IBM SPSS Statistics 30.

Results

Child participation in ECEC settings (space, voice, audience, and influence dimensions)

During the categorization process, 120 excerpts referring to explicit practices of participation were coded based on Lundy's (2007) conceptual model for participation. The excerpts were derived from the focus group conducted with teachers ($n = 60$), followed by assistants ($n = 33$) and coordinators ($n = 27$) (see Table 1).

When examining each dimension separately, certain subcategories received minimal attention. In the Space dimension, the Physical space subcategory was scarcely mentioned, with only one reference from assistants and two from coordinators. Within the Voice dimension, the Provide information subcategory was noted just once in teachers' focus groups and not at all by assistants or coordinators. Conversely, the Build capacity subcategory was more frequently discussed, accounting for 14 out of 26 mentions. In the Influence dimension, the Due weight subcategory was more prominent in the professionals' discourse, while other subcategories like Plan (shared decisions), Monitoring, and Providing feedback were less mentioned or absent, except for Monitoring in coordinators' discussions ($n = 4$). Regarding the frequency distribution among professionals, coordinators emphasized the Influence dimension more, representing about 40% of their discursive units, followed by a relatively balanced distribution across other categories. teachers provided more examples related to Space, though their distribution was more equitable across all categories. Assistants tended to offer more examples pertaining to the Influence category, followed by Space and Voice. The Influence dimension was predominantly observed in both coordinators and assistants, particularly within the Due weight subcategory (see Figure 1). Although the distribution of excerpts in this category was similar between assistants and coordinators, the quality of examples provided by these professionals differed.

A closer examination of the excerpts highlights a significant contrast in the influence dimension between assistants and coordinators. For instance, an example from an assistant narrative reflects a more limited scope of decision-making: "Last year, when we explored the theme of the sea floor, we constructed marine animals, and the initiative came from the children. They expressed, 'We want to build this one, this one, and this one,' and it was done because it was their idea. We did not suggest any animal; it was entirely their choice" (Assistant 1). While this example provides some evidence of child choice, it remains constrained by a predefined activity, indicating a narrower scope of Influence. In contrast, other examples reflect a more expansive and impactful approach to participation, influencing classroom activities and the broader school environment. For instance, a coordinator describes a project that evolved organically from children's interest:

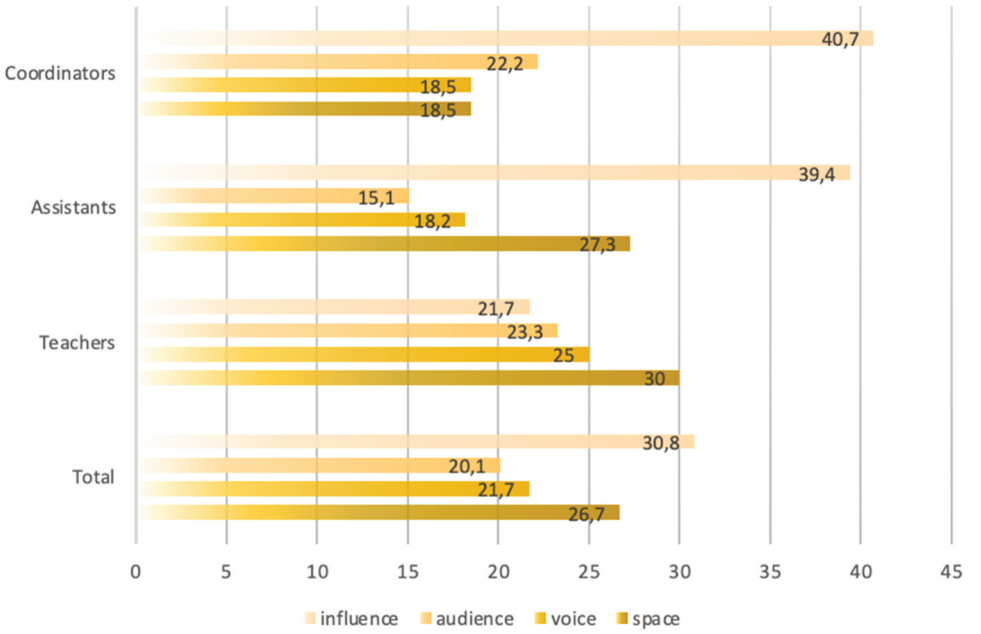


Figure 1. Percentage distribution of excerpts across the four dimensions of Lundy's (2007) conceptual model for participation, segmented by professional background.

