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A Focus Group Study on Participatory Practices in Early Childhood Education and Care Across Four European Countries

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ABSTRACT

Participation in educational settings is a universal right of every child, consigned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This right encompasses the need to protect and encourage young children's active participation and decision-making in early childhood education and care. *Research Findings:* This qualitative study, inspired by the Lundy model (2007), examined ECEC teachers' ($n = 25$) and coordinators' ($n = 25$) perceptions about participation practices, collected through focus groups conducted in Belgium, Greece, Poland, and Portugal. Participants were previously referred as implementing participatory practices. Results showed that the four dimensions of the Lundy model emerged in teachers' and coordinators' group discussions: Participative space, Children's voice, Audience of children's perspectives, and Influence. Furthermore, a number of subcategories in each dimension reflected different orientations toward participatory pedagogy. *Practice or Policy:* This study contributes to informing and inspiring participation practices in ECEC across Europe and to enriching policy discussions regarding children's participation rights, particularly in the early years. Promising participatory practices were identified in the various dimensions of participation, though some challenges remain, requiring in-depth knowledge about pedagogical practices and the promotion of initiatives to empower professionals to enhance children's right to participate, particularly at the center-level.

Participation is a right of all children and is considered a key investment in their overall wellbeing. Thus, it is recommended from the earliest ages. Based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; Nations General Assembly, 1989), children's participation includes the right to express their views, to be heard and taken seriously regarding all matters and decisions affecting them, thus influencing their everyday life. This comprehensive definition of participation encompasses but extends established related concepts such as power, agency, autonomy, engagement, or citizenship (Burger, 2019). In effect, children's participation entails a certain level of power redistribution between adults and children; requires the recognition of children's capacity to set goals, reflect, and act responsibly to effect change; involves children's active engagement with adults,

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peers, and activities; and acknowledges the importance of children's sense of belonging to a community, as democratic agents. Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings are particularly well-suited to support participation from an early age, and each professional, embedded in a broader ecological system, acts as a gatekeeper for promoting children's participation (Gal, 2017). Assuring children's participation requires teamwork and cooperation among different professionals, at several levels of decision making, from those working in the classroom to decision makers at a center level.

While a growing body of literature supports participatory practices in ECEC (Alderson, 2008; Clement, 2019; Lloyd-Smith & Tarr, 2000; Prout, 2003; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008), knowledge on their operationalization is scarce. Therefore, this study aims to expand the literature on promising practices to support children's participation, by analyzing how ECEC professionals (teachers and pedagogical coordinators) in Portugal, Belgium, Greece, and Poland discuss the promotion of opportunities for children to express their views, to be listened to, and to have their perspectives taken into consideration, within shared processes of decision making.

Participation as a Children's Right

With the adoption of the UNCRC (1989), children's participation has been considered a fundamental right and crucial for developing a culture of human rights, social justice, democracy, and rule of law (Correia et al., 2019; Hart, 1992; Lansdown, 2005). Articles 12 and 13 acknowledge children's capability to form their own views and the right to express them freely through different ways, but also note that "these views must be given due weight, according to child's age and maturity" and emphasize their "freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds" as competent informants. Later, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 2005) specified children's participation rights and added them to the general principles, including the need for these rights in the early years. Relatedly, the European Union (EU) Strategy on the Rights of the Child reinforced the importance of implementing key actions to empower children to be active citizens and members of democratic societies (European Commission, 2021).

Adults are responsible for mobilizing strategies to support all children, even young babies, to participate in meaningful ways and, consequently, the formats of participation need to vary (Lansdown, 2005; Lundy et al., 2011). For instance, acknowledging the relevance of multiple forms of expression may require the use of continuous participant observation (e.g., Nordén & Avery, 2020) as well as analyses of gestures and other body movements to understand young children's perspectives (Papandreou & Yiallourous, 2020). Moreover, it is necessary to consider that multiple health and developmental conditions can require the use of different forms of seeking young children's perspectives and recognizing their best interest in meaningful topics (Carnevale, 2020). Also, promoting child participation in settings highly dependent on adults' planning and decision-making implies creating a political arena where diverse and possibly competing perspectives are present (Papadopoulou & Sidorenko, 2022).

Theoretical Framework of Child Participation

Over time, in many cultures, children became considered as social actors and rights-holders, with the voice and competence to participate in decision-making processes affecting them (e.g., Alderson, 2008; Johnson, 2017; Prout, 2003), in opposition to ideologies of children as innocent, less competent to decide and exert influence, or as empty vessels, in need of adult protection, structure, and guidance (e.g., Düber, 2015; Peleg, 2023). This evolution of schools of thought in children's rights, anchored in debates around children's image and competences, was crucial to progressively consider children as *beings* rather than as *becomings* (Hanson, 2012). Children's participation has been conceptualized by many authors, and diverse theoretical models have been proposed, for instance by Arnstein (1969), Hart (1992), Kirby et al. (2003), Treseder (1997), Shier (2001), or, most recently, by Lundy (2007).

Among such frameworks, Lundy's model, based on article 12 of the UNCRC, has been widely used in policymaking, practice, and in early educators' professional development. Aiming to put participation into practice, this model (see Lundy, 2007; Welty & Lundy, 2013) relies on the assumption that voice is not enough, and includes four dimensions: Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence. The first two relate to the right of children to express their views, and the latter relates to children's right to have their views given due weight.

The first dimension requires that opportunities for child involvement are created, that is, an inclusive Space where all children are encouraged to participate, have opportunities to form a view, and where a child can also decide not to participate. The dimension of Voice means that children are given the direction and guidance they need to form a view, provided with the appropriate information, while also having a range of options or formats to express their perspectives (Lundy, 2007; Welty & Lundy, 2013). Then, children have the right to communicate their views and be listened to by those who make the decisions. Audience means that the adults with responsibilities in decision-making listen to children, acknowledging their various verbal or non-verbal forms of expression, and that processes for children to communicate their views are co-created. Finally, Influence means that children's views are seriously considered when making decisions, and that children are informed about decisions and the reasons for those decisions, regardless of whether they corresponded to children's views or not (Lundy, 2007; Welty & Lundy, 2013).

These dimensions are interrelated, with the model assuming that the latter are more complex. Following the Article 12 of the UNCRC, Lundy (2007) argues that Space and Voice constitute the first stage to ensure children's right to express a view; and that Audience and Influence sustain children's right to have their perspectives given due weight.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the European Commission (n.d.) recommends the use of this model, presenting the logical order of Space, Voice, Audience, Influence, which has been employed in this article. All dimensions show that assuring children's right to participate is an ongoing process (Kennan et al., 2018).

Lundy's conceptualization has been previously applied to the child welfare system (Kennan et al., 2018) and to primary education (Harmon, 2020). The potential of the model for ECEC settings was previously illustrated (Correia et al., 2022), highlighting the need to further investigate perceptions of professionals about participatory pedagogical practices across the four dimensions, as well as to understand how children's participation can be operationalized in ECEC.

ECEC as a Context for Children's Participation

Several studies have documented the importance of providing high-quality ECEC (e.g., Bratsch-Hines et al., 2020; Vandell et al., 2010), with child participation recognized as an indicator of quality (e.g., Moser et al., 2017; Sheridan, 2007; Sheridan & Samuelsson, 2001). Additionally, General Comment No. 7 (UNCRC, 2005) established that human rights education should be included in ECEC, embedded in everyday life, providing opportunities for children to exercise their rights and responsibilities in ways that respect their interests, concerns, and evolving skills.

Different authors argued in favor of the benefits of child participation for the child themselves, but also for the ECEC setting and society (e.g., Lansdown, 2005; Mentha et al., 2015; Murray, 2019; Sinclair, 2004). Besides developing children's ability to participate in a democratic society, early participation enables them to understand that others also have rights and perspectives that can be different from their own, and thus negotiation and dialogue are crucial (Hart, 1992).

