



# Constructing child participation in early years classrooms: An exploration from Wales

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## Abstract

This paper addresses the research problem that arises from evidence that, despite supportive policy contexts, enactment of pedagogies that attend to young children's participation rights in classroom settings is highly variable. We report our exploration of the ways in which the child, and child participation are constructed in early education settings in Wales, where legislation and policy around children's rights has been a key feature of the Welsh Government agenda post-devolution. Data were gathered via a qualitative online bilingual (English and Welsh) survey offered via email to teachers of children aged 3–7 in Wales. The overarching research question of the project was: How do teachers of children 3–7 years understand and enact the notion of participation as it relates to the children they teach? Data analysis focused on research participants' apparent constructions of the children they teach and their capabilities, and unpacked the ways in which these constructions relate to the reported opportunities for participation. The discussion is informed by the notion of the threshold concept, described by Meyer & Land as akin to a portal that opens new and previously inaccessible ways of thinking. We consider the extent to which the conceptual construction

of the capable child maybe a threshold concept in shaping the realisation of children's participation rights in educative contexts.

#### KEYWORDS

child participation, construction of childhood, early education, early years, Wales

## INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses the research problem that arises from evidence that, despite supportive policy contexts, enactment of pedagogies that attend to young children's participation rights in classroom settings is highly variable and can be weak or lacking (Konstantoni, 2013; Lewis et al., 2017; Murphy et al., 2022). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) has been embraced in the global context and fervently adopted in post-devolution policy and law in Wales. The research is set in the context of Wales where the stance taken on children's rights is a distinguishing feature of policy and has been described as 'emblematic' of Welsh devolution (Butler & Drakeford, 2013; Williams, 2013). We seek to understand better the ways in which the teacher frames young children's participation and what may shape this. Such insights may enable us to understand why there is limited evidence to indicate that children routinely access their participation rights in education settings in Wales (see Lewis et al., 2017).

Participation rights are considered here to be those pertaining especially to article 12 of the UNCRC which states that all children have a right to participate in decisions that affect them. Sometimes referred to as 'pupil voice', 'the voice of the child' or 'the right to be heard', terms which have been traced back to the endorsement of the UNCRC (Noyes, 2005), we recognise that these terms are poorly defined and contested (Murray, 2019; Robinson & Taylor, 2007). Alongside this, we note there is a paucity of research that explores what children's participation in early education looks like within Wales (see Murphy et al., 2022), and we set out to understand better the relationship between teachers' perception(s) of the child and their descriptions of pedagogies that support children's participation. We adopt the lens of agency, discussed below, to support analysis of data provided in a survey offered to teachers of children aged 3–7 years which set out to explore perception and practice associated with the enactment of young children's participation rights in Welsh classrooms.

The paper is set out in seven sections, firstly we set what is meant by participation and pedagogy. Secondly, we establish the theoretical frame for the study, namely the construction of the child and childhood agency. The third section describes the local context in terms of policy and curriculum requirements. Fourthly, we set out the methods adopted during analysis. Presentation of findings follow, in which we set out the apparent relationships between the teachers' construction of the child, child agency and participation evident in the data. The discussion section then seeks to explain the findings, by considering the threshold concept (Meyer & Land, 2003) and finally we signify the implications of the study for the enactment of children's participation rights in ECE classrooms and professional learning.

## PARTICIPATION AND PARTICIPATORY PEDAGOGY

Defining participation is challenging as the term is often seen as being interchangeable with notions of voice and agency (Arnott & Wall, 2022). Hart (1992) created the *ladder of participation* to reflect critically on the notion of children's participation in programmes, projects and organisations. He described participation as 'the process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives', (1992, p. 5) and explained that participation rights start as soon as a child is born. Hart (2008) later recognised the limitations of such a narrow approach when considering the complex way that children participate in their communities and acknowledged that the ladder 'is largely limited to describing the varying roles adults play in relation to children's participation' (p. 20).

In this study, children's participation is understood from the perspective of the UNCRC (1989) and so includes the right of the child to be heard (CRC/C/GC/12), be respected as persons in their own right (CRC/C/GC/7/rev1), able to 'make choices and communicate their feelings, ideas, and wishes in numerous ways' (CRC/C/GC/7/rev1, p. 3) including through non-verbal means. Moreover, we maintain that participation is a fluid notion and should be considered in the context within which it occurs. As Papadopoulou and Sidorenko (2021) argue 'participatory space should be seen as a political arena, where different and often competing agendas are at play, where the roles and relationships between children and adults are far from fixed, and where the capacity for agentic action is always socially mediated and shaped by social structure' (p. 354). The context of the early childhood setting is just one such political arena, in which the knowledge and position of adults are particularly relevant in affording young children's rights to participation (Theobald, 2019).

