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# Pedagogical practices used by early childhood education and care (ECEC) teachers to promote participation

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores pedagogical practices of early childhood education and care (ECEC) teachers in Norway, focusing on promoting participation among 4–6-year-old children. Through semi-structured interviews with four ECEC teachers, we conducted a thematic analysis to understand their practices inspired by the work of Lundy. Findings suggest that the four ECEC teachers prioritize various pedagogical approaches, emphasizing children's initiatives through observation and interpretation of their verbal and non-verbal expressions during daily activities. Pedagogical practices involve active engagement to ensure different types of participation. Decision-making includes helping children to take positions and influence majority-voting children. Indoors, ECEC teachers use observation to plan activities aligning with children's interests while also facilitating free play among peers; play equipment is promoted outdoors. Findings indicate the challenges inherent in balancing pedagogical plans and responsibility with children's participation and emotions. Pedagogical practices supporting children's critical thinking and reflection are not identified but ECEC practitioners are increasingly aware of them.

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Daily activities; early childhood education and care; physical environment; participation; pedagogical practice

## Introduction

In recent decades, international research has increasingly focused on children's participation in everyday activities within ECEC institutions (Emilson & Folkesson, 2006; Ree et al., 2019; Svenning, 2018). Such research has suggested that participation is an ongoing process that requires support from staff trained in appropriate pedagogical practices and methods (Lundy, 2007; Thomas, 2007). Participation is associated with children's initiative, critical thinking, ability to reflect on their actions, and decision-making in daily activities (Brinck et al., 2022; Elliott et al., 2020; Samuelsson & Park, 2017). That theory also emphasizes that children are active agents in their own lives, who develop competencies over time, thereby enhancing their capacity to engage in decision-making processes (Lansdown, 2005; Lundy, 2007). Children's participation has several purposes, including being able to uphold their rights, enhance their skills, promote democracy, and foster their self-esteem (Sinclair & Franklin, 2000, cited in Thomas, 2007). In Norway, children's *participation* is often defined as encompassing the freedom to make individual decisions (Bae et al., 2006; Holte et al., 2014), ability to choose or decline engagement in activities, and opportunity to engage in fellowship with others (Ree et al., 2019). Being seen and listened to by significant others such as ECEC teachers is also essential (Bae et al., 2006; Bratterud et al., 2012; Holte et al.,

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2014). Participation thus involves active interactions between two or more individuals – at base, a child and an ECEC teacher – within a defined physical and mental space (Bae et al., 2006, p. 8; Sandberg, 2016, p. 93). Participation is also associated with children's well-being and good health (Bjørgen, 2015).

In ECEC, all children regardless of age should have opportunities to participate in daily activities and matters affecting their lives (OECD, 2019) and be encouraged to do so by ECEC teachers in their pedagogical practice (Council of Europe, 2017; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005). The right of children to participate is enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), which was ratified by Norway in 1991. Article 12 states the right of children of all ages to express themselves, be heard, and participate in matters affecting them. Article 5 further addresses the responsibility of adults to support children in exercising their rights (Skrzypczak, 2022). Furthermore, participation is proposed as a criterion for one of the three dimensions of sustainability, namely, *social sustainability*, which refers to principles such as human dignity, equality, justice, and compassion, as indicated by wellbeing, safety, equity, and participation for all individuals, including children (Larimian & Sadeghi, 2021; Thin et al., 2002; Weckström et al., 2022;). Participating in decision-making, being allowed to build social capital, and fostering relationships with others are crucial for developing socially sustainable societies (Padovan, 2017; United Nations, 2015; Weckström et al., 2022). Although several studies have explored theoretical frameworks and suggested various levels of participation, few studies have explored pedagogical practices in various ECEC settings, physical environments and activities within ECEC (Alme & Reime, 2021; Venninen & Purola 2013). In this article, the theoretical understanding of children's participation refers to opportunities to engage in daily activities in ECEC institutions, to express themselves both positively and negatively, and to have those expressions listened to and valued by significant others such as ECEC teachers. To our knowledge, there are limited studies exploring the pedagogical practices used by ECEC teachers to encourage participation in various activities, both indoors and outdoors.

