

Conceptualizing child participation in early childhood education: A rights-based theoretical framework

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Abstract

Child participation is widely recognized as a significant principle in contemporary early childhood education, yet its meaning remains conceptually unstable and is often conflated with activity, voice, choice, or general engagement. This paper develops a rights-based theoretical framework that conceptualizes participation as a teacher-mediated opportunity structure within everyday pedagogy. Rather than proposing a wholly new theory, it translates established participation principles into a multidimensional framework for early childhood education comprising the child's right to receive information, the right to be heard, the right to express views, and involvement in decision-making, with the latter further differentiated into discussion, influence, and age-appropriate independent decision-making. By distinguishing participation from activity, compliance, and voice without meaningful consequence, and by arguing that participation in early childhood education must be developmentally translated rather than weakened, the framework clarifies the construct's boundaries and provides a stronger basis for theory development and future scale construction.

Keywords: child participation; children's rights; decision-making; early childhood education; right to be heard; right to express views; right to receive information; teacher-mediated participation

1. Introduction

Child participation has become a prominent principle in contemporary early childhood education because it is associated with children's rights, democratic inclusion, and pedagogical quality (Correia et al., 2023; Ribeiro et al., 2025). At the same time, the concept is often used in broad and unstable ways, referring variously to activity, choice, expression, initiative, or general child-centeredness (Correia et al., 2019; Lundy et al., 2024; Turnšek, 2016). Although these meanings overlap, they are not conceptually synonymous. Overly broad use of the term *participation* weakens its analytical boundaries and complicates its specification, examination, and operationalization as a coherent research construct. As a result, the concept may retain normative appeal while losing theoretical precision.

This conceptual imprecision is not merely terminological. Participation increasingly serves as a normative reference point for pedagogical decision-making and for judgments about educational quality in early childhood education (Correia et al., 2023). It also informs the way research and policy frame children's place in educational settings (Lundy et al., 2024). Yet when the term is extended to cover heterogeneous phenomena such as activity, autonomy, consultation, enjoyment, and inclusion, its analytical boundaries become unstable. In such circumstances, it becomes difficult to specify what educators are expected to foster and what researchers are actually investigating. The concept may therefore retain normative force while losing specificity as a research construct. This difficulty is particularly significant in early childhood education, where participation is shaped by adult mediation, developmental asymmetry, and institutionally organized pedagogy (Correia et al., 2019).

The problem becomes more complex in early childhood education, where participation is enacted within pedagogical settings structured by adult responsibility, routine, curriculum, material organization, and institutional expectations (Heikka et al., 2022; Weckström et al., 2022). Young children's communication is frequently multimodal, affective, situated, and only partly verbal, while their opportunities for influence are generally mediated by teachers and classroom arrangements (Akyol, 2025; Dunphy, 2012). Participation in this context cannot be conceptualized simply as a transfer of power from adults to children, nor as a series of isolated acts of expression. A child may be active without being informed, invited to choose without understanding the implications, or encouraged to speak without being seriously heard. A theoretically adequate account of participation in early childhood education must therefore take developmental position, adult mediation, pedagogical practice, and institutional context into account.

A further challenge concerns the relationship between theory and later measurement. Many existing frameworks address classroom quality, children's involvement, or broad pedagogical climate, but fewer conceptualize participation specifically as a rights-based structure of opportunities enacted in everyday educational practice (Barros et al., 2024; Weckström et al., 2022). As a result, measures may combine heterogeneous elements under the label of participation without clarifying why they belong together or how they relate conceptually. Before participation can be measured well, it must be defined more clearly.

This paper therefore aims to conceptualize child participation in early childhood education as a multidimensional, rights-based, and teacher-mediated construct. It does not advance an entirely

new theory of participation. Rather, it develops a more explicit early-childhood-specific framework by reinterpreting insights from children's rights theory and classical participation models in relation to the pedagogical conditions of early childhood education. The central argument is that participation should be located at the level of pedagogically organized opportunity rather than treated as a child attribute, a broad indicator of classroom quality, or a single degree of power transfer. On this basis, the paper proposes a framework comprising the child's right to receive information, the child's right to be heard, the child's right to express views, and involvement in decision-making, with the latter further differentiated into discussion, influence, and age-appropriate independent decision-making.

