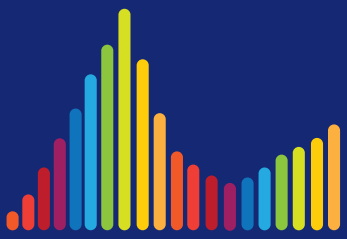
Voices into Action

The Voices of Learners and their Families in Educational Decision-Making: Literature Review



EUROPEAN AGENCY
for Special Needs and Inclusive Education

VOICES INTO ACTION

The Voices of Learners and their Families in Educational Decision-Making

Literature Review

European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Agency/European Agency: European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education

ASD: Autism spectrum disorder

ASN: Additional support needs

CRAG: Children's research advisory group

EBD: Emotional and behavioural disorders

EU: European Union

ICT: Information and communication technology

ISCED: International Standard Classification of Education

NGO: Non-governmental organisation

OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

SEN: Special educational needs

UK: United Kingdom

UN: United Nations

UNCRC: United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNICEF: United Nations Children's Fund

US: United States (of America)

ICONS USED

Throughout this literature review, different icons indicate different types of information resources. They are as follows:

Icon	Meaning
	Quotation
	Country example
	Definition
	Terminology used in the review
	Summary of key findings

FOREWORD

Listening to learners and their families is crucial for developing more inclusive schools and education systems. In its contribution to the 2021 Global Education Monitoring Report covering Central and Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia, the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency) stresses that 'inclusion cannot be enforced from above' (UNESCO, 2021a, p. 154). All stakeholders, including parents, families and guardians, should be active agents in creating equitable learning experiences for all learners (ibid.).

In an era of uncertainty, this idea becomes even more important. The Agency's recent scoping research on the impact of COVID-19 has shown that the pandemic is multi-layered and its impact is far-reaching, leading to humanitarian, economic, security and human rights crises (European Agency, 2021a). Among the numerous, profound and diverse ways the pandemic has had an impact on education, it has affected access to learning, widened inequalities and limited opportunities to hear the voices of the most vulnerable learners and families.

This underlines the need to identify effective ways to include the voices of all learners and their families in decision-making processes. The Agency's Multi-Annual Work Programme 2021–2027 stresses that Agency work must consider everything and anything that can marginalise learners and increase their risk of exclusion (European Agency, 2021b). As a direct response to its Representative Board members' request, and to the gaps identified in an analysis of all Agency work, the Agency undertook a desk research activity to assess ways of including the voices of learners and families in its future work. The desk research consisted of a literature review, an analysis of how past Agency work involved learners' and families' voices, and the development of a toolkit that illustrates concrete examples and practical ways of involving learners and families in decision-making processes.

This literature review is the first output of the desk research activities. It provides a focused rationale and key policy and research evidence on meaningful ways to involve learner and family voices in educational decision-making. While its main aim is to improve the Agency's internal ways of working, it is felt that external audiences, such as our member countries' ministries of education and other national stakeholders, may benefit from the results of this work. It is hoped that this review will contribute positively to the work of policy-makers across Europe who are endeavouring to support more participatory decision-making processes and inclusive policy development in their countries.

Cor Meijer

Director of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is now widely accepted that education policies and practices are not the sole domain of experts and professionals. Each individual can be considered an expert in their own life, with unique knowledge, experience and perspectives that can enrich others' understanding in unexpected and valuable ways.

These ideas have guided the Voices into Action (VIA) project, conducted from 2021–2022 by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency). The VIA project was initiated as a direct response to a request by the Representative Board members and to the gaps identified through an analysis of all Agency work. VIA aims to examine the critical issue of involving the voices of learners and their families in educational decision-making.

This literature review sets out the theoretical background to the VIA project, summarising important European and international policy information on the topic. It provides key research knowledge on the issue of the voices of learners and families, building on existing theoretical models and frameworks for their meaningful involvement in decision-making. It also presents recent examples from research and from Agency member countries, offering practical evidence to accompany the review's theoretical discussion.

Combining the perspectives of research, policy and the lessons learnt from the examples presented, important findings and considerations come to the fore. In relation to policy:

- From the recognition of children as agents to their effective enjoyment of this right, it has taken over 30 years of reiterated policy work and school practices. **Children's right** to be heard and considered in matters affecting them extends to ALL children. However, even though European Union countries have ratified and signed legally binding treaties/charters that state and protect children's rights, **this is not granted or systematised yet**.
- The role of families has been viewed as supporting learners' voices and speaking in their interests. **Families are fundamental actors** in developing and affirming learners' voices in educational matters and must be consulted, provided that the principle of the 'child's best interests' is always the primary consideration.
- Families and learners have the **right to be guided and supported** in exercising their right to participation. Key documents suggest that, in addition to children receiving parental guidance, institutions and communities should support parents and children.
- Countries should be encouraged to commit to **systematising and developing effective processes** for learners' and families' participation, in co-operation with all institutions and stakeholders, in all matters affecting children. Policy alignment and collaboration among stakeholders are pivotal to ensure children's and families' rights in this respect.

In relation to the academic research literature, the following key findings emerge:

- There is a significant amount of research literature on including 'voices' in education. However, there continues to be a **research-practice gap** in education. The focus is generally on learner involvement in decision-making at school or class level, and **less so on involvement in decision-making at policy level**. It should also be noted that there is a body of literature that criticises the 'voice' movement as being **tokenistic**, **inauthentic** or a **'bandwagon'**.
- A number of issues concern the research process itself. A main concern is with the lack of detailed attention to **ethical issues and considerations** around eliciting learners' and families' views and about the **need for more democratic and socially just approaches** to research. These are specifically in relation to the **imbalance of power**, where:
  - adults continue to drive the research agenda;
  - knowledge is not shared and made **accessible to all**;
  - those with the least social capital are the first to be marginalised.
- The words of learners and families are mostly used in reported speech. As a result, **the authenticity of their voices and opinions** may be lost through interpretation of their intended meaning. In addition, while the literature acknowledges the absence of the voices of some **marginalised groups**, their **active participation** in research is still limited.
- Over the past 10 years, there has been a significant **increase in research** on some groups vulnerable to exclusion in education. However, overall, there is a **need for a more participatory and intergenerational approach** that includes all families, along with the wider **communities** in which they are situated.
- The possibilities and opportunities offered by the increased use of **modern information and communication technology (ICT)** techniques and resources do not appear to have made significant or widespread changes to research methods around voices.
- **Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society** have undertaken significant work on child participation, drawing on educational research. They have also produced **a range of accessible resources** for use in relation to various aspects of children's lives, such as health and welfare, as well as education. Many of these **provide a rich resource** that can be adapted for use in inclusive education contexts.

Of particular interest for policy-makers might be the findings which concern the **ethical issues around enabling meaningful participation**, the importance of **more participatory and intergenerational approaches**, and an **awareness of those who are marginalised and vulnerable to exclusion** from participation. A rich body of resources is available to guide policy and practice in this area.

This literature review's key findings highlight important considerations for involving learners and families more systematically in educational decision-making. Different models of participation are discussed, and the 'VIA framework for meaningful participation' presents a summary of the essential elements of meaningful participation. Together, the review's findings and the VIA framework can help to create a more participatory culture in relevant processes and activities.

This review is the first in a series of outputs from the VIA project. The review's key findings will inform the project's second phase (2022), where different intergenerational stakeholder groups, including policy-makers, practitioners, learners and families, will work together to develop a toolkit that offers practical ways of involving learners and families in decision-making processes.

1. INTRODUCTION

Promoting learner and family participation in decision-making and policy development is a key priority for European and international organisations and for the member countries of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency).

The European Year of Youth in 2022 encourages young people, including children and young adults, to engage in many different forms of civic and political participation, including educational matters that affect them, through a range of innovations and activities (European Commission, 2021a). The activities are supported by a significant budget and involve a wide range of organisations, such as the European Parliament, the Member States, regional and local authorities, youth organisations and young people themselves, across European countries and at every level of society (ibid.).

Invitations to participate in research projects are part of the multitude of opportunities to directly influence the future, as the youth of today become the adults of tomorrow (European Union, no date a).

> **Young Europeans will benefit from many opportunities to gain knowledge, skills, and competences for their professional development, and to strengthen their civic engagement to shape Europe's future.**
>
> (European Commission, 2021a)

One of the four main objectives of the European Year of Youth is the urgent need to recognise and address areas of inequality in Europe. Among these inequalities is the lack of access to quality and equitable educational opportunities for many in vulnerable and marginalised circumstances (ibid.).

With the increasing awareness of the importance and active promotion of children's meaningful participation in decisions which are important to them, the role of families should not be overlooked, particularly in educational decisions. The last time an International Year of the Family was declared was in 1994, with the theme 'Family: resources and responsibilities in a changing world' and the motto 'Building the Smallest Democracy at the Heart of Society' (United Nations, 1994). Subsequently, this became the International Day of Families, celebrated annually on 15 May (United Nations, 2015a).

In 2014, the importance of 'intergenerational solidarity' was acknowledged and that, despite huge social changes worldwide, the family unit is the 'first fundamental community in which the whole network of social relations is grounded' (World Youth Alliance, 2014). Most significantly, in 2015 the role of families and family-oriented policies was recognised as crucial for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, including Goal 4: Quality Education (United Nations, 2015a; 2015b).

While the role of parents, families and, to a lesser extent, communities has long been recognised as an important element in children's education, this has not always been extended to include their meaningful participation in decision-making. One outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic has been the recognition of families' important role in their children's education. Moreover, it has shown that parents wish to be engaged, informed and to collaborate with schools and teachers and that they have much to bring to the process. As one major international report indicated, it is the time for schools to find active ways to communicate with families, rather than waiting for families to come to schools (Winthrop, Barton, Ershadi and Ziegler, 2021).

> **The COVID-19 pandemic has put the topic of families and schools working together to educate children at the center of virtually every country's education debate. Teachers around the world report developing creative ways of engaging with parents to help their students learn at home, including strategies they would like to continue even after the pandemic is over (Teach for All, 2020; Teach for Pakistan, 2020).**
>
> (Winthrop et al., 2021, p. 6)

Almost all parents, families and communities are committed to their children's education. Education is a major priority for which many families make considerable personal sacrifices, not just in times of emergency, but at all times. When asked, children are clear about the importance of their education for the present and for the future (Save the Children, 2015).

> **It is not only children who want education to be prioritised in times of emergency and crisis. Parents, caregivers and communities also consider education as an essential need that should be provided alongside food, shelter and water.**
>
> (Save the Children, 2015, p. 11)

It is now widely accepted that education policies and practices are not the sole domain of experts and professionals. Each individual can be considered an expert in their own life, with unique knowledge, experience and perspectives that can enrich others' understanding in unexpected and valuable ways.

However, it is also clear that education policies and practices within schools and organisations cannot change overnight. First steps might be to reflect on what is meant by

listening to different 'voices' within any organisation and what the concept of 'meaningful' participation entails.

> Meaningful participation occurs when children and young people have the opportunity to express their views, influence decision-making and achieve change in areas that affect their lives. Participation is informed, relevant and voluntary. (Save the Children, 2007)

Therefore, for the voices of learners and their families to be meaningfully and effectively included, individuals and groups must be fully informed. Their respective opinions must be sought, listened to, valued, promoted and shared in planning, in decision-making and in practice, to include shared opportunities for feedback and further input. Those who were previously unheard or overlooked must be engaged in interactive dialogue with others in more powerful positions than themselves. Such participatory approaches are fundamental to the development, implementation and sustainability of inclusive organisations and education systems.

Guided by these ideas, in 2021 the Agency began the Voices into Action (VIA) project, aiming to examine the critical issue of involving the voices of learners and their families in decision-making. The project's overall goal is to indicate effective ways of promoting the voices of learners and their families in decision-making processes to build better, more inclusive education systems. During the project's first phase (2021), desk research activities included analysing key policy and research literature on why learners and families should be involved in decision-making and how to effectively do so.

This literature review is the first in a series of outputs from the VIA project. The review's key findings will inform the project's second phase (2022), where different intergenerational stakeholder groups, including policy-makers, practitioners, learners and families, will work together to develop a toolkit that will provide practical ways of involving learners and families in decision-making processes.

Overview of the literature review

This review's overarching purpose is to enable learners and their families to be active participants in educational decision-making in areas of importance to them. The review is a key part of the VIA project, in raising knowledge, understanding and awareness of this topic's historical, political, conceptual, ethical and practical aspects.

The review has two more specific aims:

- to provide an overview of key international policy and academic research literature on the active participation of learner and family voices in educational decision-making;

- to identify and present a number of examples of practice, to illustrate the implementation of research into practice.

The review brings together a range of literature of interest to those involved in educational policy development, implementation and evaluation at multiple levels (from international to national, regional, local and school). It is of direct interest to those working in the Agency and to the Representative Board members and National Co-ordinators from its member countries.

As the review draws together literature on policy, academic research and practice in different educational, geographic and cultural contexts, it could also be of interest to a wide range of stakeholders in education (including academic researchers, teacher educators, practitioners in diverse educational contexts, community and youth workers, and NGOs).

It is intended that the VIA project will enable learners and families themselves to have access to all the information they need for active and meaningful participation in educational decision-making.

This review has four main sections. It begins with an introduction that clarifies the review's background, aims, methodology and terminology (Section 1). It then provides a review of the international policy literature (Section 2) and the academic research literature (Section 3). Recent examples of practice from Agency member countries are interwoven throughout the review. It continues with a discussion of the combined findings from policy and research and concludes with some key points for consideration (Section 4). The Annex includes more details on the methodology and provides some examples of relevant research projects as suggestions for further reading.

Methodology

This section summarises the methodology used to identify and further analyse international, European and national documents and other sources considered in the desk research.

The **policy review of European Union (EU) and international organisations** focused on policy documents in the English language published in the last 30 years (from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child – UNCRC – in 1989 onwards), both by EU institutions (European Commission, European Parliament, Council of the European Union, Fundamental Rights Forum) and international organisations (United Nations, Council of Europe, UNICEF).

The **academic literature review** aimed to give an overview of the landscape of conceptual and empirical research in relation to the participation of the voices of learners and families in educational decision-making. For the purposes of this review, several parameters were used to limit the field of study to empirical research conducted within the past 20 years, reflecting changes over this period. Theoretical and conceptual work around 'voices' was not time-limited, as earlier work remains authoritative and much cited in this area.

Research from around the world was included, but the main focus was Eurocentric and located in schools. Attention was given to EU and international examples, tools, mechanisms and processes of learner and family participation in decision-making. The analysis considered all learners, including those from vulnerable and 'hard-to-reach' groups (such as those out of formal education, pre- and post-school learners and learners with complex needs).

In line with widely accepted approaches to literature reviews of this type (see, for example, Coe, 2021; Denner, Marsh and Campe, 2017; Hart, 2001; Punch, 2014), the initial searches were in the major research literature on inclusive education, to include work by recognised authoritative voices in the field, in books, book chapters and in the major, peer-reviewed journals, within the time period. This was done across a range of topics, to ensure a breadth of perspectives, standpoints and approaches (Punch, 2014).

Following initial searches through university databases and Google Scholar, a snowballing approach was used to identify further citing literature (Miles and Huberman, 1994) across a wider range of journals, Agency documents and the Agency website, as well as grey literature (such as organisational reports, conference presentations, online literature and blogs), where this was in relation to, or was evidenced by, the academic literature. These further searches indicated that much current research continues to draw on the theoretical and empirical work of those identified as authorities and experts over the past 40 years.

Initial keyword searches were used to identify literature on 'voice/voices', 'decision-making' and 'participation'. These were later expanded to include a range of similar terms and close synonyms to identify literature across a wide range of related topics. Results of searches of empirical research were excluded where:

- they fell outside the dates;
- the paper was not in English;
- the main focus was not on participation in educational decision-making;
- the main focus was not on learners up to the age of 18.

The Annex provides further details about the search process.

