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CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION RIGHTS IN SCHOOLS – TEACHERS' BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

Schools represent an important context for implementing participation rights guaranteed by the United Nations Convention on Rights of the Child into the lives of children in general and into the lives of children from vulnerable groups. Providing opportunities for children to exercise their participation rights has been linked to positive youth development and universal prevention efforts in schools. Available evidence points to the importance of beliefs regarding children's agency and participation practices. This study extends available research by investigating elementary-, middle- and high-school teachers' beliefs about children's participation rights and their link to participation conducive teacher practices in schools. A comprehensive mediational model is tested, which posits that teachers' image of children as capable, active and agentic is associated with more support for children's participation rights, which in turn predict student-centered participatory teaching and classroom management behaviors. Teachers' support for participation rights was measured using contextualized vignettes including both general situations and situations specific to children from vulnerable groups. A total of 519 elementary, middle and high-school teachers completed several online questionnaires. Results showed that teachers have an ambivalent image of children's capacity and agency for decision-making, and that this view does not depend on the children's age. Having a more positive image of children and supporting children's participation rights more predicted student-centered teaching style and less controlling classroom management styles. Support for children's participation rights was a significant mediator of the relationship between the teachers' image of the children and their participation-fostering classroom practices. These findings have important practical implications for school climates which promote high-quality teaching, the prevention of problem behaviors and positive youth development.

Keywords: children's participation rights, school, teachers, image of children, child-centered practices, children from vulnerable groups

INTRODUCTION

When it comes to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and its implementation into children's everyday lives, only recently did practical and research efforts become focused on children's participation rights. Available data suggests that participation rights,

especially of children from vulnerable groups, are poorly implemented in general (Jeđud Borić et al., 2017) and particularly so in schools (Osmak Franjić & Borić, 2019). On the other hand, schools which implement programs respecting children's rights have positive benefits, such as fewer discipline problems, less violence and more democratic environments (Covell et al., 2010), leading to more positive youth development (Hart & Hart, 2014), which is a strong preventive factor for problem behavior and negative developmental outcomes for all children (Domitrovich et al., 2017). However, it is surprising that not much research attention has been given to the role teachers, their beliefs and practices play in creating school environments conducive to the implementation of children's participation rights.

Research focusing on children's rights in general suggests that different beliefs (e.g., attitudes, values, images and support) which adults, like parents and educators, harbor about children and their rights are important factors contributing to the implementation of these rights into children's lives (Borić & Širanović, 2019). However, most of the current evidence comes from early education teachers (Correia et al., 2019; Correia et al., 2020) and there is a lack of findings concerning the beliefs held by elementary-, middle- and high-school teachers. In order to address this gap in the literature, this study focuses on the beliefs of those teaching at the mentioned education levels and investigates how their image of children and support for children's participation rights is tied to their teaching and classroom management practices conducive to the implementation of children's participation rights. Focusing on elementary-, middle- and high-school teachers (later in text: teachers) can inform efforts of implementing legal documents concerning children's rights in their everyday lives, given that school-based interventions are considered to be the best way for universal prevention efforts to reach all children.

Children's participation rights do not only refer to rights described by Article 12 of the UNCRC (i.e., the right of children to express their own opinion in matters that affect them and for adults to take that opinion into account when making decisions which affect the child) but more broadly refer to a set of rights and freedoms such as the freedom of expression, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, the right to privacy and access to mass media, together with the right for their voices to be heard and for adults to respect and consider their opinions in matters of importance to children (Melton, 2006). Although there are many forms children's and youth participation can take, their common denominator is that children themselves are involved in the institutions and decisions that affect them (Checkoway, 2011). What is unique about these sets of rights is the recognition that although children depend on their parents and other adults, they are nevertheless entitled to participate in making decisions about their lives (Lansdown et al., 2014). Since these rights belong to all children, opportunities for participation need to include children of all backgrounds, characteristics and cultures, including children from vulnerable groups (Borić & Mataga Tintor, 2020), and should be promoted since the earliest ages (Crowley et al., 2021).

According to the ecological model of youth participation (Gal, 2017), schools represent one of the most important contexts for exercising children's rights, and teachers are a crucial part of that context (Lundy, 2007). In addition, teachers are, alongside parents, the most important figures who teach children about their rights and represent adults whom children turn to when their rights are infringed upon, whether in school or family life (Petani & Mijić, 2009). A recent Croatian study of children's participation in schools found that teachers report creating opportunities for children's

active participation, but children themselves do not perceive this and report very few opportunities for active participation (Huić et al., 2019a). In addition, children perceive that only some (usually the teacher's favorites), not all, children are given opportunities to participate, and the more pupils perceive this inequality, the less likely they are to get involved and actively participate in schools (Huić et al., 2019b). This is in line with findings that children from vulnerable groups are in an especially disadvantaged position when it comes to active participation (Jeđud Borić et al., 2017).

Additionally, some studies imply that teachers often hinder children's participation opportunities (Car & Jeđud Borić, 2016; Mitra et al., 2014). For example, studies show many teachers favor the controlling style characterized by applying pressure and their own agenda on students (Reeve, 2009). When managing discipline problems, teachers rarely include students' perspectives on classroom rules or best discipline practices (Hamad & Al-Abri, 2019; Thornberg, 2009). Furthermore, hierarchical school structures are often tied to anti-democratic school climates leading to poor adherence to children's rights in schools (Howe & Covell, 2018).

