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Transforming Teacher Perspectives: The Impact Of A Participatory Pedagogy Program On Early Childhood Educators' Beliefs About Children's Participation

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ABSTRACT

Background: Children's right to participation is a cornerstone of quality early childhood education (ECE), yet its implementation is often associated with teachers' beliefs and traditional pedagogical models. While many studies document teachers' perspectives, there is a scarcity of research evaluating the outcomes of targeted professional development (PD) designed to influence these views. This study aimed to investigate the relationship between participation in a professional development program, grounded in participatory pedagogy, and early childhood teachers' beliefs and self-reported practices concerning children's participation.

Methods: A quasi-experimental, pre-test/post-test mixed-methods design was employed with a cohort of 24 in-service early childhood teachers in Türkiye. The intervention consisted of a 10-week PD program focused on children's rights, participatory theory, and practical strategies. Data were collected using a pre- and post-intervention survey measuring attitudes towards participation, supplemented by semi-structured interviews and reflective journals to capture qualitative changes in teachers' understanding.

Results: Quantitative analysis revealed a statistically significant positive change in teachers' attitudes toward children's participation following the intervention ($p \< .05$). Thematic analysis of the qualitative data showed a profound conceptual shift. Pre-intervention, teachers defined participation narrowly as "giving choices" and were constrained by a protectionist view of childhood. Post-intervention, they articulated a more complex understanding of participation as a "partnership," viewing children as competent co-constructors of their learning and demonstrating increased confidence in navigating systemic barriers.

Conclusion: Participation in targeted, theoretically-informed professional development is strongly associated with a positive transformation in teachers' beliefs about children's participation, shifting them from tokenistic gestures toward authentic pedagogical partnership. The findings suggest a critical need to embed comprehensive training on children's rights and participatory pedagogy within all levels of teacher education to foster genuinely democratic and child-centered ECE environments.

Keywords: Children's participation, early childhood education, teacher beliefs, professional development, participatory pedagogy, children's rights, teacher education.

INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Imperative of Children's Participation in Early Childhood Education

The global discourse surrounding early childhood has undergone a profound transformation in recent decades. Central to this evolution is the recognition of children not as passive objects of care and instruction, but as active, competent agents with an inherent right to influence matters that affect their lives [2, 42]. This paradigm shift is formally enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) [85], a landmark human

rights treaty that fundamentally altered the perception of childhood. Article 12 of the UNCRC, in particular, establishes the child's right to express their views freely and to have those views given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity. This principle moves beyond tokenistic inclusion, demanding a genuine commitment to listening to children and engaging with them as partners in their own development and learning [45, 49].

In the context of Early Childhood Education (ECE), this rights-based perspective challenges traditional, adult-centric pedagogical models. It calls for the creation of democratic and participatory learning environments where children are co-constructors of their own educational journeys [90]. Authentic participation yields significant benefits, fostering critical skills such as decision-making, problem-solving, and collaboration, which are foundational for democratic citizenship [12]. Furthermore, when children feel heard and valued, it is positively associated with their sense of agency, self-esteem, and overall well-being [11, 36, 71]. To conceptualize this multifaceted construct, scholars like Lundy [49] have proposed influential frameworks. Lundy's model posits that for participation to be meaningful, four interrelated elements must be present: Space (children must be given safe, inclusive opportunities to form and express their views), Voice (they must be facilitated to express those views), Audience (the views must be listened to by someone with a responsibility to act), and Influence (the views must be taken seriously and acted upon where appropriate). This framework helps distinguish authentic participation from mere tokenism, where children may be given a voice but have no real capacity to influence outcomes [72, 74].