2. Child participation in early childhood education

This section develops the theoretical framework used in the paper. It first clarifies where child participation should be located analytically in early childhood education and distinguishes it from related but non-equivalent concepts. It then outlines the rights-based and developmental premises of the framework, reconsiders the relevance of classical participation models, especially Hart's ladder, and finally translates these ideas into pedagogically observable dimensions. The purpose is not to propose an entirely new conceptualization of participation, but to provide a more explicit early-childhood-specific account of how established participation principles can be understood and enacted within everyday pedagogy.

2.1. Conceptual location and boundaries

Child participation is conceptualized here at the level of pedagogically organized opportunity rather than at the level of children's subjective experience alone or broad indicators of classroom quality. This analytical position is consistent with research showing that participation in early childhood education is closely connected to pedagogical planning and to the forms of access educators establish in practice (Heikka et al., 2022). Participation is therefore approached through the patterned educational conditions under which children can gain relevant understanding, communicate perspectives, be listened to, and influence matters affecting them. Research on preschool participation has likewise emphasized that children's participation depends substantially on the conditions created by adults in everyday educational life (Sandberg & Eriksson, 2010). This conceptual location is particularly appropriate in early childhood education because participation is constituted within relationships, routines, material arrangements, and institutional expectations rather than outside them. Work on a culture of participation further indicates that participatory practice depends on how educational environments are organized to enable members of the community to be heard, make initiatives, express opinions, and influence practice (Weckström et al., 2022).

This framing also helps clarify what participation is not. Participation is not equivalent to activity or engagement. Children may be highly active, involved, and enthusiastic without being informed, heard, or able to shape what happens (Correia et al., 2023; Theobald et al., 2025). Participation is not the same as compliance. A child may adapt smoothly to adult expectations while having little room for questioning, proposing, or influencing decisions (Akyol, 2025; Emilson &

Folkesson, 2006; Turnšek, 2016). Nor is participation reducible to voice alone. Inviting children to speak does not amount to meaningful participation if what they say is not seriously received or allowed to matter (Hayes, 2024; Lundy, 2007; Lundy et al., 2024). Participation should also be distinguished from agency in a broader sense. Children may display agency in play, resistance, or peer interaction even in settings that offer limited participatory opportunities. The present framework therefore treats participation more narrowly as the organized conditions under which children's views can become meaningful in matters affecting them.

Defining participation in this way prevents the concept from becoming excessively broad. A useful theoretical construct cannot function as a label for all positive features of child-centered pedagogy. It must identify specifically participatory conditions and specifically participatory limitations. On this basis, participation is treated here as a rights-based and pedagogically structured form of inclusion rather than as a broad educational ideal.

2.2. Rights, pedagogy, and developmental translation

The normative basis of child participation lies in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and its interpretation for early childhood in General Comment No. 7 (United Nations, 1989; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006). From this perspective, participation is not simply a desirable pedagogical orientation or a marker of progressive practice. It is grounded in the child's status as a rights-holder whose perspectives are entitled to consideration in matters affecting everyday educational life. A rights-based approach therefore gives participation normative force beyond the language of child-centeredness, classroom climate, or adult responsiveness. It positions participation as a legitimate educational claim rather than as something adults may encourage only when it is convenient, manageable, or aligned with preferred pedagogical styles (Lundy et al., 2024; Ribeiro et al., 2025). In this sense, the concept is protected from being reduced to child-friendliness, adult goodwill, or a diffuse democratic ethos.

At the same time, rights do not enter early childhood education in direct legal form. They must be pedagogically realized under conditions shaped by age, dependence, care, and institutional responsibility. Participation in early childhood education must therefore be developmentally translated. This means that participation rights are enacted in forms accessible to young children, rather than deferred until they can participate in more adult-like ways. Young children rely more heavily on adults for orientation, care, and navigation within institutional life. Their perspectives may be expressed through gesture, play, silence, affect, refusal, bodily orientation, and partial verbalization rather than through extended formal reasoning. These characteristics do not diminish the right itself. Rather, they alter the forms through which the right must be recognized and enacted within pedagogical practice (Dunphy, 2012; Lundy et al., 2024).