At the same time, giving students opportunities to participate in schools (e.g., involving them in decision-making and enabling them to proactively voice their needs and interests to teachers) leads to better learning outcomes, higher levels of engagement and motivation and better academic success (Jang et al., 2016; Patall et al., 2010; Yonezawa et al., 2009). In addition, children's participation in schools has been linked to more positive attitudes toward school, better health and higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction (De Róiste et al., 2010). Even more specifically, children's participation has been linked to fewer antisocial and more prosocial behaviors (Howe & Covell, 2011), further emphasizing the importance of children's participation for the prevention of behavioral problems in schools. In addition, speaking out and participating in school decisions are part of a wider range of socio-emotional competencies which are, again, proven protective factors and crucial components of numerous school-based problem behavior prevention programs (Taylor et al., 2011; Domitrovich et al., 2017). Given the multiple benefits of children's participation in schools and the role that teachers play, more research is needed to investigate teacher's beliefs and practices.

Teachers' beliefs about children's participation rights

Available findings on teacher's beliefs come mostly from early education settings. Early education teachers' beliefs characterized by respect and trust in children's capacities are associated with higher rates of children's participation (see Correia et al., 2019 for review). There is also a link between their beliefs about children's participation and their child-centered practices, such as inviting children to voice their opinions and participate in decision-making (Correia et al., 2020). In another study, early education teachers' positive attitudes toward children's participation were associated with organizing child-friendly activities and inviting voluntary participation (Banko-Bal & GulerYildiz, 2021).

In a study conducted with student teachers, analyzing and reflecting upon the meaning of children's participation was associated with higher sensitivity and effective promotion of children's rights to participate (Niemi, 2019), again highlighting the importance different cognitions play in promoting children's rights. At the same time, studies investigating adults' beliefs about children's rights in general consistently show more support for nurturance rights than for self-determination rights

(Peterson-Badali et al., 2004; Cherney et al., 2008; Kosher, 2018). Some studies indicate teachers also have more favorable attitudes toward children's nurturance rights than toward self-determination rights (Feldman, 2020), and the same seems to be true of student teachers (Sukobljević, 2021). Given that participation rights are part of self-determination rights, these findings call for more research to focus specifically on determinants and outcomes of beliefs and support for children's participation rights.

In addition, most available studies use explicit measures of attitudes (e.g., the Attitudes about Children's Rights Questionnaire, Peterson-Badali et al., 2004) in which respondents agree with various statements describing different rights. This explicit approach is naturally confounded by socially desirable responding, resulting in high levels of support for children's rights and low variability, making it difficult to determine which variables explain these limited individual differences in attitudes. Another problem is the lack of context in which children's rights are situated.

A more fruitful approach seems to be the use of vignette-based instruments, such as those by Bohrnstedt et al. (1981) or Cherney and Shing's Revised Children's Rights Interview (2008). These instruments describe various situations (e.g., *Becky doesn't want to practice her parents' religion. She wants to try some other religions or maybe have no religion at all* (Cherney & Shing, 2008, p. 840.)) and ask respondents whether the child or the adult should be given the right described by the vignette (using either interview and/or questionnaire questions). However, information about psychometric characteristics of these instruments is very scarce, and some data seems to point to factorial instability and relatively low reliability (Huić, 2019; Huić et al., 2019c).

One other promising approach combines the contextualized view of children's rights through vignettes with a more implicit way of measuring beliefs/support for various rights. Ben-Arieh and Khoury-Kassabri (2008) gave participants vignettes describing situations of children's rights infringement and asked them to assess the extent to which a child's right was violated in that situation. If participants agree that a certain right was violated, that means they both understand and support this specific children's right. Since participants are not aware that all of the vignettes describe situations of rights infringement, this is a more implicit way of studying beliefs about children's rights, and as such it has the potential to bypass some social desirability issues associated with other measures.

Determinants and outcomes of teachers' beliefs about children's participation rights

It seems that beliefs about children's competence place limitations on how we view and work with children (Lansdown et al., 2014). This issue is further emphasized by the fact that Article 12 of the UNCRC frames the right to be heard with reference to age and maturity. Expectedly, adults are more ready to accept participation rights of older children than those of younger children (Huić et al., 2019c; Ruck et al., 2002). Schools and classroom settings are often characterized by hierarchical and unequal relationships between teachers and students, where traditionally teachers have the right to administer discipline and make decisions and children are viewed as dependent on adults, inexperienced and in need of order and guidance (Urinboyev et al., 2016). Because of the view that children are irrational and unable to decide for themselves, adults often believe they should decide

on the goals children should attain and assume they should guide children's interests (Kuterovac Jagodić et al., 2003). Giving children room to exert their influence on the educational process is often viewed by teachers as a loss of their own authority and power in the classroom (Cassidy et al., 2014; Borić et al., 2019).

Gillett-Swan and Sargeant (2019) present a conceptual model representing adults' image of children as having the capacity, autonomy, power and agency to exercise their rights. Theoretically, this image of children precludes adults' support toward voice-inclusive participatory practice. However, this assumption has not yet been empirically tested in teachers at the elementary-, middle- and high-school levels. In this study I examine whether the teachers' image of children as competent, active and agentic individuals with power is associated with their support for children's participatory rights and other child-centered practices in schools.

