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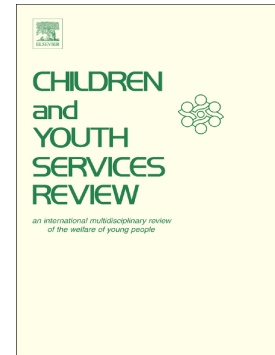
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## Accepted Manuscript

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Children's right to participate in early childhood education settings: A systematic  
review

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## Abstract

Children's right to participate is considered pivotal for establishing a culture of democracy and citizenship. Although this not a new concept, its application remains a challenge. This review aims to map peer-reviewed empirical research conducted on children's right to participate, in center-based early childhood education settings, from 1980 on. A systematic literature search was performed and 36 studies met the inclusion criteria. Findings suggest a limited number of publications, conducted mostly in northern Europe countries, in the education field. Regarding definitions and theoretical backgrounds, sociological, legal, democratic, and educational discourses converge. There is a prominence of qualitative studies, a greater focus of research on ideas about participation, and, to a lesser extent, a focus on practices to promote participation. There is more emphasis on teacher's perspectives and practices, with few studies relying on children as informants, and limited sound measures to assess children's participation. Future research should rely on multiple informants, and investigate associations between this right and children's individual outcomes.

*Keywords:* right to participate, participation, early childhood education, peer-reviewed, children

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Children's rights address the social and legal positions of children in society. The rights of young people are embedded in a culture of human rights, democracy, and rule of law, which together require the establishment of policies enabling young people to fulfill their potential and actively participate in society. Moreover, young people's active and effective participation and decision making in society must be both protected and encouraged from an early age (Council of Europe, 2017; United Nations, 2005).

The United Nations organization has been pivotal in the implementation of children's rights and in raising awareness of children's role in society. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted in 1989 and ratified almost universally, is the most comprehensive document on the rights of children. The articles of the convention define a range of provision, protection, and participation rights for children (Alderson, 2000; Lansdown, 1994). Participation rights are mostly expressed in Articles 12 and 13. Specifically, Article 12 states that children have the right to participate in all matters affecting them, from family to community, freely expressing their opinion and having it respected and considered. Several amendments to the CRC have been made with regard to specific national legislations. More recently, specific guidelines for the implementation of children's right to participate have been proposed (United Nations, 2005).

The European Commission (2013) has recommended that all member states develop integrated strategies, taking children's best interests as a primary consideration and recognizing children as independent rights-holders. One key pillar for such policies involves implementing mechanisms to promote children's participation in decision-making processes affecting their lives.

Over time, different research fields became gradually more interested in children's rights. Sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, and academics from other disciplines have contributed to the field, discussing concepts, asking questions, sharing concerns regarding children's rights, recognizing children's competence and agency, and valuing their perspectives (e.g., Berthelsen & Brownlee, 2005; Pascal & Bertram, 2009; Shaik & Ebrahim, 2015).

### **Conceptualizing the Right to Participate**

Several definitions of children's right to participate have been proposed. Because participation is defined as children's influence in all matters affecting them, it is necessarily multidimensional and can be exercised in different ways (Clark, 2005; Shier, 2001; Sinclair, 2004; Smith, 2002; Stephenson, Gourley, & Miles, 2004; Tomanovic, 2003). Understanding children's participation involves considering dimensions such as the level of participation, that is, the degree of power sharing between teacher and child; the decisions and focus of decision-making affecting children; the nature of the activity, namely participation in one-off or long-term processes; and the children involved, covering a wide range of interests, capacities, and characteristics (Sinclair, 2004).

The degree to which children should have a voice has been a subject of discussion (e.g., Sinclair, 2004). Issues of power, voice, and representation have been essential when discussing children's participation in social and political life (e.g., Farrugia, 2015; Lansdown, 1995) as they challenge the cultural notions and social representations of "adult" and "child" (e.g., Alderson, 2000).

Moreover, distinct levels of participation involving different degrees of power sharing (e.g., children being informed, consulted, or sharing decisions with adults) between children and adults have been proposed (Arnstein's, 1969; Hart, 1992; Kirby,

Lanyon, Cronin, & Sinclair, 2003; Shier, 2001; Treseder, 1997). One of the most influential models of participation suggested the existence of eight levels of participation, three of which referred to experiences of non-participation (Hart, 1992). Subsequent models proposed a non-hierarchical structure of participation (Treseder, 1997) or clarified different degrees of commitment to the process of empowerment, at each level (Shier, 2001).

Existing participation models differ in the extent of children's initiative considered at higher levels of the participation hierarchy. For instance, Hart (1992) described participation from manipulation by adults to decision-making initiated by children and shared with adults, while Shier (2001) only described participation from being listened to, to being involved in decision-making. Existing models also differ in the extent to which they propose a hierarchy of participation levels.

Thomas (2012) emphasized the importance of the theory of recognition to understanding children's participation. Proposed by Honneth (1995), this theory is founded in the concept of recognition as a fundamental element in human interaction, relevant for individual and group identity. Thomas refers to recognition as the key to individual development and social progress, highlighting three different modes that can support our thinking about children's place and participation in society – love, rights, and solidarity. Love refers to children's participation in intimate relationships, early on and throughout life, contributing to a sense of being valued and trusted. Rights are based on the respect for other people as human beings, and solidarity refers to individual contributions to collective values.

Recently, inspired by Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach, Gal (2017) proposed salient themes emerging from existing literature on children's right to participate and reorganized them into an ecological model of child and youth



participation (see Figure 1). Specifically, relevant themes include children's ability to participate and professionals' role as gatekeepers. Together with children's competence and confidence to engage with others, professionals' perceptions, motivation, and capabilities are described as significant factors contributing to child participation. Furthermore, the model considers children's ability to meaningfully participate in different ecological levels, such as the family, the neighbourhood, or the school. In fact, there is a wide range of spheres in which children may participate: from family daily interactions or negotiations between the child and other family members, to teacher-child interactions and participation in school councils and elections, and neighbourhood planning, where children interact with authority figures.

Young children's voices should be heard and respected to ensure their perceptions, concerns, needs, and dreams are considered in decisions regarding their education and everyday lives. Nonetheless, there are some barriers to the meaningful and effective implementation of the right to participate within education settings, including a general lack of awareness of children's right to participate, adults' scepticism about children's capacity to participate, and concerns that empowering children will weaken teachers' authority (Lundy, 2007).

< Insert Figure 1 >

### **The Right to Participate in Early Childhood Education Settings**

Within the early childhood education (ECE) field there is general consensus regarding the importance of considering children's perspectives (see Clark & Moss, 2005). For example, Katz (2006) suggested that assessment of ECE quality should consider multiple perspectives, including children's views and experiences. Furthermore, it is consensual that children's rights and, specifically, children's right to

participate constitute key aspects in framing ECE daily practice and overall quality (Sheridan, 2007; Sheridan & Samuelsson, 2001).

