Ask the children: reframing extended education offerings quality and policy through children's perspectives

Jasmin Näpfli* and Kirsten Schweinberger

Centre for Research on Teachers' Professional Development City Brugg-Windisch, School of Education (PH FHNW), Institute for Research and Development, University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland, Brugg, Switzerland

Although the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child mandates that children's voices must be heard in matters affecting them, their perspectives on the quality of Extended Education Offerings (EEOs) are rarely considered. This study explores how children perceive their participation opportunities in EEOs. Conducted in a Swiss canton where EEOs are well-established within a quality framework, the study involved 46 photo tours followed by group discussions with 194 children aged 5–12 across nine EEOs. These data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis focused on aspects of participation. The results reveal differences in participation practices, ranging from formalized meetings with guidelines to settings with limited or informal opportunities. Many children expressed a sense of self-determination, particularly in free play, and emphasized the importance of receiving feedback in participation processes. The analysis identified recurring patterns across participation dimensions, showing that self-determination and meaningful feedback foster children's sense of agency, while lack of transparency leads to frustration and perceived tokenism. These findings emphasize the need for intentional, context-sensitive strategies to embed participation more consistently within EEO practices. Given the significant role that EEOs play in children's lives, it is crucial to translate these insights into practice. In a short brief example, we illustrate how the findings informed the revision of the cantonal quality framework. While children are not consistently able to participate directly in policymaking, this example underscores the critical role of researchers as knowledge brokers who can represent children's perspectives. By fostering an "interactive space" between research, practice, and policy, researchers can ensure that children's voices inform quality development in EEOs. Even when children are not directly involved, their perspectives — conveyed through research — can shape institutional frameworks and strengthen participatory principles in educational contexts.

KEYWORDS

participation, extended education, quality, children's perspective, interactive space

1 Introduction

Extended Education is flourishing all over the world (Bae, 2018) and takes many forms and names, reflecting a broad spectrum of learning and care arrangements both in and out of school. Following the suggestion of Schüpbach et al. (2017, p. 58), we consistently use the term Extended Education Offerings (EEOs) to refer to all care and out-of-school educational services for school-aged children as it serves as an umbrella term. The expansion of EEOs is associated with high expectations, ranging from social and intercultural learning to fostering

inclusion, improving individual skills, and enabling care for dual-income families (Bae, 2018; Klerfelt and Stecher, 2018). Their effectiveness depends on various factors with quality — alongside structure and usage — playing a particularly critical role (Sauerwein et al., 2019; Zuechner and Fischer, 2014). Consequently, the discourse on quality in EEOs has intensified, prompting increased research and policy initiatives to establish quality frameworks. All of these frameworks (Höke et al., 2016; Landwehr, 2015; Sauerwein, 2016) address participation alongside other process quality dimensions such as relationships, climate, and pedagogical orientation, as well as structural quality aspects like infrastructure, organization, leadership, and staff.

This focus on participation gains significance as EEOs increasingly embed childhood within institutions (Seitz and Hamacher, 2024), making them vital socializing spaces (Schüpbach and Lilla, 2019) where school-aged children spend time, interact, and gather impactful experiences (Bock, 2010). Participation gives children the role they deserve in EEOs, allowing them to actively shape and influence their environment. It is also an important pedagogical and societal value (Reisenauer, 2020) gaining importance in EEOs: In Germany, for example, the Ministry of Education (KMK, 2023) states that the pedagogical design of EEOs should prioritize the interests and needs of children, creating democratically structured learning and living environments that require high participation from all stakeholders. However, to date, children's voices are not often heard (Deinet et al., 2018; Staudner, 2018; Walther and Nentwig-Gesemann, 2022).

This underrepresentation is problematic, as understandings of quality can vary significantly depending on specific contexts and the stakeholders defining them (Harvey and Green, 2000). Children, as key stakeholders in EEOs, hold perspectives that can diverge from those of adults (Hauke, 2019), yet their views are rarely taken into account.

When it comes to participation in EEOs, it seems even more important to capture the children's perspective. It is therefore vital not only that children's voices are heard, but also that deliberate efforts are made to ensure their meaningful inclusion for two important reasons. First, their unique insights are essential for evaluating and improving EEOs, especially since they experience the process dimensions of quality firsthand. Second, children's rights emphasize the importance of including their voices: Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) stipulates the right to participation, mandating that children must be consulted in matters that affect them, recognizing them as individuals with integrity and agency (Lundy, 2007). However, existing research highlights that while participation is emphasized in policy and theory, children often experience limited real influence — especially in institutional settings such as schools and EEOs (Gerbeshi and Ertl, 2023; Elvstrand and Söderman Lago, 2019). This mismatch underscores the need for more in-depth insights into how participation is perceived and experienced by children themselves.

This focus on participation aligns with the theoretical perspective of childhood studies (Thomas, 2021), particularly the sociology of childhood, which views childhood as a social construction and children as competent social actors (Corsaro, 2015; James and Prout, 1997). These two perspectives are often bridged in research (Thomas, 2021), as they are in the present study.