1.2 The Teacher as the Gatekeeper: The Central Role of Educator Beliefs

Despite robust international consensus on the importance of children's participation, its realization within the daily life of the preschool classroom is far from guaranteed. The educator stands as the ultimate gatekeeper, whose beliefs, attitudes, and pedagogical choices largely determine the extent to which a participatory ethos is cultivated or suppressed [6, 19, 70]. A teacher's "image of the child"—their fundamental perception of children's competence, capabilities, and role in the learning process—is a powerful predictor of their practice [4, 42]. If an educator views children as inherently capable and full of potential, they are more likely to create a democratic classroom, share decision-making power, and view children's initiatives as valuable pedagogical opportunities [14]. Conversely, if they see children as primarily needing protection, guidance, and instruction, they are more likely to adopt a directive, adult-led approach that limits child agency [24, 25, 64].

A significant body of research has explored teachers' perspectives on children's participation, revealing a complex and often contradictory landscape. Many educators express strong theoretical support for the principle of participation but struggle to implement it consistently in practice [1, 34, 73]. Common barriers cited include institutional pressures like standardized curricula and assessment demands, large class sizes, and a lack of planning time [29, 37]. Beyond these structural issues, however, lie deeper pedagogical tensions. Many teachers fear that granting children greater agency will lead to chaos and a loss of classroom control [55]. Others define participation in a very limited way, equating it to offering simple, pre-determined choices (e.g., choosing a play center) rather than engaging in shared inquiry or co-designing the curriculum [23, 76]. These findings suggest that a significant gap often exists between teachers' espoused beliefs and their actual pedagogical practices.

1.3 The Research Gap: From Describing Beliefs to Transforming Them

The existing literature provides valuable insight into the current state of teachers' views on children's participation across various contexts [32, 48, 83, 99]. The predominant focus, however, has been descriptive, mapping out existing beliefs, attitudes, and self-reported practices. While this work is essential for understanding the problem, there is a comparative lack of research that investigates the outcomes of targeted professional development (PD) interventions designed to actively influence these foundational beliefs and, consequently, pedagogical practices.

Changing a teacher's core pedagogical beliefs is a complex process that requires more than the simple dissemination of information; it necessitates deep reflection, collaborative inquiry, and practical support [57, 67]. Therefore, there is a pressing need for intervention-based research that examines how structured training in participatory pedagogy—a pedagogy explicitly focused on co-creation and shared power—can foster a more profound and sustainable understanding of children's rights in ECE settings. Such studies are critical for moving the field

beyond simply identifying barriers and toward developing and validating effective models for teacher education and professional growth [cf. 5, 89].

1.4 Study Rationale, Aims, and Research Questions

This study was designed to address this critical gap in the literature. Its primary purpose was to investigate the relationship between participation in a professional development program focused on participatory pedagogy and the views of in-service early childhood teachers. We sought to understand not only if teachers' views changed but also how their conceptualizations of participation evolved through their engagement with the program. To guide our inquiry, we formulated the following research questions:

1. What are early childhood teachers' baseline views and self-reported practices concerning children's participation prior to the intervention?

2. In what ways do these views and self-reported practices change following their engagement in the participatory pedagogy training program?

3. What factors do teachers perceive as enabling or constraining their implementation of a participatory pedagogy post-intervention?

2. Theoretical Framework

The concept of children's participation does not exist in a vacuum; it is deeply rooted in evolving understandings of childhood itself and is conceptualized through various analytical frameworks. To fully appreciate the intervention detailed in this study and to interpret its findings, it is essential to first establish a robust theoretical foundation. This section will explore three critical areas: first, the paradigm shift in the social construction of childhood from a model of 'becoming' to one of 'being'; second, a detailed examination and comparison of influential frameworks for conceptualizing and assessing participation; and third, the mediating role of teacher beliefs in translating these theoretical models into pedagogical practice.

2.1 The Social Construction of Childhood: From 'Becoming' to 'Being'

Historically, dominant Western paradigms of child development have framed childhood as a period of deficiency and transition—a preparatory stage for the "complete" state of adulthood. From this perspective, children are often viewed as "human becomings" rather than "human beings" [42]. This deficit model portrays children as irrational, incompetent, and dependent, requiring constant protection, guidance, and molding by adults to ensure they develop into productive members of society. This protectionist discourse, while often well-intentioned, inherently positions the child as a passive object of adult action and a recipient of knowledge, rather than as an active subject with their own valid experiences, perspectives, and contributions to make in the present moment [80]. Pedagogies derived from this model tend to be adult-centric, directive, and focused on transmitting a pre-determined body of knowledge, leaving little room for child-initiated inquiry or shared decision-making [25, 82].