There is growing interest in addressing how adults working with young children can support shared decision-making processes in which children are actively engaged (NAYEC, 2009). Relatedly, there have been efforts to develop high-quality standards aiming to guide ECE professionals in improving participatory practices and ensuring meaningful participation for children (e.g., Save the Children, 2005). The importance of recognizing children as active and capable learners, addressing their interests and needs to promote their well-being, positive self-image, physical, social, and cognitive development is among the key principles of a quality framework for ECE (European Commission, 2014). Recently, a comprehensive set of indicators were designed to establish a common framework for the quality of ECE in Europe, addressing the importance of promoting child participation (Moser, Leseman, Melhuish, Broekhuizen, & Slot, 2017). Specifically, the authors propose that ECE teachers must show high regard for children's perspectives, adopting a child-centred approach, by facilitating children's initiative and decision-making in play and other activities, and following children's lead.

### **Potential Effects of the Right to Participate**

Participation improves the organization and functioning of communities and enables individuals to develop into more competent and confident members of society, through increases in social competence, social responsibility, and political self-determination (Hart, 1992). Relatedly, two types of outcomes of exerting the right to participate are proposed: general benefits, such as better government decisions and policies, and benefits to children, such as achievement of specific objectives, development of leadership skills, self-esteem, and well-being (Save the Children, 2010).

The development of citizenship has also been proposed as an outcome of child participation (Pascal & Bertram, 2009).

In parallel with the growing recognition of children's right to participate, there has been increasing interest in children's well-being (e.g., Bradshaw & Mayhew, 2005). The CRC states that participation is a mechanism for promoting well-being and full development (United Nations, 2009). To be heard, to influence decision-making, and to exercise voice, are described as fundamental well-being outcomes (Clever & Cockburn, 2009). Relatedly, potential outcomes of children's participation comprise increased access to decision-making, influence, advocacy, and voice, which can also lead to improved development outcomes (Gero & Asker, 2012).

### **Existing Reviews on the Right to Participate**

Reviews have already been conducted on the topic. A review of the international literature mapping academic discourse on children's rights identified autonomy and participation rights as the new standard in practice and policy, and a predominant theme in the academic work on the CRC (Reynaert, Bouverne-de-Bie, & Vandeveld, 2009).

In the educational context, methods for listening to and consulting with young children in ECE settings have been reviewed (Clark, 2005). Further, another literature review has focused on how school-aged children's participation in formal and non-formal school programs can be instrumental in enhancing development outcomes and informing program design, thus increasing efficacy (Gero & Asker, 2012). In addition, Theobald, Danby, and Ailwood (2011) reviewed social policy movements and theoretical understandings of children's participation specifically in Australian ECE settings.

In the context of health services, Coyne (2008) reviewed the literature on children's participation in appointments and decision-making in health services,

highlighting professionals' and parents' reservations and concerns about children's active involvement. Likewise, a scoping review of children's participation in planning and decision-making in Norway's protection and health services is also available (Vis, Strandbu, Holtan, and Thomas, 2010).

Evidence on children and young people's perspectives on the methods used by adults to obtain their views has also been reviewed (Hill, 2006). Finally, Campos and Fernandes (2012) mapped PhD thesis and Master dissertations discussing issues of children's participation in different life contexts in the field of sociology of childhood alone, in a specific Portuguese university.

### **This Review**

Extant reviews have focused on specific methods to gather children's voices, children's participation in specific countries, children's participation in health settings, or school-aged children's participation. To the best of our knowledge, there is currently no systematic review mapping international empirical research on young children's right to participate in ECE settings. We aim to address this gap, acknowledging the importance of the early years, often underestimated and overlooked. We acknowledge the initial assumptions most likely to influence our analyses and interpretation of findings: (1) the field needs a comprehensive evidence-base on participation-related ideas, practices, and outcomes, and their mutual associations and effects; (2) the field needs strong evidence building on quantitative and qualitative studies and transversal and longitudinal high-quality research designs; (3) the field needs to consider the perspectives, experiences, and outcomes of multiple agents, maintaining a strong focus on children.

Focusing on empirical articles published in peer-reviewed journals from 1980 to 2017, we aim to (a) describe the contexts in which children's participation in ECE has

been studied; (b) identify the main definitions and theoretical backgrounds currently framing the study of children's right to participate; (c) understand whose voices and experiences are being heard or described; (d) map the methodological approaches and research designs used for studying children's right to participate; and (e) understand the extent to which the effects of children's right to participate are considered in available empirical peer-reviewed studies. Our ultimate goal is to provide scholars, policymakers, and practitioners with a synthesis of the existing empirical studies in the field, allowing for a deeper understanding of state of the art and informing about possible pathways to move the field forward.

## **Method**

### **Eligibility Criteria**

We conducted a systematic review of peer-reviewed empirical studies addressing children's right to participate in ECE settings. We used the SPIDER tool (Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, and Research type; Cooke, Smith, & Booth, 2012) to define a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies meeting the following inclusion criteria were considered for review (i.e., full-text reading and analysis):

- (i) **Sample:** Empirical studies focusing on typically developing children aged 3 to 6 years-old, including studies focusing on teachers and other professionals' ideas (i.e., values, beliefs, conceptions, expectations, or perceptions) about children's right to participate in ECE settings, and taking place in ECE centre-based settings;
- (ii) **Phenomenon of interest:** Empirical studies addressing children's right to participate, understood as the right to choose, to have an active voice, to have their opinion considered; also, studies addressing specific behaviours, decisions, or individual experiences related to the right to participate;

- (iii) Design: Any type of study design (e.g., correlational, longitudinal, randomized control trials), intervention, or method involving primary data collection and analysis;
- (iv) Evaluation: Any type of outcome, such as ideas, practices, strategies, or benefits of participation;
- (v) Research type: Any type of empirical research, involving qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods.

Regarding exclusion criteria, studies were not considered for this review if they referred to children aged below 3 or above 6 years, based on the focus of the broader research project underlying this review and because the inclusion of children aged below 3 would require a different focus of analysis. However, studies involving multiple ages that reported results for preschool-aged children were eligible. Moreover, studies were excluded if they referred to contexts other than centre-based ECE, such as family child care or sports. We also did not include studies addressing physical participation, involvement in physical activities, or referring to participatory approaches aimed at studying other topics rather than children's right to participate. Similarly, studies referring to participation as the right to attend ECE were not considered. Studies referring to children with special needs or parental participation were excluded, as they were not the focus of the research project that originated this review. Articles that did not report empirical studies (e.g., editor letters, reviews, position statements, and theoretical papers) and meta-analysis were also not selected for review. Finally, we excluded studies in languages other than English or Portuguese, studies published in non-peer-reviewed journals, or unpublished research (e.g., PhD or Master Dissertations).

### **Information Sources and Search Strategy**

A systematic electronic search was conducted in the EBSCO databases Academic Search Complete, PsycARTICLES, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, PsycINFO, and ERIC; Web of Science Core Collection and Scopus (both with interdisciplinary coverage, including law-related areas), equally applying specific restrictions in all databases: (a) published between 1980 and 2017, (b) containing selected keywords in the abstract, (c) with full text available, (d) published in academic journals, and (e) in the English and Portuguese languages. The lower temporal limit was defined trying to cover all publications since 1980, a few years before the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, in 1989.

Studies were identified using all possible combinations of the following groups of search terms: (a) “child\* participation” OR “participat\* right” OR “right to participat\*” OR “right for participat\*” AND (b) “preschool\*” OR “early childhood education\*” OR “pre-k” OR “kindergarten\*” OR “3 year\* old\*” OR “4 year\* old\*” OR “5 year\* old\*” OR “three year\* old\*” OR “four year\* old\*” OR “five year\* old\*” OR “age\* 3” OR “age\* 4” OR “age\* 5” OR “early education” OR “daycare” OR “day care” OR “childcare” OR “child care” NOT (equivalent AND NOT in Scopus) (c) “disabilit\*” OR “special need\*” OR “special education need\*” OR “handicap\*” OR “impairment\*”.

