


Article

Pre-Service Teachers' Beliefs about Children's Participation and Possibilities for Their Transformation during Initial Teacher Education

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Abstract: Pedagogy emphasises children's participation in education as a child's right and a prerequisite for learning and democratic education. However, studies show that participatory practices are not dominant in early childhood education (ECE). This calls for focused interventions during initial teacher education (ITE) to rectify this shortfall. This study examined pre-service teachers' beliefs about children's participation, exploring the effects of a targeted intervention during ITE in transforming pre-service teachers' beliefs about a participatory paradigm in ECE. Pre-service teachers from three universities completed an open-ended questionnaire, both prior to and following the intervention, as well as a self-rating scale with open- and closed-ended questions post-intervention. The results displayed the variety of pre-service teachers' beliefs, revealing the possibilities for their transformation after the intervention. The shifts observed in the pre-service teachers' thinking after the intervention showed a shift in terms of the meaning of participation, their recognition of children's abilities and rights, their ability to criticise the controlling role of the teacher, and their awareness of strategies to enhance co-decision-making processes in ECE. This study provides teacher educators with an understanding of the content of and ways to design interventions to foster participatory pedagogies in ECE during ITE.

Keywords: children's participation; early childhood education; pre-service teachers; beliefs



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1. Introduction

The need for children to actively participate in the educational process has been demonstrated in studies that connect the perception of children as social actors and capable agents [1–3], the right of children to participate in decision-making [4,5], and socio-constructivist learning theories [6]. In addition, children's participation is related to the aims of developing initiative, negotiation, democratic attitudes, and skills from an early age [7], as well as the need to “redeem democracy in early childhood education” [8] (p. 25). The definition of children's participation has varied, ranging from children simply being listened to or consulted to children actively affecting their educational experience by collectively making decisions with other children and adults [9–11].

In the preceding two decades, numerous studies have investigated teachers' beliefs about children's participation [12–22]. However, far fewer studies have explored pre-service ECE teachers' beliefs about children's participation [23], and even fewer have explored the effects of initial teacher education (ITE) on changing these beliefs [24,25].

The exploration of beliefs is important because these concepts and ideas may influence the opportunities that prospective teachers will offer in terms of children's participation in education. Specifically, the research by Avgitidou, Pnevmatikos, and Likomitrou [26] illustrated that pre-service teachers predominantly adopt a romantic or deficient view of childhood, perceiving children as either being happy, playful, and lively or immature and incapable of critical thinking, respectively. Similarly, these educators believe that children can only make decisions about simple issues and only under the guidance of adults, limiting children's opportunities to participate as capable and autonomous individuals. While this study may not comprehensively represent the views of all pre-service teachers, it is important to note that the images of children held by educators are closely connected to classroom practices and affect the implementation of children's right to participation [27].

Investigations into teachers' beliefs about children's participation have also revealed that the ways that ECE teachers give meaning to participation influence the varied manner in which they perceive children's participation and evaluate their practices as participatory [16]. Even in studies that have reported structural limitations to enhancing children's participation in ECE, such as large numbers of children in classrooms, structured curricula, and standardised assessment procedures, teachers' beliefs have been reported to be among the key factors influencing the opportunities of children to realise participatory practices [28]. The studies above show that it is worth exploring pre-service teachers' beliefs about children's participation, especially given the limited amount of relevant research. Furthermore, it is important to study these beliefs, which determine pre-service teachers' ways of understanding their observations in the classroom, as well as the educational actions they will implement. It is also crucial for teacher educators to be aware of the content and scope of pre-service teachers' beliefs so that they can intervene purposefully during pre-service teachers' education, aiming at their transformation. Beyond exploring pre-service teachers' beliefs, more studies are needed to examine whether a systematic intervention during ITE can create opportunities for a change in beliefs regarding children's participation in ECE.

Therefore, the aim of this study was twofold: to investigate pre-service teachers' beliefs about children's participation in ECE and to determine the results of a targeted intervention during their ITE that aimed to transform these for the benefit of children's opportunities to participate in the educational process.

Our research questions were as follows:

1. What are pre-service teachers' beliefs about children's participation in ECE?
2. What kind of possible changes/shifts do we observe in pre-service teachers' beliefs about children's participation after implementing a targeted intervention in the context of their ITE?
3. What kind of changes/shifts do pre-service teachers identify in their beliefs at the end of the intervention, and how do the teachers justify them?

2. The Content of Beliefs about Children's Participation in ECE

Johansson and Sandberg [23] investigated how in-service and pre-service Swedish ECE teachers perceive the concepts of participation and learning, as well as the relationship between them. They found that teachers, both in-service and pre-service, define learning and participation in a similar way: participation means being part of a group, being involved (mostly referred to by prospective teachers), listening to others, and influencing (mostly referred to by ECE teachers). When the participants were asked to describe a participatory situation, many of them indicated that participation means any purposeful activity. Most referred to play, while fewer referenced to aesthetics and circle time.