## Participation and pedagogical practices

Children's participation is a complex, multidimensional process influenced by cultural, social, and significant relational contexts (Lansdown, 2005; Ree & Emilson, 2020; Sinclair & Franklin, 2000). Weckström et al. (2022) argued that participation is a holistic, dynamic process influenced by values and shaped by the context and culture in which a child and educator are involved. Correia et al. (2023) identifies participation in ECEC from five distinct perspectives: sociological, developmental, social policy, sociocultural, and educational. From the educational perspective in particular, children's participation is influenced by teacher–child interactions, together with the knowledge, behaviour, and practices of teachers (Correia et al., 2023; Koran & Avci, 2017). Sylva et al. (2010) also emphasized the significance of supporting children's participation from an early age and, indeed, ECEC is the first educational context within which children can develop the skills needed to express themselves and engage in a decision-making process within the sociocultural norms of their society (Correia et al., 2023; Lansdown, 2005; Lundy, 2007).

From other perspectives, Thomas (2007) described participation as a process or actual outcome, while Weckström et al. (2022) addressed the need for adaptive practices among ECEC staff that are suitable to support daily activities appropriate to children's age, needs, and maturity. Along those lines, studies have suggested that ECEC staff tend to have more contact with outgoing, competent children who are easy to talk to compared with those who are shy and/or silent (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Sandvik et al., 2014). Various levels and models of participation have also been suggested, often with separate categories or subcategories of inactive and active participation (Lansdown, 2005; Shier, 2001; Sinclair, 2004). Lundy's model of participation (2007, p. 932) suggests four distinct positions for conceptualizing children's participation, namely, space, voice, influence and audience. All parts must be interconnected and are essential for providing children with

opportunities to participate. This model associates space and voice with children's right to express their views, while audience and influence is associated with weight being given to children's views. Lundy's model is acknowledged as a valuable framework to apply and encourage children's participation and is suitable for analyzing participation at different levels (Kennan et al., 2018; McCafferty, 2017). Full participation for children requires a proactive pedagogical approach on the part of ECEC teachers that enables access to these four positions for all children, both indoor and outdoor.

Children's participation arguably emerges within relationships with ECEC staff and children because a high-quality process embeds an understanding of children's needs, experiences, and perspectives (Kanyal, 2014; Sylva et al., 2010). The presence of competent caregivers with relational skills and expertise who perceive and respond to children in an appropriate manner is important for developing children's participation (Svenning, 2018). In the same vein, Fennefoss and Jansen (2015, p. 126) posit that participation occurs in the tension between a child's expressions and the ways in which staff choose to respond to those expressions. Thus, the possibility for a child to participate depends on the ethical values of staff, including respect and equality (Åberg & Taguchi, 2006). ECEC teachers' pedagogical practice therefore involves continuous ethical considerations and adaptations in relation to each child and group of children in all situations based on the knowledge and practical experience of those teachers (Børhaug & Bøe, 2022, p. 18). Variables such as level of education, work experience, and gender significantly influence pedagogical practices among ECEC teachers (DiCarlo et al., 2015). Few studies have explored the perspectives of male teachers in the context of ECEC (Butler, 2004). In this study, we explore how pedagogical practices promote children's participation in ECEC, specifically in Norway, regardless of differences related to gender, level of education, and work experience.

According to Sivertsen and Moe (2021), 4–6-year-old children experience higher levels of participation in outdoor than indoor activities. Indoor activities are often more regulated by staff (Kallestad & Ødegaard, 2013). As for children's perspectives, Stephenson (2002) identified four distinct dimensions that children perceive when comparing indoor and outdoor environments, that is, indoor activities allow more interaction with staff but those outdoors involve a greater sense of freedom, fewer routines to follow, and less control from staff. Children who are allowed to explore their surroundings in a self-directed manner tend to experience higher levels of participation (Osnes & Skaug, 2015). A study on ECEC pedagogy in the Nordic countries has even suggested that children's free play is the only activity that truly enhances their participation (Kangas et al., 2015). In this article, free play refers to dedicated time for children to engage in play activities, including constructive, functional, and symbolic play of their own choosing based on individual interests (Sawyer, 1994). Indoor time is often associated with staff-organised activities as well as free play, whereas outdoor time is a daily activity in the ECEC outdoor area often dedicated to free play (ibid.). A study investigating nature kindergarten argued that such an environment offers space and situations suitable for children's participation; however, it questions children's various abilities to truly participate (Alme & Reime, 2021).

