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Choosing classrooms: A structured interview on children's right to participate



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ABSTRACT

Discourses from distinct areas of knowledge converge on the relevance of listening to children's perspectives on their everyday lives and, specifically, in early childhood settings. Although children's participation is considered an important criterion to assess preschool settings' quality, there is little empirical evidence on children's ideas in these settings. This study aims to develop and pilot a structured interview to assess children's conceptions, expectations, and perceptions about participation. Results suggest children consider they have more opportunities to make choices in the classroom characterized by the participation narrative. Furthermore, the participation classroom is consistently described as the one in which children would feel better, have more fun, and like the most, suggesting children value more classrooms in which participation occurs.

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1. Children's right to participate

In recent years, the idea of children's right to participate has gained currency in scientific fields and more broadly in society. Specifically, there has been a growing recognition that children have the same right as adults to participate in all matters affecting them, in family, school, and community contexts (Lansdown, 2005). Broadly, children's participation consists of being active in the decisions that affect their lives, being able to express independent initiatives, and learning to take on responsibilities (e.g., Duncan, 2009), acting in partnership with adults. Participation can be exercised in different ways, describing a great variety of activities and taking place in various circumstances, assuming a multidimensional character (Sinclair, 2004; Stephenson, Gourley, & Miles, 2004).

Outside of academia, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) laid the legal framework that recognized children as holders of rights, including the right to participate. Articles 12 and 13 of this Convention are particularly important, as they delineate the right of all children to freely express their views, and the responsibility of the children's society to acknowledge and take those views into account (Auriat, Miljeteig, & Chawla, 2001).

When children are young, the activities in which they participate are generally influenced by adults' decisions and by the opportunities for participation that are offered to them (Bruder & Dunst, 2000). However, children's participation begins from the moment they are able to establish negotiations, and discover the extent to which their own voices influence the course of events in their lives (Hart, 1992). Based on this, Hart proposed eight levels of child participation (i.e., from manipulation by adults, to decision-making initiated by children and shared with adults), noticing that the degree to which children should have a voice in anything is a subject of strong divergence. Nonetheless, the emergence of this

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conceptualization was determinant to the discussion about children's participation, and to the subsequent shift from endogenous (i.e., emerging from reflection on practice) to exogenous conceptual frameworks (i.e., encompassing contributions from political and social theory). Children's voices have become a representation of the commitment to the values of freedom, democracy, and care (James, 2007). Moreover, for Lundy (2007), it is the combination of voice and action that leads to genuine participation, inclusion, and belonging.

The view of children as competent and knowledgeable actors with their own valuable experiences, ideas, and choices highlights the importance of listening to children and young people. As part of listening, it is necessary to explore children's perceptions of their lives, their interests, priorities and concerns, in order to promote child well-being, learning, and development (Sheridan & Samuelsson, 2001). This proposition is aligned with self-determination theory as it is focused on the basic psychological needs of competence and autonomy (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Furthermore, research findings suggest that the more children experience opportunities to participate, the more they gradually develop perceptions of competence, in the most diverse domains (Harter, 1999). In addition, several authors discuss the potential impacts that children's participation can have on child development, self-esteem, self-efficacy, friendships, communication, negotiation, conflict resolution and decision-making skills (Kirby & Bryson, 2002; Kirby, Lanyon, Cronin, & Sinclair, 2003; Sinclair, 2004). There is evidence of benefits that extend beyond the early childhood education and care (ECEC) setting: children who have come from settings focused on the promotion of child decision-making have higher achievement in language skills (e.g., Sylva, 1992).

This paper aims to study children's right to participate in ECEC settings by developing a measure to obtain data on children's ideas about participation and its implementation in ECEC settings. Through the design and piloting of a structured interview entitled "Choosing Classrooms: A Structured Interview on Children's Right to Participate", we aim to assess children's ideas about different types of experiences and opportunities to exercise influence within ECEC classrooms. More specifically, we aim to provide relevant information on children's conceptions (i.e., the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors children associate with participation experiences), expectations (i.e., how children's expect to feel, have fun, or learn, in classrooms characterized by different participation experiences), and perceptions (i.e., how children perceive their own classroom regarding participation practices and the activities and decisions they are able to perform there).

1.1. *Children's participation and the quality of ECEC settings*

Quality in early childhood education and care seems to be instrumental in ensuring positive developmental outcomes (e.g., Bryant, Zaslow, & Burchinal, 2010). Although the definition of quality is complex and may be analyzed from different perspectives (Bairrão, 1998; Katz, 1998; Tobin, 2005), it is agreed upon that children's rights constitute a key aspect in the framework of education and educational quality (Sheridan & Samuelsson, 2001). An early childhood setting constitutes a democratic forum in which participants learn to understand each other's perspectives, values, and histories. Listening to children's ideas contributes to the establishment of respectful and educational relationships which enhance adults' understanding of children's priorities, interests, feelings, and concerns. This understanding leads to changing assumptions and raising new expectations for both children and adults about children's capabilities (Pascal & Bertram, 2009).

Different curricula and pedagogical guidelines, while containing specificities, should capture children's interests and needs, fostering their development based on their experiences, knowledge and ideas, and interconnecting participation and pedagogical processes (Sandberg & Eriksson, 2010). ECEC teachers develop and implement their pedagogical practice based on curriculum guidelines, values, and objectives stated by different educational programs, learning theories, and research on ECEC quality, as well as their inner beliefs about participation (Samuelsson, Sheridan, & Williams, 2006).

Early childhood education is considered a fundamental microsystem for preschool-aged children, consisting of the environment and the people who contribute to an individual's experience of participation (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). Its quality plays a determinant role in children's cognitive and socioemotional development (e.g., Anders et al., 2013; Burchinal, Howes, & Kontos, 2002). At the microsystem level, a number of different pedagogical models, rooted in socio-constructivist approaches, use participation as a means to promote child development (Oliveira-Formosinho, 2007). Research has indicated that high-quality pedagogical settings are those in which children's rights have been incorporated into both teacher education and practical work (Lansdown, 1996). The assessment of ECEC settings' quality should take into account the perspectives of different stakeholders, which necessarily means including children voices (Katz, 1998). Otherwise, essential information on how children experience quality within diverse ECEC settings, as well as a global understanding of pedagogical quality will be lost (Sheridan, 2007). In fact interaction, communication, and participation describe high-quality pedagogical practices (NAEYC, 2006).

The positive relationship between children's participation and the quality of ECEC settings (i.e., characterized by positive social relationships and developmentally appropriate activities) has been documented. Specifically, children attending high-quality ECEC settings report more opportunities to participate and to exert influence on their own situation. They also report being able to express their thoughts and views, and having their opinions respected and considered (Sheridan, 2007). Likewise, children in high-quality ECEC classrooms tend to express to a larger extent that they believe teachers know what they like to do and give them responsibility to do what they like to do, based on both teacher flexibility and willingness to negotiate rules (Sheridan & Samuelsson, 2001). Therefore, it can be assumed that children in these settings can better describe their participation experiences and perspectives about participation.

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