Australia provides one of few examples where children's voices were incorporated in updating the national EEO framework. In this process, children's responses provided meaningful insights into their perceptions, illustrating how their feedback led to the inclusion of passive leisure in the new curriculum for EEOs (Barblett et al., 2023; Cartmel et al., 2024).

Although children view the quality of EEOs positively, existing studies mainly use quantitative surveys to capture their perspective (Coelen and Wagener, 2010; Sauerwein, 2016, 2019). Hence, their evaluations were limited to predetermined quality aspects established by adults.

To address this gap, the present study employs qualitative methods to explore children's experiences and perceptions of participation in EEOs. We combine the perspective of childhood studies — which conceptualizes children as competent social actors—with a rights-based understanding of participation, as outlined in the UNCRC and Lundy's model. This integrated lens allows us to explore participation both as a lived, relational practice and as a fundamental right within institutional contexts. It investigates children's perspectives on participation as a key quality dimension within EEOs, using childhood studies as our theoretical lens. Specifically, it examines how children perceive their ability to participate and what forms of participation they encounter in everyday EEO settings.

2 Theoretical framework

There are several justifications for children's participation in schools. One is a *legal* argument rooted in the UNCRC, which grants children the right to express their views on matters affecting them and requires that their opinions be given due consideration. A *societal* argument holds that schools should educate children and adolescents to become responsible citizens by imparting democratic values and skills essential for fulfilling their societal roles (Derecik et al., 2013; Reisenauer, 2020). Another is an *educational* argument, which states that participation must be an integral part of children's and adolescents' daily lives, as it helps develop essential skills like self-confidence, responsibility, and autonomy, skills that are vital for identity formation (Moser, 2010).

The term "participation" is often used interchangeably with concepts such as involvement, engagement, membership, co-determination, consultation, collaboration, and co-creation, each highlighting distinct aspects. Therefore, participation should be understood as an umbrella term encompassing various forms and intensities of involvement (Derecik et al., 2013). In this broad sense, children's participation is seen as a complex social process in which issues of social belonging and formal decision-making play a significant role (Elvstrand and Söderman Lago, 2019).

One of the most well-known models is Hart's Ladder of Participation (1992), which outlines eight rungs, representing increasing levels of involvement. However, the model has some limitations. Notably, it implies a hierarchical progression, suggesting that the highest rung is the ultimate goal, which is not the intended approach (Hart and Reid, 2008; Wagener, 2013).

In the Swiss school context, the model by Biedermann and Oser (2006) is used (see Figure 1). It describes six degrees of participation, ranging from externally determined involvement to self-determined decision-making, and emphasizes a continuum from passive to active

| | | Decision-making scope and responsibility of staff. Outcome already determined. | | Decision-making scope and responsibility of children. Outcome still open. | | | |

	External Determination		**Forms of Participation**			**Self-Determination**
	Externally Determined	Informed	Consulted	Deciding Together	Collaborating	
staff	Staff makes decisions.	Staff plans, organizes, and prepares the event.	Final decisions still rest with staff, but…	Staff includes children in decision-making processes, so…	Staff shares the responsibility, so …	Support from staff, but…
children	Children carry them out.	Children are fully informed and updated about the purpose, goals, and plans but do not provide input.	…children can share their opinions and suggest ideas on school matters, but final decisions rest with teachers or school teams.	…children are actively involved in the decision-making process. They may be included in decisions that lead to specific outcomes and participate in voting processes.	…children actively help plan, design, and evaluate projects, taking responsibility for decisions on topics like school atmosphere, space use, or homework policies.	… children initiate and carry out projects independently.

FIGURE 1
Model of participation in school (Own and adapted figure, based on Biedermann and Oser, 2006).

roles. Because this model is already well established in school practice, we adapt it to the context of EEOs.

For a long time, participation discourse focused narrowly on one aspect of participation, meaning that children were allowed to speak, but without any real influence. Early models — such as Hart's (1992) ladder — have been criticized for framing participation as a process in which adults remain in control, determining if and how children's input is considered (Elvstrand and Söderman Lago, 2019; Thomas, 2021). This understanding reduces participation to a symbolic gesture and fails to enable meaningful involvement. Furthermore, from a children's rights perspective, participation has often been treated too individualistically, neglecting its relational and institutional dimensions (Horgan et al., 2017).

In contrast, Lundy's model conceptualizes participation as a multi-dimensional process — not only encompassing voice, but also space, audience, and influence — which not only recognizes the child as a competent actor but also highlights the institutional and social context in which participation occurs. Thus, not only should the form or degree of participation be considered — as in the previous models — but also its impact, as Lundy (2007) argues, proposing a new model for understanding participation, as outlined in Article 12 of the UNCRC, which includes four key elements:

- **Space** means providing opportunities for children to express their views and encouraging their participation, ensuring they are asked about matters affecting them and have the right to choose participation.
- **Voice** refers to the right to express opinions, based on a child's ability to form them, not their maturity.
- **Audience** highlights the importance of adults listening to children's views, not just hearing them. Adults should be trained in active listening and aware of non-verbal communication.
- **Influence** involves giving children's views "due weight," ensuring decisions reflect their opinions in line with their age and capacity. This requires adults to take children seriously and avoid

tokenism. Feedback should show how their views were considered, fostering transparency ensuring participation leads to real outcomes.

