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Literature Review on best practices and international comparisons for participation in decision-making of children aged 6-12

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A report commissioned by Hub na nÓg and the Department of Children, Disability and Equality

November 2025

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

HUB na nÓg
YOUNG VOICES IN DECISION MAKING

An Roinn Leanaí, Míchumais agus Comhionannais
Department of Children, Disability and Equality

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Introduction

This Literature Review on best practices and international comparisons for the participation of children aged 6- 12 (Action 5.1.1) is being undertaken as part of broader work including a report on a consultation process on the participation of children under 12 (Action 5.1.2) to deliver the aims of the Comhairle na nÓg Five-Year Development Plan to explore participation structures for children under 12.

The inclusion and active involvement of children in public and civic participation is a critical aspect of fostering a democratic and inclusive society. Children's right to participate in decisions that impact their lives has received growing recognition since the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The literature suggests that children's participation is a complex and multifaceted concept, involving various levels of involvement, contexts, and activities (Alanko, 2019). Despite an extensive growth in the literature on all aspects of children and young people's participation it is notable that children between the ages of 6-12 remain relatively absent from this body of work.

This review focuses on children aged 6-12 years and how they can be included in collective decision-making processes and included in the processes of policy formation through formal and public decision-making participation structures. A previous review for the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) and Hub na nÓg (Horgan, 2024) examined consultation with children from birth to five years. McCall-Smith (2023) stresses that the distinction between personal and collective decision-making is important in relation to "assessing when the views of a child, either individually or as part of a group, should be sought and how to facilitate this exchange of views" (McCall-Smith, 2023, p.1183).

Although definitions vary, middle childhood is most often understood as the period lasting from 6 – 12 years (Bhana, 2010). Middle childhood is a 'key transitional childhood period' (Campbell, 2011). Lancy and Grove (2011) provide ethnographic evidence across a variety of cultures in support of middle childhood as a universal developmental period in which children make a great effort to enter the public arena. Similarly, Jones and Cunningham (2005, p.41) refer to children's expanding worlds in the period of middle childhood where 'the child's independent territorial range expands, accompanied by an increasing ability to interpret the physical and social world and to create new worlds in the imagination'. Peers become more important in children's lives, and they take a more active role in shaping the nature of their play and activities. Middle childhood is also an important period for developing social and cognitive skills and for children's emerging self-concept (McNamara et al., 2021). Childhood well-being and happiness studies indicate that the period of middle childhood is where children self-report as being at their happiest (Gavin et al., 2022).

In policy terms, middle childhood is dominated by education (Bessell et al., 2024). It is the institution where children spend most of their time when not at home. Schools, and adults in schools, are centrally important and can have a powerful impact on children during the middle childhood phase. In their work on the multiple contexts of middle childhood, Coll and Szalacha

(2004), identify both school and community facilities as the most critical resources in middle childhood. However, the institutionalised nature of childhood means that there are few pathways for children to actively take part in social and civic activities outside of school, and so, 'we need to reduce the reliance on schools as the dominant or sole institution responsible for supporting children's participation or providing intergenerational relationships' (Bessell et al., 2024).

The report is organised in the following way: a brief summary of the methodological approach to the literature review, followed by a discussion of the conceptualisation and influences on child participation. The types of formal participatory activity for children under 12 are detailed as well as some innovative international structures and practices, and strategies supporting participation. The report concludes with some recommendations for developing effective and age-appropriate structures for children under 12.

Methods

The literature review aims to identify and explore contemporary international practice and research on formal and public decision-making structures for children aged 6-12 years. The PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021) and the Covidence online tool were used to support the literature review process. PRISMA guidelines were adapted to ensure their relevance and suitability for this literature review. The search terms were derived from key words and concepts included in the request for tender document. Examples include: "children under 13", "youth council", "child council", "child parliament", "participation structures" and "formal decision-making". The search terms were applied to the four databases selected for use in the literature search: Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC and Google Scholar. The chosen databases include a wide range of disciplines and ensured an adequate range of relevant disciplines were represented in the review. The search was conducted over a two-month period between January and February 2025.

Following the initial database searches using the search terms, suitable literature sources were exported to Covidence software, an online tool for streamlining screening and data extraction processes for systematic and scoping reviews. A hand search was also conducted to include other relevant grey literature and scholarly work that was not captured in the initial search strategy. This included searching known authors and papers and reference lists of previous relevant literature reviews. The grey literature search was an important component as it yielded important and up-to-date contextual information that was not represented in the database searches.

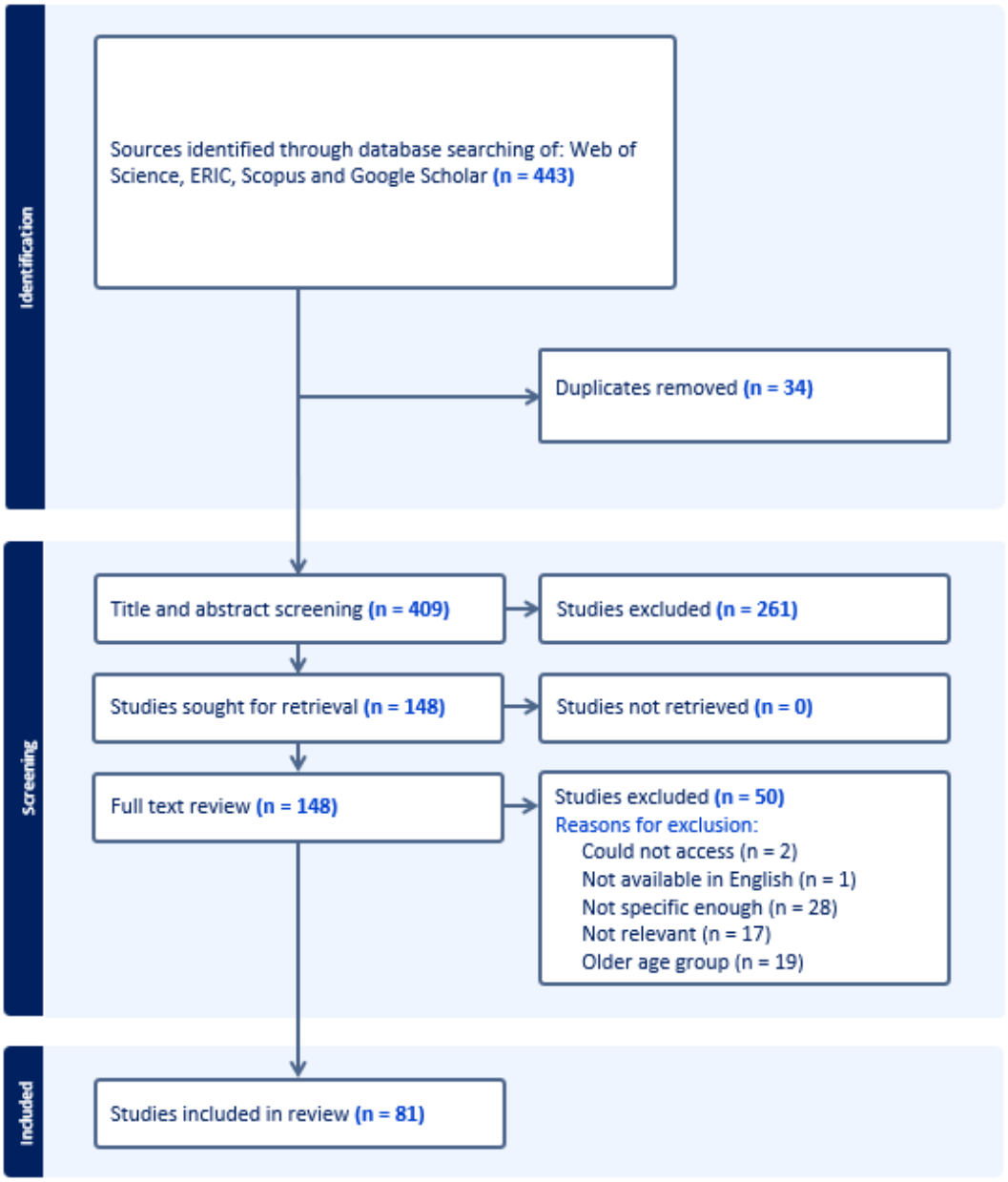
Initial screening of the titles and abstracts of sources identified through database searches was subsequently conducted by the research team. Selected sources were then subject to a full text review. Upon completion of the full text review, a total of 81 literature sources were selected for inclusion and were subject to data extraction by the research team. In addition, a number of other

peer-reviewed and grey literature sources were identified by the research team as themes emerged during the writing process and these are included in the literature review.

Table 1 Eligibility Criteria

Criteria	Selection Process
Participatory activities or initiatives	INCLUDED: Relates to children or young people involved in participatory activities. Children and young people between 6-18 are considered. EXCLUDED: Age range older than 18 years. UNCLEAR: Age range of study population not explicitly stated.
Municipal activities and citizen participation	INCLUDED: Summary indicates children's participation in forums, councils, assemblies, etc. in political, social or community life. EXCLUDED: Children's participation in contexts other than those relevant to the literature review (health, care, individual decision-making etc.)
Type of document	INCLUDED: Articles, books, book chapters, government/EU publications. EXCLUDED: Dissertations, review articles.
Language	INCLUDED: Articles written in English or available as an English translation. EXCLUDED: Articles available in languages other than English.
Access	INCLUDED: Open access sources and sources accessible via login with UCC credentials. EXCLUDED: Sources not open access or inaccessible via login with UCC credentials.
Publication date	INCLUDED: Sources published between 2000-2025. EXCLUDED: Sources published prior to 2000.

Figure 1 PRISMA Summary of Screening and Selection from Databases



Key concepts and influences related to child participation

This section examines key concepts that shape our understanding and practice of child participation, primarily informed by childhood studies literature. Childhood studies finds itself at a juncture (James, 2010) and there is still much mileage left in existing efforts to extend the conceptual language of children's participation by linking to broader debates and theories on citizenship, politics, social movements, activism and social change (Nolas, 2015). However, there is a significant body of research indicating the benefits of children's participation. Children's civic

involvement strengthens democracy and empowers them as change-makers and children's civic involvement has positive impacts and "contributes to ensuring a more just and inclusive society" (Álamo-Bolaños et al. 2024, p.3). Alias et al. (2023) contend that participation enhances children's safety by informing them, encouraging them to voice concerns, and providing strategies to address violence and abuse. Alanko (2019) identifies three interrelated dimensions of participation: the political dimension, which aligns with the UNCRC (1989) and emphasises children's right to express their views in decisions affecting them; the social and relational dimension, which highlights interactions with peers and adults; and the subjective dimension, which fosters a sense of belonging and empowerment.

Children's Citizenship

Children's citizenship and participation, particularly for those under 12, are increasingly recognised as vital components of societal development and participation initiatives underscore the importance of viewing children as capable citizens who can contribute meaningfully to their communities (Álamo-Bolaños, et al. 2024). Kay et al. (2006, p.116) advocate that children's participation should be political, so that children do not "remain on the margins of political and policy decision-making, a form of social and political exclusion, of 'secondary citizenship'".

Children and young people are often discriminated against in the political realm because of their age and perceived capabilities (Lundy, 2018; Perry-Hazan, 2016; Augsberger et al., 2024). Kelley (2006) advocates for the importance of involving children early in policy process as their position as children puts them at a disadvantage compared to adults.

> "*Unlike other interest groups, children cannot collectively organise to lobby for inclusion of their views, shout over competing voices, or hold the unresponsive policymaker to account. Early collaboration with stakeholders, the creation of 'open, speculative discussions' may be part of creating better policy more generally but is essential to any policy development that seeks to build on the views of children and young people."* (Kelley, 2006, p40).

Cultural norms and societal values shape the ways in which children learn to express their opinions and interact with authority figures. Alias et al. (2023) discuss how cultural norms in Malaysia emphasise respect for authority, hierarchy, and collectivism, which can limit children's ability to express their views openly. Children are often expected to be obedient and deferential to elders, leading them to feel hesitant or unworthy of voicing their opinions on matters that affect them. The family environment plays a crucial role, as traditional parenting styles may prioritise discipline and compliance over open dialogue. When parents do not actively encourage or validate their children's perspectives, it can result in a lack of confidence and reluctance to participate in discussions, both within the family and in broader societal settings. Horgan and Kennan (2021) highlight how the Irish government has championed and invested in child and youth participation since the turn of the last decade having emerged from a dark period of social history marked by a

series of high-profile scandals and the publication of government inquiries which revealed familial, institutional and clerical abuse and silencing of children.

Children's ability to exercise their rights is often mediated by adults, who may influence how their voices are represented and prioritised. Children often depend on adults to realise their rights, which can lead to situations where adults prioritise their own interests. Powell et al. (2025) analyse how adult campaigners invoke children and their rights in a public space campaign in Wales, using Hart's Ladder to assess participation. They find that adults selectively represent specific notions of children and childhood, often presuming to speak on their behalf. This selective advocacy results in forms of engagement that sit low on Hart's Ladder, characterised as tokenistic, decorative, and misguided (Powell et al., 2025, p. 2).

