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Making Participation Visible
From Observation to Inclusive Educational Design: A Case Study within early childhood education and care context

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Abstract: This paper presents a single-case study conducted in an early childhood centre with a 24-month-old child with a hearing disability and who uses a cochlear implant. The study examines how environmental, communicative and relational conditions, together with educators' mediation strategies, shape opportunities for participation during different moments of the day. The empirical corpus comprises six observation diaries documenting arrival, free play, an atelier activity, a transition through shared spaces and lunchtime, integrated by a pedagogical observation grid using a descriptive scale from 0 to 3. A hermeneutic-interpretive thematic analysis identified four themes: accessibility of the acoustic environment, multimodal communication, educational mediation and contextual predictability. Participation was more sustained when adults remained within the child's visual field, reduced competing stimuli, accompanied speech with gestures and recognisable cues, and intentionally organised spaces, routines and materials. The atelier and familiar daily routines offered particularly favourable conditions, whereas noise, crowding and overlapping voices made interactions harder to follow. The study highlights educational observation as a professional practice through which educators can interpret the child's responses, identify barriers and facilitators, and progressively inform inclusive educational design.

Keywords: Inclusive educational design; hearing disability; early childhood education.

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1. Introduction

In early childhood education and care settings, inclusion takes shape through everyday practices, when sharing a space is accompanied by meaningful opportunities to understand what is happening, respond to an invitation from an adult or a peer, and engage in play. Educational design therefore encompasses the situation as a whole: relationships, materials, spaces, and routines all contribute to supporting children's engagement (Bondioli & Savio, 2018; Pennazio, 2017; Restiglian, 2012). The National Guidelines for Early Childhood Education and Care Services, together with the Pedagogical Guidelines for the Integrated System from Birth to Six, identify children's rights and potential as the foundations of educational quality, emphasising respect for individual developmental rhythms and the interrelationship between care and support for development (Ministero dell'Istruzione, 2021, 2022).

Recognising this potential requires attention to the different ways in which children participate in experiences. During the first three years of life, participation is expressed through emerging words, gaze, gestures, movements, and vocalisations. Bae (2009),

drawing also on the Norwegian concept of medvirkning, highlights the importance of recognising children's initiatives and their opportunities to contribute to shared experiences. Choosing a material, pointing to an object, or reproducing a peer's action are expressions whose meaning needs to be understood within the sequence of the interaction and the responses of those involved. Educators therefore need to recognise less visible forms of engagement, which may be overlooked when verbal production or an immediate response to an instruction is prioritised.

Attention to this diversity of forms of participation is particularly relevant in the presence of hearing impairment. Deafness and hearing loss encompass heterogeneous trajectories in terms of degree and age of onset, communication modes, family history, and the use of hearing aids or cochlear implants (Gaspari, 2019; Scuola Audiofonetica di Mompiano, 2020; World Health Organization, 2021). In the early years, voice, facial expressions, gestures, and actions contribute to the construction of meaning. When access to spoken messages is inconsistent, the visibility of the communication partner, concrete cues, and joint attention become particularly important (Caselli, Maragna, & Volterra, 2006; Maragna, Roccaforte, & Tomasuolo, 2013). The pedagogical concern therefore centres on the conditions that make communication accessible and enable the child to contribute to the interaction.

To understand the relationship between these conditions and participation, the biopsychosocial perspective of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health: Children & Youth Version (ICF-CY) provides an interpretive framework that considers involvement in life situations in relation to individual functioning and environmental factors (World Health Organization, 2007). In nursery settings, this perspective encourages observation of how noise, distance from the communication partner, visual cues, and the organisation of time may act as barriers or facilitators. A transition announced solely through speech may be difficult to anticipate, whereas visible materials and recognisable sequences can provide additional opportunities for orientation. In this regard, the National Guidelines emphasise the educational value of organising spaces, time, and everyday experiences (Ministero dell'Istruzione, 2022).

The organisation of the environment thus becomes part of educational design as a component of relational experience. Pedagogical approaches to the educational environment, including those developed in Reggio Emilia, make it possible to consider furnishings, light, sound, and group arrangements as factors that shape relationships (Ceppi & Zini, 1998; Malaguzzi, 1995; Rinaldi, 2006). Conditions that support inclusion also develop through recognisable spaces and opportunities to anticipate transitions throughout the day, while preserving possibilities for choice and initiative (Aiello, 2023; Goldschmied & Jackson, 1997; Weyland & Galletti, 2018; Zappalà, 2023). Space and time, considered through the interplay of perception, cognition and action (Di Gennaro, 2023), therefore become dimensions to examine alongside the ways in which adults guide and support participation.

