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RESEARCH

Ecological and Quality Conditions for Children's Participation as a Right in Early Childhood Education and Care

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Abstract

Providing space for children's voices to be heard, listening to their ideas and giving due weight to their propositions, on all matters that affect them, describes the concept of participation rights according to the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child. Promoting children's participation as a right from an early age is essential for building democratic values and citizenship, a core principle for EU members and one of the quality criteria for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Institutions. Within the framework of children's participation rights, conditions that may foster or hinder teachers' efforts to create a participatory atmosphere need to be investigated. This study focused on ECEC teachers and coordinators' subjective experience, as key players in promoting high-quality educational experiences and as gatekeepers for establishing a rights-based participation culture in ECEC, to unveil conditions for children's participation. Focus groups were conducted in four European countries – Belgium, Greece, Poland, and Portugal – involving 50 participants. A reflexive latent content analysis was followed, using Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory alongside the structural, process, and orientational quality dimensions of ECEC, to organize and interpret conditions described by participants. The horizontal level of analysis revealed quality parameters across countries organized in four themes: Organizational Culture, teachers' Professional Profiles, Organization of ECEC Environment, and Collaboration among Professionals. Vertical analysis highlighted country-specific conditions referring to Administrative issues, Children characteristics, Teacher characteristics, Pedagogical work, and Family-school relationship. A synthesis of these two levels of analysis resulted in a framework of ecological and quality parameters, as drivers or barriers of participatory strategies influencing implementation of participatory pedagogies in diverse layers of the system with implications regarding pedagogical practice, professional development, research, and policymaking.

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Keywords Children's participation as a right · Early childhood education and care · Ecological and quality conditions · Teachers and coordinators · Focus groups

1 Introduction

Participation in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has been identified as a foundation to build capacity for lifelong learning, school success and wellbeing, with multiple benefits for individuals and society (Council of the European Union, 2019). Participation is not only valued for its contribution to children's future development and wellbeing, but also for its significance in children's everyday lives, contributing to their ongoing wellbeing, sense of belonging, dignity, and recognition as competent social actors.

Based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), child participation includes the right to express their own views and the right to be heard and taken seriously. In General Comment No. 7 (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005) a set of recommendations frame the implementation of children's rights in early childhood, acknowledging young children as right holders, capable of forming and expressing ideas and as agents, participating in decision making in matters that affect them, based on their maturity.

In this matter, ECEC constitutes a privileged setting during the first years of life, with a strong potential to have a positive impact on children's development and wellbeing (Bratsch-Hines et al., 2020; Howes et al., 2008); a space for children to live and develop democratic participation as active citizens (European Commission, 2021). This potential is reflected in the quality of ECEC services, those aspects that promote conditions for children's learning, development, and well-being (OECD, 2019). High quality is linked to child-centered approaches that prioritise inclusion, democracy, and equality (Emilson & Johansson, 2018), with positive children's outcomes, such as holistic development and well-being, through warm and responsive interactions (OECD 2021a).

Despite international recommendations, challenges and concerns persist with respect to the continuous and substantive implementation of participation rights (McMellon & Tisdall, 2020). These concerns refer to the lack of age-appropriate and culturally relevant pedagogical strategies (Valentin & Meinert, 2009), tokenism and lack of impact of children's voices in decision making (Lundy, 2018; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010), conceptual gaps in the understanding of the participation process (Lundy et al., 2024) and its application at various levels of the educational system (Lansdown et al., 2014). Importantly, there is limited knowledge regarding the conditions that may hinder or facilitate the promotion of participation rights in ECEC (Agud et al., 2014; Moran-Ellis & Tisdall, 2019). Therefore, identification of conditions for children's participation is critical as participation in decisions that influence their development and learning has been considered a key criterion to ECEC quality (Correia et al., 2022; Sheridan, 2007).

With an aim to describe and understand conditions of participation as a right in ECEC settings, Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner &

Morris, 2006) and the multidimensional concept of ECEC quality could provide valuable insights into how individual, contextual, and systemic factors may shape the way participatory pedagogical approaches are applied in ECEC settings.

Bioecological theory acknowledges children as active agents and co-contructors of their development, by interacting with their environment and shaping meaningful relationships with adults and peers. Accordingly, the ability to participate is understood as dynamically developed through interactions between different and interrelated sub-systems, suggesting the influence of a multilayered system of variables (Correia et al., 2023). Emphasis is placed on ECEC professionals as gatekeepers of children's participation and well-being and on the function of the sociopolitical context (Gal, 2017).

This ecological perspective is also reflected in the concept of ECEC quality. Bioecological theory has been proposed as a useful framework for identifying features of quality in ECEC settings (Eadie et al., 2024). Being acknowledged as a key concept for determining what constitutes effective ECEC services, quality has dominated educational and developmental research and policy about ECEC provisions. Quality is a complex and contested concept. Tensions could arise from diverse perspectives on what constitutes effective ECEC, how quality is approached, measured, evaluated, by whom and on what purpose (Siraj-Blatchford & Wong, 1999). Historically, quality has been defined through multiple proximal (e.g. teacher-children ratio, classroom interaction) and distal (e.g. programs, state or local policies) features of the classroom with an emphasis on teachers' contribution (La Paro et al., 2012).

The role of adults is highlighted in diverse models of participation, either through the notion of power relations (e.g. Hart, 2008) or through the ethos and responsibility of supporting children's influence (e.g. Lundy, 2007). By establishing bonds with families and local communities, teachers can communicate the value and practice of children's participation, creating a robust mesosystem that promotes children's participation rights in diverse contexts (Council of Europe, 2020). Relevant research has shown that professionals with leadership roles in ECEC settings have a crucial role in establishing and maintaining a culture of children's participation by promoting collaboration among pedagogical staff, providing pedagogical guidance and building strong relationships among all stakeholders involved (Nicholson et al., 2020).

High-quality ECEC requires full and specialised professional qualification, targeting the ability to articulate theory and practice, collaborative and reflective competencies, cooperation with families, responsiveness to children's needs, and knowledge of their rights (Council of the European Union, 2019; Urban et al., 2012). Irvine et al. (2023) found that only degree-qualified educators consistently framed their work in terms of autonomous, expert-informed decision-making, while fewer than half of educators overall described their practice in genuinely pedagogical terms. However, qualification alone does not guarantee reflective, theory-informed practice: this depends on broader structural conditions - adequate staff-to-child ratios, coherent training pathways, and supportive working environments - that translate qualification into quality practice (OECD 2021b).

Based on the assumptions and constraints described, this study aims to analyse ECEC teachers' and coordinators' (i.e., "professionals with technical and/or pedagogical leadership responsibilities at the center level"; Barros et al., 2024, p. 1297),

perceptions about the conditions that promote or hinder children's participation. It takes into consideration that there are few studies regarding children's participation as a right in ECEC including more than one country, many of which focus on the Nordic context (Correia et al., 2019). A cross-country, qualitative research design was implemented to provide a broader European perspective on the topic. The four participating countries, Belgium (Be), Greece (Gr), Poland (Pl), and Portugal (Pt), have different ECEC traditions and structures (see Barros et al., 2024). The reported conditions for participation, as documented during the focus group discussions, were analysed using a combination of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) and a three-dimensional quality model, filtering Kluczniok and Roßbach (2014) and Anders et al. (2016) conception of educational quality through the lens of bioecological framework. Bioecological theory provided a child-centred framework for organising the conditions that support children's participation by identifying proximal and distal influences across the three proposed dimensions of quality.

The purpose of this study was three-fold. Firstly, it aimed at reporting on the conditions of children's participation that relate to the four ECE systems horizontally (Be, Gr, Pl, Pt), identifying those emphasized by teachers and coordinators. Secondly, it focused on the vertical conditions, those that may be country specific but provide a more complete picture of the facilitators or obstacles for children's participation in ECEC. The final goal of the study was to develop a framework regarding the ecological and quality conditions for promoting children's participation rights in ECEC, based on data from the four countries, combining the horizontal and vertical analysis of teachers' and coordinators' reports in focus groups.

2 Theoretical Framework

As the Committee on the Rights of the Child stated (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment No. 7., 2005), children's participation rights should be anchored in children's everyday life, considering both proximal contexts, such as families, schools, and communities, and more distal parameters such as policy making. Gal (2017) pointed out that children's exercise of their participation rights is influenced by multiple factors beyond a given context. An ecological stance towards participation as a right in ECEC is important to enhance a participation culture inside and outside ECEC and to understand the factors that may hinder or facilitate the promotion of participatory pedagogy.

Bronfenbrenner's' bioecological theory provides a useful framework to organize and structure conditions for children's participation, identified by pedagogical staff, with an aim to get insight into how proximal and distal features of ecology may influence participatory pedagogies in the classroom and ECEC setting. As Bronfenbrenner (1999) noted, the bioecological model adds to existing approaches by highlighting the interdependency and contextual variations of influencing factors.

Moreover, examining conditions for participation in the light of the construct of ECEC quality is critical to highlight the educational blueprint of these processes and connect with practice. Combining bio-ecological theory and ECEC quality construct

to analyze and organize conditions for participation we aim to provide theoretical depth to the ecological perspective of children's participation as a right in ECEC and a framework to strengthen promotion of participatory pedagogical approaches in practice and policy.

2.1 Participation as a Right in Early Childhood Education and Care

In the Strategy of the Rights of the Child (2021), the European Commission argues for children's meaningful participation leading to real influence on decisions in the public sphere. State members are invited to strengthen education on citizenship, promote equality and participation in democratic processes in school curricula, and support schools and teachers in their efforts to engage children in the school's daily life and decision-making.

A rights-based pedagogical perspective recognizes children as active agents and human rights holders, instead of passive recipients of care or protection. Within democratic societies, founded on fundamental freedoms, children are recognised as citizens with evolving capacities whose views should be respected and given due weight, in accordance with their age and maturity (United Nations, 1989). Consequently, participation is more than being involved in activities (Lundy & O'Donnell, 2021), it rather refers to a legal and ethical entitlement that requires adults and institutions to create meaningful opportunities for children to express their views and influence decisions affecting their lives (Lundy, 2018).

A systematic review of research on the topic (Correia et al., 2023), revealed four areas of participation reflecting diverse theoretical frameworks regarding what children's right to participate in ECE settings means. Studies focusing on the legal paradigm, referring mostly to the UN CRC (1989), described participation through processes in which children express freely their opinions and ideas to audiences, mainly adults, that listen to them and consider their voices seriously in decision making. Children recognize their capacity to make suggestions and express their ideas while acknowledging teachers' responsibility for making decisions. At the same time, they expect teachers to provide feedback on how their perspectives were considered during the decision-making process (Sivertsen & Bjørgen, 2025). ECEC teachers identify ways through which children participate in decision making, such as deciding on class rules, choosing games, stories, or activities (Akyol & Erdem, 2021). A sociological perspective gives emphasis to children as social actors and agents that determine their social interactions by bringing meaningful changes to their social worlds. Children seem to value the relationships with other people when they talk about their right to participate in ECEC, showing that experiencing participation has strong links with the feeling of belonging and being included (Harcourt & Hägglund, 2013). The notion of involvement is evident in several studies focusing on the way children take part, evaluate and shape everyday experiences, such as play, learning activities and routines. Children themselves seem to value the choice of outdoor play as indicative of their right to participate and relevant to their well-being (Sivertsen & Moe, 2021). Circle time is also a routine that may provide strong opportunities for participation and communication when children's inputs are taken seriously into consideration (Ree & Emilson, 2020). A democratic perspective prioritises the devel-

opment of children's citizenship through defending needs and interests and taking on responsibilities. Research shows that children want to take responsibility for their learning experiences in ECEC, taking part in the planning and evaluation of diverse activities such as hikes, circle time, rest time, or play (Harcourt & Hägglund, 2013; Sivertsen & Bjørgen, 2025).