Children's Agency

Larkins (2022) argues that understanding children's agency is crucial for evaluating when and how their participation can drive change. Rather than being an inherent trait, agency is something children actively express within social and political contexts (Oswell, 2016). Gallagher (2019) further conceptualises agency as a quality of actions that emerge within complex networks of relationships and structures. In the context of political agency, Häkli and Kallio (2018) emphasise that children's inclusion in policymaking is not determined solely by institutional mechanisms that encourage their participation. Instead, factors such as personal experiences, public debates, social norms, institutional regulations, and legal frameworks play a significant role. The extent of children's influence is also shaped by the attitudes and connections of both children and adults in these spaces, the political relevance of their concerns, and the extent to which freedom of expression is protected. In practice, inclusion is often fostered through grassroots engagement, where trust and cooperation develop between experienced child participants, pro-participation policymakers, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), and academics. Supportive organisations play a crucial role by providing children with resources, guidance, and platforms for involvement in policymaking (Häkli and Kallio, 2018).

Childism and Ageism in Children's Participation

Young children's voices are often excluded from participatory activities due to dominant societal perceptions of them as vulnerable, passive, and incomplete individuals still in formation (Street, 2022). In policymaking, it is useful to identify the resources, relationships, conditions, and opportunities that children act with and through when seeking influence. Sundhall (2017) explores how children's participation in democratic processes is limited by childism. She argues that children are underrepresented in democratic and political spaces due to their age. Sundhall constructs age relationally, noting perceived differences between adults and children in maturity, volatility, and reflexivity (2017, p. 165). She critiques child and youth parliaments as often elitist, adult-initiated, and not genuinely child-centered (Kawecka et al., 2013; Gordon and Taft, 2011).

A key barrier to realising children's rights is their historical marginalisation from collective decision-making. This creates challenges in persuading adult decision-makers of children's "inherent capacity for autonomy" (McCall-Smith, 2023, p. 1197) and the importance of nurturing these capacities throughout childhood and adolescence. Children's participation in policymaking is often competing with other high-level policy agendas, viewed as an add-on rather than a necessary activity and therefore limited by resources. Even when included, children's voices often hold less influence compared to more powerful stakeholders. Kay et al. (2006) note that children's access to the policy process is typically sporadic rather than continuous, reinforcing their marginalisation (Smith, 1997 cited in Kay et al. 2006).

Article 12(1) of the UNCRC acknowledges children's right to participation, yet this right is often granted primarily to older children (Kjørholt, 2002). Consequently, concepts of participation and citizenship remain underdeveloped for children under 13 (Tuukkanen, Kankaanranta, and Wilska, 2012), making it more difficult for younger children to influence decisions affecting their lives (Lansdown, 2005). A discursive, voice-based form of children's participation and involvement in decision-making processes and structures, influenced by the UNCRC, has become a global standard (Wyness 2013; Alasuutari 2014). This is problematic because it excludes so many children due to their age and capacity to engage in discursive processes, but also because it ignores non-voiced forms of participation (Spyrou 2011; Alasuutari 2014; Åmot and Ytterhus 2014). A growing body of research highlights the importance of avoiding pre-conceptions about what children can and cannot do at any given age or disability level (Clark and Moss [2001] 2011; Gray and Winter 2011; Warming 2011), and the need for a wider interpretation of participation than voice-based (Åmot and Ytterhus 2014; Horgan et al., 2017). Non-voiced methods of participation can include a variety of methods including, participant observation, visual and creative methods, digital methods and map making (Syprou, 2011).

Despite their exclusion from formal political structures, children are recognised as independent actors in various settings, though their agency remains limited by adult control over their participatory rights (Pardo-Beneyto and Abellán-López, 2023). This adult control is reinforced by power imbalances shaped by cultural norms and perceptions of children's dependency and competence (Blanchet-Cohen and Torres, 2015; Shier, 2010).

Cockburn (2005) critiques the contradictions in how children are perceived, noting that they are simultaneously seen as both at risk and a risk (Stephens, 1995). Labels such as incompetent, emotional, or unreliable justify their confinement to "safe" spaces like schools and family environments, while excluding them from the public sphere. However, as Mayall (2001) argues, children are not immune to public policies and societal changes, making their exclusion from public decision-making problematic.

Adultism and adult agendas

Adults' perceptions of children's maturity significantly impact their opportunities for active citizenship and impact all three interrelated dimensions of participation; political, social and relational and the subjective (Alanko, 2019). When children are seen as inherently incapable, their participation is restricted (Phillips, 2011). The "image of the child" held by adults plays a crucial role in shaping children's engagement in society (Rinaldi, 2013; Bartholomaeus, Gregoric, and Krieg, 2016). Furthermore, practical constraints such as time limitations, school obligations, and lack of financial independence further hinder children's participation. Unlike adults, children require dedicated resources and structured support to engage meaningfully in decision-making processes (Bennett Woodhouse, 2003).

Wall et al. (2019) emphasise the importance of recognising and addressing power dynamics when supporting the participation of very young children (ages 0–7). Adults must acknowledge both the implicit assumptions that position children as powerless and the ways their own perspectives shape these dynamics. Creating a supportive and enabling environment tailored to children's developmental stages is crucial. Additionally, Wall highlights that young children are not merely passive but can exert power, influence situations, and even disrupt adult-child power structures. Furthermore, power is also present in peer relationships, affecting which children's voices are heard or silenced (Wall et al, 2019).

Mitchell and Colville (2021) discuss the significant influence of adults' beliefs on child participation. These beliefs, rooted in adults' perspectives and knowledge, shape their perceptions of children's competence and ability to express views. Their research with education professionals in Scotland found that adults hold the power to determine whether children can share their views in multi-agency meetings and how much weight those views carry. Much of this power is exercised unconsciously and without intentional bias. The study noted that professionals often linked children's capacity to age and expected them to articulate well-thought-out, reflective views for their perspectives to be considered valid (Hart, 2008; Lundy, 2007, 2018). The authors emphasise the need to make the impact of adult power and status more explicit, as dominant narratives can suppress or silence children's voices (p. 489). The study recommends training for professionals on recognising children's capacity to express and share their views.

In an article titled “You're so adorable, adorable, adorable! I'm speechless; so much fun!” (2016, p.109), Perry-Hazan analyses children’s participation in national policymaking in Israel. The quote, from an adult legislator and directed at a child participant in a policy discussion, embodies what she identifies as a key barrier to the realisation of children’s participatory rights – adults not taking children seriously. Findings from the study exemplify the various adult responses to children’s participation, namely *promising, discussing, supporting, fawning, questioning, dismissing* and *ignoring*. The most extreme reactions were fawning and dismissing which serve to marginalise the views and perceptions of children. *Fawning* refers to adults excessively complimenting or

applauding children for expressing their views and includes the use of phrases like “adorable” or “fantastic” and were observed in over 25 percent of policymaking meetings with children (Perry-Hazan, 2016, p.111) who found this embarrassing and patronising. *Dismissive* responses were characterised as disregarding children’s views, ridiculing children, laughing at their suggestions, correcting them or otherwise making children feel uncomfortable. Fawning and dismissive responses represent adultism, presuming children’s inferiority to adults (Checkoway, 2011; Shier et al., 2014) and mirror findings from other studies exploring children’s participation in policymaking (Blanchet-Cohen and Bedeaux, 2014; Hinton, 2008; Matthews and Limb, 2003; Shier et al., 2014; Wyness et al., 2004; Wyse, 2001).

However, other research on adult’s perceptions of child participation presents a more strengths-based perspective of child participation. In a study with seven Swedish politicians on their experiences of child participation methods the participants identified why they thought it was important to include children in public policymaking:

> “*The importance of understanding the views of children in decision-making processes with bearings on their lives and everyday activities was expressed as significant at the municipal political level. The adverse effects of excluding children from decisions could damage trust in the decision-makers and the quality of the decision” (*Juliussen, Garmy and Olsson, 2023, p.1103).

This study demonstrates adult decision-makers' awareness of the importance of child participation in building trust in democratic institutions and the risk of lack of engagement with children in public decision-making processes. While there is some research on the attitudes of decision-makers, there is limited evidence of the attitude of adults in the general population to children’s participation and competency. Regarding adult support for children's participation in public policy, Phillips et al. (2024) report findings from national surveys in Australia and New Zealand that assessed attitudes toward children and young people's views on environmental decision-making. The majority of adult respondents supported children, at least from age 11, having their opinions considered and acted upon in government decisions. Women were more likely than men to endorse this view. However, globally, there is limited data on adults' general support for children's involvement in government decision-making, including within the Irish context.

Harada (2023) in reviewing 3 Danish youth councils notes that many fail to influence decision-making because of poor adult attitudes towards listening to youths’ voices, feedback to policymaking and a mismatch of agenda-setting by adults (Bolding and Nielsen 2015; Matthews 2001; Thomas 2007; Tidsdall and Davis 2004). The lack of a formal decision-making process is another issue that affects youth participation. This highlights the importance of adults taking on advocacy roles. As partners in dialogic problem-solving and decision-making, youth council workers play a specific role within the councils to help them avoid tokenistic participation. They build relationships with the young people and listen to their voices as much as possible, to facilitate their influence on local policies (Harada, 2021).

To challenge adult-centric perspectives adults should actively work to remove barriers that limit children's agency. This involves recognising and addressing biases that prioritise adult viewpoints over children's perspectives (Novella-Cámara et al., 2024). Other adults can be supported to do the same by cultivating collaborative relationships between schools and local councils, in addition to partnerships with children and families to "strengthen the shared intra and intergenerational horizon" (p. 31).

Relational aspects of participation

One unfortunate side-effect of the UNCRC has been a tendency to set children's rights in opposition to adults and construct a discourse of children as independent entities and rights holders removed from their social, economic and cultural contexts. However, this is increasingly challenged from within childhood studies along with a rejection of many of the modernist dualisms of childhood – social/natural, structural/transitional and being/ becoming (Prout, 2011; Tisdall and Punch, 2012). This has led to a greater appreciation of the fluid, relational nature of children's lives (Tisdall and Punch, 2012; Horgan et al., 2017). Central to this position is a perception of children and young people as individuals having responsibilities, living relationally, inter-generationally and in their communities (Mayall, 2002) and a call for children's participation to be located within a framework of intergenerational dialogue (Wyness, 2013). This perspective emphasises the interdependency between children's 'voice' and their socio-cultural environments (Kjørholt, 2004) where the interaction of development and environment influences the judgement of what is important to children and young people and also how children's voices are constructed (Todd, 2012 cited in Horgan, 2016). This perspective locates children as relational beings, embedded in multiple overlapping inter-generational processes and highlights the interdependency between children's participation and their environment (Percy-Smith 2010; Tisdall 2013; Leonard 2016 cited in Horgan et al., 2017). Participation can then be understood as an ongoing relational process between children and adults based on dialogue and mutual respect (McCall-Smith, 2023; Mannion et al., 2020).

The relational lens also requires us to consider the role of adults and caregivers in child participation. Street (2022) in her qualitative research with mothers of young children in an economically disadvantaged community in England critiques the eliciting of young children's voices as separate from their parents. She contends that children's voices are interdependent with their social, material, temporal and spatial contexts; environments" (Street, 2022, p.103). Street (2022) contends that children's voices should not be separated from their relational and cultural contexts or treated as the sole focus, as doing so would not address the broader social and material conditions that affect the wellbeing of children and their families in low-income areas.

In addition to adult-child relations, an important aspect of this relational understanding of participation is peer relations. Alanko (2019) emphasises the significance of peer relationships for children engaged in youth councils, noting that they highly value the opportunity to interact with their peers and create new friendships.

> '*Participation is fundamentally an intersubjective (Siljander 2002) process, something that takes place in relations with others. The political dimension of participation was intertwined with the relational and the subjective aspects…. For most, a regional youth council was an arena of peer culture where it was possible to create new friendships. Thus, to participate was to interact with peers in meaningful but also joyful activities. Some of the children also expressed that the preliminary motive for joining the council was because of their peers.*" (Alanko, 2019, p155)

Using relational accounts of agency can give insight into the relationships between people and environments that may be facilitative of children's collective and individual influence (Larkins, 2022). Focusing on political agency, Häkli and Kallio (2018, p18) identify that beyond the institutional arrangements of any given policy, the intersections of relational spaces are also important: 'personal experiences, public debates, social norms, institutional regulations, legal orders, and beyond'. So, children's experience of inclusion and influence in policymaking is not dictated simply by the mechanisms to encourage, enable or oblige children's views to be taken into account. Inclusion and impact are also related to the personal experiences, attitudes and connections of the adults and children in those spaces; the salience of the children's issues in the context of wider political pressures; and the extent to which freedom of expression is enabled and protected. In the examples given, inclusion was built through personal experiences, attitudes and connections in grassroots engagement with children. Often this involved organisations who provide support as well as opportunities for involvement in policymaking, and children reaching out to their peers. Inclusion was built on trust and cooperation between experienced children who already had involvement in participation activities, pro-participation policy actors, international nongovernmental organisations (INGOs), and academics (Häkli and Kallio, 2018).

