

Child participation in early childhood education in Spain: When having rights does not mean being able to exercise them

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journals.sagepub.com/home/pfe**Ana Castro-Zubizarreta and Adelina Calvo-Salvador **

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Abstract

This article carries out a systematic review of the scientific literature on child participation in the formal education system in Spain between 2010 and 2022. Recognising the importance of child participation in the context of the European Union, the theoretical principles of this study are in line with the perspective that child participation involves recognising the fundamental right of children to be heard and taken into consideration from an early age and providing them with the opportunity to convert that listening into positive changes to aspects that affect their lives. Child participation has significant benefits, both from an individual point of view (the child's own development and the recognition that all rights are for all children), and a social and collective point of view (the strengthening of democracy itself making the school a school for participation). The systematic review of the scientific literature was conducted according to the PRISMA statement 2020. The analysis of the selected articles was based on the Lundy model of child participation (2007) which considers four dimensions: space, voice, audience and influence. The results show that despite the Spanish scientific community's growing interest in child participation in the field of early childhood education, school culture is still very adult-centric. Aspects related to the dimensions of voice, audience and influence could be improved for which more research is required. There is a clear need to broaden the techniques and instruments required for making child participation effective, and experiences that go beyond consultative participation should be developed. This would enable forms of child participation focused on improving their lives based on their own needs being heard and taken into consideration.

Keywords

Child participation, childhood rights, student voice, citizenship education, early childhood education

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Child participation. A concern in Europe

Recently Europe has recognised the importance and benefits of child participation for the construction of ethical, democratic, responsible and engaged citizenship. It considers the promotion of children's rights a strategic objective and states that children under 18 have the right to be listened to in all environments, including schools (Council of Europe, 2012). In 2013, the European Union recommended that all member states should implement mechanisms to promote child participation in decision-making processes that affect their lives, highlighting that these mechanisms should be in place from an early age (Council of Europe, 2013). The SDG Agenda also made progress in this area with the establishment of Quality education as its SDG number four. Its objectives include equal access to education and educational success for all, as well as the acquisition of the necessary skills to promote sustainable development, human rights, gender equality, global citizenship, a culture of peace and respect for cultural diversity by 2030.

Through their successive editions of *Starting Strong*, the guidelines of both the European Union and the OECD (2017) highlight the proliferation of general analyses of national policies, trends and common implementation agendas that have put the spotlight on early childhood education in Europe (EURYDICE, 2019). The Recommendation from the Council of the European Union on high quality Early Childhood Education and care systems states that these services should be child-centred, based on participation and children's interest in learning (Council of Europe, 2019). Along these lines, the Council of Europe has recently published *Listen-Act-Change*, a handbook on child participation for professionals working to ensure the right to child participation individually, collectively and in specific institutional contexts (Crowley et al., 2021).

In countries such as Norway, schools follow a national curriculum (The Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergartens – Framework Plan MER, 2017) which establishes child participation in school as one of its objectives. The curriculum highlights that children are part of a community in which they have the right to express their opinions. It clearly states that the right of children to participate in school must be guaranteed and that child participation must be incorporated into learning content (Bae, 2010; Grindheim et al., 2022; Labaha, 2014). Along similar lines, the Finnish curriculum (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018) acknowledges the importance of child participation, regarding children as active subjects who interact with people and the environment. It recommends different methods for teachers to ensure child participation, such as establishing listening to children as a central focus of their pedagogical practice, creating spaces and opportunities for children to share their initiatives, express themselves and make decisions or making children aware of their own learning (Kangas, et al., 2019). Teachers are encouraged to promote free play, since it is regarded as a unique moment for learning practical democracy and considered to be a space where children are free to act, explore and make decisions.

Finally, the curriculum framework for early childhood education in a geographical context closer to Spain, such as Portugal (Ministério da Educação, 2016), clearly states the right of children to participate and to have their point of view taken into account. Particular emphasis is placed on the responsibility of teachers as guarantors and promoters of child participation in the classroom.

In contrast, in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) the new education law that regulates the Spanish education system (LOMLOE, 2020) has only very recently included a children's rights approach in the guiding principles of the education system. However, the education law that regulates teaching at this stage (Ministerio De Educación, 2022) continues to make no clear provision for child participation, as is the case in other European countries. Although this law includes human, children's and animal rights as content, it does not explain how to make child participation in school effective. The identification of this reality requires analysis

of why child participation is important and research on how this participation is carried out in Spanish schools.