A hand search based on known authors, reference lists of previous reviews of literature, and already known papers was also performed to include relevant empirical papers meeting the search criteria that had not been captured by the electronic search. To refine and expand the hand search, we conducted a legacy search, by using the reference lists of all articles included in the review. All duplicate studies were verified, both electronically and manually, and eliminated. Search procedures were first conducted on July and updated in December 2017.

### **Study Selection and Data Extraction**

A selection of relevant studies was conducted, based on a sequential examination of title, abstract, and full text, following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) Statement (Liberati et al., 2009). The first part of the selection, title and abstract examination, followed by decision to retain or reject each study, was made by two independent coders separately, using the Abstrackr online tool (Wallace, Small, Brodley, Lau, & Trikalinos, 2012). Each of the coders screened all the articles identified, reaching 88.8 percentage agreement. All disagreements were reviewed in committee, mostly referring to non-empirical studies or studies not referring to preschool-aged children. The next step, full text examination and decision to retain or reject each study, was again conducted by two independent coders separately, reaching 85.9 percent agreement, and subsequently solving discrepant decisions through consensus.

### **Retrieval and Selection of Studies**

As illustrated in Figure 2, the initial screening resulted in the retrieval of 525 articles. This number fell to 243 after removal of duplicates. Of these, 207 studies were excluded based on their title and abstract, because they did not meet at least one of the inclusion criteria. The remaining 36 articles, together with 28 articles identified through hand search, resulting in a total of 64 articles, were screened through full-text reading, with 28 more articles excluded for not meeting at least one inclusion criterion. Disagreements, reviewed in committee, mostly referred to studies using participatory approaches, but addressing other topics or other contexts such as children's voices in nurseries, or children's voices on teacher's roles. In the end, 36 studies, 22 from database search and 14 from hand search, met the inclusion criteria and were selected for qualitative synthesis.

< Insert Figure 2 >



## Results

Detailed information extracted from the full-text review is presented in Table 1. A qualitative analysis of extracted information was conducted, aiming to identify and categorize study characteristics, in an essentially data-driven process (Schreier, 2014). Categories addressed topics such as the context of research (i.e., country and field in which the research was conducted), definitions, voices heard (i.e., sources of information), methodological approaches, and focus of the research.

< Insert Table 1 >

### Contexts of Research

The 36 studies included in the systematic review were published between 2001 and 2017, although most ( $n = 29$ , 81%) were published between 2012 and 2017. A considerable number of studies were conducted in Finland ( $n = 8$ , 22%) and in Sweden ( $n = 7$ , 19%), exclusively. Four studies included in this review (Broström et al., 2015; Harcourt & Hägglund, 2013; Theobald & Kultti, 2012; Turnšek & Pekkarinen, 2009) were conducted in more than one country, always including Sweden.

Five studies (Kangas, Ojala, & Venninen, 2015; Leinonen & Venninen, 2012; Leinonen, Brotherus, & Venninen, 2014; Venninen & Leinonen, 2013; Venninen, Leinonen, Lipponen, & Ojala, 2014) relied on data from the “Katse lapseen-hanke VKK-Metro” project (i.e., “Looking at a child” project), from the Early Childhood Education Development Unit of the Helsinki metropolitan area, in Finland, but all were considered, as distinct sample sizes and objectives were reported.

The 36 articles were published in 28 journals, with the European Early Childhood Education Research Journal publishing the most studies ( $n = 5$ , 18%). Most journals were dedicated (i.e., aims and scope) to education ( $n = 18$ , 64%), while the remaining were mostly dedicated to multidisciplinary fields (e.g., research practice,

childhood related fields), and one was dedicated to psychology. Regarding journal's indexation areas in SCImago (2017), many journals ( $n = 16$ , 57%) were indexed in Education and/or Developmental and Educational Psychology. Moreover, authors' field of study, as reflected in academic affiliations, in most articles ( $n = 32$ , 89%) was education; few articles were written by authors dedicated to psychology ( $n = 2$ , 6%) or social and welfare studies ( $n = 2$ , 6%). Based on the SCImago journal rankings (2017), only one article (3%) was published in a first-quartile journal (indexed in 'Education'), while the majority ( $n = 22$ , 61%) were published in second and third-quartile journals.

### **Definitions and Theoretical Background**

Authors relied on different theoretical frameworks and paradigms when defining the right to participate: to have a voice and to be listened to, to have competence and agency, to be involved, and to experience democratic citizenship. The four theoretical frameworks are described below.

#### **To Have a Voice and to Be Listened to**

Several studies ( $n = 25$ , 69%) defined the right to participate based on a legal paradigm, specifically referring to the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989), which affords children's legal rights to decision-making on all matters that affect them. Participation is thus seen as children's entitlement to freely express their opinion, being listened to, and having that opinion respected and taken into consideration. Over one third of the studies ( $n = 13$ , 36%) specifically mentioned Articles 12 and/or 13 of the Convention. Not surprisingly, few studies ( $n = 3$ , 8%) used this paradigm alone to define the right to participate, with most studies ( $n = 22$ , 62%) defining participation in combination with other paradigms. Some studies ( $n = 14$ , 39%) also focused on existing national legal commitments (e.g., national laws/decrees, official curriculums) to the right to participate.

### **To Have Competence and Agency**

Most studies ( $n = 28$ , 78%) relied on a sociological paradigm based on children as competent actors and active agents. The right to participate is thus conceptualized in the light of a new vision of childhood which considers children as having rights, as agents in their own social worlds, and as competent to use resources to co-construct interactions and make their own choices. Studies using this definition generally cited Prout and James (1997) or Corsaro (2005). While some articles ( $n = 7$ , 19%) used this approach alone to define children's right to participate, the majority ( $n = 16$ , 44%) used it in combination with the legal perspective. Some studies combined this sociological paradigm and other perspectives (e.g., involvement, democratic) ( $n = 5$ , 14%).

### **To Be Involved**

Some studies ( $n = 5$ , 14%) defined the right to participate as individual involvement in a life situation (e.g., taking part, being involved). This perspective considers that the right to participate consists of both involvement and decision-making. This approach translates into being involved in planning everyday activities, belonging to the group, and feeling included when solving a problem. A few studies ( $n = 3$ , 8%) referred to children's involvement according to the experiential paradigm proposed by Laevers (2005), considering children's involvement (i.e., concentration, fascination, and intensity of engagement) as a process variable that reflects the degree to which children's rights are met (Laevers & Declercq, 2018). One study (3%) considered participation as involvement from a health and functional perspective, mentioning the World Health Organization's International Classification of Functioning (2007). Two of the five studies also referred to participation as involvement according to the definition of Turnšek (2005, 2007), describing it as children's involvement in creating their life in the institution and making decisions about aspects concerning them. All studies using

this definition combined it with definitions based on the sociological perspective ( $n = 1$ , 3%), the democratic perspective ( $n = 2$ , 6%), or combined more than two perspectives ( $n = 2$ , 6%).

