

RIGHTS-BASED PEDAGOGY AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PRACTICES

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Abstract

A rights-based pedagogy is based on the principles of human rights. In education, specifically in childhood education, a pedagogy that guarantees the rights of the child must be based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the other legal issues. A rights-based approach is based on seven fundamental principles: dignity; interdependence and indivisibility; best interests; participation; non-discrimination; transparency and accountability; life, survival, and development. This research focuses on the participation of children in an educational context, from an interpersonal perspective and as a transformative process. It aims to analyse the state of the art on the educator's role in promoting children's participation. This is a systematic literature review supported by a hermeneutic analysis to proceed with its categorization and interpretation. The investigative process followed the following steps: (i) search databases by keywords; (ii) selection of relevant articles; (iii) read the texts, organizing them in a diachronic way; (iv) elaborate on categories of analysis; (v) textual elaboration, performing the intersection between pedagogy based on rights and participation. The study shows that the right of participation of children is still far from being achieved, although children's rights are present in national and international official documents for education. Their voice is not always heard and their influence on learning processes is barely visible. The study concludes that children's participation in an educational context is only guaranteed when there are practices based on rights-based pedagogies.

Keywords: rights-based pedagogy; child participation; early childhood education; systematic literature review.

1 INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly uncertain world, with several problems and inequalities, the educational contexts must invest more and more in a rights-based pedagogy, namely in children's rights. This is based on the fulfilment of the following rights: dignity; interdependence and indivisibility; best interests; participation; non-discrimination; transparency and accountability; life, survival, and development. This article focuses on children's participation in the educational context.

Participation is understood as an ongoing process [1] a right, expressed in the convention on the rights of the child, article 12 [2]. It is a way of putting children's rights into practice, namely the right to quality education. It refers to involvement (direct and indirect) in actions and/or decision-making [3]...in all matters which concern them or in any way affect their lives [1], [2], [4], [5]. It should be noted that children's decisions and opinions need to influence, taken into account and shape processes and outcomes for there to be a recognition of their role. [1]. This involvement in decision making has a positive influence on decisions, being more conscious and adapted to the children's needs and interests. [5]. This implies recognising the child as capable, with the ability to reveal their views and form their own opinions freely. This participation should be adapted and thought out bearing in mind the age and maturity of the child [2]. It includes all involvements in actions, practices and dialogue with adults, be they parents, educators, staff, community members, or even local, national and international representatives. [3].

It should be emphasised that each child should have the power to decide whether to participate, which implies that nursery schoolteachers question them about their interest in participation while respecting their decision. It is important to stress that children should have feedback on the results of their participation, revealing what, how and where their views and ideas are present. If children's views are not being heard, they should also be told why this is not the case [6].

Participation is a complex process that must be adapted and programmed taking into account the cultural, relational and social contexts where it occurs [7]. There are some adjectives, to be fulfilled, which characterize participation, which is: transparent, informed, voluntary, respectful, revealing, inclusive, safe, sensitive, responsible and trainable [3].

For effective participation to occur it is necessary to empower children and promote positive relationships based on mutual respect between them, adults and the community. It is essential that the school and those responsible for education value the partnerships that can be established with families, the local, national and international community [1].

The inclusion of children in all the day-to-day processes of kindergartens can bring several benefits. As Paulo Freire states, the involvement and participation of children influence the educational projects, so they must be involved and are agents of educational change [8]. In children, participation can, among other things, increase self-esteem, develop social skills, improve communication and problem solving and promote awareness of the practice of citizenship [9].

This article views child participation by considering Lundy's definition. It fits into a model which is based on the definition of participation expressed in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. As represented in figure 1 this model organises participation along four essential, and interrelated axes: space, voice, audience and influence [6], [10].