The importance of child participation in infant schools

Child participation is ‘a personal and collective experience that allows children to become involved in social projects that encourage psycho-educational development, the construction of values and the exercise of active citizenship through deliberation and committed action on issues that concern them and which they feel are their own’ (Novella and Trilla, 2014: 16). Although the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; United Nations, 1989) set out a framework of opportunities and rights for children, more than 30 years after its formulation a lot still remains to be done because, as Liebel and Saadi (2012) point out, having rights does not mean being able to exercise them.

There are at least three compelling reasons for promoting child participation (Trilla and Novella, 2011). The first is political, as participation is a right of citizenship and children are citizens (UNCRC, Articles 12, 13, 14 and 15). The second is pragmatic, since participation generally implies an improvement of the contexts in which it takes place. The last reason is educational, it highlights the fact that through participation we learn to participate and good citizens are formed.

In recent decades, the philosophy of education has engaged in an interesting debate proposing the need to reconsider the question ‘who is a child?’ and ‘what is childhood?’, from post-structuralist, post-humanist, feminist and post-colonial perspectives. This has destabilised some assumptions of how modernity answered these questions, for example, the idea that there is only one childhood, that children are beings at risk who need protection because they are incapable of taking care of themselves, or adult-child binary thinking (Tesar et al., 2021b).

Child participation can be approached from both a societal and individual perspective. From the societal perspective participation is recognised as a right, providing the possibility for human beings to take part in different social contexts and to have their voice taken into account. The individual perspective highlights the importance of participation in the development of the individual and supports the development of capabilities and competences that enable links and interactions with oneself and with others (Quintero and Gallego, 2016; Yelland, et al., 2021). Child participation is also associated with the construction of identity, the development of a positive self-concept, self-efficacy (Correia et al., 2019; Luff and Martin, 2014) and autonomy since it is considered to be based on the need to gradually achieve autonomy, which is understood as self-government and self-management (Correia et al., 2019; Lansdown, 2005). Participation represents a commitment to the dignity of children and recognition of their existence and the assertion of this (Nussbaum, 2011). However, child participation is problematic, given the adultcentric, patriarchal, colonialist and modern nature of the very concept of child and childhood (Tesar et al., 2021b).

Giving children a voice in school improves the democratic and pedagogical life of classrooms and schools (Hart, 2001). Forming critical, participatory citizens is essential in order to strengthen an educational paradigm that considers the child as the protagonist of his or her formative process (Gajardo and Torrego, 2022; Stuart, 2020). Participation implies sharing power (Ulvik, 2015), which is especially important in a context such as a school where the structure, culture, the professional identity of teachers and curricular traditions are clearly adultcentric (Rudduck and Flutter, 2007). It requires regarding students as an essential group capable of promoting initiatives for change and school improvement. Thus, involving this group in the school increases their sense of belonging and responsibility towards the school. Respect for children in any participatory process should be based on the premise that children are important members of society, with their own

concerns, interests and agendas, who have the right to influence decisions that affect their lives (Lundy, 2007). It also requires recognising that there is no single way of being a child and that our own conceptions of childhood may be promoting some perspectives over others or some groups over others, hence the importance of deconstructing the methodologies with which we try to research in this field and from which we define what childhood is. Our conceptions and methodologies need to adopt an intersectional and hybrid view, with more creative and innovative proposals (Tesar et al., 2021a).

Listening and participation processes are predominant in higher education. More specifically, in secondary education and, above all, the university context student opinion enjoys a greater tradition and greater levels of influence. Therefore it is both a necessity and a challenge to analyse participation in early childhood education. Infant schools offer a unique setting for children to experience participation and, therefore, to learn and experience what it means to be part, have part and to take part (Lansdown, 2001). Moreover, this learning is enhanced by the experiences of everyday life in infant schools where interactions and relationships between peers, adults and the environment are developed (Malone et al., 2020). The practices and conditions provided at school constitute the very first experiences for the development of citizenship. Addressing child participation in infant schools will contribute to the recognition of children's voices and the perception of children as citizens of the present and agents of change, that is, capable and competent children who have the right to influence the contexts in which they learn (Gajardo and Torrego, 2022).