In this regard, the difference between being heard and being listened to is central: hearing a child's voice is not enough—their voice must also have the potential to influence decisions.

The four components outlined by Lundy (2007) are useful for critically reflecting on the quality of participatory processes. They help to identify and address potential barriers and obstacles, ensuring that participation is genuine and not reduced to mere tokenism or superficial involvement (Reisenauer, 2020). At the same time, children's participation must remain within certain boundaries. This includes their right to opt out, as well as respect for social and cultural norms (Lundy et al., 2024). A balance between participation and protection is crucial, as children both have the right to be heard and to be safe. The idea that "children are experts in their own lives" can be problematic in certain contexts as in education and health decisions. Balancing children's views with adult expertise ensures both their right to participate and access to quality education (Lundy et al., 2024).

As mentioned earlier, the discussion on child participation arose simultaneously with the emergence of childhood studies, which often led to a combination of the two approaches in research (Horgan et al., 2017; Thomas, 2021). Childhood studies are based on two main assumptions: children are seen as active social actors who actively construct their surroundings, they are seen as subjects who can shape their environment and are not only objects of socialization (Corsaro, 2015; James and Prout, 1997). The second main assumption is, that childhood is a social construction (James and Prout, 1997; Qvortrup, 1994). Thus, researchers are encouraged to see children as co-constructors of knowledge, implying that participation research should be conducted with children rather than about them (Mey, 2013).

For our analysis, we will combine the adapted model of participation forms in school (Biedermann and Oser, 2006) with the categories from Lundy (2007), so that we can identify on the

one side the (structural) intensity of participation forms from externally determined to self-determination and on the other side the (process) quality of participation focusing on space, voice, audience, and influence. This integration allows for a more nuanced analysis of participation in EEOs—not only how much participation children have, but also how meaningful the process is.

3 Research findings on participation in educational settings

Existing research highlights that while children increasingly express a desire for participation, genuine opportunities for involvement remain limited, particularly in institutional contexts such as schools and EEOs (Gerbeshi and Ertl, 2023). While children feel informed and consulted, opportunities for collaboration or decision-making remain limited. They more often perceive participation in organizational aspects, such as classroom design and duties, rather than in areas like curriculum content or academic performance (Gerbeshi et al., 2024). Furthermore, children feel least able to participate in schools compared to home or community settings. While educators believe there are sufficient opportunities for involvement, children perceive schools as hierarchical, with limited meaningful participation. This highlights the need for cultural and institutional changes to empower student voices (Forde et al., 2018).

In EEOs, participation opportunities are primarily found in non-academic activities such as breaks and sports (Coelen and Wagener, 2010) suggesting that leisure-oriented environments may offer greater potential for meaningful participation than academically focused settings. However, empirical research from Swedish EEOs shows that this potential is shaped and often limited by institutional conditions. Elvstrand and Söderman Lago (2019) emphasize that participation in Swedish EEOs should be understood as a relational and ongoing practice, negotiated in everyday interactions between children and adults. They identify three key forms of "doing participation": negotiating, initiating, and choosing. Participation, in this view, is a process that must be practiced, learned, and socially supported. Elvstrand and Söderman Lago (2019) highlight the tension between participation as a pedagogical value and the pressure to make participation visible and measurable. While choice is considered central, it is often formalized and restricted, serving policy demands rather than enabling genuine influence. As a result, participation becomes a controlled and individualized practice rather than a democratic or collective experience.

Further findings (Ackesjö et al., 2024) emphasize the importance of agency as a central concept in the sociology of childhood. Their study illustrates that free choice can both expand and limit agency, depending on how it is structured and supported by adults. Meaningful participation requires active listening, not just hearing, and that children's perspectives must be integrated into the design of everyday activities. Agency, in this view, is not about total independence but about shared responsibility, relational sensitivity, and respectful collaboration between children and adults.

This aligns with the broader critique by Horgan et al. (2017), who argue that research and practice often focus too narrowly on formal, adult-structured participation, neglecting informal, everyday, and horizontal forms of involvement. They emphasize the importance of

relational contexts, where children's perspectives are genuinely acknowledged, and warn against overburdening children with responsibility through overly formalized participation frameworks.

The increased focus on children's perspectives also mirrors broader calls for structural reforms in education systems to better integrate children's voices into decisions that directly affect their daily lives (Sauerwein and Grasshoff, 2022).