Promoting children's participation rights in ECEC reflects a sociopedagogical stance that highlights respect and commitment to children's dignity, their capacities in making choices, and children's agency and self-worth, providing new insights into the protection-emancipation dichotomy (Correia et al., 2023; Lansdown et al., 2014; Lorenzova, 2017). Research has shown that young children's perceived opportunities for participation seem to be linked to their subjective wellbeing, reporting being happier and more satisfied when they experienced participation in the classroom (Sandseter & Seland, 2016). Different levels of participation have been related to the development of self-concept, communication skills, confidence, and collaboration among children (Correia et al., 2024; Nah & Lee, 2016).

Enhancing children's participation rights from an early age is essential for building democratic values and citizenship. Participatory and democratic approaches in ECEC focus on positive interactions between pedagogical staff and children, characterized by sharing power and responsibility, while communicating ideas in planning and evaluating that support children's dynamic and reflective exchanges with the environment, as active and respectful social agents (Biesta, 2014). Professionals and parents have an important role in guiding and supporting children's participation in decision making, through negotiating with others in a democratic way and understanding the consequences of their ideas and decisions for others, and in developing responsibility and skills for democratic decision making and action (Sheridan & Samuelsson, 2001).

However, there is still much to learn about which pedagogical practices activate children's participation rights in ECEC and on what conditions. This is true to some extent due to the conceptual ambiguity of participation (Correia et al., 2023; Skrzypczak, 2022), the different values concerning childhood and children's citizenship (Nutbrown, & Clough, 2009), the preconceptions about developmental issues in the early years in relation to children's information processing and ability to form valid views and express ideas (Hanna, 2021; Ferreira et al., 2018), as well as due to the status of participation as a right in ECEC curricula, teacher-children power relations, teacher authority, and professional status implications (Urinboyev et al., 2016).

Understanding how children's participation rights are promoted in ECEC settings requires looking beyond children's individual opportunities to participate and exert influence, considering the broader educational conditions that enable or constrain those opportunities.

2.2 Bioecological Underpinnings of Children's Participation

ECEC settings are a fundamental microsystem for children's development and wellbeing (Sylva et al., 2011). However, to be effective in supporting children's wellbeing and optimal development and learning, ECEC systems should not be regarded in isolation from the broader ecology of children's development. Considering partici-

pation rights, Lundy et al. (2024) noted that there are "inherent limits and possible external restrictions" (p. 2) in the exercise of children's right to have their perspectives given due weight, based on their age and maturity (UN, 1989).

Participation is shaped by multiple interconnected systems, ranging from classroom interactions and institutional practices to family relationships, governance structures, and wider socio-cultural values. Thus, Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) provides a valuable framework for understanding, organizing, and investigating the conditions and processes related to the promotion of children's rights-based participation in ECEC, filtered through established ECEC quality dimensions. This theory emphasizes that developmental outcomes emerge from the synergistic interaction of Process, Person, Context, and Time (Hayes et al., 2017; Tudge, 2008).

Processes involve child-environment interactions, influenced by quality indicators such as the physical setting, teacher-child ratio, and teacher qualifications (Khalfaoui et al., 2021). In relation to participation rights, a supportive classroom climate fosters psychological safety, self-esteem, and children's voice (Khalfaoui et al., 2021; Zurbriggen et al., 2021). The Person dimension underscores children's agency, highlighting characteristics like age, interests, and competences (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Hayes et al., 2017), and positions them as active participants in learning and in society.

Context, the core of the model (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022), encompasses various environmental layers. The microsystem includes daily contexts like family and school, while the mesosystem represents interrelations between these, particularly the family-school partnership, vital for participation and development (Petrogiannis & Penderi, 2014). The exosystem, though indirectly involving children, influences them through its effect on key adults. The way ECEC systems harness these external resources is central to cultivating a participatory culture. The macrosystem reflects wider societal and cultural norms around childhood, citizenship, and education. These are often mediated by family and school values (Kanyal, 2014), with cultural orientations like collectivism or individualism influencing children's assertiveness and participation (Helwig & To, 2017).

Finally, the chronosystem introduces the temporal dimension, Time, encompassing personal transitions and broader historical or social changes. Understanding these shifts, especially in societal values and educational reforms, is critical for advancing a strategic, rights-based pedagogy in ECEC.

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory, therefore, provides a useful overarching framework for understanding how quality conditions influence the realisation of children's participation rights in ECEC, enabling to describe proximal and distal processes with the child at the centre of the system.

2.3 Quality Dimensions in Early Childhood Education and Care and Children's Participation

Quality is a multidimensional concept with components that do not operate in isolation, as they are embedded within wider ecological systems that shape ECEC practices, institutional cultures, and children's everyday experiences. The European pillar

for social rights prioritizes, as its 11th principle, children's right to affordable and quality ECEC. At least one year of attending high-quality ECEC has been related to advanced educational outcomes and lower school dropout rates (OECD, 2016; Scherman, 2017). Many European countries seem to have followed a similar path of ECEC development and share relevant pedagogical and curricular underpinnings (OECD, 2022), including holistic pedagogical principles and child-centred approaches (Sylva et al., 2015). Yet, although many ECEC systems in Europe share common pedagogical foundations (Wysłowska & Slot, 2020), quality seems to vary significantly, generating unequal educational experiences and unequal opportunities for child development (Stahl et al., 2018).

In discussing quality aspects of ECEC, EU member states prioritize the promotion and protection of children's right to inclusive educational services, through safe and nurturing environments that respect their participation and interests, develop their autonomy and creative learning through meaningful interactions with adults, and integrate the voices of all children (Council of the European Union, 2019; European Commission, 2013; Melhuish et al., 2015).

High-quality ECEC is critical for children's participation rights (Bae, 2012), a "means of realizing children's human rights" (Lundy et al., 2024, p. 4). High-quality ECEC requires incorporating child participation into practitioners' beliefs, discourses, and practices (Lansdown, 2005). Evidence suggests that children attending high-quality settings tend to report that practitioners know their preferences, listen to them more often (Sheridan & Samuelsson, 2001), and provide more opportunities to participate and to exert influence (Sheridan, 2007).

Quality constitutes a multidimensional construct that encapsulates a variety of proximal and distal aspects of ECEC that relate to children's development, learning, and well-being (Pianta et al., 2016; Wysłowska & Slot, 2020). Although such multidimensionality has been reflected in broad, unclear, or even amorphous definitions of quality (La Paro et al., 2012), there is a consensus in the relevant literature that there are two overarching dimensions or components of quality: structure and process (NICHD, 2002). These dimensions provide a concise framework to gather essential information from ECEC classrooms and settings, namely to guide policy making and teachers' training (La Paro et al., 2012).

The *structural dimension of quality* describes the regulated aspects of classrooms and programs, such as materials, teacher-child ratio, plans or educational program and teacher education (Slot et al., 2015). Research evidence does not show immediate relation to children's outcomes, but indirect links through process quality (Bowne et al., 2017). Torii et al. (2017) added a third domain to the taxonomy of the structural and process dimensions, "the system quality". System quality was used to capture structural issues that do not refer to the regulatory standards of the ECEC setting but include wider institutional frameworks, such as national policies, funding allocations, or evaluation systems (Eadie et al., 2024). Using Bronfenbrenner's bioecological multilayered model to analyse structural aspects of quality, specifically in the context of identifying conditions for participation, is crucial to discern how structural aspects function at different levels of the system, adding depth to the way structure functions to shape quality influences.

Process aspects of quality emphasize dynamic dimensions of ECEC, including relationships, pedagogical practices and techniques that shape children's experiences with the social and material environment (Anders et al., 2012). Pedagogical interactions play a significant role in educational effectiveness and children's learning and wellbeing (Broekhuizen et al., 2016). There are approaches that differentiate between global process quality, referring to aspects such as socioemotional climate, warmth of interactions, responsiveness of ECEC staff and stimulating activities, and domain-specific process quality, regarding teaching and learning of specific knowledge and skills (Ulferts et al., 2019). Research findings support interconnection between teachers' practices in the classroom and children's participation, both reported and observed (Correia et al., 2020). Variations in teacher-child interactions are related to different opportunities of children's participation, showing that teachers who are warm and responsive to children are more likely to listen to their voices and care about their needs (Bae, 2012). Process constitutes a critical component of the bioecological framework, being considered the driver of development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Some authors (Anders et al., 2016; Kluczniok & Roßbach, 2014), building on earlier conceptualisations of ECEC quality, propose a four-component model that extends the traditional structural and process dimensions by incorporating ECEC professionals' educational beliefs (orientation quality) and networking with families. They argue that structural and orientation quality are interrelated and influence children's outcomes indirectly through their effects on process quality and family networking. *Orientation quality* refers to teachers' beliefs, expectations, and values that shape their stance towards ECEC and their pedagogical goals (Mönkediek et al., 2023). Previous research (Jerome, 2018; Waldron & Oberman, 2016) has shown that teachers' attitudes and conceptions of children's participation rights constitute a key aspect regarding the way children's rights have a real impact in educational settings. Although research on orientation quality is scarce, it is assumed that it influences child development, by guiding teaching practices (Anders & Hans-Günther, 2015).

Networking with families is a complex, multidimensional construct encompassing educators' beliefs about the respective roles of families and ECEC settings, the extent to which they value family–school partnerships, the practices that foster parental involvement and collaboration, and the quality of parent–teacher relationships (Penderi et al., 2023; Slot et al., 2025). From a bioecological perspective, these interactions span both the microsystem and mesosystem. Consequently, rather than treating networking with families as a distinct quality dimension, its multidimensional nature can be more comprehensively captured across the three established dimensions of ECEC quality: structural, process, and orientation quality.

Although ECEC quality has been linked to children's participation rights (Correia et al., 2020; Moser et al., 2017), little is known about the specific conditions in ECEC that may promote or hinder children's participation. Quality dimensions reflecting conditions that may foster or hinder teachers' efforts to support children's voices and create a participatory atmosphere in ECEC classrooms and settings need to be investigated (Pessanha et al., 2026), especially with regard to teachers and coordinators' subjective experience, as they are key players in promoting quality and gatekeepers for establishing a rights-based participation culture in ECEC (Correia et al., 2020).

3 The Current Study

This study is part of a broader qualitative study conducted within an Erasmus+ project (Anonymised), which explored complementary dimensions of children's participation in ECEC (Barros et al., 2024). In this work, we focus specifically on the ecological and quality conditions reported by ECEC teachers and coordinators, in four European countries, as facilitating or hindering children's participation.

Teachers and coordinators' reports and experiences, obtained through focus groups, are expected to shed light on how ECEC contexts are organized to facilitate or hinder children's participation rights in these countries. The practices and strategies teachers and coordinators implement or regard as effective to promote children's participation were presented in previous work (see Barros et al., 2024). By shedding light on the ecological context related to the promotion of participation rights in the classroom, we aim to identify quality factors in different layers of the ECEC environment.

The four European countries - Be (Flemish community), Gr, Pl, and Pt - have a split or partially split ECEC system (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019), with Early Childhood Education provisions, under the auspices of the Ministry of Education in each country, complying with the ISCED 2011 classification (OECD, 2022). They offer educational services to young children with different starting points in each country, from 2 and a half in Belgium to 4 years in Greece (see Barros et al., 2024). Local governance plays an important role in Belgium and partly in Greece regarding administrative issues and infrastructure, while central government authority is important for regulating ECEC in Poland, Portugal, and Greece. There are pedagogical orientations in all these countries, either in the form of a curriculum or as general pedagogical or curriculum guidelines.