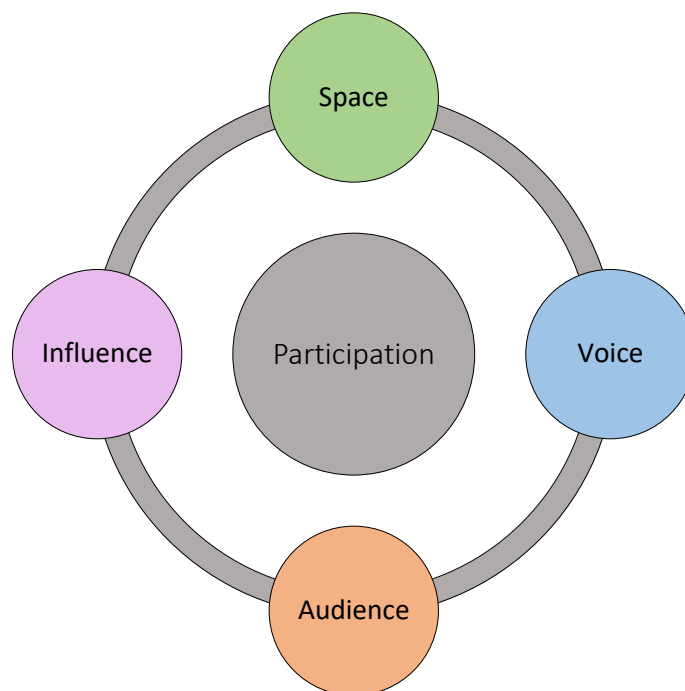


Figure 1. axes of Lundy's participation model

Participation implies the creation of a facilitating and promoting space. It should be a place of well-being, joy and pleasure, open to the plural experiences and interests of children and communities. The space should be inclusive, where all children are encouraged by adults to express their views and opinions [5]. Another dimension is voice. This refers to facilitating the expression of opinions and views by children. It should be thoughtful, free and voluntary, and take into account the children's contexts and abilities. Children are encouraged to propose their forms of participation [1]. Participation also implies listening, which includes ensuring that children's views are actively listened to and that they are aware of to whom they are being conveyed [6], [10]. It implies that their ideas are listened to by individuals or decision-making bodies [5], [11] either directly or through the creation of formal channels of communication. [11]. These children's perspectives can be expressed in various verbal and non-verbal forms [5]. Finally, there is influence, which implies that adults not only listen to children and their opinions but that they take them seriously and take their views into account when making decisions. Adults go beyond mere listening and are receptive to being influenced by them [5]. This influence should take into account some of the child's characteristics, such as age, maturity, safety, well-being and interests, but it should also take into account the level of risk involved in participation. [11].

Aware of the role that the education system, in general, can play in the life of the child and, in particular, the impact of children's participation in pre-school education, this study was developed to collect and summarise the role of early childhood educators in this process.

2 METHODOLOGY

Considering the assumption that educational agents can play a crucial role in the promotion of children's rights, namely their participation in the educational context, this literature review aimed to analyse the state of the art on the role of the educator in promoting children's participation. The systematic review of the literature followed the line of Higgins et al. which is detailed below [5].

After choosing the theme to be researched and its focus, the first process was to collect the theoretical references, using the SCOPUS, ERIC and Web of Science platforms. The expression "children's rights" AND "children's participation" AND teacher" was used and the search was limited to including the words in the title, abstract and/or keywords. In this first phase, 60 articles were obtained (25 SCOPUS, 27 ERIC and 8 Web of Science). The ERIC search was limited to studies between 2010 and 2022, and four articles were excluded. Data from the platforms were cross-referenced and duplicate articles were eliminated, resulting in the exclusion of 16 articles. A total of 40 articles resulted in the first reading and analysis. The first reading of the articles was performed by analysing the title and abstract, filtering the articles for further reading and excluding the remaining articles, considering some of the resulting categories.