### **ECEC in Norway**

In 2006, the concept of participation (Norwegian: *medvirkning*) was incorporated into the Norwegian Kindergarten Act, which effectively enshrined it within the context of ECEC. In Norway, ECEC takes a sociocultural perspective on learning that highlights the role of historical, cultural, and social contexts in the acquisition of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). All ECEC institutions in Norway are required to follow the Framework Plan for Kindergartens (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017) by explicitly integrating children's participation in the curriculum in order to promote democratic values and fellowship and thus provide children with opportunities to express themselves. ECEC institutions should also consider children's active participation in the regular course of planning and assessing activities that are suitable to their needs, age, and maturity (ibid.). Of the roughly 5,500 ECEC institutions in Norway, approximately 80% do not have a

specific profile. Of those that do, the nature and outdoor profile is most common and accounts for 8% (Statistics Norway, 2024). There are approximately 100,000 ECEC staff in Norway, and almost 90% are women. In Norway, outdoor play and learning are especially prioritized given the belief that they benefit children's development and well-being (Kaarby & Tandberg, 2017). Children in ECEC institutions in Norway do indeed spend a significant amount of time outdoors throughout the year (Moser & Martinsen, 2010).

## **Aims**

The aims of our small-scale study were to identify and explore how ECEC teachers' pedagogical practice promotes children's participation in Norway, guided by the following research questions:

Research question 1: Which pedagogical practices do ECEC teachers in Norway employ to promote participation of 4–6-year-old children?

Research question 2: Do ECEC teachers use different pedagogical practices to promote different levels of participation for children in different environments?

## **Method**

### ***Informants***

Four ECEC teachers from two randomly selected ECEC institutions in a town in central Norway were involved in our study. Initial contact with the institutions was made via phone to the principal or department manager, and written information about the study's purpose, procedures, and informant inclusion criteria was sent via email. The inclusion criteria were that teachers must have a degree in ECEC, current employment in an ECEC setting for children aged 4–6 years, and a minimum of two years' work experience with that age group. In Setting A, George and Elisabeth met those inclusion criteria; in Setting B, five ECEC teachers – one woman and four men – met the criteria. In Setting B, however, the woman withdrew from the study and a random draw between the four men was performed that resulted in the recruitment of Peter and Edward. The age of the informants was 30–45 years, and all informants were given pseudonyms.

### ***Data collection***

A semi-structured interview guide with 11 questions was designed to answer the study's research questions according to established guidelines (Kvale et al., 2015). The first five questions addressed participation independent of activities and physical environment, while the last seven questions addressed chosen activities in depth. Interviews with a semi-structured design generally give informants the opportunity to speak freely, elaborate, provide detailed responses, and share associated thoughts in response to each question (ibid.). To explore ECEC teachers' pedagogical practices targeting children's participation, we specifically investigated various indoor and outdoor activities, including field trips outside the ECEC area. Each interview was conducted one-on-one by a researcher in a separate room in the interviewee's ECEC institution. All interviews were conducted during a four-week period, were audio-recorded, lasted 38.13–53.47 minutes, and were transcribed in NVivo (version 12) shortly thereafter.