The VIA team also collected targeted information from Agency member countries through a country information template. This aimed to compile national **examples of effective practice**, as identified by the countries. Following an analysis, five indicative country examples were selected to illustrate practical evidence that accompanies this review's theoretical discussion. These examples refer to a variety of conditions and different opportunities for learner and family participation. More specifically, they provide indicative examples of:

- An initiative with one discrete learner group (Slovenia)
- A national, high-level initiative with more budget (UK – Northern Ireland)
- An initiative involving families, teachers and communities (Serbia)
- A local, low-cost initiative (Spain)
- An innovative initiative involving learners (Finland).

All country examples received (19 in total) will be available on the VIA project web area.

For more details on the review's methodology, see the Annex.

Terminology

The review is written from an adult perspective but draws on a range of research and policy literature focused on the voices of learners and of families. As some terms in policy and literature are in wide use with variations in meaning, these key terms are defined below in the way they are used in this review. However, citations from policy and academic research retain the terms from the original.

Learners, children, young people and youth

This review uses the term 'learner(s)' to refer to ***all*** individuals at the age of typical compulsory education levels, i.e. International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) levels 1–2. It includes those with complex needs, those from vulnerable or hard-to-reach groups, those who are out of formal education, those in pre- or post-school education, as well as those missing from education.

In some policy and research literature, the terms 'child' and 'children' are used interchangeably with the term 'learner(s)' in relation to young people of compulsory school age. In line with the UN definition, 'child' refers to young people up to the age of 18. The specific terms 'child', 'children' and 'young children' occur in some academic research literature, when referring to children in pre-school or early years educational contexts. The term 'children and young people' is used frequently in research and policy documents to refer to young people (generally up to the age of 18), while creating an arbitrary and undefined distinction between children and adolescents.

'Youth' is sometimes used to refer to adolescents and young adults, (approximately up to the age of 25) in literature in a broader context than education, such as that produced by NGOs.

Families

In referring to 'families', this review's intention is to include the voices of those closest to learners, whether these be parents, siblings, grandparents, extended family members/relatives, carers, guardians or other close members of their community. This is in contrast to some earlier research literature that

refers to ‘parents’ in the narrower sense of immediate family. It should also be noted that some young people do not have any one person who can act in the role of ‘family’ for them.

Voices and voice

‘Voices’ means the values, opinions, beliefs, views and perspectives of learners and their families. It also refers to the degree to which these are considered, included, listened to and acted upon when important decisions that affect their lives are being made at local (school), regional (district) or national level.

The term ‘voices’ is used to convey the notion of multiple, diverse voices. It implies that learners and families are not considered as homogenous groups, but as unique individuals who are treated as equal and valuable members in discussions.

The review uses the term ‘voice’ to convey the notion of an individual or unified group voice or opinion.

Vulnerable to exclusion, SEN/D and ASN

This review uses the term ‘vulnerable to exclusion’ to refer to learners of all ages, from pre-primary to higher education and in lifelong learning, who may experience individual or multiple barriers to participation in quality, equitable education, for whatever reason (UNESCO, 2000). It particularly includes all those groups vulnerable to exclusion identified by the Brussels Declaration (UNESCO, 2018), and conveys the importance of intersectionality, whereby ‘a person, group of people, organisation or social problem is affected and impacted upon by a number of pressures, forces, levers, discriminations and disadvantages’ (European Agency, 2021b, p. 6). The term is also appropriate for family members or those acting in this role, who may face barriers to interacting with policy-makers, teachers and other professionals in educational contexts and to meaningful participation in decision-making, about their own or their children’s education.

The terms ‘additional support needs’ (ASN) and ‘special educational needs and/or disabilities’ (SEN or SEN/D) are still widely used in the policy and research literature in some contexts.

2. POLICY REVIEW

This section provides a focused analysis of the evolution of the concept of learner and family involvement in European and international policy developments. It begins with an analysis of learner rights and voices and proceeds to discuss the role of families in relevant policy documents. The discussion focuses specifically on learner and family voices as key concepts within European and international documents, as well as policy developments that involve learners' and families' voices.

It also provides an overview of the relevant key international and EU policy documents, presented in chronological order and accompanied by a short description.

Learners' voices at centre stage

Promoting the participation of learners – in decision-making and policy development and as active contributors to educational settings and the wider community – has become more central in recent policy initiatives by European and international organisations.

The European and international policy debate on learners' and parents' voices is rooted in the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989). The UNCRC views both children and parents as active stakeholders and agents. Recent policy documents aim to foster youth participation in democratic life and to focus on the relationship between inclusion and civil society, youth, families and communities. One example is the EU Youth Strategy (European Union, no date b). It is the framework for EU youth policy co-operation for 2019–2027 and is based on a Council Resolution (Council of the European Union, 2018). Another example is the Cali commitment to equity and inclusion in education (UNESCO, 2019).

One of the European Commission's latest commitments is the adoption of a Strategy on the Rights of the Child (European Commission, 2021b), along with a Proposal for a Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee (European Commission, 2021c). These aim to promote equal opportunities for children at risk of poverty or social exclusion.

In 2021, several initiatives put children and young people centre stage, both as a focal point and as agents for change in their own right. During the inaugural event of the Conference on the Future of Europe, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, highlighted the need to build a better and fairer future for and with young people (von der Leyen, 2021a). The Conference was designed to be multilingual and decentralised, comprising events held by people and organisations as well as national, regional and local authorities across Europe. It sought to ensure broad representation, giving space to European citizens regardless of their age.

Young people leading and contributing to the platform's debates, alongside adults, was imperative to ensure they are 'fit for future democracy'.

> **It is vital that in particular young people can see the impact of their input. […] Join the platform, join our deliberations, bring your family and friends. "The Future is in your hands. Make your voice heard."**
>
> (Šuica, 2021)

Later in 2021, during the State of the Union address, President von der Leyen proposed making 2022 the European Year of Youth, a year dedicated to empowering young people:

> **… if we are to shape our Union in their mould, young people must be able to shape Europe's future. Our Union needs a soul and a vision they can connect to.**
>
> (von der Leyen, 2021b)

On that occasion, chair of the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education, Sabine Verheyen, welcomed this necessary and timely initiative at a delicate point in history, when all learners across Europe and the world are facing heightened challenges and inequalities in education. She appealed for young people to be involved in planning the European Year of Youth and for a bottom-up approach, in close consultation with the main youth organisations and associations at European, national and regional levels. 'The most important actors in the concrete design of the European Year should be the young people themselves' (Verheyen, 2021).

The central role that children and young people must play in designing their future in education is a matter of fairness and rights. In October 2021, during the Fundamental Rights Forum (2021), learners used their voices in panel discussions on educational challenges. It is increasingly clear that the normalisation of learners' participation and leadership in education must no longer be considered a one-off event or a box-ticking exercise based on a voluntary ethical code.

Children and young people's rights as learners are human rights, and therefore a legally binding set of commitments. These are rights that learners enjoy thanks to Article 12 of the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989), which all EU Member States have ratified, and Article 24 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU (European Union, 2000). These milestones, among others (United Nations, 2006; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009), shape EU policy in the field of education.

Table 1 provides a non-exhaustive chronological overview of key international and EU policy documents on considering and developing learners' rights and voices.

Table 1. Key international and EU policy documents on children's rights and voices

United Nations, 1989, Convention on the Rights of the Child	Recognises children as individuals and agents of social change and proclaims the recognition of children as a group entitled to special protection.
European Union, 2000, Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union	States children's right of expression on 'matters which concern them in accordance with their age and maturity' (European Union, 2000, Article 24).
United Nations, 2006, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Aims to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity.
United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009, General comment No. 12 (2009): The right of the child to be heard	Indicates that children's views may add relevant perspectives and experience and should be considered in decision-making, policy-making and the preparation and evaluation of laws and/or measures.
European Commission, 2011, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: An EU Agenda for the Rights of the Child	Sets out the need to listen to children and enable their participation in decision-making that affects them.
Council of Europe, 2012, Recommendation on the participation of children and young people under the age of 18	Highlights the importance of synergy among children, parents and social services in improving awareness, collaboration, fostering participation and empowering children's and parents' voices. It also introduces the concept of 'subsidiarity' and 'partnership' among children, parents and social services.

European Commission, 2013, Commission recommendation of 20 February 2013 – Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage	Sets out guidance for EU Member States on how to tackle child poverty and social exclusion through measures such as ensuring access to quality services, supporting parental participation in the labour market, and giving children the right to participate in decision-making that affects their lives.
Council of Europe, 2015, Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life	Reaffirms young people's right to be heard and considers them as autonomous actors capable of interrelating with other members of society.
Council of Europe, 2016, Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2016-2021)	Establishes the Council of Europe's priorities in the areas of equality of opportunities, participation, a life free from violence, child-friendly justice and the right of all children to access online environments.
Council of the European Union, 2017, Revision of the EU Guidelines for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of the Child (2017). Leave No Child Behind	Promotes a system-strengthening approach to protect the rights of all children, including children's participation.
Council of the European Union, 2018. Resolution of the Council of the European Union and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on a framework for European cooperation in the youth field: The European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027	Highlights the role of young people in society and sets objectives to foster youth participation in democratic life.

European Parliament, 2019, Resolution on children's rights on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child	Calls on the EU Member States to strengthen children's participation in their legislation and encourages the Member States and the Commission to create meaningful mechanisms for child participation, such as children's councils, in the work of European, national, regional and local parliamentary assemblies, particularly in key policy areas. Moreover, it stresses the importance of a holistic approach to education. The European Parliament encouraged Member States to define measures to prevent early school leaving and to ensure equal access to quality education for girls and boys from early childhood to adolescence, including for children with disabilities, marginalised children and children living in areas affected by humanitarian crises or other emergencies.
European Commission, 2021c, Proposal for a Council Recommendation Establishing a European Child Guarantee	Aims to prevent and combat the social exclusion of children in need by guaranteeing access to a set of key services, tackling child poverty and fostering equal opportunities.
European Commission, 2021d, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Union of Equality: Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021 – 2030	Aims to ensure full participation in society for persons with disabilities, on an equal basis with others in the EU and beyond, in line with the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which establish equality and non-discrimination as cornerstones of EU policies. Persons with disabilities have the right to take part in all areas of life, just like everyone else. Even though recent decades have brought progress in access to healthcare, education, employment, recreational activities and participation in political life, many obstacles remain.
European Parliament, 2021a, Resolution on children's rights in view of the EU Strategy on the rights of the child	Highlights the massive toll the COVID-19 crisis is having on children, further exacerbating their risk of poverty, severely affecting access to education, compromising their physical and mental health and increasing the danger of violence and abuse.

European Parliament, 2021b. Motion for a Resolution further to Questions for Oral Answer B9-0000/2021 and B9-0000/2021 pursuant to Rule 136(5) of the Rules of Procedure on the European Child Guarantee	This resolution is the result of a plenary debate with the European Commission and the Council on how they intend to meet the new EU target to lift at least five million children out of poverty by 2030. In the debate, the European Parliament discussed the European Child Guarantee, a proposal that should ensure access to high-quality, free healthcare, education, childcare, decent housing and adequate nutrition for every child in poverty. Parliament had been calling for this instrument for years, due to rising levels of child poverty and policy-makers failing to address the issue.
European Commission, 2021e, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child	The Strategy on the Rights of the Child is a comprehensive EU policy framework to ensure the protection of the rights of all children and to secure access to basic services for the vulnerable ones.
Council of the European Union, 2021a, Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on Strengthening the multilevel governance when promoting the participation of young people in decision-making processes	Aims to ensure that all young people have equal opportunities for participation, involvement and empowerment in relevant decision-making processes.

Source: *adapted from Mangiaracina, Kefallinou, Kyriazopoulou and Watkins, 2021*

To fulfil children's and young people's rights to participation and consideration in matters directly affecting them, the European Commission invited, involved and consulted children and young people living in Europe and beyond to share their views on how the Strategy on the Rights of the Child (European Commission, 2021b) would be shaped and what topics it would prioritise.

Learners indicated that education does not meet the current generation's needs and fails to equip them with the appropriate skills and tools needed for the future. They requested a greater emphasis on life skills, arts subjects and sport as part of education, on children's rights and on respect for their perspectives and views. The learners who were consulted raised the issue of poverty, which acts as a major barrier to social participation and inclusion and reduces life chances. Learners not only indicated weaknesses, but also made suggestions:

> **"The Strategy on the Rights of the Child should prioritize children's right to education and should urge third countries to invest more in children's affordable and quality education."**
>
> (ChildFund Alliance, Eurochild, Save the Children, UNICEF United Nations Children's Fund and World Vision EU Representation, 2021a, p. 5)

After considering and including children's and young people's thoughts and reflections, the Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee (Council of the European Union, 2021b) urged EU Member States to guarantee free access to high-quality, inclusive and safe education, including early childhood education and care for every child, and particularly for those in need. More specifically, the European Child Guarantee provides guidance and tools for Member States to support children in need, taking into account the specific needs of those from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as those experiencing homelessness, disabilities, precarious family situations, migrant, minority racial or ethnic backgrounds or those in alternative care.

In 2021, the Council of the European Union (2021a) adopted Conclusions on strengthening multi-level governance when promoting the participation of young people in decision-making processes. Again, the Council, through Member States' action, aims to ensure that all young people have equal opportunities for participation, involvement and empowerment in relevant decision-making processes at all levels.

EU efforts in terms of educational policy cannot be put in place without the Member States' commitment and implementation. National governments are held to account for protecting and implementing learners' rights and for fully inclusive practices and educational settings. Providing Member States with a comprehensive framework of tools, as well as funds, to engage with learners' futures would advance a new culture in the rule of law.

Families' voices in policy

Throughout the decades, in the framework of policy development, the fact that learners must be involved and consulted in matters affecting them has been widely shared. It is also acknowledged that, to fully empower learners' voices, alignment of different policies – not just educational ones – collaboration among different stakeholders and multi-level co-operation to implement the stated and shared fundamental rights are required.

The view of the role of parents and families has been to support learners' voices and to speak in their interests. However, it is not assumed that parents can achieve this alone. Some key documents (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009; 2013; Council of Europe, 2011; Council of the European Union, 2017) suggest that, in addition to children receiving parental guidance, institutions and communities should support parents and children.

Table 2 provides a non-exhaustive chronological overview of key international and EU policy documents on considering and developing parents' rights and voices.

Table 2. Key international and EU policy documents on parents' rights and voices

United Nations, 1989, Convention on the Rights of the Child	Recognises children as individuals and agents of social change and proclaims the recognition of children as a group entitled to special protection. Moreover, parents'/guardians' voices are recognised and respected when in line with the child's best interests.
European Union, 2000, Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union	Regarding the right to education, the Charter defends the freedom to establish educational structures with due respect for democratic principles and parents' right to ensure their children's education and teaching in conformity with their religion, philosophy and pedagogy, in accordance with the national laws governing the exercise of such freedom and right.
United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009, General comment No. 12 (2009): The right of the child to be heard	Indicates that children's views may add relevant perspectives and experience and should be considered in different settings and situations that involve them. Children's right to be heard must be applied in decision-making, policy-making and the preparation and evaluation of laws and/or measures. It underlines the importance of parents in guiding and giving space to children's right of expression. Parents are also entitled to be informed, guided and supported through parents' programmes to assist and nurture children's growth, development and learning.
Council of Europe, 2011, Recommendation on children's rights and social services friendly to children and families	Highlights the importance of synergy between children, parents and social services in improving awareness and collaboration, fostering participation, and empowering children's and parents' voices. It introduces the concepts of 'subsidiarity' and 'partnership' among children, parents and social services and it proclaims the right of children to be heard as an actual right, not a duty. This is why children need the partnership of peers and/or adults as spokespersons.
Council of Europe, 2012, Recommendation on the participation of children and young people under the age of 18	Calls on member States for measures to ensure the protection of children's rights and the opportunity for children to participate in decisions that affect their lives. Highlights parents' and carers' primary responsibility for their child's upbringing and development and, as such, that they play a fundamental role in affirming and nurturing the child's right to participate, from birth onwards.