The distinction between developmental translation and developmental weakening is therefore central. Developmental translation preserves the normative force of participation while adapting its pedagogical form to the communicative and relational conditions of early childhood. Developmental weakening, by contrast, uses children's age as a justification for symbolic, low-consequence, or tightly controlled participation while retaining the language of rights. A rights-based framework must resist this reduction. The relevant question is not whether young children can

participate in adult terms, but how participation should be organized in forms that are developmentally appropriate without becoming substantively empty. This is particularly important in a field where assumptions about immaturity or dependency can easily be mobilized to narrow children's practical opportunities for influence (Avgitidou et al., 2024; Turnšek, 2016).

This argument also clarifies why participation in early childhood education cannot be captured adequately by a single indicator such as voice, autonomy, or choice. Young children often require explanation before choice, attentive listening before sustained expression, and responsive discussion before influence becomes possible. A multidimensional framework is therefore not an unnecessary elaboration, but a way of translating participation into forms that are pedagogically meaningful under early childhood conditions.

2.3. Classical participation models and their pedagogical translation

The framework developed here is aligned with classical participation theory rather than positioned against it. Hart's ladder remains especially important because it established a crucial normative distinction between genuine participation and forms of non-participation such as manipulation, decoration, and tokenism (Hart, 1992). That distinction remains highly relevant in early childhood education, where children's apparent inclusion can easily be overstated. A setting in which children are visible, active, cheerful, or verbally invited to contribute is not necessarily participatory if they are not informed, not listened to seriously, or unable to influence what follows. Hart's model therefore continues to function as an important conceptual safeguard.

Lundy's model contributes a further clarification by showing that voice alone is insufficient and that participation requires audience and influence (Lundy, 2007). Shier's model makes adult openings, opportunities, and obligations central, which is especially useful in early childhood education, where participation depends strongly on the pedagogical arrangements adults establish (Shier, 2001). Together, these models provide the normative core on which the present framework builds.

The present framework should therefore be understood as a pedagogical translation of these classical models rather than as a wholly new conceptualization. Its purpose is to make visible how the core concerns of participation theory can be recognized in everyday early childhood practice. In this respect, Hart's stages are not discarded. They are redistributed into pedagogically observable domains. The rejection of tokenism and symbolic inclusion remains central. The distinction between expression and meaningful uptake is retained through the differentiation between being heard, expressing views, and influence. The concern with shared and child-initiated decision-making is preserved through the decisional domain and its differentiation into discussion, influence, and independent decision-making.

What changes is not the normative core, but the level of pedagogical specification. Hart's ladder is powerful as a normative model, but it is less suited to describing how participation is enacted in routine-based, teacher-mediated early childhood settings. In such settings, participation rarely appears as formal power transfer alone. It is more often organized through explanation, interpretive listening, multimodal communication, shared discussion, and bounded opportunities for autonomous action. The present framework translates these established participation principles into

a form that is more directly applicable to early childhood pedagogy while remaining aligned with the classical models on which it builds.

2.4. The child's right to receive information

The first dimension of the framework is the child's right to receive information. Children cannot participate meaningfully in matters they do not understand, yet information is often treated as a peripheral background condition rather than as a constitutive part of participation (Dunphy, 2012; Lundy, 2007). In the present framework, informational access provides the epistemic basis of participation. It concerns the child's access to relevant and understandable information about activities, routines, expectations, options, and decisions affecting daily classroom life.

In early childhood education, information must be developmentally translated. It often requires visual, embodied, repeated, and relational support rather than one-time verbal explanation (Heikka et al., 2022; Ylikörkkö et al., 2025). Child-accessible displays, routine markers, pedagogical documentation, and explanations that connect actions to reasons help children orient themselves in classroom life (Weckström et al., 2022). Information becomes participatory when it allows children to enter pedagogical processes knowingly rather than blindly. A child asked to choose, agree, or comply without relevant understanding is not participating meaningfully, even if choice is formally offered.