This mediating role can be further explored through Mortari's (2015) concept of care, understood as attention to the other's uniqueness and responsibility for their possibilities for growth. In the case examined here, listening, waiting, and adjusting support mean creating conditions in which the child can understand, choose, and act. This stance requires the educator to observe the child's responses without assigning meaning prematurely and to reconsider her own intervention. Educational professionalism thus brings together knowledge of the child, responsibility and critical reflection on practice, with a view to transforming the conditions of the setting (Di

Gennaro, Pace, Zollo, & Aiello, 2014; Lecce, Viola, & Di Gennaro, 2019). Distinguishing description from interpretation and documenting the sequence of events provide a basis for identifying barriers and facilitators and informing educational design (D'Odorico & Cassibba, 2001; Rinaldi, 2006).

The contribution focuses on this relationship between observation, participation, and educational design, presenting a single-case study of a 24-month-old girl with hearing impairment and a cochlear implant, observed at different points during the nursery day. Drawing on six observation diaries and an educational observation grid, the study examines the conditions in which the child orients herself, initiates an interaction, and sustains engagement, relating them to the acoustic environment, visual cues, the predictability of situations, and the educator's mediation. The aim is to understand the opportunities for participation within this case and identify insights that can inform the revision of educational design, without treating the findings as representative of the diversity of children with hearing impairment.

2. Participation and Hearing Loss in Pedagogical Planning in Early Childhood Settings

In early childhood, the diversity of developmental pathways among children with hearing disabilities calls for attention to individual histories and to the circumstances in which communication takes place. Early identification of hearing loss and timely support can improve opportunities for language development, especially when families are involved in decision-making and communicative interactions remain consistent (Moeller, 2000; Ching et al., 2017). Nevertheless, the use of a hearing device does not, in itself, ensure equivalent listening conditions. Device performance, distance from the speaker, background noise and the ways adults address a child all shape the child's everyday experience.

Participation provides a useful pedagogical perspective because it shifts the focus from isolated performance to the relationship between the child and the environment. Looking towards a peer before imitating an action, offering an object to initiate an exchange and anticipating a familiar lunchtime sequence are different expressions of engagement. A biopsychosocial perspective invites us to interpret such behaviours in relation to contextual features, recognising the role of environmental barriers and facilitators (World Health Organization, 2007). ICF-informed individualised educational design can translate this understanding into practical decisions aimed at supporting access to communication, initiative in interactions and sustained participation in activities shared with peers (Bianquin & Bulgarelli, 2022).

Acoustic conditions in early childhood centres can change rapidly, particularly during free play, transitions and situations in which several people speak at once, making verbal instructions harder to identify. Even children with cochlear implants may experience difficulty perceiving speech in noisy environments, with implications for the immediacy of their responses (Iglehart, 2016). Educators can respond through simple yet deliberate adjustments: moving closer without intruding on the child's personal space, remaining within her visual field, supporting speech with meaningful gestures and allowing sufficient time for attention to turn towards the message.

At the age of two, communication cannot be reduced to spoken language. A glance seeking reassurance, a pointing gesture or the imitation of a peer may initiate and sustain an interaction before children have enough words to express complex requests. For children with hearing disabilities, the availability of different communication

channels is particularly meaningful, as it helps establish relationships between a signal, an object and an action (Maragna et al., 2013). Such an approach can enrich educational experiences for the entire group rather than for the individual child alone.

Educators make decisions within a planning process that needs to remain open to revision. Deciding how to organise small groups, when to introduce particular materials or how to support a transition requires knowledge of the children and careful reflection on the consequences of educational choices. Professional practice therefore brings together planning skills, responsibility and the ability to interpret situations as they unfold, rather than applying identical procedures in every circumstance (Iori, 2009). Opportunities for meaningful participation also depend on these everyday decisions, which often go unnoticed.

Understanding an episode requires observation guided by a clear focus. Recording that the child did not respond to an instruction is insufficient unless the observer also considers where the voice came from, how many children were present, which materials were available and what occurred immediately afterwards. Distinguishing observed events from initial interpretations helps prevent premature judgments. Observational techniques developed for educational settings make it possible to document play, social interaction and communication through procedures that address explicit questions (D'Odorico & Cassibba, 2001).

The organisation of space creates different opportunities for interaction. Sheltered areas, accessible materials and recognisable visual cues may help sustain shared attention, whereas dispersed or poorly organised environments can make movement and relevant communication more difficult to follow. Atelier experiences emphasise the value of environments in which children can explore materials and express themselves through different languages without treating speech as the sole pathway to participation (Vecchi, 2010). Furniture arrangements should therefore be considered alongside relational practices and acoustic conditions.