> It started from the children's need to dig in the soil, to plant seeds, then the seeds sprout, and we continue doing more and more. So, a small garden was made for the playground, but then others got involved . . . because the playground is shared, and it gained interest . . . they also wanted to participate. We talked in the classrooms, and they also went to other classrooms, forming small groups here and there. In fact, by the end of the year, they were even offering lettuce and cabbage to the classrooms, sometimes making communal soup. Now the garden belongs to the entire school, the whole school, and it has grown significantly. (Coordinator 1)

This example illustrates a deeper level of participation, where children's initiatives not only shaped a specific project but expanded to influence the broader school community.

Identifying key conditions for supporting professionals' efforts in promoting child participation

A total of 99 excerpts were analyzed, focusing on the conditions necessary for promoting child participation. Nearly half of these excerpts were attributed to coordinators ($n = 48$), followed by teachers ($n = 32$) and assistants ($n = 19$) (Table 2).

The most frequently mentioned category was Professional Development, followed by Participatory Environment, and Leadership and Setting Conditions. As in previous analyses of child participation categories based on Lundy's model, significant variability was observed among professionals in the relative importance assigned to these conditions for fostering child participatory practices. Coordinators placed a strong emphasis on creating a participatory environment as the primary condition for promoting participation. They highlighted the critical nature of team collaboration, shared decision-making, and communication with families and community in creating conducive conditions for participation. One of the excerpts highlights how collaboration and the strategic use of community resources enhance participation and enrich educational experiences: "We make use of everything around us – the municipal council, the library, and all available resources, including sports facilities – all to increasingly support both professionals and, most importantly, the children. This allows them to develop the various projects that continuously emerge in every classroom. Ultimately, we always work as a team, and that makes the difference because it keeps us more connected" (Coordinator 5).

Conversely, for teachers and assistants, while the number of discursive units related to this category was the same, the relative importance of the participatory environment was higher for assistants. The following excerpt highlights the value of providing space for assistants to share their experiences,

Table 2. Frequencies of categories and subcategories regarding conditions for participation.

	Coordinators	Teachers	Assistants	Total
	f (%)	*f* (%)	*f* (%)	*f* (%)
Leadership & Setting Conditions	9(18.8)	6(18.8)	5(26.3)	20(20.2)
Structural Dimensions	4 (8.3)	4 (12.5)	2 (10.5)	10 (10.1)
Leadership	4 (8.3)	1 (3.2)	2 (10.5)	7 (7.1)
Professional Autonomy	1 (2.1)	1 (3.2)	1 (1.9)	3 (3.0)
Professional Development	13(27.1)	20(62.5)	8(42.1)	41(41.4)
Continuous	5 (10.4)	1 (3.2)	2 (10.5)	8 (8.1)
Network	2 (4.2)	4 (12.5)	2 (10.5)	8 (8.1)
Initial Education	1 (2.1)	4 (12.5)	2 (10.5)	7 (7.1)
Experience in ECEC	0 (0)	2 (6.3)	0 (0)	2 (2.0)
Pedagogical Orientation	5 (10.4)	9 (28.1)	2 (10.5)	16 (16.2)
Participatory Environment	25 (52.1)	6 (18.8)	5 (26.3)	38 (38.4)
Team Collaboration	8 (16.7)	1 (3.2)	3 (15.8)	12 (12.12)
Shared Decision	8 (16.7)	2 (6.3)	2 (10.5)	12 (12.12)
Communication with Families & Community	9 (18.8)	3 (9.4)	0 (0)	12 (12.12)
Total[1]	48	32	19	99

Notes. *f* = frequency. [1]Column total were calculated by adding frequencies across professionals; corresponding percentages were obtained by dividing the number of units coded in that category or subcategory by the total number of units coded in all focus groups.

fostering collaboration, and acknowledging their contributions to the educational environment: "These conversations among operational assistants are very important because we also experience the day-to-day challenges – the rush, the constant running around – and it's essential to take a moment to sit down, listen, and discuss" (Assistant 2). Children's participation should be enhanced by a climate of involvement and participation that is reflected in adults' perceptions of "feeling involved" (Assistant 1) and being part of the educational process across different pedagogical roles. Additionally, in this category there was also limited mention of team collaboration in the case of teachers and the absence of discursive units pertaining to family and community relationships in the case of assistants.