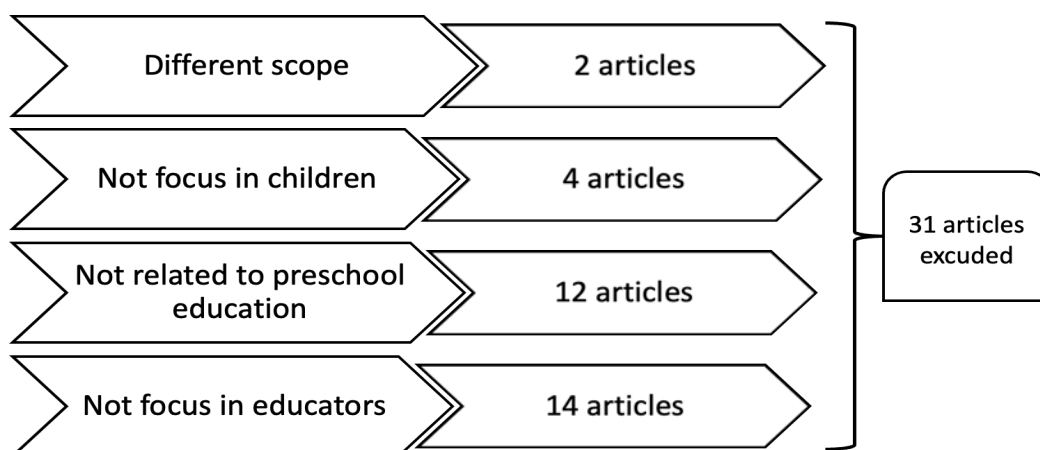


Figure 2. exclusion categories and the number of excluded articles.

As shown in figure 2, a total of 31 articles were excluded, two of them because they did not fit the theme to be investigated, four were not research conducted with children, 12 were not in the context of early childhood education and 14 did not focus on the early childhood educator. A total of 8 articles resulted in a detailed analysis.

Since some documents were not open access, we performed some searches to get them and contacted the authors. After the collection of all articles, a document was created to register the data of the articles using the Excel program. The following columns were created: year of the study, name of the authors, title of the study, objectives, country, description, theoretical notes, sample, methodology, results, and conclusions. The data were organized in an ascending order considering the date of publication. After reading all the studies and filling in the table with information from all of them, we proceeded to the content analysis of the information present in that same table. To this end, categories and subcategories of analysis were created, as explained in Table 1.

Table 1. Categories and subcategories of analysis.

Children Participation	
Category	Subcategory
Child agency	
Educators' actions to promote children's participation	Space
	Voice
	Audience
	Influence
Questioning as a strategy for children's participation	

We first analysed the table and the studies in the light of the categories, highlighting the text in different colours. The categories went through a process of refinement, from which some subcategories emerged, as shown in table 1. The following categories resulted: (i) Child agency; (ii) Educators' actions to promote children's participation; (iii) Questioning as a strategy for children's participation. Category (ii) is analysed by taking into account the four dimensions of participation defined by Lundy: space, voice, audience and influence [6], [10].

The results presented follow the presented order of the categories and subcategories.

3 RESULTS

This study aims to collect the role of early childhood educators in promoting children's participation in the context of early childhood education. To this end, it is relevant to understand the conceptions and practices of early childhood educators, highlighting some problems that lead to a reflection on the state of the art, to subsequently point out what the studies mentioned as being the true role of these agents in achieving this goal.

3.1 Child agency

The human being is an individual being, capable of autonomous thoughts and distinct visions, which may influence the way he/she sees and experiences the world. Therefore, it is relevant to highlight the conceptions of the kindergarten teachers about their role in the effectiveness of children's participation and then investigate their practices.

A recent study in Australia with 15 early childhood educators working with children under the age of three used interviews and reflection activities to gather how these educators understand agency and what role they assign themselves in the realisation of agency in infants and toddlers. The study reveals that nine of the 15 participants demonstrate confusion and uncertainty regarding the concept of agency and three even reported that they do not know what it means or that they found it difficult to define. Still, from the responses collected, educators associate agency with choice. The teachers mentioned that one of the aspects that can influence agency is the provision of space and the opportunity for choice at playtime. A third of them also mention thinking and problem-solving. They see the child as a being with a mind of its own and the ability to overcome obstacles. Overall the answers show confusion and limited perception of the concept of agency [12].

