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## Participatory research methods with young children: a systematic literature review

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### ABSTRACT

This systematic literature review aimed to ascertain what participatory methods for young children have been used in peer-reviewed empirical articles. A systematic literature search yielded 75 articles. Based on their methodology, the studies were divided into six categories: (1) multi-method and the Mosaic approach, (2) observation and ethnography, (3) language-based methods, (4) visual methods, (5) creative and playful methods, and (6) children as co-researchers. The participatory features of these methods were then analyzed. The articles foregrounded the importance of the reflective use of methods, ethically grounded research practices, and carefully considering young children's participation from multiple perspectives.

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### KEYWORDS

Participatory methods; participation; literature reviews; young children; early childhood education (ECE)

## Introduction

While children and childhood have long been studied, recent decades have witnessed a growing trend towards re-contextualizing children, especially young children, as research participants instead of considering them merely as objects or sources of information for adults (Broström, 2012; Uprichard, 2010). Furthermore, following the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, Unicef, 1989), children's participation and their right to participate in society as citizens has been emphasised worldwide. In research, various methods have been employed to elicit children's perspectives and to enable them to participate in studies, including as co-researchers (Powell & Smith, 2009).

However, supporting the participation of younger children in research is challenging (Murray, 2019). Morrow (2013) argues that while the lack of research on this issue is in part due to the assumption that development, maturity and numerical age are automatically linked to each other, the problem might also be that adults do not properly understand young children's ways of communicating and expressing themselves (Murray, 2019). Thus, more research is needed to understand how young children can be

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heard by applying age and development appropriate methods, rather than methods derived from the adult world. This systematic literature review aims to raise awareness on how young children's participation in research could be applied. The review addresses two questions: first, to ascertain what methods that include young children as participants have been used in early childhood research, and second, to investigate the typical features of these methods. The inclusion criteria were English-language, peer-reviewed empirical articles that reported research on children of early childhood education (ECE) age (from 0 to 8 years). The results of this literature review can be utilised in areas such as everyday ECE, development projects and policymaking where methods of capturing children's perspectives and facilitating young children's participation are required.

### **Taking young children's participation into account in research methodology**

Children's participation has been theoretically explored and framed in various ways. One of the most well-known of these theoretical frameworks is Roger Hart's (1992) *Ladder of Children's Participation*, which helps to identify not only different levels of participation, from consulting to collaboration, but also types of non-participation, including manipulation, decoration and tokenism. The Pathways to Participation model developed by Harry Shier (2001) builds on Hart's work. At the highest rung on Hart's ladder, decisions are child-initiated and shared with adults, whereas at the highest level of participation in Shier's model children share power and responsibility for decision-making with an adult. Other frameworks of children's participation have also been used to examine the problems associated with the definition of the concept (e.g. Lundy, 2007). The concept of participation has also been criticised. Tisdall (2015) proposed replacing participation with the concepts of hearing or inclusion. According to Tisdall, participation is based on legal thinking, which emphasises the autonomy of the individual rather than the viewpoint of the collective. Furthermore, the term hearing the "voice" of children has also been criticised. Lundy (2007) argues that "voice" alone is not enough without "space", "audience", and "influence". Murray (2019), in turn, claims that "voice" should be plural: children's perspectives are not captured by a single voice but by a multiplicity of voices.

The discussion of children's participation in conducting research as not *about* or *on* but *for* and *with* children is not new (Christensen & James, 2008). In a growing corpus of studies, children's participation in research has been either openly stated as an aim or at least been carefully considered (e.g. Lundy et al., 2011; Maconochie & McNeill, 2010). Thus, ontological and epistemological factors, such as what constitutes information, who can be considered to generate relevant information and in what ways, have been critically pondered in relation to child participation (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Uprichard, 2010). When the degree of participation is high, children may contribute to various stages of the design and implementation of the research process. While a variety of methods have been used in attempts to implement children's participation, the present review focused specifically on participatory data collection methods, while acknowledging that children's participation is, at its broadest, linked to many other phases of research.

Few efforts have been made to map methodological solutions related to children’s participation; instead, studies have tended to focus on a few specific methods, such as participatory visual methods (Brown et al., 2020) or on specific areas of research, such as pediatrics (Haijes & van Thiel, 2016) or on specific groups of children, such as children with disabilities (Eisen et al., 2019). Some studies, instead of simply categorizing methods, have focused on how children are positioned and the extent of their participation. For example, in their literature review, Siklander et al. (2020) identified three categories describing how children are studied: children as objects, children as informants, and children as contributors.