United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013, General Comment No. 14 (2013) on the right of the child to have his or her best interests taken as a primary consideration	Aims to strengthen the understanding and application of the right of children to have their best interests assessed and taken as a primary consideration or, in some cases, the paramount consideration. Seeks to promote a real change in attitudes leading to the full respect of children as rights holders. The Committee expects that this general comment will guide decisions by all those concerned with children, including parents and caregivers.
United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2016, General Comment No. 20 (2016) on the Implementation of the Rights of the Child during Adolescence	Aims to provide a contemporary consideration of the UNCRC to guide States on the legislation, policies and services needed to promote comprehensive adolescent development, consistent with the realisation of their rights.

Source: *adapted from Mangiaracina, Kefallinou, Kyriazopoulou and Watkins, 2021*

The above-mentioned policy documents identify and introduce the concept that children's right to be heard and considered in matters affecting them is an actual right, not a duty (United Nations, 1989; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013; European Union, 2000; Council of Europe, 2011). Moreover, they emphasise the complementarity of parents' role in the defence and enjoyment of these rights. Parents' voices must be respected and heard if they express children's rights and their best interests (United Nations, 1989). Parents/families/guardians' role in expressing, listening to, respecting, supporting and, in some cases, conveying learners' voices should be naturally integrated in a broader framework of learners' interests to avoid creating a new divide (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009; 2013; Council of Europe, 2012).

Parents are pivotal actors in developing and affirming learners' voices in educational matters. Through the decades, parents' role has been shaped and strengthened to support children's voices and to speak in their interests. However, it is not up to parents alone. Some documents state that 'guidance' and 'support' should come not only from parents to children but from institutions to parents. The concept of organising roles based on 'subsidiarity' gives an indication of this: when children are unable to express their views, parents should do so on their behalf, pursuing their interests. In this framework, social services should assist children and parents in need of support and guidance (Council of Europe, 2011). Moreover, some of the documents introduce parents' right to receive help in fulfilling their duties toward children. Parents have the right to information, guidance and support from services in place for this specific aim (Council of Europe, 2011).

Progress is made when EU policy documents invite Member States to unlock the potential of children's and parents' rights and duties, thus creating the conditions for these rights and duties to be enjoyed and fulfilled (Council of Europe, 2012; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2016). As extensively discussed in 'Learners' Voices in Inclusive Education Policy Debates' (Mangiaracina et al., 2021), which tackles policy developments around learners' rights and voices in depth, the role of national and local legislators and administrators is pivotal. Implementation of international engagements can only take place through national, and consequently regional/local, enforcement.

All policy developments and recommendations receive strong support, both at national and EU level, inspiring a number of national-level projects with positive impact (Council of Europe, 2020; Rand Europe, 2021; European Commission, 2021f). However, they are still little-known or not properly used within EU Member States at the national, regional and local levels, where concrete policy mechanisms have to be developed and implemented.

Summary of key findings from the policy literature

- The **right of children** to be heard and considered in matters affecting them extends to ALL children.
- From the recognition of children as agents to their effective enjoyment of this right, it took over 30 years of reiterated policy work and school practices. However, this is **not granted or systematised yet**, despite the fact that EU countries have ratified and signed legally binding treaties/charters that state and protect children's rights.
- **Policy alignment** and collaboration among stakeholders are pivotal to ensure children's rights.
- The **role of parents and families** has been viewed as supporting learners' voices and speaking in their interests. Families are fundamental actors in the developing and affirming learners' voices in educational matters and they must be consulted, provided that the principle of the 'child's best interests' is always the primary consideration.
- Families alone might not be able to achieve this, so they have the **right to guidance and support**. Key documents suggest that, in addition to children receiving parental guidance, institutions and communities should support families and children.
- Countries must commit to systematising and developing effective **processes for learners' and families' participation** and interaction in synergy with all institutions and stakeholders in all matters affecting children.

3. RESEARCH LITERATURE REVIEW

This section draws on research literature to give the conceptual basis for including the voices of learners and their families in decision-making processes and evidence of how this has been achieved in practice. The review begins with some conceptual clarifications about voices and participation, then goes on to address two key questions:

1. Why is it considered necessary to involve learners and their families in decision-making processes?
2. How has this involvement been developed and implemented in research?

To address question 1, the review summarises the background to the issues of learner and family voices and participation in decision-making. It does this by defining the key concepts and outlining the justification for, and issues and tensions around, learner and family voices.

To address question 2, findings from research indicate how existing theoretical models and frameworks have been used and adapted for meaningful learner and family involvement in decision-making. Evidence of how the concept of voices is put into action is interspersed through the review in the form of research project examples as well as recent examples of practice from Agency member countries.

This section discusses issues around the voices of learners and families in the educational research literature and cites examples of their responses across a number of topics. It is evident in the research literature, however, that the words of learners and families are mostly used in reported speech, and it is adults, as the researchers, who select the topics on which the words of learners and families may be cited verbatim. With a few notable exceptions, the words of families occur less frequently in the literature, with the voices of certain marginalised groups in the minority.

Learners' views on the right of choice to be heard and seen

> **When adults do think of students, they think of them as potential beneficiaries of change. They rarely think of students as participants in a process of change and organisational life.**
>
> (Fullan, 2007, p. 170)

So often in the debate around the voices of learners is the underlying assumption that adults in some way extend this right to young people. However, it is clear in the research literature that young people, and particularly learners, want to be heard and to participate in discussions and decisions about their education, and are keenly aware of the power imbalance between themselves and adults (Davey, Burke and Shaw, 2010). Children need their views 'to carry weight' and to feel that their voices have impact and make a

difference, and they resent it when their views are sought but ignored (Burke and Grosvenor, 2003; Kilkelly et al., 2004; Pearson and Howe, 2017; Wyness, 2018).

> **There is a recognised need to move from getting the views of children and young people, to more active involvement and genuine participation. There is clearly much work to be done to build up the trust of young people with respect to their meaningful consultation and involvement.**
>
> (Kilkelly et al., 2004, p. 42)

Kilkelly et al. (2004) also note that children can become 'cynical' when they feel they are asked for their views and there is no evident result or feedback. Clearly, if learners and families are to be included in decision-making, it must be genuine and it can only proceed on a basis of trust, which may take time to build.

It is also important that adults do not assume that it is always safe for children to express their views and experiences, nor that it is always right to ask them to do so. It is the ethical responsibility of adults, or those in positions of power and authority, to ensure that children have a choice about when and how to speak and on which topics, and that they have the opportunity and means to do so or to remain silent. In this context, it is important to note that children's views are often overlooked and silenced in the context of the family or community (ibid.).

> **When children and young people were asked in the schools research what was most unfair about their lives, by far the most pressing issue to emerge was having limited influence on the decisions that affected them.**
>
> (Kilkelly et al., 2004, p. xxii)

Learners feel strongly when they are marginalised or not considered in decisions, with younger ones and those with special educational needs or from minority groups disempowered to the greatest extent (Bradwell, 2019; Davey et al., 2010). Where their opinions are sought but not responded to, and where no rationale is given for adult decisions, learners perceive it as indicative of the low status of their views (Davey et al., 2010).

> **Nobody sees me.**
>
> (Six-year-old child, cited in Bradwell, 2019)

When a child aged six says the powerfully simple words, 'Nobody sees me', it conveys a sense of invisibility: 'not seen, not heard and not acknowledged in the educational environment' (Bradwell, 2019, p. 428).

International organisations and societies now widely recognise the importance of including diverse voices. However, young people themselves have clearly indicated, when given the opportunity to do so, that priorities are to 'be heard' and 'respected' by adults around them (Joining Forces, 2021; Lundy, 2007; Morrow, 1999; Shier, 2001; Cuevas-Parra, 2011) and to be included in decision-making processes (Kilkelly et al., 2004; Shier, 2001). This emerges as a strong theme in much educational research over the past 30 years, echoing Morrow's words that, when asked, children and young people:

> … appeared to be more concerned with the everyday, even mundane, problems of being accorded little dignity or respect, and having little opportunity to simply have a say and contribute to discussions (1999, p. 166).

Much of the research literature (Bradwell, 2019; Davey et al., 2010) continues to reiterate Morrow's conclusions from many years of research that children felt they had no autonomy and, if they were heard, their views were 'discounted'.

Only 20% of children responding to an international survey of children's rights during the COVID-19 crisis, including European countries, considered that the government listened to them when making policy decisions. The same study found that young people's rights to education (Articles 28 and 29 of the UNCRC) featured prominently among young people's needs and priorities. (Queen's University Belfast, 2020)

It is telling that, while international organisations and educational research were already established in promoting young people's voices by the year 2000, it has taken over 20 years for this topic to move to centre stage in educational decision-making. While children may have many more ways to communicate their opinions now, the issue is not so much having a 'voice' as the value that is put on that voice, and that children's views are not just sought but also respected (Burke and Grosvener, 2003; Murray, 2019).

> **Children want to be heard and to feel that adults listen to their views, experiences and priorities. This message emerges as a powerful demand from respondents from all countries and all backgrounds.**
>
> (ChildFund Alliance, Eurochild, Save the Children, UNICEF United Nations Children's Fund and World Vision EU Representation, 2021b, p. 10)

There remains a discernible thread through the research literature that children think their views may still not bring about the changes they seek and that adults, after all, still hold all the power. In relation to issues of education, a similar sentiment was clear in children's words in 1967 and in 2001 (Burke and Grosvenor, 2003) and echoed in the title of a recent NGO policy brief:

> **We're Talking; Are You Listening?**
>
> (Joining Forces, 2021)

Children are also clear about the ways they can make their voices heard in an adult world. This demonstrates an understanding not only of the need for age-appropriate communication, but also of the need to find the means to overcome the 'resistance' they are likely to encounter.

Some 20 years ago, in 2002, during the UN Special Session on Children, children and young people were already clear about what was needed for their meaningful and effective participation. This pre-empted much of what researchers would later articulate as essential elements of participatory research. Their views in 2002 accord with Article 13 of the UNCRC, which states that children's right to freedom of expression includes a right to impart information 'either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice' (United Nations, 1989, p. 4).

Voices in educational research

> **Children's voices, even in the plural, are certainly never enough. They must be conjoined with others as part of a complex of generational, intergenerational and intragenerational struggle.**
>
> (David Oswell in Baraldi and Cockburn, 2018, p. viii)

There is a significant body of literature around the notion of voices in relation to educational practice, and an emerging literature around including voices in educational decision-making (Cook-Sather, 2002; 2006; Cox, Dyer, Robinson-Pant and Schweisfurth, 2012; Fielding, 2001; Hart, 1992; Lundy, 2007; Mitra, 2001; 2007; Rudduck and Flutter, 2000; 2004; Scorgie and Forlin, 2019; Shier, 2001).

While policy-makers draw extensively on the academic research literature to inform policy decisions, a gap remains between the academic research community and practitioners in schools and other educational contexts. There are increasing initiatives to bridge this gap and to draw those who experience the implementation of educational policies into the research community.

It is clear that changes to deeply-held attitudes, traditions and structures, such as those in education, take many years. Including the opinions of those not yet even consulted in decision-making processes may require a shift in thinking and mindset, which may only be achieved gradually. Morrow (1999) provides a succinct overview of the gradual shifts in thinking about the concepts of children's rights, responsibilities, care and protection up to the end of the 20th century, and the moves towards children's participation in societies.

In respect of educational research, Cook-Sather (2018) gives an overview of the key developments in the evolution of 'student voice' (from primary to tertiary education). This demonstrates the shifts from children as research objects (research on children), to research with children, where children participate in different aspects of the project to a greater or lesser degree. Thus, the shift to participation in educational research both mirrors and anticipates societal changes.

Children undertaking participatory research gain responsibility, and develop agency and a realisation of their ability to make meaningful decisions about things that may affect them. In this sense, agency is seen as having influence to make transformational change within the educational environment. Through agency, learners gain experience of the importance of their role in influencing outcomes that have a wider impact beyond themselves. With this comes a wider awareness of their rights.

Learner agency is defined as:

'… students' ability to exert influence in their learning context, to transform their own and others' learning experiences, and to expand learning … Student voice and student agency are closely linked when school stakeholders connect the sound of students speaking with students having the power to influence analyses of, decisions about, and practices in schools' (Cook-Sather, 2020, p. 183).

Researchers have shown that this type of participatory research is not necessarily age- or ability-dependent and can be widely used, provided the appropriate methodology, strategies and topics are chosen (Alderson and Morrow, 2020; Fielding and Bragg, 2003; Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell, 2015). Participatory research with children should consult the participants around the topics and methods and take their views into consideration, in order to avoid being inauthentic, tokenistic or unethical.

As the types of research develop (such as participatory action research and collaborative research), so too does the notion that the participants, of whatever age, are experts in their own lives, who can give their views and have the right to have those views listened to and respected. This is particularly the case in research around aspects of the school environment and daily life in schools, where adult perceptions of children's experiences may be inaccurate (Pearson and Howe, 2017). At the same time, it is important to

recognise that children neither see nor experience daily life as adults do, and continue to need appropriate support, guidance and care in their lives as well as when undertaking research.

> **[Children] recognise the limits of their autonomy, but also the need for guidance from adults.**
>
> (Morrow, 1999, p. 152)

It is considered particularly important that research in inclusive education should itself be inclusive of those who experience education on a daily basis, in schools and other educational contexts (Nind, 2014; Pearson, Callaghan and Cooper, 2016). These may be learners of all ages, parents and families, teachers and other associated professionals, student teachers, leaders and community members. All have experience and understanding of education in their own way, as experts in their own lives. Academic researchers have recognised that their participation in research generates greater insights, knowledge and understanding.

Inclusive, participatory and transformative research of this kind is research 'with' and 'by' people who are themselves not part of the formal academic research community, rather than research 'on' or 'about' individuals or groups of people, as objects of research. This type of research aims to give voice to those not previously heard or not considered sufficiently competent or who have been hard-to reach, by using different and innovative research methods (Cahill, 2007; Jones, Ben-David and Hole, 2020; Milner and Frawley, 2019; Nind, 2014; Puigvert, Christou and Holford, 2012; Veck and Hall, 2020).

The evidence suggests that, while participatory research generates new insights and knowledge and can have a greater impact on educational practice, tensions remain in terms of privileging one set of voices over another (Fielding, 2004; Porter, 2014) and in the 'competing underlying purposes' (Lewis, 2010, p. 16). Lewis adds a further cautionary note, emphasising the need for careful and reflexive consideration of '*how, why and when* "child voice" is realised in co-constructed research and professional contexts' (ibid., p. 14, emphasis added).

Enabling the presence of different voices in educational research, policy and practice is a complex set of processes, in which there are often competing and contradictory issues at play and important ethical considerations at all stages (Porter, 2014). There are challenges around whose voices can be heard and whose are not heard, on what topics, and how their 'knowledge' is gained and used for purposes which they may not be fully aware of or understand. How individuals and groups may be empowered must be balanced against issues of safeguarding and protecting children and vulnerable adults. There are ethical issues of informed consent, assent, dissent, confidentiality, anonymity and privacy to be considered, in the real world and the virtual world, as well as differing legal requirements in diverse contexts and countries (Alderson and Morrow, 2020; Archard and Uniacke, 2021; Blum-Ross, 2015; Bourke and Loveridge, 2014; British Educational Research Association, 2018; Christensen and James, 2008; Lundy and McEvoy, 2012).

However, there are a number of difficulties inherent in this type of research. These can arise from the power imbalance between children and adults, or from adults who choose inappropriate methods to enable learners of any age to participate fully. In participatory action research, the researcher is in the position of creating 'ethical symmetry' between the learners-as-researchers and the adults (Christensen and Prout, 2002; Dockett, Einarsdóttir and Perry, 2011). This is particularly important in the context of educational research, where learners remain subject to school rules and restrictions, and where school leaders act as gatekeepers. This role can restrict access to participants, as well as to the research topics. Participatory action research undertaken with both teachers and learners as co-researchers can overcome some of these issues.