Educational planning also concerns the temporal organisation of experience. Arrival, tidying up, lunch and movement through shared spaces can provide a recognisable structure without becoming inflexible sequences. Showing an object before moving to another room, repeating a familiar gesture and leaving a few extra seconds for a response may help children connect the activity that is ending with what comes next. Routines have educational value precisely because they combine predictability with opportunities for initiative, progressively supporting participation and independence (Restiglian, 2012).

Observation accompanies these processes and enables educational decisions to be reconsidered. In early childhood services, pedagogical attention should concern what children do as well as the relationships they establish with adults and peers. As Viola (2022) also observes, narrative records preserve the sequence of events, while an accompanying observation grid makes it possible to recognise recurring features without losing sight of the specificity of each situation. Documentation thus becomes a resource for team discussion, the examination of hypotheses and the revision of interventions, in keeping with an educational approach that values listening and shared interpretation (Rinaldi, 2006).

In the present case, these considerations converge on one question: under what conditions can the child understand what is happening and remain involved alongside others? The answer cannot be found in her individual characteristics alone. It requires consideration of the auditory signal, the speaker's position, the organisation of materials

and the opportunities for interaction. The following analysis is grounded in these relationships as observed in the everyday life of the centre.

3. Research Aim

This study seeks to understand how a 24-month-old girl with a hearing disability and a cochlear implant participates in different moments of the day at an early childhood centre. Rather than measuring her hearing abilities, the research examines the circumstances in which she is able to orient herself, initiate interactions and sustain engagement. Particular attention is paid to spatial arrangements, peer presence, background noise, available visual cues and the educator's forms of mediation.

The research question is: how do environmental and communicative conditions, together with educational strategies, facilitate or hinder the child's participation in different moments of the day? The analysis focuses on observable behaviours, including gaze orientation, responses to prompts, communicative initiatives, recognition of familiar routines and sustained engagement. Interpretations were developed only after reconstructing the episodes, keeping descriptions of actions separate from hypotheses about their meaning.

4. Materials and Methods

The research employs an exploratory qualitative single-case study design, allowing participation to be examined within the everyday life of the centre rather than isolating behaviours from the relationships and circumstances in which they occur (Yin, 2018). The aim is to develop an in-depth understanding of a bounded case, not to generalise findings statistically. Any implications for other settings are therefore discussed as situated interpretive and educational possibilities that require careful consideration.

4.1. Setting and Participant

The study took place in an early childhood centre organised into classrooms, shared spaces and an atelier, where routines and the arrangement of materials provide familiar points of reference throughout the day. The atelier is mainly used for small-group activities, while the shared pedagogical area and other communal spaces accommodate larger groups and have less stable acoustic conditions. This variety made it possible to examine episodes differing in group size, noise level and activity structure.

The focal participant, referred to by the pseudonym Angela, was 24 months old, had a hearing disability and used a cochlear implant. During some activities the educator used a remote microphone connected to the device. Spoken language was still emerging and vocabulary remained limited; eye gaze, gestures, pointing and vocalisations played a significant role in communication. Peers' and adults' actions were considered integral to the case because they contributed to the opportunities the child had to access shared experiences.

4.2. Procedure and Instruments

Observations were undertaken in the centre's natural setting without altering planned activities. Six observation diaries were collected: one concerning arrival, two concerning free play in the shared pedagogical area, one concerning an atelier activity, one concerning a transition through communal spaces and one concerning lunch. The two free-play episodes, recorded in Diaries 3 and 4, lasted approximately 30 minutes each; the remaining observations followed the actual duration of the activity. Sampling

different moments allowed a comparison of contrasting acoustic and relational conditions.

The diaries were written during observation and completed immediately afterwards. Descriptive entries recorded the spatial arrangement, individuals present, actions, audible speech and the sequence of events, whereas reflective notes contained initial hypotheses about barriers and facilitators, reconsidered only after the full set of records had been examined. This separation helped prevent observed events from being confused with possible explanations and reflects a central methodological principle of observation in educational settings (D'Odorico & Cassibba, 2001).

Alongside the diaries, an observation grid covered seven dimensions: responses to auditory stimuli, non-verbal communication, understanding of routines, relationships with peers, environmental accessibility, adult educational strategies and emotional well-being. The descriptive scale ranged from 0 to 3 and was not intended for diagnostic purposes: 0 indicated that a behaviour was not observed in the episode; 1 indicated occasional occurrence or substantial support; 2 indicated relatively stable occurrence with contextual support; and 3 indicated stable occurrence within the situation. Every score was accompanied by qualitative notes to preserve its contextual meaning.