Child-centred pedagogy is followed in these orientations, but children's participation as a right is not explicitly addressed except for the Flemish and Portuguese official documents. The Greek national curriculum, the Unified Cross-thematic Curriculum Framework for Kindergarten, which was in use exclusively until the school year 2022–2023, promotes a participatory pedagogy with emphasis on active and experiential learning, while the accompanied Teacher Guide (Dafermou et al., 2006) notes the importance of listening to children's ideas and engaging them in decisions concerning their learning. The Portuguese policy documents (General and Specific Profiles of the ECEC teacher - Decree-Law No. 240/2001 and Decree-Law No. 241/2001; Lopes da Silva et al., 2016) are more explicit on children's rights to participate, again focusing more on the educational process (Barros et al., 2024). In the Polish National Guidance for Preschool Education (Edukacji Narodowej, 2017) guidelines are indirectly related to children's participation through respectfor their rights and engagement in educational matters.

Based on the goals, presented in the Introduction, the study aims to address the following research questions:

1) What conditions for children's participation are emphasized by teachers and coordinators across the four ECEC systems (Be, Gr, Pl, and Pt)?
2) What country-specific conditions facilitate or hinder children's participation within each of the four ECEC systems?

3) How can findings be integrated into an ecological and quality framework for promoting children's participation rights in ECEC?

4 Method

4.1 Context and Design

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive design to explore how ECEC professionals, specifically teachers and coordinators, understand the conditions that facilitate or constrain children's participation rights in ECEC across four European countries. A qualitative descriptive approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to generate an in-depth account of participants' perspectives rather than develop theory or study a particular cultural group. However, theory was used to guide the generation of categories and themes and for developing the ecological framework of conditions for participation, based on the third question of the study.

The study was informed by a constructivist epistemology, assuming that understandings of children's participation are socially constructed through professional practice and dialogue. Consequently, focus groups were considered appropriate as the data generation technique because the study aimed to elicit collective understandings and shared professional experiences regarding children's participation rights.

Focus groups, as collective conversations (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005), constitute a constructivist process for meaning-making in research, enabling participants and researchers to co-create knowledge. The interaction among participants was expected to stimulate reflection and reveal agreements, tensions, and contextual differences that individual interviews may not have captured. By acknowledging different views and realities, they may identify common themes and orientations, develop new ideas, challenge preconceptions and given assumptions, while connect experiences to specific situations. Engaging participants with similar characteristics and experiences in collective discussions has been acknowledged as beneficial for participants' ease and research purposes. This is particularly relevant when participants are encouraged to share experiences and unveil issues that relate to their professional identities (Rodriguez et al., 2011). Based on the nature of focus groups, this approach may be more appropriate for exploring professional conceptions, experiences, and practices on sensitive issues (Smith, 2015) such as young children's participation rights. Diverse strategies were used to establish the trustworthiness (Lim, 2025) of the study as presented in Table 1.

4.2 Participants

Participants were recruited based on their professional role and experience in ECEC, through extensive examination of the researchers' professional networks to fulfil the following criteria: (i) being a reference for good practices related to children's participation, (ii) representing different types of ECEC sectors and urbanity, and (iii) working with children above 3 years of age. All participants were recognized in the field

Table 1 Criteria and strategies for trustworthiness

Strategies	Criteria			
	A[1]	B[2]	C[3]	D[4]
Prolonged engagement - expertise of the core research team in the field - in-depth literature review prior to the analysis	X			
Persistent observation - repeated rereading of the dataset - audit trail notes about emerging concepts	X			
Triangulation - different types of participants (teachers and coordinators) - participants from four European countries	X	X	X	
Member checking - debriefing at the end of each focus groups and verification of conclusions with participants - info day discussing findings with participants in each country	X		X	
Peer debriefing - research process has been revised by the Consortium of the Erasmus program and the relevant Committee in each HEI	X			
Case analysis - country-specific conditions, that did not appear in the common patterns, were elicited	X			
Referential adequacy - the interpretations in each phase of the analysis were cyclically revised using the data set of each country - excerpts of the participants' narratives are provided for each category	X			
Audit trail and inquiry - the research process is described in detail - the research design was evaluated by external evaluators during the Erasmus+ processes		X	X	
Reflexivity - in each phase of the analysis, coders reflective notes were discussed and possible biases were identified - the core team reflected on the coding process and revised accordingly			X	
Thick descriptions - detailed and contextual descriptions of the findings are provided				X

[1]A= Credibility: authenticity and believability of the research findings

[2]B= Dependability: consistency of the research findings

[3]C= Confirmability: impartiality or neutrality of the research

[4]D= Transferability: applicability in other contexts

as competent advocates for children's participation rights, promoting high-quality pedagogical strategies.

An equal number of teachers and coordinators (i.e., professionals with pedagogical or/and administrative leadership roles in ECEC settings) participated in homogeneous focus groups (i.e., for teachers or coordinators), in a total of 50 ECE professionals. Participants' demographic characteristics are described in Table 2 (for more details, see Barros et al. (2024). All participants had at least a bachelor's degree. Teachers and coordinators from Poland had a master's degree, based on country specific criteria for entering the workforce (Oberhuemer, & Schreyer, 2018); three professionals from Portugal also had a master's degree.

Table 2 Focus groups participants' demographic characteristics ($N=50$)

Country / demographics	Belgium		Greece		Poland		Portugal	
	T $n=5$ M(SD)	C $n=4$ M(SD)	T $n=6$ M(SD)	C $n=8$ M(SD)	T $n=4$ M(SD)	C $n=5$ M(SD)	T $n=10$ M(SD)	C $n=8$ M(SD)
Age (years)	37.40 (8.44)	42.35 (12.61)	42.5 (9.91)	47.25 (2.92)	41.00 (14.58)	43.00 (12.71)	43.00 (13.25)	53.86 (8.45)
Experience in ECEC (years)	13.60 (9.45)	17.50 (12.29)	14.83 (7.52)	20.88 (3.27)	16.50 (15.15)	16.40 (14.10	20.34 (13.35)	31.29 (8.30)
Experience in current position in the setting	12.27 (11.61)	5.88 (7.51)	8.83 (5.78)	9.88 (5.40)	13.25 (11.03)	8.00 (12.31)	12.27 (11.61)	17.29 (12.82)

T Teachers, *C* Coordinators

4.3 Data Collection Procedures

A discussion guide was developed based on previous research and a literature review. Open-ended questions covered: (i) strategies and practices to promote children's participation in everyday situations; (ii) balance between pedagogical goals, children's interests, and official guidelines; (iii) importance of promoting children's participation for children's development and learning; (iv) effectiveness of relevant pedagogical practices; and (v) conditions that promote or hinder children's participation and effectiveness of pedagogical work. As barriers and drivers constitute the two sides of the same coin, they were not distinguished in the analysis. For coordinators, questions focused on the setting level, regarding the encouragement and support of teachers' efforts to promote children's participation rights and the infusion of a participatory approach into the organizational culture of the ECEC setting.

Focus groups were conducted in-person, in each country, in different meetings for teachers and coordinators, from February to April 2020. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles for research involving human participants and the APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (Ledford et al., 2024), while complying with the ethical regulations of the participating Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in each country. Each country was represented by one HEI, except for Portugal, which participated through two institutions. The core research team responsible for the data analysis consisted of two researchers from each institution, for a total of 10 members.

Before data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. Confidentiality and anonymity of participants and their institutions were ensured throughout data collection, analysis, and reporting, with any identifying information removed or anonymized. Focus groups discussions lasted from 45 to 90 min, and they were audio recorded and transcribed, omitting personal information, in the language of the country and some parts translated into English to allow for cross-check and cross-national comparisons of coding criteria.

Two members of the research team facilitated the focus groups in each country. The moderator guided the process by asking the core questions, encouraging all participants' engagement in the discussion. The moderators used the discussion guide

but also elaborated on participants' relevant input, when necessary. Moderators were instructed to have minimal intervention, adopting a non-judgemental attitude, but bringing the discussion back to the topic in case the focus was lost (Lauri, 2019; Prosser et al., 2023). The co-moderator was the person facilitating the process of welcoming the participants by helping them find their name tags and be seated in the discussion area. They took notes during the discussion, paying attention to important details and observing the participants nonverbal expressions. They also provided help in any case of unexpected assistance needed during the session. After each session, the two researchers discussed the themes that emerged and took notes to support the analysis.

4.4 Analysis

Content analysis was used as a hybrid methodology that combines qualitative and quantitative techniques (Drisko & Maschi, 2017). Reflexive latent content analysis was selected, as described by Kleinheksel et al. (2020), using theoretical frameworks and involving a level of interpretation, especially when meaning was not evident on the surface (see Table 3), because the study sought to identify both manifest descriptions of educational experiences and the underlying meanings associated with the ecological conditions supporting or hindering children's participation. Although the analysis was theoretically informed, coding was not restricted to predefined categories, being sensitive to participants' meanings. The analysis combined deductive and inductive coding in an iterative manner. The repeated engagement with the transcripts allowed codes to emerge from participants' narratives and prompted refinement of the preliminary coding framework. This was particularly relevant to our study as

Table 3 Aims, phases and levels of content analysis

Aims and phases of analysis	Decontextualization	Recontextualization	Categorization	Level of analysis
Aim 1: Conditions of children's participation across the four European countries	(i) identify units of meaning in the data set regarding facilitators and constraints (ii) creating a coding grid	(i) apply the grid to the data (ii) check issues of homogeneity and exclusiveness (iii) revise the grid	(i) develop categories to organize codes (ii) unveil underlying meaning	Horizontal
Aim 2: Country specific conditions of children's participation	(i) identify units of meaning in the data set regarding facilitators and constraints (ii) using conceptual knowledge to identify country specific conditions	(i) form judgements about the implied meaning and particularities with regard to the grid	(i) develop categories to organize codes (ii) unveil underlying meaning	Vertical
Aim 3: Ecological and quality conditions for children's participation	(i) organize a framework to combine bio-ecological systems with quality dimensions	(i) apply the framework to categories derived from the horizontal and vertical levels of analysis (ii) check for general and country-specific meanings	(i) organize the categories based on the framework	Horizontal and Vertical

conditions related to the promotion of children's participation rights have a multidimensional and multilevel nature.

During the *Decontextualization* phase, two researchers from each participating HEI in each country independently analysed the focus group transcripts in the original language to identify facilitators and constraints related to children's participation rights in ECEC. Through an iterative combination of deductive and inductive coding, each national team developed preliminary codes and themes and selected up to five excerpts, translated into English, for cross-country discussion. To ensure consistency, a core team consisting of four researchers developed an initial coding framework on a single country dataset and iteratively refined it using the preliminary analyses conducted by the other national teams. The outcome was a common codebook containing code definitions and illustrative excerpts.

In the phase of *Recontextualization*, the multinational research team reviewed and refined the coding framework through a series of online meetings, resolving discrepancies and clarifying code definitions. Each national team then re-examined its transcripts using the agreed coding framework and provided additional illustrative excerpts Table 4.

During *Categorization*, conceptually related codes were grouped into broader categories and themes through collaborative discussions among representatives for the national research teams. The horizontal analysis identified themes that were consistently represented across the four countries, providing the basis for a shared understanding of the conditions supporting children's participation. The coding framework was subsequently applied by each national team to quantify the representation of categories within their respective datasets (Table 3).