Across all studies, there is a consensus that participation must be understood beyond formal structures. It is not a static right, but a contextual, socially negotiated, and relational practice. Despite the apparent potential of EEOs as more flexible environments, children's participation remains highly dependent on adult attitudes, institutional frameworks, and the ability to translate participatory values into everyday interactions. This reveals a persistent gap between participation as a pedagogical ideal and its practical realization—a gap that this study aims to explore further.

4 Context of the study and the situation in Switzerland

The Swiss School System is federally governed, with the 26 cantons developing their educational frameworks autonomously, while schools are managed by local communities. Regarding EEOs, there is only a national obligation for municipalities to provide needs-based programs, with no nationwide quality framework or binding quality standards in place. Approximately 36.2% of school-aged children in Switzerland attend EEOs (BFS, 2024).

Our data comes from one pioneering canton in Switzerland (Schüpbach and Von Allmen, 2013), where EEOs are above-average used, already strongly anchored. The EEOs we examined cater to children aged 4 to 12 years and are offered as a complement to regular classes. Their primary focus is leisure-oriented, not focused on academic outcomes. Children are often allowed to choose their activities, which fosters an environment conducive to non-formal and informal learning, often referred to as play-based or child-centered pedagogy (Hedges and Cooper, 2018). In addition, EEOs provide meals, supervised free play, as well as guided activities and homework supervision.

All decisions regarding extended education in this canton are determined by the Ministry of Education. Notably, this canton has an established quality framework (Landwehr, 2015), in which participation is one quality dimension. This institutional anchoring of participation makes the canton a particularly relevant setting for examining how participation is experienced by children in practice. Over the past decade, EEOs in the canton have rapidly developed, prompting the Ministry of Education to initiate a revision of the quality framework, a process in which the authors were actively involved.

5 Methods

The aim of the study was to explore how children perceive and experience participation within their respective EEOs. Following the methodological principles of childhood studies, we recognize children as social actors and consider it essential to explicitly ask for their perspectives (Mey, 2013, p. 53). Children are seen as experts in their own lives, and qualitative methods are particularly well suited for

capturing their subjective views on their living environment (Heinzel, 2000, p. 22). This methodological approach was chosen to address a gap in existing research, which often neglects the everyday, informal, and relational dimensions of participation as experienced by children. Childhood studies emphasize the importance of children's own experiences and their active involvement in research. Accordingly, participatory methods are often used to engage children in sharing their views, positioning them as active agents in their lives and aligning with the theoretical shift that recognizes childhood as a distinct and valuable phase of human development, rather than merely preparatory (Barblett et al., 2023; Deinet et al., 2018; Klerfelt and Haglund, 2014; Walther and Nentwig-Gesemann, 2022).

In line with this, we chose a qualitative approach to gather the children's perspectives. As an initial, ice-breaking activity and to gather the most uninfluenced views from the children while recognizing them as experts in their EEOs, we first asked them to show us their EEO. The children guided us through their EEO and showed us the places which they liked or disliked. At each chosen location, we took photos (without children present, for ethical reasons) and discussed with the children why they like or dislike the place. These photo tours served as a neutral stimulus and allowed for child-led exploration, which formed the basis for the following group discussions (Nentwig-Gesemann et al., 2017, p. 20). By using group discussions and child-centered inputs, we strive to reduce the traditional power imbalance between adults and children in educational research, enabling a more nuanced understanding of children's lived experiences (Schultheis, 2019; Sedding, 2019). To align with the methodological orientation of childhood studies and to reduce adult–child power imbalances during data collection, we tried to adopt a "least adult role" (Corsaro and Molinari, 2017; Mandell, 1988). This role positions the researcher not as an authority figure, but as a co-participant who engages with children on their terms. Throughout the photo tours and group discussions, we consciously avoided evaluative or directive behavior and instead allowed the children to take the lead, using their own language and deciding what they wanted to show and discuss. We responded with open-ended, non-directive questions and used child-appropriate vocabulary to encourage spontaneous expression. This combination of child-led photo tours and group discussions is well aligned with the principles of childhood studies, which emphasize co-construction, autonomy, and the situated nature of knowledge. This approach fostered a safe and inclusive atmosphere in which children were more likely to share their genuine thoughts and experiences.

A semi-structured discussion guide was developed, based on thematic blocks derived from the cantonal quality framework for EEOs, including a specific section on participation. Photo tours and group interviews were conducted in immediate succession, within the same groups, each lasting approximately 45 min. All sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and anonymized for analysis.

The study was conducted across nine EEOs in a Swiss canton, involving 46 groups of 194 children aged five to twelve, with group sizes ranging from three to seven children. Parents were provided with written information regarding the study's purpose, methods, and data handling, and were asked to give written consent for their child's participation. However, even with parental consent, children retained the right to decline participation. Recruitment and group allocation were managed by the EEO leaders, who ensured that both the children's and parents' consent was obtained. We are aware that this might have influenced the group composition, e.g., by including children considered particularly communicative. The groups were composed to maximize diversity in terms of age and gender. If children were not actively participating in discussions, they were gently encouraged to share their thoughts to capture a broad range of perspectives. However, we fully respected any child's decision to refrain from expressing their views, in line with their right to opt out (Dockett et al., 2009). Despite this, we argue that data saturation was achieved across the different locations, as no new themes or insights emerged after conducting the 46 photo tours and group interviews. The group interviews as well as the photo tours were transcribed and anonymized so that names of children are not visible. For this paper we analyzed all transcript sections which focused on participation.