While there have been findings regarding pre-service teachers' meaning of participation, we lack more detailed information about how teachers think regarding the necessity of children's participation, what difficulties they perceive related to children's participation, and their knowledge of strategies to enhance children's participation. Teacher educators require this information in order to develop an improved and more complete understanding

of the beliefs of teachers. Based on the limited number of studies on pre-service teachers, we present an analysis of studies into teachers' beliefs about children's participation.

Regarding the meaning of participation, ECE teachers have referred to varying meanings of children's participation: children's free choice of activities, teachers listening to children's opinions regarding educational processes and making joint decisions with children [12], teachers encouraging children to make their own decisions, teachers creating conditions for children to make independent choices, teachers listening to children and understanding their way of thinking, and children's sense of belonging to a group [13,20]. Moreover, other studies have referred to ECE teachers' beliefs about participation as a child's individual choice, children making decisions in terms of their self-determination [29,30], and children simply taking part in activities [18,22]. Based on Shier's model of child participation [10], we observed that some of the beliefs found in the studies above refer to low levels of participation, such as merely referring to children's response to activities introduced by the teachers; others consider median levels of participation, such as teachers listening to children's opinions; and some beliefs refer to higher levels of participation, such as creating opportunities for children to co-shape their educational process or make independent decisions and choices. Further research has illustrated that, in some cases, ECE teachers' beliefs about children's participation can be complex, messy, and dependent upon the teachers' resources and knowledge, as well as upon contextual features [21].

Fewer studies have described ECE teachers' specific examples of children's participation. These primarily focus on children-led decisions during play [23], teachers providing guidance and explanations to enhance children's participation in activities or tasks [18], teachers discussing issues that concern children [23], children being involved in decisions about rule formation [12], and children being involved in evaluations of their work, as well as choosing stories or songs [18].

ECE teachers' assessments of the necessity of children's participation relate to whether children are perceived as being able to make their own decisions and whether their participation is viewed as beneficial to school improvement [12]. Other reasons regarding the necessity of children's participation relate to making children's learning easier and assisting in the development of socio-emotional skills [12,15], as well as motivating children [12].

Regarding ECE teachers' perceived difficulties in relation to children's participation, most of the studies revealed issues relating to structural factors, such as a lack of staff resources, space, and equipment; managerial workload; and a lack of professional competency and relevant knowledge [12,15,19,20]. The studies also showed that teachers relate children's difficulties to individual factors related to the child, such as their family or social background, their abilities, or their readiness for participation [12,15,19–21]. Fewer studies have shown that ECE teachers are aware of their own role in affecting children's participation. A teacher's role in affecting children's participation might be related to their wish to keep control over children's activities, the provision of few or no opportunities for children to participate, or the lack of a warm and supportive relationship with children [12,18–21].

Finally, studies on ECE teachers' beliefs about the strategies adopted to enhance children's participation have shown that these techniques include asking children questions, involving children in role play, listening to the child without criticism [12], recognising children's meaning-making abilities during participatory practices [31], displaying a positive response to children's ideas [12,13,18,32], encouraging and actively creating opportunities for dialogue and decision-making, and involving children in the co-design of activities and processes [13,15,16,18,20,23,31,32].

3. Supporting Pre-Service and In-Service ECE Teachers in Transforming Their Beliefs about Children's Participation

As mentioned above, few studies have examined the effects of ITE on pre-service teachers' beliefs about children's participation, with only one study comparing pre-service teachers' initial beliefs with those held post-intervention. Specifically, in her intervention with pre-service teachers during work-integrated learning (WIL), Shaik [25] included an

introduction to Shier's model of participation [10], an examination of differences among participatory and transmissive educational practices, a discussion of the developmental theories stressing children as active agents, and an analysis of the relationships between the beliefs and practices of teachers. While her research results showed positive changes in the willingness of pre-service teachers to listen to children, they also emphasised barriers, including the aim of teachers achieving their learning outcomes, the large number of children in classes, the structured ECE curriculum, and the use of transmissive pedagogies by the ECE teachers acting as mentors during WIL.

Araujo's study is also relevant since it showed that pre-service teachers' discourse about young children often changed following their practicum, shifting towards a greater identification of children as subjects with rights and agency who are thus capable of acting upon the world and who are motivated to experiment and learn [24]. The use of socio-constructivist pedagogical approaches in pre-service teachers' experimentation and reflection, as well as the close collaboration among university professors, mentors, and student teachers within a participatory paradigm, were among the reasons referred to by Araujo [24] to explain this shift in the student teachers' beliefs about children before and after the practicum.