This dimension also includes the legitimacy of children's questions. In a participatory classroom, questioning is not treated as a disruption to the adult plan, but as a legitimate route into shared understanding. Serious responses to children's questions position them as knowers whose understanding matters. In this sense, the right to receive information translates the more general participation principle into a pedagogical form that is particularly salient in early childhood education, where understanding often depends on adult explanation and environmental support.

2.5. The child's right to be heard

The second dimension is the child's right to be heard. This concerns the reception and recognition of children's communication rather than the production of communication itself (Clark, 2005; Lundy, 2007). A child may speak often and still not be meaningfully heard if adult responses are rushed, selective, or merely symbolic. In early childhood education, being heard becomes visible when teachers respond attentively, allow communicative time, interpret partial contributions seriously, and treat children's comments as meaningful parts of pedagogical life rather than as interruptions (Hayes, 2024; Theobald et al., 2025).

Being heard is especially important in early childhood education because communication is often multimodal. Young children may communicate through gesture, affect, hesitation, symbolic play, bodily orientation, silence, or emerging language. Listening in this context is not passive reception. It is an interpretive and relational practice through which adults recognize communicative acts as meaningful rather than dismissing them as noise, immaturity, or inconvenience (Ree & Rosell, 2025; Theobald et al., 2025). This receptive dimension also extends beyond adult-child interaction. When teachers cultivate group norms of attentive listening and help peers take one

another's ideas seriously, they transform individual expression into socially recognized participation (Girbés-Peco et al., 2024; Muhonen et al., 2026).

This dimension reflects one of the key insights of classical participation theory: expression alone is insufficient unless it meets an audience. In pedagogical terms, the right to be heard translates this principle into observable practices of recognition, responsiveness, and interpretive care.

2.6. The child's right to express views

The third dimension is the child's right to express views. Whereas being heard concerns adult uptake, expression concerns whether children are actively enabled to formulate and communicate perspectives. Expression is not a spontaneous given. It is pedagogically created through time, emotional safety, open questioning, communicative openness, and the legitimacy granted to children's contributions (Akyol, 2025; Moreno-Romero et al., 2024). In early childhood education, expression must be understood multimodally. Children do not express views only through formal speech, but also through play, drawing, storying, movement, symbolic action, selection, and refusal (Clark, 2005; Dunphy, 2012; Pramling et al., 2019).

The distinction between being heard and expressing views is theoretically necessary. Expression concerns the availability of communicative opportunity. Being heard concerns the quality of adult receptiveness once communication occurs. Neither can substitute for the other. A classroom may appear communicatively open while listening poorly, or listen attentively in isolated moments while offering too few opportunities for children to initiate communication. Treating hearing and expression as distinct dimensions therefore clarifies that participation requires both opportunity and uptake.

This dimension also demonstrates how classical participation principles take specifically pedagogical form in early childhood education. If participation is to be meaningful for young children, then opportunities for expression must be created in ways that recognize multiple communicative modes and do not privilege only articulate verbal contribution.

2.7. Children's involvement in decision-making

The fourth dimension is children's involvement in decision-making, where participation becomes visibly consequential. Information, hearing, and expression are indispensable, but participation remains incomplete if children's perspectives never enter processes through which classroom life is organized. Decision-related participation is therefore treated as the consequential domain of the framework. It is differentiated into discussion, influence, and age-appropriate independent decision-making because these capture distinct ways in which children's perspectives may shape judgment and action.

Discussion refers to children's inclusion in deliberation about matters affecting classroom life, such as planning, routines, shared problems, or activity organization (Barros et al., 2024; Heikka et al., 2022; Weckström et al., 2022). In early childhood education, such deliberation is typically embedded in everyday routines rather than formal meetings. It becomes visible when teachers allocate time for children to compare alternatives, justify preferences, reflect on shared

issues, and listen to one another's ideas (Muhonen et al., 2026). Discussion matters because participation does not begin only when a final decision is made. It begins when children enter the process through which meanings and alternatives are negotiated.