By adopting student-centered learning/teaching practices in their classrooms, teachers can create natural environments for the implementation of children's participation rights in schools. Student-centered approaches focus on students' needs and interests and involve students in decision-making about both the content and the format of teaching and assessment (Trigwell et al., 1999). Learning goals are not set solely by the teacher, and students make autonomous decisions about how best to achieve them (Pedersen & Liu, 2003). Student-centered teachers view their classrooms as democratic places in which learning also happens in the direction from student to teacher. This teaching approach supports students' autonomy by giving them choices and allowing them to participate in their education by means of articulating their own opinions, interests and offering critiques (Assor et al., 2002). Given the obvious similarities between student-centered teaching and classroom practices through which teachers can enable the exercise of children's participation rights, I expect teachers' higher support for participation rights to be associated with their student-centered teaching approach.

Ways in which teachers decide to manage their classrooms can also be conducive to creating participatory practices. These include getting to know students' interests, incorporating these interests into teaching and inviting students to give input during classroom activities (Marzano et al., 2005). Studies show that inviting students to participate in discussions about classroom rules (Thornberg, 2009), seating arrangements and conflict resolution (Thoyibi et al., 2021), and not using controlling strategies (Urinboyev et al., 2016), allows for children's voices to be heard, especially when dealing with discipline problems (Hamad & Al-Abri, 2019). On the other hand, teachers with more negative attitudes toward children's rights seem to use more controlling classroom management styles (Penović, 2021).

Teachers who exhibit higher levels of control adopt a more traditional view of teachers as power figures and of children as unruly and in need of strong authority (Urinboyev et al., 2016). They do not invite students to give input, do not involve them in decisions important for them and do not believe the students themselves have anything to contribute, which leads to them not supporting students' autonomy (Martin et al., 2007; Reeve, 2009). On the other end of the spectrum are autonomy-supporting teachers who engage students and take their opinion into account when making instructional and disciplinary decisions. An autonomy-supporting style leads to the fulfillment of basic needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness, which is important for student's

well-being and positive development (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Based on previous studies and these classroom management styles, I expect teachers' support for participation rights to be negatively related to their beliefs about control during classroom management.

PRESENT STUDY

Available studies show benefits of fostering children's participation rights in schools as well as which teachers' behaviors are beneficial for children being able to exercise their rights. However, with the exception of early education settings, studies investigating teachers' beliefs about participation rights are rare. In this study I try to address this gap in the literature by investigating elementary-, middle- and high-school teachers' beliefs as well as both their antecedents and their predictive value for teachers' classroom practices. In order to investigate teachers' beliefs about participation rights more comprehensively, and to address some of the limitations of previous research, I include examples which incorporate not just children in general but vulnerable children as well, and use an implicit, highly contextualized way of operationalizing teachers' beliefs.

The study posits a mediational model in which teachers' image of children is associated with their support for children's participation rights, and this support in turn predicts teachers' teaching and classroom management styles as examples of participation-conducive practices (see Figure 1). Given that children's rights are contingent upon their age (Ruck et al., 2002; Huić et al., 2019c), image of the children of various ages was tested (4, 7, 11, 14 and 17 years old), which roughly corresponded to the ages of children at different levels of education (early education, the beginning of elementary, middle and high school and the end of high school). It was expected teachers would be more prone to see the older children, as opposed to the younger children, as autonomous and agentic individuals capable of making their own decisions.

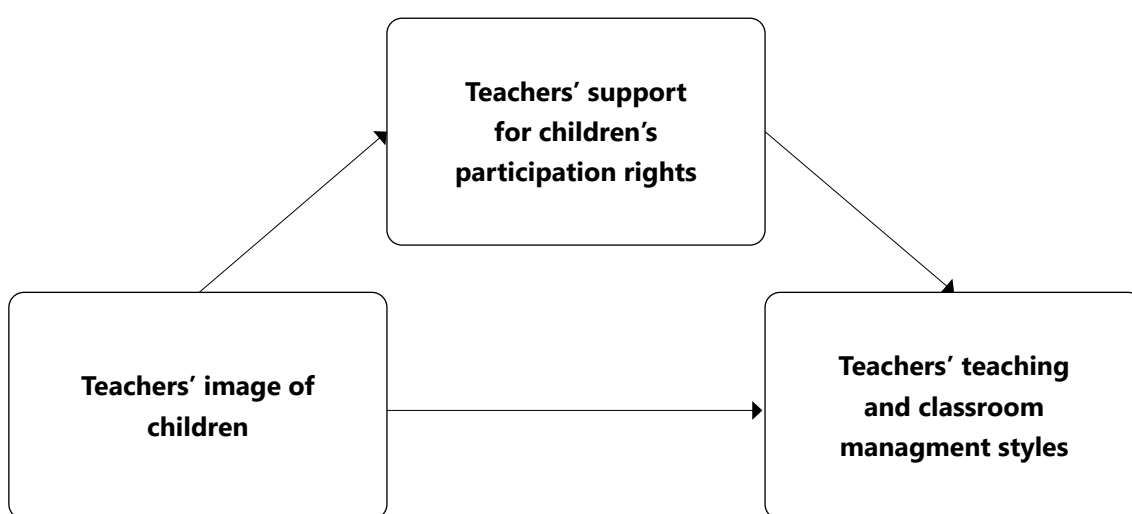


Figure 1. Conceptual mediational model linking teachers' image of the children with their support for children's participation rights and teaching and classroom management styles

METHOD

Participants

A total of 528 teachers participated in the study, out of which 437 (83.7%) were women. On average, the teachers were 42.88 ($SD = 10.129$) years old and had 16.26 ($SD = 10.356$) years of work experience. Around one fifth of them ($n = 113$, 21.4%) were elementary-school teachers, 219 (41.5%) were middle-school teachers, 186 (35.2%) were high-school teachers, and 10 teachers failed to answer this question. Teachers of all school subjects (STEM, arts, languages, social sciences, religious studies, ethics and physical education) were represented in the sample. The majority lived in cities (58.8%), while the rest lived in smaller towns and rural areas (38.9%).