For both teachers and assistants, professional development was identified as the most critical condition for ensuring children's participation. Within this category, pedagogical orientation was the most frequently discussed subcategory, particularly by teachers, while experience in ECEC received fewer mentions. In fact, one of the most frequently mentioned obstacles to children's participation is associated with pedagogical orientations and increased pressure for the schoolification of ECEC activities. One of the assistants described the emotional toll of performance-driven expectations in ECEC, highlighting the diminishing space for play and the resulting strain on both children and educators:

> They (children) are constantly overwhelmed, and I mention this because we often discuss it in the classroom — stories, doing math exercises. These children are 5, about to turn 6, yet playtime is gradually being lost because they have to. It may not be the case everywhere, but there is a demand for results, and that pains me because I have been through this before. Sometimes we see children, and we ask, "Look, aren't you going to play?" — and that hurts. It hurts me deeply, and I know it hurts the educators too. But we are working, and we have to follow what is imposed on us. Some parents like it, others don't, of course, but it is a complex situation. (Assistant 1)

All professionals noted that schools are progressively responding to pedagogical directives that emphasize the need to invest in a child-centered approach, particularly by creating space and time opportunities for participation. At the same time, there is an increase in the number of activities, highly intensive schedules, and the schoolification of ECEC. Children seem to notice and evaluate this: "So we don't play afterward?" (Teacher 7).

Another challenge in fostering participation relates to the lack of a shared vision, which hinders the development of consistent practices and effective participatory engagement. An illustrative example was provided by a coordinator: "I once had a colleague who was an elementary school teacher working in preschool, and she would use photocopies from the first-year workbook. And it is a problem! For me, it was troubling to see the harm it caused those children, and the rigid approach made me very uncomfortable" (Coordinator 3). Regarding professional experience, one of the teachers mentioned how their experience and openness to learning allowed them to understand the importance of recognizing the capability of children to participate:

> It was also something that I learned over time, and I learned it from them, from the kids, because we have a strong tendency to want to be the ones to decide the idea, to put a filter on their ideas, to think that many things are impossible, that they can't be done. We have a strong tendency to do this without realizing it. Because we are not really listening, they are talking, and we let it slip away. (Teacher 10)

Leadership and the ECEC Setting were the least mentioned categories among all three groups of participants. Nonetheless, Structural Conditions emerged as a key point of consensus, recognized as one important factor for influencing child participation. Physical space, group size, and heterogeneity were identified as potential barriers to effective participation. For instance, one coordinator highlighted the challenges of balancing diversity and group dynamics:

> Sometimes I think that the number of children, their age, and the diversity within the groups, while offering many advantages, can also present significant challenges (. . .) especially concerning the older children. Accepting the younger or more vulnerable ones is very interesting and enriching, but it also brings its own set of challenges. (Coordinator 2)

Another example emphasizes the impact of structural conditions on individualized attention. A teacher reflected on the difficulties of focusing on each child considering the demands of managing the group: "I appreciate those moments when I can truly see the child, as often, I only see the group and the day-to-day chaos" (Teacher 7).

Leadership was identified as critical for fostering an environment that promotes child participation. However, top-down decision-making, which excludes teachers, appears to negatively impact the availability of essential conditions for effective participation. One teacher reflected on how imposed schedules and directives limit their ability to adapt to children's needs:

> But this is how it is . . . the time, and then the pressure (. . .) the pressure from management that I have to cover all subjects every day, that I need to fit in 45 minutes of English somewhere . . . I calculated the hours in the day and, well . . . it barely works. There aren't enough hours in the day. (Teacher 10)

In contrast, professional autonomy to design curricula tailored to children was highlighted as critical for creating a participatory environment:

> That's how it is — this schedule, and then the pressure . . . the pressure from management that I have to work on all areas every day, that I have to fit in 45 minutes of English somewhere . . . that I have to fit it in. So, I did the math for the day and there's barely any time. There aren't enough hours in the day. (Teacher 7)

Contrastingly, one coordinator emphasized the importance of top-down management and collaborative leadership: "As a coordination team, we meet monthly and communicate daily, but the role of the coordinator in each social response (. . .) is to provide resources and encourage everything the children choose to do with their educators" (Coordinator 4).