While learners may bring important topics to adults' attention, it is still likely that adults will have overall control of the research methods and outcomes. Recognising the difficulties inherent in the move from rhetoric to practice, particularly with younger learners, Dunn (2015) undertook a small-scale study, in which a 'children's advisory group' worked with their peers in the primary school setting, prior to the same children advising the next phase of the research. This was done to ensure that the children gained knowledge about the research process and the topic, as a means of being able to make and articulate informed decisions, guided by adults (Alderson and Morrow, 2011; Dunn 2015; Lundy and McEvoy, 2012). This is an ethical approach which places learners as 'neither incompetent nor fully competent' (Dunn, 2015, p. 397) and remains aware of their 'evolving capacity' (Smith, 2011), but also aims to build capacity through the research process.

> **[There is] a need to bring young people's perspectives, agendas and experiences into critical dialogue with researchers', policymakers' and practitioners' perspectives on young people, in order to involve young people as active partners in knowledge production.**
>
> (Wulf-Andersen, Follesø and Olsen, 2021, p. 3)

Where personal or confidential information is brought into the public domain, there may be unintended consequences for some individuals or groups, which may cause more harm than good. It is also important to consider that while the process of finding the perspectives and experiences of diverse learners shares some of the complexities and approaches of finding those of families, these may be competing voices (see also 'The voices of families' section). The experiences of parents and family members, as they interact with their children's lives at school and at home, create a complex set of different narratives, which researchers must navigate (Ferguson, Hanreddy and Ferguson, 2014).

> **If children are to act as "participatory citizens" in a true democracy … they must be listened to. Only in this way can children be "subjects" who act in their own right and not the "objects of concern" whose "best interests" and "welfare" are interpreted on their behalf by adults.**
>
> (Roche, 1999, cited in O'Quigley, 2000, p. 1)

The notion of 'voice' is frequently present in the academic literature, suggesting that there is a unified, homogenous voice that can represent the views and experiences of very diverse groups of people. This overlooks the importance of the individual and assumes that a diverse group speaks with one voice. In much policy, individuals are grouped together by others under labels and classifications, such as 'learners', 'disabled learners', or 'migrant students', with the assumption that this indicates awareness and presence. However, it could also imply a glossing over of the awareness of individual needs, in favour of group needs. On occasion, groups are conflated, such as 'learner and family voice', indicating a united opinion, whereas the research evidence suggests that these two groups may sometimes be in conflict based on the competing rights and autonomy of the different parties involved (Harris and Riddell, 2011; Riddell, Harris and Davidge, 2021).

Voice and voices

While the research literature often uses the terms 'voice' and 'voices' interchangeably, it is important to maintain a distinction between a group or collective voice and individual voices (Murray, 2019). The use of 'voices' suggests that there are many individual voices within a group, and that these may not always be in agreement.

In any democratic society, be that a school, an organisation or a community, all individual members do not necessarily expect to have a say in the details of all decision-making processes. It is necessary to distinguish between individual and group or collective voices, and between the individual voice in private interactions and decisions, and the public voice, involving decisions which may affect large or small groups. There are decisions that will affect individual children and families directly, and there will be larger policy decisions that affect a class, a school, a community, or many thousands of young people. Enabling these different types of voices to participate and be heard, for different purposes, will require a range of approaches (Sinclair, 2004).

There are occasions when young people choose to affiliate themselves with, or organise themselves into, a group that can then speak with one voice. This may be at a small level, within a class or school group, or at a national or international level. This has been particularly the case in recent years, supported by social media and digital technology. These have the power to bring together people separated by time and place, in small school or community events at a local level, or in mass regional or global events. Examples here might include UNICEF's Voices of Youth Campaign or the Fridays for Future movement.

This distinction between the right to an individual voice and to a collective voice is important in terms of representation, advocacy, empowerment, autonomy and agency. It is important to note in this context that where children do not consider adults to be proactive in dealing with international issues of importance to them, they are willing to make their voices heard to force the issue into the public arena. In terms of demonstrating an understanding of citizenship, these young people are using their voices, as individuals who do not yet have the right to vote in many countries, and indicating that they are politically aware and active.

> **Children are not only citizens of the future but also citizens of the present with the right to express themselves in the present and to participate in decisions that affect them now. Knowledge of their rights is fundamental to children's practice of citizenship.**
>
> (Howe and Covell, 2005, p. 8)

Twenty years ago, Fielding wrote about the concept of student voice, which entails many ways in which learners can actively participate in school life and decisions (2001). Then, the focus was on the 'group voice': the idea that learners in schools are able to become active participants rather than remain as the passive recipients of others' decisions, in which they have no say, no prior knowledge and no right of reply or explanation, in many cases. It is interesting to note that Fielding is very aware of the impact of decisions on 'peers' – something which is not always discussed in debates around voice. This implies that having a voice comes with responsibility to the whole group, rather than being seen as an individual right with no further responsibility, beyond oneself, to other individuals or organisations. This is an important element in the notions of equity and community, which are implicit in inclusive education, and has implications for citizenship and democracy.

The multiple interpretations of 'voices'

Despite the increased acknowledgement of the concepts of 'voice' and 'voices', the terms are not always defined or used in the same way in the research literature, nor by all countries in policy documents. Thomson has argued that the use of the term 'voice' has become so widespread that it is 'meaningless' (2011, p. 19). As Alexander pointed out, the notion of voice is 'complex and can be used in various ways, reflecting different contexts, aims and beliefs' (2010, p. 144). It can have 'multiple meanings' (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 23) and interpretations, and is associated with a range of other notions, such as 'participation', 'engagement', 'involvement', 'consultation', partnership and 'agency' (Cook-Sather, 2018; 2020; Fielding, 2006; Lundy, 2005; Tiusanen, 2017). In addition, these words are used in some contexts to denote what elsewhere might be expressed by 'voices', leading to a somewhat confused picture. This in turn may result in a range of diverse practices, dependent on interpretation in any context. Messiou indicates that, in her research over many years, the term 'voices' has come to indicate not only the diversity of voices, but also encompasses 'thoughts, emotions and actions for bringing about change' (2019, p. 769).

A lack of clarity and definition of terms can occur at any level and may have a negative impact on outcomes. Lundy (2007) notes that the wording of Article 12 of the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) is frequently cited in an abbreviated form, thereby 'watering down' the full responsibility of the nations that have ratified the agreement.

> **"The practice of actively involving pupils in decision making should not be portrayed as an option which is in the gift of adults but a legal imperative which is the right of the child."**
>
> (Lundy, 2007, p. 932)

Lundy notes that policy and research literature frequently fail to cite Article 12 in full, reducing it instead to a few words, which she refers to as 'convenient shorthand'. Examples include:

> … 'the voice of the child', or 'pupil voice', as it is more commonly referred to in education. Other abbreviations include: 'the right to be heard', 'the right to participate' and/or 'the right to be consulted' (ibid., p. 930).

This apparently small alteration in the Article's wording can have major repercussions on the interpretation into practice, as the force of the Article's legal status can be overlooked.

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

'1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

2. For this purpose the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law' (United Nations, 1989, Article 12).

These ideas around the voices of learners are not all new. Much earlier, over 100 years ago, some educational thinkers were advocating for new approaches. These were notable in Dewey's work – particularly in *Democracy and Education* (1916/2008), although the terminology was, of course, different – and more recently in Freire's work on dialogic teaching and critical pedagogy approaches to education. This work has influenced and

been developed by more recent educational researchers, theorists and practitioners (Burbules, 2017; English, 2013; Waks and English, 2017), such as in the example below, which draws on *Pedagogy of Hope* (Freire, 1994).

> **By sharing power with students, by listening to them and seeking to follow their advice, we have learned that educators, researchers and policy makers are more likely to promote contexts through which the voiceless have voice, the powerless have power and from such spaces hope can emerge.**
>
> (Berryman, Eley and Copeland, 2017, p. 491)

Communication: voice, listening and silence

When the words 'voice' and 'voices' are used conceptually in educational discussions, it is generally intended to refer to the communication of opinions or ideas. Thus, 'having a voice' indicates not only the possession of opinions on the topic, but the opportunity to express them to others. Implicit in this is the understanding that the intended audience will hear and pay attention to what is said, reflect on it and respond, to initiate a dialogue. This indicates that it is necessary to be present, to listen to others and to be listened to by others. It also requires the willingness to listen to others, in the sense of paying attention to and being open to what is said. Where this type of listening does not take place, listening may be said to be passive.

In the Western educational tradition, learning and teaching systems have prioritised articulation and speech. Talk is encouraged as 'active participation' and silence is frequently viewed as a deficit position, indicating a lack of knowledge or understanding (Acheson, 2008; Forrest, 2013). Learners indicate their understanding and knowledge by talking and responding verbally, engaging in classroom discussion. Those who do not speak or respond – either because they cannot, because of linguistic, cultural or social differences, or because they actively choose not to – may be thought to be inattentive, not engaged with the classwork, to be ignorant or even stupid, or to be actively resistant to teaching and learning (Forrest, 2013).

Within the classroom or other group environment, an imposed silence can be used as a form of control, to ignore or to diminish the value of a speaker's answer or presence, or by prohibiting speaking in other languages, in cultures with a politically dominant language or mode of expression. These uses of silence as a form of control work effectively to 'silence' some groups, which in turn is disempowering and marginalising (Harper and Welsh, 2007, in Forrest, 2013).

Silence, however, is also an active and important communication tool in educational environments (Schultz, 2009). For many learners, collecting their thoughts, finding the 'right words', or marshalling the courage to answer may all create a delay in responding. Silence can be as powerful as speech in conveying meaning (Acheson, 2008) and the active withholding of speech is itself a strong form of communication.

Many who have no speech have other means to communicate their intended meaning, through eye or body movement, gestures and facial expressions, sound, mood, emotion and appearance, or through assistive or digital technology. Far from being deficit or passive, the choice to be silent might indicate thoughtful reflection, attentive listening to the words or meaning of others, cultural respect for the speaker's position, or an act of resistance.

Researchers' awareness of the significance of silence is increasing. This is not only in terms of recognising the unheard voices and 'untapped ideas' (Hintz, Tyson and English, 2018) of those who are silent or silenced, but also in the challenges researchers may encounter in enabling the silent voices and the silence within communication to be situated in the research and reported as evidence (ibid.; Spyrou, 2016).

Research into listening, particularly in the educational context, has sought to understand listening as both an active and a passive activity. Listening is active when the listener attends to the speaker and to what is being articulated. This is an important capacity for teachers, learners and researchers to develop and to practise in the context of the classroom and in interactions with learners and their families.

Recent research in education has identified different forms of 'listening' (Haroutunian-Gordon, 2009; Haroutunian-Gordon and Waks, 2010; Waks, 2008; Hintz et al., 2018). Hintz et al. (ibid.) identify five different forms of listening within the educational context, some of which are 'passive' and some 'active'. This research recognises that there are many marginalised and absent voices in education and presents a 'pedagogy of listening' to enable diverse voices to participate in ways that value others' knowledge and understanding:

> **A pedagogy of listening … that goes beyond listening for the right answer, to listening for the voices, identities, understandings and resources of previously silenced voices and untapped ideas.**
>
> (Tyson, Hintz and English, 2018, p. 1)

'Listening' can also marginalise the very voices that should be heard. Presence at the discussion is, in itself, no real guarantee of being heard or of having a voice in the sense of meaningful participation.

Silenced voices are those voices which have been deliberately marginalised or ignored, or where no effort has been made to enable meaningful communication to take place. In the context of education worldwide, there are

many adults and children who are marginalised, or ignored, and whose silenced voices must be heard.

Even where people are able to voice their opinions, they may not experience this as 'feeling heard' (Murdoch, English, Hintz and Tyson, 2020) or they may feel excluded and unable to articulate their views. This is conveyed by 15-year-old Nicky, who describes how she feels when a teacher does not respond to her presence in her lessons:

> **It feels like [she's ignoring me] cos she looks at me … you know, she just doesn't pay much attention to me. [I feel] stupid. It's like, unwanted, like I'm not really meant to *be* here at this school at all. It's like blocking me out.**
>
> (Nicky, aged 15, cited in Murdoch, 2019, p. 192)

Enabling children and families to participate meaningfully in educational decision-making calls for changes to attitudes, beliefs and negative perceptions, and for an awareness that everyone has a right to be heard and to participate, no matter what their background or personal circumstances. As the 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report states, 'everybody's view should count' (UNESCO, 2020, p. 21). However, the report also indicates that in addition to changed attitudes, there is a need for support and resources to enable those previously overlooked – both families and children – to participate, particularly at the community level.

> **Engage in meaningful consultation with communities and parents: Inclusion cannot be enforced from above […] Governments should open space for communities to voice their preferences as equals in the design of policies on inclusion in education.**
>
> (UNESCO, 2020, p. 23)

Many adults are vulnerable to exclusion, experiencing barriers to their participation in their children's education, as are many millions of children worldwide. Those who experience multiple intersecting barriers are particularly vulnerable in this respect. Their absent voices must be heard and their meaningful participation must be enabled through active support and dedicated resources. Among the absent voices have been those of children with a range of disabilities and learning difficulties, and their families (Parsons and Lewis, 2010). Until relatively recently, these children were often represented by their parents, who acted as their advocates and voices, but whose own views were not sought or were overlooked, and about whom decisions were made (Bjarnason, 2009a; 2009b).

In terms of communication, there are many who must be heard but who do not use speech or verbal language to communicate, or who may have limited knowledge and understanding of the context's dominant language. These people may become 'voiceless', considered too hard to reach or seen as not sufficiently competent to be included in decision-making processes. These absent voices must be included for participation to be socially just and meaningful.

Meaningful participation in decision-making by learners vulnerable to exclusion is an area which has met with challenges, as schools and other professionals working with children seek to bring them into collaborative decision-making processes, in line with their rights (Norwich and Kelly, 2006). For an extensive discussion around this topic, see Sinson, 2020.

> **"The child's right [to be heard] is not dependent on his or her ability to express views, but to form them."**
>
> (Butler et al., 2003, cited in Kilkelly et al., 2004, p. xii)

Also marginalised in verbal communications are those learners and adults with hearing difficulties, as well as those with more hidden disabilities, which may involve language processing, outward expression, memory, concentration, co-ordination, or learning difficulties (cognitive impairment), for example. An awareness of accessibility should be an active and on-going aspect to all development in this area.

Evidence from research with those with a range of communication difficulties, including severe and complex difficulties, indicates that almost all can contribute to discussion when their participation is appropriately enabled, and that their voices bring important new insights and perspectives to education (de Boer and Kuijper, 2020; Rose and Shevlin, 2004; Twomey and Shevlin, 2017). As Lewis, Parsons and Robertson indicate: 'There is a need for flexibility of methods to suit individual participants, but given this flexibility and time, a very wide range of children and young people can share their views' (2007, p. 3).

While much of the educational research in this area is in relation to learners, it is important to ensure participation by families. Families themselves may face significant additional barriers to participation in decision-making about their own and their children's lives. The educational literature has noted that this is an under-researched area (Maguire, Brunner, Stalker and Mitchell, 2009).

> **"It is very, very important … as a disabled person you lose so much control over your life that to be able to still feel like a parent and still be able to do things in the school. You know I mean I want to do this volunteering, to be involved in school I think it's really important, more important because you've not got other avenues to feel useful because you've got to feel useful to your children."**
>
> (Parent, cited in Maguire et al., 2009, p. 40)

> **Those of us who experience disability are frequently conspicuously left out of dialogue about our own lives.**
>
> (Cologon, 2020, p. 2)

Amongst the absent voices are those of educational researchers with intellectual difficulties, who have themselves felt that their views are absent or 'very selectively reported' in the literature (Strnadová and Walmsley, 2017, p. 132). This is evidenced by the fact that they are often referred to as 'co-researchers', promoting the discussion about the dilemma of labelling and not-labelling and issues of power and visibility, which is as important in the research community as in all other aspects of society (Seale, Nind, Tilley and Chapman, 2015). Educational research undertaken with children vulnerable to exclusion as co-researchers needs greater ethical awareness of the power imbalance. Their voices need to be evidenced authentically and for purposes which benefit the learners themselves (Faldet and Nes, 2021).