Instruments

Image of children was measured with 8 pairs of bipolar adjectives/statements previously used in the UNICEF Croatia Participation of Vulnerable Groups study (Huić et al., 2019c). Participants answered how much they agreed these adjectives (ranging from -3 (completely agree with the adjective on the left side) to 3 (completely agree with the adjective on the right side)), describing children of a certain age (4, 7, 11, 14 or 17 years of age). Adjectives/statements described children's abilities and competencies (*active/passive*, *competent/incompetent*, *able/not able to express their opinion*, *responsible/irresponsible*, *beings who know/do not know what they want*, *capable/not capable to decide about themselves*, *beings who know/do not know what is good for them*, *beings who actively shape their lives/beings who passively receive incentives from adults*). The online survey program randomly assigned only one target age to each participant, resulting in around a hundred answers for each target age ($n_{4y.} = 108$, $n_{7y.} = 88$, $n_{11y.} = 99$, $n_{14y.} = 111$ and $n_{17y.} = 100$). Cronbach's alpha reliabilities were high for all target ages, ranging from .80 to .90.

In order to measure teachers' support for children's participatory rights, we used 10 vignettes from the **Support for Children's Participation Rights in Schools Scale** (Borić, Huić & Širanović, 2019, according to Huić et al., 2019c). The vignettes were based on a similar study by Ben-Arieh & Khoury-Kassabri (2008). Both general examples of children's rights violations in schools as well as examples for children from vulnerable groups were included (see Table 1). For each vignette, teachers rated the degree to which a child's right was violated on a 4-point scale (0 = the right was not violated at all, 1 = somewhat violated, 2 = mostly violated 3 = completely violated). Since all the vignettes described situations of children's rights violation, a higher result represents teachers' higher support for children's participation rights in school. Factor structure was unidimensional, with high reliability ($\alpha = .81$).

Teaching styles were operationalized with the **Revised Approaches to Teaching Inventory** (R-ATI, Trigwell, Prosser & Ginns, 2005). This questionnaire distinguishes between two different teaching approaches: the information transmission/teacher-focused (ITTF) approach (11 items, e.g., *I feel it is important to present a lot of facts to the students so that they know what they have to learn for this subject*) and the conceptual change/student-focused (CCSF) approach (11 items, e.g., *I encourage students to restructure their existing knowledge in terms of the new way of thinking about the*

subject that they will develop). The respondents assessed each item on a 5-point rating scale (from 1 = never/only rarely true of me to 5 = always/almost always true of me). Higher scores indicate a higher prevalence of a specific approach. Cronbach's alpha was .83 for the ITTF approach and .85 for the CCSF approach.

The **Attitudes and Beliefs of Classroom Control Inventory ABCC-R**, (Martin et al., 2007) measures two dimensions of classroom management: instructional management (IM; 10 items, e.g., *When moving from one learning activity to another, I will allow students to progress at their own rate (reversed)*) and people management (PM; 10 items, e.g., *I believe class rules are important because they shape the students' behavior and development*). Teachers rated each statement on a 4-point scale (from 1 = does not describe me at all to 4 = describes me completely). The items are scored so that higher results indicate a higher degree of teacher control. Cronbach's alpha was .75 both for the instructional and people management subscales.

Procedure

A convenient sample of teachers participated in an online survey via the LimeSurvey program. After reading about the purpose of the study, the participants confirmed that they work as teachers in Croatia and gave their informed consent. They were recruited via several teacher-related Croatian Facebook groups and directly through schools. Additionally, we asked participants to share the link to the survey with other teachers. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

RESULTS

Teachers' support for children's participation rights was medium to high (see Table 1). Support seems to be higher in instances when children's needs to be fully included and to fully participate in schools are not being met, then in instances when children's voices and wishes need to be respected.

Table 1. Descriptives for teachers' support for children's participation rights

	M	SD
Nikola knows the school keeps a dossier on all the students and that there is a dossier about him in the school administration office. Nikola wants to know the contents of that dossier. His teacher said it is not allowed for students to see the dossier.	1.43	1.024
Boris was violent toward another student during recess. In order to punish him, his teacher told him to stand in the corner for an hour, with his back to the class.	1.68	1.051
Refugee and immigrant children wish there were halal meals available at their school. The school did not make this possible.	1.87	0.976
Josipa wrote a note to her friend during class. The teacher caught them and read the note in front of the whole class.	1.93	0.981
Vlasta lives on a small, remote island and has reading and writing difficulties. There is no expert on the island who could help Vlasta, and neither the school nor the local community has ensured that an expert visits the island.	2.35	0.791
A Romani child wishes to sing a song in the Romani language at a school festivity. The principal told him that does not make any sense because nobody would understand the lyrics.	2.46	0.797
The school has introduced additional science classes. Ema is not interested in attending but nevertheless must pay for the classes.	2.54	0.772
Diana reported her teacher for sexual harassment, resulting in an official investigation. Diana must still attend this teacher's classes.	2.6	0.688
Kristijan's geography teacher insists that all students buy an annual prescription to National Geographic and for every student to bring their personal copy to each class. Kristijan lives in poverty and cannot afford this.	2.6	0.674
Damir has a physical disability and is not able to use public transport to school. Both the school and the local community failed to ensure alternative means of transport for Damir.	2.74	0.602