Knowledge is lacking, however, on what kinds of methods are appropriate to facilitate young children’s participation and sensitive to their meaning-making processes (see Boileau, 2013; Murray, 2019). Without making claims about what methods best support participation, this review aimed to shed light on what participatory methods have been used with young, ECE-aged children. Hence, we examined the participatory methodological choices of studies researching young children’s everyday lives and views. In this review, we do not contest authors’ assertions that the methods they reported using are “participatory”, even if not all are participatory in the full sense that they follow the ideological principle (e.g. Waller & Bitou, 2011) that children are accorded a certain amount of agency during the research process. Thus, this review also reveals the wide variety of methods and approaches that researchers have considered “participatory”.

## Data and methodology

### Systematic literature search

The data for this review were collected via a systematic literature search for peer-reviewed articles. The process is described in Figure 1. No time frame was used and all articles published before July 2021 were accepted. The search returned a total of 255 articles.

The subsequent screening process yielded a total of 75 peer-reviewed articles. Closer inspection revealed that only 12 of these articles had been published between 2004 and

#### 1. SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE SEARCH

##### SELECTION CRITERIA

peer-reviewed

##### SEARCH TERMS

appearing in the title, abstract or keywords of the article

‘participatory methods’	AND	‘early childhood education’
‘participatory research’		‘ECEC’
OR		‘ECE’
‘research with children’		‘preschool’
		‘pre-primary education’
		‘kindergarten’
		OR
		‘preschool children’

##### DATABASES USED IN SEARCH

ERIC, Education Collection, Education Database, PsycINFO, Social Science Database and Sociology Database

#### 2. SCREENING PROCESS

with the following selection criteria

English-language  
based on the use of empirical data  
participatory methods used  
includes ECE-aged children as  
research participants

255 articles

75 articles

**Figure 1.** The criteria and selected peer-reviewed articles in this study.

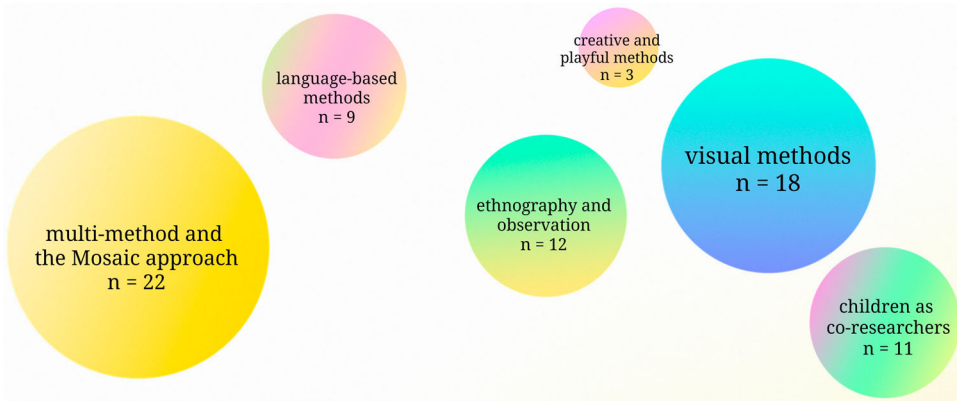
2010 and thus the majority date from 2011 onwards. The 75 articles were then categorized and a written description of the data prepared collaboratively by all the authors.

### ***Analysis and limitations***

First, we examined the methodologies used in the studies and carried out a data-driven categorization. Methods were categorized and named based on shared characteristics and the sensory and communication channels used in the data collection. The categories thus formed were: (1) multi-method and the Mosaic approach, (2) observation and ethnography, (3) language-based methods, (4) visual methods, (5) creative and playful methods, and (6) children as co-researchers.

In some cases, the methods used in individual studies were overlapping, hence the choice of category was not always exclusive. The categorization could have been carried out in either of two ways: by classifying each article based on its primary data collection method or by classifying all the methods used in each article. Since most of the studies used multiple methods, we chose the first option; the second option would have been less informative, more challenging to carry out, and more open to interpretation. For example, the fact that most studies also used language-based methods, categorizing them based on all the methods used would have meant assigning most of them to the same (language-based) category. However, although we adopted the first option, some similarities and overlap remain between the categories. Some method categories, such as ethnography and the Mosaic approach, typically include the use of several different methods rather than constituting a single method. In these cases, we identified the methodological focus in the article. For example, because the methodological discussion in a study applying a multi-method or the Mosaic approach centered on the use of diverse methods of listening to children's perspectives, the article was assigned to that category. A limitation of our categorization thus is that it underrepresents some methods: for example, we categorized many visual, creative and play-based methods within multi-method and the Mosaic approach as these were the primary foci of the methodological discussion in those studies. We made our classification based on the authors' emphasis in justifying their methodology. We sought to increase the reliability of the categorization by having each author review some of the articles independently and collaborating on the assignment of unclear cases.