In recent years, advocacy groups, associations, NGOs and major international organisations have taken a more prominent position in raising awareness of the rights and needs of some of these previously overlooked groups. A number of these organisations have funded or undertaken substantial research on these issues. In addition, medical and technological advances have given those previously considered hard-to-reach increased opportunities for participation in education and have allowed their voices to be heard through diverse research projects. The crucial role of assistive and digital technologies in meaningful participation and in increasingly enabling the voiceless to speak and be included in decisions about their lives is providing greater opportunities for many (see also the 'Voices, participation and the role of technology' section).

As researchers work collaboratively with learners and their families, it is important that the evidence from this research is used to enable meaningful participation to take place, through listening to others, no matter how they communicate their views, and to develop knowledge and understanding of how wide and varied the human capacity for communication is. It is the researcher's responsibility to find the means to bring in all the absent voices, to enable all voices to collaborate in decision-making, and to develop an ethos of trust and respect in which all feel they are welcome to participate. In this sense, listening is a moral activity.

The following initiative from Slovenia provides an example of a marginalised group of learners and their families that was given voice and choice on how to solve their issues collaboratively.

Country example: A voice-oriented approach for learners with emotional and behavioural disorders in Slovenia

Context: The 'Pre-placement Intervention' (*Prednamestitvena obravnava*) programme was developed in response to the observed needs of parents who face challenges related to learners' behaviour and emotions. Six educational institutions for learners identified as having emotional and behavioural disorders (EBD) implemented the programme between 2017 and 2019 in the scope of the 'Professional Centre for the Treatment of Children and Adolescents with Emotional and Behavioural Disorders' (*Vzpostavitev strokovnih centrov za otroke in mladostnike s čustvenimi in vedenjskimi težavami*) project, co-funded by the Republic of Slovenia and the European Social Fund. This example refers to the programme implementation by the Institute for Education in Logatec (*Zavod za vzgojo in izobraževanje Logatec*), provided by four experienced professionals and including 13 learners and their families.

Aims: The programme aimed to solve problems in the environment where the learner lives, without placing them in the Institute, through support, counselling activities and the active participation of all. The ultimate aim was to establish better communication in the family and to achieve better learning outcomes and positive learning habits.

Implementation: The learners, aged 8–17, were two girls and eleven boys and their families. All learners attended basic (primary and lower-secondary) or upper-secondary school and were diagnosed with EBD. The voices of learners and their families were central to the whole initiative. The participating learners and their families had the opportunity to present their own perspectives on the problem. Professionals encouraged them to find inner powers and to solve the problems within their families. Each family worked separately with four counselling specialists (a social worker, a psychologist and two social pedagogues) following a staged approach: meetings at home; placement in a housing unit or in the Institute.

Impact: The Institute estimates that the quality of the counselling support has improved. At local level, increased support has led to greater self-reliance and communication within families and to more positive outcomes. After the project's completion, the programme became part of the regular tasks of the Institute's counselling service (*svetovalna služba*). It was eventually renamed 'Preventive Counselling Support' (*preventivna svetovalna pomoč*). At national level, the programme changed the organisation of counselling services and approaches to EBD across the country. Families are now included in the intervention plan (previously not considered), using an integrated approach to solving problems (i.e. the individual in the home environment/context).

Voices in inclusive educational debates

Over the past 30 years or so, the concept of 'voice' has emerged in relation to a range of other concepts within education and to broader issues in society. The idea of 'giving voice' to individuals and groups in society is associated with increased participation and involvement in different spheres of social and political activity. It is seen as an important element of the democratisation of societies and in the development of citizenship. This works to reduce hegemonic practices and raise awareness of social, political and human rights issues and inequities. There is an increasing call for more 'voices' to be heard and for openness and transparency at every level of society.

> **"From the outset, the term "student voice" aimed to signal not only the literal sound of students' words as they began to inform educational planning, research and reform but also the collective contribution of diverse students' presence, participation and power in those processes."**
>
> (Cook-Sather, 2018, p. 18)

A significant range of evidence from research indicates that when young people are consulted and included in all aspects of their education, it leads to improved teaching, learning and educational outcomes for learners and overall school improvement (Mitra, 2001; 2007; Rudduck and Flutter, 2004). This evidence has influenced the movement towards inclusive education systems and the development of new approaches to teaching and learning.

There has been a shift in thinking among some educational and social researchers, that young people's voices give the 'missing perspective of those who experience daily the effects of existing educational policies in practice' (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 3) and that these voices 'can stand alongside those of teachers, to co-create knowledge, meaning and dialogue' (Pascal and Bertram, 2009, p. 254). These voices are not intended to replace the authority and responsibility of teachers and other professionals, but to work with them (Cook-Sather, 2006). This is seen as part of a movement towards increasing the participation and empowerment of young people in their education (Rose and Shevlin, 2004; Mitra, 2001; 2018), as a means of developing citizenship, and as appropriate preparation for participation in democratic societies in adult life (Devine, 2002; Roche, 1999, in Lundy, 2007).

> **A democratic education system acknowledges the importance of child voice and recognises that prioritising "participation" enhances children's self-esteem and confidence, promotes their overall development and develops children's sense of autonomy, independence, social competence and resilience.**
>
> (Ring and O'Sullivan, 2021, p. 1)

The participation of learner voices also has the potential to create more inclusive education systems through the opening up of spaces and capacities 'for racial and ethnic historically marginalized youth to play key roles in school change and hybrid learning spaces' (Gonzalez, Hernandez-Saca and Artiles, 2017, p. 451). This approach supports more socially just school environments (Mansfield, 2014; Taines, 2014; Salisbury, Rollins, Lang and Spikes, 2019) to ensure that disenfranchised youth are included in decision-making processes (Ginwright and Cammarota, 2007; Cammarota and Romero, 2011; Salisbury et al., 2019). Moreover, it fosters positive youth development around agency and civic engagement (Mitra and Serriere, 2012; Brasof and Spector, 2016).

> **As oppression, marginalization, and inequality continue to plague our nation's children, it is urgent that we educate students to see, name, frame, and call out societal failures and ills. Simultaneously, educators need to enact pedagogical frameworks that help school children develop competencies that allow them to become agents of change.**
>
> (Soslau and Gartland, 2021, p. 11)

In these different conceptions of 'voice', a greater association with increased participation in education can be seen, whereby learners move from a more passive to a more active role, with increased agency (Cook-Sather, 2020). In this sense, agency is defined as 'students' ability to exert influence in their learning context, to transform their own and others' learning experiences, and to expand learning' (ibid., p. 183).

These processes, which are essential elements of inclusive education, are seen as more socially just and as a part of democratisation and empowerment. In them, the opinions of learners and, in some cases, families, are included alongside those of professionals, enabling collaboration and influencing decisions. This leads to improved teaching and learning, and creates more equitable educational experiences and outcomes. In this sense, voice is closely linked with inclusion and with an inclusive approach to education.

Sinclair (2004) draws on a range of literature to identify eight different reasons for, and benefits of, participation, grouped around the legal, social and political. Each of them is influential in all spheres of education. They are: to uphold children's rights, to fulfil legal

responsibilities, to improve services, to improve decision-making, to enhance democratic processes, to promote children's protection, to enhance children's skills, and to empower and enhance self-esteem.

The politics of voices

The notions of voice, agency, participation, citizenship and democracy cannot be separated from a political dimension, as they are bound up with competing views of the purposes of education (Biesta, 2015; 2008). These competing agendas can have a significant impact on national and local educational policies and how these are interpreted into practice in schools and classrooms. While the concept of learner voices is embedded in the emancipatory and democratic discourse of inclusive education, it has also become associated with school improvement, interpreted through the neo-liberal discourse (Charteris and Smardon, 2019).

Listening to the voices of marginalised and previously unheard or under-represented groups is seen as a way to include these individuals and groups in education. In many cases, those who have absented themselves from the education system by choice or necessity, or who have been excluded, can be brought back into education through dialogue and collaborative approaches (Rose and Shevlin, 2004; Messiou, 2006; Ainscow and Messiou, 2018; Harwood and Murray, 2019). Other groups may also not feel or be fully included, for reasons which may be cultural, religious, ethnic or linguistic. Recognition of these marginalised groups at a classroom, school, community or national level may become a first stage in their meaningful participation and inclusion in education.

In this way, listening to and enabling the presence and participation of diverse learner voices is also seen as an integral and necessary part of inclusive education (Mitra, 2001; 2007; Rudduck and Flutter, 2004; Messiou, 2006; Fielding and Moss, 2011; Ainscow and Messiou, 2018). Thus, voice has a conceptual link with interpretations of human rights (Lundy, 2007) and diversity (see, for example, Herring and Henderson, 2011), as well as more broadly with the increase of political or social capital. In this view, those who have 'voice' gain advantage and power and those who lack 'voice' become disadvantaged and disempowered (Thomson, 2011). The extent of participation in this sense can be visualised as a continuum between these two points, sometimes known as 'weak' and 'strong' voice (ibid.), and can be seen as one indicator of the development and emergence of social justice in education.

There are, however, some counter-arguments in the literature. These indicate that the rise in learner empowerment is in counter-balance to a perceived decrease in authority and power for teachers, and a corresponding undermining – or even eroding – of their professional standing and expertise (Arnot and Reay, 2007; Clarke, Boorman and Nind, 2011; Cook-Sather, 2006). Many teachers equate a rise in disciplinary issues in classrooms with learners' increased awareness of their rights.

Parents have also voiced this concern. They perceive that, as children become more aware of their rights, the competing rights of adults and children may result in the erosion of parental rights (Howe and Covell, 2005) and that children may choose to act against their parents' wishes (Archard, 1993; Gereluk, 2010). See Archard and Uniacke (2021) for a discussion of the moral and ethical complexities around rights.

A second emerging theme in the literature over the past 20 years has been how the effects of neo-liberalism, neo-conservatism and performativity (Apple, Au and Gandin, 2009; Ball, 2003) have run counter to the emergence of voice as a means of improving social justice and equity in education in high-income countries. Performativity refers to the ways in which the educational landscape has become increasingly subject to 'market forces' and systems of control and auditing. Both teaching and learning are now frequently measured in terms of targets achieved (outputs), with a corresponding loss of autonomy for the individual teacher and learner. Statistical measuring of this type values product over process and leads to a shift in the positioning of teachers and learners as managed groups.

These effects have shifted the notion of quality in education away from justice and equity within educational settings, towards quality being measured in terms of results, targets and productivity, with individuals shouldering responsibility for their educational experiences and outcomes (Biesta, 2008). These processes put limitations on learners' agency. Consultation with learners becomes a means of 'legitimising' the position of schools by apparently giving learners a 'voice'. However, it is done in a way that suits the schools' purposes, without enabling genuine participation in decision-making (Wyness, 2018; Charteris and Smardon, 2019).

Performativity in education is seen as being counter to the conceptual foundations of inclusive education. It creates conflicts for teachers and school leaders, who see themselves as agents for social change but are still answerable to, and measured by, the dehumanising demands of productivity and targets (Ball, 2003; Perryman, 2006).

Research in educational contexts can aim to bring to the fore the complexities inherent in these competing interpretations around learner voices, and how teachers and learners are caught up in the processes (Ball, 2003; 2016; Bragg, 2007; Keddie, 2016; Mayes et al., 2017; Nelson and Charteris, 2021; Taylor and Robinson, 2009).

The following extract from ethnographic research shows how the culture of standards and productivity may run deep in schools and societies, even as they appear to espouse the principles of voices and rights:

> **"I observe that some boys seek ways in which to perform a particular masculinity to remain together in 'a pack' and to create distance between themselves and the girls (and some other boys) as they move down corridors between their classroom and the school assembly hall… The boys manage their performative corridor practices with skill and panache: they configure themselves to re-form and intermingle with other girls and boys as they approach the hall where adult eyes are once again upon them. In so doing, they demonstrate that they are fully aware of the empowerment orthodoxy of Children's Rights which they are expected to perform. In this example these boys are caught between the power of the performative culture of masculinity and that of the Children's Rights discourse to challenge it."**
>
> (Rebecca Webb, in Mayes et al., 2017, p. 22)

The following example from Northern Ireland shows how learner and family voices can reiterate the importance of education and promote more positive attitudes towards education, by underlying its core values.

Country example: A learner- and family-led advertising campaign in the UK (Northern Ireland)

Context: Having developed several advertising campaigns in the past (including 'Education Works', 'Give your child a helping hand' and 'Miss School, Miss Out'), the Department of Education in Northern Ireland created a new campaign focusing more on children and families from lower socio-economic groups.

Aims: The campaign aims to illustrate the importance of education, the value in following your passion and the positive routes it can lead to. The key strapline has been designed to spark the interest of children who would not normally listen to this sort of central government message.

Implementation: The Department of Education has an advertising budget which it can draw upon to promote positive messages. Young people and parents were involved in designing and developing a new advertising campaign about education. Twenty in-depth interviews were conducted with parents of children and young people ranging from primary to secondary school ages and covering the key learning stages. Schools were asked to provide some real-life examples of learners whose attitudes to education had changed as a result of the positive influence of a teacher, peer or mentor. These case studies were then shared with the appointed advertising agency to develop advertising concepts that were launched across Northern Ireland in 2021. As a result of this process, a new 'Hope/Aspiration' campaign was developed, entitled 'Try and Stop Me'. This was then tested with a number of young people and families in the target group. Their comments were used to refine and finalise the key messages in a 30-second video and radio bulletin. The campaign will use social media channels that young people use, together with social influencers, to help encourage and build upon the central message of hope and aspiration.

Impact: Among the positive comments from testing were: the clarity of communication at a high level; the targeted scripts; the advertising that appeals to all age groups and also has parental approval; different age groups can draw different messages out which they feel are relevant at the time. The campaign's impact will be measured both quantitatively (in terms of the number of impacts on TV, radio, social media, etc.) and qualitatively (in terms of people's attitudes to the campaign and how it has affected their attitudes to education). The campaign will be evaluated independently at various points through its time span.

Voices and participation in schools and communities

While there is clearly a close association between voices and participation in the literature and in practice, it is important to identify exactly what is meant by 'participation' and how it can be evidenced. In the context of this project, the discussion around 'participation' and the models described below refer to participation in educational decision-making for learners and families.

Participation is conceptualised in different ways and is 'multi-dimensional' (Sinclair, 2004, p. 108). As a result, wide differences emerge in practice (see Mager and Nowak, 2012, for an extensive review). In 1979, Elise Boulding expressed strong views about the importance of intergenerational participation. Her words were cited by Hart (1992) at the start of a paper for UNICEF underlining the need for 'frank and honest confrontation between generations when perceptions, needs and interests differ, in a context of mutual acceptance of responsibility for each other' (Boulding, in Hart, ibid.).

Hart reiterated the need to recognise the importance of 'joint community projects carried out by adults and children together, in which capacities of the young [to] contribute to the welfare of all' (1992, p. 37). These words clearly express how important participation is, not just in education, for all young people. They indicate that the key to transforming lives and communities lies in intergenerational co-operation and collaboration, starting at the level of the communities of home and school, in which young people grow, learn and live. The importance of family, community and intergenerational participation remains a key concern, and is highlighted as a key message for developing more inclusive education systems:

> **"Keeping learners at the centre to achieve the goal of inclusion in education also requires genuinely involving parents and families as well as the wider community."**
>
> (UNESCO, 2021a, p. 130)

Perhaps the phrase 'genuinely involving' is the most telling here. It lays down a challenge to governments, societies, communities, schools and individuals to recognise and address not only the challenges that will be encountered and to take the steps to meet these, but also the vital role of parents, families and communities in improving societies through education.

Recognition of the importance of a holistic, intergenerational approach to the transformation of education – and, indeed, societies – emerges strongly in the literature (UNESCO, 2021a). It is clear that learners are a part of families, of communities and of groups, which may themselves be marginalised in their societies. Each of these must be visible, present and informed to be able to participate actively in their children's education, within school and within the wider community.