### **To Experience Democratic Citizenship**

A democratic perspective was identified in eight studies (22%), defining the right to participate as a key concept of democratic cultures and pedagogies. This definition emphasizes children as active and democratic citizens, who learn to defend their interests and take on responsibilities. This is in line with the *philosophy* of education paradigm and the theory of democracy proposed by Dewey (1916), based on the direct participation of all society members, and on education as the way individuals experience participation and, therefore, democracy. All studies using this definition of children's right to participate combined it other perspectives (e.g., defining participation based on the democratic and involvement perspectives).

### **Voices Heard and Experiences Documented**

Regarding sources of information, 14 studies (39%) included teachers as participants, six studies (17%) included children only, nine studies (25%) included both teachers and children, and one study (3%) had teachers and parents as participants. Three studies (8%) collected data through legal document analysis. One study (3%) used both legal documents and teachers as sources of information and two (6%) combined the analysis of documentation practices with teachers and children as informants. As expected, all studies involved preschool-aged children.

### **Methodological Approaches**

Regarding the type of methods used, most articles ( $n = 24$ , 67%) reported qualitative research, and few reported quantitative research ( $n = 7$ , 19%) or mixed methods ( $n = 5$ , 14%). Within qualitative studies, seven used a combination of data

collection methods such as observations, interviews, visual data (e.g., photographic records, children's drawings), and conversations; five studies involved analysis of documentation practices, ECE teachers' behaviours, social interactions, etc.; five studies conducted conversation analysis; three studies involved document analysis, and the remaining studies used a focus group discussion, a critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954), a structured interview, or a combination of document analysis and survey.

All quantitative studies involved the use of self-report questionnaires. Fewer than half (Lopes, Correia, & Aguiar, 2016; Venninen et al., 2014; Zorec, 2015) provided information regarding the psychometric properties of the measures used. One study (Zorec, 2015) analysed the effects of a teachers' training program, comparing two data collection points.

### **Focus of the Research on Children's Right to Participate**

A synthesis of main results regarding the focus of studies on children's right to participate in ECE can be found in Figure 3.

< Insert Figure 3 >

#### **Ideas About Participation**

Almost half the studies ( $n = 17$ , 47%) investigated ideas about participation, focusing on teachers' ( $n = 13$ , 36%), children's ( $n = 3$ , 8%), or both teachers' and children's ideas ( $n = 1$ , 3%). It is noteworthy that the number of studies focusing on teachers' ideas is four times the number of studies focusing on children's ideas.

Regarding teachers' ideas, some studies focused on teachers' conceptions about the meaning of participation. ECE teachers seem to conceive participation as being part of a group and listening to others (e.g., Johansson & Sandberg, 2010), as participating in planning and decision-making (Sandberg & Eriksson, 2010; Turnšek, 2008), or as

children's own activity and independent choice, supported by teachers (Broström et al., 2015).

We also found studies focusing on teachers' ideas about practices aiming to promote children's right to participate. Good practices reported by teachers include: supporting child participation in both child-initiated and adult-initiated activities, by promoting opportunities for discussion and negotiation in decision-making, within shared experiences and rules (Kangas et al., 2015; Kangas, Venninen, & Ojala, 2016; Lopes, Correia, & Aguiar, 2016; Turnšek & Pekkarinen, 2009; Venninen & Leinonen, 2013, Zorec, 2015); facilitating professional skills for supporting children's perspectives (Kangas, et. al, 2016); and enabling a participation environment characterized by pedagogical sensitivity and respect for children's will to participate (Kangas et. al, 2016; Koran & Avc1, 2017). However, teachers also identified obstacles to the implementation of children's participation, namely the use of a commanding and directing language and communication style (Koran & Avc1, 2017), the existence of educational structures characterized by traditional interaction patterns based on teacher power and child subordination (Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012), challenging adult-child ratios and management work (Venninen et al., 2014).

One study documented teachers' ideas before and after being exposed to a two-year intensive training program focused on the pedagogical principles of the Reggio Emilia approach, which emphasizes child participation (Zorec, 2015).

The three studies focusing on children's ideas mostly investigated how children perceive their right to participate. Children seem to describe participatory classrooms as those they like the most and in which they have more opportunities to make choices, feel better, and have fun (Correia & Aguiar, 2017). Also, children describe the right to participate as being linked with action and embedded in the relationships established

with others, in accordance to their own needs (Harcourt & Hägglund, 2013).

Participation is also perceived by children as the opportunity to freely engage with and use different areas and materials without having to ask for permission from the ECE staff, as well as the opportunity to participate in decisions about what activities they should engage, with the possibility of refusing staff proposals (Sandseter & Seland, 2016).

The study analysing both teachers' and children's ideas about participation mostly investigated and categorized their perspectives about participation practices and experiences. Children seem consider citizenship-related topics, describing participation as managing group relations and participating in discussions and negotiations, while teachers highlight the complementary role of citizenship education, perceiving educational settings as major agents of socialization (Dias & Menezes, 2013).

### **Practices and Strategies Related to Participation**

One third of the studies ( $n = 12$ , 33%) described practices aiming to promote the right to participate, either examining teacher practices ( $n = 1$ , 3%), children's strategies for agency ( $n = 2$ , 6%), teacher and child practices/strategies simultaneously ( $n = 6$ , 17%), or teachers' and parents' practices ( $n = 1$ , 3%). Two studies (6%) relied on the analysis of documentation practices (e.g., portfolios), while also including teachers and children as participants.

Some studies described specificities of teacher-child interactions with the potential to promote children's right to participate, suggesting the importance of teachers' pedagogically sensitive attitude, characterized by respect, attention, and trust in children's capacities (Freitas Luís, Andrade, & Santos, 2015; Mesquita-Pires, 2012; Pettersson, 2015; Salminen, 2013). Examples of specific interactional strategies include the use of indirect requests for child participation, namely 'I wonder' formulations

(Houen, Danby, Farrel, & Thorpe, 2016), the use of active listening, encouraging and validating children's talk (Alasuutari, 2014; Theobald & Kulti, 2012; Tholin & Jansen, 2012), and the promotion of conversations and discussions by referring to shared rules and classroom management (Salminen, 2013). Some studies (e.g., Houen et al., 2016) described nonverbal aspects of teacher-child interactions (e.g., silences during a conversation).

Other studies analysed practices aiming to promote children's participation in specific activities, namely in documentation practices such as portfolios, or presentations of children's work (Knauf, 2017; Pettersson, 2015), and in the resolution of peer disputes, with children contributing to organize interactions and making their voices heard (Mashford-Scott & Church, 2011). Other studies observed child participation in a wide range of activities, from free play to teacher-planned or child-planned activities (Freitas Luís et al., 2015), although giving preference for active experiences, such as manipulating tools, over static or passive activities (Nah & Lee, 2016).

Importantly, few studies examined children's strategies to exercise their right to participate, stressing the role of strategies of silence, avoidance, and negotiation as ways for children to resist an adult's remark, or to be in control, defending their space and partially accepting decisions established by adults (Markstrom & Hallden, 2009). Together with negotiation, the role of imagination was documented as important to promote children's instructive roles, control, and agency (Shaik & Ebrahim, 2015).