Despite the recognition of the importance of child participation in the school context, no single model for either understanding or implementing it exists. However, numerous models have been devised from Hart's classic work on the ladder of participation (1992), the model of the so-called four forms of participation: simple, consultative, proactive and meta-participation (Trilla and Novella, 2011), the model of indicators for assessing child participation: level of awareness, decision-making capacity and capacity for action (Gaitán, 1998) to models that analyse barriers to child participation in schools such as organisational structures or practices (Shier, 2001).

Given this rich legacy of analysing and understanding child participation, in this paper we will use the model of child participation proposed by Lundy (2007), which was developed within the framework of the UNCRC. This model has been used by institutions and organisations such as the Irish Children's Ombudsman and Unicef. It has the originality of organising all the articles relating to the right to participation around article 12 of this convention. It proposes the need to consider four factors in the promotion of child participation processes: space, voice, audience and influence and they are presented in a rational chronological order:

1. Space: children should be given the opportunity to express their views in safe and inclusive spaces or environments.
2. Voice: children should be encouraged to express their views.
3. Audience: children's perspectives need to be listened to.
4. Influence: children's opinions need to be taken into account and their contributions should have a positive impact on their lives.

In this paper we have adopted this four-factor model to analyse child participation experiences developed in Spanish schools in recent years (2010–2022).

Research objectives

The aim of this research is to analyse the level and quality of child participation in Spanish infant schools over the last 12 years (children aged 0–6 years old).

The following questions have been used to guide this research:

1. What experiences and research on child participation have been developed in the Spanish context within the field of Early Childhood Education during the period 2010–2022?
2. What influence or impact has child participation had on their own lives and school context?
3. To what extent are the four factors proposed by Lundy (2007) to promote child participation processes (space, voice, audience and influence) evident in these experiences and research to date?

Methodology

In order to answer the questions formulated and to achieve our objective, a systematic review of the literature was conducted (Guirao-Goris et al., 2008). A systematic review is defined as a way of evaluating and interpreting all available research relevant to a particular research question, within a thematic area or phenomenon of interest (Benet et al., 2015; Kitchenham, 2004). It is, therefore, a synthesis of the available evidence in which a review of primary studies is carried out with the aim of presenting the existing information on the topic of interest. The PRISMA 2020 statement (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) was taken into account throughout the development of the systematic review in order to document the reason for the review, the procedure followed and the main findings transparently (Page et al., 2021). We have also used the flowchart template recommended in this statement to demonstrate the procedure followed during the entire process.

Procedure

We conducted an analysis of the main experiences and research on children's voice and participation with regard to young children (0–6 years old) developed in Spanish schools during the period 2010–2022 and published in indexed journals.

The overall process of searching for articles consisted of four phases: 1. Consultation of databases and documentary sources, 2. Establishment of the search strategy, 3. Specification of the document selection criteria and 4. Organisation of information.

The Web of Science (WOS), SCOPUS and Dialnet databases were used to find works on the topic mentioned above, both in English and Spanish. The search was carried out between September–November 2022 using the following terms (in Spanish and English): Children's rights, Child participation and Student voice. All three terms were combined with Early Childhood Education. The time frame covered publications between 2010 and 2022.

In the specific case of the Web of Science (WOS) portal, the following tracking strategy was used in order to focus the search through the advanced search mechanism. Therefore, we were able to filter the search by providing the results of each step with the following descriptors:

Child participation AND Early Childhood Education: (a) Time frame (2010–2022): 1430 results, (b) Search of the database restricted to the Web of Science collection - field Educational research: 945 results and finally, (c) Selection by authorship affiliated to Spanish territory: 44 results.

Children's rights AND Early Childhood Education: (a) Time frame (2010–2022): 1082 results, (b) Search of the database restricted to the Web of Science collection - field Educational research: 713 results and finally, (c) Selection by authorship affiliated to Spanish territory: 26 results.

Student voice AND Early Childhood Education: (a) Time frame (2010–2022): 91 results, (b) Search of the database restricted to the Web of Science collection - field Educational research: 80 results and finally, (c) Selection by authorship affiliated to Spanish territory: 13 results.

For the search in the SCOPUS database the tracking strategy was as follows:

Child participation AND Early Childhood Education: (a) Time frame (2010–2022): 1113 results, (b) Search restricted to subject area (social science): 700 results and finally, (c) Selection by authorship affiliated to Spanish territory: 29 results.