The search for research articles had also certain limitations that should be noted. It was performed using scientific publications databases that systematically search for all the articles that meet the search criteria. This method is not without its flaws, as the search may have excluded studies in which participatory method(s) were defined and conceptualized differently, using terms such as "child-centered methods" or "children as participants". Moreover, studies solely utilising the concepts "day care", "childcare" or country-specific ECE terms remained outside of the search. It should also be noted that although rather heavily targeted, ECE was not the only search context. The essential inclusion criterion was that the children studied were of ECE age (0–8 years), although, countries differ in the structures of their ECE institutions and in the ages at which children receive ECE. Studies could also include older children, but their methodological reflection had explicitly to concern ECE-aged children. However, limiting the search terms to



**Figure 2.** Variety of participatory methods in the data.

participatory methods and ECE-aged children yielded a processable volume of articles, whereas expanding the search would have yielded more articles than it would have been possible to examine for the purposes of this review.

### Participatory methods in studies concerning young children

Figure 2 below presents the different methodological approaches adopted in the studies included in the review. The multi-method and the Mosaic approach (22 articles) and visual methods (18 articles) were the largest categories. The emphasis in the data was on multi-sensory, experimental and relatively recent methods. The categories and the possibilities and challenges associated with them in promoting children's participation are described below.

#### *Multi-method and the Mosaic approach*

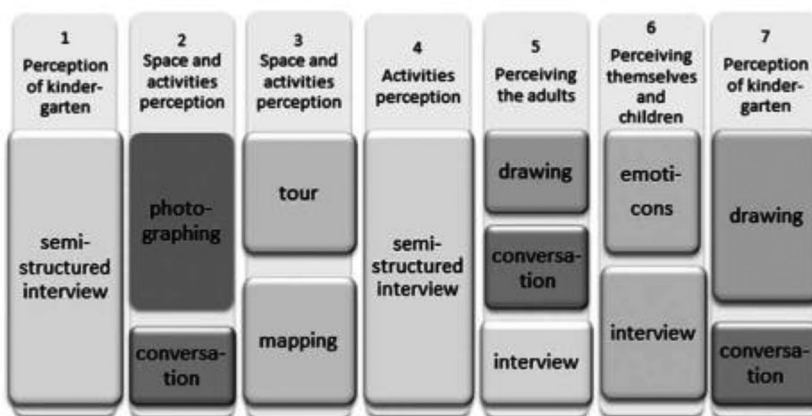
The Mosaic approach or other multi-method approaches were adopted in 22 of the peer-reviewed articles. The children's ages ranged from 18 months to 12 years. Four articles included under-threes and in three articles ECE-aged children were studied together with older children. However, in more than half of the studies the children were aged 3–6 years. The Mosaic approach emphasises children's participation and the use of multiple methods as a way of capturing children's perspectives on the phenomenon of interest (Clark, 2007; Rogers & Boyd, 2020). The idea is that each piece of data collected through different methods forms a single tile that, when grouped together with other similarly formed tiles constitute a whole, or mosaic. The approach is characterised by the use of multiple interaction channels, the concurrent use of visual and linguistic methods, and the many ways and methods of hearing children (e.g. Clark, 2010; Rogers & Boyd, 2020). Multi-method approaches offer a looser research strategy that can be used, for example, to combine qualitative and quantitative methods or several different qualitative methods (e.g. Einarsdóttir, 2007; Murray, 2013). Nevertheless, these studies emphasised that a single method is insufficient to appreciate young children's views;

instead, to capture children's multimodal means of expression, a combination of methods is necessary.

Studies based on multi-methods or the Mosaic approach combined various methods, such as drawing, map drawing, walking tours or interviews, participatory observation, pedagogical documentation, photography, role play, storytelling, and interviews and discussions with children (e.g. Hansen et al., 2016; Kumpulainen et al., 2016; Meehan, 2016; Merewether & Fleet, 2014; Waller & Bitou, 2011). Many studies have combined walking interviews with children's photographs, drawings, and maps. For example, Fler and Li (2016) collected children's drawings of what they liked or did not like about their preschool. The children also took photographs during community walks with the researchers in groups of 5–6, after which the researchers also conducted video interviews with small groups of children. Some studies have embodied several different methods, including Breneselović and Krnjaja's (2016, p. 59) study on gender, which is illustrated in Figure 3.