A complementary *vertical analysis* was then conducted to identify country-specific meanings that were not captured by the shared coding framework. Using the most representative excerpts from each country, one representative of each national research team identified additional codes reflecting contextual facilitators and constraints unique to individual national contexts. These codes were subsequently discussed and validated by the core team and organised into additional categories and themes (Fig. 1). Rather than constituting mutually exclusive findings, the vertical themes complemented the horizontal analysis by highlighting contextual emphases, different system levels, or unique pedagogical and organisational conditions relevant to children's participation, derived from participants' narratives.

The *Conclusion* phase involved reviewing and validating the final themes and categories. All categories derived from both the horizontal and vertical analyses were mapped onto Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework and the three-dimensional quality model, forming the ecological framework proposed in this study (Table 5).

5 Findings and Discussion

5.1 Conditions for Participation Across the Four Countries

Regarding the first aim of the study, to identify conditions for children's participation emphasized by teachers and coordinators across the four ECEC systems, four general

Table 4 Results from the horizontal, quantitative process of content analysis on teachers and coordinators' reports from the four countries ($N=50$)

Themes and categories			Number of excerpts in teachers & coordinators narratives				Total number and frequency of the excerpts	
Themes	Categories	Description	Be	Gr	Pl	Pt	at the category level	at the theme level
Organization of ECEC Environment	Organizational issues	Human resources, group size, number, quality, and arrangement of materials.	**5**	11	**20**	8	44 (12.5%)	44 (12.5%)
Collaboration among Professionals	Team Collaboration	Listening to colleagues, establishing processes for communication, team problem solving.	5	5	11	9	30 (8.5%)	42 (12%)
	Professional Networks	Share practices and experiences with other professionals outside the ECEC centre, communicate and exchange ideas	1	1	4	6	12 (3.4%)	
Professional Profiles	Initial Teacher Education	Pre-service training, preparation prior entering the profession conducive to children's participation.	6	**1**	7	5	19 (5.4%)	123 (35%)
	Continuous Professional Development	Formal and informal continuous professional learning, supporting professional development initiatives during in-service work.	2	3	1	6	12 (3.4%)	
	Professional Experience in ECEC	Professional experience promoting participation, professional experience challenging participatory practices.	2	2	**17**	2	23 (6.6%)	
	Pedagogical Orientation	Trends, attitudes or curricula-pedagogical models shaping orientations.	19	10	**6**	14	49 (14%)	
	Personal Learning Dispositions	Personal characteristics that promote commitment for improving children's lives and participation.	6	2	10	2	20 (5.7%)	

themes organised the meanings and contents of the 13 categories identified in the material, based on the horizontal level of content analysis.

The frequency of excerpts identified for each category was calculated to provide a picture of the types of conditions that were emphasized across the four countries. In total, 351 excerpts were coded in the 13 categories of the coding grid (see Table 4).

Table 4 (continued)

Themes and categories			Number of excerpts in teachers & coordinators narratives				Total number and frequency of the excerpts	
Organizational Culture	Pedagogical Leadership	Culture of supporting and influencing changes regarding promotion of participation in ECEC, inspiration by pedagogical figures with leadership roles.	5	2	**25**	5	37 (10.5%)	142 (40.5%)
	Professional Autonomy	Autonomy in planning and implementing participatory practices.	4	4	5	2	15 (4.3%)	
	Climate among Professionals	Warm and respectful relationships among pedagogical staff.	1	3	1	1	6 (1.7%)	
	Shared Vision	Similar attitudes towards children's participation and commitment for change.	10	**1**	14	10	35 (10%)	
	Collaboration with Families and Broader Community	Interactions and collaboration with families, visitors and community	14	10	13	12	49 (14%)	
	Total number of excerpts coded		**80**	**55**	**134**	**82**	**351**	

Be Belgium, *Gr* Greece, *Pl* Poland, *Pt* Portugal

Counting and quantification play an important role in reflexive content analysis to create and interpret patterns, to enhance credibility, to establish claims and suggestions for policy and practice (Nicmanis, 2024).

The results are presented and discussed by theme, considering the frequency of occurrence of excerpts in each category across the participants' narratives.

Organizational Culture *Organizational Culture* was the theme with most references (40.5%) by teachers and coordinators in the four European countries. Organizational culture refers to the ways the ECEC setting differs from others, comprising an organized set of beliefs, priorities, and norms that shape how people interact and communicate in the ECEC organization (Lumby, 2012; Sailes, 2008). It is regarded as a fundamental pilar to understand how educational settings promote equity, inclusion, and democracy (Torres, 2022). It included categories reflecting the atmosphere in the ECEC setting, shaped by culture, leadership, emotional climate, communication, and relationships (Raviv & Shwartz-Asher, 2024): (a) Pedagogical Leadership, (b) Professional Autonomy, (c) Climate among Professionals, (d) Shared Vision, and (e) Collaboration with Families and Broader Community. The categories identified are in line with the pluralistic and composite nature of school culture, suggesting micro-, meso- and exo- systemic processes, having the child at the centre of the system.

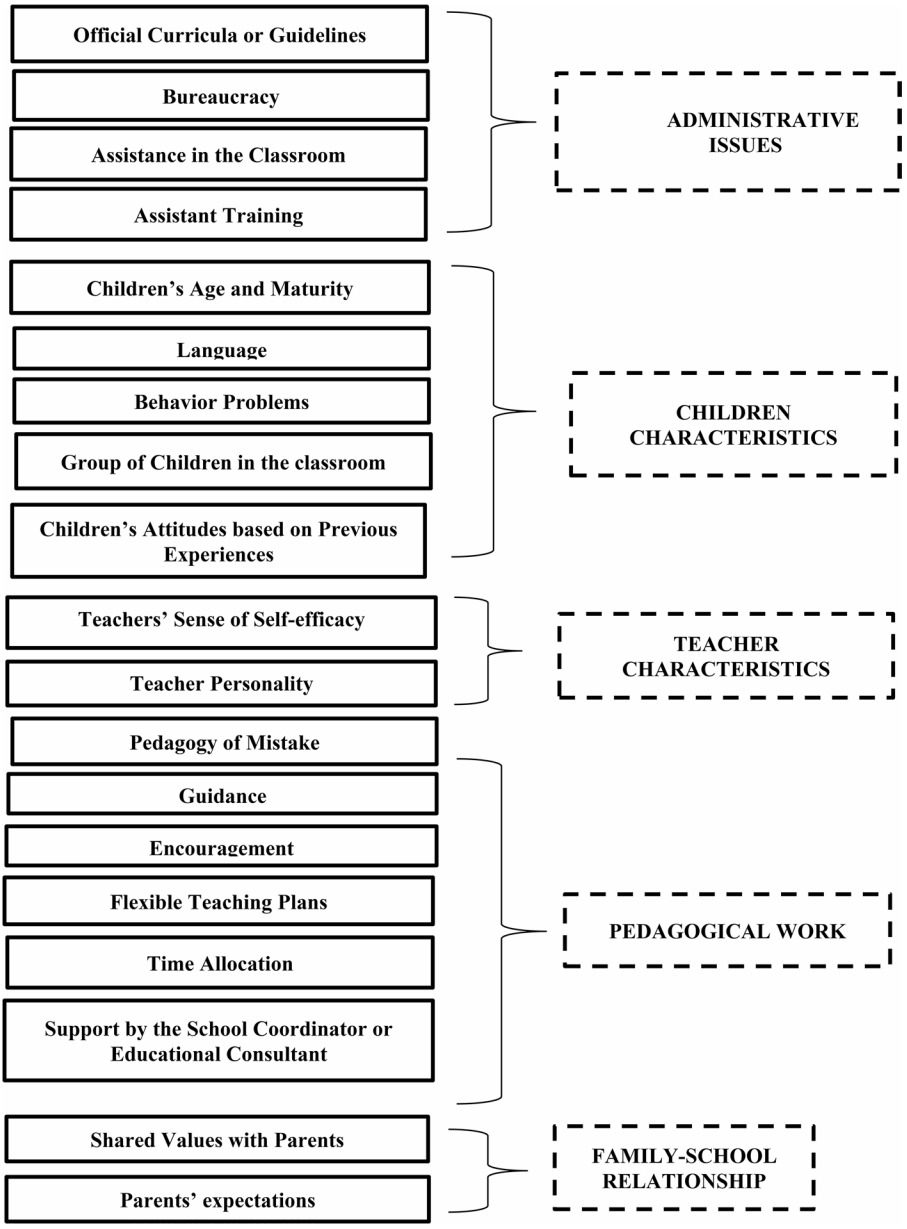


Fig. 1 Categories and themes for country specific conditions for children's participation, based on vertical qualitative content analysis

Participants' reports about *Collaboration with Families and Broader Community* revealed different aspects of family involvement and collaboration with the local community. Family involvement has been identified as a key indicator of ECEC quality, a prerequisite for democratic schooling, and an essential condition for promoting

Table 5 Framework of ecological and quality conditions for promoting children's participation rights in ECEC, based on teachers and coordinators' reports in the four countries ($N=50$)

	Structural quality	Process quality	Orientation quality
Person (the child) as a bio-social system	- Child Age and Maturity (Pt, Be) - Language (Be) - Behavior Problems (Gr)		- Children's Attitudes based on Prior Experience in ECEC (Pt)
ECEC Microsystem	- Organizational issues - Initial teacher education - Professional Experience in ECEC - *Time Allocation(Pt, Gr, Pl)* - *Assistant Training* (Pt) - *Assistance in the Classroom* (Pl)	- Pedagogical Leadership - Professional Autonomy - *Pedagogy of Mistake* (Be) - *Guidance* (Gr) - *Encouragement* (Pl) - *Group of Children in the Classroom (Be)* - *Time Allocation(Be, Pt)*	- Pedagogical Orientations - Personal Learning Dispositions - Shared vision - *Teachers' Sense of Self-efficacy* (Pt) - *Teacher Personality* (Be)
Mesosystem		- Collaboration with Families and Broader Community	- Shared vision - *Shared Values with Parents* (Pl) - *Parents Expectations* (Pl, Gr)
Exosystem	- Continuous Professional Development - *Bureaucracy* (Pt, Pl) - *Support by the School Coordinator or Educational Consultant (Be, Gr)*	- Climate Among Professionals - Team Collaboration - Professional Network - Pedagogical Leadership - Professional Autonomy - *Flexible Teaching Plans* (Pl) - *Support by the School Coordinator or Educational Consultant(Be, Gr)*	- Shared vision
Macrosystem	- Organizational issues - *Official Curricula or Guidelines* (Be, Gr)		

[1]*Be* Belgium, *Gr* Greece, *Pl* Poland, *Pt* Portugal

[2]The categories of the horizontal analysis were written with bold, those of the vertical analysis with italics, while the categories placed into different layers of the Context or dimensions of quality were underlined

children's participation rights (Formosinho & Passos, 2019). Parents have the right and responsibility to provide guidance and direction to children in the exercise of their rights (UN, 1989), with their role being particularly significant during early childhood (Varadan, 2019). However, not all parents have the knowledge or confidence to support children's participation effectively. Moreover, some may question the appropriateness of assigning participatory responsibilities to very young children or have concerns about the responsibilities that such participation may entail.

A coordinator emphasised the role of ECEC professionals in educating parents about children's participation in relation to the learning process through the projects they organize and the importance of listening to children's ideas and experiences regarding their learning, instead of paying attention to the product of their involvement: "One also must educate the parents in that respect. It's the process that counts, not the final project they [the children] go home with. Also, what they say about it

and the experience. That is the most important." (Be, C). Bringing together children, parents, and teachers to construct together activities and develop shared meanings of achievements is at the heart of the sociopedagogical thinking of Reggio Emilia that promotes a rights-based participatory pedagogical approach (de Sousa et al., 2019).