Children's rights AND Early Childhood Education: (a) Time frame (2010–2022): 857 results, (b) Search restricted to subject area (social science): 582 results and finally, (c) Selection by authorship affiliated to Spanish territory: 20 results.

Student voice AND Early Childhood Education: (a) Time frame (2010–2022): 84 results, (b) Search restricted to the field (subject area social science): 73 results and finally, (c) Search by authorship affiliated to Spanish territory: seven results.

The DIALNET database was searched as follows: Child Participation and Early Childhood Education: 1128 results. Document type filtering by applying articles: 642. Children's rights and Early Childhood Education: 237 results. Document type filtering by applying articles: 168. Student voice and early childhood education: 84 results. Document type filtering by applying articles: 41.

Eligibility criteria

Studies and experiences of child participation published in indexed journals between 2010 and 2022 were considered. The works included in the project had to have been carried out in the early education stage (0–6) within Spanish territory. Literature reviews or theoretical contributions were not included. The early childhood education pupils participating in the study had to play an active role in the research. Therefore, research on childhood in which this group does not actively participate was not included.

Selection of studies

The title and abstract of the articles resulting from the search were reviewed and the eligibility criteria described in the previous section were applied. The application of these criteria together with the elimination of duplicate results in the databases we consulted significantly reduced the number of articles to be analysed. The flow chart ([Figure 1](#)) specifies the process carried out to obtain the articles that were finally submitted for analysis and review in this work.

Data analysis

An analysis table ([Table 1](#)) was created to record and systematise the most important information from each selected article. The categories of analysis that guided the elaboration of the table were: title of the study, authorship, year, journal of publication, thematic focus, participants and main results.

Each article identified whether the four factors proposed in Lundy's model of participation (2007) – space, voice, audience and influence – were met or reflected in the study, using the questions for each factor proposed by Welty and Lundy as indicators (2013) ([Table 2](#)).

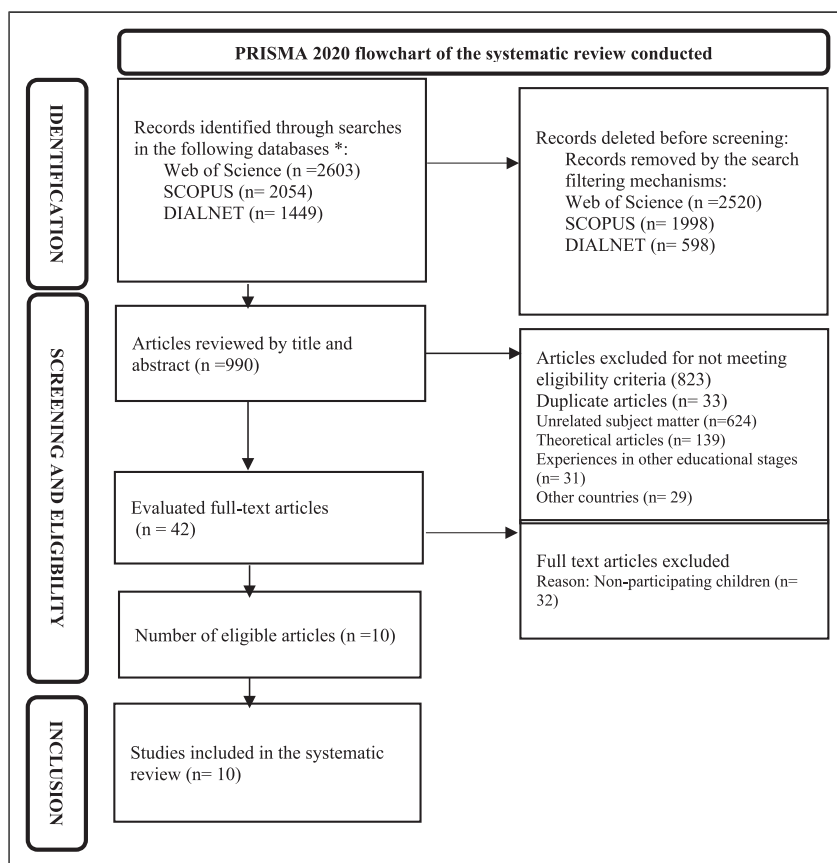


Figure 1. Flowchart of the systematic review conducted.