Finally, one study addressed the role of professional development and reflexive practices as means to change teachers' practices towards supporting and improving conditions for children's participation (Mesquita-Pires, 2012). In the context of a case study and using two data collection points, the author described the transformation of



teachers' practices, through discussion and experiential learning focused on how to create enabling environments, materials, routines, and attitudes, contributing to new opportunities for adults to listen to and adequately respond to children.

While some studies documented children's capacity to manage their personal autonomy, being able to accept or decline to participate according to their own will (Houen et al., 2016; Markstrom & Halden, 2009), others observed teachers' greater agentic status, having more power than children, with the possibility to promote but also limit child participation (e.g., Alasuutari, 2014; Mashford-Scott & Church, 2011; Salminen, 2013, Pettersson, 2015). Additionally, some studies observed child participation as secondary to the planning (Alasuutari, 2014), with democratic approaches occurring only sporadically (Tholin & Jansen, 2012), and no real opportunities being offered for children to exert influence, for instance, in documentation processes (Pettersson, 2015).

### **Ideas and Practices Related to Participation**

Few studies ( $n = 3$ , 8%) investigated both practices and ideas simultaneously, although none of them documented associations between ideas and practices. Two studies examining both teacher and child practices and perceptions (Nah & Lee, 2016; Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012). For instance, children's participation in designing learning spaces and activities, such as the development of a play area with adult's support, was described as empowering children (Nah & Lee, 2016).

Another study described variations in children's ideas and experiences as a function of ECE process quality (Sheridan & Samuelsson, 2001). In fact, also within the studies focusing solely on practices, a few mentioned the importance of ECE settings' quality to the promotion of child participation, suggesting that high-quality contexts are

more focused on children's voices and initiatives (e.g., Freitas Luís et al., 2015; Houen et al., 2016; Sheridan & Samuelson, 2001).

### **Legal documentation**

Three studies (8%) analysed participation practices as addressed in specific legal documents. These documents included legislation, guidelines, or documents regulating ECE practices, and defined participation as taking part, being involved in decision-making, and able to make their own choices, respecting children's interests (Ärlemalm-Hagsér, 2013; Batur Musaoglu & Haktanir, 2012; Synodi, 2014).

One study ( $n = 1$ , 3%) analysed both participation practices as addressed in a specific document (i.e., curriculum) and teachers' ideas about participation (Leinonen et al., 2014), again framing participation as children being able to choose. Nonetheless, this study did not test associations between these two aspects.

Notably, all studies described in this section highlighted that consideration for children's voices and initiatives is scarce, or absent in the different documents analysed. Participation and agency seem to be neglected, and the documents do not reflect real participation as indicated in the CRC. Rigidity and bureaucracy of educational systems are pointed as obstacles to effective consideration and implementation of children's rights (Synodi, 2014).

### **Child outcomes**

Either investigating ideas and/or practices, only few studies ( $n = 5$ , 14%) tested associations between ideas about or experiences of participation and specific child outcomes. One study reported associations between teachers' ideas about their own practices and teachers' reports of children's self-regulation (Kangas et al., 2015), suggesting support for children's self-regulation differs as a function of levels of participation. Specifically, support for children's self-regulation was more frequent

when acknowledging the child and his/her opinions than when providing opportunities for child participation in decision making and pedagogical planning.

Another study reported associations between children's ideas about their opportunities to participate and their subjective well-being (Sandseter & Seland, 2016), suggesting, for instance, positive associations between children's experience of being autonomous and being able to use the ECE classroom areas whenever they want, and liking the centre and being happier there. Three other studies analysed child outcomes in the context of case studies. One study investigated associations between teachers' practices and children's sense of belonging and autonomy (Freitas Luís et al., 2015), suggesting that children's autonomy and sense of belonging increase when participation is promoted. Another study described multiple benefits of child participation, following the implementation of a professional development intervention, not only for children (e.g., increased autonomy, communication, persistence in problem solving, and self-care skills) but also for teachers (e.g., increased sensitivity and stimulation of learning processes) (Mesquita-Pires, 2012). A third study described benefits from participation for both children and adults, such as increases in children's confidence, communication, cooperation and negotiation skills, and increased teachers' attentiveness and respect for children's ideas, interests, and needs (Nah & Lee, 2016). However, associations between variables were not considered.

### **Discussion**

It was our purpose to map peer-reviewed empirical research addressing children's right to participate in centre-based ECE settings. This mapping was needed to identify gaps in available research and informing the field on how to move forward. Interestingly, the first noteworthy finding was that, despite the growing interest in children's right to participate, the number of peer-reviewed empirical publications on

this topic is still scarce. More empirical, peer-reviewed research is thus needed to inform ECE policy and practice in meaningful ways.

### **Contexts of research**

Studies included in this review were published from 2001 on. Although the CRC entered into effect in 1990, when most countries ratified it, the shift to approaches based on the views of the child was not immediate, which might also help explain the scarce number of empirical publications retrieved. In fact, views of children as social agents, active participants, and “beings” rather than “becomings” were progressively adopted in subsequent years (e.g., Christensen & James, 2000; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999; Mayall, 2000; Prout & James, 1997).

This shift was important for children’s rights to be seen as worthy of investigation, with researchers becoming more interested in listening to children, investigating their perspectives and opinions, and attempting to construct more sophisticated theories of child participation (Thomas, 2012). The statement issued in General Comment no 7 (United Nations, 2005) also reinforced the attention drawn to children’s right to participate in decision making (Harcourt & Einarsdóttir, 2011).

One specific aim of this review was to identify the social and scientific contexts in which research on children’s right to participate in ECE settings has been conducted. As anticipated, research is conducted mostly in northern Europe countries, namely in Finland, Sweden, and Norway. These are countries where, for decades, public discourse and legislation have addressed the promotion of children’s rights and acknowledged children as active citizens (e.g., Kjørholt, 2002). As suggested by Hart (1992), children’s participation has become fundamental in the approach to the implementation of children’s rights in several countries, and this might be an area for valuable exchange of experiences between northern and southern European countries as well as countries

from other parts of the world. Therefore, comparative studies are needed to promote and inform such exchanges.

Relatedly, no study from the United States met the inclusion criteria. The CRC entered into force in 1990, and most countries ratified it, including all members of the United Nations, except the United States. Unlike European countries, where child participation has been reinforced by formal policies and national educational structures throughout the years, in the United States a national mandate and formal policies for child participation are lacking. Therefore, participation policies are mostly bottom-up and there are no standards structuring and regulating consideration of children's participation rights in educational curricula. Consequently, education does not necessarily address child participation, and recent efforts to promote participation in education settings have not proved effective (Mitra, Serriere, Kirshner, 2014).

Regarding scientific domains, most studies were conducted within the education field, with few studies analysing children's right to participate from a psychological point of view. We argue that strengthening the contributions of educational psychology to the field may deepen our knowledge on the cognitive and behavioural outcomes potentially involved in children's experiences of the right to participate, such as motivation, self-regulation, social skills, and self-concept.

### **Definitions and Conceptual Framework**

When considering main definitions and theoretical backgrounds, this review suggests that current sociological, legal, democratic, and educational discourses converge in emphasizing children's right to participate as a pivotal dimension of high-quality ECE. As noted by Malone and Hartung (2010), a shared and consistent definition of children's right to participate might be hard to attain, as it appears to be a multifaceted concept. Still, in this systematic review, different conceptualizations were

frequently combined, resulting on the broad shared assumption that the right to participate presupposes listening to children, recognizing their competence, and involving them in decision-making.