Even though research about the outcomes of child participation in ECEC is not abundant (see Correia et al., 2019, for a systematic review), studies from different countries found noteworthy results, namely: positive associations between participatory practices and children's self-regulation (Kangas et al., 2015); positive associations between child participation (e.g., choosing spaces and activities, having influence over time in activities and play, opportunity to negotiate with staff) and child reports of subjective well-being (Sandseter & Seland, 2016); associations between opportunities to participate

and children's sense of belonging and autonomy (Freitas Luís et al., 2015); associations between participation practices and children's communication (Mesquita-Pires, 2012; Nah & Lee, 2016); and associations between observed participation practices and children's self-concept, mediated by their own perceptions of participation (Correia et al., 2023).

Besides child benefits (e.g., gains on child communication and socioemotional development), many studies documented benefits for teachers (e.g., increased sensitivity and stimulation of learning processes) as a consequence of the increase of child participation in the scope of professional development programs/interventions (e.g., Mesquita-Pires, 2012; Nah & Lee, 2016); and better alignment between children's perspectives and ECEC pedagogical practices (Murray, 2019). We seek to advance the field, by examining the extent to which ECEC settings (including those explicitly valuing children's participation) approach participation, considering all Lundy dimensions.

Importantly, Sheridan and Samuelsson (2001) reported that child participation was more common in higher-quality settings. Links between higher-quality ECEC and child participation were also found in a Portuguese study (Correia et al., 2020b) showing that lower levels of decision-making by teachers were associated with higher observed quality – specifically, with emotional support, which in turn was positively associated with more participation perceived by children. A positive emotional environment may create the space for gathering and giving due weight to children's perspectives (Correia et al., 2020b; Warren, 2021). Though the Lundy model was not mentioned in these papers, the emotional climate corresponds to the Space dimension in Lundy's (2007) model, which sets the stage for Voice, Audience, and Influence as dimensions of child participation. Interchangeably, collecting children's perspectives may also contribute to enriching pedagogical practices following children's interests and preferences, as teachers' perceptions about children's interests may not exactly correspond to reality (e.g., Matsui, 2020). In addition, intervention projects, mostly using action-research, also showed positive effects of child participation for improving the ECEC environment, with interventions frequently requiring changes in the usual way of working and interacting with children, as well as changes in daily rhythm and routines (e.g., Clement, 2019; Nordén & Avery, 2020).

Accordingly, some authors have argued that implementing a rights-framed participatory approach in ECEC is associated with teachers' perceptions about participation and child agency (Mentha et al., 2015) and is dependent on cultural issues (e.g., Huang et al., 2019; Matsui, 2020). Specifically, perceptions about children and participation rights may still be constrained or traditional in many contexts. For instance, a study with professionals working in kindergarten through 9th-grade in the US revealed they considered participation important, but only for children/youth themselves, not for the school or society (Lugo-Hernández et al., 2016).

Considering the importance of teachers' perceptions and conceptualizations for child participation (e.g., Correia et al., 2020a; Mesquita-Pires, 2012), it is imperative to understand how ECEC professionals operationalize participation dimensions in their practice. In this scope, not only teachers' perceptions, but also the perceptions and practices of other adults in leadership roles (for instance, coordinators) are relevant for understanding child participation in ECEC, building on the assumption that solid pedagogical leaderships can foster high-quality ECEC (Aizenberg & Oplatka, 2019; Halpern et al., 2021). Thus, adults in leadership roles can be crucial for building a cohesive and participatory culture in ECEC, supporting teachers through collaboration, interpersonal relationships, and pedagogical practices guidance (Nicholson et al., 2020). Reflection about these concepts in close relation to practice is needed so that rights are embedded in educational contexts (Mentha et al., 2015).

Indeed, Correia et al. (2019) found a limited number of publications specifically addressing child participation in ECEC, mostly conducted in northern Europe. Furthermore, they found that studies included in their review ($N=36$) had a larger emphasis on ideas about participation, and less on practices. Still, some examples of practices to promote child participation were found, though mostly emerging from case studies or small samples. Some dimensions of Lundy's participation model, such as Audience and Voice, found expression in different practices. These included: active listening to children, through extended sequences of talk, and valuing their contributions (Alasuutari, 2014; Freitas Luís et al., 2015; Theobald & Kultti, 2012); responding to and extending child-initiated

sequences of learning (Church & Bateman, 2019); planned conversations between ECEC teachers and children during project-based activities (Tholin & Jansen, 2012); involving children in documenting their work through portfolios or presentations (Knauf, 2017); peer play promoting social and emotional competences essential for further participation in educational and social contexts (Cederborg, 2018; Dardanou & Gamst-Nergård, 2021; Sheridan & Samuelsson, 2001); and engaging children in projects aimed at addressing specific issues in the setting (e.g., Nah & Lee, 2016; Nordén & Avery, 2020).

Notwithstanding the importance of these findings, previous studies focused predominantly on a single country, and, as stated, located mainly in Nordic Europe. In the present study, four countries from Southeastern, Central, Western, and Southern Europe were included. Furthermore, there is a prevalence of papers focused on challenges related to participation rights compared to papers presenting inspiring practices (see McMellon & Tisdall, 2020, for a review of 56 papers across several fields). Therefore, this study expands upon previous research by employing a qualitative approach that focuses on identifying participatory practices in various regions of Europe. This will contribute to the construction of knowledge regarding the operationalization of children's right to participate in matters affecting them while attending ECEC.

Current Study

This study focused on children's participation in ECEC settings in Belgium (Flemish community), Greece, Poland, and Portugal. These EU countries have split ECEC systems, with ECEC for younger children under the auspices of ministries of labor and welfare (designations are country-specific) and ECEC for older children (beginning at 2½ years in Belgium, 3 in Portugal and Poland, and 4 in Greece) under the auspices of ministries of education. In Belgium, pre-primary education is assigned to the three regional communities, and a part of the institutions in Greece for 2,5 years to 6-years-old have local governance; central governments have a crucial role in regulating preschools in Portugal, Poland, and in the other part of services in Greece (i.e., kindergartens).

These countries have pedagogical orientations for preschool education, either in the form of a curriculum (Greece, Belgium, Poland) or in the form of guidelines (Portugal), addressing child participation to different extents. Flemish official documents explicitly refer to children's right to participate. For example, the renewed general basic competences for teachers refer to (social) participation, emphasizing specific domains in which teachers can support children (Competences 2.2 and 2.3; BVR June 8, 2018). However, in the Flemish Developmental Goals for children in pre-primary education, there is no explicit reference to child participation.

In Greece, different documents highlight child participation: the Unified Cross-thematic Curriculum Framework for Kindergarten (UCCFK) (FEK 304; Greek Ministry of National Education and Religion, 2003) states that the aim of kindergarten is to promote whole child development and socialization, giving priority to active, experiential, and collaborative learning (p. 586); the Kindergarten Teachers' Guide (Dafermou & Mpasagianni, 2006) emphasizes teachers' role in the organization of challenging, meaningful, supportive, and inclusive learning activities promoting child autonomy and active participation, and carefully listening to children's ideas, encouraging them to decide on matters that affect them.

In Poland, references to participation seem less explicit. The National Guidance for Preschool Education (Edukacji Narodowej, 2017) includes statements indirectly related to children's right to participate (e.g., supporting independent exploration of the world; respecting their rights and obligations and those of others, paying attention to their individual needs; organizing the space and providing didactic aids to motivate children to act independently).