Results

There are few studies that directly address child participation in the context of early childhood education in Spain. Despite the high volume of papers identified in the overall search process, after an initial reading of their title, abstract and key words, we began the process of screening and selecting the studies found according to the pre-set eligibility criteria. The search for experiences in the Spanish context and the exclusion of theoretical texts or literature reviews significantly reduced the field of study.

On the other hand, the specificity of the early childhood education stage was a determining exclusion criterion. Although 11 studies that included child participation in infant and primary schools were identified, the experiences reported in these works focused on primary education pupils. A total of 10 articles finally met the criteria and were therefore included for final analysis. This clearly shows that children in infant schools have the least opportunities to be listened to and taken into consideration in the context of the Spanish education system.

With regard to the participants in the research analysed, only two of the 10 articles focus on the first cycle of infant education. It was found that children between 4 and 5 years old have had the most opportunities to be listened to within the context of infant education. Researchers face the

Table 1. Analysis of the studies found in the literature search.

N°	Authors	year	Title	Review	Thematic focus	Participants	Results
1	Castro	2012	The transition from infant school to primary school: Perspectives of children, families and teachers	<i>Spanish Journal of Pedagogy</i>	Educational transition	Pupils aged 5, families and teachers	Importance of listening to all those involved in the educational transition process. Children and families are the most silenced. Breaking with the bias of studies that only reflect the adult perspective on an issue that affects children.
2	Castro	2015	Child's view of the school transition process from infant school to primary school.	<i>Educational Profiles</i>	Educational transition	Children aged 5	Through children's contributions, factors to be considered for a smooth educational transition are identified. Recognition of the value of children's contributions to the creation of educational transition programmes/plans.
3	Castro and Manzanares	2015	The youngest take the lead: The nursery school they would like to see	<i>Complutense Journal of Education</i>	Quality of infant schools	Children aged between 4 and 5	The results of the study show children's demand for an infant school different from the one they know and the existence of divergent thinking from that of adults.
4	Sánchez-Blanco	2017	Computers in early childhood education: Voices of children in Galicia (Spain)	<i>Journal of Pedagogy</i>	Use of technology	Children aged 4 and 5	Gathering of perspectives of pre-school children on the use of screens in the classroom.
5	Ceballos-López	2018	Spaces to play, to learn. Spaces to interact. A student voice experience in infant schools.	<i>Pedagogic studies</i>	School space	Boys and girls (0–3)	Improvement of the school's outdoor space through the participation of families, teachers and children.

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

N°	Authors	year	Title	Review	Thematic focus	Participants	Results
6	Muela	2019	Improving the quality of preschool outdoor environments: Getting children involved	<i>European Early Childhood Education Research Journal</i>	School space	Children aged 3–6, families and teachers	Improving the quality of children's outdoor environments through a participatory intervention involving children, parents and teachers.
7	Pascual-Arias, García-Herranz, and López-Pastor	2019	What do children in infant education want? The role of formative and shared assessment in their right to decide	<i>Culture and Education</i>	Assessment in early childhood education	Children aged between 3 and 4	The results of this experience show that students are capable of expressing and proposing changes in their classroom, making decisions, contributing ideas about the teaching-learning process, as well as improving their engagement with their own learning and their ability to express themselves.
8	Parejo	2020	Music as a vehicle for early childhood education: a Case study.	ARTSEDEUCA	Music and multicultural education	Children aged 5	Research project focussing on music as a tool to promote multicultural education in an infant education classroom. It reflects children's feelings, their enjoyment of the activities and the impact of the music project on their coexistence and knowledge of multicultural richness.

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

N°	Authors	year	Title	Review	Thematic focus	Participants	Results
9	Gajardo and Torrego	2022	Analysis of an experience of daily practices of democracy in infant education	<i>Theory of Education, Interuniversity Journal</i>	Experiences of democratic practices in everyday classroom life	46 children aged between 2 and 6 and their teacher	It shows the possibility of articulating consistent and reflective processes in children in their first experiences of community participation and highlights the capabilities and competence of children.
10	Castro and Valtárcel	2022	Voices from early childhood during the Spanish covid-19 lockdown	<i>Latin American Journal of Social Sciences, Childhood and Youth</i>	Impact of covid lockdown on early childhood education students	16 children aged 3	The results not only show children's ability to adapt, but also how they come to identify positive aspects resulting from lockdown from which we can identify the demands of children as they return to their daily lives.