Before the study began, the service and the family were informed of its educational aims. The records were anonymised to avoid identifying the child, her peers or the staff. The observer maintained a discreet presence and introduced no additional tests, protecting both the continuity of everyday educational experiences and the child's well-being.

4.3. Data Analysis

The six diaries were read repeatedly through a hermeneutic-interpretive thematic approach. Initial meaning units remained close to observed actions, such as searching for an adult's face, turning towards a voice, imitating a peer, responding after repetition or briefly interrupting an activity. These units were subsequently examined in relation to the circumstances of each episode to understand when participation was sustained and when obstacles emerged.

The codes were compared and organised into interpretive themes, which were recursively reviewed against the diaries and research question (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Scores from the observation grid were used as descriptive points of reference rather than combined into a single index. Bringing narrative sequences together with structured notes yielded four themes: accessibility of the acoustic environment, multimodal communication, educational mediation and predictability of contexts.

5. Results

The first theme concerns acoustic accessibility. Diaries documenting the shared pedagogical area and transitions show that larger numbers of children, movement and overlapping voices were frequently associated with slower responses. Angela sometimes interrupted her activity, watched her peers or waited for an additional cue before acting. When the educator spoke from a distance, she appeared to take longer to locate the voice; moving closer, repeating the message or adding a gesture was followed by a more immediate response. In quieter conditions, with the speaker clearly visible, understanding appeared more continuous.

Within the same episodes, the educator's voice was more consistently accessible when Angela could connect the message to a face, gesture or object in the situation.

When the adult spoke outside her visual field, she needed more time to identify the action being requested and often looked to peers for further information. Communicative accessibility therefore emerged through the interplay of auditory information, visual references and shared action, mediated by the educator's position and the pace of interaction.

The second theme, multimodal communication, captures the ways Angela combined words, vocalisations, looks and pointing gestures within a single interaction. When instructions were brief and supported by a visual cue, she readily oriented towards the materials and began to act; longer utterances delivered while her gaze was elsewhere were associated with delayed responses and greater reliance on peers' behaviour. Imitation served as an active means of understanding the situation, anticipating what would happen next and joining the activity. On several occasions, Angela observed a peer, reproduced an action and then sought the adult's gaze, as if checking its social meaning.

In the third theme, educational mediation was particularly visible in face-to-face positioning, physical proximity and the time allowed for a response. Rephrased instructions and accompanying gestures changed the course of interactions, enabling Angela to turn towards the educator and resume her activity. During crowded transitions, support was effective when it clarified the addressee and reduced competing information. By contrast, instructions delivered to the whole group from a distance, while several voices overlapped, were followed less consistently.

The fourth theme relates to contextual predictability and legibility. Participation was especially sustained in the atelier, where a contained space, a small group and concrete materials offered a common focus. Angela watched, explored, named some objects and imitated peers as the activity progressed. Clearly visible materials and recognisable sequences of action complemented the quieter acoustic conditions. A similar pattern was observed during arrival and lunch, when familiarity with routines helped her anticipate successive steps and participate more confidently.

Taken together, the six diaries portray participation as variable yet understandable in relation to contextual conditions. In quieter and more predictable situations, Angela used her communicative resources more consistently; in noisy settings she spent longer observing peers and sought adult support more frequently. When she understood the direction of an activity, signs of emotional well-being were apparent. Uncertainty did not necessarily produce overt distress: brief pauses, slower responses or momentary withdrawal to the margins of an activity were more common, and their meaning could only be understood within the circumstances in which they occurred.

6. Discussion

The findings suggest that participation is a situated, relational process whose continuity changes according to noise, distance, activity structure and adult mediation. Angela used her communicative resources more confidently when the situation provided stable cues and enabled her to understand how the shared experience was unfolding. This interpretation is consistent with the ICF-CY perspective, in which environmental factors are integral to functioning (World Health Organization, 2007). The adult's voice became meaningful when it could be connected to the speaker, the focus of joint attention and the ongoing group activity.

Educational mediation was particularly significant when Angela paused, observed peers or waited for an additional signal. Rather than treating such actions as isolated

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difficulties, the educator interpreted them in context, adjusted her distance, reformulated messages and allowed time for a response. This form of professional competence combines observation, responsibility and planning: the educator not only interprets the child's responses but also modifies the conditions in which an interaction can take place (Iori, 2009; Schön, 1983). Support therefore depends on a knowledgeable presence capable of understanding events and making timely adjustments.