Discussion

Considering the centrality of creating participatory environments in ECEC contexts, understood as ensuring opportunities for children to express themselves and to have their perspectives considered, the current study aimed to examine professionals' narratives of participation and conditions for enhancing participation. Given the distinct roles of coordinators, teachers, and assistants within ECEC settings, the research triangulated their perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of the quality and context of participation practices. A qualitative analysis of data gathered in focus groups with these professionals in Portugal, highlighted three key results for problematizing the centrality of participation in ECEC pedagogical practices. Although the results for participatory practices and conditions to promote it were presented separately, reflecting two research questions, the discussion integrates both axes to interpret similarities and differences in narratives from coordinators, teachers, and assistants. Within this integration of both axes, it becomes visible that the narratives about participation practices appear to be rooted in the context of their implementation, based on facilitators or barriers identified by the pedagogical staff.

The first finding emphasizes the importance of professional backgrounds, with teachers providing more illustrative examples of participation and more naturally referencing pedagogical practices associated with child participation in ECEC. This result could be explained by two hypothetical factors related to potential power imbalances in ECEC settings – such as coordinators' management roles, teachers' greater influence in the classroom, and the limited involvement of assistants in decision-making processes. First, we could argue that initial education and training could be important for acknowledging participation practices when evaluating work conducted in ECEC contexts. As previously discussed, child participation has become increasingly significant in pedagogical orientations and is progressively being integrated into ECEC practices as a critical indicator of quality (Bratsch-Hines et al., 2020; Moser et al., 2017; Sheridan, 2007; Sheridan & Samuelsson, 2001; Vandell et al., 2010). In this sense, the length and level of specialization in teachers' training compared to assistants could partially explain the discrepancy between both professionals when addressing participation practices and conditions. This highlights the need for targeted training and continuous PD

opportunities for assistants (Hulpia et al., 2024), toward enhancing their capacity to support children's participation effectively (Cramer & Cappella, 2019). Second, the discrepancy between teachers and coordinators could be attributed to professionals' distinct roles in the context of ECEC. If coordinators tend to give fewer examples of participation practices, this pattern is reversed when analyzing conditions for participation, more evident when analyzing the role of a participatory environment. In fact, when analyzing the Participatory Environment category, which involves subcategories that address consistency of practices, namely Team Collaboration and Shared Decisions, we have found that coordinators more spontaneously address these dimensions compared to teachers and assistants. Additionally, this result, along with the differentiation between professional categories and the elicitation of both examples of participation practices in ECEC and conditions for participation, prompts us to reflect on the degree of intentionality and consistency regarding the place and space that participation plays in educational practices. For instance, when examining the examples provided by assistants and coordinators within the Influence category, distinct differences emerge in the quality of the indicators and their operationalization. Influence generally refers to the realization of children's choices and their active participation in decision-making, which are considered higher-level, more advanced forms of participation (Johnson, 2017; Lundy, 2007). However, in the case of assistants, the extent of child participation appears limited to externally imposed possibilities defined by adults. This finding may reflect a lingering perception of children's inability to have a genuine influence on educational decisions (Gal, 2015; Waters-Davies et al., 2024) and highlights the need to invest in shared decision-making processes, as well as in providing feedback, to fully complete the cycle of participation (Johnson, 2017). Despite this conclusion, it is still important to mention that Influence was one of the most referred categories, which may reflect curriculum approaches and a focus on results rather than on the process of participation.