Table 2. Analysis of the studies according to the factors described in the model of children's participation proposed by Lundy (2007).

Dimension	Studies submitted for analysis									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
ESPACE										
Active search of children's opinions	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Safe space to express themselves freely	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Measures taken to ensure that all children are involved	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
VOICE										
Informed consent	✓	✓	✓	—	✓	✓	—	✓	✓	✓
AUDIENCE										
The person in the institution to whom the information is made available has the power to make changes.	✓	✓	✓	—	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Children aware of how their opinions are used	✓	✓	✓	—	—	✓	✓	—	—	—
INFLUENCE										
Children's views taken into consideration	✓	✓	✓	—	✓	✓	✓	—	✓	✓
Feedback on decisions taken	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

Note: Codes: (✓) Identification in the text. (—) Not made explicit/found in the text.

challenge of finding the most effective techniques and mechanisms to gather children's perspectives and contributions while respecting the multiple languages that children use to express themselves. Drawing, adult observation and conversations with children were among some of the techniques reported in the research analysed.

Child participation in the research analysed revolved around issues such as: (1) Children's perspectives on the transition to primary education, (2) School spaces, (3) Child participation in assessment processes, (4) Children's perception of school, its organisation, and the use of educational technologies, (5) The promotion of intercultural education through a musical project, (6) Participation in daily activities and (7) Children's perspectives of the lockdown caused by covid-19. The thematic diversity within which children's perspectives are contemplated demonstrates the capacity and power of children to undertake actions that enhance their opportunities to participate and take part in projects and actions that have an impact on their lives.

The first year in which we found an experience in our country that includes children's perspectives was 2012. We also noted that 2019 stands out as a time of growth in educational experiences which involve children in their development. However, we noted that these studies are the result of lines of research by groups located in specific universities, mainly in Cantabria and the Basque Country. Therefore, it can be seen that there is no broad development in this field throughout the country.

The analysis of the studies based on the participation model proposed by Lundy (2007) also offers aspects for further improvement in educational research aimed at involving children. In this respect, it can be seen that space (providing the opportunity for children to express their views in safe and inclusive spaces or environments) is the most common factor in the studies analysed. In fact, in all of the research analysed we found evidence that children's opinions were actively sought, safe spaces were used for children to express themselves freely, and measures were taken to involve all children. The second factor, voice (encouraging children to express their views), has already raised issues that could be improved by further research. In two of the 10 articles selected, there is no

mention of informed consent, while in the others it is explained in the main body of the article. We noted that two studies had made progress in the ethical commitment to respect children by not only collecting the informed consent of the children's legal guardians, but also by proceeding to collect the children's informed consent, thus respecting the final decision of these children whether or not to participate in the research. The third factor, audience (the child's perspective needs to be listened to) involves two indicators. On the one hand, it was found that the person in the institution to whom the information is delivered has the power to make changes and in most studies this indicator is achieved. On the other hand, the second aspect of the audience factor, aimed at ensuring that children are aware of how their contributions are used, is not adequately addressed. In more than half of the studies analysed, no action is explicitly stated in this regard. Finally, the last factor, influence (taking children's opinions into account and making sure that their contributions have positive repercussions on their lives) is the least developed and one of the major limitations identified was the feedback given to children about decisions taken.

Despite the results obtained, it should be noted that although some of the aspects analysed do not appear in the text, we cannot conclude that in all cases these aspects have not been addressed. However, we believe that it is both important and necessary to highlight these factors in educational research involving children in order to promote child participation practices which, from a rights-based approach (Lundy, 2007), promote the construction and exercise of committed and transformative citizenship.

Discussion and conclusions

Contemplating child participation in school should be viewed as a key element in the construction of democratic citizenship. We understand child participation to be a fundamental pedagogical right in schools that invites us to rethink the role of pupils, teachers and the school environment as a safe and caring space for children's free expression. This requires making progress in both personal and collective projects that have a social impact, in which children's contributions are taken into consideration and the power of childhood is recognised.

The results of this work provide a framework of reflection and support for education professionals interested in promoting child participation from an early age. Moreover, the analysis of the studies found through the participation model proposed by Lundy (2007) raises aspects that could be improved in current practices and paves the way for us to progress towards achieving greater influence.