Hart referred to the need to create opportunities for all young people to 'participate in programmes which directly affect their lives' (1992, p. 6), stressing that the needs of

disadvantaged children particularly should be addressed through participation, indicating later that children may be considered 'fellow-citizens' (2008, p. 24). The concept of citizenship continues to be closely aligned with that of meaningful participation and links to social justice and democracy, as the voices of those vulnerable to exclusion from society and from education, including those without citizenship, may be heard.

The notion of children as 'active citizens' is embedded in the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (European Commission, 2021b, pp. 3 ff.) and is clearly expressed by the Council of Europe:

> Participation and active citizenship is about having the right, the means, the space and the opportunity and where necessary the support to participate in and influence decisions and engage in actions and activities so as to contribute to building a better society (2015, p. 5).

> **Building an inclusive school in a social context characterized by exclusion, discrimination and lack of acceptance is a major challenge. Learner voices need to be heard, listened to and acted upon. But what learners experience in education systems is often the result of the stance the school and the wider community take towards their parents. Parents and communities are the pillars on which to build a favourable environment in support of inclusive education.**
>
> (UNESCO, 2021a, p. 139)

The following example from Spain illustrates how a holistic, intergenerational, community-wide approach can enable participation at different levels and can help to transform the whole educational community.

Country example: A local educational community in Spain

Context: The 'A school, a village, an educational community' initiative is located in a rural agricultural community (population 600) around a small primary school with 41 learners (aged 3–12, 30% are not Spanish) and five teachers.

Aims: The initiative aims for full inclusion, involving the whole community in the children's education. Specifically, it aims to instigate educational strategies that contribute to overcoming inequalities and promoting social cohesion by attending to key elements, such as grouping learners and ensuring family participation.

Implementation: The whole community is actively involved in the initiative. Professionals (teachers), families and learners are all 'social agents' alongside the educational community (i.e. the council, village associations and the entire population of the area). All are involved as 'key contributors' and have different but equally important qualities/skills to bring. The school is the central driving force of the community. Community participation is promoted in the school council. A range of approaches are used to enable participation, such as: increasing awareness of vulnerable members of the community; participation of all in decision-making and budget discussions; evaluating educational activities; particular attention to gender inequalities, by promoting participation of all women (parents and community) in activities with school children; everyone taking part in learning activities, in school and beyond school; conflict prevention initiatives from learners.

Impact: Full evaluation is in place, using an adaptation of an internationally recognised framework. Learner empowerment, enabling them to act as 'agents for change', has been the major impact. The innovative practice has been recognised at federal level with an award. The model has been extended to other rural communities in Spain. Information and practices are shared in a variety of ways with other rural areas, including through training opportunities.

Research with children

Action research is a rich source of evidence about issues in education, in which young people participate at every stage of the process. This type of participatory action research often takes place in the context of schools, in the community or in other places where education policies are lived out day by day. Not only does this type of research provide insights from different perspectives (the 'insider view'), it also offers examples of how diverse and often multi-generational voices can work together on designing and delivering the research, on dialogue and reflection, and on disseminating the outcomes (Cammarota and Fine, 2008; Ginwright, 2008).

This type of research takes place **with** a group of people, working together towards a common goal of change and improvement. It is not undertaken by one group **on** another. For many, the process itself can be transformative and empowering. Previously unheard, overlooked and minority voices can bring their unique perspectives to enable real change to take place within a classroom, a school, a community or a society, by challenging previously held and often unchallenged negative assumptions about others' lives (Gwynn, 2004).

Undertaking participatory research with learners in schools can present its own complexities. These may be in working within the structures of school curricula and timetables, as well as in the relationship between the adults and learners, in terms of how they are placed in relation to the project and to the context (Padilla-Petry and Miño Puigcercós, 2022). Thus, while adults may initiate the research, learners are the ones who possess the knowledge about the context (such as the school).

The way research projects of this type are planned and undertaken is critical to achieving the aim of learners participating as co-researchers. Padilla-Petry and Miño Puigcercós (ibid.) discuss a range of challenges encountered in their ethnographic participatory research in secondary schools with learners aged 15 to 18. Interesting here is that assumptions were made on both sides about what and how the research would proceed, which created an additional set of problems, in the extent learners chose to engage with the research.

> **Regardless of the best democratic intentions and critical pedagogical approaches of adult teachers and researchers, youth will engage on their terms and follow their interests and both of these factors cannot be fully anticipated by teachers or researchers. Thus, truly listening and accepting youth's interests and terms are key to any participatory research project or educational endeavor concerned with student engagement.**
>
> (Padilla-Petry and Miño Puigcercós, 2022, p. 10)

'Children' cannot be considered a homogenous group, even within the context of a class or school. Therefore, research topics and methods must reflect an openness to this diversity of ideas and means of expression. An interesting review of research studies (Hill, 2006) aimed to gain evidence about children's views on research and consultation and the methods they preferred, as well as to identify the effectiveness of different methods, and the correlation between popularity and effectiveness. While the review is more general, and not specifically related to education, it gives an interesting analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of different research methods. It also indicates some of the inherent complexities for the children themselves in their role as participants. The author makes the important point that the children's responses are as 'people and as children' and that there is not a great difference to the views of adults about their participation in research. This is an important consideration when including children in the design and dissemination of research, in their agency, competence and in their potential as intergenerational researchers to create change.

There are important ethical considerations in approaching research with children, in relation to the extent to which they understand what they are being asked to do and the consequences of their participation. Participation in research should be on topics of interest and relevance to children and should bring benefit to them, in order not to reduce them to the status of the 'objects' of research. As indicated previously, the research process itself should benefit the participants, including by enabling them to gain knowledge and understanding (see the 'Voices in educational research' section).

Dunn (2015) conducted a small-scale study where a 'children's research advisory group' (CRAG) was set up. The CRAG worked with the researcher to gain the views of children aged six and seven on using popular culture to teach writing in the primary classroom. One aim of the research was to ensure that the children gained knowledge about the research process and the topic, and developed capacity to make and articulate informed decisions, guided by adults. The study is interesting as regards the methods the researcher used to build trust with the young learners and to enable them to understand the topic and express their views in the ways most natural to them.

In a second stage of the project, the same learners advised the researcher on the best methods to involve other learners of their age in the project. Their decisions were later acted on, and they were involved in the interpretation stage. The findings indicate that the young learners' understanding of the issues which were meaningful and relevant to them were enhanced by using a range of appropriate strategies. Their knowledge and experience as 'experts' were evident to the researcher as the learners carried out their advisory role.

Some groups of people are considered harder to engage in research than others, often referred to as 'hard-to-reach'. There is extensive discussion around the use of this term, which some consider to be pejorative, and the diversity of those who might be considered hard-to-reach (Chamberlain and Hodgetts, 2018). Nonetheless, it is the term most frequently used in the research literature and is used here in this general and open way, with no disrespect intended.

In the context of research with learners, those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are often considered – or assumed – to be more difficult to reach. The absence of their voices is a gap in the participatory research literature. However, in a case study in a special

school setting, Zilli, Parsons and Kovshoff (2020) used approaches that enabled secondary school learners with ASD to meaningfully participate. The researchers first aimed to ascertain from the learners the practices and strategies which would enable them to participate in research. Only then did they proceed with the research, using the methods identified by the learners themselves. The carefully planned approach built trust and enabled learners to decide how and on what topics the research would proceed. Importantly, the authors note that inclusive, open and flexible school leadership is essential to the success of this approach.

The importance of assistive and digital technology in inclusive education (discussed later in this review – see the 'Voices, participation and the role of technology' section) is significant in participatory research to enable learners to use a diversity of approaches. Where this research is located in the school context, access to ICT facilities will be similar for all participants, thereby reducing inequalities.

This point was important in the design of research on learner voice carried out in 13 schools in Spain, from pre-primary to secondary (Susinos-Rada, Calvo-Salvador, Rodríguez-Hoyos and Saiz-Linares, 2019). The decision was made to use ICT, as it provides greater opportunity for a greater range of voices to participate and to foster inclusion, expressed in terms of 'deliberative democracy' (ibid., p. 41), as a tool for school improvement. This multi-stage project enabled as many learners as possible to participate through a range of methods and consultation strategies, such as questionnaires, assemblies, debates, posters and interviews. Following analysis of the data, learners were given a choice of 'languages, formats and tools of expression' (ibid., p. 42) to engage in open dialogue about the particular improvement to be undertaken in their school. The learners chose the project's final outcome and they were actively involved in its design, development and evaluation. The researchers noted that using a range of technology was key to developing inclusive and participative experiences throughout the project.

Participatory research with children has the potential to enable diverse voices to be heard, for meaningful participation in decision-making to take place, and to include previously marginalised or excluded groups. However, it is not without challenges, both in the aims and the purposes to which it may be put.

Most particularly, these challenges are in relation to 'who participates, in what ways, and under what conditions' (Hansen, Ramstead, Richer, Smith and Stratton, 2001, p. 295). These refer to potential imbalances of power at every stage, and between all levels of potential participants, from university researchers to teachers and learners.

> **To further a democratic research process, equality of opportunity to participate cannot be assumed at any stage of the research process.**
>
> (Hansen et al., 2001, p. 295)

Hansen et al. use the term ‘pseudo-democracy’ (ibid., p. 316) to encapsulate how processes within participatory research may mask these power imbalances. For these to be addressed, they suggest increased awareness of the possibility of teachers and learners ‘collaborating to identify research issues of mutual concern and developing a controlling role in research’ (ibid., p. 318).

Some 20 years on from this, and in line with the recent developments in thinking around participation and agency discussed earlier, one might consider that learners, and indeed families, should be empowered to initiate research on topics of importance to themselves.

Models of participation

A number of models or frameworks of participation have been developed to indicate how these different conceptualisations might be applied in educational settings. Among these, four of the models considered to be most influential in practice in educational settings will be discussed (Hart, 1992; Shier, 2001; Sinclair, 2004; Pearce and Wood, 2019). These different approaches can be used individually or in complementary ways to enable organisations wishing to increase learner participation to evaluate their current policies and to develop new policies and practices.

Other models to consider are Treseder (1997), Driskell (2002) and Bonell García and Ríos (2014). In some ways, these models are adaptations of Hart’s ‘ladder’ into other configurations. Hart (2008) later addressed some of his critics and clarified some issues about his original work. All of these models may be readily adapted to evaluate the extent of family participation in educational decision-making.

The Ladder of Participation

Hart’s notion of the Ladder of Participation (1992) indicates eight stages of increased participation. The lower rungs (one to three) represent non-participation or tokenistic participation. The top rung represents a stage in which children initiate and invite adults to participate. Hart’s stages concern the participation of children and young people in decision-making and emerging citizenship, from a time when children were not always considered competent to be a part of decision-making. Hart’s approach might be equally appropriate for adults from marginalised, minority and vulnerable groups in society. The metaphor of the ladder itself is a reminder that each stage develops from successful completion of the previous one, enabling schools and other organisations to build on their earlier knowledge and practice.

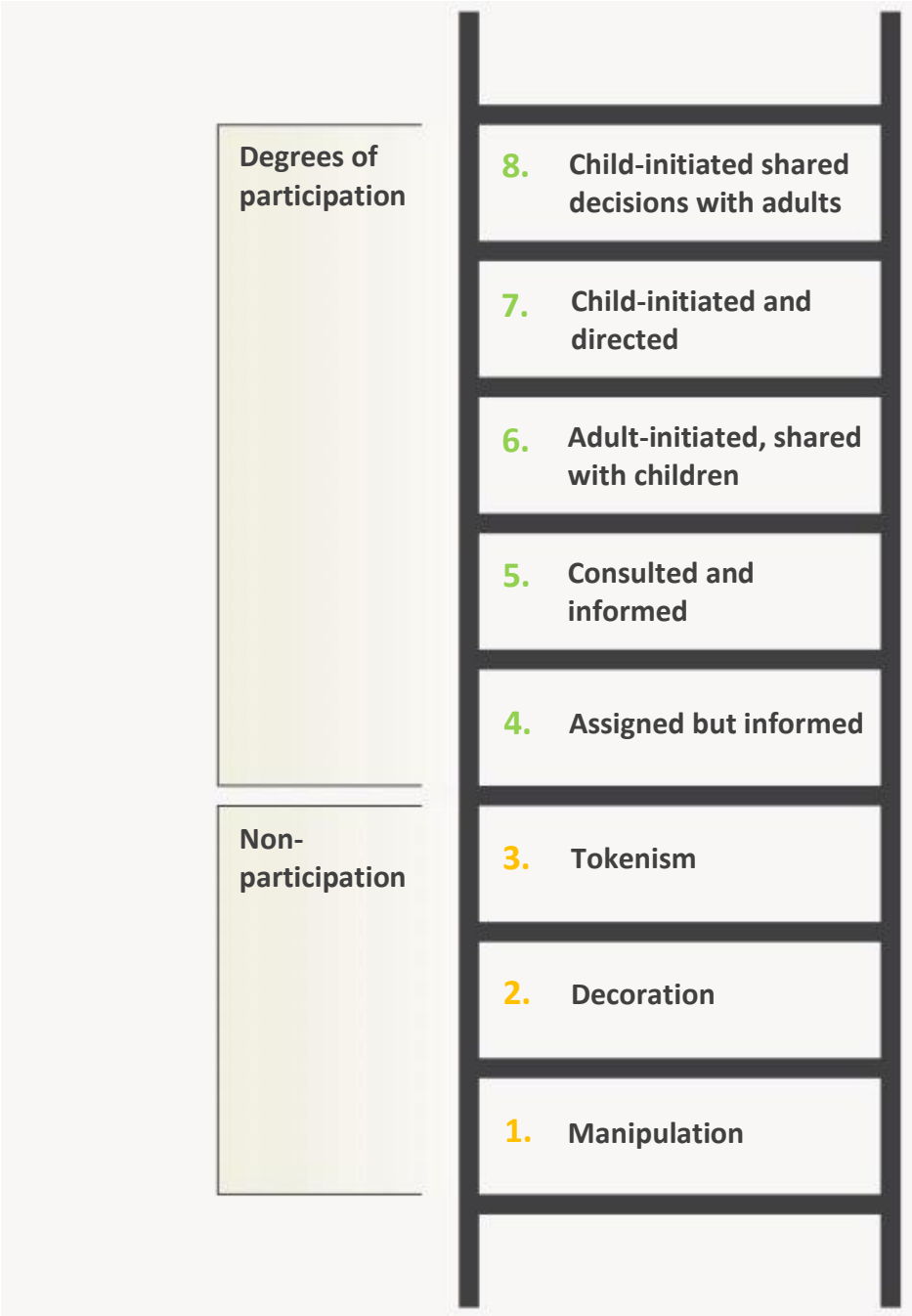

Figure 1. Hart's notion of the Ladder of Participation (1992)

Pathways to Participation: a five-level model

While some have criticised the implied hierarchical approach of Hart's work (for example, Treseder, 1997, who developed a wheel and spoke model with the child at the centre), practitioners may draw on Shier's approaches for different types of participatory activity or project (2006).

Shier's five-level approach addresses questions to enable organisations and individuals to define the clarity and purpose of each activity as they plan a participatory approach. This

model has five levels of participation. It should be noted that the model excludes any aspects of non-participation.

1. Children are listened to.
2. Children are supported in expressing their views.
3. Children's views are taken into account.
4. Children are involved in decision-making processes.
5. Children share power and responsibility for decision-making (ibid., p. 110).

Within each of these five levels, practitioners must identify their own stage of commitment, defined as 'openings, opportunities and obligations' (ibid., p. 3), by answering sets of questions.