In Portugal, children's right to participate is emphasized in ECEC policy documents, such as the Portuguese Guidelines for Preschool Education (PGPE; Lopes da Silva et al., 2016) and the General and Specific Profiles of the ECEC teacher (Decree-Law No. 240/2001, (2001); Decree-Law No. 241/2001, 2001). The PGPE recognize children as subjects and agents of the educational process as a core

pedagogical principle, highlighting the need to listen to and consider children's perspectives, while creating opportunities for ECEC teachers to reflect on their participation practices.

This study aimed to reach an in-depth understanding of ECEC professionals' experiences and practices in promoting young children's participation in ECEC settings across the dimensions of Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence. Specifically, we aimed to understand how ECEC professionals from the four participating countries describe their practices to ensure that children have opportunities to express their views, to be listened to, and to participate in shared decision-making in matters affecting them.

Method

This qualitative study collected data in the scope of the Erasmus+ project "PARTICIPA – Professional Development Tools Supporting Participation Rights in Early Childhood Education" (2019-1-PT01-KA202-060950) that involved Belgium, Greece, Poland, and Portugal.

Participants

In each of the four countries, participants were purposefully selected from the researchers' professional networks, to constitute one group of teachers and one group of pedagogical coordinators, considering the following criteria: being an ECEC teacher currently working in an ECEC classroom, with children aged 2–6 years, or being an ECEC professional with a coordinating role (coordinators were professionals with technical and/or pedagogical leadership responsibilities at the center level); and being recognized in the field as providers of high-quality ECEC based on participatory approaches, conceived as those that acknowledge children as active and competent in decision-making and in the construction of knowledge (Formosinho & Oliveira-Formosinho, 2016). The recruitment process intentionally ensured representatives from diverse ECEC sectors (e.g., public, private for profit, private nonprofit) and from different geo-social contexts (e.g., urban and rural). Ethical standards and procedures for research with human beings were followed. All participants provided written consent.

Table 1 presents participants' sociodemographic characteristics, at individual and setting levels. Participants included 25 teachers and 25 coordinators, across the four countries. All participants were female. All teachers from Belgium and Greece had bachelor's degrees, all from Poland had master's degrees, and in Portugal seven teachers had bachelor's and three had master's degrees. Most teachers worked with mixed-age groups (Belgium: $n = 2$, Greece: $n = 6$, Poland: $n = 1$, Portugal: $n = 4$); the others worked with same-age groups of children aged 2/3 years (Belgium: $n = 1$, Poland $n = 1$, Portugal: $n = 3$), 4 years (Poland: $n = 2$, Portugal: $n = 1$), and 5 years-old (Belgium: $n = 2$, Portugal: $n = 2$). Pedagogical coordinators had at least a bachelor's degree, but some had master's degrees (Belgium: $n = 2$; Portugal: $n = 5$; Greece: $n = 2$; Poland: $n = 4$).

Procedures

Focus groups were used to build in-depth knowledge about ECEC professional's reported use of practices aiming to support children's participation. This method takes advantage of group dynamics to disclose individuals' similar and different perceptions (Kaplowitz & Hoehn, 2001). Focus groups were held face-to-face by type of participant (ECEC teachers or coordinators) and lasted from 45 to 90 minutes. They were conducted in the national language of each country, audio-recorded and transcribed omitting participants names. Parts of the transcripts were translated into English.

In all countries, two researchers with a background in the field of education facilitated each group discussion: one moderated and another took notes and supported the discussions when needed. To encourage interaction and discussion among participants, both researchers were particularly attentive to ensuring that all participants had the opportunity to share their opinions. The moderator

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the participants and their ECEC settings.

	Teachers					Coordinators				
	Belgium (n = 5)	Greece (n = 6)	Poland (n = 4)	Portugal (n = 10)	Belgium (n = 4)	Greece (n = 8)	Poland (n = 5)	Portugal (n = 8)		
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)		
Age (years)	37.40 (8.44)	42.5 (9.91)	41.00 (14.58)	43.00 (13.25)	42.35 (12.61)	47.25 (2.92)	43.00 (12.71)	53.86 (8.45)		
Experience in ECEC (years)	13.60 (9.45)	14.83 (7.52)	16.50 (15.15)	20.34 (13.35)	17.50 (12.29)	20.88 (3.27)	16.40 (14.10)	31.29 (8.30)		
Experience in current setting (years)	12.27 (11.61)	8.83 (5.78)	13.25 (11.03)	12.27 (11.61)	5.88 (7.51)	9.88 (5.40)	8.00 (12.31)	17.29 (12.82)		
Group size	26.20 (6.05)	16.50 (4.04)	19.75 (3.40)	20.60 (3.10)						
Adults in classroom	2.20 (0.84)	1.33 (0.52)	2.00 (0.82)	2.20 (0.42)						
Classrooms coordinated					6.6 (4.43)	2.75 (1.16)	9.80 (8.81)	8.57 (7.02)		
Teachers coordinated					10.25 (6.85)	3.13 (1.46)	18.00 (9.19)	9.43 (8.77)		
Number of non-teaching staff					3.33 (1.15)	1.75 (0.50)	9.20 (5.40)	12.29 (13.49)		
Number of children					129.25 (97.07)	37.13 (21.63)	209 (221.48)	183.71 (149.25)		
	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n		
Location										
Urban	2	3	3	6	1	4	3	2		
Suburban/Rural	3	3	1	4	3	4	2	6		
Sector										
Public	1	5	2	4	1	6	1	4		
Private nonprofit	4	1	2	3	3	1	1	3		
Private for-profit	0	0	0	3	0	1	3	1		

intervened when the debate strayed from its purpose or when saturation for a particular theme was reached.

The focus groups had the following structure: (a) introduction, explaining the purpose, clarifying rules and procedures, and highlighting ethical issues; (b) main questions, including an initial question for introductions and “ice-breaking,” a transition question, key questions and final questions; and (c) conclusion. Procedures were similar for teachers and coordinators; nonetheless, some key questions varied, based on the professional role.

For teachers, the main topics addressed: opportunities created for children’s participation, in everyday activities and routines; strategies used to enable children’s participation; possible changes in practices throughout their career; balancing pedagogical goals with children’s interests; relations between (national) guidelines/frame for ECEC and promotion of children’s participation; importance of promoting participation and its effects; and practices they planned to implement. Some of the questions addressed in the focus group interview guide were: (a) Throughout a typical day, what opportunities do you create for children’s participation, at different times in everyday activities and routines?; (b) Keeping in mind those experiences, can you elaborate on the strategies that you use to enable children’s participation?; (c) Were your pedagogical practices always like you have just described, or did they change and why?; (e) How do you balance pedagogical goals with children’s interests?.

For coordinators, topics covered more the institutional practices, such as: strategies/practices used to support teachers (and assistants) in promoting children’s participation; examples of the influence children’s views had in their center and school/institutional decisions; how child participation was considered or discussed in their setting; monitoring and evaluating the implementation of children’s right to participate; practices that could be successful in supporting teachers (and assistants) in promoting children’s participation; written regulations (e.g., educational project, statutes) about children’s right to participate and their relation with center-level pedagogical practices. Some of the questions addressed in the focus group interview were: (a) What strategies/practices do you use to support staff in promoting children’s participation?; (b) Share some examples of the influence children’s views have had in your center and in your school/institutional decisions; (c) How is child participation considered or discussed in your institution as a whole?; (d) To what extent do you monitor and evaluate the implementation of children’s right to participate?; (e) What differences in practices promoting children’s participation do you find between the classrooms or centers you manage/coordinate?.

Coding and Analyses

Focus group transcripts were analyzed using directed content analysis. This approach identifies key concepts, or initial codes, that are used as a coding grid for all the data, based on theory or previous research (Bardin, 2011; Cropley, 2019; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The decision to use this approach lies in the PROJECT background, which used the Lundy model (2007) as a starting point to define and operationalize child participation in ECEC settings. Analyses were conducted by national researchers, in each country, using a common coding tree. Additional themes were identified and labeled, to elucidate relevant concepts that were not directly considered in the model.