Participation as educational pedagogy/ socio-educational activity

Alparone and Rissotto (2001) discuss how the concept of the pedagogy of participation (Manuetti, 1997) is aimed at replacing a paternalistic view of the idea of the protection of childhood and at rejecting the widespread notion of children's incompetence, and educational models based on passivity. Alanko (2019) defines the pedagogy of participation as a framework that recognises children as active agents with unique life experiences.

> *"Pedagogy of participation highlights the importance of acknowledging that the right to participate is intertwined with the sense of responsibility. This means responsibility of the adults to support and guide children in their participation activities"* (Alanko, 2019, p158-159).

In essence, the pedagogy of participation promotes a more dynamic and interactive approach to education, where children's voices are heard and valued. This approach not only enhances their learning experience but also fosters a sense of agency and empowerment. Sant and Davies (2018) describe educational contexts as safe spaces for children's participation, where the intended

outcomes are increased engagement, critical reflection and citizenship, as opposed to increased political participation. They describe schools as “situated spaces” where children learn about and negotiate their citizenship.

Riádigos-Couso and Gradaílle (2023) position child participation in the community as a socio-educational activity that fosters children’s developing citizenship and democratic values. They suggest that citizen participation facilitates children to develop new skills allowing them to think critically about what is important to them and how they can make improvements. Riádigos-Couso and Gradaílle (2023, p.8) state that participation “must be educational, since children and adolescents learn to participate in community, … [where] they go from being –simply– listened to, to being involved, empowered and learning to take responsibility in the decision-making process of projects at the local and/or community level, independently of adults”.

In citizenship education, children's participation is recognised as an essential practice that requires pedagogical support (Alanko, 2019). However, there are ongoing tensions in this field. Biesta, Lawy and Kelly (2009) argues that democracy is learned through active participation in everyday life, and that all areas of society, not just schools, should support children's right to participate. Despite this, Biesta criticises approaches for being individualistic and instrumentalist, focusing too much on imparting specific competencies to children rather than fostering a broader understanding of citizenship. Similarly, Smith (2012), Wyness (2013) and others refer to the danger of child participation becoming an instrument of governmentality associated with a future-oriented citizenship curriculum comprising policy and activities designed to mould future citizens, workers, and voters (Horgan et al., 2017).

In citizenship education, children's participation is seen as an educational practice requiring pedagogical support (Alanko, 2019).There are ongoing tensions in citizenship education and participation and Biesta, Lawy, and Kelly (2009) are critical of the ‘idea that an alleged crisis in democratic society can be adequately addressed by (re)educating young people so as to make them ready for their roles as democratic, participating and active citizens’ (p.2). The teaching of citizenship should include a deeper understanding of how young people learn democratic citizenship through their everyday participation in communities and practices. Focusing on citizenship learning in everyday life helps to see how it is integrated into young people's lives and how these lives are connected to the broader social, cultural, political, and economic context (Biesta, Lawy, and Kelly, 2009). Similarly, Nolas (2015) distinguishes between a governance approach, focused on audit and service improvement driven by corporate practices, and a social movement impetus, aimed at improving children's lives by focusing on their everyday experiences. He suggests that renewing the participatory agenda requires paying more attention to children's daily lives and broadening the evidence used in research, policy, and practice.

Murphy et al. (2024) examine pedagogical practice that embedded children’s participation rights in lower classes in Welsh primary schools. They identify the Curriculum for Wales (CfW) (Welsh

Government, 2021) as a turning point in the move towards rights-based education for young children. The curriculum references detailed explanations of "education about, through and for human rights" (UN General Assembly) and emphasises learner voice in curriculum design. Despite the foregrounding of education for human rights in CfW, there is a paucity of guidance for how this can be embedded in school contexts. The authors argue that foregrounding concepts in policy are insufficient without appropriate support for teachers who facilitate children's participation in schools. The UNICEF Child Rights School programme is an example of an initiative which can support teachers with embedding children's rights in school. This long-running international UNICEF initiative seeks to embed children's rights in the everyday practices of the school through a whole school approach. Introduced in Ireland in 2019, the programme allows schools to apply for participation and work towards recognition through the *Rights Respecting Schools Award*. In 2022, the first schools in Ireland were formally granted this award (UNICEF, 2025).

In conclusion, the literature on child participation underscores the multifaceted nature of children's involvement in societal and political processes. Key concepts such as children's citizenship, agency, and the impact of cultural norms highlight the importance of viewing children as capable and active participants in their communities. Despite challenges like ageism and childism, fostering environments that support children's voices and agency can lead to more inclusive and effective policymaking. By recognising and addressing the barriers to children's participation, society can empower young individuals to contribute meaningfully to social change and democratic processes. The next section explores the literature on the limitations of existing child participation structures.

Recent policy drivers and practices

International and European context

This section provides some background context in terms of international and EU developments regarding child participation in more formal decision-making structures. Two important mapping exercises undertaken at EU level are discussed (Percy-Smith, 2015 and Janta et al. 2021).

Riekkinen (2011) argues that to help rebalance the limitation of electoral rights on the basis of age, children should be provided alternative opportunities to express their views on political matters affecting them, and their views should be given due weight by public authorities. This is the approach of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

UNCRC (1989) and CRPD (2006)

Nolan (2010, p.126) describes Article 12 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) as "arguably of greatest use in terms of serving as a springboard for children to input into democratic decision-making processes that affect them". This Article laid down the right

of all children to be heard and have their views taken seriously in accordance with their age and maturity (UNCRC).
Subsequently in a statement on the child's right to participation, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2006 urged states to:

> 'guarantee systematic inclusion of the child's right to participation in policy matters, as well as ensuring that child participation is taken into account in resource allocation.' (para. 25)

The CRC General Comment in 2009 supports children's involvement in governance at all levels, including law and policy making, and budget allocation. It notes that the child does not need comprehensive knowledge of the matter affecting him or her, but sufficient understanding to be capable of appropriately forming a view.

In addition, Article 7(3) of the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (UNRPD) invites states parties not only to recognise children with a disability's 'right to express their views freely on all matters affecting them' but also to provide assistance to children with a disability in order to exercise that right.

In the past, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has been criticised for not addressing to any great extent the concept of children as democratic citizens, in the sense of having the right to have a direct formal input into democratic decision-making processes (Nolan, 2010). The information concerning such practices is only infrequently found in state periodic reports to the Committee on the Rights of the Child according to an analysis by Riekkinen in 2011 (p. 171).

European Union

At the European level, the Council of Europe (2012) Recommendation on children's participation was foundational. Following comprehensive reviews of the reality of child participation in a number of member states and with the direct involvement of children in the work of the drafting Committee, it set out steps for member states to enhance children's opportunities to express themselves and to participate in public life. It covers the rights of children and young people to be heard in all settings, including in schools, in communities and in the family as well as at national and European level. It is supported by guidance and tools including the Child Participation Assessment Tool (Council of Europe, 2016) providing specific and measurable indicators with which states can measure progress in the implementation of the recommendation.

Children's digital participation rights have become more central in recent years (Lalor et al., 2024) with the Council of Europe (2018) recommendation to member states to develop online civic and social platforms to facilitate children's participation and strengthen their capacity for democratic citizenship and political awareness.

> *'This was echoed also in the European Commission's endorsement of "active participation" as a key pillar of its Better Internet for Kids strategy (European Commission, 2022) while the*

> *European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC) has called upon governments to ensure that "the digital environment offers an additional engagement platform for children to participate in social, community and civic roles.'* (Lalor et al. 2024, p.2)

The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (2021) sets out EU actions to empower children to be active citizens and members of democratic societies. The strategy stresses the need for the EU to promote and improve children's participation at all levels of governance: local, national and EU. It envisages actions to strengthen the collaboration between the EU Children's Participation Platform, the European Parliament and the child rights organisations. Other actions include conducting child-specific consultations; promoting children's active participation in the European Climate Pact; and systematically mainstreaming children's rights in all relevant EU policies and actions. At the same time, Member States are invited to promote school curricula that include education on citizenship, equality and participation in democratic processes.

The Eurochild Child Participation Strategy (2021) advocates for putting children's rights at the heart of EU policy-making. It sets four key goals – that national and EU governments are supported in establishing child participation mechanisms; that there are opportunities for child participation at EU and national level to reach a more diverse group of children in terms of background and age; that members and external actors have increased capacity to engage with children in a meaningful way; and that children have more opportunity to influence Eurochild's governance.

The EU Children's Participation Platform (for children under the age of 18), a flagship initiative of the EU strategy, was launched in 2022 to amplify children's voices and embed children in the EU decision-making process. The Platform brings together existing child-participation mechanisms to work towards a more systemic, coherent, meaningful, inclusive, and safe approach to child participation. The 2025-26 Workplan was co-created with children and young people. It emphasised equal opportunities and social inclusion in education, healthcare, and housing; mental health and well-being; online safety; and climate action.

Ireland

The last 25 years has seen the development of a policy framework to support children and youth participation through Governmental and Non-Governmental participatory structures for consulting with children and youth in Ireland for the purpose of giving them a stronger voice in policy-making (Horgan and Kennan, 2021). The Irish Government's commitment to child and youth participation can be charted as originating in the *National Children's Strategy 2000* and progressing to the *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making* (DCYA, 2015), the first of its kind in Europe, to the current *Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-Making: Action Plan (2024–2028)*.

Many Government Departments and State agencies have engaged in the process of including the views of children and young people in their policy development. The Department of Children,

Disability and Equality (DCDE) has supported many of these processes. It provides support, expertise and practical assistance through Hub na nÓg (the national centre for excellence on child and youth participation), the National Participation Office, as well as focused consultations and engagement with Comhairle na nÓg (the nationwide youth council structure supported by DCDE and local authorities). In 2022, the National Youth Assembly of Ireland was established to provide a forum for consultation and discussion with children and young people aged 12-24 years on issues of national importance.

Comhairle na nÓg was established as the permanent structure representing young voices in decision-making at local and national level in Ireland in response to Ireland's commitment to the United Convention on the Right of the Child. Since 2002, Comhairle na nÓg (local youth councils) is the recognised National Structure for participation by children and young people in Ireland giving young people a voice on the development of local policies and services in each of the 31 Local Authorities. Young people aged 12-18 become members of their local Comhairle na nÓg through their schools, youth organisations and community groups. In addition to being the recognised structure locally for youth participation in decision-making, Comhairle na nÓg also provides young people with a voice in decision-making nationally through Dáil na nÓg (National Youth Parliament), the National Youth Assembly of Ireland and Government consultations on National Policy.

Established in 2001, Dail na nÓg is Ireland's National youth parliament where young people aged 12-18 years from 31 local councils (Comhairle na nÓg) are hosted by the Minister of DCDE every two years to discuss and vote on issues of national importance to young people. The National Executive is a representative group of 31 young people for each Comhairle na nÓg who are tasked with progressing the issue as voted on at Dáil na nÓg over their two-year term. Delegates range from 12 to 24 years of age and come from all over Ireland.

DCEDIY established the National Youth Assembly of Ireland in 2022 to meet key commitments in the Programme for Government by collaborating closely with other Government Departments to convene Youth Assemblies on specific policy areas. The National Youth Assembly of Ireland is an overarching structure for Youth Assemblies that meet on different policy topics that are of importance to and impact on young people. The National Youth Assembly of Ireland delegates range in ages from 12 to 24 years and come from all across Ireland. Approximately 60 young people are selected to sit on the National Youth Assembly for a term of 24 months. These sitting delegates are nominated by Comhairle na nÓg (Local Youth Councils) and a wide range of youth and community groups nationally. Delegates are selected with an aim to have a broad representation of diverse young people from a range of youth organisations, taking into account geographical spread, urban/rural representation, age, gender and seldom heard. Guest delegates join the Assembly on a temporary basis from organisations and groups with a particular focus on the topic of the Assembly.

In recent years, there has been a deepening and strengthening of this agenda through the current *Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (2023–2028*), the vision of which is 'An Ireland which fully respects and realises the rights of children and young people'. Also, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth published the *Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-Making: Action Plan* (2024–2028) provides a framework to support all government departments and State agencies to have meaningful engagements with children and young people when developing relevant policy, legislation, research and services. A key recent development has been the establishment of a Student Participation Unit in the Department of Education in 2023. The unit will implement a number of actions that support the participation of children and young people at school level, including updating the guidance to post primary schools on supporting the establishment of student councils and developing guidance for primary schools – clear policy involving younger children. An expert group on student participation to advise the department on how best to improve its work on involving children and young people in its policy development. The student participation implementation group will oversee implementation of the actions in this implementation plan.