The reconceptualisation of a child's image is a key issue in research on teacher education that aims to support the recognition of children's right to participate and, at the same time, motivate changes in teacher practices [33,34]. In addition, the prerequisite mentioned in other studies for the participatory transformation of educational beliefs and practices was the ability to recognise both children's perspectives and the influence of teachers' actions on their participation [35]. Further, teachers' achievement of self-awareness and their support within a reflective and dialogical framework [36] were reported as enhancing factors transforming their practice into a participatory one.

4. Context of the Current Study

This study was organised based on a collaboration among teacher educators in three different university ECE departments within the X program (not named for the purposes of anonymity). This program aimed to disseminate scientific knowledge about how to enhance the opportunities for children's participation in decision-making by creating appropriate materials for teachers and pre-service teachers and testing them on a pilot basis during ITE (a 4-year B.Ed). The intervention in the three ECE departments had specific aims and a common basis, content, and methodology, as well as a duration of one semester, running from September 2021 to January 2022. The research was conducted during the teaching of undergraduate courses on early childhood education pedagogy and teaching practice. The aims and content of the intervention concerned the depiction of the necessity of children's participation as a right, a prerequisite for learning, and a democratic practice. The courses also included a presentation of different meanings, types, and levels of children's participation using various theories and models, such as Shier's model. The educational process was initially organised on the basis of reflective questions, in which pre-service teachers were invited to discuss their personal theories and knowledge based on the presentation of theoretical frameworks, videos, and examples from practice. The pre-service teachers also worked within groups to identify the type of children's participation in educational scenarios, analyse influencing factors, and propose alternative actions. For example, the pre-service teachers were asked to work in groups to identify the type of children's participation in scenarios, evaluate the actions of the ECE teacher, explain how these affected children's participation levels, and advance alternative strategies.

The course activities gave opportunities to the pre-service teachers to reconceptualise their image of children, recognise children's perspectives, and discuss the different ways in which they participate and the feasibility of their involvement in ECE. Moreover, various strategies to enhance children's participation in ECE, namely Reggio Emilia, the Mosaic approach, and children-as-researchers, were presented and analysed with the use of examples. In addition, the pre-service teachers became familiar with the research and reflective

tools that were created for the needs of the program. The research tools identified specific indicators and procedures for recording children's and teachers' actions, e.g., during play or during a teacher-directed activity, in relation to fostering or hindering factors affecting children's participation. The reflective tools also included scenarios and questions that would assist the pre-service teachers in identifying their beliefs and reflecting upon them.

In two out of the three university courses in which the intervention took place, pre-service teachers in their second year of studies had the opportunity to observe how children participated in an ECE classroom. In the third case, concerning students in their third year of studies, relevant examples were utilised to relate theory to practice. The educational materials were uploaded to the course's digital platform following each lesson. At the end of the intervention, the pre-service teachers were asked to reflect upon their initial beliefs and detect changes in them.

The study therefore evolved in three phases: (a) at the beginning of the semester, an initial exploration of the pre-service teachers' views regarding children's participation was carried out using a questionnaire at the individual level; (b) a series of courses followed with an emphasis on frameworks and models that enhance children's participation; and (c) exploration of the pre-service teachers' views was repeated at the end of the semester together, with an investigation into their self-beliefs about possible changes that occurred in their understanding of children's participation to obtain information about the effects of the intervention.

5. Materials and Methods

5.1. Participants

The participants in the present study were second- and third-year pre-service teachers from three different Greek departments of early childhood education, namely the University of Patras (UPatras), the Democritus University of Thrace (DUTH), and the University of Western Macedonia—Greece (UoWM). Since participation in the study was optional, the number of participants who completed the research tools used for the study varied. Specifically, 90 pre-service teachers completed the 1st questionnaire at the beginning of the course (37 from UPatras, 16 from DUTH, and 37 from UoWM), and 79 completed the 1st questionnaire at the end of the course (22 from UPatras, 35 from DUTH, and 22 from UoWM). Lastly, 68 pre-service teachers from all universities completed the 2nd questionnaire.

5.2. Data Collection Methods and Procedure

The pre-service teachers were informed about the purpose of the study and the anonymous and voluntary completion of two questionnaires and providing their consent prior to their online completion. The questionnaires were created by the researchers. The questions in the first questionnaire were formulated to detect what pre-service teachers meant by participation and their knowledge regarding the necessity of fostering and strategies to foster children's participation in the educational setting (first research question). The second questionnaire aimed to record the pre-service teachers' beliefs about the possible changes that occurred in their understanding of children's participation at the end of the semester and explain the reasons for these changes (third research question). The 1st questionnaire included five open-ended questions, one description (example of participation), and two close-ended questions. Specifically, the pre-service teachers were asked to describe their beliefs about the meaning of children's participation (What does children's participation in the educational process mean for you? How does it become evident?), provide a relevant example (Give an example of children's participation), explain the necessity of children's participation (Do you consider children's participation necessary? Why yes/no?), describe their knowledge of teachers' strategies to enhance children's participation (How can a teacher support children's participation?), and outline possible difficulties encountered during its enhancement (Do you think there are difficulties in achieving children's participation? If yes, what are the reasons for these difficulties?). The 1st question-

naire was completed at both the beginning and end of the intervention to detect possible shifts in the pre-service teachers' meanings regarding children's participation (second research question).