Ree and Emilson (2019) explored communication between educators and young children in early years settings in Norway and argue that notions of participation go beyond having a voice in decision-making processes but encapsulate notions of inclusion, acceptance and engagement alongside agency and voice. They define participation as 'how children are included, accepted, engaged, and taking part in communities' (p. 2230), and this definition draws attention to relational aspects such as how others respond to the child. This shifts the focus from what the child does to participate towards how the child is recognised and responded to as a participant. Such conceptualisation is also evident in another concept often linked with participation: listening.

Moss et al. (2005) reflect on listening as a way of moving beyond decision-making, towards children having a sense of belonging and feeling part of a community. This broadens the notion of listening from being purely an aural function to encompassing a multisensory and multifaceted conceptualisation of the term. Lundy's (2007) work also explores listening to young children as a process; she proposes a voice model which provides a theoretical and practical understanding of Article 12, based on four interrelated elements: space, voice, audience and influence. From this position it is not sufficient to recognise the interests of children at a superficial level; there is a need for adults to take these views seriously and act on what has been said (Chicken & Tyrie, 2023). Recognition of 'pluralism' in children's perspectives is also required (Murray, 2019, p. 1) and the onus, for adults, is placed upon the responses given to children's perspectives, summed up as 'not only hearing – but attending to' (ibid.). This approach requires teachers to be receptive to children's voice and to leave behind preconceptions of what children should or can say and know at any particular time. It has been argued that this in turn requires teachers to hold certain perceptions or constructions of the 'capable' child in order that they can respond to children's perspectives within their pedagogical approach (Barros Araujo, 2022; Waters-Davies & MacDonald, 2022).

Participatory pedagogy can be defined as classroom modes that support children's participation rights and agency, and which enable children to 'express and enact their own ideas, perspectives and knowledge' (Carey-Jenkins, 2018; Mascadri et al., 2021, p. 2). Pedagogical approaches do not necessarily attend to children's views and/or include opportunities for participation, and this has been particularly evident for younger children (Lansdown et al., 2014). The application of participatory pedagogies is challenging; Konstantoni (2013) explored the interpretation of the rights-based policy context in early years settings in Scotland. She examined the processes of children's active participation and contends that practitioners construe participation too selectively in practice. While participation was expressly valued by early years staff, there were restrictions in their practice; for example, the practitioners would not really 'listen' to the children or enact their expressed wishes. Similar issues were evident in studies in Ireland, the 'Seeing Voices: Voice of the Child' project (Louth Leader Partnership, 2021) carried out with 288 children aged from 1 to 5 and 56 educators in Ireland recognised that practitioners understood how important voice and participation were in the early years. However, the documentary analysis undertaken as part of this project found that observations of the children were often written from a deficit perspective and learning stories lacked individual voices, and the decision-making voice of the child was absent in these types of documentation. The project found that in transferring the policy rhetoric into practice, 'the focus on the child became diluted' (Louth Leader Partnership, 2021 p. 32). More recently the project 'Look Who's Talking' in Scotland has generated discussion and research regarding enabling children's voices within the early years (Wall et al., 2019). Cassidy et al. (2022) acknowledge the need for a re-evaluation of the ways in which we recognise and determine children's capacity to participate in order to translate rights-based ideologies into meaningful practice. Lewis et al. (2017) similarly argue that in Wales there is a 'limited, patchy and variable evidence base for the enactment of young children's rights in education settings in Wales' (p. 27). The research problem explored here is to understand better the relationship between practitioners' perception of the child and their enactment of participatory pedagogy; given that such enactment appears to be problematic (Konstantoni, 2013; Lewis et al., 2017) despite the supportive policy contexts in Wales, Ireland and Scotland.