The second finding, closely linked to the previous one, concerns identifying conditions that hinder the development of a participatory environment. Interestingly, all professionals identified what we refer to as the "paradox of participation." This contradiction arises from the increasing pressure to structure the school schedule with distinct activities while simultaneously emphasizing participation as a critical domain for prosocial development. The outcome is often reflected in teachers' difficulties in managing time, with reports of children mentioning a lack of time for play. Other obstacles to participation include the absence of cohesion and the heterogeneity of the groups. Research has highlighted the "schoolification" of ECEC practices, where the push to produce "school-ready" children through the adoption of formal education methods (Gunnarsdottir, 2014) is seen as a critical factor that disrupts the balance between academic preparation and the developmental needs of young children. Interestingly, this phenomenon is also associated with the power imbalance between professionals and a lack of consideration for assistants as critical contributors in pedagogical settings (Peeters et al., 2018). This imbalance can further hinder the effective implementation of a child-centered approach, as the perspectives and insights of assistants – who often work closely with children – may be undervalued in decision-making processes (Peeters et al., 2018).

Contributing to participatory environments involves understanding the structural dimensions of school organization and the meaning of participation within the school's pedagogical mission. As previously discussed, incorporating participatory practices as quality indicators, especially through legal frameworks, is crucial for their implementation (Council of Europe, 2012; Gal, 2015; Johnson Harbach, 2025). The pressure of the neoliberal education system, which often emphasizes premature achievements that may not align with children's developmental stages, can undermine the essential role of play, creativity, and democratic practices in ECEC (Gunnarsdottir, 2014). Future studies could be essential for examining the relationship between pedagogical orientations and participation, focusing on the role of reflective practice, critical teaching, and collaborative discussions around participation/practices (Lundy et al., 2024). Another key indicator, particularly relevant considering Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), would be to examine the degree of involvement of children, families, and the community in shaping participation as a central element (Correia et al., 2022; Sinclair, 2006). This could serve as both a quality indicator for

educational practices and, more broadly, as an asset for civic education and participation in a democratic society.

Lastly, a third finding relates to the analytical frameworks used to analyze the discourse of participants in the study. Building on previous research, Lundy's framework appears to offer significant insights. Nevertheless, considering, for instance, the Influence dimension and the observation that assistants tend to place greater emphasis on participatory environment conditions compared to teachers – a result that may reflect their efforts to legitimize their role and contribution to pedagogical work – it becomes essential to adopt an analytical approach that incorporates the evaluation of power dynamics within ECEC contexts. Including these dimensions in future analyses would support a more comprehensive understanding of the quality and impact of participation in ECEC contexts, namely by providing information regarding contexts that are committed with a genuine shared decision-making with children. As Hart (1992) emphasized, participation cannot be fully understood without acknowledging power relationships. This perspective is crucial for preventing tokenism or superficial forms of participation, where children's involvement is more symbolic than genuine. Ensuring meaningful participation requires focusing on how power is distributed and how children are empowered to take an active role in decision-making processes. The heterogeneity of examples and the varying depth of discourse surrounding children's participation underscore the necessity of operationalizing a child-centered approach/conceptualization to participation in ECEC contexts. A significant factor contributing to the challenges in fostering a pedagogical framework that intentionally prioritizes child participation is the lack of comprehensive initial and ongoing training for ECEC assistants (Peeters et al., 2018). Without adequate training, it becomes increasingly difficult to implement practices that effectively integrate children's voices and participation into the daily operations of educational settings. Sinclair (2006) asserts that for participation to be both meaningful for children and effective in driving change, it is imperative to move beyond isolated activities and integrate it as a central component of relationships with children, and actively challenge adult-centric definitions of participation, fostering more equitable power-sharing with children.