Mapping of child participation in EU Political and Democratic life

An evaluation of legislation, policy and practice of child participation in the European Union published in 2015 (Percy-Smith et al., 2015) identifies and maps the existing situation in terms of child participation in the development and implementation of actions and policies that affect them both at national and EU level. The education sector shows the most widespread evidence for legislation relating to Article 12. All Member States include some degree of provision for child participation within their general Education Act or Code. In many countries, children's participation is instituted through school councils. These structures are the most widespread for students of secondary school age but are less evident for primary school students. The participation of younger children is highly variable, but some good practices exist. In particular more attention needs to be paid to finding out from children who don't participate e.g. at-risk groups and under 12s meaningful ways for them to participate.

It found that there is a general lack of participation of younger children under the age of 12, so that 'the rights of the child remain significantly overshadowed by EU legislation, policy and programmes in the 'youth' field. This has resulted in some disparities in the support for participation on the basis of age. The 14- to 16-year-old age group have benefited to a greater extent than younger children from the significant resources invested in this policy area' (Percy-Smith et al., 2015: 186).

More recently, in 2021, the European Commission published a study on child participation in EU political and democratic life (Janta et al., 2021). The report provides a helpful insight covering 27 Member States and the UK, looking at child participation at the national level. The researchers also examined child participation at the local level in 10 countries, including Ireland. Only a small

number of councils at national and European level, which explicitly state the age range of participants, include under 13's. More than 200 children and young people along with other stakeholders shared their opinions and experiences in interviews and focus groups. The report clearly identifies poor data and the need to focus on younger children in these participation structures, processes and practices which are typically geared towards children above the age of 12 years old, with a particular lack of mechanisms geared towards younger children. The concern that children are somehow 'lost' in mechanisms dominated by young adults was noted by several international and EU-level interviewees who observed it across many countries. Some of the identified mechanisms did appear to focus on including younger children, for instance the children's councils in Malta (8–12 years old) and Portugal (8–17 years old), the children's parliament in Slovenia (6–15 years old), and the Danish National Council for Children's Mini Child Panel includes approximately 1,000 children aged 4–7 years.

Overall, then, there is a clear need for adult stakeholders to do more to engage children from younger age groups. The report also raises issues about the adaptability of the mechanisms to different groups, e.g. the communication material to target children and provide feedback, and the required skills from facilitators/adults supporting children's participation mechanisms and processes (Janta et al., 2021).

In a statement during the Covid 19 pandemic in 2021 the European Commissioner for Human Rights noted the disproportionate impact of policy decisions made by leaders who are elected by, and accountable to, a population in Europe that is ageing on children's lives. He argues that few governments have made systematic efforts to institutionalise mechanisms at different levels for children to participate actively and meaningfully in all decisions that affect them. The statement calls for child-led initiatives that aim to improve existing patterns, empowering children and young people to make choices and meaningfully influence their future.

Incorporation of UNCRC into national domestic legislation

Incorporation in law is recommended by the Committee on the Rights of the Child and recognised as key to the implementation of the UNCRC (Lundy et al., 2013). Research has confirmed that incorporation in some form is a feature in many States that are party to the Convention, but that full and direct incorporation is less significant, with many States favouring the sectoral approach which means less disruption to the national legal order (especially at the constitutional level), and which engages most obviously with narrow areas of policy and practice that are traditionally regarded as having an impact on children (Hoffman and Stern, 2020, p. 149).

Recent developments by countries incorporating the CRC into their domestic legislation provide some insights. Juliussen et al. (2023) in their study with a small number of Swedish elected political representatives at the municipal level suggest that since the UNCRC was officially incorporated into Swedish legislation (2020) there has been some positive attitudinal change and

increased awareness of children's rights at both local and national level however it is a complex picture and the research suggests that the law has not been fully implemented or realised in everyday work and practice.

> *Societal changes in awareness and attitudes have been seen when citizens have questioned politicians about how the UNCRC has been considered in connection to decisions. Even though changes have been noted in attitudes, the changes were not as apparent within the municipality as within the society…Regarding the complexity of implementation, participants were unanimous that the law needs clarity, and the municipalities need more experience. Difficulties at the political level were found in assessments made when the articles were incorporated and accounted for in decisions.* (Juliussen et al., 2023, p.1106).

McCall-Smith (2023, p.1198) discusses how Scottish incorporation of the CRC signifies 'the beginning of a new era in the realisation of children's rights in Scotland, but this is only the first step'. Advocacy and education surrounding the incorporation of international human rights is required to ensure rights-holders and duty-bearers drive culture change at every level of society and government. She demonstrates how the direct incorporation of the UNCRC offers a stronger opportunity to entrench children's participation rights in Scotland.

What the limited evidence tells us about its contribution to the realisation of children's rights, is that incorporation can be seen as potentially having a range of impacts which include influencing administrative decision-making and policy, leading in some cases to policy more consistent with children's rights (Hoffman and Stern, 2020).

Limitations of existing structures

Critique of formal and invited participation structures

Children are often regarded as "non-governmental public actors" because they are legally excluded from holding public office, voting, or substantial governmental employment until the age of 16 (Kay et al., 2006; Jones and Bell, 2000). While most OECD countries maintain a voting age of 18, some exceptions, such as Austria and Estonia, have lowered it to 16, the lowest age currently implemented in democratic systems (Gottschalk and Borhan, 2023) meaning children aged 8-12 are unable to vote in local or national elections. Participatory activities within formal and invited participation structures for children and young people are often predetermined by adult facilitators and lack flexibility, therefore limiting opportunities for children's meaningful participation (Kiili and Larkins, 2018). There are also differing opinions on power dynamics within participatory mechanisms, for example stakeholders' debate whether formal participation structures like youth councils empower children and young people, or rather serve as a mechanism for "preservation of the political status quo?" (Sant and Davies, 2018, p.374). Grace et al. (2019) argue that children's participation can be limited by power dynamics, social context, and their stage of life, which can

restrict their decision-making abilities and make participation not always positive. This raises the question of whether formal participation structures like child and youth councils support citizenship and agency, or encourage compliance and acceptance with dominant modes of participation (Sant and Davies, 2018; Adu-Gyamfi, 2013; Raby, 2012).

An over-emphasis on the provision of formal and invited participation structures may detract focus from the importance of supporting children's right to participate in the everyday, situated spaces in their lives (Kiili and Larkins, 2018; Mannion et al., 2020). This is especially relevant for under-represented groups of children, for example younger children and children from low SES backgrounds' whose inclusion in participation in formal decision-making is already limited (Raby, 2014). Crowley (2015) critiques the structures set up for child participation such as children's councils and school councils as "providing opportunities for children to practice "good" citizenship, develop a responsible attitude, learn about the complexity of public decision-making and much less about, real influence on public decision-making and improvements to the accountability of public services to their intended beneficiaries" (p. 603). Results from a study conducted by Sant and Davies (2018) demonstrate that children and youth who may reject mainstream avenues of participation appear to favour participation through activism and social movements. Rather than focusing on including the voices of marginalised children, attention should be paid to how and if formal participation structures are of benefit to them, and the potential for alternative avenues of participation for children who do not want to participate in formal decision-making activities.

Children's involvement is not equally distributed across participatory activities

Research on the mechanisms of children's political participation in the UK and EU (Janta et al., 2021) indicates that children's participation at local, national and European levels is most likely to be sought at the beginning of policymaking cycles, and their involvement in the policymaking process decreases over time. This aligns with previous findings that suggest children are most likely to be involved in generating new ideas and least likely to be involved in policy implementation, service delivery, monitoring and evaluation (Kay et al., 2006). Janta et al. (2021) also note the limited number of mechanisms that demonstrate children's impact on policymaking. Similarly, research on children's participation in decision-making in school councils found that children were most likely to be asked to plan extra-curricular once-off events (DeCastro, 2012). These types of participation activities are limiting for children as they do not allow for children's ongoing involvement in decision-making in everyday spaces. To achieve meaningful participation, children need to be included in every step of decision-making on issues relevant to their lives. Tisdall (2013), for example, discusses the work of collaborators from Brazil, India, South Africa and the UK on 'transformative child participation' emphasising 'co-production' which is embedded and deep across key stages of policy development.

Types of participatory activities/Examples of facilitation of participation for under 12s

Approaches to the facilitation of children's participation internationally are varied. While a large body of literature focuses on the participation of older children and young people, examples for supporting children under 12 years are limited. The meaningful participation of children requires time, effort, and trusting relationships with the adults supporting them to exercise their rights (Cockburn, 2005). This section provides examples of how the participation of children under 12 is facilitated at local or municipal level internationally. In particular, it examines models for national children's parliaments, municipal children's councils, consultations with children, student councils and green school councils.

National child councils and parliaments

Youth parliaments are a relatively new and yet widespread phenomenon having emerged in the mid-1990s (the Parlement des Enfants was established in France in 1994) and early 2000s (the Cyprus Children Parliament in 2000) (Shepherd and Patrikios, 2013). The growth of children's parliaments was galvanized by the UNCRC and its participation rights, in particular, Article 12 of the UNCRC (Tisdall, 2021). Evidence shows that in a relatively short space of time, the youth parliament has become an omnipresent institution in European democracies (Shepherd and Patrikios, 2013). The European Youth Parliament is represented in 40 countries across Europe. Outside of Europe, youth councils are not as prevalent. Percy-Smith and Thomas (2010) describe children's parliaments initiatives in Northern India, Bolivia, Columbia, the Philippines, Scotland the UK, and eastern Africa. However, Weeks (2025 in press) argues that in the absence of a global network that convenes all the youth assemblies, it is difficult to determine how many of them exist.

A children's parliament can be defined as a formal structure for children and young people's participation that meets on a regular or semi-regular basis (Tisdall, 2021). These are one response to ensuring children's views are expressed and given due weight in collective decision-making. Shepherd and Patrikios' (2013) overview of Youth Parliament structures suggests that they appear to fulfill Article 12.1 of the UNCRC. Weeks (2025 in press) in a summary of the literature on the practice of youth representation globally finds that there are few national youth councils operating on a statutory basis. Most such councils have been established by a government or departmental directive.

Children's parliaments are found throughout the world, across all regions, though formats and models vary considerably, sometimes backed by nongovernmental organisations (e.g., Ethiopia and India) while others are supported by government (e.g., Finland, Ireland, Scotland, and the United States) (Tisdal, 2021). NGOs involved in organising children's parliaments include both local

organisations, such as social service NGOs, and large international organisations that support the development of child participation structures. For instance, in Tamil Nadu, India, the Bon Secours Social Service Society (BSSSS) NGO established 45 children's parliaments in Thiruvallur district (Delphina and Sivagami, A., 2023). Similarly, in Ethiopia, Save the Children International has played a key role in supporting child participation initiatives (African Child Policy Forum, 2015).

Generally, children's parliaments tend to involve older children and young people (i.e., over the age of twelve), although there are exceptions (Shepherd and Patrikios, 2013; Tisdall, 2021). Tuukkanen et al., (2013) argued that the concepts of participation and citizenship have not been established for children under age 13. This can perhaps be evidenced in the fact that there are far more resources on youth parliaments than on children's parliaments, and youth parliaments frequently include young people below and above the age of eighteen.

A report commissioned for the European Commission mapped out children's and youth parliaments in the EU (Janta et al., 2021 p. 22), and categorised them into two groups:

(1) Parliaments exclusively for children (aged 0 to 18 years) exist in ten countries and include children's parliaments operating in three countries; five 'Youth Parliaments', but participants' age categories are exclusively for children; two countries have 'Children and Youth Parliaments' but participants were limited exclusively to children. In only five cases, however, did these include children under 12 - Slovenia, Poland, France, Portugal and the UK (and in three of these they included 10 years and older and 11 years and older).
(2) Parliaments for children and youth (a combined structure for under and over 18 years old) in six countries: Belgium (17–27 years old), Cyprus (maximum age 21 years old), Greece (maximum age 21 years old), Latvia (14–24 years old) and Malta (13–35 years old); and 'Children and Youth Parliament', a structure combining children and youth participants, occurred in one Member State Luxembourg. Cyprus is the only country with two separate parliaments, one for children participants (12–18 years old) and one for youth (maximum age 21 years old).

Cushing and van Vliet (2019) report that many countries have a national youth council to provide a coordinating or supportive structure for local or regional councils, often recommending guiding principles and implementation strategies. The literature documents other key functions and attributes of youth councils as comprising offering a safe space for open and respectful political discussion among youngsters, opportunities for children and young people to engage in democratic practices, influence decision-making, policy and legislation, and develop personal skills and leadership qualities (Shepherd and Patrikios, 2013; Perry-Hazan, 2016; Tisdall, 2021; Vrydagh et al., 2020). They are usually seen best as annual education and training programmes culminating at a plenary session (or a set of activities) in the national parliament (Janta et al., 2021).