The enactment of children's rights in Welsh primary classrooms has been associated with teachers' varied constructions of childhood which affected how they responded to the UNCRC principles and how they tried to portray these within their practice (Lyle, 2014). Teachers in Lyle's study held a range of different constructions of children, such as 'the innocent child ... the child as a blank slate ... [and] the developing and immature child' (2014, p. 222), and some participants thought that the realisation of UNCRC principles was a 'threat' to how they viewed their role, power and agency as teachers. This belief was more prevalent among teachers who favoured an authoritarian teaching style, while teachers who perceived children as socially competent were more likely to adopt UNCRC principles, particularly a child's right to have their voice heard. Lyle's research was conducted with teachers working with primary-aged children aged over 7 years, over a decade ago; however, her findings are relevant to those in this study because of the associations she reported between the constructions of the child displayed by the teachers and how this manifested itself in the enactment of participation within the primary classroom.

More recently, in a study concerning prospective early years teachers' constructions of the young child before and after practicum experience in Portugal, Barros Araujo (2022) reports recognition of children as agents is more robust in students' discourses after practicum. She tentatively suggests that practicum experiences provided the opportunity for students 'to reflect on the image of the child they held' (p. 907). However, citing considerable research (e.g., Avgitidou et al., 2013; Salamon & Harrison, 2015) in this area she recognises that 'changes are dependent

upon opportunities for systematic observation and reflection by the student, and on the quality of support by mentors' (ibid.) and that the students in her study were engaged in considerable and purposeful 'opportunities for renewed situated understandings of the image of the child' through discussion with mentors (p. 907). These findings suggest that the construction of the child requires direct attention during programmes of preparation for those intending to work with young children, in schools and/or care settings. We return to this idea in our discussion.

## THEORETICAL FRAME

To address the research problem, we draw upon the conceptual construction of the child and childhood agency. We use the construction of the child and childhood agency as a way of framing how teachers perceive the children they work with and their capacities.

The construction of the child refers to the way in which the child and/or childhood is understood, conceptualised or imagined within a social group. As James and Prout explain 'Childhood, as distinct from biological immaturity, is neither a natural nor a universal feature of human groups but appears as a specific structural and cultural component of many societies' (James & Prout, 1990, p. 8). That is, the way a social group understand childhood, and the child, is culturally located. In this paper, the social group of the participants is teachers who work with young children aged 3–7 years within the Welsh context. We are interested therefore in the way in which children and their capabilities are constructed by teachers, and how the teachers construct children's participation in their classrooms.

Aligned with the construction of the child is the concept of childhood agency (James et al., 1998) which positions the child as social actor, 'active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live' (James & Prout, 1990, p. 8). Children are not therefore the passive subjects of social structures and processes. Teachers' conceptions of young children's capabilities influence their behaviour towards the children and have significant implications for children's educational experiences as indicated in the international literature (Salamon & Harrison, 2015). Similarly, we posit that, within the school context, the way in which teachers perceive the children they work with, that is their construction of the child and the child's capabilities, determines how they construct children's agency, and children's participation, and therefore how they shape their pedagogy.

Constructions of the child that have been dominant over time and across different cultural contexts include the image of the child as: a deficient being (defined by what s/he cannot do), a developmental being (defined by normative understandings of development), a vulnerable being (defined by weakness and immaturity) and, in recent years especially in literature related to childhood agency, the 'child as actor' (Esser et al., 2016, p. 6; see also Baader, 2015). These constructions extend those offered by Lyle (2014), as described above. Esser et al. (2016) problematise the notion of child as actor, that is the child with 'autonomous capacity for action' (p. 8), within the context of global inequalities, feminist theory and the rejection of 'fictions of Western autonomy' (p. 8). They set out the aspiration to locate [childhood] agency within social relations and interdependency instead of independence and autonomy. This requires the assumption that 'agency is not inherent in individual entities but that these entities themselves and their agency are originally produced in relationships' (Esser et al., 2016, p. 9). In turn, such an assumption also challenges intentional and cognitive understandings of agency. As a result, 'agency can be seen as a realised, situated, permuted capacity that can be accomplished through the combination of various, interconnected "persons" and "things"' (Raithelhuber, 2016, p. 98). We support such an



assertion as it helps us consider, and attend to, the complex context of the school setting, and the similarly complex relationships between culture, history, reified practices, curriculum and pedagogy that sit across the people and things that inhabit a school space. We support the assertion that agency therefore 'is produced in conjunction with a whole network of different human and non-human actors and is distributed among these' (Esser et al., 2016, p. 9). It is on this basis that we explore teachers' perceptions of children and their capacities, and the relationship such perceptions have with teachers' reports of children's participation in school contexts.