Some of the reviewed studies focused on the everyday living environments of children, such as the outdoor environments or ECE environment, with the aim of examining them through children's eyes (see Clark, 2007; Fler & Li, 2016; Hansen et al., 2016; Moore et al., 2021; Muela et al., 2019; Waller & Bitou, 2011). Multi-method approaches were also used to elicit children's evaluation of policy programmes, services or development programmes (Carroll & Sixsmith, 2016; Meehan, 2016). Other themes explored in these studies included environmental issues, climate change and the future for children (Boileau, 2013; Mackey, 2012).

One of the core principles of the Mosaic and other multi-method approach, also included in the right of the child to be heard in all matters pertaining to the child as set out in the UNCRC, is the facilitation of children's equal participation and respect for children's agency (e.g. Mackey, 2012; Meehan, 2016). The Mosaic approach is also often seen as grounded in the Reggio Emilia approach, which emphasises the importance of hearing children and attending to their various ways of interacting and expressing themselves (e.g. Merewether & Fleet, 2014; Rogers & Boyd, 2020). Some of the studies



**Figure 3.** Research themes, steps, and techniques in Breneselović and Krnjaja's (2016, p. 59) study using the Mosaic approach.



foregrounded the importance of hearing the voices of groups of children who are often marginalised and vulnerable to being excluded from studies, such as very young children, children with immigrant backgrounds and children with developmental disabilities (e.g. Carroll & Sixsmith, 2016). Other studies addressed issues of diversity, equality and discriminatory practices based for example on gender (Breneselović & Krnjaja, 2016). Stokes (2020; cf. Lundy et al., 2011 in a study in the category “children as co-researchers”) applied to the Children’s Rights Advisory Group (CRAG) in order to ensure children’s participation in the research process.

The Mosaic approach is sometimes characterised by multiple subject perspectives, meaning that the participants can include parents and employees as well as children (e.g. Muela et al., 2019). Some articles discussed the inclusion of adults’ perspectives in their co-construction of knowledge with children in the Mosaic approach (Clark, 2010; Hansen et al., 2016; Murray, 2013; Rogers & Boyd, 2020). According to these studies, the approach facilitates information exchange between adults and children by enabling adults to understand the child’s perspective through multi-sensory information. These studies also argued for using the concepts of “participant-centered”, or “person-oriented” instead of “child-centered” methods, as this might also enhance understanding of children’s perspectives (Rogers & Boyd, 2020). Hansen and colleagues (2016) foreground a situational approach where human (children alongside adults), nonhuman and discursive are co-creators of multiple perspectives.

In sum, the articles emphasised children’s *skills* in expressing themselves, their *right* to express their opinions and be heard, and their *knowledge* of matters that affect their everyday lives (e.g. Carroll & Sixsmith, 2016; Fler & Li, 2016; Rogers & Boyd, 2020). The articles discussed and problematised the idea of giving a voice to and empowering children (Hansen et al., 2016; Rogers & Boyd, 2020) and highlighted challenges and ethical questions associated with hearing children and the approach taken (Einarsdóttir, 2007; Waller & Bitou, 2011; Stokes, 2020). Such ethical questions concerned children’s privacy and confidentiality, the power imbalance between a child and an adult in representing the “voice” of the child, generating data and capturing children’s perspectives (e.g. Einarsdóttir, 2007; Fler & Li, 2016; Lane et al., 2019; Merewether & Fleet, 2014; Rogers & Boyd, 2020), but also unquestioned assumptions regarding the effectiveness or success of children’s participation, and empowerment via a multi-method approach (Lane et al., 2019; Waller & Bitou, 2011).

### **Observation and ethnography**

Altogether, 12 studies used ethnography or observations. Some combined observation and ethnographic approaches with multi-method data or interviews with children. The children ranged in age from 0 to 8 years, with infants and toddlers as participants in about half of the studies. Studies focusing on older children emphasised linguistic data, whereas those focused on younger children and children who could not yet speak were, naturally, primarily based on observations of behavior and non-verbal communication (e.g. Elwick, 2020). Some studies used video recording as an observation tool (e.g. Breathnach et al., 2018; Ólafsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2017; Theobald & Kultti, 2012).