A teacher commented on parents' role in shaping school policy, sometimes as a barrier to the implementation of innovative pedagogies such as participatory approaches: "And I particularly remember, by chance in [the] private [sector], when I adopted this system of involving, listening, sharing with the children, but the parents were formatted for the directive system, for 25 cards glued to the wall, all the same, we had a manual…in preschool, a manual automatically adopted by the institution and we all had to…parents paid, so we had to use it, so that was a barrier at the time" (Pt, T).

A coordinator focused on working with the parents on how to promote children's autonomy and responsibility at home and support children initiatives. The issue of observing and monitoring children's behaviour and progresswas considered of importance for parents to acknowledge and promote children's participation: "At the beginning of the year, we come to an agreement with the parents to have a common pedagogical policy. I ask them to give initiative to the children, and I urge them to monitor children. The truth is that many parents tell me we have seen a huge difference. Most of them are very happy to see that they do not need to yell or punish children for cleaning up. They develop responsibility, especially with their toys and cleaning up their room" (Gr, C). Continuity in learning experiences between school and family is a core concept in Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory, at the heart of the mesosystemic processes. The role of the school to enhance parents' knowledge and skills regarding children's participation rights with the aim of promoting a culture of participation across microsystems constitutes a criterion for high-quality ECEC and a basic principle of its sociopedagogical mission. However, this multidimensional construct of family-school collaboration, reflected in participants' narratives regarding children's participation, is neither acknowledged nor practiced across the EU ECEC centres, signalling a critical gap in relevant services for preschool children (OECD, 2024).

Another participant referred to the importance of community resources and professionals to promote children's inquiry-based learning and development of projects: "We use everything we have around us, and we have the Town Hall, we have the library, we have all these resources next to us, we also have spaces for sport and we use everything to put at the disposal of the professionals and the children, mainly, so that they can develop all the projects that arise and are always arising in all classrooms" (Pt, C). Lundy et al. (2024) acknowledge resources as a basic factor for high-quality ECEC suggesting that not only should resources be adequately allocated to ECEC settings but also that children may participate in decision making about priorities and needs.

Pedagogical Leadership was the fourth most highly reported category within this theme. Considering that within the same organizational culture different subcultures may exist, leaders are expected to balance power relations through open and flexible structures, having in mind that leadership processes are part of the culture, too (Torres, 2022). According to a coordinator, promoting children's participation

requires that routines and tasks are flexible and open, and this can only be done if the leader inspires teachers to be creative and leave room for the children: "You can never impose that from above, those are things that you have to make your colleagues aware of and then invite them to add ideas to it themselves. That's how they start building it up. We now also place a lot of emphasis on all those routines, fruit moments and such… Why do the children have to do all of this at the same time, because it's already done? What should they do in the meantime? Otherwise, children will be waiting" (Be, C).

Polish participants emphasized that effective leadership fosters a participatory climate not only for children, but also among staff: "Because I have a coordinator who gives us freedom, but at the same time controls us, I mean not completely, because there is a very good relationship between the staff and the coordinator. It is very important that I can come forward with any problem and count on help" (Pl, T); "A good leader can support his teachers by giving them courage. If he/she can discuss his/her decisions and is not directive, he/she has a good chance to create a work environment where everyone is important and their voice is heard" (Pl, C).

Participants' reports highlighted the pedagogical leader as a caring figure for both children and staff, inspiring, guiding, and supporting giving space and tools to participate and enjoy their agency and commitment (Siraj-Blatchford & Hallet, 2014). Interestingly, Polish teachers and coordinators highly appreciated *Pedagogical Leadership* as a condition for children's participation, producing 68% of the relevantexcerpts.

Importance was also placed on *Shared Vision* among stakeholders in the ECEC setting, except from Greek participants who contributed with only one reference in this category. Portuguese participants discussed inconsistencies in ECEC professionals' vision towards children's participation. A teacher commented on the influence these inconsistencies have on both teachers and children's participation and wellbeing: "I have been with this group for a very short time and this group is used to a more directive pedagogy and I am constantly changing groups I feel this difficulty so we still have a lot of our directed pedagogy and our proposed works and then the child has to follow them and as I try to do a little of that inverse I sometimes find myself distressed by having to mix these two things, because they are used and not used to being heard" (Pt, T).

A coordinator noted the fact that participation is not something you do or not. It regards the school culture; it should be included in the vision of the school, and it is reflected in every decision and action: "What I also often find is that child participation is often seen as one thing. Child participation, the participation of preschoolers, listening to preschoolers, that's all. But it is sometimes detached from the complete vision of the school. It is seen as something that you add or not, while that is something all-encompassing in a school. It starts from how the parents are or are not welcome at school or how you organize lunch together or do excursions. That's in so many things" (Be, C).

Although *Professional Autonomy* represented only the 4.3% of the coded excerpts, it seemed relevant for the promotion of children's participation in all the countries. A teacher emphasised the fact that teachers have gained their freedom in implementing pedagogical practices in the classroom, as far as they are effective to pursue the

learning goals, which in turn is helpful for promoting children's participation: "We are also allowed to do our own thing increasingly. In my class there are not very many rules except for pursuing the goals. It doesn't matter how they are pursued. Compared to ten years ago, we can do much more. If we can, why can't the kids?" (Be, T). A coordinator also focused on the role of teachers' voice and contribution to the participatory culture of the setting. "…if we are to talk about participation, it must be at all levels and teachers must feel that their opinion counts" (Pl, C).

Lastly, *Climate Among Professionals* represented only 1.7% of the coded excerpts from the transcribed material. A Polish coordinator stressed the importance of trust among staff, which promotes a sense of belonging and rapport: "What the staff talks about also shows the attitude and trust of the teachers towards each other. To what extent they see themselves as a source of support, they form a community, is a necessary condition for participation, because participation requires trust" (Pl, C). A coordinator from Portugal goes even further suggesting that informal, friendly meetings among professionals constitute the key for establishing good professional relationships: "In addition to these, therefore, we also try to maintain a relationship of friendship, in addition to the professional relationship. So, we always have the meeting points. We have lunches on Thursdays, we meet for lunch those who can, sometimes one or the other can't, but we always have them on Tuesdays. And then, for example, when there's no school break, we're not at school, but we always arrange a tea, or a crepe and we all meet. So, this, strengthening the friendship is also strengthening the professional relationship" (Pt, C). A strong sense of collegiality provides the foundation for reflective practice, enabling professionals to develop shared meanings and understandings of children's agency and democratic participation (Skrzypczak, 2022).

On the other hand, when professionals have their own agenda oriented to more academic goals and parents put pressure on desired outcomes, the climate in the school does not favour participatory approaches: "Sometimes I feel pressure from colleagues and parents. Most of my colleagues have their own programme, with their prefixed topics and activities that most parents expect their children should do in kindergarten. When you work with children and follow their ideas and suggestions you may do unexpected activities and work on topics that are unconventional. I'm not encouraged and accepted. They believe I do not do my work. Even if they do not tell it to me directly, I can feel it" (Gr, T); "You don't always have a team that is so driven or where things come naturally" (Be, C). Teacher-directed approaches are less likely to respond to children's ideas and interests. In contrast, research suggests (Lerkkanen et al., 2016) that child-centred teaching in ECEC is associated with higher academic skills in first grade, regardless of children's initial skills.

Professional Profiles *Professional Profiles* was the second most frequently reported theme with 35% of the coded excerpts. It included five categories that described professional and personal characteristics of the pedagogical staff that influence their stance and pedagogical choices towards children's participation: (a) Initial Teacher Education, (b) Continuous Professional Development, (c) Professional Experience in ECEC, (d) Pedagogical Orientations, and (e) Personal Dispositions.

Pedagogical Orientations included the knowledge of pedagogical approaches that promote children's participation which was deemed important for ECEC professionals to develop a positive stance and relevant practices. As a teacher noted, "I have read about Reggio Emilia and how children's experiences and ideas are cherished and acted upon (…)" (Gr, T). Reggio Emilia constitutes a pedagogical approach, based on experimental practice that uses a participatory and democratic methodology to promote critical thinking and innovative learning (Fernández-Santín & Feliu-Torruella, 2020).

In other cases, ECEC professionals referred to the pedagogical approaches adopted in their settings, highlighting participation as a core value and suggesting that their decision to work in a particular setting reflected an alignment with its underlying pedagogical philosophy: "We are also a Freinet school, so it is completely anchored in our way of thinking about good education. So, starting from what children are doing, working on responsibility, which I also find a very important necessity to work on participation, so that you really dare to give responsibilities to children. That they are given responsibility for those pieces of work or those small plans that they make, to really get to work with them and to do things with them. So that's completely contained in Freinet' s vision" (Be, C).

Participants in almost all focus groups mentioned examples of how prior *Professional Experience* could facilitate or hinder the implementation and effectiveness of innovative pedagogies such as children's participation. Polish teachers and coordinators provided most of the relevant reports (74%). A coordinator mentioned prior experience as a criterion for workforce recruitment, potentially associated with the motivation to work with new approaches: "In a setting I used to work in, the coordinators did not want experienced professionals because they thought that those having worked with teacher-directive pedagogical methods could not easily adopt participatory practices. They preferred to train the novice professional and not hire experienced ones" (Pl, C).

Most importantly, it was noted that experience in ECEC is a driving force to promote participation as the more professionals work with children the more they understand their competences and ideas and, relatedly, the more they are sensitive to their needs: "…it was also something that I learned over time, and I learned from them, from the kids because we have a great need to want to be the ones to say what the idea is, to put… to put a filter on their ideas, to think that many things are impossible, that they cannot be done, we tend to do this without realizing it. Because we're not watching, they're talking and we drop that" (Pt, T).

This is very relevant to *Personal Learning Dispositions*. A coordinator described it very well: "This process of change, maturing as a professional involves the need for the teacher but also the coordinator to have a concept of themselves as a learner. And being reflective. If the teacher thinks of him/herself as a person who already knows everything, and only the others, like children, must learn; if he/she does not understand that there is always a need to search for new solutions, then nothing will help" (Pl, C). Love for the children and commitment to their participation and learning is also important as a teacher from Belgium highlighted: "I love working with children because they give a lot of input about what they want to learn in the classroom. So, I

try to go with that. It is fascinating what comes out of the children themselves" (Be, T).

Continuous Professional Development and *Professional Networks* are two categories with small and equal weight (3.4%). The importance of *Continuous Professional Development* along with professional experience and reflection was highlighted by a teacher in Belgium: "We have Freinet techniques. In doing so, we start entirely or within from the world of the child… The professionalization courses ensure that we dare to try. [As a teacher] you come out of school and that is completely different from when you stand alone in front of the class. I learned so much more in the years I worked than I studied. That's not rude. You try and when something fails you reflect yourself" (Be, T). Moreover, for some participants continuous professional development is necessary to update their knowledge and expertise and especially to follow the needs of the children and families which have changed dramatically over the years: "I think that we should have training on that issue. I need to know certain methods and models. Things change, children and families change, we need to know how to promote children's citizenship. This was not the case some years ago" (Gr, C).

This seemed particularly relevant, as their *Initial Teacher Education* courses did not include models and practices regarding children's participation rights, as a teacher from Portugal noted: "When I did my initial training (degree), I also consider that there were many gaps, it was the first year that the higher education school was starting (…), so my course was very focused on learning and on promoting children's skills [and not child participation]" (Pt, T). Kilderry (2015) emphasized the role of initial teacher education, arguing that the knowledge provided through ECEC programs, together with the expectations embedded within management structures, mediate how teachers interpret pedagogical approaches and translate them into practice.