The number of studies analysed shows that there is much to be achieved to make the right of children to participate effective and provide them with the status and opportunities for participation they deserve as citizens of the world today. These experiences are an example of the slow but necessary shift that is taking place, which is why it is necessary to continue demanding a childhood of rights and capabilities in our country. At the same time, these studies can be seen as a lever to reclaim a childhood rich not in material things, but in capacities and, therefore, a means to promoting rich and powerful pedagogies (Moss, 2014).

A striking fact is that 70% of the studies analysed exclusively present children's perspectives. This is a significant advance in the value given to children's perspectives, as it shows their discourse is considered important and empowering. In the remaining studies, it can be seen how children's contributions are taken into account at the same level as those of other adult agents (families and teachers). This breaks with the bias of those studies that only include the adult perspective on an issue that affects children.

The progressive recognition of children as social actors and agents of change challenges the traditional view of children as passive agents in the process of evolving. The inclusion of children as protagonists in the research analysed is a reflection of how their constructions, actions, interpretations, knowledge and experiences are considered valid and of interest. This directly calls for the need to change the way we regard children, to abandon adult-centrism (Duarte, 2006), which places children in a situation of inferiority and in a kind of moratorium in preparation for the future, which denies their presence and opportunities for action in the present (Novella et al., 2014).

In light of the results found, it can be seen that the right to participate and be taken into consideration continues to be conditioned by inertia where attitudes and the adult-child power disparity silence children's voices (Osoro and Castro, 2017; UN, 2009).

In this regard, the experiences analysed in this research are not based on children's interests and demands, but rather those of adults who invite children to participate by involving them in projects. The dominant type of child participation in the experiences analysed is consultative participation (Sayeed and Guerin, 2000). We understand that this may be the first step towards raising awareness of the value of children's contributions among education professionals, offering the potential to reduce the bias of those experiences of educational innovation and improvement that are constructed from the adult perspective and the study of childhood (childhood as an object of research). Involving children in educational research by sharing the role of co-researcher with adults enables a new understanding of current childhood and, above all, allows children to be the constructors and narrators of their own experiences of learning, discovery, exploration and meaning.

Some implications for policy and practice in the Spanish education system can be derived from the results obtained. Greater consensus is required in education policy across the legislative framework of all the autonomous communities, with regard to recognition of the children's rights approach that is currently included in national education law (LOMLOE, 2020). This is particularly important in the first cycle of infant education (0–3 years old), where the policies of some autonomous communities are still imbued with a more welfare than educational focus, especially in those where private ownership of these schools prevails over public ownership (Alonso and Alcrudo, 2011).

For educators, it is clear that there is a need to establish tutoring as a unique space to promote experiences and opportunities for child participation in school, by encouraging listening processes among education professionals, families and other adults involved. Secondly, it is necessary to explore more creative, open, hybrid and emergent ways of co-designing new didactic proposals with children. It is imperative that in the participation processes implemented in daily life at school, the rhythms and times of children are respected, diversity is recognised and divergence is not cancelled. Thirdly, it is important to diversify the use of different languages and create safe spaces where children feel they can express themselves. Fourthly, the experience of free play in infant schools should be promoted, as opposed to more clearly academicist, structured and pre-designed models that consider the infant education stage as a preliminary step to success in primary education. Finally, initial and on-going training processes for early childhood education teachers should be more informed by non-adultcentric, non-patriarchal, non-anthropocentric and postcolonial perspectives that ultimately enable them to understand the performative nature of their theoretical conceptions and classroom practices.

There are several limitations to the study carried out. Firstly, the fact that the search did not include works that have not been published in indexed journals means that we may have overlooked interesting experiences of child participation in the early education stage. On the other hand, the lack of development of the first cycle of infant education in our country, the great diversity of structures and experiences that exist in the autonomous communities and the prevalence of a welfare focus in

this cycle limit the possibilities of finding experiences of child participation. In addition, the research analysed does not allow us to observe the diversity of the children with whom we have worked (social class, ethnicity, abilities, gender, etc.), which has very probably led to a bias in the results.

As a future line of research, we propose extending this work with an international comparative study, including experiences that have been developed within the European framework, as well as exploring education for global citizenship in this level of education.

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