Teachers' image of children of various ages can be seen in Table 2. Interestingly, there were no significant differences in teachers' image of children of various ages ($F = 1.299$, *n.s.*). In general, teachers had a mostly ambivalent image of the children, as can be seen from the results concentrating around the midpoint of the scale ($M = 4.36$ – 4.56). Regardless of the children's age, the teachers seemed to view them neither as overly active, responsible, competent, knowing what is best for them and being able to make their own decisions nor as passive, irresponsible, incompetent and not being able to make their own decisions. In addition, we did not find a large difference between teachers teaching at different education levels.¹

1 Univariate analysis of variance showed a significant main effect only of the education level of the teacher's school ($F = 6.267$, $p > .0001$), with an insignificant main effect of the children's age ($F = 0.744$, *n. s.*) and an insignificant interaction ($F = 0.711$, *n. s.*). Elementary-school teachers had a somewhat more positive view of children than middle-school teachers ($p < .05$) and high-school teachers ($p < .01$), with no significant differences between teachers from middle and high schools.

Table 2. Descriptives for teachers' view of children of various ages

	N	M	SD
child 4 years of age	114	4.55	0.976
child 7 years of age	94	4.56	1.083
child 11 years of age	100	4.66	1.059
child 14 years of age	117	4.36	1.117
child 17 years of age	106	4.40	1.334
Total	531	4.50	1.121

Given there were no significant differences between teachers' images of children of various ages, we collapsed the seven subsamples with regard to children's age into one and performed all subsequent analyses on the whole sample. Descriptives and correlations between study variables can be seen in Table 3.

In accordance with our expectations teachers' image of the child was positively correlated with their support for children's participation rights and the student-focused (CCSF) teaching approach. It was negatively correlated with both instructional and people management. This is not surprising, given that higher results on both classroom management scales indicate higher degrees of controlling behavior. We did not find a significant correlation between teachers' image of the children and the teacher-focused (ITTF) teaching approach. Teachers' support for children's participation rights was positively correlated with the CCSF teaching approach but was not associated with the ITTF approach. Again, in accordance with our expectations, we found negative correlations between both subscales of classroom management and support for participation rights.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and correlations of all study variables

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. Teachers' image of the child	–					
2. Teachers' support for participation rights	.155**	–				
3. CCSF approach	.120**	.333**	–			
4. ITTF approach	.040	.004	.414**	–		
5. Instructional management	–.122**	–.146**	.151**	.521**	–	
6. People management	–.202**	–.393**	–.521**	–.143**	–.039	–
M	4.50	2.22	4.09	3.70	2.52	2.21
SD	1.111	0.511	0.528	0.625	0.478	0.438

Notes: CCSF = conceptual change/student-focused teaching approach, ITTF = information transmission/teacher-focused teaching approach, ** = $p < 0.01$.

To further test our hypotheses, hierarchical regression analyses were performed. Results, which can be seen in Table 4, show that teachers' image of the children significantly positively predicts their student-focused teaching approach. In addition, it negatively predicts control in both instructional and people classroom management. However, teachers' beliefs about children explain only a small percentage of variance in their self-reported behavior (between 1.2% and 4.1%). Adding teachers' support for participation rights to the model significantly improves its predictive power for all three criteria. Higher levels of support for participation rights significantly predict higher levels of student-focused teaching and lower levels of control in instructional and people classroom management. The overall model is best for predicting people management (predicting almost 20% of variance), then for predicting the CCSF teaching approach (11.3%) and finally for predicting instructional management (only 3.4% of explained variance). Importantly, adding teachers' support for participation rights in the second step of the model lowered the beta coefficients, pointing to a possible mediating role.

Table 4. Hierarchical regression results

Model	Predictors	CCSF	Instructional management	People management
1		β	β	β
	Image of children	.111**	-.148**	-.203**
		$R = .111^*$ $R^2 = .012^*$	$R = .148^{**}$ $R^2 = .022^{**}$	$R = .203^{**}$ $R^2 = .041^{**}$
2		β	β	β
	Image of children	.055	-.132**	-.141**
	Support for participation rights	.323**	-.110*	-.389**
		$\Delta R = .101^{**}$ $R = .337^{**}$ $R^2 = .113^{**}$	$\Delta R = .012^*$ $R = .184^*$ $R^2 = .034^*$	$\Delta R = .148^{**}$ $R = .434^{**}$ $R^2 = .189^{**}$