Specifically, first the Portuguese researchers conducted a collective iterative reading of Portuguese focus group transcriptions and discussed the adequacy of the theoretically defined principles of the Lundy (2007) model to code the data. Second, Portuguese researchers independently coded the transcripts according to the theoretically defined categories and identified additional themes. Then, the adequacy of the codes was discussed among the Portuguese team. Issues regarding the homogeneity (i.e., similar content grouped in the same category/subcategory) and exclusiveness (i.e., same content not coded in different categories/subcategories simultaneously) of the coding categories were taken into consideration.

Then, categories (i.e., codes) and their meanings were discussed during online meetings with researchers from all participating countries. The complete coding tree and a set of examples coded from the Portuguese focus groups were shared with researchers from Belgium, Greece, and Poland. At this stage, researchers from each country also contributed to proposing additional codes based on iterative reading of the data collected in their respective countries. The new codes were defined and discussed among the entire team. Then, to ensure the coding tree was clear and comprehensive, two researchers in each country coded and discussed coding until consensus was achieved for all data from that country. If at any point during coding, a researcher believed it was pertinent to suggest additional codes, to better coordinate the flow of new information a meeting with the Portuguese team was scheduled to discuss its definition; then the new codes were shared with all coders. It is important to note that whenever a new code was introduced, researchers coding the data received the updated coding tree and list of definitions, along with instructions to revise all transcripts to identify coding units that could fit the new codes.

In each country, we used procedures to minimize coding disparities, by discussing thoroughly the coding process and resolving disagreements as a research team (cf. Kuckartz, 2014). Moreover, all coders were members of the research team since the beginning of the project, being familiar with the research questions, the theoretical model used for interpretation, and categories defined for analysis. To assure consistency of coding decisions across countries, each country team sent the Portuguese team two units coded in each subcategory and disparities were discussed by the whole team. Consequently, minor adjustments were made to some categories and their definitions. After this further discussion, the final coding scheme was shared and, in each country, the same two researchers verified their coding and made the necessary changes, accordingly.

Coded excerpts (units of analysis) were long enough to ensure clarity and context. As a rule, excerpts shorter than a sentence were not considered a unit, although splitting a sentence (in clauses) was accepted if representing different categories and keeping the main meaning. Each excerpt/unit stood for itself, and short expressions that did not describe content, such as “I agree,” were not considered. We included both sophisticated and less sophisticated examples, if they conveyed meaningful content about children’s participation. The same unit could not be coded into different categories/subcategories. When the unit fit more than one category, it was coded in the more complex one, according to the Lundy model and to the interpretation of Lundy’s model by the European Commission (n.d.); for instance, when one unit could be coded for Influence and Voice, researchers coded Influence, as the model rationale assumes that order.

The coding tree (Figure 1) included practices that illustrated the four dimensions of the Lundy model (see Correia et al., 2022, for an expanded definition of categories). Each country team reported the frequencies for each category/subcategory, and the two best examples of units for each subcategory. Based on these data, for each country, percentages were calculated for each subcategory, by dividing the frequency of each subcategory by the total number of units/excerpts coded in that country.

Findings

Table 2 includes frequencies of each subcategory of the four dimensions of participation, for each country and across countries. Overall, considering the complete *corpus*, teachers and coordinators from the four countries provided examples of practices in the four categories – *Participative space*, *Children’s voice*, *Audience of children’s perspectives*, and *Influence*. Globally, in all countries, more units were coded under the four dimensions in the teachers’ than in the coordinators’ discussions.

Next, we focus on each dimension of participation, presenting excerpts from the discourse of teachers and coordinators that, across countries, illustrate the subcategories, while noting patterns and salient results.

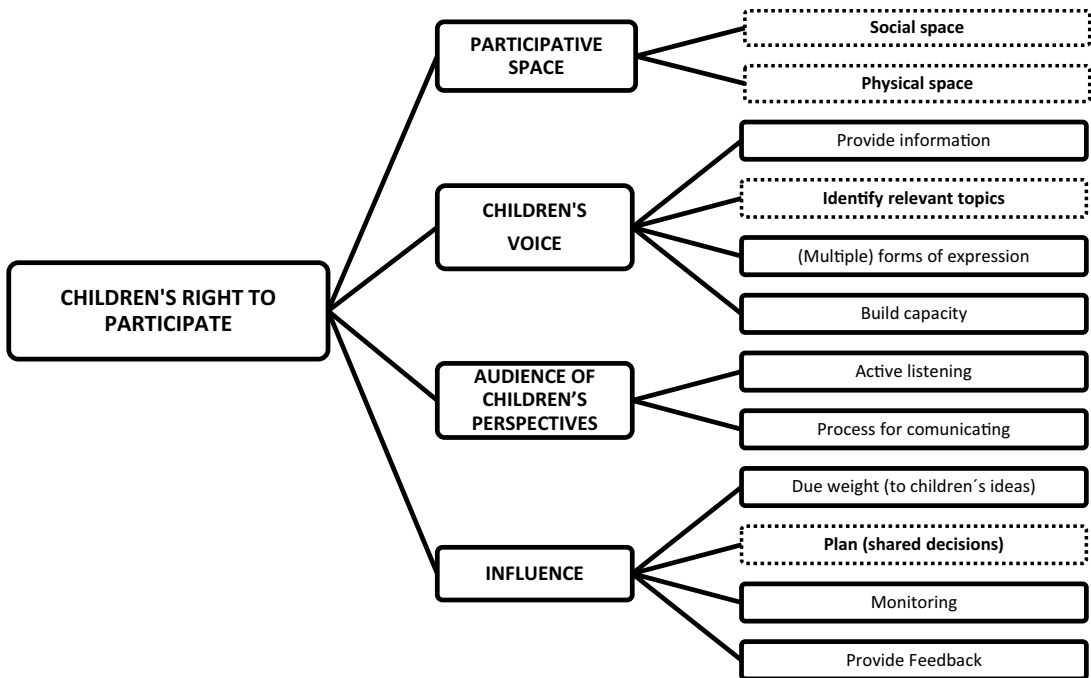


Figure 1. Coding tree for the focus groups. Categories and subcategories highlighted in straight boxes refer to dimensions and operationalization indicators explicitly defined in the Lundy participation model and used for deductive coding; categories and subcategories highlighted in dashed boxes refer to indicators specifically defined by the PARTICIPA consortium and used for deductive coding.

Participative Space

Participative space was the dimension with the highest percentage of units coded overall (33.6%). It includes practices illustrating the creation of a climate and of conditions at the classroom or setting/center level that promote child participation. Teachers provided more examples regarding Participative space than coordinators in all countries, except for Greece. In Portugal, the difference in frequencies in this category between teachers and coordinators was noteworthy (18 versus 5).

Two subcategories were defined to operationalize Participative space – Social and Physical space, and both appeared in all countries' discussions. Teachers and coordinators focused more on Social space than Physical space in all countries (the most frequent subcategory overall). Notably, coordinators from Greece and Poland did not discuss any examples of Physical space. Thus, descriptions of good practices at the center level are less abundant in the current study and come only from Belgium and Portugal.

When addressing Social space for participation, teachers and coordinators discussed the importance of an overall positive climate between adults and children and among children, at the classroom or setting level, fostering opportunities for child participation. For instance, a respectful attitude and responsiveness were highlighted: “The first step, absolutely necessary, is respect for the other person, the child, and the ability to recognize their emotions, strongly related to both listening and sensitivity to their behavior” (Polish Coordinator 3). Adults' sensitivity, awareness, and responsiveness to children's needs, emotions, interests, difficulties, and positive communication were illustrated by many participants: “We work with an open reception moment. (...) with all kinds of different greetings (...) shaking hands, saying good morning, jumping to each other” (Flemish Teacher 4). Participants also underlined practices assuring that children are comfortable in taking risks and seeking support: “I give initiatives according to the possibilities I see in each child. Even the shyest child can contribute and do nice things if he/she feels safe in the classroom and builds confidence. This

Table 2. Frequencies of each subcategory in teachers' and coordinators' focus groups.