After the CRC placed children's right to participate on the agenda, including in ECE settings, many conceptualizations of children's participation and agency emerged from sociology of childhood (Lansdown, 2005). Therefore, it is not surprising that these two perspectives are frequently combined. Nonetheless, they both seem relevant to understand various positions and discussions about children's right to participate. For instance, studies framing participation from both legal and sociological perspectives (e.g., Alasuutari, 2014) documented the need to validate children's talk and take their views into account, reinforcing the notion of the competent child.

Participation has also been described as involvement, as a way of translating this abstract concept into real action (e.g., Baraldi & Iervese, 2014). Studies relying on this definition reported increases in children's involvement associated with opportunities to participate, together with an increased sense of belonging and general well-being (e.g., Freitas Luís et al., 2015).

A democratic approach was also considered in some studies, reflecting the persistent influence of Dewey's philosophy of education. Research focused on this paradigm proposed the implementation of democratic practices related to documentation (Knauf, 2017), or child participation in a play area development project (Nah & Lee, 2016). Georgescu (2008) notes Dewey's pedagogical maxim of 'learning by doing' contributed to extensive reflections on child-centred pedagogies (i.e., promoting children's decision-making), interactive teaching and learning (i.e., encouraging children to participate and take part in the construction of learning), democratic schools (i.e., helping children understand the nature of citizenship and

providing the necessary knowledge and skills to maintaining democracy), or reflexive practices (i.e., developing principles, knowledge, methods, and tools aimed at assisting ECE teachers promoting child participation). In fact, conceiving children as active pursuers of their own objectives is of great relevance to the study of children's right to participate.

Curiously, Honneth's theory of recognition (1995) was not referred to in this body of research, despite its acknowledgement by theorists on children's rights (e.g., Alderson, 2000; Lansdown, 1994; Thomas, 2012).

### **Voices Heard**

Importantly, there was greater emphasis on teacher's perspectives and practices than on children's ideas, experiences, or strategies towards exercising their right to participate. The limited focus on children's perspectives and experiences is likely not the result of researchers and practitioners devaluing children's voices, although it may reflect traditional roles and power relations between teachers and children (e.g., Alderson, 2000). However, it may also be associated with the methodological challenges involved in researching with young children, including the lack of validated and authentic instruments (Lansdown, Jimerson, & Shahroozi, 2014). Nonetheless, consistent with the underlying conceptual framework, children's voices should be a primary focus of future research on children's right to participate, alongside the inclusion of additional informants or actors.

### **Methodological Approaches**

Regarding methodological approaches, the prominence of qualitative studies in this review is consistent with the study of teachers' and children's perspectives/voices on the right to participate, and particularly relevant to understanding subjective experiences in natural contexts. Nevertheless, we argue that there is a lack of

quantitative research and research based on mixed methods. From an educational psychology perspective, a quantitative approach would be valuable to document the effects of the right to participate on children's development and well-being as well as its effects on adults and organizations, advancing the field beyond (mostly) values-based (i.e., conceptual) arguments.

Relatedly, few studies reported using measures specifically designed to assess children's right to participate. We argue that the lack of measures, with sound psychometric characteristics, to measure the implementation of children's right to participate in ECE, may be an obstacle to the development of the field and should be addressed in future research. Such sound measures would allow for important cross-context comparisons.

Importantly, as shown in this review, research on children's rights, and more specifically on children's right to participate, seems to have little tradition in experimentation and evaluation (Petticrew, 2003). Future studies should use high-quality evaluation studies to establish links between young children's right to participate and specific individual outcomes. This might also contribute to publication in highly ranked journals and, thus, increased dissemination.

### **Focus of Research**

Most studies described ideas about participation and, to a lesser extent, practices aiming to promote participation. Teachers' ideas reflect different levels of child participation, from being heard to making independent choices (e.g., Hart, 1992), while children's ideas highlight the possibility of exerting participation through silence, resistance or avoidance strategies, which may be considered important interaction competences (e.g., Hutchby, 2002), and a way of demonstrating agency (Shaik & Ebrahim, 2015). Studies focusing on practices also reflect both child capacity and



agency, and teachers' agentic status, mirroring the traditional imbalance in the relationships between teachers and children (e.g., Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012).

Importantly, most studies focused on a single level of analyses, with limited consideration of associations among ideas and practices and their potential outcomes for children, adults, and organizations. Indeed, studies examining individual outcomes of the right to participate are almost nonexistent, as previously acknowledged by Reynaert et al. (2009). Nonetheless, the few studies considering child outcomes identified self-regulation, general well-being, and increased autonomy, communication, and problem-solving skills as positive consequences of participation for children.

Even though participation is understood more in terms of process rather than in terms of results (Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012), we argue that evidence about children's, adults', and organizational outcomes of experiencing the right to participate may be instrumental in informing policymakers and practitioners about the educational, developmental, and social benefits of participation processes. Such evidence may allow the field to move further beyond arguments built around participation as a value, and inform policymakers and practitioners about the conditions under which participation experiences may benefit children's development and well-being.

Interestingly, when focusing on specific features of teacher-child interactions, some studies reported the importance attributed to teachers' pedagogically sensitive attitude, suggesting specific strategies and activities to promote participation. Moreover, some studies considered nonverbal aspects of communication between teachers and children, potentially capturing less observable aspects of the right to participate. This is important because it suggests several forms of participation in early ages have been considered. This is also in accordance with Article 12 of the CRC (1980), which

suggests children's views should be given due weight in accordance with age and maturity, but not devalued because of age.

Participation as stated in legal documents was also analysed in the studies reviewed here. Although suggesting limited opportunities for child participation, the analysis of the right to participate in regulating documents, such as national decrees, seems useful to evaluate the implementation of this right at the policy-level and to understand the guidelines for ECE practice that might influence teachers' decisions.

Another aspect emerging from our results is the role of professional development and reflexive practices. Including children's rights and child-centred approaches in teacher's training, and reflecting on specific practices aiming to promote participation, can be important in building teacher awareness and develop specific competences towards the promotion of this right (e.g., Emilson & Folkesson, 2006).

### **Limitations**

This review is limited by its inclusion criteria. Importantly, a criterium derived from the broader research project that encompasses this review, resulted in the exclusion of a limited number of studies focusing on the right to participate of young children with disabilities, the group of young children least likely to express their views and to be heard. Further, our focus on peer-reviewed research may also have resulted in the exclusion of research studies that tackle some of the gaps highlighted here. Finally, the features and diversity of the evidence-base limited the depth of our analyses and may have contributed to an essentially descriptive approach, while also preventing meaningful meta-analytical synthesis.

### **Conclusion**

Children's right to participate relates to many dimensions and processes (Lekkai, 2016). The right to participate should not be considered static, but dependent on the

characteristics of the activities, organizations, and people involved. This seems fundamental to promote a culture of participation in which researchers, policymakers, and practitioners need to be aligned. By mapping peer-reviewed research on children's right to participate, we witnessed some conceptual consistency in available research. Also, research is already giving voice to different actors, including children, although to a limited extent, and applying some methodological diversity.