## WELSH CONTEXT

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989, was momentous in the emergence of attention across all aspects of children's rights. Since devolution in Wales in 1998, politicians have placed children's rights centrally in legislation and policymaking encompassing a 'children first' approach. As such Wales has been the leading nation on children's rights within the UK, making children's rights 'emblematic' of Welsh devolution (Butler & Drakeford, 2013; Williams, 2013). Wales formally adopted the UNCRC in 2004 and as such, was the first nation in the UK to establish a Children's Commissioner. The Welsh Government's Seven Core Aims for Children, guided by the UNCRC, were set out in *Children and Young People: Rights to Action* in 2004. Subsequently, the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure (2011) provided a legislative framework to enshrine children's rights in law, underlining Wales' commitment to children's rights and the UNCRC (Welsh Government (WG), 2022). The Measure necessitates Welsh Ministers to have due regard to the UNCRC when decision-making around legislation and policy in Wales including completion of the Children's Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) to support compliance (WG, 2022).

Since 2011, further policies have been developed to support children's rights in Wales including the Children and Young People's National Participation Standards (WG, 2018). The standards support organisations and individuals working with children and young people to place participation centrally in their day-to-day work. The Standards are underpinned by the UNCRC and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which sees the involvement of children as crucial to improving well-being (Children in Wales, 2016).

In line with the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure (2011), the UNCRC is fundamental to children's educational experiences in Wales and therefore should be reflected in all aspects of planning and delivery of teaching and learning experiences. In the early years, the Foundation Phase Framework for 3–7-year-olds in Wales was introduced in 2008 and updated further in 2015 (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008; WG 2015). This curriculum was in place during the time that these data for this project were collected and is characterised by play based, experiential pedagogy incorporating a balance between adult and child-initiated activities. Embedding the Seven Core Aims, the framework presented an emancipatory vision for children (Waters, 2016) with well-being and personal development as central tenets of this vision with the intention of supporting the child's right to participation (Murphy et al., 2022).

The education system in Wales is currently amid a sustained period of reform, which began with the review of the curriculum and assessment arrangements in Wales by Donaldson (2015). Within the Curriculum for Wales (CfW; WG, 2023) introduced in 2022, there is a commitment to uphold what has been labelled effective Foundation Phase pedagogy, as well as making sure that practice reflects current perceptions regarding how young children learn (Donaldson, 2015). The CfW represents a re-evaluation of pedagogy and curriculum-making across the statutory school

sector. It seeks to move from a prescriptive to a co-constructive stance, encouraging teachers to co-produce a localised curricular experience with learners and other community stakeholders. The CfW framework is underpinned by the Four Purposes which are at the core of the curriculum, designed to support children to be ethical informed citizens who understand and exercise their human and democratic responsibilities and rights, and respect the needs and rights of others, as a member of a diverse society (WG, 2023). This places children's participation centrally within the curriculum, as well as supporting schools to incorporate human rights education and rights-based approaches into pedagogy and school-level curriculum design and development (WG, 2023).

## METHODS

This paper reports on secondary analysis of data generated via a survey which sought to explore how teachers working with 3–7-year-olds (at the time, Foundation Phase teachers) *understand* and describe their *enactment* of the notion of participation as it relates to the children they teach. Primary data were collected via a bilingual (Welsh and English) online qualitative survey in the latter part of 2020 and early 2021. An online survey was chosen due to the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic which prevented the research team from visiting settings to collect the data. It was distributed across education networks and via social media across Wales and invited respondents to describe what children's participation meant to them, and how their pedagogic approaches supported children's participation. 26 responses were received in both English and Welsh. Five of the respondents did not attempt the questions related to enactment although they did complete the questions relating to their understanding of participation.

Findings from primary analysis of the data concluded that the Welsh Government's 'child first' commitment to children's rights does not translate directly into practice (see Murphy et al., 2022). The data indicated that practitioners' perceptions of participation are varied and context specific. Some teachers were unaware of participation as an aspect of their pedagogy and others were reflective about the role of participation in their daily pedagogical decision-making. Nevertheless, knowledge and practices concerning young children's participation in school contexts were restricted (see also Chicken & Tyrie, 2023) in some examples by varied judgements about the competency and agency of young children. That is, some teachers reported that their children were too young or did not yet have the required capacities for participation. For some respondents 'participation is enacted within specific activities rather than being an overarching participatory pedagogy' (Murphy et al., 2022). Examples of the boundaries placed by respondents around children's participation were both temporal (e.g., children can participate at certain pre-designated times), and spatial (e.g., they can participate in certain spaces). The full report of findings from the study can be found in Murphy et al. (2022). One of the most striking features evident in the data was the variation in responses across the respondents.