Influence concerns whether children's views can shape adult-mediated outcomes. This is the clearest safeguard against tokenism. A classroom may be warm, dialogic, and expressive while remaining weakly participatory if children's contributions never affect what happens next. Influence does not require automatic agreement. Adults retain ethical, curricular, and safety responsibilities. But participation is strengthened when children's perspectives can modify plans, redirect timing, reshape activity, or receive reasoned explanation when a proposal cannot be followed (Lundy et al., 2024; Ribeiro et al., 2025). In this sense, influence means responsive consequence rather than total control.

Age-appropriate independent decision-making refers to those bounded domains in which children can directly plan, initiate, organize, or implement actions alone or with peers (Ree & Rosell, 2025; Ylikörkkö et al., 2025). This is not unrestricted freedom. It is supported child agency within pedagogically justified boundaries. Including this form of decision-making is important because participation in early childhood education is not exhausted by consultation about adult-run processes. It also includes opportunities for children to exercise direct initiative within shared classroom life.

Together, discussion, influence, and independent decision-making translate the higher stages of participation theory into pedagogically recognizable forms. They retain Hart's concern with authenticity and meaningful involvement while adapting it to the everyday realities of early childhood education.

2.8. Ethics, inclusion, and structural conditions

A robust framework for participation must also account for the right not to participate. In a rights-based approach, participation is a voluntary entitlement, not a behavioral obligation (Lundy, 2007; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006). If children are required to express an opinion, join every discussion, or choose among adult-defined options, participation risks becoming another form of compliance. A participatory environment is therefore not one in which every child is always visibly involved, but one in which children have legitimate access to participation without being compelled to perform it.

This issue connects directly to inclusion. Participation opportunities are not experienced uniformly by all children. Differences in language, disability, communicative style, temperament, and teacher beliefs about competence affect how easily children enter participatory processes. Recent work indicates that participation of children with disabilities in early childhood education remains uneven and often constrained by structural and pedagogical barriers rather than by individual limitation alone (Dott & Licandro, 2025). A rights-based framework must therefore ask not only whether participation opportunities exist, but whether they are accessible across different children and groups. This has implications across all dimensions: information must be accessible, hearing must include non-standard communication, expression must be multimodal, and decision-making must not depend solely on rapid or formalized contribution.

Participation is also shaped by structural conditions. Curriculum requirements, staff-to-child ratios, time pressure, safety expectations, documentation demands, and the physical architecture of the classroom all influence the opportunity structure of participation (Heikka et al., 2022; Weckström et al., 2022). Teachers often work within negotiated boundaries, balancing children's right to influence with institutional demands for order and care (Ree & Rosell, 2025). Recognizing these structural conditions makes the framework more realistic, but it should not be confused with excuse-making. Institutional constraints do not dissolve rights. They help explain why participation varies across routines and why rights-based pedagogy requires not only individual commitment, but also organizational support.

3. Discussion

This paper has argued that child participation in early childhood education should be conceptualized more precisely as a rights-based, teacher-mediated opportunity structure rather than as a broad synonym for child-centeredness, activity, or democratic atmosphere. In doing so, it responds to a recurring problem in the field: participation is widely endorsed, yet often left conceptually under-specified. When participation is used as a diffuse label for multiple desirable features of pedagogy, its analytical boundaries become unstable and its value for theory and research is reduced (Correia et al., 2019; Correia et al., 2023). The framework developed here addresses that problem by proposing a multidimensional account comprising the child's right to receive information, the right to be heard, the right to express views, and involvement in decision-making, with the latter further differentiated into discussion, influence, and age-appropriate independent decision-making. Its contribution lies not in replacing existing participation theory, but in clarifying how established participation principles can be translated into the pedagogical realities of early childhood education.