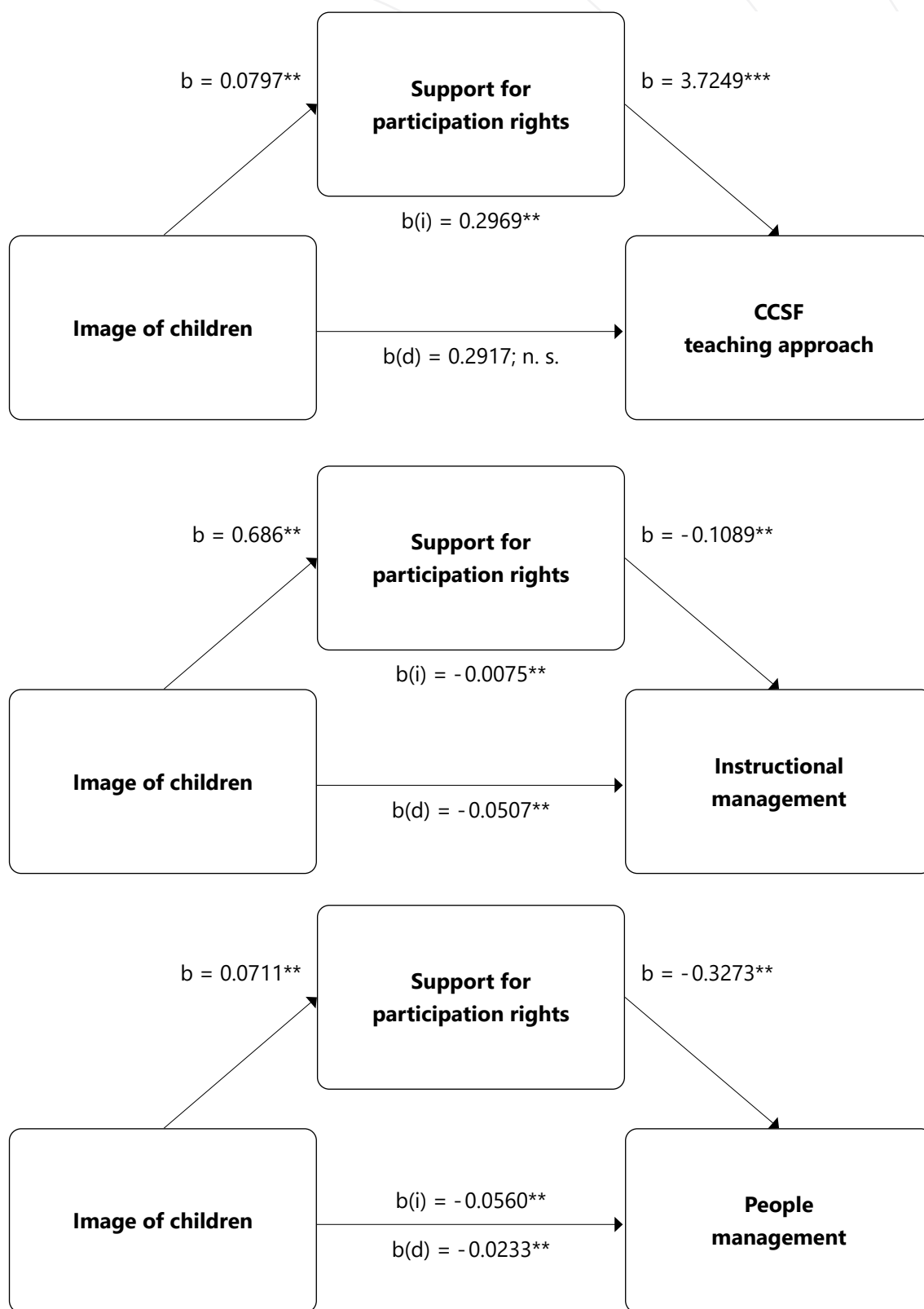
CCSF = conceptual change/student-focused teaching approach, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Three mediational analyses, with teachers’ image of the children as a predictor, teachers’ support for participation rights as a mediator, and teachers CCSF teaching approach, instructional management, and people management as three different criteria were conducted (performed with the PROCESS Macro for SPSS (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Results can be seen in Figure 3.

Teachers’ support for children’s participation rights fully mediates the relationship between teachers’ image of children and their CCSF teaching approach. Indirect effect was significant ($b = 0.2969$, $LLCI = 0.1133$, $ULCI = 0.5267$), with an insignificant direct effect ($b = 0.2917$, n. s.). Teachers who view children as active, competent and capable of making their own decisions support children’s participation rights more and this is, in turn, associated with a more student-focused teaching approach.

Similarly, teachers’ support for children’s participation rights also mediates the relationship between teachers’ image of children and their classroom management strategies, although only partially. Indirect effect in case of teachers’ instructional management was significant ($b = -0.0075$, $LLCI = -0.0179$, $ULCI = -0.0004$), with the direct effect between teachers’ image of the children and instructional management staying significant ($b = -0.0507$, $p < .001$). Overall, teachers who view children as active, competent and capable of making their own decisions support children’s participation rights more, which is, in turn, associated with less controlling behaviors in instructional management.

Results for the mediation regarding people management mirror the latter. Indirect effect in case of teachers’ people management was significant ($b = -0.0233$, $LLCI = -0.0388$, $ULCI = -0.0089$), with the direct effect between teachers’ image of the children and instructional management staying significant ($b = -0.0560$, $p < .0001$). Overall, teachers who view children as active, competent and capable of making their own decisions support children’s participation rights more, which is, in turn, associated with less controlling behaviors in people management in classrooms.



Legend: b(i) – indirect effect; b(d) – direct effect; b – non-standardized regression coefficients; $** p < .01$; $*** p < .001$

Figure 2. Results of mediational analyses²

² An additional set of mediational analyses, adding the education level of the schools at which the teachers worked as a covariate, in order to control its effects, showed the same direct and indirect effects for all three criteria.