Professional Networks did not seem a popular strategy among participants. Only professionals from Belgium and Portugal referred to organised professional networks: "I am also involved in an experience-oriented Contact Group. Since I went there, my vision has been constantly changing and changing. I like that, because you get to know something from everyone. Just like now. To hear everyone. These are also different networks, different schools. What you do. And you want to taste and try out something else" (Be, T). Only coordinators from Greece and Poland mentioned some examples of informal networking with other leaders to exchange ideas and experiences, especially with an aim to solve problems: "Making changes is easier when there is a group of people facing the same problems… Then it is easier to open up, to ask: listen, I have this difficult conversation with my teachers, how do I manage it?" (Pl, C). Professional networks and communities of practice represent democratic approaches to professional development that promote high-quality ECEC by supporting critical reflection, transformation, and innovation in ECEC (Jensen & Iannone, 2018).

Organization of ECEC Environment The *Organization of the ECEC Environment* referred to Organizational Issues such as (a) number of children in the classroom, (b) number, quality, and arrangement of materials, (c) teacher-child ratio. It represented the 12,5% of the coded excerpts. *Organizational Issues* was the third most

frequently coded category. It includes aspects that were described by participants as both facilitating and hindering children's participation, a duality that also applies to many of the other categories that emerged. According to participants, one aspect that seemed to have influence on participation was the way the physical space is organized. The physical space was particularly highlighted by Polish participants whose reports contributed 45% of the total excerpts of the category: "It works because there are architectural conditions for it, on one side of the corridor there's my door and on the other side the door to the classrooms. So, when I have the door open, I can hear what is going on in the groups all the time, I can hear the conversations between the adults and the children, there is full transparency" (Pl, C). Previous studies suggest that children's opportunities to participate are shaped by the number and quality of furniture and materials in the environment, the way it is arranged, and the extent to which children are represented in the physical space of ECEC (Knauf, 2019). Relatedly, Reggio Emilia approach has introduced the idea of the environment as the third teacher, meaning that the classroom surroundings have meanings and messages that help teachers to draw deeply into children's perspectives (Fraser, 2006).

Other aspects of structural quality such as number of children and children-adult ratios were highlighted in participants' narratives. A coordinator from Portugal commented on the group size, the mixed-aged classrooms, and heterogeneity as challenging conditions, both in a positive and negative way: "Sometimes I think that maybe the number of children, the age, the heterogeneous groups that bring a lot of advantages, but sometimes they also bring very big challenges (…) especially in relation to the older ones, the acceptance of the little one, of the weakest, it's very interesting, it's very enriching, but it brings many challenges" (Pt, C). A teacher from Greece reflected about the number of children in the classroom: "All of these are different depending on the group you have. Whether it is numerous or not. I think that in the big groups that we work with, this is a bit difficult because the first ideas and suggestions can be heard but then it is difficult for all the children to take turns and speak. I have 25 children. Can you imagine giving the turn to all of them?" (Gr, T). Additional staff in the classroom was also pointed out by some teachers as important for children's participation: "When there are several teachers (co-teachers) in the classroom, that enhances children's opportunities to choose" (Be, T). Dealing with staff shortage was pointed as an obstacle in promoting children's participation in ECEC in Skrzypczak's study (2022).

Collaboration among Professionals *Collaboration among Professionals* was the least reported (12%) theme. It included two categories, (a) Team Collaboration, referring to communication and shared decision making among pedagogical staff in the ECEC institution, and (b) Professional Networks, referring to connection and exchanges with professionals outside the ECEC setting. *Team Collaboration* represented 8.5% of the coded material. A Polish coordinator focused on the issue of trust and support between colleagues as a prerequisite for promoting participation: "What the staff talks about also shows the attitude and trust of teachers towards each other. If they consider themselves as a source of support; do they form a community… which is a necessary condition for participation" (Pl, C). Exchanging experiences and shar-

ing ideas between colleagues is a means for reflecting on practices and broadening perspectives regarding participatory approaches: "We try to find times during the day, even during break time, to talk with each other and share experiences and our evaluations of children's participation. Collaboration with colleagues makes me reflect about my practices and improve my approach through sharing ideas" (Gr, C). Communication, trust, and responsiveness among professionals in ECEC settings are essential conditions for effectively promoting children's participation rights (Skrzypczak, 2022) strengthening the sense of belongingness and self-effectiveness among staff (Marçalo et al., 2026).

5.2 Country-Specific Conditions for Participation: Vertical Analysis

Country-specific conditions for children's participation as described by teachers and coordinators in the four countries were organised in categories and relevant themes, based on the vertical analysis (Fig. 1). Five additional themes were identified focusing on teachers and coordinators' narratives, derived from categories that were not evidenced across the four countries, revealing country-specific considerations: Administrative issues, Children characteristics, Teacher characteristics, Pedagogical work, and Family-school relationship. Categories and themes in the vertical analysis were not mutually exclusive with the corresponding ones in the horizontal analysis. However, they introduced new meanings, a different focus regarding the level of the system (for example, person-classroom-institution), a targeted emphasis on the educational practice, or particularities not evidenced in the horizontal analysis.

Administrative Issues *Administrative Issues* (vertical analysis) is a theme closely related to *Organization of ECEC Environment* (horizontal analysis) but it shifts the emphasis more on characteristics of the systems that relate to the pedagogical work and to a lesser extent on structure. It regards (a) Official Curricula or Guidelines, (b) Bureaucracy, (c) Assistance in the Classroom, and (d) Assistant Training.

Specific references were made by some professionals about the importance of *Official Curricula or Guidelines* that acknowledge children's participation rights and suggest relevant strategies: "I think that the curricular orientations only come to validate that…" (Pt, T). A Greek teacher commented on the open character of the official curriculum which leaves room for teachers and children's ideas: "The basic thing is that we have a curriculum that is open. Every goal we have is based on play. We do not have the stress of having to cover certain themes or materials. We are free to design our own program" (Gr, T). Curricular orientations are an important dimension of quality in ECEC, providing a framework of principles, theoretical perspectives, and pedagogical approaches that guide educational practice. Policy documents play a key role in communicating knowledge, establishing shared understandings, and providing guidance for the implementation of rights-based ECEC (Mansikka & Lundkvist, 2022). While national curricula are part of the structural quality, the way they are understood and implemented in practice constitute a vital component of process quality (Laevers, 2005).

On the other hand, *Bureaucracy* seems an insurmountable obstacle for participatory pedagogical approaches at the level of administration: "The bad side, there's a lot of bureaucracy, a lot of time is wasted on papers, on platforms" (Pt, C); "But a lot, a lot has changed recently, because there are bureaucratic procedures, some formal issues. But we make sure that there is time to talk about our daily work" (Pl, T).

A teacher from Poland reflected on the need to have *Assistance in the Classroom*, from an assistant teacher or co-teacher, to become more responsive to children's participation and give appropriate and due weight to their needs: "Support of additional adults is very important. If some children would not like to go out to the garden, we could divide the group; one person would go out with the children, and the other would stay" (Pl, T). The issue raised here differs somewhat from the broader concern regarding shortages of pedagogical staff identified in the horizontal analysis. The Polish teacher emphasises the pedagogical importance of having an assistant teacher or co-teacher, regardless of the number of children in the group. The presence of additional pedagogical staff is viewed as enabling educators to respond more effectively to both the collective and individual needs of children, while creating greater opportunities for children to participate meaningfully in matters that are important to them.

To this end, training of the auxiliary staff, especially *Assistant Training* for those ECEC systems that include a second professional in the classroom, seems important to establish a seamless participatory pedagogical culture in the classroom and the ECEC setting: "There is a problem here because our operational assistants and technical assistants are workers from the municipality, and the municipality… We, the school clusters and I advise… We are always asking for training for the operational assistants and mainly because childhood education must have a specific and adequate response. And not having training, I, myself, had already given training to operational assistants, to technical assistants of the family support activities" (Pt, C).

Children Characteristics *Children Characteristics* was a theme uniquely derived during the vertical analysis, with four categories: (a) Children's Age and Maturity, (b) Language, (c) Behaviour Problems and (d) Group of Children in the classroom. It focused on the role of children in the realization of participation pedagogy in ECEC. This is in line with bioecological theory that regards children as co-constructors of their development in collaboration with adults and peers in specific socio-cultural contexts. However, listening to children's voices is not enough. How children are informed about the results of their participation shapes the way to better understand and cherish this participation and helps them to develop diverse expressional tools to communicate their ideas, feelings, and suggestions (Sivertsen & Bjørgen, 2025).

Children's Age and Maturity seems an important condition for children to take initiative, express their ideas, and participate in the classroom, according to participants, in Portugal and Belgium: "…because we felt that interviewing children with 3 years old is more difficult" (Pt, C); "Children in my classroom predominantly start to take initiative from January onwards. I think that older children in the third year of preschool are even more able to take initiative and to participate in the classroom" (Be, T).

Teachers in Belgium and Greece referred to *Language and Behaviour Problems*, respectively, as challenges to participation: "Language… Last year we had a group of

second kindergarten students who were very articulate, and you could already have a conversation with them. And now that is pulling and dragging to get something out of it. Also, in the second [age group], but we have a lot of silent children that don't dare to say anything, although they can. We know that" (Be, T); "The number of children with some problems is increasing and we are alone in our classrooms to deal with difficult situations. When you have one child that has so many difficulties, even kicks, bites, and pushes other children all the time, it doesn't even sit in the cycle to discuss their experiences over the weekend. And you have all the other parents to complain and even threaten you… what to do… you must be teacher-centred and even force discipline…" (Gr, T). These narratives raise the issue of a clear disconnect between how legal rights and theory protects children's participation rights and what is evidenced in pedagogical practice and daily classroom experiences, especially for children with disabilities or and behavior problems. Even difficulties in language expression are understood as disruption to be managed and not a form of communication or reaction to unmet needs (Dott & Licandro, 2025).

A narrow and developmental-deficit view of children's capacities constitutes a barrier to participation, a finding with direct implications for more targeted and developmentally appropriate pre-service education and professional development. Systematic education in a rights-based and inclusive education by university departments responsible for ECEC teacher training is critical to cultivate commitment and expertise to educate and care for all children (Koutsoklenis & Papadimitriou, 2024).

A teacher from Belgium gave emphasis to the *Group of Children in the Classroom*, highlighting the importance of participation as a characteristic of the whole group and not only of each child individually, as a collective activity: "…in some class groups, as a whole, children participate more frequently than in other class groups" (Be, T).

Another issue raised by a teacher from Portugal regarded *Children's Attitudes based on Previous Experiences*, which may hinder or facilitate participatory approaches, showing the gaps and discontinuities in pedagogical approaches followed in diverse ECEC settings, even in the same educational system: "And I have a difficulty, and in group management. I reflect about it and I attribute this difficulty to what happened before. Therefore, they [children] were not used to this dynamic and, therefore, there is still a difficulty in meeting certain parameters" (Pt, T).

Teacher Characteristics *Teacher Characteristics* was a theme that appeared in focus groups in Portugal and Belgium. *Teachers' Sense of Self-Efficacy* seemed an important prerequisite for organizing the pedagogical work, stemming from knowledge and experience: "I believe I am more mindful when I think of what I'm going to do next year, when I think about the times, as I told you earlier, about the space, even about the space usage. I make some personal options, that's true" (Pl, T). *Teacher Personality* was identified as an important contributor to this end. "The competence to enable children's participation needs to be an intrinsic part of yourself, inspired by Ferre Laevers and CEGO" (Be, T). These themes are aligned with previous research: teachers' psychological characteristics such as personality and self-efficacy have been found to be related significantly to teaching effectiveness (Klassen & Tze, 2014).