	Teachers				Coordinators				Total ¹
	Belgium	Greece	Poland	Portugal	Belgium	Greece	Poland	Portugal	
	<i>f</i> (%)	<i>f</i> (%)	<i>f</i> (%)	<i>f</i> (%)	<i>f</i> (%)	<i>f</i> (%)	<i>f</i> (%)	<i>f</i> (%)	
Participative Space									108 (33.64)
Social Space	14 (21.88)	8 (20.00)	10 (30.30)	14 (23.33)	11 (23.91)	12 (41.38)	6 (27.27)	3 (11.11)	78 (24.30)
Physical Space	11 (17.19)	1 (2.50)	5 (15.15)	4 (6.67)	7 (15.22)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (7.41)	30 (9.35)
Children's Voice									75 (23.26%)
Provide Information	2 (3.13)	2 (5.00)	2 (6.06)	1 (1.67)	0 (0)	1 (3.45)	1 (4.55)	0 (0)	9 (2.80)
Identify relevant topics	1 (1.56)	2 (5.00)	1 (3.03)	2 (3.33)	1 (2.17)	3 (10.34)	2 (9.09)	2 (7.41)	14 (4.36)
(Multiple) forms of expression	3 (4.69)	0 (0)	0 (0)	4 (6.67)	2 (4.35)	1 (3.45)	0 (0)	2 (7.41)	12 (3.74)
Build Capacity	4 (6.25)	7 (17.50)	5 (15.15)	8 (13.33)	6 (13.04)	7 (24.14)	2 (9.09)	1 (3.70)	40 (12.46)
Audience of Children's Perspectives									49 (15.26%)
Active Listening	4 (6.25)	7 (17.50)	2 (6.06)	6 (10.00)	0 (0)	3 (10.34)	1 (4.55)	5 (18.52)	28 (8.72)
Process for Communicating	1 (1.56)	5 (12.50)	1 (3.03)	8 (13.33)	3 (6.52)	0 (0)	2 (9.09)	1 (3.70)	21 (6.54)
Influence									89 (27.73%)
Due weight	15 (23.44)	4 (10.00)	6 (18.18)	13 (21.67)	9 (19.57)	1 (3.45)	2 (9.09)	6 (22.22)	56 (17.45)
Plan (Shared Decisions)	7 (10.94)	4 (10.00)	1 (3.03)	0 (0)	4 (8.70)	1 (3.45)	1 (4.55)	0 (0)	18 (5.61)
Monitoring	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (4.35)	0 (0)	5 (22.73)	4 (14.81)	11 (3.43)
Provide Feedback	2 (3.13)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (2.17)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (3.70)	4 (1.25)
Total excerpts coded per country	64	40	33	60	46	29	22	27	
Total excerpts coded overall			<i>f</i> = 197			<i>f</i> = 124			<i>f</i> = 321

f = frequency. For each country, percentages (in parentheses) were calculated by dividing the frequency in each category/subcategory by the total number of units coded in that country per type of participant. ¹Totals were calculated by adding frequencies across professionals and countries; corresponding percentages were obtained by dividing the number of units coded in that category or subcategory by the total number of units coded in all focus groups across the four countries.

can be done through simple things. For example, a little girl who is very shy, I make her the assistant of the day (...)” (Greek Teacher 3). In addition to highlighting practices in the ECEC classrooms, some participants emphasized the relevance of having goals related to Social space for the whole center: “One of the goals we had last year in the group of teachers and staff in the center was not to speak loudly and talk at the level of children” (Greek Coordinator 2). Globally, the idea that adults should give children “security to want to know” (Portuguese Teacher 5) was often reinforced.

Although less frequently coded in all countries by both teachers and coordinators when compared to Social space, different aspects of Physical space were described as setting the stage for participation. Arrangement of space supporting children's autonomy was specified. One participant mentioned that “what is important in giving space, arrange the space in a way that children have spaces where they can be without the direct supervision of a teacher” (Flemish Coordinator 4), while others focused on accessibility and the possibility of free choice of materials. A coordinator noted “They can decide for themselves what they want in the classroom: the materials, the organization of the materials” (Portuguese Coordinator 9), and a teacher said that: “They know more or less the organization for each space and

choose these games, and it is usually quite peaceful (. . .). There's always someone who gets more annoyed because he/she would like to go play elsewhere, and 'come, and talk to me,' and I either try to get them to negotiate among themselves, or I explain that later they can choose that game" (Portuguese Teacher 2).

Children's Voice

Children's voice accounted for 23.36% of the total excerpts coded across focus groups in all countries, describing how professionals facilitated the expression of children's views and encouraged bidirectional dialogue, either at the classroom or center-level. This dimension requires providing children with the necessary support and orientation to form their perspectives. For that, it is acknowledged in this study that (a) they need to be provided with the appropriate information to form a view, (b) specific topics that matter to them are identified and shared to get their perspectives, (c) a range of options or formats are available to express their perspectives and (d) processes to enhance their abilities and skills to continuously form and share their perspectives are put in place, so they will be increasingly empowered. Frequencies and percentages varied greatly across these four subcategories – Provide information, Identify relevant topics, (Multiple) Forms of expression, Build Capacity – in the four countries (Table 2), as follows.

The most frequent subcategory coded in all countries was Build child capacity, with the exception of Portuguese discussions among coordinators, in which build capacity appeared only once, and in Polish discussions among coordinators, in which build capacity and identify relevant topics had the same frequencies. When considering all participants, Build capacity was indeed one of the most frequent subcategories (third-highest percentage, following Social space under Participative Space and due weight, under Influence). Statements illustrating that professionals have the goal of enhancing children's attitudes, knowledge, and skills, to express and act upon their views and interests were shared. In ECEC settings, professionals can build children's capacity to express views, interests, and preferences in many ways. For instance, creating opportunities for children to work in groups and take up responsibilities was considered important: "We have introduced in our school the idea of volunteerism and collaboration among children. That means when they are doing something, those children who can, usually the older and those who are more competent regarding the goals and theme of each activity, help the others. In this way, they feel that they participate in their learning and have a voice over the processes" (Greek coordinator 6); "I organize task stations and there the children are put into groups depending on their number (. . .). Sometimes I divide them, give them roles, and sometimes I don't, and I just observe, that is, they divide themselves. They know that they must get along with each other then" (Polish Teacher 3). Another interesting practice to build capacity for participation came from Greece: "Many times I have used a book that has topics in different fields, for example how to set rules with children, and has the two dolls that play and give rise to discussions. Using the dolls, for example, we provide them with tools to deal with a problem and develop skills. They are techniques that help children develop ways to have their say while they learn how to share things, how to be in one's shoes, etc." (Greek teacher 3). Also, working specifically about concepts related to democracy were highlighted: "(. . .) we are doing a project together with X [a cultural Foundation] (. . .) the annual schools' project about "microdemocracy". (. . .) we're going to do some workshops with them, we're going to develop what is microdemocracy. (. . .) will involve the children in the project itself. What do they understand by this" (Portuguese Coordinator 1).