Analysing the Finnish Children's parliament, Tuukkanen et al., (2012) examine what kinds of issues children want to participate in and influence. Their findings indicate that children comment mainly

on issues that directly impact their lives, such as school. However, they also want to engage in issues that are global in nature, such as children's general well-being. Weeks (2025 in press: 5) in an international review finds that youth parliaments and national youth councils do at least "allow young people to set the agenda on issues that affect them the most. This typically concerns local community issues, around schools, playgrounds, traffic or health-related matters".

Studies consistently find that children and young people who are members of children's parliaments benefit personally in terms of confidence, self-esteem, and personal skills (Forde and Martin 2016; Shephard and Patrikios, 2013). Furthermore, the research suggests that involvement encourages children and young people to engage in future civic engagement and contributions (McGinley and Grieve 2010; and Shephard and Patrikios, 2013).

For critics, however, children's parliaments are tokenistic, evoking fawning or dismissive responses from adult parliamentarians (Perry-Hazan, 2016), with unrepresentative structures that limit rather than further children and young people's participation to influence decision-making collectively. Furthermore, institutions rarely translate youth preferences and grievances into tangible and applicable policy outcomes (Tisdall, 2021). Vrydagh et al. (2020), for example, conclude that the Belgian youth parliament faces difficulties in generating impact and guaranteeing representativeness among the participants which limits the *Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse* potential to close the widening gap between young people and politics. Perry-Hazan, (2016) discussing children's rights to participate in the Israeli Knesset's discussions concludes that policymaking is one of the most challenging arenas in which children's participation rights are implemented. There is no known case of a national parliament being obliged to follow-up on and legislate for the recommendations of a youth parliament (Weeks, 2025 in press). MacLeod and Eichorn (2020) refer to the potential for greater participation of children and young people through the public petitions and committee processes in the Scottish Parliament. Some findings do show the potential of children's participation in national policymaking to mobilise policy change and to contextualise policy discussions but often that it is in the form of 'soft influence' and not cause and effect (Mochrie-Cox, 2013). Tisdall (2021) makes the point that impact should be treated as a multifaceted measure, which extends beyond policy. Youth Parliaments are not just about using youth voice to influence policy, but about engaging youth in the political process (for example, in Scotland and Ireland increased propensity of volunteering is mentioned as a side benefit) and in developing education and core skills (Martin et al., 2017; Tisdall, 2021).

A key note of debate is whether children's parliaments are representative of children and young people more generally. McGinley and Grieve (2010) and Turkie (2010) argue they are not, reporting how young people are often selected by adults. Yet Martin, et al. (2015) and Forde and Martin (2016) (on Ireland's Dáil na nÓg) and Patrikios and Shephard (2013) (on the Scottish Youth Parliament) find that young people who are members are generally demographically representative of their communities. Cushing and van Vliet (2017), meanwhile, reported proportionally more young people from racial minorities and female council members from their communities.

Vrydagh et al. (2020) in their study of the Belgian youth parliament *Jeugd Parlement Jeunesse*, argue that to contribute to the overall quality of democracy, youth parliaments must reflect certain democratic principles in their own organisation and they identify five principles to assess the democratic credentials of youth parliaments: the quality of representation, quality of participation, openness of the agenda, meaningful impact, and enlightened understanding.

Local children's councils

In their international scoping review, Augsberger et al. (2024) conclude that municipal councils are the one common mechanism to engage youth in policymaking. In the absence of lowering voting age, child and youth forums and youth parliaments are mechanisms that can be viewed as a compensation aiming at giving children the possibility to participate in public decision-making (Leviner, 2019). Furthermore, as many decisions affecting children are made locally, attention has turned to children's participation in local governance (Couzens, 2016).

However, research in this space is patchy with considerable lack of public information available about the operation of youth councils at the local level (Janta et al. 2021). Riádigos-Couso et al. (2025) assess the current state of civic participation among children and adolescents between 8 and 17 years of age in local government, through a systematic review of peer-reviewed empirical studies. Findings highlight the predominantly qualitative nature of this socio-educational research. Opportunities for advancing this field include broadening the geographical scope through international studies and conducting longitudinal or evaluative research. Augsberger et al., (2024) note that while there are many examples of municipal youth councils across the globe, no cross-county studies compile the lessons from these efforts. Cushing and van Vliet (2019) in a study of youth councils in the US note that a comprehensive profile of basic characteristics of youth councils is lacking, which hinders an examination of key trends and national variations. While Leviner (2019) in the Swedish context concludes that there is a need for further research on how these mechanisms work and how children in Sweden themselves perceive their opportunities to influence local, national, regional and international politics and public decision-making.

The scoping review by Augsberger et al. (2024) examines the structure, activities, barriers, and impacts of youth engagement through youth councils. It found robust examples of municipal youth councils globally, however, there is wide variation in the origin, structure, and activities and little attention focused on measuring policy and community impacts. Riádigos-Couso et al., (2025) in their systematic review of civic participation among children and adolescents in local government argue that research could expand knowledge in three areas: (1) the impacts on governance, public policies, and social and power relations between children, adolescents, and adults; (2) the inclusivity of children and adolescents in participatory processes and practices; and (3) a deeper exploration of the levels and contexts of children's and adolescents' participation in local government.

History of children's councils

Councils involving young people have become widespread, both in developed and developing countries (Harada, 2021). Children's councils in Europe began in 1979, during the International Year of the Child, when the Municipality of Schiltigheim, France, established the first Children's and Young People's Town Council. This model spread quickly across Northern Europe, with variations but common features included: an elected assembly of children or young people within schools, the ability to propose ideas to local government on urban issues, and municipal funding for council-led initiatives (Manuetti, 1997 cited in Alparone and Rissotto, 2001). In Italy, similar efforts emerged in the early 1990s, supported by environmental groups like WWF and Legambiente. At the European level, the 1990 'Charter of Young People's Participation in Municipal and Regional Life' from the Council of Europe further promoted children's active participation in community life, predating the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (Alparone and Rissotto, 2001). The impact of the UNCRC has been significant with the overarching rights framework used as a guide to develop national, regional, or local legislation to support the development of youth councils internationally (Hanssen, 2019; Collins et al., 2016; Cushing and van Vliet, 2017). Czechia is now the only EU member state that does not have some form of a national youth council (Weeks, 2025 in Press)

The European Network of Local Youth Councils (ENLYC) a trans-national network of European YCs was established in 2011, focused on networking between councils, the exchange of ideas and experiences, and strengthening the political position of YCs in Europe (ENLYC 2025).

Structure and governance of children's councils

Couzens (2016) looks at how children participate in local governance and offers three examples of different types of engagement with local authorities, ranging from highly structured (from within the government structures) to hybrid (where children's organisations have received some formal recognition from the state but enjoy some (full or partial) independence from the government) to informal (from outside of the governance mechanism). In most countries children's participation in governance will be a non-electoral participation aimed at addressing, to a certain extent, children's lack of formal political power (Couzens, 2016).

The international scoping review by Augsberger et al., (2024) found robust examples of municipal youth councils globally, however, there is wide variation in the structures – in terms of whether the youth council was attached to either a city council, the mayor's office, or both; the involvement of schools; the size of the council (ranging from around 10 youth members to 85 or more); age parameters (typically the focus is on secondary school aged youth, but some included children as young as nine and others extended ages into young adulthood, up to age 25); and representativeness (in terms of diversity of youth and range of localities). Similarly, Cushing and van Vliet (2017) discuss how youth councils exist in numerous countries and operate at several levels of government. Collins et al. (2016) in their study of youth councils in 24 municipalities in one

major metropolitan area highlight that the attributes and activities of municipal youth councils demonstrate a high degree of variability.

In most OECD countries, national youth councils operate independently from the government, serving as platforms for youth advocacy. For instance, Sweden's Youth Council provides policy consultation without being part of a formal structure, while the Dutch Youth Council plays a key role in youth representation without official governmental status. However, in some cases, such as Ireland, youth councils are integrated into local government structures. Youth Councils in OECD countries are more common at the regional and local level. Approximately half of European countries legally mandate the establishment and structure of youth councils, often placing them under the authority of the ministry responsible for youth policy, which provides support and funding (Gottschalk and Borhan, 2023). In the US, youth councils generally operate with little funding and are commonly administered within parks and recreation departments or city council offices (Cushing and van Vliet, 2017).

Cushing and van Vliet (2017) note Scotland and Wales as exemplary models of youth councils and note that there are 1200 local Youth Councils for younger children ages 9-18 years in France. France promotes children's participation at a municipal level and adopts a pedagogical perspective of participation. One such example is the Children's Council of Paris which comprises 50 children aged 9 to 11. The aim of the council is to provide children with the opportunity to practice exercising their participation rights to help them adjust to civic life (Augustyniak, 2022). Elections for membership of the council are held in primary schools and participation is voluntary. Children's responsibilities in the council include deliberating on issues within thematic groups and discussing pertinent issues with local representatives and authorities. The Children's Council is considered an important mechanism of embedding citizenship education values in young Parisians (Augustyniak, 2022).

In Finland, youth councils are a statutory requirement in each municipality and are valued as important sites for facilitating children's citizenship. Under the Youth Act (1285/2016), local councils are tasked with promoting children and young people's participation and personal development (Alanko, 2013). For example, in Oulu, a city in central Finland, there are 15 regional youth councils comprising children aged 9 to 16. Each council is assigned a youth worker who mediates between the council and municipal officials. Members of these councils are typically selected through voting processes conducted in schools and youth houses, ensuring a broad base of participation. Occasionally, members are also invited by teachers or recruited informally through peers. Each school and youth house is represented by two to five members, with council membership usually drawn from primary and secondary school students aged 9 to 16. The size of councils varies, typically comprising between 10 and 20 members (Alanko, 2013, p.152). The councils meet once a month to explore both child-led and citywide issues and they provide a platform for children's voices in local decision-making (Alanko, 2019). In addition to monthly local council meetings, the city council provides a budget for annual regional youth council meetings to explore broader issues and plan events. Education and Cultural Services in each city are

responsible for supporting the participation of children within their cities from early childhood. There is a particular focus on the pedagogical aspects of participation, drawing from Article 29 of the UNCRC which emphasises the importance of citizenship education in preparing children for life in a free society (UNCRC, 1989).

A further innovative model of child-led electoral processes can be found in Rajasthan, India, where the Bal Sansad (Children's Parliament) has been operating since 1993. Established by a local social work centre, this initiative was designed to increase children's involvement in local governance, promote their decision-making powers, and ensure their views are respected. Children aged 6 to 14 elect their representatives through a secret ballot, with approximately 1,700 child voters selecting 15–20 MPs. The elections are competitive, with candidates aligned to two parties and a government formed by the party winning the majority of votes. The process is supported by the social work centre, which provides training and capacity-building for both candidates and voters (Wyness, 2001).

Activities of Children's councils

Generally, the goal of child and youth councils is to provide youth voice on issues of local government. Key activities identified by Augsberger et al., (2024) in their international scoping review include policy advocacy, community assessments, education and prevention, service projects and recreational activities. Cushing and van Vliet (2017) reporting on the US identified that the rationale for starting youth councils has shifted over time. The earlier youth councils were largely developed to seek solutions to youth-related problems whereas after 2000 the focus tended to be more on youths' development of skills, leadership, and civic engagement. Some youth councils are started because of a specific issue to be addressed with participatory budgeting, environmental disaster, or issues of community crisis (substance use, suicide) often the impetus.

The most common is a more general model such as that described by Alanko (2019):

> *"The aim of the youth councils is to represent the youth population of the municipality and to express the opinions of the youth in current issues. Councils act as intermediaries between the youth population and the officials of the municipality, and they organize different kinds of events and activities" (p.151).*

Riádigos-Couso et al., (2025) in their systematic review of civic participation among children and adolescents in local government identify the design of local public policies, coexistence in the territories they inhabit, and co-responsibility in the configuration and transformation of their daily environments as key foci and activities. Feringa and Tonkens (2017) contend that local youth councils are increasingly seen as suitable places for young people to come together and act on issues of public concern. Much of the literature points to the citizenship building activities of youth councils (Alanko, 2020; Augsberger et al., 2024). While this is critically important, Feringa and Tonkens (2017) in an analysis of six youth councils identified the style of participation as being "internally focused" (on the youth participants) rather than emphasising deliberation about civic

issues or issues affecting other young people. The researchers conclude that the councils do not at present increase young people's participation in democracy by representing the needs of young people more broadly.