The 2nd questionnaire was designed to collect data about the pre-service teachers' beliefs regarding the effects of the intervention. It included two open-ended questions asking the pre-service teachers to describe any possible changes they detected in their beliefs about children's participation at the end of the intervention and to explain the reasons for these changes. Both questionnaires were approved by the research ethics committee of the university responsible for the study prior to their distribution to the pre-service teachers, and they were completed online using LimeSurvey, which ensured their anonymity.

5.3. Data Analysis

The responses to the open-ended questions in the first and second questionnaires were analysed based on an inductive process of gradual data reduction and via continuous comparison of the pre-service teachers' written responses [37]. Specifically, each response to an open-ended question was first coded to describe the various meanings entailed in the text. A comparison of these codes and an exploration of their similarity produced conceptual categories for each question analysed. For example, the pre-service teachers' responses regarding the meaning of participation were coded as "children answer teacher's questions", "children follow teacher's guidelines", "children listen to the teacher", "children respond positively to the activities designed by the teacher", and "children taking part in everything that the teacher decides for the whole day", constituting the conceptual category "children responding to the educational process". The correspondence of the pre-service teachers' responses to the categories produced in each open-ended question was assessed by two researchers, and the intercoder agreement percentage varied between 86.10 and 97.80, with the mean intercoder agreement being 93.80. Disagreements were discussed until 100% agreement was reached. The percentages of the pre-service teachers' responses in these categories were calculated based on the total number of references made by all the pre-service teachers for each question and were not based on the number of participants since one participant's response could include references to various different categories. Measuring the frequency of references to the different analytical categories prior to and following the teaching intervention allowed us to detect shifts in the pre-service teachers' beliefs (second research question).

Data are displayed using time-ordered meta-matrices to compare the pre-service teachers' beliefs about children's participation prior to and at the end of the intervention and to show possible shifts in the content of their beliefs. The categories were then clustered into groups, providing meaning to the shifts observed in the pre-service teachers' beliefs after the intervention. This helped us to move to higher levels of abstraction regarding these shifts. For example, the meanings given by the pre-service teachers to children's participation were divided into three clusters: a cluster of categories referring to children's basic responses to the teacher's actions, a further cluster that referred to children expressing their opinion, and, lastly, a cluster of categories that referred to children's active roles in decision-making processes.

The results of the comparison among the pre-service teachers' responses prior to and following the intervention indicate the effectiveness of the teaching intervention. An evaluation of the intervention's effectiveness was also produced based on the results from the pre-service teachers' beliefs regarding the types of and reasons for the changes they detected in their understanding of children's participation.

6. Results

The pre-service teachers' meanings of participation varied widely (Table 1). Some of the pre-service teachers could not provide a clear answer on the meaning of children's participation (category 1). However, this difficulty was reduced following the intervention.

The presentation of participation as being children's mere response to teachers' actions and the planned educational process (category 2) was lowered to half after the intervention, while the percentage of references to children's interactions with the teacher and among themselves (categories 5 and 6) increased from 16.5% to 24.5%. Lastly, children's participation in decision-making processes (categories 7 and 8) was mentioned twice as frequently at the end of the intervention.

Table 1. Pre-service teachers' definitions of children's participation.

Categories	Before	After
1. General response without a clear reference to the form of children's participation (e.g., children view pictures, children draw, children's smiles).	34 (14.35%)	18 (7.4%)
2. Children responding to the educational process (e.g., doing what the teacher asks of them or performing the activities planned by the teacher).	65 (27.4%)	36 (14.75%)
3. Children expressing their opinions or asking questions.	56 (23.6%)	51 (20.9%)
4. Teacher adapting to children's needs, interests, and abilities (e.g., drawing ideas from their interests or formulating the lesson based on their needs and wishes).	12 (5.1%)	14 (5.75%)
5. Interactions between teacher and children (e.g., interacting with the teacher while conducting an activity or strong cooperation with the teacher in certain activities, such as music).	17 (7.2%)	22 (9%)
6. Interactions among children (e.g., to interact with their peers or be able to collaborate with other children).	22 (9.3%)	38 (15.55%)
7. Participation in decision-making without a clear result of their participation in the final decision (e.g., children taking initiative, thinking critically, or suggesting activities).	24 (10.1%)	35 (14.35%)
8. Participation in decision-making with a clear influence in the final decision (e.g., children choosing what book to read or how to play).	7 (2.95%)	30 (12.3%)
Total	237 (100%)	244 (100%)

The examples provided by the pre-service teachers enable the development of a clearer understanding of their definitions of children's participation (Table 2). The frequency of examples showing children's mere responses to the teacher's actions (categories 4 and 5) lowered after the intervention, while the frequency of examples referring to children freely voicing their opinion doubled (category 8). The percentage of references in the categories that revealed children's active roles in decision-making and in shaping the educational process (9, 10) increased after the intervention (from 8.2% to 25%).