Within Children's voice category, Identify relevant topics was the second most highlighted subcategory yet with low frequencies. Contrary to the other subcategories which were strictly based on Lundy's model definitions for Voice, this subcategory emerged from our data. An interesting practice was shared by Flemish Teacher 2 who referred that "If children want to do something with us, they can just bring it up. That could be cooking, breakfast in class. . . That could be anything! The children bring it up and we see what is feasible." This excerpt illustrates the importance of guaranteeing that children express their perspectives in themes of their interest, and according to their will. Furthermore, Polish Teacher 1 mentioned: "Recently I have noticed that they have started to dress their dolls, they have

become interested in this, because with the dolls' corner it varies, sometimes there is no interest at all, (...) so I have started to provide them with some clothes and accessories.” This acknowledgment highlights the importance of consistently attending to subjects relevant for children, as they evolve within the daily ECEC routine and children's experiences.

Providing children with opportunities to participate using multiple forms of expression was evidenced in few excerpts in all countries except Poland. Teachers and coordinators gave different examples (e.g., drawings, puppets) for providing children multiple forms to share their perspectives. One participant described in detail other expressive tools apart from spoken language: “the diary is an instrument with four columns (...) in which children register during the week situations that displease them, someone hits them, someone scratches them, someone doesn't know what to do with them, what, they go there to write autonomously, write their name, write the name of their peers, make a drawing” (Portuguese Teacher 5).

As abovementioned, Providing relevant information about relevant topics is one of the processes that contribute for children to be able to form and express their perspectives and, ultimately, participate in decision-making. The provision of information is one of the requirements for participation stated in General Comment No. 12 (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child [UNCRC], 2009). In the current focus groups, examples regarding the importance of providing information to children, in developmentally appropriate ways, were identified less frequently than other subcategories (corresponding to 2.80% of units in the whole *corpus*). In the coordinators' focus groups only two excerpts appeared denoting that at the center level, these practices seem to be uncommon, even when considering the focus groups of the four countries.

Interestingly, a teacher emphasized the need to discuss with children about events and bring relevant information: “talking through information and situations that are happening here and now with the children. (...) So, we need to discuss the situation, there are many situations here and now, and I think you have to talk to your children about them every time” (Polish Teacher 3). The need to give information to guide children's process of thinking and discussing also emerged: “(...) give them [children] some directions, that they can think of course. That is, when we reach a point in our subject that there may be two or three points of view, that there may be disagreements, I put them in such a process to think of different parameters of the topic and value different parameters in their ideas. I usually use dilemmas or case studies to help them think about the different dimensions” (Greek Teacher 6).

Audience of Children's Perspectives

Audience of children's perspectives accounted for 15.26% of the excerpts coded overall, being the least frequently coded dimension. Notably, the Greek teachers' group followed a different trend, with this category highly present in their discussion. Globally, teachers contributed more than coordinators with examples of practices to ensure that children's views are truly listened to and are communicated to people involved in decision-making. So, the promising practices collected focus more on classroom-level initiatives than center-level ones. When analyzing the two subcategories, active listening was slightly more frequent than the process for communicating children's perspectives.

Active listening refers to practices showing that there is someone available and fully absorbing, understanding, responding, and retaining what children say, taking time to understand their views, feelings, and interests. Examples referred to actively listening (in its more literal meaning) and actively observing, reinforcing the need to “take the time to observe the child's play very carefully will reveal a lot about the child” (Portuguese Teacher 6) and to “listen to their ideas and their decisions, to listen to their concerns” (Greek Teacher 6). One of the participants emphasized the importance to “watch their ideas carefully and see what they bring, they build things, they make houses, different things for pets and they are proud of it” (Polish Teacher 4). These and other excerpts in the *corpus* acknowledge that children are listened to (with the discourses focusing mainly on the person him/herself – “I”), but are imprecise in detailing who else listens/observes or who should listen/observe, and to what end.

Practices related to the process for communicating children's views, ensuring that children know the adult to whom their perspectives may be or are being communicated, were rarely discussed. Portugal had a relatively high percentage of excerpts coded with this subcategory; conversely, Greek coordinators did not offer any examples of center-level practices. An organized process for communication was described in detail by Portuguese Teacher 6: "communications take place at the end of the morning, in my weekly schedule. They sign up to show what they do during activities in projects – and projects in which they are the actors, and all the moments in which they are actors, in which they have the power of the word and in which they will expose themselves in front of others (...) they ask them questions or give them suggestions and these interactions are fantastic. The other is the 'council meeting' (...) in which the positive and negative occurrences of our day-to-day are democratically discussed. Therefore, we plan weekly, through what we write both in the 'we want' diary and in the 'how' list of projects; we manage and we plan." Another example relates to "the daily meetings in the circle themselves [which] make it possible to talk to children about a particular topic. Children then become our partners" (Polish Teacher 4). In addition, Polish Coordinator 1 shared that "Children and teachers in groups on Friday afternoons discuss together what will happen next week, what are their needs and expectations. The idea is not to determine how long something will last, but what interests them."

Influence

Influence refers to practices showing how children's views are considered by adults with authority to make changes. This dimension highlights the relevance of procedures assuring that children's views are taken seriously and given due weight, to monitor and to provide feedback to children about decisions. Influence was the second most coded category, when summing frequencies from the four countries and considering teachers and coordinators (27.73%). The subcategory due weight received the most units under this dimension and emerged as the second most frequent subcategory overall. Teachers provided examples regarding most subcategories of influence, with monitoring emerging as a notable exception, with no teachers in any country providing examples. Under this dimension, one of the four subcategories coded – plan shared decisions – emerged from our data and was present in three of the four countries' focus groups.

Examples in the due weight subcategory illustrated that children's ideas and suggestions were implemented: "Last week it was the doll corner, they had a problem. They wanted to turn it into a hospital, but they didn't have enough beds, so they wanted to make their own beds. What do we need for that? Then the process starts again and then our big children from group 5 started helping them to put together beds. For us, this is day-to-day operation" (Flemish Coordinator 3). Although this subcategory was one of the most frequently coded in all countries and in both groups, typically, the excerpts merely acknowledged that children's ideas were acted upon, with scarce elaboration or in-depth description of the process.

Plan for shared decisions received some examples, except in the Portuguese focus groups. This subcategory emerged from the data and was included by the team when operationalizing Influence for the ECEC system. It was more common in the teachers' discussions than in the coordinators,' thus illustrating fewer planned initiatives at the center-level. For instance, one of the participants described that: "The same procedure, voting, was used with a vegetable garden project. So, the [children] first tasted all kinds of things in advance and then went and looked like OK what do we want in our vegetable garden now. (...) they actually get a lot of say. They are also given responsibility because they then have to draw up a shopping list. They also go to the store with the class to buy the necessary items. The children are also responsible for tending to the vegetable garden. They don't really have a real children's council, but they are questioned about important changes or events. So that's kind of a council, actually" (Flemish Coordinator 1). Polish Coordinator 2 explained that having a planned shared decision process can make a difference in child participation, as opposed to simply choosing materials: "The most important thing should be communication . . . defining areas where children can

decide. Because if there is no agreement, then actively listening and understanding the child's needs does not contribute anything. If it is just choosing a toy during free play, it is not participation either."

Although no teacher gave any example of monitoring children's participation, the subcategory emerged in coordinators' discourses – more focused on their role as leaders with supervision responsibilities – in Belgium, Poland, and Portugal, but not in Greece. Monitoring requires verifying or documenting the implementation of children's perspectives, as in these examples: "we have an educational observatory (...) and this observatory interviews parents, children, educators; and it is, therefore, a group that manages to work on these issues of participation, to see that the participation of children bears fruit. (...) and I am happy that the self-evaluation team shared a report, because we will need it for the external evaluation, (...) and the ECEC teachers were the ones who had excellent at everything, and we talk about the participation of children and we talk about the social and educational responses, the proactive methodologies (...)" (Portuguese Coordinator 5); and "we also have the department meetings (...) there is much of that space to talk about this participation of children" (Portuguese Coordinator 1).