Pedagogical Work *Pedagogical Work*, was composed of five categories: (a) Pedagogy of Mistake, (b) Guidance, (c) Encouragement, (d) Flexible Teaching Plans, (e) *Support by the School Coordinator or Educational Consultant* and (f) Time Allocation. It adds to the analysis of conditions about participatory approaches in ECEC with applied pedagogical strategies and not just pedagogical orientations, emphasized in the horizontal analysis [*Professional Profiles*].

Enactment of participation is at the heart of the *Pedagogical Work* based on the *Pedagogy of Mistake*, according to another teacher: "Teachers should give children the opportunity to make mistakes. It is important that children's ideas are not immediately filtered through adults. Sometimes it is possible that children's ideas are not good or realistic, but it is important to give them the opportunity to try their ideas. Only by trying, children can realize that their ideas were perhaps not as good as they seemed to be at first sight" (Be, T). Bringing together the pedagogy of mistake with children's participation rights may challenge conventional understandings of control, agency, and learning. Mistakes and errors are understood as valuable opportunities for exploration, reflection, dialogue, and meaning-making. Such an approach can create space for children to exercise agency, express their views, and participate in decisions concerning their learning, thereby connecting everyday pedagogical practice with the principles of democratic participation (Gabas et al., 2023).

A Greek teacher commented on the need for *Guidance* to help children form opinions and share their ideas, to gradually develop autonomy and self-determination: "Children are not ready from the beginning of the school year to express their ideas, to make questions and suggestions. At first, I used more guidance, and I am the one who has control of the learning process, especially now with so many 4-year old children in the classroom. I need to teach them how to think about their learning and then gradually to help them participate in the design of the activities with their ideas and interests" (Gr, T).

A teacher from Poland discussed the importance of *Encouragement*, especially for disadvantaged children who may feel subordinate and do not believe in their abilities: "Those children from disadvantaged families… they do not have faith in their own abilities; they face limitations from the very beginning" (Pl, T). Encouragement is a characteristic of supportive teacher-child relationships, among the most important components of the proximal processes in the ECEC microsystem and a critical quality indicator for optimal development (Pianta et al., 2016).

Finally, the need for teachers to develop *Flexible Teaching Plans* was stressed by a Polish coordinator, showing that children's participation needs strategic planning at all levels of the system to be promoted and established, both as a classroom pedagogy and as a school culture: "The flexibility of the teaching plans is important. If teachers and the director are unable to prepare them, there is no room for children to participate" (Pl., C).

Support by the School Coordinator or Educational Consultant was mentioned by professionals from Belgium and Greece: "Coordinators have an important role and should be role models for teachers and staff. I try to be a good example for them to promote children's participation" (Gr, C); "…when the school director gives flexibility in working with goals" (Be, T); "We do not have somebody [Educational Con-

sultant] with appropriate knowledge to guide us and help us apply new methods or improve how we work" (Gr, C).

The issue of *Time Allocation* was also highlighted by professionals in Belgium and Portugal. To promote children's participation, teachers should give them space and time to work at their own pace, elaborating on their ideas: "Time is the one that escapes from our hands and can't stretch it a little bit more" (Pt, T); "It is important sometimes to make time. When your week schedule is too full, you do not have room to enable participation" (Be, T); "For example, when children are busy with a task and they would like to finish it, I make time to enable children to continue their work" (Be, T). Relatedly, time was recognised by teachers as the main challenge in promoting children's participation in Skrzypczak's study (2022), as lack of time for discussions among all parties involved, children, parents, and staff, reflection and shared decision making, limits authentic participation.

Relationship with Parents The theme *Family-School Relationship* elaborated on the horizontal category *Collaboration with Families and Broader Community* of the *Organizational Culture* theme. It raised the issues of (a) Shared Values with Parents and (b) Parents' Expectations as important for children's participation, which are critical aspects of the relationship dimension of family-school collaboration (Petrogiannis & Penderi, 2014).

Relationship with Parents was mentioned by some Polish and Greek participants. The issue of *Parents' Expectations* was highlighted by a coordinator from Poland, noting that parents' expectations differing from both the children and the teachers may be an obstacle: "There are obviously issues of parents' expectations that need to be considered. If a parent for example does not agree with his/her child to go on a trip, then even if the child wants it and the teacher wants it, we must respect the decision of the parent" (Pl, C). A Greek teacher also indicated, "When I use other practices and methods that presuppose authentic participation by children, sometimes parents are critical, especially of those children who cannot participate as we would expect them to. Parents tell me that I use more advanced methods compared to the age and children's capabilities. In many cases, parents behave towards their children as they are babies and when we expect them to have active participation in decisions in the classroom, they think we do not know how to work with children" (Gr, T).

Shared Values with Parents was among the issues highlighted by a Polish teacher: "I think every parent is and must be the partner of a teacher, because we are raising one child together. It cannot be that we stand in opposition to each other. We should establish a common system of values, establish a way … a style of raising a child. Because if a child goes home and has a completely different style of upbringing than in the kindergarten, it is simply difficult for him/her" (Pl, T).

Acknowledging the importance of parents' expectations to promote shared values between ECEC and family is a critical aspect to achieve effective collaboration, showing that this collaboration is not only a matter of practices but also relationship building.

5.3 Ecological and Quality Conditions for Promoting Children's Participation Rights in ECE

To address the third aim of the study, a framework was developed (Table 5) to depict the ecological and quality conditions related to the promotion of children's participation rights in ECEC. Based on Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory and the construct of quality in ECEC, the framework reflects participants' perceptions, experiences, and suggestions on ECEC conditions across and within each country. We used the five layers of the *Context*, proposed in Bronfenbrenner's framework, in the horizontal axis and the three dimensions of quality in the vertical axis.

Placing each category in the horizontal axis was relatively straightforward due to the specificity of *Context* layers, while placing categories in the appropriate quality dimension was challenging due to the ambiguity in the conceptualization and measurement of quality (Cohrssen et al., 2023), especially process quality, as well as the limited consideration of orientational quality in relevant literature.

Bronfenbrenner's structure of the Context was used by Edwards (2021) to discern levels of structural characteristics with reference to (a) the macrosystem, such as national regulations, legislated child-to-staff ratios, group sizes, requirements for professional education and training of educators/staff; and (b) the microsystem, such as centre-based policies, management of services, safety procedures, the length of the learning day. Accordingly, as evidenced in Table 5, the category *Organizational Issues* was included in the structural quality axis but in both the microsystemic and macrosystemic layers. For example, group size and mixed-age groups arrangements constitute macrosystemic components while the organization of the physical space and availability of materials are aspects of the microsystem, as based on the participants' reports they seemed to reflect centre-based conditions.

The category *Support by the School Coordinator or Educational Consultant*, was placed in the exosystemic layer, but both in the structural and process quality dimensions axes. The (lack of) support by the Educational Consultant referred to the structure of the system surrounding the ECEC setting at the local level, but the support from the coordinator reflected the professional work of the staff in the setting, which is part of the process quality. Process quality mainly focuses on children's interaction with the teachers and the instructional components of the program. Although teachers' relationship with parents is regarded as an element of process quality (OECD, 2017), "adults working together" is referred by some as an indicator of structure, while appearing in some research under the umbrella of process quality (Ha et al., 2024, p. 2).

Overall, findings show that children's participation emerges from the interaction between structural conditions, professional beliefs, organisational cultures, and broader ecological influences, supporting the idea that a rights-based participation is a systemic process that permeates the entire ecological system.

In our framework, *Collaboration with Families and Broader Community* as part of the mesosystem, and *Climate Among Professionals*, *Team Collaboration* and *Professional Network*, as components of the exosystem, were regarded as part of process quality. Attitudes, values, and dispositions towards collaboration and relationships were identified as inherentto orientation quality and were included in the microsys-

tem when theyreferred to the teacher and pedagogical processes in the classroom or setting. *Parents Expectations* and *Shared Values with Parents* referred to the mesosystem being characteristics of the relationship between family and school. *Shared Vision* was included in the microsystem as this is something that is negotiated with children and experienced in everyday interactions. It is also a part of the exosystem, as participants mainly focused on the professionals' pedagogical stance towards participation rights, which is developed through exchanges among pedagogical staff without the presence of the children. *Shared vision* was included in the mesosystem, too, as in a democratic school a shared vision should be developed and communicated also with families. *Children's Attitudes based on Prior Experience in ECEC* was one of the four categories from the vertical analysis that were included in the first layer of the Context, the person as a biosocial system, reflecting orientation quality. The other three, namely *Child Age and Maturity*, *Language*, *Behaviour Problems*, were placed in the axis of structural quality as they describe children's characteristics that shape the structure of their development and learning, as well as the structure of the group in the setting.

6 Conclusion

The study investigated teachers and coordinators' narratives across four European countries to understand the facilitators and constraints in promoting children's participation as a right in ECEC settings. The purpose of the study was three-fold: (i) understanding the conditions of children's participation relevant for the four ECEC systems, from the perspectives of teachers and coordinators (horizontal analysis), (ii) understanding country-specific considerations (vertical analysis); and (iii) developing a framework depicting ecological and quality parameters in promoting children's participation rights in ECEC. To achieve this, the framework used and combined categories from both the horizontal and vertical analyses.

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory, and particularly its layers of the Context, was used to organize conditions, filtered through the three-dimensions model of quality in ECEC, namely structural, process, and orientational quality (Anders et al., 2016). This choice was driven by the fact that the promotion of children's participation rights is related to ECEC quality (Lundy et al., 2024). The variety of characteristics associated with ECEC quality has led to efforts to organise them into a smaller number of broader dimensions. This tendency can be understood through the principle of conceptual parsimony, whereby a theoretical framework seeks the simplest possible representation of a phenomenon without substantially compromising its explanatory or descriptive adequacy (Vandekerckhove et al., 2015). In ECEC research, this has involved the gradual organisation of numerous individual indicators into broader categories, most notably structural and process quality (Slot, 2018), while other frameworks have added system quality as a distinct third domain (Eadie et al., 2024; Torii et al., 2017) or have included orientation quality and networking with families as additional components (Anders et al., 2016; Kluczniok & Roßbach, 2014). Such conceptual condensation does not imply that quality is a simple con-

struct; rather, it seeks to organise its complexity into a limited number of theoretically coherent dimensions.

By proposing a three-dimensional model of quality and combining these quality dimensions with Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework, the study further strengthens this parsimony, as it retains a limited set of quality dimensions while adding explanatory depth through the multiple layers of context. In this way, conditions for participation can be examined across the ecological system, from the immediate settings in which participation occurs to the broader contextual and systemic conditions that shape it. Moreover, the bioecological model puts the child in the centre of the developmental and learning processes, considering factors and processes from proximal and distal layers of the ecological system that are related to wellbeing (Cassells & Evans, 2020).

Narratives from pedagogical staff are of particular importance, primarily, as a matter of professionals' democratic participation in the academic field to provide their perspectives on those aspects that affect ECEC. This participation supports the expression of their voices over their professional milieux with an aim to promote the quality of children's educational experiences, focusing on their rights-based participation. Moreover, as quality conceptions depend on cultural and historical contexts, professionals' points of view and consultation on conditions that establish high-quality ECEC and promote children's participation experiences are of particular importance, delivering messages on behalf of the children andtheir best interest (Lundy et al., 2024; Vandenbroeck & Peeters, 2013). Teachers and coordinators' participation in focus groups is also important to exchange ideas and experiences regarding children's participation rights, to develop a shared understanding of practices and conditions that facilitate or hinder children's participation, and to be further motivated and committed to support such participation.