We were interested in the variation across the responses we received and began to discuss the possible reasons for these. This discussion was, in part, driven by research undertaken in the Welsh pre-school sector (Waters-Davies & MacDonald, 2022) in which a small minority of early childhood practitioners persistently described children as being too young, too socially disadvantaged and with too limited a verbal skill set to think independently and ask questions. The persistence of such conceptualisations, despite experiential professional learning focussed on children's competencies, was theorised as being related to an underpinning construction of the young child as incapable (that is, the young child was routinely constructed as deficient). It has long been established that beliefs

about the child drive professional practice (e.g., Barros Araujo, 2022; Biesta et al., 2015; Salamon & Harrison, 2015; Wilcox-Herzog, 2002), and Waters-Davies and MacDonald (2022) indicated that such beliefs were persistent and able to override core messages from national policy and targeted professional learning. As a result, we wanted to explore our survey data again to consider the extent to which specific constructions of the child were evident in survey responses, and how this related to the reported opportunities for children to participate.

In short, we wanted to investigate whether we could unpack the construction of the child that was implicit within the responses of the teachers, and if so, how such construction(s) related to the participation the teachers described. We re-read all the responses and created a draft code book (MacQueen et al., 1998; Oliveira, 2022) in which we loosely categorised the underpinning constructions of the child into three groups on a spectrum that was evident in the data. This was an inductive process based on discursive engagement with the data, which was iteratively informed by our prior engagement with literature about the construction of the child. For example, we identified four possible codes after initial familiarisation with the data: bounded child, controlled child, capable child and contradictory.

The 'bounded child' code was associated with data where the respondent had indicated that learners were provided with opportunities to make choices, provide information and share ideas at certain times in the school week or during certain activities, for example here in relation to planning for the week ahead:

'Pupil voice in planning learning/activities' Response 10.

And here where the response indicated that children might express a view, but there was no indication that the view would be acted upon:

'Children are given opportunities to express what they would like to explore and learn. They discuss opinion, likes and dislikes. They give their own views on what they want to learn. Children have a right to their own opinions' Response 13.

'Usually at the beginning of a new topic, children are introduced to a stimulus or hook and then their ideas are gathered in terms of what they want to learn' Response 14.

Such responses, we suggest indicate that the child is constructed as capable of sharing views, and offering ideas in specific contexts, and participation is understood to be children making such contributions during these specific contexts. The responsibility for decision-making about what happens to the children's contributions is held by the teacher.

The 'controlled child' code as used when children's participation was described as children engaging in pre-determined learning and conforming to expectations of learning behaviour such as here:

'Children completing activities independently and with support. Children's work on the walls. Children joining in games'. Response 37.

'When teaching, pupils are encouraged to participate during all aspects of the lesson and when learning, they are participating in group activities through discussions etc' Response 14.

In these responses the child, we suggest, is viewed as 'becoming' (James & James, 2004), and essentially incompetent; competency is indicated by the child demonstrating that they are engaged in desired behaviours. In such responses, we suggest that child is not viewed as inherently competent.

The 'capable child' code was allocated when the response indicated that children were listened to and responded to as a matter of routine, for example:

'Classroom experiences evolve from pupils' suggestions on how to enhance the classroom for learning. A fortnightly planning grid is produced with pupils' own activities listed. Class teacher facilitates their ideas'. Response 39.



‘Pupil Voice in shaping and determining how we teach and choice’. Respondent 4.

In such responses, we suggest the child appears to be considered capable and competent in making choices regarding their own learning and activity. The role of the adult is to listen to and respond to the child, children’s participation therefore shapes provision.

We used the ‘contradictory code’ for responses where pupil voice was seen as valued, however, the terminology used indicated adults provide permission so that participation is ‘allowed’, and so this may mask restricted or controlled participation, for example;

‘Children participation means allowing pupils to engage within lessons through discussions and to have a voice within the classroom setting’. Response 14.

There was limited data that was coded as ‘contradictory’, and this was removed prior to the second pass of data analysis.