Greek, Polish, and Portuguese teachers did not discuss any practices that could be coded as Provide feedback about the children's participation; and neither did coordinators from Greece and Poland. Across all countries, only four units were coded under this subcategory, two from teachers and two from coordinators, and thus it was the least coded subcategory overall. Providing feedback to children requires that they are informed about how their views were interpreted and used. This means that adults are accountable for the outcomes of children's communication (i.e., following-up on their participation in decision-making; explaining how their views have been interpreted and used; how they influenced any decisions, or why not; how they will have the opportunity to be involved in follow-up). One participant explained that "Sometimes, I need to say that it's not feasible" (Flemish Teacher 3), and another mentioned that "we explained to them that in order to be certified [a tree house suggested by children and built as a consequence of that], it has to be certified by a company because if there is an accident, if there is a spiral staircase, it has to be certified as playground equipment, and these are processes that take time" (Portuguese Coordinator 3).

Discussion

This study examined how groups of professionals from four European countries promote child participation in ECEC across the four dimensions of Lundy's model – Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence.

Teachers and coordinators from all participating countries provided examples of practices in the four categories corresponding to the dimensions of participation defined by Lundy (2007). These findings provide evidence that conceptualizing the promotion of children's participation in the four dimensions is aligned with practices implemented in Belgium, Greece, Poland, and Portugal, notwithstanding differences that may characterize specific practices within each country. Participative space was the dimension with the highest percentage of units, followed by Influence. Audience was the dimension with a lower frequency overall. Although the different frequencies in the dimensions should be understood, it is noteworthy that all of them were represented in all countries. The frequencies of subcategories are useful to understand areas requiring greater improvements in each country, expanding research on ECEC quality that often incorporates aspects related to social space as a fundamental basis for child wellbeing and participation.

One important aspect of the Lundy model (2007) is the interrelation among the four dimensions of participation, with an intersection between *Space* and *Voice*, and between *Audience* and *Influence*. In this study, considering that the coding procedure defined mutually exclusive categories, with examples in the intersection between dimensions coded at the more complex level, we expected that Voice and Influence would receive more examples. However, Participative space was coded more frequently than Voice, and was the most frequently coded overall. Influence had the second-highest frequency, indicating that teachers were more

comfortable talking about how children's perspectives are considered (i.e., acted upon) than explaining how they facilitate the expression of children's views and encourage bidirectional dialogue (Voice), and ensure that children's views are listened to and communicated to people involved in decision making (i.e., people with the power to take into consideration their views), as defined in the model. This is aligned with research from Sandberg and Eriksson (2010), suggesting that ECEC professionals value both safe, supportive environments and children's opportunities to exert influence as crucial for child participation. The current study expands available evidence by providing concrete examples of how teachers and coordinators can operationalize these high-quality processes.

Concerning Participative space, teachers and coordinators in all countries provided more examples of Social than Physical space. In other words, the discourse of teachers and coordinators in all countries was more focused on the social aspect of Participative space for child participation. This focus can be related to the ECEC professionals' recognition of the crucial role of relationships, as found in some studies (e.g., Barros & Leal, 2015). Lundy (2007) proposed that creating a safe and inclusive space, where children are encouraged to express their views, is a precondition for their meaningful participation. Viewing participation from a rights' perspective promotes mutual understanding and collective responsibility to improve our world as active and informed agents (e.g., Kemmis, 2011). For this reason, the space must be safe for children to express their views without fear of criticism or reprimand (i.e., Lundy, 2007). The importance of warm and responsive relationships was shown in several studies (e.g., Nguyen et al., 2020; Salminen, 2013). In Correia et al. (2020b), for instance, a mediating effect of emotional support was found in the association between teachers' participation practices and children's perceived participation (but not any mediating effect of other observed quality dimensions). Consistent with this result, Sheridan (2007) reported that participation in decision-making tends to occur in situations characterized by reciprocity, turn-taking, and involvement.

In this study, Physical space referred to the physical conditions/arrangements leading to the promotion of autonomy and accessibility, needed for participation. In addition to being less common than Social space, the most notable excerpts did not elaborate much on how specific features of space and materials can facilitate children's participation, namely in decision-making. Participants rarely provided examples that operationalized the characteristics of the Physical space that enhance participation, and, in some groups of coordinators, this subcategory was not coded. Considering that coordinators have responsibility over decisions concerning the physical structures, this suggests a low awareness about the role of Physical space for child participation.

The Voice dimension requires intentionality in professionals' pedagogical practices to support children in forming their own perspectives about matters affecting them. For that, they should be provided with the information needed and have varied ways to share perspectives (Lundy, 2007; Welty & Lundy, 2013). Nevertheless, our findings show that providing information is the subcategory with the lowest frequency of practices described both by teachers and coordinators across the participant countries, which can indicate the need for (a) unpacking misconceptions of child-centered approaches that may lead professionals to believe that promoting child participation means minimizing their role in information delivery; and (b) provide professionals with opportunities for increasing knowledge about participation in early ages. Building child capacity was the most frequent subcategory coded in Children's voice and one of the most coded overall. This may be related to ECEC professionals' perception that one of their purposes is to promote child development and learning (Roth, 2020). The low frequency of units related to varying forms of expression is particularly relevant, as we are discussing children's right to participate during early childhood, when they may not be proficient in talking about their perspectives yet. Moreover, providing different forms of expression is necessary to ensure inclusion (Lansdown, 2005; Lundy et al., 2011; Nordén & Avery, 2020; Papandreu & Yiallourous, 2020). Our findings further suggest that there should be a stronger focus on providing children with the information they need to participate. This need is particularly evident in the role played by coordinators. The increased focus on providing information to children necessitates

consideration, at the center level, of what type of information children need to formulate and express their perspectives, thereby enabling their participation in institutional decision-making.

Although the Audience of children's perspectives had fewer units coded than the other dimensions, "process for communicating" brings together good examples of practices for intentionally collecting children's perspectives. Audience requires authentically listening to truly understand children and their perspectives, going beyond adult's perceptions (Colliver, 2017). Audience relates to conceptions about childhood and child participation. In the Portuguese focus groups, for example, it was evident that many of these practices fit into a specific pedagogical model, the Modern School Movement – MSM (Niza, 2007), which explicitly supports participatory approaches. Specifically, instruments described by participants that are inspired by MSM include regular daily and weekly council meetings and communication time (Folque & Siraj-Blatchford, 2011). Our findings suggest that these instruments tend to be used in the classroom by teachers, but rarely by coordinators. This points to the need for a more comprehensive approach, embedded within the center's culture and actively engaging leaders (Nicholson et al., 2020). As the category with the lowest frequency, it highlights the need to create conditions for those responsible for decisions in the ECEC to effectively listen to the children's perspectives, through active listening and by establishing channels and processes for communication at the classroom level and, more importantly, at the center level. Although there seems to be space for participation, the mechanisms for the children to effectively formulate their perspectives (conveyed by the category Voice) and even more so for them to be heard seem to require more investment. If the mechanisms for listening are not in place, then there is a shortage of essential conditions for children's perspectives to have an influence on important decisions that affect them, as will be explained below.