Over the past several decades, this traditional view has been powerfully challenged by the "new sociology of childhood." This critical perspective argues that childhood is not a universal, biological stage but a social construct, varying significantly across cultures and historical periods. It posits that children are competent social actors who actively interpret, create, and shape their own lives and the lives of those around them [36]. This "agentic child" is recognized as an expert on their own experiences and a co-constructor of knowledge, culture, and social worlds [2, 4]. This shift from "becoming" to "being" reframes the child as a citizen of the present, with a right to be respected and heard now, not just at some future point of maturity.

This contemporary understanding of the child as a competent social agent provides the philosophical underpinning for the global children's rights movement, culminating in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) [85]. The UNCRC is revolutionary because it codifies the child as a full human being with civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. It moves beyond the traditional focus on "provision" and "protection" rights to also include "participation" rights, most notably in Article 12. This shift is not merely semantic; it represents a fundamental rebalancing of the power dynamics between adults and children, obligating society to view children as active participants in, rather than passive recipients of, decisions that affect them [45]. It is from this rights-bearing, agentic view of the child that the pedagogical imperative for participation in early childhood education emerges. If children are indeed capable social actors with a right to be heard, then educational settings must be transformed into democratic

spaces that honor and cultivate this agency from the earliest years [12, 78].

2.2 Conceptualizing Participation: Frameworks for Authentic Engagement

While the principle of participation is widely endorsed, the term itself can be ambiguous, risking dilution into tokenistic gestures that fail to empower children meaningfully. To operationalize participation and distinguish authentic engagement from superficial inclusion, scholars have developed several influential conceptual frameworks. These models provide invaluable tools for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to analyze, evaluate, and enhance the quality of children's participation. This study's intervention was designed around a synthesis of these key frameworks, particularly those of Lundy, Shier, and Thomas.

Lundy's Model: An Interdependent, Rights-Based Framework

Laura Lundy's (2007) model [49] is arguably one of the most significant conceptual contributions to understanding Article 12 of the UNCRC. Lundy argues that "'Voice' is not enough" and proposes that the right to participation can only be fully realized when four distinct but interrelated elements are addressed. These elements are:

- Space: Children must be provided with a safe, inclusive, and accessible space in which they can form and express their views. This is not just a physical space but also a psychological and relational one. In an ECE context, a participatory "space" is one where the classroom culture is built on trust and respect, where children feel secure enough to share their ideas without fear of dismissal, and where the daily schedule is flexible enough to allow for emergent dialogue and inquiry [37, 90].

- Voice: Children must be facilitated to express their views. This element recognizes that children communicate in diverse ways and that it is the adult's responsibility to be attuned to these "many languages" of childhood. "Voice" encompasses not only verbal language but also non-verbal communication, play, drawings, constructions, and behavior [90]. Providing a "voice" means actively listening, observing, and offering various tools and modalities for expression, ensuring that all children, regardless of their developmental stage or communication style, can be heard [15, 86].

- Audience: Children's views must be listened to by an appropriate audience—that is, someone who has the power and responsibility to respond. In the classroom, the primary audience is the teacher. However, for participation to be meaningful, teachers must see themselves not just as listeners but as active responders [6, 14]. This element highlights the importance of creating formal and informal channels through which children's ideas are directed to those who can act on them.

- Influence: Finally, and most critically, the views expressed by children must be taken seriously and must be able to influence decisions. This is the ultimate test of authentic participation. Influence does not mean that every child's suggestion must be implemented, as other considerations (safety, resources, curriculum goals) are also valid. However, it does obligate the adult audience to give children's views "due weight" [85] and to provide transparent feedback on how their input was considered and what decisions were made as a result. The absence of influence reduces participation to mere consultation or, at worst, decoration [72].