Table 2. Pre-service teachers' examples of children's participation.

Categories	Before	After
1. Reference to children's activities without a clear form of participation (e.g., when all children participate in circle time).	12 (10.9%)	8 (7.4%)
2. Pleasant and joyful/non-boring activities (i.e., teaching via fun activities so children are not bored but instead participate).	8 (7.3%)	4 (3.7%)
3. Teacher explaining, guiding, and encouraging children to participate (e.g., the teacher explaining the rules of a game or guiding children to understand the plot of a story).	12 (10.9%)	11 (10.2%)
4. Teacher asking questions (e.g., what they know or what they think) or children asking questions.	19 (17.3%)	9 (8.3%)
5. Teacher asking children to perform a task (e.g., to imitate an animal, draw, or construct something).	7 (6.3%)	3 (2.8%)
6. Teacher discussing the children's concerns with them (e.g., something that bothers them).	2 (1.8%)	2 (1.85%)
7. Co-operative activities (e.g., children collaborating during play or presenting their group work).	9 (8.2%)	3 (2.8%)
8. Children expressing themselves freely and speaking their opinions.	13 (11.8%)	27 (25%)
9. The teacher taking initiative but the children shaping the process (e.g., the teacher asking the children what they want to do and the children deciding after expressing their opinions and reaching a conclusion).	5 (4.6%)	12 (11.1%)
10. Children voting, choosing, or co-deciding (e.g., teacher recording children's ideas and children deciding the theme of an activity or about the materials to use).	4 (3.6%)	15 (13.9%)
11. Free play or play as a means of participation.	17 (15.5%)	13 (12%)
12. Children taking on responsibility for the ECE program (e.g., one group being responsible for tidying after play and another being responsible for assisting children in preparing for recess).	2 (1.8%)	1 (0.95%)
Total	110 (100%)	108 (100%)

Regarding the necessity of children's participation (Table 3), changes were observed after the intervention concerning the instrumental value of children's participation (category 6); thus, fewer pre-service teachers related children's participation to the achievement of specific results (from 21.7% to 11.7%). We observed a slight increase in the number of references justifying the need for participation based on children's rights (category 4), while an increasing number of students related child participation to their view of children as capable agents (category 5, from 2.6% to 10.8%). However, it is worth noting that the number of responses without clear reasoning for the necessity of participation (category 1) doubled after the intervention.

Table 3. Pre-service teachers' reasoning for the necessity of children's participation.

Categories (Participation is Necessary as/for...)	Before	After
1. General response without clear reasoning for the necessity.	6 (5.2%)	12 (10.8%)
2. Presupposition for learning (emphasis on children's interaction, pleasure, and joy).	9 (7.8%)	7 (6.3%)
3. Facilitating learning (i.e., supporting children's interests and active learning and thus accomplishing competencies and learning aims).	38 (33.1%)	39 (35.1%)
4. Children's right (and adults' obligation).	10 (8.7%)	12 (10.8%)
5. Children's ability to participate (children seen as capable).	3 (2.6%)	12 (10.8%)
6. Achieving results (to achieve future success in school or to develop competencies).	25 (21.7%)	13 (11.7%)
7. Enhancing the teacher's awareness (helping the teacher learn more about the children).	6 (5.2%)	6 (5.5%)
8. Indication of a good teacher (i.e., an activity with children presupposes their participation being conducted in the right way).	7 (6.1%)	3 (2.7%)
9. Preparation for citizenship (i.e., to be active citizens and to develop competencies to enable participation in public issues later on).	8 (7%)	5 (4.5%)
10. Children's needs (i.e., children need to participate to express themselves and be involved in a group).	3 (2.6%)	2 (1.8%)
Total	115 (100%)	111 (100%)