Field work was carried out in ECE settings, for example, in center-based or family day care. An ethnographic approach was used to examine such phenomena as everyday

social relationships and play, or social exclusion and equality between children in ECE (e.g. Konstantoni, 2013; Ólafsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2017). Four studies used observations and these studies aimed at finding methods to facilitate the participation of toddlers in ECE and research (e.g. Elwick, 2020; Salamon, 2017). Recognition that children do not live in a vacuum isolated from other people informed these research processes of observing children in relation to the adults and other people, such as friends and siblings, in their local environments (e.g. Salamon, 2017).

The articles also discussed whether ethnography and observation are suitable methods for enabling children's participation (e.g. Albon & Barley, 2021; Dennis & Huf, 2020). For example, one observation-based article noted the tension between the ideal of children's participation and actual practices, highlighting "blind spots" and the power of adults to define children's participation in research (Theobald & Kultti, 2012). One article criticised the focus on field notes compiled by adults and instead suggested engaging in dialogue on field notes with children as a way of strengthening children's participation in ethnographic research (Albon & Barley, 2021). The power imbalance between adult researcher and child was also examined through the authors' own research processes (e.g. Breathnach et al., 2018; Dennis & Huf, 2020). For example, Dennis and Huf (2020) proposed the adoption of a posthumanist and materialistic approach in ECE research as one solution to the issue of power relationships in ethnographic research that would create a playful and relational relationship between adults, children and the material environment. Some articles also critically examined data production in ethnographic approaches, discussing for example how researchers should take into consideration "overspill" and the multi-layered nature of observations, the significance of the observer's experiences and feelings, and how to leave space for observing the unexpected (Millei & Rautio, 2017).

### ***Language-based methods***

Language-based methods were reported in nine articles. The ages of the children in these studies ranged from 3 to 5 years. While the traditional interview remained a popular method for collecting language-based data, other ways of interviewing, such as interviews utilising play-based, multi-sensory communication methods, were also used (Underwood et al., 2015). Several studies recommended the use of supplementary material, such as drawings, toys, characters, emojis, photographs and visual materials produced by children themselves, alongside linguistic dialogue to enrich the discussion and establish contact with the child (Jug & Vilar, 2015; Pascal & Bertram, 2009; Smith, 2014).

The articles in this category used interviews and spoken data to elicit children's views on various phenomena and issues in the everyday lives of children, such as emotions (Mortari, 2011) and safety (Smith, 2014). Interviews were also used to examine children's social relationships and bullying (Lund et al., 2016) or friendship (Papadopoulou, 2016). One article (Richardson, 2019) focused on the ethical dilemma of non-participating children, who were nevertheless affected by the research process.

On the issue of interviewing children, the articles highlighted the importance of choosing a suitable environment for the interview. The researchers favored spaces familiar to

children, such as ECE centers, as interview sites (Jug & Vilar, 2015; Smith, 2014). The role of the researcher and the different dimensions of the adult–child power relationship were also emphasised by authors pondering how children make sense of the interview situation (Formosinho & Araujo, 2006; Lund et al., 2016; Pascal & Bertram, 2009). In a study of children with disabilities, the interview method was adapted to each child’s individual ways of communicating and special needs, and the analysis included non-verbal reactions as well as linguistic responses (Underwood et al., 2015).

In addition to individual interviews, common methods for hearing children included various types of group interviews or group discussions. The benefits of group interviews included lower levels of participant anxiety and shared recollection and interaction, while the disadvantages centered on group phenomena such as the sidelining of some participants, or challenges related to group dynamics (Jug & Vilar, 2015; Lund et al., 2016). In all the articles included in the review, the language-based methods used aimed at highlighting children’s opinions, views and matters meaningful to them, and above all hearing their voices. The challenge in doing so was identified as adults’ imperfect attunement to listen to and interpret young children’s voices in a non-controlling, accurate and respectful manner (e.g. Pascal & Bertram, 2009).

### **Visual methods**

Data were primarily collected using visual methods in 18 studies. The most common of these methods were videos (e.g. Bird et al., 2014), photographs (e.g. Butschi & Hedderich, 2021; Dockett et al., 2017) and drawings (e.g. Rodríguez-Carrillo et al., 2020). The children were under age 3 in two studies and from 4 to 6 years old in most of the others. Digital technologies such as emojis (Fane et al., 2018) and baby cams attached to infants that recorded their visual and audio environment (Elwick, 2015) were also used. In one study, children aged from 3 to 6 years wore video cameras to obtain footage of what children look at in their environment (Green, 2016).