Limitations

Some limitations in the current study should be addressed when interpreting the results. First, due to the qualitative nature of the data, careful consideration is required when assessing its transferability to other contexts. While the inclusion of assistants as critical informants regarding pedagogical and participation practices is an innovative aspect of the study, future research should also involve other key informants, such as parents and children, particularly to examine the implications and meanings of participation in ECEC. It is essential that children play a central role in examining practices, with their "voices" being included to gain a deeper understanding of how they perceive space and time opportunities and whether these are felt as genuine opportunities to freely express their views about school and the world. The second limitation concerns the decision to conduct focus groups with professionals in separate groups. Although this may create a safer environment for addressing power dynamics and fostering participation in the discussion, including heterogeneous groups might encourage diverse perspectives on participation and promote greater perspective-taking among participants. A third limitation concerns the gender imbalance in the sample and the fact that the study was conducted exclusively with professionals from the north of Portugal, potentially limiting the broader applicability of the findings. Although the observed gender imbalance reflects the low participation of men in ECEC in Portugal (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020), future studies should aim to include more gender-diverse samples. A fourth limitation concerns the selection criteria for professionals, which required that their ECEC settings be recognized by peers or the professional community for having well-established participatory practices. Lastly, a fifth limitation is that frequency counts, while illustrating patterns in the data, cannot ensure equal contribution from all participants, and some perspectives may be underrepresented. Future studies employing quantitative

methodologies could provide a more comprehensive and representative analysis of participatory practices in ECEC contexts across Portugal.

Conclusion

More than three decades after the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), significant progress remains to be made in fully recognizing and respecting children's agency and their capacity to express their perspectives. This study highlights a persistent gap between the theoretical acknowledgment of child participation and its practical implementation in ECEC settings. Although widely recognized as important, participation is frequently constrained by systemic barriers, such as the growing "schoolification" of early education and inflexible time-management practices that restrict opportunities for meaningful engagement.

At this critical juncture, a fundamental choice must be made: do we strive to build democratic, inclusive, and empathic societies, or do we prioritize accelerated learning at the expense of children's agency? Genuine participation fosters more democratic educational environments, characterized by transparent and reciprocal adult-child relationships where children's voices are not only heard but also valued in decision-making processes (Lansdown, 2005). Achieving this vision necessitates structural and curricular reforms, alongside targeted professional development that equips educators, including assistants, with the skills to implement child-centered approaches effectively. In fact, a key contribution of this study is its recognition of educational assistants as essential actors in children's development. However, future research should further explore the impact of working conditions and professional training – an especially relevant issue in Portugal, where this role is often undervalued and lacks access to continuous training and supervision.

Ultimately, the realization of democratic education depends on fully acknowledging children's rights to express their opinions, influence their environments, and actively participate in shaping their learning experiences. This requires a paradigm shift in how relationships are fostered, educational spaces are conceptualized, and institutional conditions are structured to amplify children's voices and ensure meaningful participation in all aspects of ECEC life and children's development.

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Appendix A

Focus group guide| teachers

You were all invited for this focus group session because you are considered experts in fostering children's right to participate.

(1) Can you, please, share a situation or experience that you are proud of or that was particularly effective or successful in promoting children's participation?

(2) (KEY QUESTION) Throughout a typical day, what opportunities do you create for children's participation, at different times in everyday activities and routines?

[**Additional prompts, if necessary**: Please, consider how you (a) facilitate children's expression of their voice, (b) listen to children, and (c) facilitate children's participation in shared decision-making.]

(3) (KEY QUESTION) Keeping in mind those experiences, can you elaborate on the strategies that you use to enable children's participation?

[**Additional prompts, if necessary**: How do you enable child participation? What strategies/practices do you use to promote children's participation?]

(4) (KEY QUESTION) Were your pedagogical practices always like you have just described? What changed and why?

[**Additional prompts, if necessary**: What made the difference? What was key/contributed for you to promote children's participation?]

(5) How do you balance pedagogical goals with children's interests?

(6) How do the (national) guidelines/frame of reference for preschool influence your practices that promote children's participation?

(7) (KEY QUESTION) To what extent have the practices you described before influenced children's experiences, well-being, and their evolving capacities? OR Why do you think these experiences are important for children?

(8) (KEY QUESTION) What are the main facilitators you identify in your centers that support practices that promote child participation?

(9) What are the main challenges that you identify in your institutions? And how could it be overcome?

(10) Can you give us some examples of practices that you think would be successful in promoting child participation but you haven't been able to implement yet?

(11) (KEY QUESTION) Can you please share some examples of the influence children's views have had in your classroom and in your school/institutional decisions?

(12) Let's think about opportunities of in-service training on children's participation. What suggestions would you give for training programs (for example, specific contents, methodologies, type of materials)?