Shier clarifies these in a diagram:

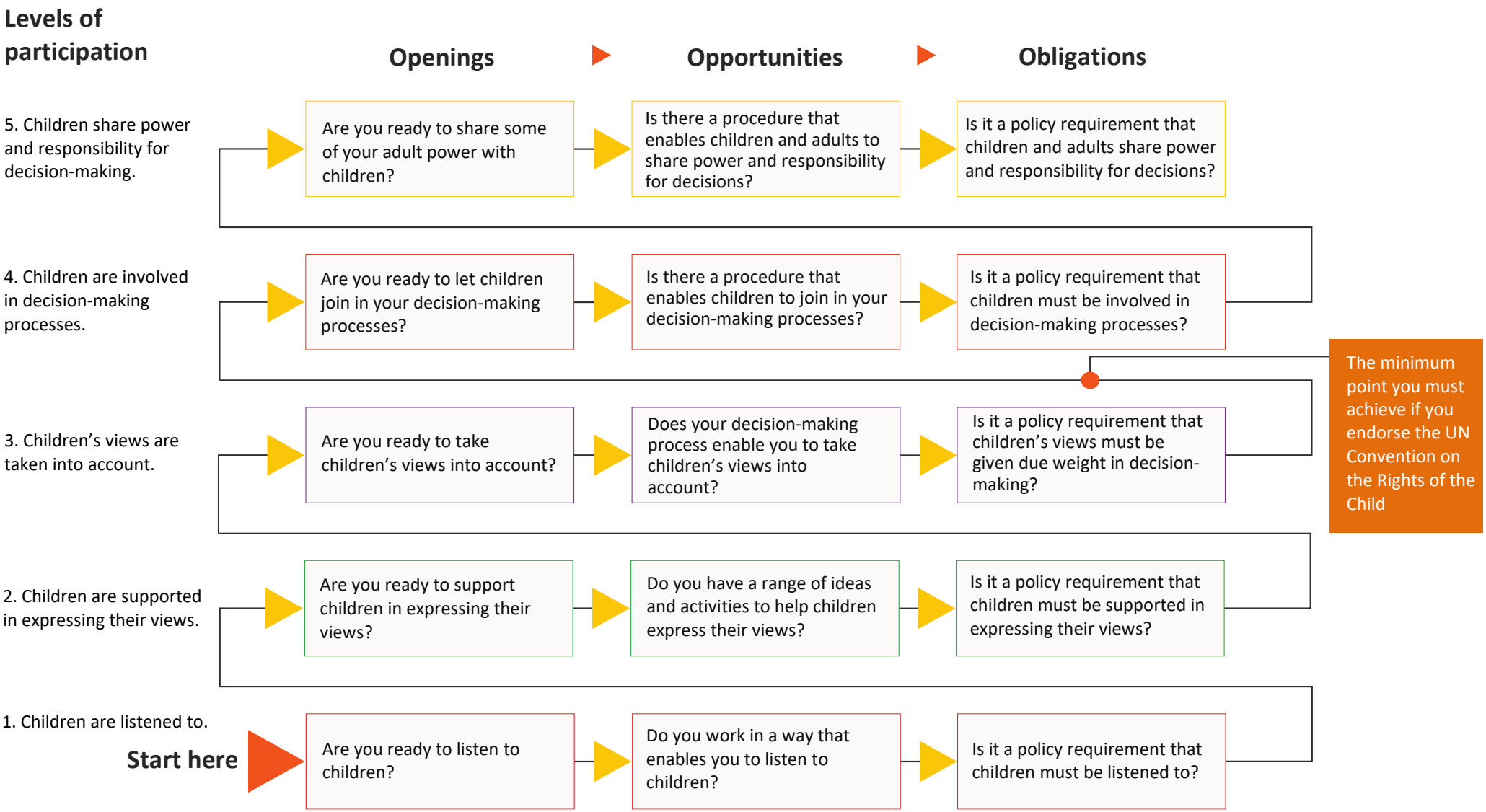

Figure 2. Shier's model of participation (Shier, 2006)

Thus, the first question at level one is ‘Are you ready to listen to children?’, indicating an opening level of commitment, progressing through three questions for each of the five levels. The final question at level five indicates an obligation to share power and responsibility for decision-making: ‘Is it a policy requirement that children and adults share power and responsibility for decisions?’

Shier identifies the processes and changes that must occur at each stage and level in order for these 15 questions to be answered. This indicates that, far from being a box-ticking exercise, this is a very hands-on framework for practitioners. He suggests that this model should be used as a starting point for in-depth and reiterative reflection, with particular attention to be paid to questions where the answer has been negative.

An evaluative framework

More recent work around learner voice and participation has been able to look back at 20 years of research and development and reflect on the extent to which learner voice in schools has been transformative to learning and teaching experiences. Pearce and Wood (2019) reviewed the literature around learner voice over the previous 10 years, drawing on Cook-Sather’s earlier definition (2014) of initiatives around voice as ‘the consultation of, feedback from, and engagement of, students in their education’ (Pearce and Wood, 2019, p. 114), identifying a rapid growth in initiatives and practices over this time.

However, in the hope of improving the quality of education, their review has a second, evaluative aim: to identify and define the particular ‘building blocks and conditions’ (ibid., p. 114) required for learner voice work to be transformative. These are that the work must be dialogic, intergenerational, collective and inclusive, and finally, transgressive.

In response to the complexity of the field, Pearce and Wood propose a model as a reflective and dialogic tool, as a contribution to on-going debate and discussion. This means that the model can also be used alongside the other models or as a reflective tool to return to, at any point.

The seven realms

A very different way of conceptualising children’s participation was presented by Francis and Lorenzo (2002, cited in Malone and Hartung, 2009, pp. 28–29). They reimagine types of participation as seven ‘realms’: romantic, advocacy, needs, learning, rights, institutionalisation and proactive.

The realm corresponding most closely to education is the ‘Learning Realm’. This describes projects which involve teachers and environmental educators without necessarily using research knowledge. The focus is on the process of changing perceptions and skills rather than physical places. In this type of research, the location is usually in schools or the community and children are ‘engaged as learners’ (Malone and Hartung, 2009, pp. 28–29).

The essential elements of participation in decision-making

The models described above, while different in application, have similar features which are considered essential for participation to be meaningful. While there is discussion around what might be required for meaningful participation to take place, it largely depends on the size, type, topic, context, age range and accessibility requirements of the

individual or group. However, there are core features which are considered essential for all meaningful participation to take place and to avoid participation that is tokenistic, manipulative or unsafe (UNICEF, 2020).

Sinclair (2004) suggests that there are four main aspects to consider:

- The level of participation
- The focus of the decision-making
- The nature of the activity
- The children involved.

In terms of the level of participation, different approaches may be required for public or private decisions, depending on whether these are individual and group decisions, and for what purpose. Purposes may differ greatly, such as for service provision, policy or research. There is wide variation in different types of participatory activities, and these must be appropriate in the light of the other factors. Sinclair emphasises the importance of recognising that 'children' do not form a homogenous group, but are very diverse in terms of their individual and collective circumstances.

Participation takes many forms, from a private conversation between two people, to a class or school group, to a larger local or community event, to international presentations. Whatever the form of participation, it must always start with knowledge: knowing what others know and what there is to know on a topic. Only in this way can anyone become informed and be able to have an opinion.

Where accurate and accessible information is not available, exclusion will occur. Publicly available information must be open and accessible, in a variety of formats and languages. This is important at every level, from the classroom to the national forum. Participation and citizenship are not possible if people of any age do not have access to the information they need, in a format which allows them to understand its meaning and be able to come to an opinion, based on the facts. Information can be given in text, video, poster or artwork, spoken word or visual presentations, small group work or on an individual basis. Language can be simplified without loss of meaning, technical terms and jargon can be explained, and other communication systems such as Braille, signing or speech synthesisers can be used (Ollerton, 2012; Salisbury, 2007; Simpson, McBride, Spencer, Lowdermilk and Lynch, 2009; DAISY Consortium et al., 2015; European Agency, 2015).

Lundy, McEvoy and Byrne (2011) suggest space, voice, audience and influence as essential elements of participation. In their model, children must have the opportunity to express their views (space) and to be 'facilitated' to do so (voice). This is to be interpreted as the means and opportunity to express views in a way that is accessible and meaningful to the child, in respect of their age, understanding and preference. The views must be listened to, by those who are relevant in the process and decision-making (audience) and be acted upon in an appropriate manner and 'given due weight' (influence) (ibid., p. 714). Thus, young people are present at the discussions and their views are heard and taken into account as important contributions. Furthermore, this process is iterative and should be revisited until a final agreed decision is made.

Lundy et al. (ibid.) also indicate that this process must work within the framework of other Articles of the UNCRC to include the right of non-discrimination, the principle of best

interests, the right to guidance, the right to seek, receive and impart information and the protection from abuse. Important in this model is the notion that 'audience' and 'influence' move children's participation beyond the local, and that the intergenerational involvement of adults is mandatory, through the obligations of the additional Articles (Percy-Smith, Thomas, O'Kane and Twum-Danso Imoh, 2009).

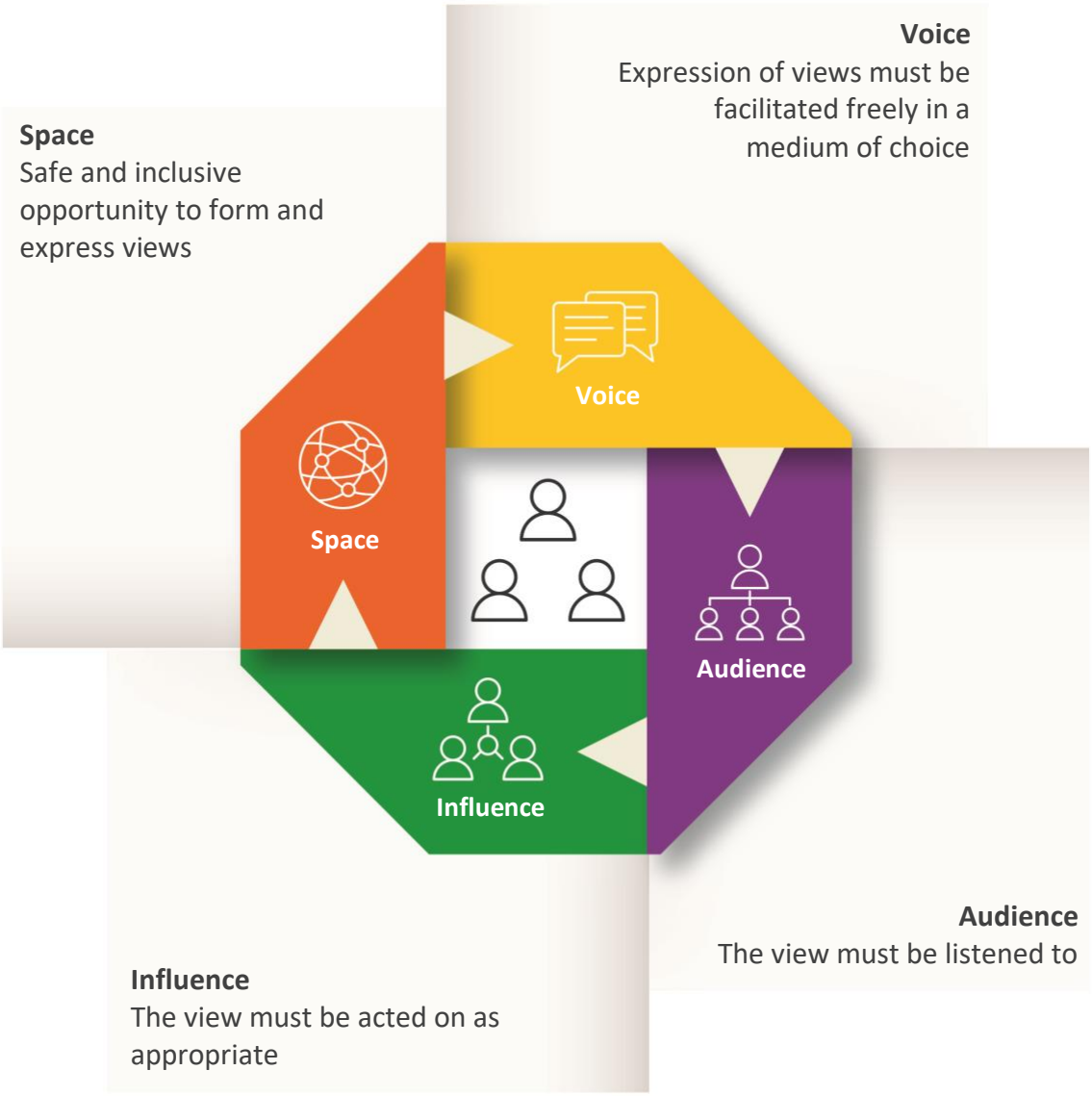

Figure 3. Features of meaningful participation

Extensive work by UNICEF on adolescents' participation and civic engagement (2020) identifies and describes nine further 'basic requirements', in addition to space, voice, audience and influence (Lundy, 2007). It states the approaches must be transparent, voluntary, respectful, relevant, child-/adolescent-friendly, inclusive, supported by training, safe and sensitive to risk, and accountable.

In addition, UNICEF identifies four modes of participation: 'no participation or unethical participation', 'consultative participation', 'collaborative participation' and 'adolescent-led participation' (2020, p. 11). These modes, or levels, are in line with those in the four

earlier models described above. These are linked particularly with education in formal and non-formal environments (UNICEF, 2020).

Finally, the recent *Handbook on children's participation* (Council of Europe, 2020) is a substantive contribution to the Strategy for the Rights of the Child, promoting child participation. It was produced by the Council of Europe's Children's Rights Division, in collaboration with international child participation experts and following consultation with over 50 children and young people on the challenges to be addressed. It offers practical approaches for professionals to support the children they work with – both as individuals and as groups – to participate in decisions that affect them.

For many of those working in diverse educational contexts, it is clear that the processes involved in meaningfully increasing learner agency and participation are complex and must be on-going. This will involve reflection and restructuring of traditional roles between teachers and learners to share power and control over learning (Robertson, 2017).

The 'VIA framework for meaningful participation'

The following overarching 'VIA framework for meaningful participation' in educational decision-making uses the essential elements of all models discussed above. This framework continues to be developed and will be completed during phase 2 of the VIA project. It includes indicative actions related to the essential elements for participation.

The VIA framework is based on the four aspects of Lundy's model (space, voice, audience and influence) to encapsulate what is considered essential in the different approaches for learners and families.