We then scrutinised the data again, here we explored the features of each response that prompted our initial coding. We refined the codes to remove some overlap that was evident between ‘controlled’ and ‘bounded’ codes and created a new code, ‘deficit’. Data originally coded as ‘bounded’ was allocated to a revised code: ‘boundaried’ and the data originally coded as ‘controlled’ was reviewed and recoded either as ‘boundaried’ or ‘deficit’. This allowed us to draw out the nuance between a ‘boundaried’ view of child competence, which reflects the varied ways in which children’s participation was described as partial, and allocated to specific times, and places or permitted for certain children only, for example those who sat on school council. The ‘deficit’ view of the child reflects responses in which children’s participation was viewed as the extent to which they demonstrated engagement in pre-determined learning and desired behaviours.

This process of iterative engagement with the data was inevitably messy and time consuming; however, it enabled us to ensure rigour in our analytical process (Oliveira, 2022), refine the code-book categories (MacQueen et al., 1998) and identify the specific features of each of the resulting three categories.

## FINDINGS

As set out above, the analytical process enabled us to create three categories according to different constructions of the child that, we suggest, were evident in the data set: the *capable child*, the *boundaried child* and the *deficit child*. For each construction, we also set out the nature of participation associated with this construction alongside the role the adult (teacher) plays within this construction regarding the enactment of participation. The constructions of the child previously reported by Lyle (2014) and Esser et al. (2016) above, such as ‘the innocent child,’ ‘the child as a blank slate’ and ‘the developing and immature child’ were visible in the data in one of the categories, the *deficit child*.

The three categories are set out below with excerpts from the data used to exemplify them.

### The capable child

The child is understood as a rights holder and a capable enactor of decisions and/or choices and within the setting, the children’s interests drive curriculum provision. Responses indicate the adult is intentionally responsive to the child’s voice in the pedagogical decision-making process, an active listener and observer as well as being responsive and alert to all children. These responses were characterised by notions of inclusion, acceptance and engagement (Ree

& Emilson, 2019) and receptive listening (Moss et al., 2005) by the adult to facilitate the child's agency in all aspects of the learning experience.

The capable child construct was therefore associated with participation being constructed as adult responsiveness to the agency and voice of the child. The learning experiences offered, or made available, to the child are therefore responsive to the interests of the child. In this way the curriculum offer can be construed as being responsive to children's interests.

The following responses typify those categorised as being based on a construction of the capable child, the response code and age of the children the respondent taught are included after each exemplar response:

Learning environment which is resourced with open ended resources. Enhancing to follow individual needs and interests. Adapting spaces when needed. Staff tuned into learners' development and guiding and challenging learners at the right moment.

Response 53, age group 3–4 years

Active engagement in learning, pupil voice in shaping and determining how we teach and choice.

Response 4, age group 6–7 years

The children are independent and confident in their learning and have given their ideas in the areas of provision provided which enables them to access the learning they are enthused to do.

Response 93, age group 4–5 years

## The boundaried child

While the child is acknowledged as having competency to provide a view, this is only within specific contexts, at specific times and for specific purposes. The data indicated that children's views are secondary to other demands (e.g., a predefined or pre-planned curriculum) and only sought in order to service such higher demands.

The boundaried child construct was associated with participation being constructed as one-off or scheduled events or around specific decision-making, often governed by adult-driven processes such as teachers' planning, or to satisfy the school's need to evidence children's voices in decision-making. The adult role is that of facilitator for the enactment of participation and decision-making through specified mechanisms and at times or in spaces determined by the teacher.

The following responses typify those categorised as being based on a construction of the boundaried child:

Participating in 'Pupil Voice' sessions... collaborative discussion about how to enhance the classroom on a fortnightly basis to enhance the learning but equally continuing to stimulate interest and engagement.

Response 39, age group 6–7 years

Membership of the school's Senedd committee.

Response 6, age group 6–7 years

Each class integrates pupil contributions at the beginning of each term and planning should reflect this.

Response 74, age group 3–5 years

## The deficit child

The child is constructed as needing to be controlled, schooled or supported by an adult in order to conform to the expectations of developmental milestones and norms and/or the requirements of a predetermined curriculum.

The deficit child construct was associated with a construction of participation linked to notions of incompetence and the need for adult control or support to enable the child to overcome deficits in order to meet developmental norms or engage with predetermined learning experiences.