Visual methods were used to elicit young children’s perspectives not only on everyday life but also on the quality of ECE (e.g. Hilppö et al., 2017; Martin & Buckley, 2020; Rodríguez-Carrillo et al., 2020) and on everyday occurrences in ECE, such as transitions (e.g. Jadue Roa et al., 2018) and the learning environment (e.g. Popa & Stan, 2013). Some articles also discussed the theoretical basis of visual methods or questions associated with a use of a specific visual method, such as the use of cameras. It was pointed out in one article that researchers sometimes forget that play is a typical behaviour of ECE-aged children that also leads them to use cameras in playful ways (Bird et al., 2014).

Visual data collection methods were considered effective in eliciting young children’s perspectives, especially those of children with difficulties in written or verbal communication (e.g. Butschi & Hedderich, 2021; Pyle, 2013). Visual data were also often employed alongside language-based methods, such as interviews and group discussions (e.g. Scrafton & Whittington, 2015). Children’s own output, such as photographs, were argued to help in creating and deepening communication between researcher and child (e.g. Lipponen et al., 2016). A commonly reported method was photo elicitation (e.g. Dockett et al., 2017), which, at its simplest, means incorporating an image or images into interviews. The method is thought to help capture different kinds of information, including memories and narratives, compared to exclusively using spoken language in an interview. Visual

methods were also advocated on the grounds that they give children “more power” to decide what they want the study to include. For example, when making their own videos children can choose what and what not to record (Green, 2016). It was also stated that visual methods can help elicit children’s thoughts and perspectives on (complex) emotions and issues (e.g. Dockett et al., 2017; Pyle, 2013). However, as Meehan (2016) reminds us, visual images are not neutral or objective but also interpreted and in need of interpretation.

### ***Creative and playful methods***

Creative and playful methods, reported in only three studies, in which the participating children were from 3 to 6 years old, were the least used primary data collection methods in our data. Creative and playful methods emphasise artistic expression and creative, playful activity in one way or another. Examples included asking participants to compose, draw, act, photograph, tell a story, plan or create something new (Eckhoff, 2015; Green, 2017; Linklater, 2006). Some creative and playful methods used digital technologies. For example, children were asked to produce and create digital imagery using various means (Eckhoff, 2015). Creative and playful activities were supplemented by interviewing children either during or after their creative efforts (Green, 2017; Linklater, 2006) or observing them during the data-eliciting process (Eckhoff, 2015). Thus, creative and playful methods often overlapped with visual and language-based methods.

In one article, children were motivated to engage in artistic expression by being asked to play with a miniature model of their ECE environment (Linklater, 2006). In another study, a group of children not only participated in the topic selection and analysis, but also chose their preferred data collection methods from among eight different options offered by the researcher. They ultimately opted for art creation, role play, building models and sensory GoPro tours in a forest (Green, 2017).

Children were found to take more interest in the art production process and related meaning-making than in the artistic outcome (Linklater, 2006). When they were allowed to choose what to produce, they also exercised strong agency and control over the process (Green, 2017). However, even creative and playful methods are not free from ethical problems. Generating data through photography or video recording often compromises anonymity. Eckhoff (2015) notes that, depending on the creative and playful data collection tools and data generation methods to be used, a multitude of issues may need to be agreed upon or negotiated. Such negotiations place researchers and teachers in a complex position: for example, using cameras requires constant negotiation with children about so-called camera etiquette, i.e. turn-taking when several children want to photograph the same subject; how to ask for permission to photograph someone and how to use a camera responsibly (Eckhoff, 2015).

Although the data generated using creative and playful methods were considered rich and diverse, their analysis can be challenging, as artistic output is by its very nature context-dependent, based on individual expression and often poorly suited to precise and systematic analysis (Eckhoff, 2015). As a result, artistic data are often analyzed together with supplementary data, such as linguistic data collected through interviews or discussions, as analysing such data is more straightforward (Green, 2017; Linklater, 2006). Nevertheless, artistic expression, as an integral part of the multi-sensory dialogue

carried out by researchers with participants, can help enrich examination of the phenomenon of interest.

### ***Children as co-researchers***

In total, 11 studies were placed in the “children as co-researchers” category. The participating children were under 1 year old in two studies and from 2 to 6 years old in the others. Besides, in one study ECE-aged children were studied together with older children (Murray, 2017). This category differs from the other categories in that its primary focus is on the position assigned to children in the research process and study design. Thus, these studies defended the right of young children of ECE age to participate in research as active agents and researchers (Harcourt, 2011; Lundy et al., 2011; Murray, 2017).