Barriers to effective youth councils

Many studies refer to problematic areas within children and youth councils including adultism and tokenism, organisational infrastructure and support, representativeness and accessibility (Feringa and Tonkens 2017; Augsburger et al., 2024). Collins et al. (2016) in their study of youth councils in 24 municipalities in one major metropolitan area highlight the barriers to effectiveness including: overscheduled youth, adult reluctance to partner with youth, limited diversity and outreach. Curran (2012) in a study of children's participation in three local youth councils in New Zealand found that their inclusion in council decision-making remains inadequate primarily due to challenges associated with council procedure and the frequent incorrect choice of method for engagement. That planners believe their role in council does not require a direct relationship with children and young people and that there is a gap in what is being promoted in theory and what is being implemented in practice. Youth councils are said to reflect the hierarchical nature of parliamentary and representative democracy, leading to tokenistic participation (Harada, 2021).

In some cases, the lack of legal frameworks is a barrier to the effectiveness of youth councils. Munyede et al.'s (2021) research in Zimbabwe uncovered a range of problems with junior councils (for those aged between 15 to 24 years) resulting in tokenistic participation in local governance. These problems related to inadequate funding and technical support, lack of clarity regarding their legal status (as both government ministries and local governments claim ownership) and the absence of a specific legal framework to regulate their activities. The young people indicated that they were not being afforded enough opportunities to fully execute their mandate due to underfunding and irregular meetings which affected the continuity and implementation of resolutions made by the junior councils.

Impact of children's councils

There is a significant body of research and literature highlighting the value of youth council participation for individual young people including confidence, self-esteem, autonomy, and communication competencies, an understanding of democracy, and the ability to make informed decisions (Esteban, 2023; Cano-Hila et al., 2021; Fonseca and Maiztegui-Onate, 2017; Martin et al., 2015). However, concrete impacts are less evident (Flanders and Van Vliet, 2016) with research on the contribution and impact of youth councils at the institutional and macro level limited (Augsberger et al., 2024).

Riádigos-Couso et al., (2025) in their systematic review of civic participation among children and adolescents between 8 and 17 years of age in local government reveal the importance of promoting the participation of children and adolescents at the local level to transform daily realities and promote the construction of citizenship from a pluralistic perspective. Children and youth councils

can condition progress towards more democratic, inclusive, and just societies. The authors highlight what they term the 'community or place of belonging' benefits of youth councils (Riádigos-Couso et al., 2025: 10), such as improvements to public spaces and services for children and adolescents and enhancing community engagement and adolescent participation in neighbourhood life. While examples of youth council work including participatory budgets in Boston have empowered entire communities (Augsberger et al., 2018).

Many youth councils fail to exert a real influence on decision-making in local policies. This is because of a lack of necessary information related to participation, poor adult attitudes towards listening to youths' voices, feedback to policymaking and a mismatch of agenda-setting by adults (Harada, 2021) as well as bureaucracy, lack of meaningful inclusion of CA perspectives, and the limited decision-making power of youth councils (Riádigos-Couso et al., 2025).

Potential of youth councils

Curran (2012) in a study of children's participation in three local youth councils in New Zealand found that children and young people have the necessary capacity to contribute in a meaningful way to council decision-making, but their inclusion in council decision-making remains inadequate. Arising from this the author makes key recommendations - to promote the use and implementation of strategies and staff dedicated to participation involving children and young people, the modification of council procedures to better provide for the needs of children and young people, to increase community awareness of the benefits associated with participation involving children and young people, and to encourage the use of diverse, flexible and targeted methods of participation when engaging with children and young people.

Harada (2021) argues that studies on the formal structures of youth participation have tended to focus on their failings and reveal little about structures and processes that might encourage youth participation. To address this gap, the author examines three youth councils in Denmark (the youngest are 13 y-15 yrs) and argues that the structures of these youth councils – referred to as 'dialogic democracy'– are what encourage effective participation, ensure the fairness of decision-making processes and develop young people's citizenship skills so that they can have agency in the arena of local policy.

Overall, the literature points to a need for more robust evaluation research focused on the multi-level impacts of youth engagement on community and policy-level impacts (Collins et al., 2016) as well as research on the precarity and lifecycle of youth councils, the developmental stage of 'youth' (Augsberger et al., 2024) and generally more robust international comparative research.

Consultations

Consultations with children and young people are argued to be routine practice (Byrne and Lundy, 2020). Increasingly, however, research is advocating a child-led approach to such consultations.

The Irish government has conducted numerous consultations with children since the early 2000's on a range of policy issues. The DCYA claims that 'several of these consultations have resulted in significant developments in public policy and services, aimed at improving the lives of children and young people' (DCYA, n.d.). Horgan (2017) provides examples of two consultations with children, on health and afterschool care, and their impact on policy in Ireland. These appear to achieve in terms of timeliness, participant mix, child-friendly methods, connection to policymaker audience, and quality of information gained. However, real progress must be made in the areas of dissemination, impact and continuity. The potential for consultations of this kind to influence and child-proof policy are reflected on; with indications that consultations with children, even as one-off exercises, can be an effective form of participation, in accessing their views on policy issues of importance to them which help to child-proof policy and ensure it is in the best interests of children.

Byrne and Lundy (2020) argue that while public policies increasingly reference the CRC, and consultations with children and young people are becoming routine, there is as yet no agreed understanding of what a children's rights-based approach to policymaking should look like. They propose a framework for children's rights-based approaches to policy including: the principles/provisions of the CRC; the process of children's rights impact assessment; the participation of children and young people; partnership to ensure joined up working; public budgeting to ensure that the resources are in place for implementation; and publicity to make policies known to children and young people.

An Australian scoping review of rights-informed resources and academic articles that provide a sound rationale and "good practice" information, education and/or professional learning about children's participation rights by Canosa, Graham and Simmons (2022). Among the resources sourced are important practical consultation toolkits which provide guidelines on how to consult with children and young people and how to involve them in decision-making opportunities. The authors note, however, that despite there being a greater focus on the steps to enact participation and consult with children and young people in the participation Web resources (e.g. consultation tools), the resources are often aimed at adults and rarely developed by, with or for children and young people. For example, they found only one child-friendly consultation tools from Australia "DIY Reality: Recipes to Transform and Inspire," that is specifically created by and for children and young people offering guidance for marketing and project managing ideas for creating change.

In this regard, children are often very good at expressing a view in response to a professional agenda, but these may not be what are most important for young people (Percy-Smith, 2010). Vromen and Collin (2010) compare the policy consultations led by adults and the considerable differences when these policymaking processes are child-led. They conclude that child-led opportunities can have meaningful influence on policymaking and at the same time influence young people's lives in a positive way (Vromen and Collin, 2010).

School councils

Fernández-Terol et al. (2024) identify schools as sites best placed to foster children's democratic development. They suggest that schools can provide safe environments from which children can learn about their rights, citizenship, participation and social justice, and foster deep learning. Maitles and Deuchar (2006) identify school councils as initiatives that can take forward the citizenship agenda in the light of children's rights and highlight the impact of pupil councils in primary schools. Research indicates that when schools make space for children's voices, children can act as active co-creators of knowledge with teaching staff and achieve positive outcomes (Fielding, 2018). However, it suggests that in their representational forms these approaches do not allow for the diversity of children's lives to emerge and, instead, often reinforce inequalities (Wyness, 2009).

Forde et al. (2018) presents and discusses the results of qualitative participatory research with children and young people aged between 7 and 17 years, teachers and school principals, and parents, on their attitudes towards and opportunities for participation by students in schools in Ireland. None of the primary schools that participated in the research had a student council but children in these schools indicated that they saw student councils as an important formal participatory structure. In particular, children and younger second-level students felt that they had less of a voice in school although older students reported a movement towards greater independence, autonomy, and voice with increased age (Forde et al., 2018).

Fernández Terol et al. (2024) conducted a qualitative analysis of the Children's School Council in a rural Infant and Primary School in Spain, located in an area of socioeconomic disadvantage. The authors identified several key challenges in implementing the Council; namely teacher resistance and pupil selection.

> "*When you tell this to teachers in other schools who do not really understand why this is done, or why this is important, the first thing they say to you is: How can you leave the children alone and not fight with each other? So, I tell them: if we want to educate them in freedom, we have to give them opportunities to exercise that freedom. They know the responsibility they have as members of the school council, but they have to be given the opportunity to assume that responsibility (Principal)*" (Fernández Terol et al., 2024, p.12).

However, the principal noted that in time, and in alignment with wider organisational transformation, teachers adapted and learned to "give space to the child" (p.12).

Student selection comprised random selection through class lotteries and voluntary participation. Particular attention was paid to gender equity, and to the inclusion of children with perceived challenges (such as shyness, children who experienced challenges interacting socially with peers etc.). Meetings were convened by the school principal who attended only the beginning of council meetings to begin recording, then left the children to meet alone. Following meetings, the principal met with representatives from the council to learn about decisions made and attempt to put them into practice. Results indicate that effective horizontal leadership is vital to progress child

participation agendas in schools and create transformative change (Bolívar et al. 2022; Fullan 2015).

Mannion et al. (2020) explored how young people in schools in socio-economically deprived areas in Scotland experienced participation and how it impacted their overall well-being and attainment. The authors identified four arenas of participation within schools salient to their study: formal curriculum, wider curriculum, decision-making groups, and connections with the wider community. Arenas of participation enabled the authors to emphasise "the importance of relevant situated, emergent, everyday places and practices across school life" (2020, p.31). Key findings from the study included the importance students placed on respectful relationships with their teachers reiterating the role of respectful intergenerational dialogue for the promotion of children's participation rights. Students also identified that the most useful kinds of participation occurred when the issues addressed were relevant to their everyday lives, and when they could see that their participation had influenced outcomes. Noting that the smaller instances of participation were equally if not more meaningful than participation in school councils or other governance groups. This highlights the nuance of child participation activities and the need to extend participation-related thinking beyond student councils.

Similarly, Cockburn (2005) contends that participation for children needs to be relevant to their lives, "children and young people contribute to political debate on their own terms and through their own volition. This is necessary to reverse the presumption that children are to be expected to fit in with adult ways of participating. In this sense, children are allowed to inhabit 'child friendly spaces' while participating (Moss and Petrie, 2002)." (p.116)

O'Reilly and O'Grady (2024) in the Irish context discuss how student democratic participation in schools is often limited to involvement in school councils with associated dangers of tokenism and speaking for others. There is limited space for students to have a voice in what is learned due to mandated state curricula and scepticism about student capacity, even though consultation with students about matters that affect them is a legally binding obligation under Article 12 of the UNCRC. These challenges have resulted in limited research on operationalising substantive student voice. The authors examine the potential for more authentic approaches to voice and agency to dynamically alter student engagement. Empirically, they draw on work on curriculum negotiation and integration to consider the operationalisation of student voice as the fundamental driver of curriculum.

In this context, the recent establishment of the student participation unit within the Department of Education with a programme based on consultations with children and the high-level recommendations of an expert group is important. The report of the expert group cites a range of best practice examples including the development of Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying, Policy on Irish -medium education outside of the Gaeltacht, Review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act, Curriculum and Assessment Policy (CAP) Unit consultations, and the Inspectorate: Student Participation Project. The report recommends that the Department builds its understanding, develops its processes for child participation, communicates with

children and young people, promotes good participation practices, and holds itself accountable (Department of Education, 2024a). The implementation plan published in 2024 states that the Department of Education will review and update the Student Councils: A voice for students' resources to support the establishment of student councils in primary and post--primary schools in 2025 (Department of Education, 2024b).

Green Schools/Eco School Movement

Green Schools is a global initiative promoting long-term, whole-school environmental practices. Known by various names such as Eco Schools, Enviroschools, and Sustainable Schools, these movements emerged following the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development, which emphasised youth involvement in environmental protection and sustainability (Gough, Lee, and Tsang, 2020). In Ireland, the programme is managed by the Environmental Education Unit of An Taisce in collaboration with local authorities. Students participate in decision-making through Green Schools Committees, fostering leadership and community engagement. Schools meeting programme standards receive a Green Flag, symbolising their commitment, which must be renewed every two years (Green School Ireland). The first step in establishing a Green School is forming an Eco Committee or Green Schools Committee, consisting of students, teachers, non-teaching staff, and parents. This group plans and leads environmental projects, meeting regularly to ensure progress. Members may be volunteers, elected, or selected by staff. Drawing on Sant and Davies (2018) definition, the Green School committees could be described as a **"**situated space" where children learn about and negotiate their citizenship.

Larri and Colliver (2020) highlight best practices in fostering student voice within the Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative (AuSSI). They emphasise the importance of student empowerment and leadership through inclusive decision-making. Key strategies include:

- Forming Green Groups where students actively contribute to environmental decisions.
- Encouraging students to speak at assemblies, participate in youth forums, and engage in peer learning events (ibid, p. 84).