The pre-service teachers' descriptions of strategies to enhance children's participation varied and can be divided into four main clusters (Table 4). The first cluster of categories (categories 2, 3, 4, and 5) emphasises teacher control, with the educator playing a key role in choosing the appropriate methods, planning a pleasant environment, explaining to/guiding children, and enabling their participation. The second cluster (categories 6 and 7) refers to the teachers' personal characteristics (personality and professional adequacy) necessary to enhance children's participation. Category 8 refers to structural factors, such as space and materials, as presuppositions to enhance children's participation. The third cluster of categories (categories 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13) highlights the supportive role of the teacher in creating opportunities for children's participation based on a trusting relationship and respect for children's needs in the exploration of prior knowledge and the encouragement of co-decision processes in the classroom. The percentages of the pre-service teachers' responses were lower in cluster one (from a total of 34.7% to 24.3%), in cluster two (from 8.85% to 4%), and in category 8 (from 8.3% to 2%), showing a shift away from the dominant role of the teacher in making decisions and the contextual restrictions set by the space and materials. Conversely, the increase in the percentages of responses in the third cluster (from 44% to 59.8%) demonstrated the gain in the pre-service teachers' awareness of strategies that provide more opportunities for children's active participation. Lastly, co-operation with parents and the teachers' use of observation and reflection received the fewest references, both before and after the intervention.

Table 4. Pre-service teachers' description of strategies to enhance children's participation.

Categories	Before	After
1. General response without a clear reference to strategies (e.g., teachers should choose the right approach).	4 (1.85%)	15 (7.4%)
2. Teacher using appropriate methods for learning (e.g., play, inquiry, or experimentation).	26 (12%)	21 (10.4%)
3. Teacher creating pleasant, interesting, and appealing learning environments/activities.	34 (15.8%)	20 (9.9%)
4. Teacher explaining things well and giving correct guidance to children.	10 (4.6%)	3 (1.5%)
5. Teacher allowing/accepting children's ideas (i.e., teacher is open, accepting, and flexible during activities with children; teacher lets children express their ideas).	5 (2.3%)	5 (2.5%)
6. Characteristics of the teacher's personality (e.g., patient, friendly, sensitive, and loving with a good disposition towards children).	15 (7%)	6 (3%)
7. Scientific and professional adequacy (i.e., teacher has the necessary knowledge and support to design participatory practices).	4 (1.85%)	2 (1%)
8. Structural presuppositions: space and materials (i.e., suitability of space and ample materials for use are required to enhance children's participation).	18 (8.3%)	4 (2%)
9. Teacher supporting communication, familiarity, and trusting relationships with children (i.e., teacher understands their concerns, difficulties, and fears, and children feel free to express themselves without restriction).	32 (14.8%)	40 (19.9%)
10. Teacher supporting/encouraging/creating opportunities for interactions with children (i.e., teacher asks for children's opinions and encourages discussions among children).	33 (15.3%)	32 (15.9%)
11. Teacher respecting children's needs/characteristics and the value of each child (e.g., teacher encourages children to speak about their wishes and concerns and offers opportunities to choose between activities).	19 (8.8%)	35 (17.5%)
12. Exploration of children's prior knowledge.	3 (1.4%)	4 (2%)
13. Teacher designing activities after a co-decision with children about their content or process.	8 (3.7%)	9 (4.5%)
14. Co-operation with parents.	4 (1.85%)	3 (1.5%)
15. Observation and reflection.	1 (0.45%)	2 (1%)
Total	216 (100%)	201 (100%)

Regarding the pre-service teachers' beliefs about the difficulties in achieving children's participation (Table 5), we observed that, after the intervention, they no longer focused so much on children's personal characteristics and family background (categories 3 and 4) or on various structural difficulties beyond the teachers' control (category 2). Thus, references

to these categories decreased from 61.1% to 34.8%. On the other hand, the pre-service teachers' recognition of the controlling and non-supportive role of the teacher as the main explanatory factor for children's difficulties with participation (categories 5, 6, 7, and 8) increased from 31.7% to 60%.

Table 5. Pre-service teachers' beliefs about obstacles to children's participation.

Categories	Before	After
1. General response with no clear reference to obstacles.	4 (3.2%)	5 (4.3%)
2. Structural difficulties (e.g., when proposals regarding the curriculum are imposed, or the institutional framework of kindergarten).	24 (19%)	14 (12.2%)
3. Children's characteristics (e.g., shy or introverted children or children's origin).	37 (29.4%)	17 (14.8%)
4. Family/social environment (e.g., parents' perceptions or educational and financial status).	16 (12.7%)	9 (7.8%)
5. The teacher not supporting children's participation (e.g., the teacher feels that they should transmit knowledge to children; the teacher does not trust the children's abilities).	9 (7.1%)	20 (17.4%)
6. Teacher's actions not achieving children's participation (e.g., the teacher's actions do not interest the children).	18 (14.3%)	19 (16.5%)
7. Teacher making decisions about/controlling the activities (e.g., teacher imposes activities without asking or listening to the children; teacher acts as an authority and decides the course of the educational process).	8 (6.3%)	21 (18.3%)
8. Lack of positive/supportive relationship among the teacher and children (e.g., when children are afraid of criticism from the teacher or other children).	5 (4%)	9 (7.8%)
9. Lack of appropriate teacher education (i.e., the teacher has not been educated in the right way).	5 (4%)	1 (0.9%)
Total	126 (100%)	115 (100%)

The pre-service teachers described and justified the changes they observed in their beliefs regarding children's participation in different ways, generating data of interest. Several stated that they did not know what children's participation meant and that they gained this knowledge through their participation in the course. Pre-service teacher (PST) 38 said, "Before this course, I did not know what children's participation in the educational process meant and why it is important. After the course, I understood this, as well as how it can become possible". Also, PST 42 stated, "Before, children's participation was unspecified, while now the criteria which show children's participation and the role of the teacher are more specific and understandable".