DISCUSSION

This study examined whether elementary-, middle- and high-school teachers' image of children as agentic, capable and active is associated with higher support for children's participation rights, and whether this support is, in turn, positively associated with classroom practices conducive to children's participation, such as a student-centered teaching style and autonomy-supporting classroom management. Findings are in line with Croatian research showing positive teachers' attitudes about children's school participation (Huić et al., 2019a). However, incorporating a more implicit measure and including examples of children from vulnerable groups led to the teachers in this study showing only medium levels of support. The teachers were least inclined to support the participation rights of children exhibiting problem behaviors. This finding is in line with other studies showing adults are especially unlikely to support participation rights of children who commit criminal offenses (Borić et al., 2017; Huić et al., 2019c). It is possible that inviting less participation from children exhibiting problem behaviors is used by teachers as a form of punishment. Furthermore, the responsibility for problematic behavior is usually attributed to the child, so teachers might not see these children as capable to assume responsibility for their lives in an adequate manner, thus making them less inclined to support their participation rights. Future studies should investigate these possible reasons in more depth.

Somewhat surprisingly, teachers had an ambivalent view of children regardless of whether they were asked about children who were 4 or 17 years old. They saw children as neither active, independent, capable of making their own decisions and knowing what is good for them nor the opposite. Given that positive beliefs about children's capabilities and agency in decision-making have been linked to adults respecting children's participation rights more (Gillett-Swann & Sargeant, 2019; Lundy, 2007; Urinboyev et al., 2016), finding that teachers have a largely ambivalent view of children is not very encouraging. In social cognition research, ambivalence is seen as problematic because it does not lead to consistent behavior but is easily swayed by persuasion attempts (van Harreveld et al., 2015). In order to ensure teachers' support for children's participation is consistent, regular and translated to their behavior, practical efforts should aim to strengthen their image of children as active, responsible and capable of decision-making.

Furthermore, teachers might have an ambivalent image of children because their view is dependent on specific situations and decisions of which they think children are capable. For example, they might view children as autonomous and agentic when it comes to some school activities such as parties, decorations, outings etc. but not others. There is some available evidence that school children report that their teachers invite them to participate in just such activities but not in decisions about schoolwork or classroom rules (Huić et al., 2019b). Echoing these findings, another study, in which teachers were asked about the level of participation they would allow students based on Hart's (1992) ladder of participation model, found teachers were more supportive of full children participation in cases of different out-of-class activities (e.g., outings, decorations, music etc.) than in cases of different in-class activities (e.g., dates of exams, classroom rules or specific topics to cover in class) (Klepić, 2021). In general, this might help explain why children in schools report very few opportunities for meaningful school participation, even when teachers have highly positive attitudes toward children's rights (Huić et al., 2019a; Car & Jeđud Borić, 2016).

Future studies should also investigate specific images of children from vulnerable groups (e.g., whether children with physical disabilities are seen differently in terms of their agency and capacity for decision-making than children with learning difficulties or children who live in poverty), especially given that, at least when it comes to the inclusion of children with disabilities in schools, teacher's beliefs about different disabilities and abilities have been found to play an important role (Kiely et al., 2015). As mentioned before, it would be especially interesting to focus on teachers' image of children with behavioral problems and how their agency, capacity for decision-making and knowing what is best for them are seen.

In accordance with our expectations, having a more positive image of children as capable, active and agentic individuals and supporting children's participation rights in the school context predicts both teachers' teaching and classroom management styles. This is not surprising, given that creating an environment in which children can exercise their participation rights in schools simultaneously means putting them in the center of the teaching and learning process, making decisions about the curriculum and exams together with the children, asking about their interests and incorporating them into class activities as well as inviting them to give input and opinions and using student critiques to reflect on and change one's teaching practice. In other words, the student-centered teaching style seems to be especially conducive to the exercise of children's participation rights in schools. Our findings seem to be among the rare ones empirically confirming this theoretical similarity (see also Correia et al., 2021 for early education settings).

Also, in accordance with our expectations, teachers with a more favorable image of children and those who are more supportive of children's participation rights in the school context seem to be less likely to impose their views on how children should behave, less likely to ask for complete compliance with the rules of order in class and less likely to discipline students for being off task. Furthermore, they are less likely to think firm rules and procedures are a key to good classroom management and are less controlling of students when distributing materials, arranging seatwork and organizing different daily routines. This finding is in line with previous studies showing that teachers with more favorable attitudes toward children's participation rights are more likely to include children in decisions about classroom rules and procedures (Thornberg, 2009), seating arrangements (Thoyibi et al., 2021) and discipline problems (Hamad & Al-Abri, 2019) as well as to exercise less control during their classroom management practices (Penović, 2021).

Along with predicting their instructional management style, teachers' image of children and their support for participation rights also predicted a less controlling people management style. This is not surprising, given that behaviors which refer to this classroom management dimension describe instances of giving students autonomy. Teachers who support autonomy more believe children should choose the topics and tasks to work on, that students can manage their own time in class and that students' interests, emotions and decision-making processes should be welcomed and incorporated into teaching. This is an important finding since autonomy-supporting teacher behaviors have been previously linked to schoolchildren's well-being through fulfilling students' basic psychological needs for competence, relatedness and autonomy as well as having better relationships with their students (Reeve, 2009).

Mediational analyses revealed that teachers' support for children's participation rights in schools were an important mechanism behind the association between their image of children and their reported classroom practices. Results indicate that teachers possibly use their beliefs about how children should exercise their rights in schools in order to rationalize their controlling behaviors in class. They might use them especially in order to rationalize not using student-focused strategies when teaching. This represents a novel point and extends previous literature by showing these specific links empirically.