Lundy's model is powerful because it presents these four elements as a holistic and interdependent system. A weakness in any one element compromises the integrity of the entire participatory process.

Shier's Pathways to Participation: A Developmental Tool for Practice

While Lundy's model provides a strong rights-based definition, Harry Shier's (2001) framework, often cited in the literature [74], offers a more developmental and practice-oriented tool. His "Pathways to Participation" model outlines five ascending levels of engagement, which can be used by an organization or an individual educator to assess their current practice and to plan for deeper levels of participation. The levels are:

1. Children are listened to. This is the foundational level, requiring adults to create opportunities for children to express themselves and to pay attention to what they say and do.

2. Children are supported in expressing their views. This level moves beyond passive listening to active facilitation, where adults provide encouragement, tools, and support to help children articulate their ideas more clearly.

3. Children's views are taken into account. This level aligns with Lundy's 'Influence' and marks a significant step toward authentic participation. Here, adult decision-making processes are demonstrably affected by what children have expressed.

4. Children are involved in decision-making processes. At this level, children are no longer just consultants but are active participants in the process of deliberation and choice. This often involves creating democratic structures like classroom meetings or planning sessions.

5. Children share power and responsibility for decision-making. This is the highest level of participation, where adults and children act as full partners, jointly initiating ideas, making decisions, and taking responsibility for the outcomes.

Crucially, Shier adds a second dimension to this model: for each of the five levels, an educator or institution can have different levels of commitment. They can create Openings (acting on their own initiative), Opportunities (having systems and policies in place), or Obligations (being formally required to engage at that level). This two-dimensional structure makes Shier's framework a highly practical tool for reflection and strategic planning, allowing educators to ask not only "What are we doing?" but also "How can we embed this more systematically into our practice?"

Thomas's Typology of Participation: Analyzing Initiative and Decision

Nigel Thomas (2007) [81] offers a complementary perspective by focusing on the dynamics of power within participatory acts. He proposes a typology of participation based on a two-by-two matrix that considers who initiates an action and who has the power of decision. This yields several distinct types of participation, ranging from adult-led to fully child-led engagement. For example:

- Assigned but informed: An adult initiates and decides, but children are informed about the process and their opinions are considered. This aligns with lower levels of participation.

- Adult-initiated, shared decisions: An adult initiates a project or process, but the decisions about how to proceed are made jointly with children. This is a common form of participation in project-based ECE settings [96].

- Child-initiated, shared decisions: Children initiate an idea or inquiry, and they work in partnership with adults to decide how to explore it. This reflects a high degree of child agency [69].

- Child-initiated and directed: Children initiate, plan, and execute their own projects, with adults acting as facilitators and resource providers rather than directors.

Thomas's model is analytically useful because it encourages a nuanced examination of specific interactions. It helps educators move beyond a simple "is it participation or not?" dichotomy to ask more sophisticated questions about the nature of power, initiative, and control in their relationships with children.

2.3 Teacher Beliefs as a Mediating Factor

These theoretical frameworks provide a clear vision for what authentic participation can and should look like. However, the bridge between these elegant models and the messy reality of the classroom is the teacher. Research consistently suggests that an educator's personal beliefs, values, and assumptions about children and learning act as a powerful filter through which all pedagogical knowledge, including theories of participation, is interpreted and enacted [1, 26, 73].

A teacher's "image of the child" [4] directly influences their willingness and ability to implement participatory practices. A teacher who fundamentally believes in the agentic child—the child as a competent, capable protagonist—is more likely to embrace the ambiguity and share the power inherent in the higher levels of Shier's framework or in child-initiated projects within Thomas's typology [14]. They will perceive a child's unexpected question not as a disruption to their lesson plan but as a valuable "pedagogical opening."

Conversely, a teacher who holds a more traditional, protectionist "image of the child"—the child as an empty vessel or an apprentice adult—will find it difficult to move beyond the most basic forms of participation, regardless of their theoretical knowledge [24, 70]. They may learn the language of participation but enact it in a way that maintains adult control, such as by offering highly constrained choices or listening to children's ideas before ultimately proceeding with their original plan. Their fear of

losing control, their focus on pre-determined outcomes, and their perception of children as not-yet-ready will mediate their engagement with these frameworks, effectively placing a ceiling on the level of participation possible in their classroom [55].