Other pre-service teachers explained that they acquired a new understanding of what children's participation is and why it is necessary, as well as a better knowledge of its different forms and ways to enhance it. PST 25 said, "I understood that participation does not only mean children participating in the classroom's activities but also taking initiatives, making decisions, and freely expressing their opinions. Myself, as a teacher,

should make sure that a positive climate exists in the classroom and that I allow margins for children's freedom".

It is significant that most of the pre-service teachers stated that they changed their views, philosophy, and perspectives concerning children's participation. This statement signified, in many cases, a change in beliefs about the role of children and children's abilities, as well as the role of the teacher in the educational process. PST 2 said, "The role of children changed. It became central and protagonist. I understand that it is the children who should make decisions about what to do. The activities should concern the children and be meaningful to them". PST 7 noted, "I changed my beliefs because my horizons were expanded concerning children's participation and I started to see things in a different way", while PST 10 said, "I changed my belief about the extent to which children could help during the educational process. I now know that children can contribute to a great extent". PST 14 added, "Before, I thought that all was due to children's personality and dispositions. Now, I believe that participation is related to the teacher's beliefs and the way she designs activities".

These statements verify the transformations observed in pre-service teachers' ways of thinking about children's participation. Thus, shifts in their beliefs about the meaning of participation were accompanied by shifts in their ideas concerning children's abilities and their role in decision-making processes. At the same time, shifts occurred in their beliefs regarding their ability to criticise the teacher's controlling role and to recognise the need for teachers to support and enhance children's participation. Furthermore, the pre-service teachers' statements verified that the content and processes applied during the course interventions were effective under certain circumstances at promoting the transformation of beliefs.

7. Discussion

Initial teacher education (ITE) is essential for ensuring effective educational processes given that teachers are educated to respond to the multiple roles required by the complexity of the social and economic conditions in which we live. In a contemporary sense, ITE is of fundamental importance for two reasons. On the one hand, there is a strong belief in the academic community that the quality of educational provision is related to teacher education [38,39]. Conversely, teachers face challenges such as children being marginalised by the education system [40] and other factors (e.g., migration, climate change, political uncertainty), which have turned scholars' and policy makers' attention to the role that education systems can play in addressing and overcoming these issues [39]. Children's inclusion in society, as well as the promotion of democratic, active, and aware citizens, presuppose supportive and educated teachers on the matter of children's participation in decision making processes. Particularly, the rights of the child are becoming a critical topic for academics, governments, and organisations, as ECE is acknowledged to be crucial for learning and development [41].

Therefore, pre-service teachers' views were examined in the current study in order to highlight educators' perception of children's participation. Regarding the first research question concerning the content of pre-service teachers' beliefs about children's participation, our study showed a variety of views. Many of these opinions were also mentioned in previous studies examining ECE teachers' beliefs about children's participation. The outcomes of these studies on strategies for enhancing participation are similar to our results, e.g., teachers' positive responses to children's ideas (categories 9, 10, 15, and 29), teachers' encouragement and active creation of opportunities for dialogue and decision-making, and children's participation in the co-design and co-formation of activities and processes (categories 10, 12, 13, 15, and 28). Other beliefs, such as the importance of the teacher's personality in enhancing children's participation or the significance of teachers' ineffective actions as a stated difficulty in achieving participation, only emerged from our study. This can likely be explained by the fact that other studies have examined in-service, and not pre-service, teachers' beliefs. Overall, the present study adds to the body of research by

offering an extensive list of categories that depict pre-service teachers' beliefs along several axes (meaning, necessity, difficulties, and strategies), thus providing a more holistic understanding of beliefs concerning children's participation.

Concerning the second research question, our study proceeded through the process of grouping the categories of pre-service teachers' beliefs into clusters to illustrate the kind of shifts observed in them after a systematic intervention during ITE. Specifically, the pre-service teachers' meaning of participation shifted from referring to children as merely responding to teachers' guidelines to including them in interactive educational processes and, further, in decision-making processes. This result was verified by the answers given by pre-service teachers following the intervention, which showed a decrease in the frequency of references to specific teacher practices, such as questioning children or asking them to perform specific tasks, and an increase in the frequency of references to children's free expression and their participation in shaping the educational process.