The following responses typify those categorised as being based on a construction of the deficit child:

Children that have additional needs, that don't have the adult support they need to help them participate, is a barrier to their participation.

Response 64, age group 6–7 years

At the earliest age, children need guidance to be able to formulate suggestions, and all need training to be able to make realistic workable contributions.

Response 74, age group 3–5 years

[participation is] Active listening and looking during teacher led learning. Taking part/talking and listening during adult led activities.

Response 27, age group 4–5 years

My children are very young so sometimes struggle to contribute to discussions around what they would like to learn.

Response 50, age group 3–5 years

## DISCUSSION

Our findings suggest a relationship between a teacher's construction of the child and her/his capabilities, and the opportunities for, and recognition of, children's participation and therefore their agency within classroom spaces. Such a relational understanding of child agency reflects the aspiration set out by Esser et al. (2016) to locate [childhood] agency within social relations and interdependency instead of independence and autonomy. This discussion therefore seeks to consider how agency 'is produced in conjunction with a whole network of different human and non-human actors and is distributed among these' (Esser et al., 2016, p. 9). We propose that the teacher's construction of the child forms part of the network within which children's

participation in school settings is structured. We suggest that the variation that exists across approaches to young children's participation in education settings is associated with variation in the underpinning construction of childhood held by early childhood educators.

Our analysis demonstrates a relationship between a capable construction of the child and child participation in the school context being conceptualised around adults being responsive to children's interests. The notion of the responsive adult is nothing new in early childhood education literature (e.g., Hamre et al., 2014); indeed, the role of the adult in responding to children's interests is emphasised in research evidencing how adults can extend or develop children's ideas, thinking and/or conceptual understanding (Fleer, 2019; Lewis et al., 2019; Sylva et al., 2014). Such practice therefore is a mainstay of local, national and international early childhood pedagogy, including the curriculum framework in place at the time of the data collection which required practitioners to understand, inspire and challenge children's potential for learning (WG, 2015). We might ask therefore why we received responses that indicated teachers of young children behaving in any other way, and we suggest that there is an extent to which the conceptual construction of the capable child maybe a *threshold concept* in shaping the realisation of children's participation rights in education contexts. Our data indicate that some teachers of young children hold constructions of the child that do not support children's full participation in ECE contexts, and that indeed limit, restrict and even deny such participation.

Alongside the construction of childhood and agency set out above, the work of Meyer and Land regarding the threshold concept is useful in consideration of constructions of the child implicit in education practice. Meyer and Land (2003) introduced the threshold concept and offer the following description:

A threshold concept can be considered as akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress. As a consequence of comprehending a threshold concept there may thus be a transformed internal view of subject matter, subject landscape, or even world view ... Such a transformed view or landscape may represent how people 'think' in a particular discipline, or how they perceive, apprehend, or experience particular phenomena within that discipline (or more generally)

(Meyer & Land, 2003, 1)

A threshold concept is distinguished from what might be considered a core idea or a core concept in a body of knowledge and understanding. A core concept is seen as a conceptual 'building block' that 'progresses understanding of the subject; it has to be understood but it does not necessarily lead to a qualitatively different view of subject matter' (Meyer & Land, 2003, p. 4), whereas the threshold concept leads to just that, a transformed view. In research with early educators, Waters-Davies and MacDonald (2022) argue that the construction of the child as competent and capable, that is, as an actor within a social structure, may be a threshold concept that is needed for the enactment of responsive and relational pedagogies in which educators attune to children's interests in order to support higher order thinking. In their study, a persistent minority of respondents argued that the children in their care were somehow lacking capacity and were therefore denied access to certain types of play provision (Waters-Davies & MacDonald, 2022). We consider here in this study that a deficit construction of the child by educators can limit provision for children participation.

Meyer and Land (2005) characterise a threshold concept as a conceptual gateway and explain that these gateways can be 'transformative (occasioning a significant shift in the perception

of a subject), irreversible (unlikely to be forgotten, or unlearned only through considerable effort), and integrative (exposing the previously hidden interrelatedness of something)' (Meyer & Land, 2005, p. 373/4). Associated with the transformative nature of the threshold concept is the likelihood of the transformed perspective involving an affective component, that is, a shift in values, feeling or attitude (Meyer & Land, 2003, p. 5). In addition, Meyer and Land conclude that a threshold concept 'can of itself inherently represent ... troublesome knowledge' (2003, p. 2). Troublesome knowledge can be counter-intuitive, or even appear absurd at face value. Arguably to think of the young child as capable and competent and active and strong is an absurd idea if taken at face value (Waters-Davies & MacDonald, 2022).