These data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz, 2018) using MAXQDA. This method was chosen because it allows for a combination of theory-driven and data-driven coding: The analysis began with a deductive category system, based on the model of participation by Biedermann and Oser (2006) and the categories of Lundy (2007). This led to the creation of the main theoretical categories: space, voice, audience, influence, and boundaries, each with associated subcategories. In Table 1 the full categories stem with examples from the data are presented.

A sample of the same material was coded independently by the two authors to ensure intersubjective comprehensibility. After comparing and discussing the coding, additional inductive categories were developed — mainly in relation to specific spaces mentioned by the children. This expanded category (Table 1) system was then applied to a second data sample and again checked for coding agreement.

In the first step of analysis, we described the categories based on summarized data and used illustrative quotes to highlight key findings and ensure transparency regarding data grounding. In the second step, we examined the material for recurring patterns across categories, which we present in relation to the different dimensions of participation.

6 Results

The results section is divided into three parts: First, we examine the categories Space and Voice, highlighting their interconnection — opportunities for participation are closely tied to how children express themselves and engage with these opportunities. Second, we present findings related to Audience, Influence, and the boundaries that shape or limit participation. The categories presented below correspond to the analytical framework outlined in Table 1, illustrating how different dimensions of participation — such as space, voice, audience, and influence — are experienced by children in their everyday lives within EEOs. Finally, we identify patterns that emerged across all categories, offering a broader understanding of how participation is practiced and perceived by children within the institutional context of EEOs.

6.1 Space and voice

The children named various spaces for participation, which can be categorized into (a) topics where they perceive participation

TABLE 1 Category system.

Deductive category	Subcodes	Examples
Space	Activities for the group	I: Yes. (.) And, um, do you get to have a say in things like, for example, whether you go on a trip to the fountain, or to the theater, or to the movies? P: (several) Yes.
	Activities for themselves / Freeplay	I: Okay, what about freedom, um, you choose the rooms you go to, right? P: (several) Yes.
	Material	We wanted new games.
	Sports hall	Well, in gym class very often. In gym class, we are allowed to suggest what game we want to play next time.
	Food	I: Can you also suggest what you want to eat? P: Yes, we could do that once. Hot dogs, sushi.
Audience	Heard	I: One last question. What if you go to a caregiver and say, "I would like this," that you want to do something. Does that happen? P: Sometimes, sometimes. P: But then the teacher or someone says, "No, tomorrow or the day after." P: And then they do not do it tomorrow or the day after.
	Listen to	P: Hmm, well, I'm usually allowed to have a say in things.
Influence	Feedback /	I also have something on the topic. We actually wanted to ask in the EEO if we could put up walls here, but then they said "No," we are not allowed to do that
	Influence	I: Cannot you choose what food there is? P: Yes, sometimes we can choose. P: Pizza day.
	No-influence	S: She says no to almost everything.
Forms of Participation /voice	Informed	Activity zone plan
	Consulted	Exactly, the day after tomorrow, so on that day we then/could write down everything we can do, and then, yeah, maybe we'll do it sometime.
	Deciding together	Hmm, no. Someone makes a suggestion, then an adult says 'yes, that's okay,' and then someone else comes up with a suggestion, and then they are combined, and then we get what we want.
	Collaborating	Um, they just ask us, 'What do you want to do?' and once we said we wanted to buy chips and drinks, and we were allowed to do that. I do not know if the others are allowed to do that too. But = we were allowed to.
	Self-Determination	And what I generally like is that you can decide when you want to eat, whether you want to go to the gym.
	Externally	I: Who decides here? P1: The adults. I: And can you have a say? P2: Nope.
Boundaries of participation	Room, Norms	No! Not everything we want! Not watching TV.

opportunities and (b) institutionalized formats. The key spaces identified in the data were free play, group activities, food-related practices, and the sports hall. Across these spaces, children reported different forms of participation (*voices*). In fact, they referred to all categories of voice described in Table 1.

Free play was consistently associated with self-determination. In all EEOs, children were able to choose their own activities. This autonomy included selecting rooms or engaging in preferred activities, such as playing games or painting:

> I: You can choose in which room you go?
>
> Several Ps: Yes!
>
> P1: Yes, we can decide where we will go [in the EEO], that's / that I mean by freedom. (A3, p.138)

Some EEOs use an activity zone system, which children highlighted during the photo tours. In this system, staff inform children about open rooms, enabling them to choose where to go and what to do. In other EEOs, children are assigned to fixed group rooms but still have the freedom to select activities within them.