Another study collected the views of eight Turkish educators and eight primary school teachers on children's participation in educational institutions. Through interviews, it was perceived that the kindergarten teachers limited their view of children's participation to participation in activities, emphasising that this should be voluntary. They refer that active participation takes place in the establishment of group rules and the election of the representative or responsible person. They mention the family as an influential factor in the participation of children, together with the process of adaptation to the educational context, the readiness of the child, the kindergarten teacher, the environment, the educational institution, and the peer relationship. The kindergarten teachers showed a positive perspective toward children's participation and emphasised the importance of supporting children in their participation. Most of them mention themselves as being able to ensure and improve children's participation, but some educators have a contrary opinion [13].

The same study also reveals the conceptions of childcare workers regarding the benefits/advantages of participation from a decision-making perspective. They reveal the positive impact on the socio-emotional development of children, the increase in their self-esteem and preparation for the future. They also highlight the motivation it can have in the teaching and learning processes [13].

3.2 Educators' actions to promote children's participation

Although the rights of children have been globally recognized and several countries have established laws that encourage the participation of children in different aspects of their lives, particularly in educational settings, not all educators follow and value these guidelines, as can be seen in the points presented below. In this sense, it becomes necessary to reflect and rethink the educational practices in early childhood education contexts, to promote child participation throughout the educational process.

The studies indicate the need to create learning communities, as a strategy for enhancing the view of the child as an agent. One such study was carried out by Mesquita, who resorted to action research to identify and minimise relevant problems in a specific kindergarten context, using democratic research,

in which educators and researchers were involved collaboratively to gather and organise relevant knowledge and analyse data and design interventions for change. It identified that this involvement of educators in the whole process, through the creation of learning communities, where it reiterated joint reflection and planning, was the motto for improving practices. It provided greater involvement of children and commitment of adults in the whole institution. The research tools used, accompanied by moments of joint analysis, were the motto for reflection and change in the adults' practices. It emphasises that the reformulation of the vision of the child may be the key to achieving the child's right to participation and a driver for changing the practices of educators. To this end, children need to be seen as competent and active, with the capacity for complex thoughts and actions. It highlights the importance of participatory pedagogies in creating this vision of the child [14].

In the following, we analyse what the studies refer to as participation practices of children promoted by nursery schoolteachers. As previously stated, Lundy's model is used, distributing the actions by the four dimensions of participation: space, voice, audience and influence [6], [10].

3.2.1 *Space*

Participation practices reveal greater space indicators, with their reference in six of the nine articles analysed. Studies reveal autocratic and directed practices. Research carried out with child educators, through reflections based on their practices, highlights the importance of giving space and time to children, recognising their power, and giving them openness. They reflect on the role of body language. They emphasise the need for interactions, reflecting on the existence of voluntary, informed, and respectful participation.

Koran and Avci conducted a study in which they used observations to investigate the behaviours of 15 kindergarten educators working with children aged 4 to 6 years about their right to participate in classroom activities. They reveal a negative view of the educators' behaviours, with 505 negative cases recorded compared to 144 positive cases. The space did not always encourage respectful, voluntary and informed participation. Teachers frequently commented, directed, cautioned, bullied, teased, and criticised children. They used autocratic methodologies, with unilateral communication, authoritarian behaviour and a passive role for the children. There were several records of gender discriminatory behaviours that referred essentially to the selection of material, in which educators directed boys and girls to different activities. Even so, some cases point to positive behaviours in the democratic management of the classroom [15].

Studies reveal to us that, the strategy of giving time and openness to the child, which they call "stepping back" allows us to reflect on children's actions and intentions and assess the need or not for intervention. It also makes it possible to observe and recognize the children's abilities [12]. Another study highlights the same strategy. Tholin and Jansen, in research with early childhood educators of children between the ages of three and six, discussed planned conversations between early childhood educators and children during project-based work and how teacher invitations enabled democratic practice. They report that some educators, when giving the child time to remember, think about a topic and/or speak at their pace, enabled greater involvement of children [16].