### ***Data analysis***

Thematical analysis was applied to the interview transcripts to explore the experiences, meanings, and realities of informant responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006) based on the discovery of diverse codes and themes within the data. Our analysis followed a rigorous, systematic six-step approach

developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. First, all interviews were transcribed, and initial notes were used to familiarize ourselves with the data. Second, codes were constructed using tags and keywords, and important citations were highlighted. Third, the prevalence of those codes in each and across all interviews was determined. Fourth, all codes, highlighted citations, and their prevalence were compared and paired to form overarching themes, after which coherent themes were identified and distinguished and incoherent ones discarded. Fifth, the themes were named. Sixth, a final analysis was conducted. Three major themes emerged from our analysis of the data: pedagogical practices related to children's initiatives; pedagogical practices related to children's decision-making; and pedagogical practices related to indoor and outdoor environments. The main findings are associated with and inspired by Lundy's (2007) model. Practices supporting the four positions of participation are explored.

### **Ethical considerations**

Prior to the interviews, written information about the study's aims was provided to the participating ECEC teachers, who were also informed that their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time, for any or no reason. Throughout the study, we adhered to ethical guidelines regarding audio-recording (e.g., each participant's consent to being recorded was obtained), the anonymity of personal identifying information (e.g., ensured by using pseudonyms for informants and ECEC institutions), and data storage as directed by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (SIKT); we also safeguarded all informants' rights and privacy. The study was approved by SIKT and the local municipal service in which this study was conducted.

### **Findings and discussion**

The aim of this study was to explore ECEC teachers' pedagogical practices promoting participation for 4–6-year-old children and examine practices applied in indoor and outdoor environments. Overall, the findings of the study, gleaned from responses to semi-structured interviews with four informants – Peter and Elisabeth in setting A and George and Edward in setting B – suggest that ECEC teachers use various positions in their pedagogical practice to promote children's participation, as proscribed by Lundy (2007). The findings indicate a strong emphasis on children's initiative, highlighting the need to observe and interpret their verbal and non-verbal expressions. Striking a balance between children's participation and teachers' pedagogical plans and responsibilities is challenging. The decision-making process for children involves voting by raising their hand and the ECEC teacher then making the final decision based on the majority of votes. The findings show that ECEC teachers position themselves differently indoors and outdoors, providing various opportunities for children to participate. A few examples were provided of pedagogical practices aimed at developing children's sense of awareness and responsibility, such as the teacher providing an audience for the children or allowing some children to influence the thoughts or decisions of others. The findings are presented below according to the three main themes outlined earlier.

### ***Pedagogical practices for including children's sense of initiative***

The study findings indicate that the ECEC teachers employ various pedagogical practices and positions to include children's sense of initiative. Children's interests are identified as a pivotal pedagogical practice to promote participation. All four ECEC teachers emphasized the importance of children's interests and employed diverse positions to identify and explore them. Children's interest in activities, materials or themes is included in everyday activities such as play time and circle time. The ECEC teachers emphasized the need to adapt to and create variation according to children's evolving interests over time because they considered flexibility to be essential to fostering



participation. The ECECE teachers continuously explored children's interests, often on a daily basis, through observation and conversation, as seen in the following examples:

Pedagogical practice is being close to children to hear and listen to what they say. It is being in dialogue and conversations with them. (Elisabeth)

You need to be close to children in play and everyday situations to catch up with what is happening. (Peter)

Both examples reflect practice that provides space for children to express themselves, which significantly influences their daily lives. These practices align with findings from other studies (Brinck et al., 2022; Elliott et al., 2020; Samuelsson & Park, 2017). The ECEC teachers' provision of space for expression is not restricted by time or location. Rather, they described their position as being both observer of and audience for children to express themselves within these spaces. This practice requires listening to each child daily to promote participation for all children.

The study findings also suggest that the ECECE teachers emphasized their role as a "significant other" through consistent observation of and listening to all children, which aligns with previous studies (Bae et al., 2006; Bratterud et al., 2012; Holte et al., 2014). Observing and interpreting children's interests is a prominent aspect of their practice. However, little attention is paid to whether or how children are informed of or made aware of these observations. To what extent children recognize their participation in this practice or awareness of being observed remains unclear. If this practice of creating space is invisible to and unknown from the perspective of children, one might question the extent to which children experience participation. Additionally, this raises questions about how children can develop decision-making skills if they are unaware of their own involvement in such processes. Developing these skills is fundamental to fostering children's participation. For children to develop these skills, they must be aware of the skills they are acquiring and receive appropriate support, as suggested in other studies (Correia et al., 2023; Lansdown, 2005; Lundy, 2007). Further, Elisabeth's statement underscores the use of two-way communication and highlights her own active engagement as an audience, demonstrating the significance of teacher-child interaction in pedagogical practice (Correia et al., 2023; Koran & Avci, 2017). All four informants highlighted their position as an active listener who provides suitable responses to children during everyday conversations. Being an audience to children's expressions requires interpreting these expressions, as exemplified by the following examples:

Sometimes we must interpret them [the children] based on what they express. Some children's verbal skills are not that strong, but all children should have influence over how they spend their days. (Edward)

If they [the children] are supposed to influence their everyday lives, then we need to be there to listen to them and figure out what they're communicating. (Peter)

Both quotations show that being an audience requires knowledge of and sensitivity to each child's means of expression. ECEC teachers' practice involves both ethical considerations and knowledge of each child within a group, as demonstrated in other studies (Børhaug & Bøe, 2022). The findings include numerous examples of the informants drawing on their knowledge of each child's personality, mood, and unique way of expressing themselves to facilitate participation. This relational practice reflects ethical considerations, emphasizing respect and equality for all children, consistent with findings in other studies (Åberg & Taguchi, 2006; Børhaug & Bøe, 2022; Fennefoss & Jansen, 2015). Being sensitive to each child's expressions allows ECEC teachers to gain a deeper understanding of the meanings behind them, reflecting ethical considerations and their sensitivity when positioned as an audience. This practice is essential, as children's interests and initiatives influence the planning of appropriate and enjoyable activities while ensuring variety. George's examples underscore this approach:

Then you often get an impression of what they [the children] would like and not. What they like, they enjoy themselves there and what is best that day. And trying to provide some variation ... It is all the time about where the focus is and what is interesting, what is catching, what is the feedback.

The ECEC teachers demonstrated sensitivity to children's emotions when planning and organizing activities. Children's emotional expressions, particularly positive feelings such as joy and engagement, influence their activity planning. This reflects a practice that is both sensitive and adaptive to children's emotional states. The emphasis on children's positive feelings aligns with the findings of Bjørgen (2015). The examples demonstrate how ECEC teachers provide space for children to express themselves, positioning themselves as an audience. Children's influence is expressed in the incorporation of their interests when planning activities based on their level of engagement and expression of enjoyment.

### ***Pedagogical practices for including children's decision-making***

Findings in this study provide examples of how children's participation is promoted through decision-making processes within a group setting. All four ECEC teachers utilized a "majority decide" approach based on voting, as seen in the following example:

If the children come up with an alternative, then we vote on it. That is a form of participation that's democratic ... At the same time, there are some things that we adults know better and need to be in control of.  
(Peter)

Children are given sufficient space and support allowing them to express their opinions on specific decisions affecting the group, encompassing both collective and individual participation (Thomas, 2007). ECEC teachers positioned themselves as an audience for children, ensuring that each child has the opportunity to make their perspective known. However, the extent to which each child experiences this practice as meaningful participation may depend on the outcome and whether it aligns with their vote. Peter underscores the need to balance children's expressions with practical considerations such as time and organizational constraints before making a final decision. This suggests that children are made aware of their role and choices within the decision-making process. Each child's expressed opinion contributes to decisions that affect both themselves and the group. Other findings highlight the practice of individual decision-making tailored to each child. These are often facilitated when children independently choose activities or peers to play with, as demonstrated in the following examples:

First of all, you must be conscious about knowing all the children [individually] and as a group. Some children have a lot of opinions, and you need to try to reach all of them. (Edward).