Group activities were present in all EEOs. Here, we found various examples of externally determined formats in which staff selected the activities for the group:

> So, you can say, yes, when they ask: "Do you want to come along?" But you can't decide whether it's going to be a skating week or something like that. You can't choose the topic yourself. (B2, p.223)

This highlights that while children may choose whether to participate in a group activity or opt out, they are rarely involved in determining what that activity for the whole group will be.

Mechanisms such as wish boxes, wish lists, and, in one case, formalized children's participation meetings provide avenues for *consultation* and *decision-making*. When it comes to *deciding together*, small groups of friends often collaborate on what they want to do. For whole-group activities, children provide examples such as choosing games or activities to engage in collectively. Various methods exist for making these decisions, including finding an agreement where everyone can choose once (for example music) or using a majority vote as well as drawing a raffle ticket:

> Our group always does this after brushing our teeth: we have a basket where we can write down 'F' for football, or 'B' for building, or something like that. (F6, p.404)

Still, children expressed a wish to suggest more collective activities such as baking or visiting a museum. In the **sports hall**, consultation was the most common format. Children reported that they could suggest games to play:

> So, in sport quite often. In sport, we are allowed to wish for which game we want to play next time. (C5, p.91)

In some cases, joint decision-making was also used in this space, for example through majority voting.

Food was another recurring topic. Children could request specific menus and, in some EEOs, evaluate the meals by giving ratings. However, due to health-related constraints, participation in this domain often remained limited to consultation. In a few EEOs, children helped prepare snacks for the group — indicating a more collaborative form of participation. One EEO had a highly structured participation format that included children's meetings

> P1: So, always after the holidays, there is a week where it [box for wishes] is available. There are slips of paper inside, and then you can write your wishes on them.
>
> P2: No, there are slips of paper where you can write what you would like to eat.
>
> P3: Or also what you want to do in the EEO. Then the leaders look at which wishes are possible and which are not, and then there is a participation meeting, that's what we call it, where a few children select which of the possible wishes will be implemented and when. (E3, p.93)

Children also reported that some of their material wishes — such as for new sofas or board games — had been fulfilled, which they interpreted as outcomes of joint decision-making.

Participation opportunities were not distributed equally. Children reported that participation opportunities varied by age and group size.

> P1: Yes, but the other groups NEVER get to decide, the others usually don't get to participate in the decisions at all.
>
> P2: Yes, but we are just a small group, so we can also decide faster, and we are older. (D5, p.347)

Overall, the data show that participation opportunities were more common in individual contexts such as free play, while group-based activities tended to be more predefined and staff-led. Formal, institutionalized participation mechanisms, such as wish boxes or lists, exist in several EEOs, whereas participation meetings are present in only one.

6.2 Audience, influence and boundaries

This section explores how children perceive the responsiveness of adults to their expressed views (*audience*) and whether these views have a tangible impact on decision-making processes (*influence*). The analysis is based on the subcategories *heard* and *listened to* (audience), as well as *influence*, *no influence*, and *feedback* (influence), as outlined in Table 1.

Participation becomes meaningful only when children's input is not merely acknowledged but also taken seriously and reflected in actions. The children's accounts paint a nuanced picture: while some describe experiences of genuine influence, others report tokenistic practices or a lack of clarity about how and why decisions are made. This suggests that the quality of participation is not only a matter of offering space and voice, but also of ensuring responsive and transparent adult engagement.

Children noted that staff members differ in how attentively they listen to them. Some staff members ask for their input but do not genuinely listen:

> And I actually think it's pretty good now that you can accept yourself like that, because in the past, it annoyed me a bit that this cook sometimes added something to my food that I didn't want, even though I said I didn't want it. Even when I said 'I don't want that', she still added it to my food. (C3, p.208)

In contrast, other staff members listen to children's voices and take them seriously by allowing them to experience genuine influence over decisions made within the EEOs. When staff actively listen to children, they feel heard, fostering a sense of self-efficacy; however, if staff members do not engage meaningfully with children's voices, this can lead to tokenism — where children's participation feels superficial rather than impactful.

Children often express confusion about why some of their wishes are granted while others are not, they frequently mention a lack of feedback regarding these decisions. In some EEOs, children may not even be aware of where wish boxes are located or that they exist at all:

> P1: But sometimes [Name of EEO staff member] also asks us what we want to do.
>
> P2: Very often.
>
> P3: And then, yeah, I know.
>
> P2: But then it almost never happens. (D6, p.246)

The children identified various boundaries affecting their participation rights. Notably, age plays a significant role. Another boundary is the needs of other children:

> Look, but when you serve yourself, then/ then/then sometimes you take too much and there is nothing left for the others. (A4, p.82)

Additionally, structural boundaries limit opportunities for participation; for example, room size can restrict freedom when choosing where to eat or what activities to engage in, while unhealthy wishes — such as eating sweets or watching TV — are often dismissed.