Our findings support claims from Kirby and Bryson (2002) and Lansdown, Jimerson, and Shahroozi (2014) regarding the need to further explore the effectiveness of participatory methods and the outcomes associated with the realization of children's right to participate. In fact, given the lack of empirical evidence on the effects of participation on children's sociocognitive development and well-being, further studies should investigate associations between experiencing this right and the potential individual outcomes proposed in literature. Future research should prioritize investigating the potential effects of experiencing this right, bridging the gap between the benefits identified at a conceptual level and concrete evidence.

ACCEPT

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## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors whose names are listed below certify that they have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureaus; membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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Table 1

*Summary of reviewed studies*

No.	Authors/year	Country	Field	Definition	Source of information
1	Alasuutari (2014)	Finland	Education	Legal and Sociological	Teacher and Parents
2	Ärlemalm–Hagsér (2013)	Sweden	Education	Legal	Document
3	Batur Musaoglu, and Haktanir (2012)	Turkey	Education	Legal and Sociological	Document
4	Broström et al. (2015)	Australia, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Greece, and Sweden	Education	Sociological	Teacher
5	Correia and Aguiar (2017)	Portugal	Psychology	Legal and Sociological	Child
6	De Freitas Luís, Andrade, Coelho, and Santos (2015)	Portugal	Education	Sociological and Involvement	Teacher and Child
7	Dias and Menezes (2013)	Portugal	Education	Sociological	Teacher and Child
8	Harcourt and Hägglund (2013)	Australia and Sweden	Education	Legal	Child
9	Houen, Danby, Farrel, and Thorpe (2016)	Australia	Education	Legal and Sociological	Teacher and Child
10	Johansson and Sandberg (2010)	Sweden	Education	Sociological	Teacher
11	Kangas, Ojala, and Venninen (2015)	Finland	Education	Legal and Sociological	Teacher
12	Kangas, Venninen, and Ojala (2016)	Finland	Education	Legal and Sociological	Teacher
13	Knauf (2017)	Germany	Social Welfare	Legal and Democratic	Document, Teacher and Child
14	Koran and Avcı (2017)	Cyprus	Education	Legal and Sociological	Teacher

15	Leinonen and Venninen (2012)	Finland	Education	Legal and Sociological	Teacher
16	Leinonen, Brotherus, and Venninen, (2014)	Finland	Education	Legal and Sociological	Document and Teacher
17	Lopes, Correia, and Aguiar (2016)	Portugal	Psychology	Legal and Sociological	Teacher
18	Markstrom and Hallden (2009)	Sweden	Education	Sociological	Child
19	Mashford-Scott and Church (2011)	Australia	Education	Legal and Sociological	Teacher and Child
20	Mesquita-Pires (2012)	Portugal	Education	Sociological	Teacher and Child
21	Nah and Lee (2016)	South Korea	Education	Legal, Sociological and Democratic	Teacher and Child
22	Pettersson(2015)	Sweden	Social Welfare	Legal and Sociological	Document, Teacher and Child
23	Salminen (2013)	Finland	Education	Sociological	Teacher
24	Sandberg and Eriksson (2010)	Sweden	Education	Involvement and Democratic	Teacher
25	Sandseter and Seland (2016)	Norway	Education	Legal and Sociological	Child
26	Shaik and Ebrahim (2015)	South Africa	Education	Legal and Sociological	Child
27	Sheridan and Samuelson (2001)	Sweden	Education	Legal and Democratic	Child
28	Synodi (2014)	Greece	Education	Legal	Document
29	Theobald and Kultti (2012)	Australia and Sweden	Education	Legal and Sociological	Teacher and Child
30	Tholin and Jansen (2012)	Norway	Education	Legal and Democratic	Teacher and Child
31	Thornberg and Elvstrand (2012)	Sweden	Education	Legal, Sociological and Democratic	Teacher and Child
32	Turnšek (2008)	Slovenia	Education	Sociological, Involvement, and Democratic	Teacher

33	Turnšek and Pekkarinen (2009)	Slovenia and Finland	Education	Democratic and Involvement	Teacher
34	Venninen and Leinonen, (2013)	Finland	Education	Legal and Sociological	Teacher
35	Venninen, Leinonen, Lipponen and Ojala (2014)	Finland	Education	Sociological	Teacher
36	Zorec (2015)	Slovenia	Education	Legal and Sociological and Involvement	Teacher

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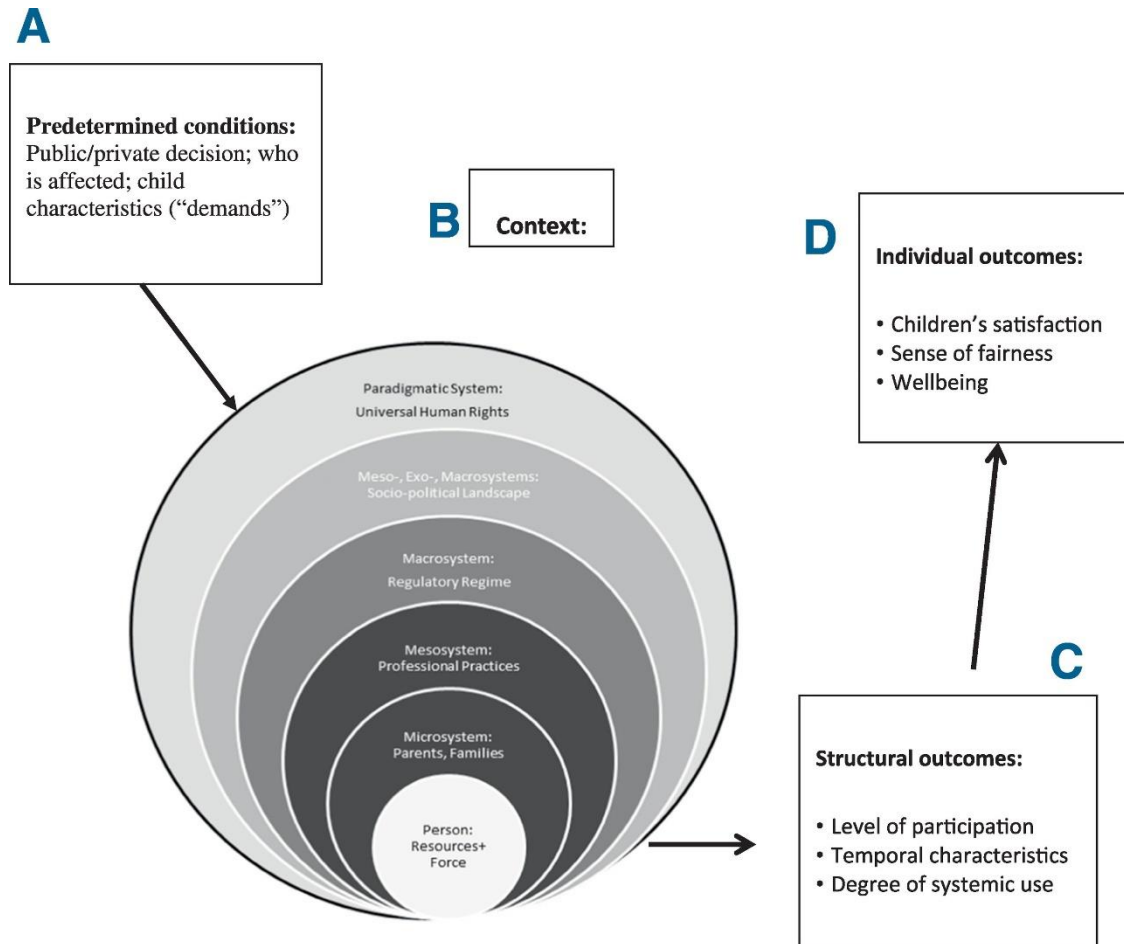


Figure 1. Ecological model of child and youth participation (Gal, 2017). Reprinted with permission.