The influence dimension of the Lundy model (2007) highlights the relevance of establishing transparent procedures that ensure children's perspectives are taken seriously and are given due consideration by adults who have the power to implement their ideas. This involves (a) giving due weight by actively listening to children's perspectives and taking them into consideration when making decisions, (b) establishing shared decision-making processes that are communicated clearly to children, and (c) monitoring and providing feedback to children about the decisions in which they are involved. In this study, participants shared practices showing that children's ideas and views are considered by the adults with power to make changes. The subcategory due weight had a high frequency, which could indicate that children's perspectives were being taken seriously and adults were taking actions to effectively implement and/or incorporate children's views in actions. As previously explained, in this study, we coded excerpts corresponding to each subcategory under the "influence" dimension, counted their frequencies, and did not analyze the complexity of the issues in which children participated. Future studies could analyze the depth or complexity of the decisions in which the children participate, collecting data for this purpose, which was not the focus of this study. Nevertheless, the best excerpts that illustrated this category showed some superficiality in the way the topic was discussed. Examples of practices lacked the specific description of how children's ideas and perspectives are implemented, beyond the recognition that these were considered by teachers and coordinators. Therefore, we emphasize that for ensuring high-quality child participation, educational professionals need to recognize that children can make decisions not only about simple matters, but also about complex issues related to ECEC. Moreover, based on the Quality Framework for ECEC (European Commission, 2014), and the national guidelines for four countries, greater meaningfulness was expected in the best practices' descriptions. This may indicate the need for strong leadership in ECEC that fosters a genuine commitment to high-quality child participation, which involves recognizing and valuing children's capabilities to contribute meaningfully to complex decisions that impact their ECEC experiences.

Teachers seem to be sensitive to act upon children's ideas, in line with the recommendations of developmentally appropriate practices for the early years, which highlight the need to follow children's interests and make adjustments to practices (e.g., National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020). However, few, or even no specific descriptions of feedback and monitoring practices regarding child participation emerged in the professionals' discourses. Therefore, this study showed that

increased intentionality regarding the promotion of participatory practices is needed. The definition of structures and processes for planning shared decisions with children, and documenting their frequency and depth would be pivotal to improve participatory practices. As Lundy (2007) mentions, child participation processes empower children and cannot be decorative or superficial. They need to be embedded in the school's culture. Therefore, in the context of ECEC, participation can occur through interactions between teachers and children, and several elements play a defining role in shaping the structure of these participatory interactions: the individuals involved, the quality of relationships, systems of action, contexts of practice, and the element of time (Vieira, 2017). In effect, children, the relationships, and interactions established within ECEC are embedded in complex and interconnected processes (i.e., systems of action) taking place in specific contexts or situations, where time emerges as a transversal dimension, influencing the frequency and duration of participatory interactions and experiences. The consideration of participation as a system of action is particularly important, as participation cannot be reduced to certain activities. Instead, it should be viewed as made up of several dimensions such as the person, the cumulative and recursive nature of participatory actions and activities, and the outcomes of participation. Further, participation involves children's evolving capacity and competences, and the social roles that are expressed through interactions in daily life, in different contexts, such as the family or early childhood education (Stoecklin, 2013). This conceptualization is consistent with the bioecological framework, namely with the constructs of process and person, which develop within an immediate or remote environmental context, in specific time periods (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Applied to the study of children's participation in ECE, these interacting elements and dimensions illustrate the complexity of participation and highlight the need to consider multiple levels of analysis (Gal, 2017; Vieira, 2017).

Therefore, to establish these practices clearly and effectively, it would benefit the ECEC context to thoroughly plan the entire decision-making process. This plan should encompass specific details regarding children's participation, including defining times and processes for decision-making within center or classroom educational projects, monitoring their involvement, evaluating whether their perspectives have been considered, and establishing procedures for sharing the outcomes with the children. An illustrative example of a more complex decision involving children is their ongoing participation in defining rules of coexistence or discussing behaviors considered adequate within the ECEC center or community settings. A participatory process could be implemented, inviting children to express their thoughts, concerns, and suggestions regarding the rules relevant to their daily experiences. This could involve group discussions, playful activities to explore the topic, and democratic procedures to decide on the rules or framework for behaviors. Continuously involving children in this process not only grants them a sense of autonomy and responsibility but also ensures that the rules better reflect their needs and perspectives, fostering a more inclusive and collaborative environment.

Remarkably, both groups of professionals primarily provided examples of practices at the classroom level. Additionally, teachers contributed more with units for the analyses than coordinators. Considering the coordinators' leadership role, specific inquiries about center-level practices were introduced in the discussion. However, few center-level practices emerged. This finding suggests that coordinators had more difficulties in operationalizing how children can participate at the institutional level, with some coded units focusing on classrooms rather than on the whole institution. Literature has emphasized that leadership in ECEC is pivotal for supporting and influencing changes to achieve a shared goal or vision for the ECEC setting (Douglass, 2018), meaning that coordinators are in a key position that could support and strengthen teachers' practices for promoting an ECEC culture of child participation. Future research is necessary to examine the potential impact of professionals in leadership roles within ECEC, such as coordinators, on teachers' practices regarding child participation at the classroom and center levels.

Overall, our study underscored the need for targeted professional development and leadership training for coordinators to bridge the gap between theory and practice, for fostering a culture of child

participation not only within classrooms but also at the institutional level. In this regard, using mixed-method methodologies can contribute to a deeper knowledge about the complex dynamics of child participation within ECEC. Accordingly, future research can integrate quantitative approaches to examine the impact of coordinators in leadership roles on teachers' practices and the impact of teacher practices on child development and learning outcomes. Concurrently, a qualitative approach can be employed to identify potential strategies to enhance child participation across multiple levels within ECEC settings. Such investigations have the potential to offer valuable insights into specific practices that are effective and can be incorporated in teacher training programs, while also documenting the positive effects of participatory practices in child development.

Finally, given that participation is acknowledged as a universal child right, and is recognized, to some extent, in the curricula or guidelines for ECEC in the European countries participating in this study, future research can delve into in-depth analyses of participation practices and discourses. This can assist the ECEC field in navigating potential tensions between practices and curricula or curriculum guidelines.

Limitations

While interpreting the results of this study, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations. The data were coded by four separate teams, each from a different country, potentially introducing some variability in the coding process. However, as explained in the method, rigorous procedures were established and refined in collaboration with the entire team. Extensive efforts were made to discuss and finalize the coding grid, writing precise definitions of each category and subcategory, and maintain continuous communication among researchers.

Although criteria for forming the focus groups were predefined, some differences between the groups emerged, such as the variation in the number of participants. While this variability could influence our findings, it should be noted that the transcripts were analyzed comprehensively. Furthermore, since one focus group was conducted per type of professional per country, theoretical saturation could not be established. Therefore, additional studies are warranted to bolster the reported evidence. Despite these limitations, the adoption of a consistent framework and the inclusion of ECEC professionals serving both at the classroom and at the center levels, in four European countries, constitute important strengths.

Conclusion

This study focused on the perceptions of ECEC professionals regarding their practices in promoting children's right to participate. Future research can further analyze how these perceptions are related to participatory pedagogical practices, thus building upon previous studies that provided insights into the alignment between teachers' ideas and practices (e.g., Salamon & Harrison, 2015).

Overall, the findings indicate that ECEC teachers and coordinators from Belgium, Greece, Poland, and Portugal operationalize in their practices the four dimensions of Lundy's model. These professionals predominantly emphasized the Participative social space, which aligns with global high-quality ECEC practices, particularly those related to emotional support. Generally, they valued practices that support children's Influence, even though certain aspects such as planning joint decision-making, monitoring children's participation, and providing feedback to children were less prominent. Discussions of children's Voice and Audience, crucial for ensuring meaningful participation, were less frequent, also meriting careful consideration. By informing about the dimensions of participation that are more (and less) emphasized by ECEC professionals, and discussing those that appear to be addressed with reduced intentionality, these findings have the potential to support professional development initiatives aimed at enhancing participatory practices among ECEC teachers and coordinators. In conclusion, this study identified promising practices, thereby contributing to the

construction of relevant knowledge on the operationalization of children's participation rights in ECEC settings. Given that these four countries are European and that participation is a universal right enshrined in the Convention they all signed, these exemplary practices can serve as inspiration for intentionally designed pedagogical practices aimed at promoting participation in these and other countries.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data Availability Statement

The authors did not obtain participants' written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

Ethics

Ethical standards and procedures for research with human beings were followed. Participants provided written consent. GDPR rules were followed.

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