Cousin (2006, p. 4) explains that the prevalence of a 'common sense' or intuitive understanding of a concept can inhibit grasping and mastering a threshold concept. 'Getting students to reverse their intuitive understandings is also troublesome because the reversal can involve an uncomfortable, emotional repositioning' (ibid, p. 4). In her own work, Cousin (2006) explored some of the emotional issues that make learning troublesome; she makes the case that we should temper the implicit suggestion in the idea of a threshold concept that the difficulty of its mastery inheres in the concept itself. 'While this is very often the case, we need to be aware that this difficulty cannot be abstracted from the learner or the social context' (p. 5). For the early years teacher there may be a *common sense* understanding that the young child is weak, innocent and in need of protection by mere fact of being a child and therefore physically immature and lacking strength and knowledge to stand alone in the world. As Cook (2009) explains, the cultural force, in the wealthy sectors of the global north at least, of the child as immature innocent is such that overcoming this force requires significant effort.

## The construction of the child as a threshold concept

The responses we received in the survey demonstrate a range of underpinning constructions of the child and associated child competency; we argue that the reason for such variation lies within the threshold concept of the young child as capable. We suggest that once this threshold concept is grasped, the enactment of pedagogies that are responsive to the perspectives of the child, that routinely attend to children's agency and capacity are possible. However, we suggest that it may not be possible for teachers who have not grasped this concept to fully enact a responsive pedagogy in which children's perspectives are genuinely recognised and used to drive provision.

That the academic field of early childhood studies demands the construction of the child as capable and strong is counter-intuitive. The need to conceptualise differently the state of childhood therefore is troublesome, it requires deep exploration of the meanings of the words being used and the concepts being brought into play. It requires that as adults we re-consider how we view our childhood selves, that we reconsider our adult relationship with the children around us. Since teacher preparation programmes in Wales have not historically required that such effort is taken when entering the profession, we suggest that it is to be expected that teachers will vary in the extent to which they have engaged with this threshold concept, they will vary in their construction of the child, childhood agency and therefore how they structure children's participation. However, this situation is not acceptable if we, collectively, are to realise young children's participation rights in early education contexts. In Wales, the new Professional Standards for Teachers expect respect for children's rights to be part of the values and dispositions held by teachers; similarly, there is a stated expectation that in practice the needs and rights of learners will be central and take priority in the teacher's approach to their role (WG, 2019). Such



legislation provides yet further strength to the robust policy context in Wales in support of the enactment of children's rights in education settings. However, as result of this study and the analysis undertaken, which explores the variability in teachers' descriptions of participation in early years classrooms, we suggest that the construction of the child as capable is a threshold concept, required in order to enact pedagogies, universally, that support the realisation of children's participation rights.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the apparent constructions of the child and their capabilities held by teachers who told us about opportunities for participation experienced by their children in the classes. The data indicate that deficit constructions of the child are associated with bounded or restricted opportunities for participation and a capable construction associated with wider opportunities for children's enactment of agency within the classroom. We argue that the construction of the child as capable should be recognised as a threshold concept for those working in early childhood. Returning to the findings of Barros Araujo (2022) cited above, who suggested that changes in the underpinning construction of the child, held by her students, required 'opportunities for renewed situated understandings of the image of the child' (p. 907), we suggest that programmes of professional learning and preparation for entry into teaching and working in the early childhood sector should include such opportunities and attend directly and explicitly to the construction of the child held by those working with young children.

In order for preparation programmes for early childhood professional to address this issue, we recommend that the construction of the child is recognised as a threshold concept. As such it requires attention and pro-active consideration, as well as challenge and reconsideration, during theoretical and practical aspects of professional learning. Centring on reflexive challenges such as exploring the ways in which young children demonstrate capability and the ways in which adults can respond to young children's competencies in practice settings should be an explicit part of professional preparation programmes. Without such explicit, and sustained, attention in professional learning we predict that the variation related to the opportunities for children's participation currently experienced in education contexts will continue.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There is no conflict of interest to disclose.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data set for this project is not available open access.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical approval was gained from University of Wales Trinity Saint David Ethics Committee.

## PATIENT CONSENT STATEMENT

All participants provided voluntary informed consent, prior to participation.

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