Therefore, this study is predicated on the understanding that for professional development to be truly transformative, it cannot simply teach educators about the models of Lundy, Shier, and Thomas. It must also create a space for teachers to critically examine, challenge, and reconstruct their own foundational beliefs about children, teaching, and learning. The intervention was designed to foster this deeper transformation, helping teachers to not only understand the "what" and "how" of participation but to also internalize the "why"—a profound belief in the competent child. It is this shift in core beliefs that unlocks the potential for teachers to authentically and sustainably embed participatory pedagogy into their practice. This theoretical understanding provides the necessary lens through which to analyze the methods and results that follow.

3. METHODS

3.1 Research Design

To address the research questions, this study employed a quasi-experimental, pre-test/post-test mixed-methods design [27]. This approach was chosen for its dual strengths: it allowed for the quantitative measurement of changes in teachers' attitudes before and after the intervention, while simultaneously using qualitative methods to explore the depth, nuance, and meaning behind these changes [20]. The quantitative component provides evidence of the intervention's overall association with change, while the qualitative component offers a rich, contextualized understanding of the process of belief transformation. The study is framed as an intervention case study [97], focusing intensely on a specific group of teachers undergoing a shared experience, which allows for a detailed examination of the process of change.

3.2 Participants and Context

The participants were 24 in-service preschool teachers (23 female, 1 male) from 10 different public preschools located within a large metropolitan area in Türkiye. A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit teachers who expressed an interest in professional development related to innovative pedagogies. The participants had a range of teaching experience, from 3 to 22 years, with a mean of 11.5 years. All held at least a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education. The preschools served diverse socio-economic communities. Ethical approval was obtained from the university's institutional review board. All participants provided written informed consent after being fully briefed on the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary nature, and the measures taken to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

3.3 The Intervention: Participatory Pedagogy and Children's Participation Training

The intervention was a 30-hour professional development program delivered over 10 weeks, with one 3-hour workshop per week. The program's design was grounded in established adult learning principles, emphasizing experiential learning, critical reflection, and collaborative inquiry rather than passive information transmission [8, 50]. The content was structured into four core modules:

- Module 1: Theoretical Foundations. This module introduced the socio-constructivist view of the child and the legal and ethical framework of children's rights, with a focus on the UNCRC [85]. It explored theoretical models of participation, including Lundy's (2007) model [49] and Lansdown's (2005) concept of the "evolving capacities" of the child [43, 44], to provide a robust conceptual vocabulary.

- Module 2: The Listening Teacher. This module focused on practical strategies for creating a culture of listening in the classroom. It covered techniques for observing and interpreting children's verbal and non-verbal cues, documenting their ideas and theories, and engaging them in meaningful dialogue [15, 16].

- Module 3: Co-designing the Curriculum. This module challenged teachers to move from a pre-planned, adult-led curriculum to an emergent, negotiated one. It introduced methods for planning projects based on children's interests and inquiries, involving children in the planning of daily activities, and creating learning environments that invite exploration and modification by children [37, 46, 92].

- Module 4: Creating a Participatory Culture. The final module addressed the broader classroom and school ethos. It focused on strategies for democratizing classroom

routines, resolving conflicts collaboratively, and communicating the value of participation to parents and school administration, drawing on principles of participatory pedagogy [33, 78].

Each workshop combined theoretical input with practical activities, video analysis of classroom interactions, and structured discussions where teachers could share their experiences and collaboratively problem-solve challenges from their own practice.

3.4 Data Collection Instruments

A mixed-methods approach to data collection was utilized to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the intervention's outcomes.