Another study highlights this aspect of body language. It was conducted with nursery teachers and children aged between 4 and 6 years old, which used conversation analysis of three video excerpts, to gather how teachers construct learning opportunities for children within the interacting conversation. In it, Church and Bateman highlight that the physical positioning of both the educator and children is an indicator of the child's level of listening [17]. Also, Tholin and Jansen reflect on this aspect. The educator should demonstrate an open and receptive attitude through his or her tone of voice, movements and eye contact. [16].

Another aspect mentioned as essential is the recognition of the child's power. This implies that the adult places himself at the child's level, which has repercussions on the child's agency, by creating a feeling of emotional security [12].

Akyol and Erdem refer us to another important aspect that we frame in the dimension of space, the openness to the other, to the interactions and the culture of the child. They emphasize that an aspect that may influence the children's participation in the relationship with their peers and the inclusion of the family in the educational context is [13].

Zachrisen's study, which aimed to investigate the interaction between 110 children aged 18 to 36 months and 21 professionals from seven kindergartens about democratic practices in preschool education, revealed important data on interactions. It highlights the importance of interactions since they enhance

the sense of belonging and community. It mentions the need for a counterbalance between dyadic interactions (educator-child) and group interactions (children-children) since they develop this sense for both the educator and the rest of the group of children [18].

Studies alert us to the need to think of spaces as a whole (interior and exterior) [17].

3.2.2 *Voice*

Four studies reflect on listening to children's voices. The data show that children are often listened to, including in the planning of learning experiences.

The studies show different results about the action of early childhood educators. Burr and Gegotardi noticed some practices, although in a minority, which were not very participatory, namely about the children's voice. Children were not always asked whether or not they wanted to participate in the learning experiences, only that they were given the opportunity as to how they wanted to participate in [12].

A study conducted with 151 early childhood educators and 48 operational assistants, used the questionnaire to collect the occurrence of different degrees and forms of children's participation and non-participation in early childhood education. It found that the level of child participation depended on the tasks. About voice, children were frequently asked to give their opinion when planning activities (40.9% mentioned frequently and 27.3% very frequently). In the moments of evaluation, reflection and register (29.6% mentioned frequently and 29.2% sometimes) and in the moments of planning and implementation of contents (39.7% mentioned sometimes and 29.6% frequently) the children were also listened to but not in such an expressive way [19].

Akyol and Erdem's study demonstrates encouraging results, noting that the majority of the early childhood educators who participated in their study stated that they enabled children to freely express their opinions [13]. Tholin and Jansen also report positive cases. They show that some educators invite children to give suggestions and make the child's voice visible in society. They give some tips that can be used to encourage the child to speak, such as confirming or repeating statements made by the child and questioning him/her about his/her speeches [16].

3.2.3 *Audience*

Three of the nine studies analysed reflect on the presence of the dimension of audience in the practice of childcare workers, two of which reveal that these agents do not always pay attention and listen to the child.

Church and Bateman collected low levels of listening by educators towards their children. They were at a minimum level of acknowledgement of children's questions and comments, with behaviours such as ignoring and not responding, delaying the child's response by asking him/her to speak later, acknowledging or confirming through expressions such as "umm" and "yes", and not giving them continuity and attention. On the contrary, it was verified that when educators answered the children through questions it promoted greater participation from them [17]. Other studies collect similar data, referring to low attendance. Of the rare cases observed, they found that some teachers asked the children questions to help them express their views, which showed that they were listening to [15].

Akyol and Erdem point out that early childhood educators mentioned that in their practices they tried to listen to children's opinions without criticising them [13].

3.2.4 *Influence*

Three of the nine articles analysed refer to the influence of children in the educational contexts, highlighting the creation of rules, the planning of teaching and learning experiences, the organisation of spaces, the change of daily routine and cooperation between kindergarten, families and the local community.

Akyol and Erdem collected some moments of children's influence in some educational processes, although with some limitations. The main influence of the children was related to the definition of the room rules, stating that they made them together with the children [13].