Two main approaches were identified in this category, namely a research with children approach, referring to studies in which children are co-researchers, and a participatory action research (PAR) approach. Both approaches were characterised by a mingling of the roles of researcher and research participant and by active collaboration, i.e. sharing and learning together (e.g. Maconochie & McNeill, 2010). The methods used in the studies in this category were diverse, although most followed the Mosaic or multi-method approaches (e.g. Gray & Winter, 2011) in order to respect children’s multiple ways of expressing themselves.

The studies based on the research with children approach focused on the rights of young children in the data generation process. In some studies, such as that by Gray and Winter (2011) or Harcourt (2011), the aim was to listen to children’s views on ECE services and practices. One of the key aspects of this approach was a commitment to having children participate in carrying out the research together with the researcher(s): children could participate in the research by helping define the theme, research questions and methods to be used in the study, collecting data independently or together with researchers, and providing perspectives for and participating in the data analysis (e.g. Gray & Winter, 2011; Harcourt, 2011; Lundy et al., 2011). In relation to this, Murray (2017) studied what kinds of epistemological factors structure and promote research with ECE-aged children. The approach also emphasised the reporting results in a manner that takes children’s standpoints into account or together with children (Harcourt, 2011). Disseminating and communicating the results and improving, for example, everyday practices in ECE based on children’s views were named as important steps in giving children a sense of ownership of the process (Gray & Winter, 2011; Harcourt, 2011).

In the PAR studies, the aim was to ensure that children were heard in addition to or instead of adults and that their perspectives were considered in actions to change or develop certain practices (e.g. Maconochie & McNeill, 2010). The themes of these studies included the development of health services with the participation of infants (Maconochie & McNeill, 2010), the ECE curriculum (Miller Marsh & Zhulamanova, 2017) and education for sustainability (Hirst, 2019). Some studies focused on the redesign and development together with children of daily ECE environments and functions that would better facilitate children’s inclusion and belonging (Nutbrown & Clough, 2009) or meet the needs of sustainable education (Nordén & Avery, 2020). The PAR studies emphasised the importance of taking children’s views seriously and of collaboration between diverse participant groups, i.e. between children, their families, students,

practitioners, and researchers to promote learning together or create new inclusive pedagogies and policies (e.g. Chappell et al., 2016; Hirst, 2019; Nordén & Avery, 2020; Nutbrown & Clough, 2009).

The researchers argued that this type of research demands commitment to valuing children's knowledge and perspectives, time, ethical and communication skills, and flexibility from researchers (Harcourt, 2011; Murray, 2017; Nordén & Avery, 2020). These studies also acknowledged the tensions between children's participation and the normative (adult) agenda of developing, teaching or researching (e.g. Nordén & Avery, 2020). One of the challenges in research and development with children concerns children's equal participation, i.e. how to incorporate the views of children with disabilities (Gray & Winter, 2011), from diverse backgrounds (Miller Marsh & Zhulamanova, 2017; Nutbrown & Clough, 2009), or in a weaker position (Harcourt, 2011; Lundy et al., 2011) in research. Leaning strongly on the UNCRC, the articles in this category generally defended and justified the right of ECE-aged children to be heard and influence matters relevant to them by being active agents in research (Harcourt, 2011; Lundy et al., 2011; Maconochie & McNeill, 2010). This was also argued in relation to the questions of young children's citizenship and democracy (Broström, 2012; Maconochie & McNeill, 2010; Nutbrown & Clough, 2009).

## Discussion

The aim of this systematic literature review was to ascertain what kinds of participatory research methods for young children have been used in peer-reviewed empirical studies. Based on their methodology, the 75 eligible studies were divided into six categories: multi-method and the Mosaic approach, observation and ethnography, language-based methods, visual methods, creative and playful methods and children as co-researchers. Categorizing articles based on their methodological commitment was not always an easy task. Some articles, such as Clark's two papers (2007, 2010) discussed two or more methodological perspectives at the same time. These cases were categorized according to the methodological foci of the study.

The reviewed studies raised many important questions about children's participation rights in research. One is related to age. The ages of children in the reviewed articles were diverse. Infants and toddlers were mostly studied through observation and ethnographic means. Those studies, which did not include under-threes, reported on language-based as well as creative and play-based methods. Language-based methods are reasonable as they rely heavily on speech. Only a few studies reported the use of creative and play-based methods, which may partly explain the absence of very young children in this category.