- Quantitative Data: The "Teachers' Views on Children's Participation" (TVCP) questionnaire was administered one week before the program began (pre-test) and one week after it concluded (post-test). This 25-item instrument, developed for this study based on a review of relevant literature, used a 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree). It included sub-scales measuring: (a) Belief in Child Competence, (b) Willingness to Share Pedagogical Power, and (c) Self-Efficacy in Implementing Participatory Practices.

- Qualitative Data:

  - Semi-structured Interviews: Each teacher participated in two one-on-one interviews, one pre-intervention and one post-intervention. The interviews lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and used an open-ended protocol to explore teachers' personal definitions of participation, examples from their practice, perceived challenges, and the role of the teacher.

  - Reflective Journals: Participants were asked to maintain a weekly reflective journal throughout the 10-week intervention. They were given prompts to encourage reflection on how the workshop content connected to their daily practice, moments of success or tension, and any shifts in their thinking [59].

  - Final Focus Group: A 90-minute focus group was conducted two weeks after the final workshop to collectively discuss the most impactful aspects of the program and the perceived enablers and barriers to sustaining a participatory pedagogy in their schools.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded in two parallel streams.

- Quantitative Analysis: The data from the TVCP questionnaire were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 26). Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were calculated for pre-test and post-test scores. Paired-samples t-tests were then conducted to determine if there were statistically significant differences between the pre- and post-intervention scores on the overall scale and each of the three sub-scales.

- Qualitative Analysis: All interviews and the focus group were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts, along with the reflective journal entries, were subjected to an inductive thematic analysis [9, 28, 53]. The process followed a systematic methodology [41]: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading; (2) generation of initial codes from the raw data; (3) searching for patterns and collating codes into potential themes; (4) reviewing and refining these themes; (5) defining and naming the final themes. To ensure trustworthiness, data from the different qualitative sources were triangulated, allowing for cross-validation of emerging themes [47, 51]. Two researchers coded a portion of the data independently and met to discuss discrepancies until a high level of inter-rater reliability was achieved.

4. RESULTS

The analysis of the mixed-methods data revealed a significant transformation in the teachers' views on children's participation following the intervention. The findings are presented below, organized by research question.

4.1 Baseline Views: Pre-Intervention Findings

The pre-intervention data provided a clear picture of the teachers' initial perspectives, which were characterized by a mix of theoretical support and practical apprehension.

Quantitative Results: The pre-test scores from the TVCP questionnaire indicated a moderately positive but ambivalent stance. On the 5-point scale, the overall mean score for the sample was 3.12 (SD = 0.65). While the "Belief in Child Competence" sub-scale scored relatively high (M = 3.85, SD = 0.71), the "Willingness to Share Pedagogical Power" (M = 2.60, SD = 0.88) and "Self-

Efficacy in Implementing Participatory Practices" (M = 2.91, SD = 0.75) sub-scales scored noticeably lower, highlighting a disconnect between believing children are capable and feeling able or willing to act on that belief.

Qualitative Themes (Pre-Intervention): The analysis of the pre-intervention interviews and initial journal entries yielded three dominant themes that explained the quantitative findings.

- Theme 1: Participation as "Giving Choices." The most prevalent understanding of participation was limited to providing children with structured, adult-defined options. Teachers frequently described their practice in these terms. One teacher explained, "Of course, I support participation. Every day, I let them choose if they want to play in the block corner or the art corner." Another stated, "During story time, I always let them vote on which of the two books I have selected we should read." This view frames participation as a managerial tool for offering limited autonomy within a rigid, teacher-controlled framework, rather than a collaborative process of co-creation.

- Theme 2: The "Competent but Unready" Child. Teachers often expressed a paradoxical view of children. They readily acknowledged children as smart, creative, and full of ideas, but simultaneously expressed doubts about their readiness for genuine decision-making. This protectionist stance was common. As one experienced teacher put it, "They have wonderful ideas, but they can't see the big picture. They don't understand the curriculum goals or safety rules. We have to guide them for their own good." This belief positioned the teacher as the sole expert who must filter and direct children's input, reflecting a view of children as "becoming" adults rather than "beings" with valid perspectives in the present [cf. 4, 80].