With reference to the horizontal analysis regarding conditions for participation across the four countries, four general themes and thirteen categories were derived from the transcribed material. The theme with the highest frequency of responses was *Organization Culture*. The categories of this theme were included in diverse layers of the context, reflecting complex processes that span the system, referring mainly to process quality, with one exception, *Shared Vision*, which is an aspect of orientation quality. The importance of *Shared Vision*, as highlighted by respondents, briefly and meaningfully reflects the need to establish a culture of democratic participation throughout the whole school environment (Lansdown et al., 2014). It is integral to any effort for improvement and change, bridging the present with the future towards the implementation of educational and social innovations and strategies (Toikka & Tarnanen, 2024). To achieve this, a positive *Climate among Professionals* is a critical factor, as collective responsibility to achieve the goals and improvements regarding this visionrequires co-creation, trust, and collegiality among professionals (Ford, 2014). This collegiality is promoted and supported by strong and committed *Leadership* that should alsosupport *Professional Autonomy* for pedagogical staff to exercise their agency and make pedagogical decisions tailored to children's views, needs, and interests. Despite not being specifically mentioned in the Convention (UN, 1989), *Collaboration with Families and the broader Community* seems to be a critical factor, according to participants, for establishing a participatory culture in ECEC settings, as

a joint responsibility that brings together all important individuals in a child's life, in line with Bronfenbrenner's theoretical premises (Miller et al., 2014).

The second most highly reported theme was *Professional Profiles*, emphasizing pedagogical staff characteristics that cover aspects of structural and orientation quality in the microsystemic and exosystemic levels. Pedagogical staff underscored the importance of robust *Initial Teacher Education* and *Continuous Professional Development* which transforms knowledge and skills to commitment to supporting children's participation and relevant practice. This is relevant to *Professional Experience in ECEC*, as this experience influences *Personal Dispositions* in relation to the *Pedagogical Orientation* of the staff, to form perceptions and beliefs about their pedagogical roles (Salminen, 2013) and children's status regarding participation in ECEC (Heikka et al., 2022). Moreover, these *Professional Profiles* constitute the basis to develop a shared understanding and inclusive practices to involve children and support their participation considering the different ages, backgrounds, and needs not only individually but also collectively (Mesquita-Pires, 2012; Sairanen et al., 2020).

Organization of ECEC Environment, the third theme in frequency, referred to structural quality in the micro- and macro- systems. The microsystemic level of ECEC environment depicts the structure of space, the physical environment, and the arrangements that orient the functioning of the classroom and the social relationships, based on the institutional framework of policies and the curricula, at the macrosystemic level, that create the context in which pedagogical staff and children interact and exercise their agency (Kangas et al., 2016).

The least frequently reported theme was *Collaboration among Professionals*. Related categories - *Team Collaboration* in ECEC settings and development of *Professional Networks* - are aspects of the process quality in the exosystem. Collegiality and collaboration among professionals constitute the basis for the shared vision and the promotion of a culture of participation in ECEC. Importantly, there is a discrepancy here considering that the theme *Organization Culture*, which refers to the orientation components of the shared vision, was the most coded, while the theme *Collaboration among Professionals*, which focuses on the enablers of the shared vision, was the least coded. This discrepancy is an example of the gap between theory and practice, beliefs and practices, and between orientation and process quality (Chan, 2016). This discrepancy is linked to the theme *Professional Profiles*, showing the importance of a systemic approach, considering all aspects of the ECEC system and quality dimensions to promote this participatory pedagogy culture to promote children's participation rights (Hayes et al., 2017).

The vertical analysis of data was a useful filter, identifying unique characteristics of ECEC conditions within countries. Some themes and categories functioned in both ways. For example, *Administrative Issues* elaborated on microsystemic structural characteristics of the ECEC environment with relation to the management of professional work, such as *Bureaucracy*, *Assistant Teaching*, and *Assistant Training*. These categories relate to the organization of teachers' work in ECEC directly or indirectly targeting their pedagogical interaction with the children. The administrative organization is shaped by *Official Curricula and Guidelines* that are nested in the macrosystem and indirectly influence the pedagogical approaches through the way they are incorporated in ECEC policy.

Children's Characteristics, identified uniquely in the vertical analysis, completed the ecology of the participation as a right in ECEC, as this theme covers the level of the Person, in Bronfenbrenner's model, which is the centre of the ecology from the perspective of the child's development, learning, and well-being. *Child Age and Maturity* was a category mentioned by some participants showing the challenges they face in ECEC's everyday practice to promote children's participation, especially when they consider *Language* as the vehicle for children to express their voice. This perception has at least two implications. The first regards the ability of younger children to express their views and ideas. Pedagogical staff sometimes fail to understand the power of children's non-verbal communication, for example using body language, signs, pictures, etc. As Bae (2009) pointed, children internalize the experience of their voices being given due weight when their actions, such as playing, acting, singing, etc. are recognized and taken seriously by educators (Lagerlöf et al., 2022). The second refers to the inclusion of children with diverse linguistic backgrounds or educational needs who may lose their voice or be transparent in the classroom due to their differences. Evidence from older children shows that those with disadvantages stay behind in the implementation of their participation rights, even in the school system, which hinders their opportunities to mitigate their civic engagement gap (Bartlett, & Schugurensky, 2024). This is quite relevant to difficulties in promoting participation for those children with *Behavior Problems* and with negative *Attitudes based on Prior Experience in ECEC*. Based on a sociopedagogical stance towards children as agents of change, teachers' role is to be "an honest companion to the child" (Petrie et al., 2011, p. 138) and support his/her inclusion and participation, locating the roots of the behaviours or misbehaviours and helping the child to thrive using all available resources.

Teachers' Characteristics enrich the theme *Professional Profiles* from the horizontal analysis, by adding to the microsystemic level and the dimension of orientation quality two important individual characteristics. *Teachers' Sense of Self-efficacy* and *Teacher Personality* refer to the way teachers internalize the effectiveness of their educational work and attune their personality traits with their professional role. As Nyland (2009) suggested, not only teachers' beliefs about children's competences and needs but also their image of themselves as capable professionals, their role and values regarding teaching and learning can be powerful drivers or restraints for children's participation. Research findings suggest that a participatory, rights-based approach effectively is shaped by positive adult-child interactions and routines, while also empowering staff through improved confidence and management (Martin & Buckley, 2020).

The next theme of the vertical analysis, *Pedagogical Work*, uniquely highlighted the importance of using broad pedagogical strategies to nest the participation-specific educational practices (see Barros et al., 2024; Correia et al., 2022). The categories of the theme were included in the micro- and exo- systemic structural and process quality dimensions. As participation is not a one-shot activity but a dynamic process, children need *Guidance* to access and understand relevant information and *Encouragement* to express their views in ways they can and choose, promoting meaningful and informed participation. The *Pedagogy of Mistake* is an important strategy to promote children's agency in learning (Gabas et al., 2023). Tailoring guidance to chil-

dren's specific needs and laying foundations for the development of self-efficacy and self-esteem, teachers encourage and upscale their participation as a fearless "fantastic attempt" (Donaldson, 2019). Within this line of thought, *Time Allocation* becomes essential, as both teachers and children should not be hurried under academic pressure for children and bureaucratic pressure for teachers (McNair & Papaspyropoulou, 2025). This time is necessary for teachers to enrich classroom routines with moments of meaningful and positive interactions which are the foundations for children to express their views (Nyland, 2009). Support by the *School Coordinator or Educational Consultant* mentioned by some participants shows the guidance needed for critical reflection and constant improvement of teachers' pedagogical work to support children's participation. It is acknowledged that pedagogical staff, either teachers or leaders, are important factors, either barriers or drivers, for the implementation of participatory approaches in educational systems (OECD, 2023).

Finally, *Family-School Relationship* focused on the relational dimension of the connection between the family and the school, adding to the collaboration the notion of the quality of interactions (Petrogiannis & Penderi, 2014). *Parents' Expectations* and developing *Shared Values with Parents* are fundamental principles to promote a vision and a culture of participation in the ECEC community. As participation is a value laden construct, shared values between parents and teachers are important for positive relationships and engagement in promoting children's agency.

7 Limitations, Strengths, and Suggestions

There are limitations in this study, such as the limited number of countries and participants, as well as the potential subjectivity of material interpretation and coding. Moreover, the concepts investigated and the theoretical frameworks used have complex, sometimes ambiguous or even contradictory conceptualizations. However, the multilevel and in-depth analysis and the robust theoretical considerations that situated children's participation rights at the heart of pedagogical work, the detailed description of the methodology and the analysis plan, along with the critical reflection of the research team, provided evidence for the quality of the research design.

The common institutional and pedagogical grounds of the ECEC systems in the four European countries contributed to a robust corpus of themes and categories regarding conditions of participation. On the other hand, specific features of the four countries provided additional and unique aspects that elaborated and, to a certain extent, completed the ecological and quality parameters for the implementation of young children's participation as a right and the development of a culture of participation in the ECEC community. Other studies, using appropriate research designs, could deepen the comparison between diverse ECEC systems in different countries to identify specific conditions that stem from systemic differences.

The organization of these parameters based on the levels of the Bronfenbrenner's framework and ECEC quality dimensions, has both theoretical and practical contributions. For example, it provides a framework for pedagogical staff to strategically organize and evaluate the context for the implementation and effectiveness of their pedagogical approaches to promote children's participation.

In addition, this framework could be used to educate teachers and coordinators regarding the holistic ecological and quality conditions for children's participation. Research on children and parents' perspectives on the conditions for children's participation rights could provide valuable insights on the topic, enriching and deepening our knowledge of how participatory practices are implemented in ECEC. Such a perspective could provide a comprehensive picture of ecological quality issues in a democratic, inclusive, and socially just approach. Finally, educational policies could use the framework to improve guidelines and curricula for ECEC to be more sensitive to children, teachers, coordinators, and families' needs and participation rights to build truly democratic and participatory educational contexts.

Overall, the theoretical framework and the analytical strategy used in this study, supported rich contextual descriptions of several conditions that were deemed important by participants – ECEC teachers and coordinators - in the four European countries, regarding children's right to participate. Themes and categories, identified using a combination of inductive and deductive analytical approaches, seemed to cover almost every aspect in the ECEC reality, showing that children's participation as a right is not an additional or voluntary endeavour but a high-quality ECEC outcome and a process leading to diverse developmental outcomes, deeply rooted in the culture and pedagogical orientation of ECEC as a system.

Author Contributions E.P. conducted the focus groups interviews with the Greek participants, transcribed and analyzed the Greek data, worked on the conceptual and analytical framework of the manuscript, implemented the analysis, wrote the main manuscript text, reviewed and finalized the text after the authors' suggestions for revision. S.B. conducted the focus groups interviews with Portuguese participants, transcribed and analyzed the Portuguese data, provided the code tree for the horizontal analysis, reviewed the manuscript. V.C. conducted the focus groups interviews with Portuguese participants, transcribed and analyzed the Portuguese data, provided the code tree for the horizontal analysis, reviewed the manuscript. K.P. worked on the conceptual framework of the manuscript, reviewed the manuscript. O.W. conducted the focus groups interviews with the Polish participants, transcribed and analyzed the Polish data, reviewed the manuscript. H.T. conducted the focus groups interviews with the Belgium participants, transcribed and analyzed the Belgium data, reviewed the manuscript .N.C. conducted the focus groups interviews with Portuguese participants, transcribed and analyzed the Portuguese data, reviewed the manuscript. C.A. conducted the focus groups interviews with Portuguese participants, transcribed and analyzed the Portuguese data, reviewed the manuscript.

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Data Availability The data analysed in this manuscript comprise narratives collected during focus groups with ECEC teachers and coordinators, conducted as part of the broader qualitative study within the Erasmus+ project "PARTICIPA – Professional Development Tools Supporting Participation Rights in Early Childhood Education" (2019-1-PT01-KA202-060950). The study was conducted across the four participating countries: Belgium, Greece, Poland, and Portugal.

Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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