Regarding the necessity of children's participation, the pre-service teachers shifted from perceiving its instrumental value in terms of achieving specific learning and developmental outcomes to viewing children as capable agents and participation as one of their rights. Thus, our study confirmed the findings from prior research about the importance of viewing children as capable agents [24,33,34] and the necessity of moving away from an emphasis on the achievement of specific results [25] to promoting participatory practices in ECE.

Furthermore, our study illustrated that the pre-service teachers' initial reasoning for the lack of children's participation (difficulties) was based on the individual characteristics attributed to children and teachers (e.g., children are shy or introverted or/and teacher lacks patience and sensitivity) and on structural constraints, such as an imposed curriculum. These findings are consistent with those of previous research [12,15,19–21,32]. However, this reasoning shifted after the intervention since the pre-service teachers recognised a teacher's controlling and non-supportive role as one of the main obstacles to children's participation.

Additionally, our research revealed that the pre-service teachers' beliefs about the strategies for enhancing participation shifted from those emphasising teacher control, the teacher's personal characteristics, and structural constraints to those relating to specific strategies, such as supporting, encouraging, and creating opportunities in a safe and interactive context, as well as building a trusting relationship with children, respecting the value of each child, and actively fostering children's participation in the decision-making process.

Regarding the third research question, the pre-service teachers' self-ratings of their gained knowledge after the intervention and their justifications of the change in their beliefs verified the idea that these shifts were related not only to greater knowledge of specific strategies and actions to support children's participation but also to a repositioning regarding the meaning of participation, children's abilities, and teachers' roles in the educational process. This repositioning altered not only their expectations of children and teachers but also their beliefs about the potential possibilities of children's participation in ECE.

Overall, the clustering of categories into meaningful themes that described pre-service teachers' shifts in their beliefs about participation and a qualitative analysis of the pre-service teachers' reasoning for the change in their beliefs provided an explanatory framework for what needs to be supported during ITE and by which means. The clarification of the meanings of children's participation, a critical awareness of the controlling role of the teacher, a repositioning regarding children's abilities and rights, the downgrading of individual factors as explanatory of children's lack of participation, and the counterbalance of specific teaching strategies and structural constraints regarding children's participation exemplify the shifts that need to be fostered according to theoretical and practical reflection.

In this study, the anonymous completion of the questionnaires by the pre-service teachers was a limiting parameter, preventing the learning paths of each participant from being closely examined. However, this fact did not negatively affect the present research

since, as mentioned initially, the main purpose of this study was to examine the range and content of pre-service teachers' beliefs regarding children's participation, as well as the possible shifts that could be achieved in the students' initial views after a specifically targeted intervention during their ITE.

Overall, the learning experiences of young children in ECE are directly related to the choices that their teachers make. Teachers' choices, however, are significantly affected by their knowledge, attitudes, values, and understanding of children's rights [16,27], as well as previous experiences, among which their ITE plays an important role. The necessity of including children's rights and participatory practices in ITE courses is therefore important [42].

The results of the current research also showed how important it is to probe pre-service teachers' ideas in order to identify their perceptions and work on their reconstruction systematically. Any changes take time: as such, time and resources need to be invested into enriching ITE curricula in universities by providing multiple opportunities for pre-service teachers to familiarise themselves with and engage in children's rights and participatory educational practices. Linking courses more closely to pre-service teachers' reflection processes and feedback on the implementation of theory into action can potentially facilitate learning during ITE.

Our suggestions for future research include closer study of the learning paths that result in a transformation in pre-service teachers' thinking in relation to the actions applied during the teaching intervention. In addition, an examination of the relationships among the observed shifts in pre-service teachers' beliefs about children's participation and their teaching practice, using data from implementations within real classroom settings, would be an interesting research theme relating pre-service teachers' beliefs and practices. Pre-service teachers' practicums, included in ITE, can therefore constitute a fruitful field for relevant research.

To conclude, we found that, after a systematic intervention, pre-service teachers may experience shifts in their knowledge and thinking about children's participation. This conclusion is highly encouraging, as the results of other interventions with teachers have shown that, despite the undeniable benefits of the interventions, the entrenched traditional views of teachers on the issue are difficult to change [34]. This study therefore has implications for teacher educators regarding the content (meaning, necessity, difficulties, and strategies) and processes (opportunities for pre-service teachers to reconsider their prior beliefs; use of theoretical, research, and reflective tools to assist with developing an in-depth understanding of the levels and reasons for children's participation; analysis of examples from practice; etc.) for supporting pre-service teachers' understanding of children's participation. An awareness of the orientation of possible shifts in pre-service teachers' thinking about children's participation and of the factors affecting potential change can guide the actions of teacher educators during ITE.

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