These initiatives create leadership opportunities and ensure students feel heard by both adults and peers. Implementing the AuSSI Education for Sustainability (EfS) model has also led to increased student engagement, well-being, and active citizenship, contributing to broader climate action efforts in Australia (Larri and Colliver, 2020, p. 92).

In France, educational policies promote Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), encouraging schools to adopt values such as sustainability, eco-responsibility, autonomy, participation, and solidarity. These programmes help students understand sustainability challenges, fostering informed and responsible citizenship (Lange and Victor, 2006, cited in Gough et al., 2020, p. 160). Participation in Green Schools has also been linked to youth activism, inspiring

students to engage in leadership, advocacy, and grassroots organising, including participation in climate protests (Gough et al., 2020, p. 403).

Guidance given on the establishment of Green School Committees in Ireland

An Taisce provides a Green-Schools Handbook to guide the establishment of Green School Committees in Irish schools. The handbook emphasises that Green-Schools offer opportunities for students to develop decision-making skills, build confidence, and foster a sense of citizenship through participation. According to the Green-Schools Handbook (ND), the committee is the driving force behind the programme, ensuring all phases are implemented. It suggests the committee should be representative of the whole school, primarily composed of students, and may include teachers, the Principal, non-teaching staff, parents, and community members. The committee can be formed through volunteerism or elections and should represent various classes and age groups for continuity.

The committee's purpose includes:

- Implementing the six steps of the programme.
- Empowering students and valuing their ideas.
- Ensuring all school community views are heard.
- Maintaining programme continuity.
- Linking with school management and the local community.

Regular meetings, record-keeping, and disseminating decisions identified as essential for the committee's success. The guidance suggests inviting a Local Authority Environmental Awareness Officer to help get the programme started effectively. This emphasis on connecting to professionals outside the school to support the programme could be very important to creating impact and influence. The handbook highlights the importance of schools being willing to involve children in decision-making and actions at every stage.

Good practices from Green schools that could be transferred other child-decision-making structures

Reviewing the literature on Green School practices highlights key elements for child decision-making structures which are transferable, including a clear focus on activities, adult support for participation frameworks, and connections to external resources to enhance the project's impact. There is also an emphasis on capacity building for teachers through the provision of accredited CPD funded by the Department of Education. Literature on Green Schools has identified the need for indicators to measure the success of the programmes, which is also an important issue in child participatory initiatives. For example, the Ontario EcoSchools programme plans to improve data management and develop more concrete qualitative and quantitative performance indicators.

These indicators will be linked to environmental impact and student-led initiatives (Bunce, McGee, and Phillips-McNeil, 2020).

Innovative international consultative and participative methods with children under 12

Across Europe, research indicates that at local and national levels, children are participating in public decision-making on issues as diverse as asylum, child protection, community development, disaster management, employment, environment, media and transport (Crowley and Larkins, 2020). Findings from an international children's survey conducted by Save the Children on the inclusion of children in policymaking are reported on by Bennett Woodhouse (2003). Children in the survey suggest several ways for better involvement of children in government decision-making: involve them from the start and encourage ongoing participation, ensure clear communication about timelines and processes, provide child-friendly information, use multiple media for outreach, allow sufficient time for participation, adapt adult procedures to support children, be transparent about available resources, create various engagement opportunities (e.g., school visits, forums), offer regular feedback, fulfil commitments, use young adults as facilitators, incorporate and acknowledge children's ideas, and ensure adults are trained in child rights and working with children. This section discusses examples of innovative international consultative and participative methods used with children under 12 years.

Deliberative Democracy and Child Participation

Deliberative democracy offers opportunities for inclusive decision-making, including the participation of children;

> "*Certain forms of deliberative democracy can also include opinions and inputs from children. Deliberative processes that are well-designed can promote inclusion of groups, such as children, who tend to be disempowered or historically marginalised in political processes (Curato et al., 2017). While inviting children into the democratic arena still tends to be quite unexplored (Pearse, 2021), there are some potential mechanisms that could be used to facilitate this.*" (Gottschalk and Borhan, 2023, p.23).

Emerging mechanisms in deliberative democracy practices could facilitate children's engagement (Gottschalk and Borhan, 2023, p. 23). Ireland has been identified as a forerunner in the inclusion of children in deliberative democracy practices through the inclusion of children in the Citizen's Assembly. Gottschalk and Borhan (2023, p.24) note that during the Irish Citizens' Assembly (2016–2018) on climate action, children were not eligible to participate directly in deliberations however they were allowed to submit contributions. Despite this opportunity, only a small proportion of public submissions (3%) came from children and young people (Gottschalk and Borhan, 2023,

p.24). This example highlights both the potential and the challenges of integrating children's voices into deliberative democratic processes. Future efforts could focus on increasing accessibility, outreach, and structural support to enhance children's participation in decision-making forums and future Citizen's assemblies in Ireland.

Opportunities for Public participation

Some examples of public participation by children involve large-scale surveys, focus groups and child participation platforms. An EU consultation in 2020 on the development of the European Commission's proposal for an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child used an online survey, which the report (Dunhill et al., 2021) acknowledges favoured older children and those who have digital access.

The Council of Europe conducted a mid-term review of its *Children's Rights Strategy* in 2019. In-depth focus groups were used with children in community locations. Children also represented the findings from their own research at a conference, sitting alongside and questioning adult policy actors (ministers, administrators, and service providers). These examples therefore involve an element of direct dialogue between individual children and decision-makers as well as representation through children and adults speaking and writing on behalf of children they have consulted with (Larkins, 2022).

IMCITIZEN is a European Union funded project that aims to advance child participation practice for children under 12 years of age in Spain (VA. IMCITIZEN, 2024). IMCITIZEN positions participation as a crucial mechanism for teaching young children about citizenship (Novella-Camara et al., 2023). It aims to do this through the creation of child participation "platforms" - groups of children linked with local, national and EU children's councils for the purpose of participation in decision-making. The project comprises ten primary schools in six municipalities in Spain. Participating children and adults initially attended capacity-building workshops on children's rights, participation and voice. Each school's group of IMCITIZEN volunteers then co-designed their participation "platform" (Novella-Camara et al., 2024). As part of the project, children also co-designed a child-friendly book to inform other children of their participation rights and provide suggestions for how children can create their own participation platforms specific to their own area and context. IMCITIZEN positions adults as socio-educational agents who support and facilitate children (Novella-Cámara et al., 2024).

Child Friendly Cities Initiative and urban planning

Child Friendly Cities Initiative

The Child Friendly Cities Initiative (CFC) is a UNICEF-led initiative active in more than 40 countries that supports local governments to realise children's rights. CFCs operate through networks of children, municipal governments, academia and private and civil society organisations and

approaches are informed by the UNCRC (Child Friendly Cities Initiative, 2025). CFCs can positively impact children's rights within communities and create opportunities for child participation, particularly for younger children. For example, evidence from Victoria, Australia, suggests that communities with such initiatives are more likely to recognise children's rights and consult younger children on public policy. However, even in these communities, there is limited evidence of monitoring these rights (Bartholomaeus et al., 2016). Powell (2024) explored the opportunities and challenges in planning and implementing CFC programmes through interviews with practitioners in nine cities across seven countries. The data indicates that CFCs can reshape local government decision-making processes, allowing for greater opportunities for children's civic participation and ensuring their interests and voices are heard. However, practitioners face challenges such as unclear definitions of 'child-friendly', complex governance structures, lack of political will from external partners, and intergenerational tensions. Age-based fragmentation can further marginalise children's interests in key policy areas. Similarly, Alias et al. (2023) conducted qualitative research with young people who were formerly children's councilors in a CFC initiative in Malaysia. Their findings suggest that for these initiatives to be effective, adults must relinquish some power and prioritise children's voices and rights in planning, policymaking, and implementation. Successful collaboration requires adults to engage with children as equal participants, fostering trust and meaningful involvement. Cities working towards 'child-friendliness' for a longer period reported observed improvements in the extent to which children were considered by adult decision-makers (Powell, 2024).

Urban planning

Manouchehri and Burns (2021, p.364) note the growing emphasis on including children in urban planning. "As a consequence of bottom-up inclusive planning approaches, urban planning has shifted from viewing children as research subjects and dependent community members to recognising them as social actors, agents, and rights holders". This shift can occur both within CFC initiatives and in communities without formal CFC programmes. Challenges in the inclusion of children in urban planning include a lack of expertise among urban specialists in translating children's input into planning discourse (Hanssen, 2019 cited in Manouchehri and Burns, 2021). Additionally, children's ideas are often used by professionals to label a process as "democratic and/or child-friendly" (Cele and Van der Burgt, 2015, p.16) without demonstrating genuine competence in understanding their insights (Manouchehri and Burns, 2021).

Kimberlee (2008) examines Birmingham City Council's Streets Ahead on Safety project, which aimed to improve road safety in a high-risk area with a history of severe traffic accidents. The project involved 405 young people (aged 9–11) in environmental audits, road safety awareness programmes, and decision-making. The council gained insight into young people's ambivalent attitudes toward cars, dissatisfaction with public transport, and suggestions for improved urban design. The initiative also enhanced children's road safety awareness and set a precedent for more inclusive policymaking. Alparone and Rissotto (2001) warn of the risk of unrealistic expectations in child participation. High emotional investment can lead to inflated hopes among children, parents,

and teachers, making it difficult for administrators to deliver meaningful responses. This may cause children to shift from confident advocates of their needs to frustrated protesters echoing adult complaints (ibid, p. 426).

Digital participation

Approximately one-third of Council of Europe countries have established national e-participation platforms to enhance youth engagement. In France, the Ministry of Education supports *L'Isoloir* (The Voting Booth), a digital initiative enabling 14- to 18-year-olds to express opinions on societal issues. The platform features interactive games educating youth on civic rights and allows them to propose debate topics, participate in discussions, and vote on key issues (Gottschalk and Borhan, 2023). Questions remain about the involvement of younger children in e-participation platforms and how to support them in this space. Gottschalk and Borhan (2023) discuss Livingston's work on Global Kids Online and proposals on needing a ladder model for children's digital participation, beginning with gaming and socialising before progressing to educational, civic, and creative activities.

Riádigos-Couso et al. (2025), in their systematic review of 34 papers on child and adolescent participation in local government, highlight the need to further explore child and youth engagement through digital environments. These platforms have become key spaces for interaction among younger generations, fostering political involvement and socio-educational engagement with their local communities (Castellanos et al., 2022 cited in Riádigos-Couso et al. (2025). Even though social and digital media are now pervasive in the lives of children, the potential to use these as tools to facilitate youth consultation is still surprisingly at an early stage of development (Lalor et al., 2024). In a study commissioned by the Ombudsman's Office in Ireland, Lalor et al. (2024) conducted a national mixed-method study on how digital technologies can be better utilised for this purpose. Over 300 children (ages 6 to 17) and 30 professional stakeholders from government departments, public agencies, industry, and civil society were consulted about their experiences and attitudes toward facilitating children's participation through social and digital media. While children and young people generally expressed optimism about the potential of digital tools for participation, professional stakeholders held varying opinions regarding the pros and cons of utilising digital tools. The study highlights the contours of this sometimes-contentious debate over the appropriate balance to be struck between protection and participation in using digital technologies and taking into consideration children's best interests in realising their right to be heard. A focus group with children under 12 years also proposed a dedicated platform that would inform, educate and enable young people's voices to be heard about topics of interest to them.

> "I think it would be very child-safe, to make sure … that nothing offensive or disturbing could get into that. Like, young children like us couldn't see anything that they don't need to see, or they don't need to know. It's just all facts and fun (FG2, 10–12 years)" (Lalor et al. 2024, p. 8).

The study contends that an overriding reason to engage young people online is the potential it offers to reach a much larger cohort of young people than would be possible in face-to-face settings. They cite the consultation process undertaken as part of the LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy 2018–2020 in Ireland as a good example of where an online consultation method was used to broaden participation (Department of Children and Youth Affairs [DCYA], 2017). The online consultation process reached approximately 4,000 young people and was described by government officials as "hugely beneficial" in the development of the strategy.

Lalor et al. (2024) recommend several principles for digital participation which emphasise the importance of using social and digital media to foster engagement while ensuring that participation is meaningful, and rights based. Not all topics are suitable for digital consultation, so careful consideration is needed. Involving children and young people in designing participation opportunities enhances relevance and effectiveness. Simplicity, openness, and transparency are essential to building trust and accessibility. A blended approach, combining digital and in-person methods, can be most effective. Additionally, providing training and support ensures that participants can engage confidently and effectively.

Benedix and Hedžet (2025) explore what youth movements do when their political participation in international organisations is limited. Using the examples of two groups considered particularly vulnerable - young migrants in the European Union and transnationally organised working children. They argue that these actors resort to social media to make their arguments visible. Given limited room for self-representation in IO debates, social media posts represent a practice of aesthetic reversal. Through Twitter (X) and Instagram posts these youth actors challenge the ways they are represented in and by IOs and claim political subjecthood (Benedix and Hedžet, 2025).