A central contribution of the framework is its location of participation at the level of pedagogically organized opportunity. This shifts the analytical focus away from participation as a child disposition, a broad classroom climate, or a general indicator of educational quality. Such a shift is important because participation in early childhood education is not primarily a matter of what children bring with them into the setting. Rather, it is constituted through the conditions educational environments make available through explanation, listening, communicative openness, deliberation, and opportunities for influence. In this respect, the framework makes adult and institutional responsibility more visible without reducing participation to adult benevolence. Teachers remain central, not because participation belongs to them, but because they organize many of the conditions under which children's participation becomes possible or constrained. This analytical move is especially useful in early childhood education, where participation is enacted under conditions of adult mediation, routine-based pedagogy, and material and temporal organization (Heikka et al., 2022; Weckström et al., 2022).

A second contribution lies in the argument that participation in early childhood education must be developmentally translated rather than weakened in the name of age appropriateness. This distinction is theoretically important because it avoids two recurrent errors in the literature. On the one hand, participation can be interpreted through models that assume relatively formal, verbal, or power-transfer-oriented forms of involvement and therefore fit older children more easily than

younger children. On the other hand, participation in early childhood education can be treated as necessarily minimal or symbolic on the grounds that young children are too dependent, too immature, or too limited in communication to participate meaningfully. The present framework rejects both positions. It argues instead that young children's dependence on adults does not reduce the normative force of participation as a rights-based concept; rather, it changes the pedagogical forms through which participation must be enacted. This includes attention to multimodal communication, accessible information, interpretive listening, bounded decisional spaces, and pedagogical responsiveness (Dunphy, 2012; Lundy et al., 2024). By framing participation in this way, the paper preserves the normative seriousness of participation while adapting it to the conditions of early childhood education.

The framework also has methodological significance. Because it distinguishes among informational, receptive, expressive, and decisional dimensions of participation, it provides a more defensible conceptual basis for later scale development than one-dimensional or weakly bounded accounts. This is particularly important for research that seeks to examine participation empirically without collapsing it into general classroom quality, teacher responsiveness, or child agency in a broad sense. A clearer conceptual structure can support more precise item generation, stronger construct validity arguments, and more careful interpretation of empirical findings. At the same time, the framework does not assume that later empirical work must reproduce its structure exactly as proposed. Its purpose is conceptual clarification rather than premature measurement closure. Later research may show that some dimensions are more closely related than expected, or that certain distinctions require empirical refinement. That possibility does not weaken the framework. Rather, it underscores why conceptual discipline should precede measurement rather than follow from it.

At the same time, the framework remains selective and should be understood as such. It does not claim to encompass all forms of democratic life, all dimensions of institutional power, or all expressions of child agency in early childhood education. Its purpose is narrower: to identify the core participatory functions through which children's rights are enacted in everyday pedagogy and to justify these functions as a coherent basis for theory and later research. This selectivity is an advantage rather than a limitation in itself, because a concept broad enough to include every desirable educational feature would become analytically weak. Nonetheless, the framework has limits. It remains theoretical and requires empirical examination across diverse contexts. It also foregrounds pedagogical opportunity rather than children's lived experience, which means that future work should triangulate teacher-reported or observed conditions with child-perspective methods wherever possible (Theobald et al., 2025). Further research could also examine how the dimensions proposed here vary across routines, age groups, institutional cultures, and inclusion contexts, including the participation of children whose perspectives are less easily recognized in conventional classroom formats (Dott & Licandro, 2025). Such work would strengthen understanding not only of whether participation is present, but of how it is differentially organized in everyday early childhood education.

Conclusion

Child participation in early childhood education is more adequately conceptualized as a multidimensional, rights-based, and teacher-mediated opportunity structure than as a single level of power transfer or a broad synonym for activity. The framework proposed here clarifies the conceptual boundaries of participation by distinguishing it from compliance, busyness, voice without meaningful consequence, and agency in general. By specifying the child's right to receive information, the right to be heard, the right to express views, and differentiated forms of decision-related involvement, it offers a more precise account of how participation is constituted in everyday educational life.

The discussion has further shown that participation in early childhood education must be developmentally translated rather than weakened in the name of age appropriateness. Young children's dependence on adults does not reduce the normative force of participation; it makes the pedagogical organization of participation more important. This clarification matters not only for theoretical work, but also for future empirical research, because it provides a more coherent basis for identifying, examining, and later operationalizing participation in early childhood education.

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