You need to keep in the back of your head that everyone should express their opinions, not only the fastest ones or the ones in front of the queue. (George)

When ECEC teachers facilitate a strategic order in which children can speak, they use their knowledge of each child's personality to provide individualized support. Edward and George highlighted their attentiveness to the needs of each child within a group, demonstrating how awareness guides their supportive practice as an audience. Both examples demonstrate how regulating the time and frequency of each child's voice in a group setting serves two purposes. The first is to ensure the inclusion of each child's voice by providing time for each one to express themselves. The ECEC teachers position themselves as audience to each child. The second purpose is to support children in expressing their thoughts without being influenced by their peers. Edward emphasizes the importance of tailoring his support to meet the individual needs of children, especially those who appear shy in group settings. By listening and encouraging these children to express themselves, the ECEC teachers demonstrate sensitivity to their unique needs and provide targeted support. This practice aligns with findings from previous studies (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Kanyal, 2014; Sandvik et al., 2014; Sylva et al., 2010).

Another example of participatory practice involves children's decision-making within defined and structured planning meetings, as illustrated in the following example:



We have planned participation meetings, especially with the oldest children. These children can develop activity plans they would like to do next semester ... In the end, it is up to the staff to decide what is realistic and include other activities. (Peter)

In this example, space for children's participation is intentionally planned and purposefully defined. Children are informed about the meeting's purpose and are made aware of how their expressions influence future activities. The meeting is specifically designed to promote children's participation, while the ECEC teachers position themselves as an audience for children's opinions. However, the extent of children's influence depends on the ECEC teachers' consideration of whether or how they can accommodate their requests. Participation meetings are conducted twice a year, that is, not often. Peter found these meetings to be a suitable means of promoting children's participation. The low frequency of these meetings is interesting, as they seem to promote children's participation in a suitable manner. These examples demonstrate how various pedagogical practices are employed to facilitate decision-making among children, thus addressing children's varying needs of support.

### ***Pedagogical practices for indoor and outdoor environments***

According to the study findings, ECEC teachers employ various pedagogical practices indoors and outdoors to promote children's participation. Starting points for the organization of these activities vary, which aligns with other studies comparing indoor and outdoor organizational methods (Stephenson, 2002). Indoors, the ECEC teachers plan circle time and activities based on children's initiatives, allowing them the opportunity to choose among activities. According to other studies, this practice of choosing is essential to participation (Ree et al., 2019). The ECEC teachers listen to children's voices, and their wishes influence their further engagement in activities. In contrast, outdoor time is often dedicated to free play, where children engage in play of their own choosing, without pre-planned intention by the ECEC teachers. During outdoor time, children are provided with numerous opportunities to interact and participate with their peers, while the ECEC teachers facilitate play equipment and ensure safety in accordance with outdoor regulations. Indoors, the ECEC teachers provide opportunities for children to express their preferences and influence activities. For instance, during circle time, children can exert influence by selecting themes or activities. This balance between planned activities and children's ability to influence what they do is demonstrated by the following example:

Sometimes we practice learning new songs, while other times we try to talk a lot ... When they [the children] start talking, we totally change the subject. Then it is a balance between following up children's expressions, but not all the time. (George)

The ECEC teachers provide space and voice to children indoors and position themselves as an audience. The all highlight the challenge implicit in balancing planned activities with the possibility of children being able to participate by exerting influence. Striking a balance between pre-planned intentions and children's expressions of interest or engagement is closely tied to the sensitivity ECEC teachers demonstrate in relation to children's participation. All participants questioned their own practice when trying to create this balance, and whether or not children's participation is a matter of responding to their requests. This balance presented several ethical challenges to the ECEC teachers, as the decision they make whether to follow up or disregard a child's request has a direct effect on that child's experience of participation. The findings reveal a sense of ambivalence among these teachers because their decisions can either promote or inhibit children's participation. This is evident, however, only in indoor practice. From one perspective, children's participation is not fully achieved if their expressions do not influence outcomes. From another perspective, participation is achieved because children are given the opportunity to express themselves, regardless of the outcome that may be suggested by others (Ree et al., 2019). This highlights the need to discuss the balance between curriculum, pedagogical practice, and children's participation, especially indoors. Other perspectives also need to be addressed in

relation to outdoor practices. The following examples demonstrate outdoor practices enacted by ECEC teachers:

Outside, it's kind of a free area for them [the children]. And they can do what they want to. (Peter)

It is more freedom during outdoor time. Then the children can do whatever they want, mostly. (George)