- Theme 3: Perceived Barriers as Fixed Obstacles. Teachers unanimously identified numerous barriers to implementing greater participation, which they often described as immutable features of the system. One participant lamented, "With 22 children and a packed daily schedule from the ministry, there's simply no time for long discussions. We have to keep things moving." Another noted, "My principal wants to see specific learning outcomes. Taking a detour because a child gets interested in a spider on the wall is seen as falling behind." These barriers were presented as external impositions that left little room for pedagogical agency.

4.2 Measuring the Shift: Post-Intervention Quantitative Findings

The post-intervention quantitative data showed a dramatic and statistically significant shift in teachers' views. The overall mean score on the TVCP questionnaire rose from 3.12 to 4.28 (SD = 0.51). A paired-samples t-test confirmed that this increase was statistically significant, $t(23) = -8.74$, $p < .001$. Significant increases were also observed across all three sub-scales (see Table 1).

Table 1: ***Pre- and Post-Intervention Mean Scores on the TVCP Questionnaire (N=24)***

Sub-scale	Pre-Test Mean (SD)	Post-Test Mean (SD)	*t*-value	*p*-value
Belief in Child Competence	3.85 (0.71)	4.65 (0.49)	-5.12	< .001
Willingness to Share Power	2.60 (0.88)	4.05 (0.65)	-9.31	< .001
Self-Efficacy in	2.91 (0.75)	4.15 (0.55)	-7.98	< .001

Practice				

The largest change was observed in the "Willingness to Share Pedagogical Power" sub-scale, suggesting the intervention was particularly associated with a shift in teachers' readiness to cede control.

4.3 A Deeper Understanding: Post-Intervention Qualitative Themes

The qualitative data from post-intervention interviews, journals, and the focus group revealed a profound transformation in the teachers' conceptualization of participation. Three new themes emerged that reflected this growth.

- Theme 1: Reconceptualizing Participation as Partnership. The most significant change was the shift from "giving choices" to "engaging in partnership." Teachers began to use language that reflected a more collaborative and democratic ethos. A teacher who had previously defined participation as voting on books reflected in her journal: "I used to think I was doing enough. Now I see that participation isn't about me giving them a choice between A or B. It's about us creating option C together." Another teacher commented in the final interview, "It's a dialogue now. I bring my pedagogical knowledge, and they bring their curiosity and expertise on being a child. We plan with each other, not for each other."

- Theme 2: The Child as a "Capable Protagonist." The "competent but unready" view was replaced by a genuine appreciation for the child as a capable protagonist in their own learning. Teachers provided numerous examples of being surprised by children's capabilities once they were given the space to contribute meaningfully. One teacher shared an anecdote: "We had a problem with the plants in our classroom garden dying. My first instinct was to tell them what to do. But I remembered the training and just asked, 'What do you think is happening?' The ideas they came up with were incredible... one child suggested we move them to a sunnier spot, another suggested we 'ask the school gardener for advice.' They solved the problem themselves." This reflects a newfound trust in children's ability to engage in complex problem-solving [cf. 14, 69].

- Theme 3: Barriers as "Negotiable Challenges." While teachers still acknowledged the existence of systemic barriers, their stance toward them shifted from passive acceptance to active negotiation. They began to see these constraints not as absolute roadblocks but as challenges to be navigated creatively. In the focus group, one teacher explained, "The curriculum is still there, but now I see how I can integrate their interests into the required topics. If the theme is 'transportation' and they are obsessed with insects, we can study how insects transport pollen. It's about being flexible." This suggests an increased sense of professional agency and a reframing of participation not as an "add-on" activity but as a core pedagogical orientation that could be integrated into existing structures.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest a strong association between participation in a targeted professional development program and a positive transformation in early childhood teachers' beliefs and self-reported practices regarding children's participation. The significant shifts observed in both the quantitative and qualitative data offer important insights into the process of teacher change and have clear implications for teacher education and policy.