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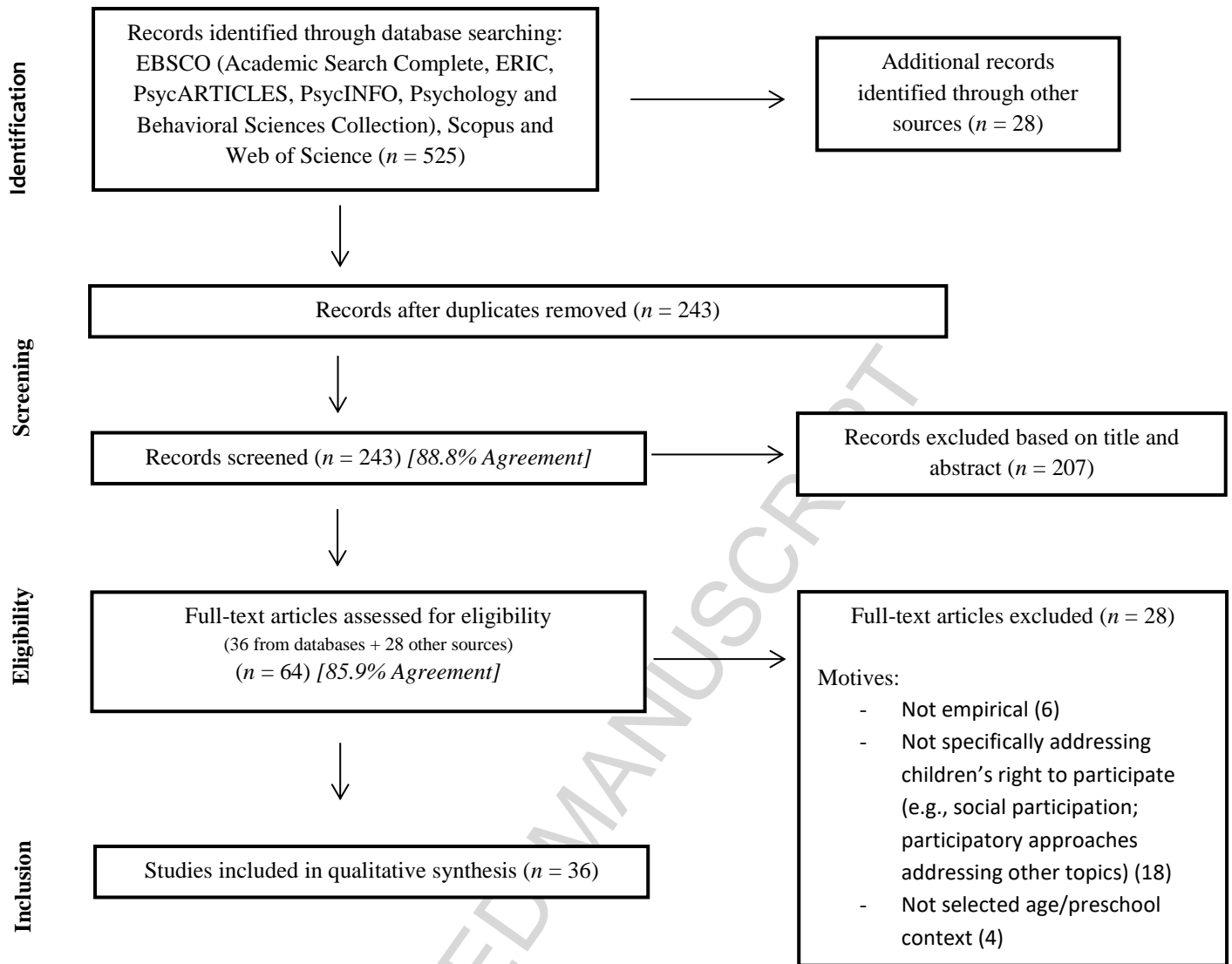


Figure 2. Results of search strategy based on the PRISMA Statement (Liberati et. al, 2009).

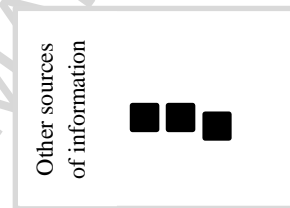
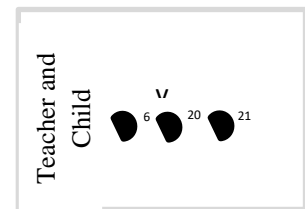
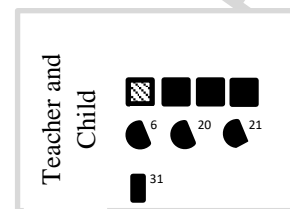
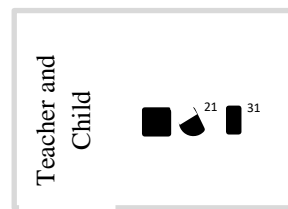
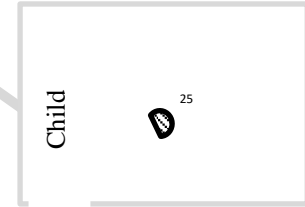
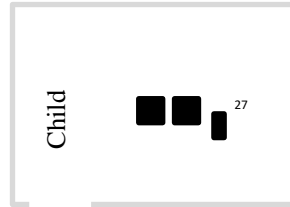
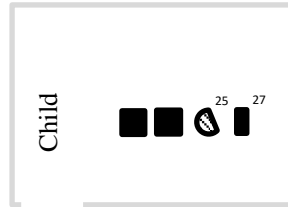
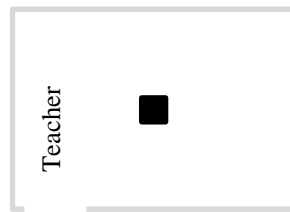
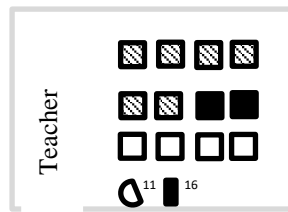
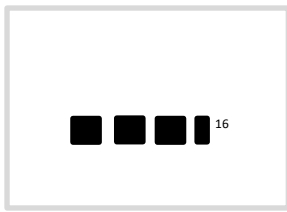







**LEGAL DOCUMENTATION**

**IDEAS**

**PRACTICES AND STRATEGIES**

**OUTCOMES**



-  Qualitative study
-  Quantitative study
-  Mixed methods study
-  Single study including different sources of information and/or focus of the research
-  Single study including associations with child and/or teacher outcomes

Note: Numbers in the figure refer to numbering of studies, as presented in Table 1

Figure 3. Synthesis of focus of the research on children's right to participate

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- Mapping of empirical research on children's right to participate in ECE
- Limited number of publications, mostly from northern Europe and education field
- Greater focus on ideas about participation and to a lesser extent on practices
- Few studies relying on children as informants, and limited participation measures
- Need to further investigate the effects of participation at the individual level

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