Children are provided with opportunities to participate in activities of their own choosing, while ECEC teachers often assume a more passive role. Free play is emphasized, which changes the practices employed by ECEC teachers. In the findings are a few examples of ECEC teachers actively listening to children, beyond requests for materials or support. The emphasis on free play outdoors allows children to decide what, with whom, and where to play, a practice supported by previous research (Kallestad & Ødegaard, 2013). Free play is often suggested to be the most authentic form of participation for children, particularly for those who actively engage and participate with peers (Kangas et al., 2015). Other studies have also reported that children participate to a greater degree when playing outdoors (Sivertsen & Moe, 2021). This raises the question of whether children prefer free play over structured, organized activities. Outdoors, children have numerous possibilities to experience all four positions of participation because they engage in self-directed exploration of games and their surroundings (Osnes & Skaug, 2015). For outspoken children who easily engage in play with peers, this practice can develop their participation skills. However, for children who struggle to engage or do not naturally participate in free play, sufficient support from ECEC teachers is needed to ensure their development of the necessary skills and experience of participation (see also Alme & Reime, 2021).

Another finding related to various indoor and outdoor practices is regulation of social interactions and, hence, audience positions. Indoors, ECEC teachers divided children into smaller groups, which regulated their experience of an audience. Outdoors, children were free to choose their audience playmates, as seen in this example:

We set up some activities [indoors]. ... Children are divided into smaller playgroups and choose between activities. They might be encouraged to move on to something different if they've done the same thing several days in a row ... Many experience joy when they're challenged to get out of their comfort zone. (George).

Thus, indoors, ECEC teachers provide an audience for children by including them in a group. Outdoors, children need to find their own playmates to listen to them. George's example of organizing smaller playgroups indoors highlights how organizational practices can enhance children's participation, as suggested in previous studies (Børhaug & Bøe, 2022; Sargeant, 2018; Venninen et al., 2014).

### ***Strengths and limitations of this study***

Semi-structured interviews are a strength of our study because they provide elaborate, detailed answers. Including two ECEC profiles was another strength of our study. A limitation, however, is the inadequate gender balance, which results from the national gender distribution of ECEC teachers in Norway. A limited number of informants and the homogeneity of age, geographical, cultural, and educational background could explain the slight variations in pedagogical practices observed in our study. Another strength of this study is its alignment with Lundy's model of participation, which supports the validity of our results.

### ***Further research***

Studies with a higher number of informants representing a greater range of ages, genders, and geographical locations could further explore pedagogical practices of participation among ECEC teachers.

## Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the pedagogical practices used by ECEC teachers to promote children's participation in school. Three main themes informed the research: children's sense of initiative, their ability to make decisions, and variations between indoor and outdoor environments. The findings explore some areas in need of attention. Inspired by Lundy's (2007) model of participation, the ECEC teachers positioned themselves as an audience by providing the space and support needed for children to express themselves. The degree of influence a child is able to exert and their awareness of having participated depend on ECEC teachers' sensitivity to each child. The findings highlight the challenge inherent in balancing structured activities with children's expressions, underscoring teachers' ethical considerations when considering whether to act on them. This finding necessitates a discussion regarding how to find an appropriate balance between pedagogical intentions, curriculum requirements, inclusion, and the development of suitable participation skills among children. Outdoors, children's free play is emphasized, providing them with more freedom to engage with peers and explore their environment. Outdoor practices require focused attention on the part of ECEC teachers, especially in response to children who may need additional support in initiating or maintaining interactions. Our findings suggest that outdoor play offers valuable opportunities for children to practice decision-making and develop social skills with peers. However, it also requires targeted support for children who struggle to participate. There is thus a need to raise awareness among ECEC practitioners about the importance of fostering children's critical thinking and decision-making skills, and ability to reflect on their actions. Further studies should explore why these critical aspects of participation are not incorporated in ECEC teachers' pedagogical practice. While findings from this small-scale study cannot be generalized, they offer new and additional insights to the research field. The implications of these findings may be of interest to researchers and practitioners in ECEC not only in Norway and Scandinavia but also across Europe and worldwide.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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