Future studies should investigate other determinants of teachers' beliefs about participation rights (e.g., autonomous vs. controlling teaching motivation, professional well-being teacher agency in school decision-making). In addition, given the role that the wider school context plays in creating opportunities for participation (Hart & Hart, 2014; Lansdown et al., 2014), our findings call for future studies to investigate the attitudes toward children's participation rights and image of children held by other school experts, such as school psychologists and school social pedagogists as well as special education and rehabilitation experts. Given these experts often focus on children with behavioral problems and other children from vulnerable groups, it would be especially relevant to investigate their beliefs associated with children's participation in schools. Future studies should also focus on other contextual factors, such as types of educational settings, school size, the number of children per class, democratic school climate and the principal's leadership style. Comparative studies focusing on how various countries use formal (e.g., legislative) and informal (e.g., school norms) means of implementing children's participation rights in schools should also be informative.

Methodological considerations and practical implications

When interpreting our findings, some study limitations need to be mentioned. The teachers in this study represent a convenient sample, so more representative samples are needed before generalizing the results. Nevertheless, our sample was quite heterogenous with regard to the level of education and school subjects taught. Results are based on self-report measures and future studies should include more objective observations of teachers' behavior in class. Directly observing to what extent and in which ways teachers invite all children, especially children from vulnerable groups, to participate would provide enriched data on any differential treatment of children from vulnerable groups. In addition, including both teachers and their respective students in these studies would allow for more perspectives and sources of data incorporating different contexts of participation rights enactment. Furthermore, this was a correlational study, and no causal conclusions can be reached. Future studies should be based on longitudinal data or experimentally test the efficacy of educational programs aimed at teachers' beliefs about children's participation rights for their classroom practices. Nevertheless, this was one of the rare studies to investigate both the determinants and outcomes of teacher's beliefs about children's participation rights in schools and has important practical implications.

Our finding that teachers' image of children as capable to form opinions and decide about themselves preclude their beliefs and support for children's participation rights speaks of the need to work with teachers in order to make their image of children more favorable. This can be done

through professional development programs, as well as through initial teacher education programs. In general, these programs should focus more on topics concerning children's participation rights to give teachers higher levels of self-efficacy when it comes to implementing children's rights in schools (Cassidy et al., 2004; Borić & Širanović, 2019). These programs should be careful not to overburden the teachers with extra work or create pressure for teachers to behave in a certain way, which is paradoxically linked to teachers using fewer autonomy-supporting participatory practices and exhibiting higher levels of stress (Reeve, 2009). That is why the associations between regular teacher practices in classrooms and children's participation rights found in this study are important: they show that, just by employing high-quality teaching and classroom management practices, teachers can simultaneously improve the implementation of the UNCRC into children's lives.

In conclusion, this study showed that seeing children as active, agentic and capable of making their own decisions and supporting children's participation rights in schools predict teachers' use of child-centered participatory practices in their classrooms. These findings add to the literature investigating children's participation in schools and further emphasize the important role that teachers play in creating a favorable context for child participation. Given that inviting students to participate and directly influence school practice has been recognized as a crucial factor for successfully addressing mental health issues in schools (Adelman & Taylor, 2000), enhancing young people's resilience (Ungar et al., 2019), preventing problem behaviors (Domitrovich et al., 2017) and implementing UNCRC as a legal document by making sure schools address children's rights issues (Hart & Hart, 2014), future studies should continue examining school teachers' beliefs and practices with regard to children's participation rights and broaden their focus to children from vulnerable groups as well.

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DJEČJA PRAVA NA PARTICIPACIJU U ŠKOLI – NASTAVNIČKA UVJERENJA I PRAKSE

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SAŽETAK

Škola predstavlja važno okruženje za implementaciju dječjih prava na participaciju, kako u živote djece općenito tako i u živote djece iz ranjivih skupina, posebno s obzirom na povezanost takvih praksi s pozitivnim razvojem i univerzalnom prevencijom. Cilj ovog istraživanja bio je ispitati uvjerenja osnovnoškolskih učitelja te predmetnih osnovnoškolskih i srednjoškolskih nastavnika o djeci i njihovim participativnim pravima kao i povezanost između tih uvjerenja i nastavničkih praksi koje podržavaju participaciju učenika. Testiran je medijacijski model koji pretpostavlja da će nastavnička slika djece kao sposobnih, kompetentnih i proaktivnih bića biti povezana s većom podrškom dječjim pravima na participaciju, što će zauzvrat biti povezano sa stilom poučavanja usmjerenim na učenika i upravljanjem razredom koje podržava autonomiju učenika. Nastavnička podrška pravima na participaciju operacionalizirana je putem visoko kontekstualiziranih vinjeta koje su, osim općenitih školskih situacija, uključivale i situacije specifične za djecu iz ranjivih skupina. Ukupno 519 učitelja i nastavnika ispunilo je bateriju online upitnika. Rezultati su pokazali kako učitelji i nastavnici imaju ambivalentnu sliku o kapacitetima i proaktivnosti djece te da njihov pogled ne ovisi o dobi djeteta. Pozitivnija slika djeteta bila je povezana s većom podrškom dječjim pravima na participaciju kao i s pristupom poučavanju usmjerenom na učenika te manjom kontrolom prilikom upravljanja razredom. Podrška participativnim pravima bila je značajan medijator odnosa između slike djeteta i učiteljskih/nastavničkih praksi. Nalazi imaju i važne praktične implikacije za školsku klimu koja promiče visoku kvalitetu poučavanja, prevenciju problema u ponašanju i pozitivan razvoj mladih.

Ključne riječi: dječja prava na participaciju, škola, nastavnici/učitelji, slika djeteta, poučavanje usmjereno na učenika, djeca iz ranjivih skupina