For some children, the space for participation seems overwhelming:

> P: We are allowed to decide, but it also takes quite a long time until everyone has been somewhat covered. For example, child X, she always starts to say something like (.) something to child Y like he's stupid or something, and then it always takes a long time. And we can't really explain what we want to do. (B1, p.107)

Not everyone uses the right to opt out of participation; others do not use the right to participate:

> I: And are they always the same ones who speak, or/?
>
> P1: No, not really. But a few are QUIET, say NOTHING at all. (B1, p.188)

Further, we found examples illustrating that children often misunderstand the process of participation, frequently confusing decision-making with the idea that their opinion should always prevail. However, participation also means accepting that the majority's decision may override individual preferences.

> P: But I never get to decide. BECAUSE there are always other children who get to decide. And I just never get to decide.
>
> I: And YOU don't, why not?
>
> P: Because other children are always chosen.
>
> I: Yes. Do you also have this impression, or do you find it still fairly distributed?
>
> P: Hm-mh, I always get to decide. (C6, p.117)

This quote demonstrates the previously described pattern: both children have the same opportunity to participate, but they experience it differently. These findings suggest that *audience* and *influence* are deeply interconnected: Without transparent and respectful engagement from adults, children may feel that their voices have little value, even when invited to speak. True participation in EEOs requires not only asking for children's input but also providing feedback, negotiating boundaries, and ensuring that participation is perceived as fair, inclusive, and effective.

6.3 Patterns

As part of the second part of our analysis, this section presents recurring patterns across the different dimensions of participation as

experienced by children in EEOs. By synthesizing findings from the previously discussed categories — space, voice, audience, and influence — we identified patterns that offer a deeper understanding of how participation is practiced and perceived from the perspective of children in everyday EEO contexts.

The following Table 2 provides a condensed overview of participation forms as experienced across four key domains of EEO life: Free Play, Food, Group Activities, and the Sports Hall. Each row corresponds to a specific setting, and the columns represent the main forms of participation, the type of adult responsiveness (audience), the degree of influence children experienced, the perceived effect of this influence, and the boundaries or structural limits encountered. The table must be read from left to right, as each row illustrates how participation unfolds in context.

During free play, children often experience self-determination, a common feature across EEOs, fostering a sense of self-efficacy. However, their choices are often constrained by room availability, structure (limited spaces for some activities) and norms (e.g., "Do not disturb others.").

Food-related decisions reveal varying degrees of participation. In settings with "open restaurant" systems, children can choose when, where, and what to eat – which fosters self-efficacy. We also observed collaborative forms of participation, such as children evaluating meals or preparing snacks. When children's voices are listened to and taken seriously, this results in influence and self-efficacy. However, when their input is merely heard without resulting in action or feedback, this leads to tokenism, generating frustration.

Children described a range of consultation practices regarding food. While they are often asked about their preferences, the response to their input is inconsistent. Some children reported being listened to, with their preferences respected. Others described situations where food they explicitly rejected was still served—without explanation. This lack of transparency results in perceived tokenism. For example, when wishes for certain foods (e.g., pizza) are fulfilled sometimes but ignored at other times without feedback, participation becomes symbolic rather than meaningful. Even when decisions not to fulfill wishes are justifiable (e.g., for health reasons), the absence of explanations fosters mistrust and disappointment. This underscores the importance of feedback and transparent communication by adults, as emphasized in Lundy's concept of "audience" (2007). In some EEOs without open restaurant systems, even decisions about when and where to eat are externally determined, further limiting participation.

Regarding group activities, we found similar patterns to food. While collaboration was not mentioned, children described various forms of "deciding together," such as everyone taking turns or drawing raffle tickets. When these processes are respected by adults, they lead to influence and self-efficacy.

The sports hall follows similar patterns. A key difference here is the use of majority voting, which sometimes led to frustration—especially when children felt their individual vote did not matter. In one EEO, this issue was addressed by protecting minority interests; when football was the majority's constant preference, staff members ensured that other suggestions were also implemented at times. This approach promoted fairness and inclusivity. Here, too, transparent communication about boundaries and shared rules is crucial to avoid the perception of unfairness and increase the legitimacy of participation.

TABLE 2 Patterns of participation in EEOs.

Space	Main form	Audience	Influence	Effect	Boundaries
Freeplay	Self-determination	–	Influence	Self-efficacy	Room availability, structure and norms
Food	Self-determination		Influence	Self-efficacy	Structure, Health, room availability
	Collaborating: Feedback, evaluation, preparing snacks	Listened to	Influence	Participation- > Self-efficacy	Health
		Heard	No influence	Tokenism- > frustration	Health
	Consulted: what in the plate / wish	Heard	No influence	Tokenism- > frustration	Health
		Listened to	Influence	Participation- > Self-efficacy	Health
	Externally determined		No influence		Health
Group activities/ excursions/	Self-determination (opt out option)	–	Influence	Self-determination	Others and their wellbeing, safety
	Consulted	Listened to	Influence	Participation- > Self-efficacy	Age, size, feasability
		Heard	No influence and feedback		
	Deciding-together: every one once/ to draw a raffle ticket	Listened to	Influence	Participation- > Self-efficacy	
	Informed	–	No influence		
	Externally determined		No influence		
Sports Hall	Self-determination (opt out option)	–	Influence	Self-determination	Others and their wellbeing, safety
	Consulted	Listened to	Influence	Participation- > Self-efficacy	Age, size, feasability
		Heard	No influence and feedback		
	Deciding-together: majority vote	Listened to	Influence	Participation- > Self-efficacy	Minority protection
			No influence	Participation- > Accepting the effect	
				Not understanding the process participation -> frustration	
	Externally determined		No influence		