5.1 Observed Changes Following Professional Development

The central finding of this research is the pronounced shift in teacher perspectives following the intervention. The pre-intervention data aligns with much of the existing literature, depicting teachers who support participation in principle but define it narrowly and feel constrained by a protectionist view of childhood and systemic pressures [1, 55, 73, 80]. The post-intervention data, however, illustrates a significant pedagogical evolution. Teachers moved from a superficial understanding of participation as choice-giving to a more profound conceptualization of it as a democratic partnership. This shift is crucial, as it may reflect a move away from tokenistic levels of participation toward more authentic forms of engagement where children's voices can genuinely influence their educational experiences [49, 72].

The design of the program, which integrated theory,

practice, and reflection [8], may be linked to these positive outcomes. By grounding practical strategies in a robust theoretical framework of children's rights [85] and participatory pedagogy [33, 78], the program appeared to help teachers build a new "image of the child" [4]—one centered on competence and agency. This resonates with research indicating that professional development that challenges educators' core beliefs and assumptions is often associated with positive change [57, 66, 67]. The intervention seemed to help teachers bridge the often-cited gap between the abstract principles of rights and the concrete realities of classroom practice [95, 96].

5.2 From Belief Change to Sustainable Practice

While the transformation in beliefs was evident, the study also highlights that belief change is a necessary but not sufficient condition for sustainable practice. In the post-intervention discussions, teachers demonstrated a new sense of agency in navigating systemic barriers, but they also acknowledged that these barriers had not disappeared. Issues of class size, curricular mandates, and assessment pressures remain significant challenges [29, 37]. This finding underscores the idea that individual teacher development must be complemented by systemic and organizational support to be truly sustainable.

For a culture of participation to flourish, it cannot rely solely on the efforts of individual, motivated teachers. It requires a whole-school ethos that values child agency, supportive leadership that encourages pedagogical innovation, and policies that allow for flexibility and emergent curriculum design. Without this supportive ecosystem, even the most committed teachers risk frustration and a gradual reversion to more traditional practices. This aligns with broader research indicating that educational change is most effective when it is addressed at multiple levels, from the individual teacher to the school culture and district-wide policies [18, 88].

5.3 Implications

The findings of this study have several important implications for policy, practice, and future professional development.

- For Teacher Education: The results present a strong case for making comprehensive training on children's rights and participatory pedagogy a mandatory, core component of both pre-service teacher education and in-service professional development. Too often, these topics are treated as optional or peripheral. This study suggests that deep, reflective training is associated with the fundamental shifts in perspective necessary for creating truly child-centered learning environments [5, 89].

- For Policy and Practice: School leaders and policymakers must work to create the enabling conditions that allow teachers to put their new knowledge into practice. This includes promoting flexible curriculum frameworks, valuing process-oriented learning alongside outcomes, and fostering collaborative professional learning communities where teachers can continue to support one another in developing their participatory practice. Aligning school-level policies with national strategic goals for children's rights can provide a powerful mandate for this work [54, 65, 79].

- For ECE Professionals: This study highlights the power of critical reflection and collaborative inquiry. It serves as an encouragement for practitioners to engage in ongoing reflective practice [59] and perhaps even practitioner action research [56] to systematically examine and enhance the opportunities for participation within their own classrooms.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

This study, while providing valuable insights, has several limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small and drawn from a specific geographic context, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study relied on teachers' self-reported beliefs and practices. While journals and interviews provide rich data, future research should incorporate direct classroom observations to correlate these self-reports with actual, observed pedagogical behaviors. Third, the study's timeframe was limited to the duration of the intervention. A longitudinal study that follows teachers for a year or more post-intervention would be invaluable for assessing the sustainability of the observed changes over time.

Future research could build on this study in several promising directions. It would be highly beneficial to investigate the impact of such teacher training programs on child outcomes, such as children's engagement, well-being, and development of democratic competencies. Furthermore, replicating this study in different cultural contexts could provide insights into how local values and educational systems interact with the principles of

participatory pedagogy. Finally, and most importantly, future work must continue to explore effective ways to include children's own perspectives on their experiences of participation in research and practice [86].

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