The atelier offered the most consistently favourable configuration, as its contained space, small group and manipulable materials reduced ambiguity and provided more stable references. Within Malaguzzi's educational philosophy, the atelier is a place of inquiry in which diverse expressive languages intersect and learning processes become visible (Malaguzzi, 1995; Vecchi, 2010). Acoustic accessibility, clarity of action and interest in materials appear to reinforce one another, so the observed pattern cannot be attributed to any single factor. In this case, the environment supported the child in exploring, choosing and communicating alongside peers without diminishing the richness of the group experience.

During everyday routines, recognisable sequences helped Angela anticipate what would happen and remain involved even when spoken messages were only partly understood. Familiar cues coexisted with changing interactions and the child's responses, enabling the educator to give more explicit support during unfamiliar or communicatively demanding transitions. At lunchtime and on arrival, the familiarity of the sequence appeared to support orientation and a more confident entry into shared activity.

Comparison across episodes brought to light pauses and hesitations that were more frequent when sound sources multiplied or visual cues were absent and that, without attention to context, might have been mistaken for disinterest. Separating observation from subsequent explanation is therefore also an ethical concern. A pause does not necessarily mean a lack of interest; it may reflect the conditions in which communication occurred (Camaioni et al., 2004). Rigorous educational observation requires clarity about its focus, purposes and instruments, which should remain aligned with the guiding research questions (D'Odorico & Cassibba, 2001). In this study, such an approach made it possible to reconsider educational conditions and use documentation as the basis for further planning (Rinaldi, 2006).

The study is limited by its single-case design and the small number of observations, which restrict the scope of the findings and do not permit comparisons across different hearing profiles. The presence of only one observer did not allow a systematic comparison of observation records and interpretations between observers, while the absence of video recordings prevented a more detailed re-examination of gaze direction and the timing of interactions. The 0–3 scale was developed solely for descriptive purposes and is not a validated instrument. The findings should therefore be regarded as interpretive hypotheses to be explored through longitudinal observation, systematic discussion with educators and greater involvement of the family.

7. Conclusions

The case examined highlights how participation in nursery settings takes shape through the relationship between the child's resources and the conditions provided by the educational experience. Variations in sustained engagement across the observed situations invite reflection on how activities are organised and how adults make interactions accessible. Consistent with the ICF-CY perspective, behaviours acquire

meaning when considered alongside the environmental factors that may facilitate or hinder their expression (World Health Organization, 2007). The study therefore provides insights into the child's functioning in everyday life, within the limits of an exploratory single-case investigation. In terms of educational planning, this interpretation suggests connecting attention to individual needs with opportunities for shared experiences with peers. ICF-based planning enables goals and support to be identified through the relationship between the child and the context, using participation as a criterion for guiding educational choices (Bianquin & Bulgarelli, 2022). In this case, this involves examining which adaptations enable the child to access shared activities and which opportunities allow her to choose, take initiative, and contribute to the shared experience. The quality of inclusion therefore also depends on the opportunities afforded to the child to contribute, reflecting an understanding of children's participation grounded in everyday interactions (Bae, 2009).

The combined use of observation diaries and the observation grid made visible expressions of participation that an approach focused on immediate responses might have overlooked. Pauses, waiting, and looking to peers for cues prompted a reconsideration of the conditions of interaction, demonstrating the value of distinguishing what is observed from interpretations developed subsequently (D'Odorico & Cassibba, 2001). Documentation can thus become a resource for professional dialogue: it enables educators to revisit episodes, discuss hypotheses, and justify revisions to educational provision (Rinaldi, 2006). Its value lies in supporting decisions grounded in experience and open to further examination.

This willingness to reconsider one's intervention reflects the ethical dimension of care. In Mortari's (2015) perspective, attention to the other's uniqueness entails responsibility for their possibilities for growth. For the educator, this responsibility is expressed through adjusting her involvement, recognising the child's signals, and allowing sufficient time for her to contribute. Care is thus translated into educational choices that make experiences understandable and accessible while preserving opportunities for autonomy. The National Guidelines for Early Childhood Education and Care Services provide a framework consistent with this approach, connecting the quality of the environment, respect for individual rhythms, and educational professionalism (Ministero dell'Istruzione, 2022).

The limited number of observations does not allow the continuity of the identified patterns to be established over time or their occurrence to be attributed to individual factors. Further longitudinal investigation, accompanied by dialogue with the educational team and the family, would enable these interpretations to be examined and the effects of subsequent planning decisions to be documented. The contribution therefore opens a direction for further work: using observation to understand how opportunities for participation change when the context is reconsidered. It is through this transition from interpreting episodes to revising shared experiences that research can support educational professionalism and the everyday development of inclusion.

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