Overall, Table 2 and corresponding examples demonstrate that the experience of participation is shaped not only by whether opportunities exist, but also by how they are framed, mediated, and responded to by adults. Boundaries such as age, space, health considerations, and institutional structure significantly impact whether children perceive their participation as meaningful or symbolic.

7 Discussion

This study examines children's views on participation in EEOs in a Swiss canton. The findings reveal that children feel they have more influence over personal choices, such as whether to participate in an activity, compared to determining the content of group activities, a result that aligns with previous research (Gerbeshi et al., 2024). Participation is notably high in sports hall activities, confirming earlier findings (Coelen and Wagener, 2010).

The study found varying structures across the nine EEOs, with some using formal meetings for participation, while others rely on informal methods like wish boxes. Across all EEOs, children

experience space for participation (Lundy, 2007), and all forms of participation were found (Biedermann and Oser, 2006). However, externally determined formats still dominate group-based activities, indicating that opportunities for deeper involvement are often limited to individual spaces such as free play.

These findings underscore the importance of participation as a dimension of process quality in EEOs (e.g., Landwehr, 2015). While space and self-determination were often realized, the inconsistent presence of influence and audience suggests that quality remains uneven across institutional settings.

8 Conclusion

Our research explored how children perceive their participation rights, the extent to which they feel heard by staff, and how their perspectives can influence their experience in the EEOs. The results indicate both opportunities and challenges in integrating children's voices into the decision-making processes within EEOs.

Institutions that empower children to explore autonomy and engage in decision-making are vital for fostering democratic skills and promoting well-being (Sauerwein and Grasshoff, 2022). Our study shows that EEOs can fulfill this role effectively by offering diverse forms of participation across topics and activities (Biedermann and Oser, 2006), thereby supporting children's development as active citizens. However, meaningful participation depends on transparent and responsive feedback: staff must not only ask for children's views, but explain how these views are considered and why certain suggestions are implemented while others are not. This helps prevent participation from becoming symbolic and instead fosters a sense of recognition and trust among children.

To achieve this, staff need ongoing training to integrate children's voices effectively and prioritize participation in daily practices (Macha et al., 2024). As Lundy (2007) and our results point out, children's views are essential but must be balanced with professional responsibilities regarding safety, health, and pedagogical objectives. This requires transparent communication of boundaries and appropriate adjustments for different age groups and their capacities. Additionally, EEOs should recognize age-related differences in children's ability to express their opinions and adapt their approaches accordingly.

In the canton where this study was conducted, the Ministry of Education initiated a revision of the existing quality framework for EEOs, involving both practitioners and our research team. Children's voices should not only be heard at the practice level but also inform policy decisions. As researchers, we contributed to the revision process by bringing children's voices from our study into these policy discussions.

A key example was the debate about removing "meal" as a quality dimension. The practice group argued that the open restaurant system had reduced its relevance. However, our findings (Näpfli and Schweinberger, 2025) showed that meals remain central to children's daily well-being. We advocated for retaining the dimension based on the children's views—and it remained. This case also illustrates how researchers can act as "knowledge brokers" (Ward et al., 2009), bridging the gap between children's lived experiences and institutional decision-making. While children rarely participate directly in policymaking, such mediated approaches enable their perspectives to influence systems that shape their everyday lives. It also aligns with participatory principles enshrined in the UNCRC and childhood sociology expanding these research-informed processes could embed participatory principles more deeply into educational governance at both local and national levels.

The concept of an "interactive space"(Coburn and Stein, 2010) was crucial during the framework revision process, allowing children's voices—conveyed through research—to influence decisions collaboratively with practitioners and policymakers. Strengthening such spaces and fostering more exchange among EEOs on participatory practices would further enhance the quality and consistency of participation across institutions.

In summary, our research underscores the importance of actively listening to children's voices in EEOs and integrating their perspectives into policy frameworks. While there are significant opportunities for enhancing children's participation rights, challenges remain that must be addressed through targeted training for staff, structural changes within EEOs, and clearer communication about participation processes. By fostering an environment where all children feel heard and valued, the EEOs can promote the well-being of children and enhance their democratic skills.

Data availability statement

Author contributions

JN: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. KS: Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The authors declare that Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. Generative AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT and deepl) were used to support language editing and phrasing during the manuscript preparation. All intellectual content, analysis, and interpretation were created and reviewed by the authors. The authors remain fully responsible for the content.

Publisher's note

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