(13) During our discussion, we talked about . . . (ORAL SUMMARY BY THE MODERATOR – 2 TO 3 MINUTES) Have I described appropriately what was said?

(14) Our goal is to understand professionals' needs, priorities, and experiences related to children's right to participate in ECE settings. Is there anything we should have talked about and missed? Is there anything you would have liked to share and did not have the opportunity to do so?

Focus group guide| coordinators

You were all invited for this focus group session because of your positive practices in fostering children's right to participate.

(1) Can you, please, share a situation or experience that you are proud of or that was particularly effective or successful in promoting children's participation?

(2) (KEY QUESTION) What strategies/practices do you use to support teachers (and assistants) in promoting children's participation?

(3) (KEY QUESTION) Can you please share some examples of the influence children's views have had in your center and in your school/institutional decisions?

(4) (KEY QUESTION) How is child participation considered or discussed in your institution as a whole?

(5) (KEY QUESTION) To what extent do you monitor and evaluate the implementation of children's right to participate?

[**Additional prompt, if necessary**: What indicators do you include in your evaluation?]

(6) (KEY QUESTION) What kind of facilitators have you faced when trying to develop or encourage practices that promote children's participation?

(7) (KEY QUESTION) What are the main challenges that you identify in your institutions? And how could they be overcome?

(8) (KEY QUESTION) What differences in practices promoting children's participation do you find between the classrooms or centers you manage/coordinate?

[**Additional prompt, if necessary**: How do you explain those differences? What strategies do you use to minimize those differences?]

(9) Can you give us some examples of practices that you think would be successful in supporting teachers (and assistants) in promoting children's participation but you haven't been able to implement yet?

(10) To what extent do the written regulations (e.g., educational project, statutes of the institution) of your school/center focus on children´s right to participate?

(11) (KEY QUESTION) How do you try to build or find coherence between the written statements and the pedagogical practices in your center?

(12) Let's think about opportunities of in-service training on children's participation. What suggestions would you give regarding training programs (for example, specific contents, methodologies, type of materials)?

(13) During our discussion, we talked about . . . (ORAL SUMMARY BY THE MODERATOR – 2 TO 3 MINUTES) Have I described appropriately what was said?

(14) Our goal is to understand professionals' needs, priorities, and experiences related to children's right to participate in ECE settings. Is there anything we should have talked about and was missed? Is there anything you would have liked to share and did not have the opportunity to do so?

Focus group guide| assistants

You were all invited for this focus group session because of your center's good practices in fostering children's right to participate.

(1) Can you, please, share a situation or experience that you are proud of or that was particularly effective or successful in promoting children's participation?

(2) (KEY QUESTION) Throughout a typical day, what opportunities do you or the classroom team create for children's participation? [Additional prompts, if needed: Please, consider how you (a) facilitate children's expression of their voice, (b) how you listen to children, and (c) how you facilitate children's participation in shared decision-making.]

(3) (KEY QUESTION) In those experiences that you have just described, what was your role, as an assistant teacher?

(4) (KEY QUESTION) Were the practices in your center always like you have just described? What changed and why?

[**Additional prompts, if necessary**: What made the difference? What was key/contributed for your center/team to promote children's participation?]

(5) (KEY QUESTION) What are the main facilitators that you identify in your centers and allow you to develop practices that promote children's participation?

(6) (KEY QUESTION) What are the main challenges that you identify in your institutions? And how could they be overcome?
(7) Can you give us some examples of practices that you think would be successful in promoting child participation but were not implemented in your classroom or center yet?

(8) Could you share an example of children's participation that influenced decisions in your classroom or at your center?

(9) (KEY QUESTION) How are you involved in the discussion and planning of opportunities for children's participation?

(10) Let's think about opportunities of in-service training on children's participation. What suggestions would you give for training programs (for example, specific contents, methodologies, type of materials)?

(11) During our discussion, we talked about . . . (ORAL SUMMARY BY THE MODERATOR – 2 TO 3 MINUTES) Have I described appropriately what was said?

(12) Our goal is to understand professionals' needs, priorities, and experiences related to children's right to participate in ECE settings. Is there anything we should have talked about and missed? Is there anything you would have liked to share and did not have the opportunity to do so?