Nevertheless, like most interactions between people, research is by nature strongly language-based. The data analyses and reporting in the reviewed studies were no exception. The emphasis on linguistic material was also highlighted by the fact that despite collecting data using a multi-method approach, some of these studies reported findings based exclusively on discussions and interviews with children. This ignores the rationale for the multi-method and the Mosaic approach, i.e. that children have many ways of expressing themselves and that the use of multiple methods provides a richer picture, opens new perspectives on the phenomenon being studied and facilitates

acknowledgement of the diversity in the ways various aged children perceive the world (see Clark, 2007; Merewether & Fleet, 2014; Rogers & Boyd, 2020). That said, some of the reviewed studies highlighted the recognition of children's perspectives as a more crucial aim for children's participation in research than age and maturity as criteria for their participation in research (Boileau, 2013; see also Morrow, 2013). In a similar vein, several studies examined the possibilities for hearing very young children, toddlers or infants (e.g. Elwick, 2020; Maconochie & McNeill, 2010; Salamon, 2017). The central message was that children's equal participation is possible and that it falls to researchers to find the methods and channels for hearing diverse children or children of widely different ages on phenomena important to them in their everyday lives. Age is, however, a perspective that merits more investigation: it would be interesting to review which methodological choices are emphasised with different age groups and how age is taken into account in research settings.

The second issue to consider are the phenomena and topics of interest in the studies that explicitly aimed at listening to children's views. Many of the reviewed studies sought young children's views about their everyday practices, environments and issues. Uprichard (2010) criticized the fact that research with children typically focuses solely on their everyday practices and environments. In her opinion, the notion of children as active agents and capable information producers also calls for children to be heard on more challenging topics. It is noteworthy that some of the recent studies included in the review explored themes of climate change, sustainable development and sustainability education, in all of which hearing children was deemed important (Mackey, 2012; Nordén & Avery, 2020). In some cases, children's participation was visible not only in the methodological choices made, but also in the research topic itself, such as equality among children or inclusivity in children's participation (Gray & Winter, 2011; Lundy et al., 2011).

The third contribution is associated with the question of what the use of participatory methods with young children means. The analysis found that children's involvement was most often implemented in data collection procedures. However, while children participated in the data collection processes, they were presented with the analysis or results in only a few studies. It is also noteworthy that quantitative studies were lacking in this review, as if participatory methods were incompatible with them. Some of the reviewed articles asked whether it is enough merely to collect data with methods that respect young children's ways of communicating or whether the "real" participation of children would demand more from the study design (e.g. Gray & Winter, 2011). The reviewed articles considered children's participation in research from multiple perspectives to ensure that it does not remain an empty promise and that children do not become mere informants or "decorations" who are only seemingly considered and involved in the research process (e.g. Gray & Winter, 2011; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017).

The methodologies in the studies were strongly rooted in the conception of children as capable of describing and evaluating their own lives in childhood studies. Strong commitment to the UNCRC and children's right to express their views and be heard in all matters affecting them was emphasised (see Lundy et al., 2011). In addition, a commitment to children's rights was visible in many of the reviewed studies in the thoroughness of their authors' discussion of ethical issues, such as the role of the adults involved in the study



and their gatekeeping behavior, and the different kinds of research permissions and consents required, including the obtaining of informed consents from children (e.g. Pascal & Bertram, 2009; Stokes, 2020). The core ethical dilemma discussed centered on the power hierarchy between adults and children (e.g. Meehan, 2016). As Maconochie and McNeill (2010) argue, children's perspectives are quite often adult-filtered, and thus children's participation is partial and incomplete. Although participatory methods are considered as "empowering" children, they may nevertheless contain the idea that without adult-designed methods, children cannot thoroughly exercise "agency" (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008). On the other hand, Rogers and Boyd (2020) argued that adult power should not always be seen as negative and adult perspectives as opposed to or undermining those of children.

## Conclusion

Our review indicates that various methods were used in order to guarantee children's participation in research processes. It also reveals that many methods can be seen as "participatory", although the research does not necessarily ideologically commit to address children's participation in the research process. Children's participation in research remains a larger question than finding suitable, innovative, and fascinating methods (Broström, 2012; Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008). The reviewed studies emphasised, in line with Article 12 in the UNCRC, that from very early on children need to know that their voices, participation and perspectives are sought and needed. Thus, the ethical imperative for researchers is to take children's perspectives into account and promote their fuller participation both to fulfil the demands of democracy and to respect the voices of children as members of society (Broström, 2012; Thomas, 2019). In the future, it would be beneficial to examine how different methods enable children to take part and what kinds of participation the use of these methods produces. This would shed more light on the complex relation between "method" and "children's participation rights in research".

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