Some studies reveal children's influence on teaching and learning experiences. In Akyol and Erdem's study some educators, although few in number, express the existence of children's influence in determining the activities carried out in an educational context [13]. Another study reveals a rare influence on children. Among the 10 participants and in the 30 activities collected, only one of them put into practice the ideas launched by the children. He used children's questions or comments as a teaching and learning opportunity [17].

Another study analyses the level of influence on the organisation of spaces, on changing the daily routine and on cooperation with families and the local environment. It reveals that children have more influence on changes in daily routine (33.2% reported sometimes, 29.6% often) and on the organisation of space (41.9% reported sometimes, 24.2% often). Cooperation with families and the local environment is mentioned as having less influence on children (40.3% mentioned sometimes and 30.1% rarely), with special emphasis on the influence on the change in the local environment, where 51.8% of the participants refer that it never happens and 32.5% refer that it rarely happens. The opportunities for children to influence changes in the institution are also low, where 36.9% refer that it rarely happens and 26.3% refer that it happens sometimes [19].

3.3 Questioning as a strategy for children's participation

How early childhood educators respond to and extend child-initiated learning sequences can encourage child participation. This implies not only inviting children to participate in experiences planned and thought out by adults but essentially allowing them to be drivers and initiators of learning sequences. This implies not only thinking about the physical environment of the educational context but also about the interactions that take place there at [17].

Several studies reflect that a teaching and learning methodology based on questioning can encourage children's participation, but for this, it is necessary to be aware of some aspects of [16], [17]. It should start from children's interests and curiosity, and children need to feel that they are valued and respected. The way the educators respond to children's questions and comments can also encourage children's participation. The educator should be attentive to the dialogues, not only to answer their doubts but also to base his/her practice on the concepts generated by them, deepening them. This does not prevent the adult from initiating or leading discussions and questioning, but these should be based on the interests and needs of the children [17]. Questions and expressions such as, "What do you think about...?", "Do you have any ideas about...?", and "I need help..." may help these moments [16].

For the child to be open and at ease to introduce such comments, the stance of the kindergarten teacher is central. The right of a child to initiate a topic is influenced by the legitimization of the other speakers, be they adults or the children themselves. The authors also point out that the position of these adults gives an indication of the child's listening level, and that they should show respect for the child's point of view. They alert us to the importance of collaborative and cooperative work since participation is dependent on these actions [17].

Rutar and Štemberger introduce another role of the educator in the questioning of children, stating that the educator should make records with the children, whether for plans, evaluations or reflections, with adults, with children and even with parents [19].

4 CONCLUSIONS

The fulfilment of children's rights is part of national and international policies. In this sense, and knowing that in situations of hardship, as is the case of the pandemic experienced, but also of war and armed conflict, the most vulnerable population is the most affected [20]. Therefore, it becomes increasingly important to invest in studies and practices that respect and promote human rights, namely children's rights.

This research, characterized by a systematic literature review of 9 scientific studies collected from the SCOPUS, ERIC and Web of Science platforms, aimed to analyse the state-of-the-art educator's role in promoting children's participation. Three categories emerged from the content analysis: (i) current problems; (ii) the action of early childhood educators: an analysis of their practices; (iii) questioning as a strategy for child participation. The study gathered the following evidence:

- Some early childhood educators are confused and uncertain about the concept of agency and find it difficult to define;
- Studies have shown positive conceptions of the importance of child participation on the part of early childhood educators. However, most of the studies that analyse their practices detect contradictory behaviours, revealing little listening and inclusion of children in educational processes;
- The studies reveal more data on the space dimension, with the audience dimension being the least highlighted;

- Research shows possible advantages of the use of questioning by the educator in promoting child participation.

This research demonstrates the need to invest in studies regarding the promotion of a pedagogy based on children's rights, namely in the participation of children in the educational context. It is necessary to develop work with educators, to encourage them to change their practices, through the creation of learning communities.

There is a lack of research on rights-based pedagogy for children, which reinforces the importance of conducting studies like this one. The need for practical studies, which involve the inclusion of child educators and encourage them to reflect on their actions, should be reinforced. They should also include children as active agents of change.

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