Although there is limited literature on safeguarding in digital participation activities for children, the EU Children's Participation Platform has developed a Safeguarding Framework to guide its efforts (EU Children's Participation Platform, 2025). This framework outlines nine key requirements to ensure safe, inclusive, and meaningful participation including: providing clear and transparent information; ensuring participation is voluntary; treating all participants with respect; focusing on relevant and meaningful activities; creating child-friendly environments; promoting inclusivity; offering staff training; managing risks proactively; and maintaining accountability through regular review and improvement of safeguarding practices. However, Gottschalk and Borhan (2023) argue that in order to promote children's empowerment in digital environments, rather than viewing children as a group solely in need of protection, learning opportunities can empower them in promoting their own safety and privacy, alongside appropriate policy and legal supports.

Participatory Budgets

Children's participatory budgeting has been implemented in various international child participation initiatives, allowing children to play a role in allocating public resources while

promoting ownership, transparency, and accountability in decision-making (Gottschalk and Borhan, 2023).

One prominent example is the Children's Participatory Budget Council (CPBC), established in Barra Mansa, Brazil, in 1998 to foster citizenship among children aged 9–15 (Guerra, 2005). Through this initiative, children elect their peers to a children's council and control a budget to implement participatory activities. The CPBC provides training in governance, decision-making, and civic responsibility, equipping participants with skills to evaluate projects based on financial and technical constraints, prioritise initiatives, and advocate for their ideas. It also helps children understand public planning barriers, budgeting regulations, and the complexity of urban governance (Guerra, 2005).

In Scotland, youth-led participatory budgeting programmes have also been developed. The Youth Participatory Budgeting (PB) Process empowers young people aged 8–25 to manage a budget dedicated to youth-based community initiatives. Children and young people also contribute to wider community budget decisions, participating in every stage—from designing application forms to promoting the scheme on social media and engaging in council discussions (Cook, 2021 cited in Gottschalk and Borhan, 2023, p. 47). Research in Spain has examined the institutionalisation of participatory budgeting within local administrations. Pardo-Beneyto and Abellán-López (2023) emphasise children's participatory budgeting as a democratic method of prioritising funding according to children's wishes.

Strategies to support participation

Empirical studies highlight both barriers and facilitators to child participation. Novella-Càmara et al. (2023) explored the barriers and enablers to child participation in Spanish municipalities and made suggestions for the development of child participation practice. The study surveyed children, adolescents, and local government officers and elected representatives. In accordance with previous studies (Crowley et al., 2020; DCYA, 2015; Ministry of Education, Social Policy and Sports [MEPSD], 2008), the authors identified four factors that play a key role in facilitating or hindering child participation; institutional and organisational commitment; training and community competence; resources; and the use of process evaluation as a tool for improvement and knowledge transfer that can work more systematically and rigorously towards developing children's participation (Novella-Càmara et al. 2023, p.107). Strengthening collaboration between schools, local councils, children, and families can help build a shared intergenerational understanding, fostering an environment where children's voices are both valued and acted upon (Novella Cámara et al., 2024, p. 31).

Bennett Woodhouse (2003) reports on findings from an international children's survey conducted by Save the Children on the inclusion of children in policymaking. Children in the survey suggest several ways for governments to better involve them in decision-making: involve them from the start and encourage ongoing participation, ensure clear communication about timelines and processes, provide child-friendly information, use multiple media for outreach, allow sufficient time for participation, adapt adult procedures to support children, be transparent about available resources, create various engagement opportunities (e.g., school visits, forums), offer regular feedback, fulfil commitments, use young adults as facilitators, incorporate and acknowledge children's ideas, and ensure adults are trained in child rights and working with children.

The use of creative child-centred practices that seek to include children's 'voices' in participatory work with children is evident in the literature (Horgan, 2016; Forde et al., 2017; Schepers et al., 2018) and has been found to be particularly beneficial for more marginalised children including from socio-economically disadvantaged children (Fernandez et al, 2021; Horgan et al., 2023) migrants and younger children (Mand, 2012). Using fun and participatory activities is recommended by a number of authors including Alias et al. (2023) who discuss using fun and playful approaches which can also help lessen the power differentials between children and adults. Much research in this area is drawn from the early years which has developed specific multi-sensory games and activities for listening to young children about their pre-school experiences (Clark et al., 2003; O'Toole et al., 2023; Horgan, 2024). These include listening on telephones, use of Puppets; Storytelling; Persona Dolls; Ranking games Multi-sensory methods Cameras; Tours and mapmaking; Audio recording; Creative arts (such as drawing, painting, sculpting, roleplaying (Clark et al., 2003; Wall et al., 2019).

Creating conditions and spaces for listening to children

Clark et al. (2003) outline the conditions necessary for listening to children's views. To listen effectively, adults need to ensure that children's views are elicited in familiar and comfortable environments, in the presence of supportive adults with whom they have existing relationships (Tolfree and Woodhead, 1999; Baxter, 1993; Stuart, 2001). Adults wishing to elicit children's views should provide a variety of enjoyable, child-centered methods to encourage voluntary participation of children, that capture the many ways children express themselves (Clark et al., 2003, p.30).

Research on participation structures for children has emphasised the important role of participation champions (Martin et al., 2015) or adult allies (Checkoway, 2011) in successfully eliciting and acting on children's voices. An evaluation of the Children's council at the ARK Children's Cultural centre revealed the facilitators of the Ark Children's Council as participation champions who promote children's citizenship and participation in artistic and cultural spaces (Cummins et al., 2021). In an evaluation of the extent to which Tusla, the Child and Family Agency embedded children's right to be heard in its culture and operations also identified individual "champions" as key to the success of creature cultures of participation at an organisational level

(Kennan et al., 2021). These individuals championed children's rights through role modelling and inspired others to action. The authors recommend that champions could be identified at national, regional and local levels to support children's right to be heard.

Batsleer et al. (2020) highlight the potential of youth workers to promote the participation rights of children and young people. Youth work is described as a space rife with opportunity to support children and young people develop autonomy. Sala-Torrent and Planas-Llado (2024) report on strategies identified by youth workers in Catalonia, Spain, to promote youth participation. A key strategy is co-designing processes, supported by the development of strong socio-educational connections. The authors also highlight conditions that facilitate participation, such as supporting and resourcing organisations that already work with young people. These organisations have established relationships with youth and offer spaces that encourage participatory activities.

> "A further step forward would therefore be to support trusting spaces where adults and young people can share power and make decisions together and see each other as allies (Checkoway, 1996), and to plan spaces where both groups can connect and discuss issues that affect them." (Sala-Torrent and Planas-Llado, 2024, p.7).

Leisure and free-time associations are particularly noted as ideal for fostering such activities. Youth workers' roles within the community, with a specific focus on young people, provide them with a unique ability to support children and young people in decision-making. They have the "potential to understand young people's needs, create a positive environment, be aware of available resources and services, build meaningful relationships, and work as a team to offer support and guidance" (Sala-Torrent and Planas-Llado, 2024, p.3).

Art and creativity as key tools in children's participation

Tisdall (2013) discusses the role of arts and creativity in participation as being powerful tools and participation-as-performance can have a deeper and more lasting impact on attitudes and perceptions than simply incorporating young people's views into decisions. Tisdall (2013) cites an example from the UK of videos created by young disabled people which inspired professionals and decision-makers, leading to attitudinal shifts and concrete actions, such as training initiatives and a national Good Practice Guide on accessible play spaces. This approach aligns with participatory models by engaging children and young people as active creators, influencing not just structures but also mindsets. The success of such initiatives is linked to their use of cultural and creative expressions like storytelling, play, and digital media.

Mand (2012) looks at the use of participatory arts-based methods with pre-teen children, aged 9 and 10, of Bangladeshi heritage, within a school context in England. Using activities involving drawings, writing and role play, ranking and mapping (people, places and practices), drawing family trees that located members socially and spatially, fictional writing and role play. In one setting,

participatory workshops were limited towards the production of artwork around the theme of journeys to produce children's representations of transnational lives through art leading to the democratisation of the process

Mitchell and Colville (2021) emphasise the importance of creative strategies to enhance children's participation and representation within these structures. They advocate for the use of storytelling and narrative approaches to empower children to share their views and experiences in their own words, highlighting their strengths, resilience, and competencies rather than focusing solely on vulnerability (Tisdall et al., 2014, cited in Mitchell and Colville 2021). Such approaches help challenge adult-dominated narratives and tokenistic participation and can strengthen the authenticity of children's voices in decision-making forums.

Proximity of participation structures

Evidence from the literature suggests that the proximity of child participation structures to young children can impact their effectiveness, highlighting the importance of "situated space" in child participation. Alparone and Rissotto (2001) emphasise the crucial role of location in the success of children's councils, as it influences how children express themselves. They argue that children need a space where they can make mistakes and speak openly, free from adult constraints. Formal settings like the Town Hall may impose adult behaviours that feel unfamiliar to children. However, providing dedicated spaces outside the Town Hall both acknowledges the council's work and demonstrates the city administration's support, enhancing the initiative's political significance (Alparone and Rissotto, 2001, p. 425). Crowley (2015) based on her research with children's forums in Wales makes a number of suggestions to support the impact of such structures on public policy including having participation "close to home", clarity in the objectives of the structures; access to people who exercise power and authority to make changes and the integration of child participation structures with similar local-level civil society initiatives. Pardo-Beneyto and Abellán-López (2023) suggest school as an ideal place for enabling the development of children's participation beyond "exercises of citizenship" or "well-intentioned speeches".

Conclusion

This report provides a review of the literature relating to children's participation in more formal structures and begins with a section on the concepts and influences on children's participation. The next section provides the contextual backdrop on the international, EU and Irish policy context, followed by the limitations of existing structures, types of participatory activities including national children's parliaments, children's municipal/local councils, consultations, school councils, and Green schools. Some innovative international consultative mechanisms are detailed including deliberative democracy through children's involvement in Citizens Assembly, Child-Friendly cities, digital participation, participatory budgets are discussed in the following section. The review

uncovered a lack of research specifically related to the 6–12-year age group and an overall lack of evaluation and research of participation practices and structures. The review concludes with some research evidence-based recommendations which identify a range of factors from the literature which can support the participation of children under 12 in collective decision-making processes.

Evidence-based recommendations for developing appropriate and effective participation frameworks for children under 12 within Ireland's context.

Strengthening Intergenerational Connections: By promoting shared experiences and understanding between different generations, adults can help ensure that children's contributions are integrated into broader community and societal contexts (Novella Cámara et al., 2024)

Fostering Collaborative Relationships: Building strong partnerships between schools, local councils, children, and families is crucial. These collaborations help create environments where children's voices are valued and heard. (Novella Cámara et al., 2024)

Participation Practitioners: Practitioners who already have skills in supporting children's participation such as youth workers are well-positioned to promote the participation rights of children (Batsleer et al., 2020) and create trusting spaces in community and leisure-time organisations (Sala-Torrent & Planas-Lladó, 2024). These practitioners and organisations have established relationships with children and youth and can offer spaces that encourage participatory activities.

Ongoing Evaluation and Research: It is important to monitor and evaluate participation structures and there are a number of research gaps, particularly in relation to children under twelve (Janta et al., 2021), the effectiveness of participatory approaches and the level of participation (Gottschalk and Borhan, 2023), the outcomes and impact of children's participation in public-decision-making (Crowley, 2015). Álamo-Bolaños et al. (2024) systematic review highlights the need for more empirical studies on children's participation and more research on the methodological processes for participation. Process Evaluation of children's participation activities could be used as a tool for improvement and knowledge transfer that can work more systematically and rigorously towards developing children's participation (Novella-Càmara et al., 2023).

Child-Friendly City initiatives can positively impact children's rights within communities and create opportunities for child participation, particularly for younger children: Child-Friendly City can serve as a useful model of participation for this age group highlighting the issue of proximity and relevance to children's lives (Powell, 2024).

Participatory Budgets: Evidence that children's participatory budgeting has been implemented in various international child participation initiatives, allowing children to play a role in allocating

public resources while promoting ownership, transparency, and accountability in decision-making (Gottschalk and Borhan, 2023).

Digital Voting Platforms: Example of digital participation from North Ayrshire councils called 'Shaping North Ayrshire' in Scotland who introduced a virtual voting system after Covid for children and young people which allowed students to vote through their high schools: *"Shaping North Ayrshire: You get to decide what happens on your doorstep" engages with youth through a variety of online platforms targeting different age groups, such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Discord". (*Gottschalk and Borhan, p. 47, 2023).

Accessible and Local Spaces for Participation: Facilitating children's participation "close to home" (Crowley, 2015) and where children will see the direct impact of their efforts and input has been recognised as important. This emphasises the importance of known, everyday, situated spaces for participation including schools (Pardo-Beneyto and Abellán-López, 2023).

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