As in Lundy's model, the VIA framework is informed by the rights-based approach and could therefore be used in conjunction with the UNCRC principles. As Figure 4 shows, all four aspects can be linked with specific UNCRC Articles:

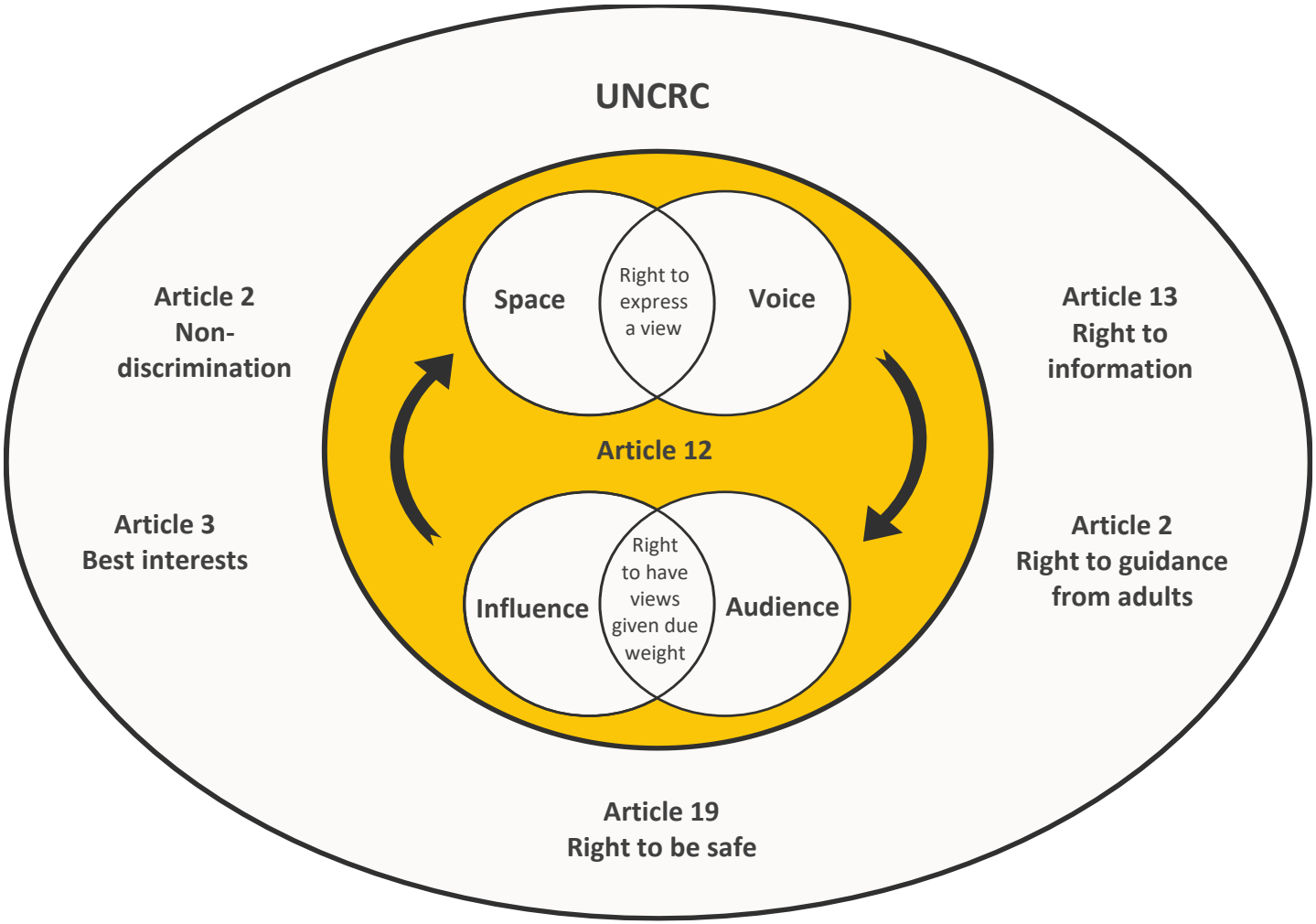

Figure 4. Conceptualising Article 12 (*adapted from Lundy, 2007, p. 933*)

Table 3. Extract from the VIA framework for meaningful participation

Space	Voice	Audience	Influence
Opportunity to be listened to: a safe and inclusive environment to express views	**Support in expressing views: provision of appropriate information in a variety of formats; choice, knowledge and guidance**	**Views are communicated to someone with the responsibility to listen**	**Views are acted upon: active agency, shared power and responsibility for decision-making and/or initiating debates**
Setting up the environment • Gain participants' informed consent. Provide full, accessible, diversity-sensitive and age-appropriate information about the participation process. • Be clear and transparent around the topics, purposes and outcomes: topics should be meaningful, of interest, relevant and beneficial to the individual/group. • Ensure mutual agreement about timing and location that is accessible and convenient for all participants (i.e. school, park or café, private or online spaces.)*	**Building capacity for participation** • Build capacity, knowledge and understanding of the topic, the processes and the possible outcomes and implications. • Provide support and training to those interacting with learners/ families to develop the appropriate knowledge, understanding and skills for effective participation. • Enable participants to express their views in a way that is accessible, relevant, appropriate and meaningful to the individual/group.	**Becoming a responsible listener** • Be knowledgeable in the topic area, recognising that others (i.e. learners, families or community members) may be the experts in the topic under discussion. • Recognise, encourage and value the important contributions of intergenerational and diverse perspectives. • Access support to listen to and understand the views expressed (e.g. translation, interpretation, explanation, with the holder of the views present, if possible, to ensure authenticity).	**Enabling meaningful participation in decision-making** • Record the views authentically and accurately, without distortion of their meaning or their removal from the process • Take seriously and act upon the views expressed. Give all views 'due weight' and proper consideration. • Give appropriate feedback to all participants and/or other stakeholders. • Involve participants in the evaluation of the whole process (i.e. planning, implementation, follow-up).

Space	Voice	Audience	Influence
Ethical considerations • Give participants the choice/opportunity to refuse or withdraw participation or to remain silent at any point. • Give participants the opportunity to choose someone to speak, interpret or represent their views. • Be aware of vulnerabilities, risks and the implicit imbalance of power/control in intergenerational or personal-professional interactions. * Consider the additional ethical implications related to the use of online spaces, i.e. lack of equal access to ICT, security, confidentiality, privacy issues, etc.		**Ethical considerations** • Give all participants the choice to share their views and be heard. • Be attentive to the 'silent' or marginalised voices and ensure they are heard. • Be equally open to and acknowledge a range of diverse views, including those that may be negative, contradictory, challenging or go against the majority. • Minimise the effect of vulnerabilities and risks, such as those arising from the imbalance of power, status and control and/or unconscious bias.	

The voices of families

> **The way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children's families. If educators view children simply as students, they are likely to see the family as separate from the school. That is, the family is expected to do its job and leave the education of children to the schools. If educators view students as children, they are likely to see both the family and the community as partners with the school in children's education and development. Partners recognize their shared interests in and responsibilities for children, and they work together to create better programs and opportunities for students.**
>
> (Epstein, 2010, p. 81)

The role of parents in their children's education is known to have a generally positive effect on education outcomes. The inclusion of the voices of parents and families in decision-making processes around education has been less extensively researched and documented. However, it is now widely recognised as a research area of increased importance.

Most research in this area involves teachers and parents; however, there are also some studies on the importance and influence of siblings in education. Sibling relationships are generally under-researched in relation to education (Davies, 2019), but are included here as important actors in the complexity of relationships in modern families. Gillies and Lucey (2006) explore this in relation to social capital. They indicate that these are complex and shifting relationships, but significant in relation to care and protection in the school environment. Aaltonen (2016) investigated the influence of parents and siblings on learners' decisions, identifying the strength of the older sibling. Davies (2019) indicated that sibling relationships in school are not always as anticipated, either in terms of the roles of older or younger siblings, or in the areas in which siblings intervene or interact. Rather, they are a complex interaction of numerous roles, responsibilities and demands (Gillies and Lucey, 2006). Findings indicate that sibling relationships are important factors for usually younger or more vulnerable siblings to be able to negotiate school.

Research evidence indicates that involving families in schools can bring a wide range of benefits to schools and to learners, in terms of increased educational attainment for children. It also brings a number of more 'general' benefits, such as:

- improved parent-teacher relationships, teacher morale and school climate;
- improved school attendance, attitudes, behaviour and mental health of children;

- increased parental confidence, satisfaction and interest in their own education (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011).

When parents and families hold high expectations for their children's education and support their children in fulfilling their academic work and engagement with school, it is linked to raised achievement and is known to bring benefits to the whole school community (Boonk, Gijselaers, Ritzen and Brand-Gruwel, 2018).

A review for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Gorard, See and Davies, 2012) synthesises the available evidence on the causal impact on educational outcomes of aspirations, attitudes and behaviours of young people and their parents across a number of different variables, in the school and the home. This is a nuanced approach, with indications of strong or weak causality, which include the correlation between negative aspirations, attitudes and behaviour by parents and children. This is an important synthesis, although it should be noted that while the authors are based in the UK, many of the studies used were conducted in the US, and evidence may not be fully generalisable to other contexts.

Other distant structural factors in the home and the wider community can also affect the inclusive processes experienced by learners (European Agency, 2017a). These include collaboration with families and support services, as well as procedures for smooth transitions to and from the educational setting (ibid). Further benefits occur when communities are closely involved in school life, which may continue after learners leave school (Kefallinou, Symeonidou and Meijer, 2020). This could be when, for instance, organised civil society groups act as advocates and 'watchdogs' on the right to participation and to the provision of quality inclusive education for all (UNESCO, 2020).

It is recognised, however, that there are challenges to successfully involving parents and families in their children's education. These arise from a number of different factors at the individual level, including attitudes, assumptions, beliefs and expectations on all sides, as well as significant factors arising from social, political, cultural and other factors (Cologon, 2020; Davidson and Case, 2018; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; Hornby and Blackwell, 2018).

> **"Society is deeply unconscious of its rejection and devaluation of people who are different but this plays out in the way society treats vulnerable people individually and as groups."**
>
> (Mother, Family #6, cited in Cologon, 2020, p. 13)

A study by Ule, Živoder and du Bois-Reymond (2015) takes in a broader European context, across eight European countries. It focuses on parents and children living in disadvantaged areas of cities, responding to changes in the parental role in education arising from recent moves to a neo-liberal ideology. This shifts responsibility from the state to the individual, giving parents and children themselves greater accountability for learning and achievement.

Families *and* children or families *versus* children?

Research on, and with, families often starts with the concept of the 'family' as a homogeneous unit. However, for many societies, the concept of 'family' has always been broader and more fluid than a traditionally-held Western view of the nuclear family as parents and their children. The 'family' in Western societies, as elsewhere, is now a complex set of internal relationships, situated within widely diverse geographical, social, ethnic, religious and political contexts (Popenoe, 2020). While there may be a range of views about the impacts of these changes, the evolution of family 'multi-generational bonds' is considered by some as a positive change, with benefits across societies (Bengston, 2001).

It is important to note that parents/families (however constituted) and young people do not always work in agreement with each other, and that they may have opposing views on issues, or be in conflict (Ofsted, 2011). Parents do not always have their children's best interests at heart, either intentionally or unintentionally, or because they are unaware of all the consequences of decisions. For instance, unnecessarily labelling children might contribute to negative attitudes among parents and other family members regarding their child's potential and rights (UNICEF, 2012; European Agency, 2017b).

There should not be an assumption that parents' views are those of their children, no matter what the age or cognitive ability of the child or young person. Legislation around the rights of children and young people is explicit in this area in some societies, where there must be a careful balance between rights, responsibilities, safeguarding and the best interests of the child (Riddell and Carmichael, 2019; Riddell and Tisdall, 2021).

Independent and separate dialogue with both young people and their families is an essential part of this process, as well as co-operation and collaboration, where this is agreed by both sides. Individual examples might concern removal from activities in conflict with child or parental beliefs or practices, cultural clashes, disciplinary issues, sports or cultural events, non-attendance at school, or holidays taking place in school time, among many other possibilities (McCluskey et al., 2008; Zakszeski and Rutherford, 2021).

Family engagement with schools and communities

While the models of participation indicated earlier are also applicable to families, Epstein (2010; 2018) developed the Framework of Six Types of Involvement in relation to parents and their children's education, placing children at the centre. The framework, underpinned by extensive research, describes the six types in terms of increased participation. It gives examples in practice, alongside an indication of the likely outcomes for parents, learners and teachers, and some challenges that may be encountered.

The types of family involvement enabled by schools are briefly outlined below:

1. **Parenting**: Help all families establish home environments to support children in schools.
2. **Communicating**: Design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to school communication about school programmes and children's progress.
3. **Volunteering**: Recruit and organise parental help and support.

4. **Learning at home**: Provide information and ideas to families about how to help learners at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions and planning.
5. **Decision-making**: Include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives.
6. **Collaborations with community**: Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programmes, family practices, and student learning and development.

Source: *adapted from Epstein, 2018*

Extensive research around the topic of family engagement over 20 years has underpinned the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) in the US, founded by Epstein. The NNPS works to:

> … increase an understanding of the nature and effects of school, family, and community partnerships and to improve policies and programs of family and community involvement at the school, district, and state levels (National Network of Partnership Schools, no date).

The model above is based on the notion of three interdependent 'overlapping spheres of influence' in the school, the family and the community (Epstein and Sheldon, 2006, p. 118; Epstein, 2010). In Epstein's theory, these can be 'mutually reinforcing or mutually undermining' (Epstein, 2018, cited in Organizing Engagement, no date). For partnerships to develop and be mutually reinforcing, all participants must be proactive. Learners' important role in the partnerships' success is recognised, together with how learners interact and intermediate between teachers and family members.

> **"Predictable patterns of school, family, and community disconnection will result *unless* educators, students, families, and community members take affirmative, proactive steps to address negative overlapping influences and build positive, mutually beneficial partnerships."**
>
> (Epstein, cited in Organizing Engagement, no date)

It is important to recognise that creating successful partnerships of these types should be underpinned by national and local policies and support, as well as local, community and school leadership (Barr and Saltmarsh, 2014; Epstein, 2010).

> **Developing trusting relationships more consistently throughout the community can be critical to working more effectively to support all students.**
>
> (Mapp, 2003, cited in Davidson and Case, 2018, p. 50)

Another framework which outlines a set of stages for family and community participation emerged from a four-year research project conducted in six schools across Europe (Malta, Spain, Finland, Latvia and the UK) (Bonell García and Ríos, 2014) (see INCLUD-ED project). It identified five types of participation: informative, consultative, decisive, evaluative and educative. These all represent different stages along the way to full participation in decision-making processes, which schools can undertake as they seek to work with families in a transformative way. Of these, the final three – decisive, evaluative and educative – are the most significant for successfully improving school performance. The five types, or levels, of participation are similar to the five upper rungs on Hart's Ladder of Participation (Hart, 1992).

Figure 5. Five types of family and community participation in schools

Source: *Bonell García and Ríos, 2014*

Teachers' role in creating an environment for families to participate in decision-making in schools should not be underestimated. This is a feature at all levels of school and pre-school education – not just in early or primary years or in special education settings, where parents are known to have greater direct interaction with one or more of their child's teachers. Teachers cannot be assumed to know intuitively how to relate to parents and families in a way that enables them to develop the sorts of open partnerships that are envisaged. Initial and on-going training opportunities are needed for teachers in practice, as well as those who are undergoing initial teacher education. As an essential feature of inclusive education systems, the partnership between schools, families and communities must have a sound basis, evidenced in research, to allow teachers and school leaders to

develop the trust, ethos and environment in which parents feel able to become partners in their children's education and for the benefit of all children in the community.

> **The success of student voice initiatives and the extent to which they are democratic processes is largely dependent upon strategic leadership and the school environment that this generates.**
>
> (Morris, 2019, p. 6)

It is an extension of the concept of 'every child belongs, and every teacher is a teacher of every child' (Pugach and Blanton, 2014, p. 873) in the way that Epstein expresses 'family-like schools, school-like-families and school- and family-like communities' (2018, p. 83) in which the strong and positive features of each are drawn together.

Hornby and Lafaele (2011) discuss a number of studies and models, developed from the research evidence, which identify a range of forms of parental engagement and involvement. However, despite these, it would appear that the realities for schools and for families may be different to what is suggested.

> **Over the past thirty years in particular, teacher resistance has been the most persistent barrier to family engagement in their children's education.**
>
> (Jeynes, 2018, p. 160)

Drawing on Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence (Epstein, 2018), Hornby and Lafaele (2011) identify significant barriers to parental engagement and involvement, in relation to four different areas: individual parent and family factors, child factors, parent-teacher factors and societal factors. They suggest that these barriers must be addressed before further progress can be made in parental involvement in education.

Jeynes (2018) uses a meta-analysis of several studies to try to draw out reasons for some of these barriers and to suggest solutions. The overriding issue is one of attitude: the attitudes of school leaders and teachers towards parents, indicating that as professionals they do not want or need input from parents (ibid.). This works in parallel with the attitude of parents. They have viewed educators increasingly as 'professional', in possession of expert and specialist knowledge, and have gradually withdrawn from involvement and from their responsibility to support and promote their children's education (Brennan and Noggle, 2007, in Jeynes, 2018). Clearly, there needs to be profound change to improve this situation, and this lies in the potential of school leaders to work with teachers and parents.

Teachers and educational practitioners need on-going training and development to enable them to benefit from the evidence of research, to make changes to their practice, and work with parents and families to include them in partnership (ibid).

> **When a specific instructor becomes familiar with the findings on parental -involvement and -engagement it can change a class, but when a school leader embraces these same truths it can change a school, a set of schools, and even an entire district.**
>
> (Jeynes, 2018, p. 161)

Transformative opportunities for families

Involving families with schools can, however, be seen as transformative for the families themselves and for whole communities, when schools and communities can work together towards a common goal (Flecha, 2015; McCaleb, 1995). Transformative, in the sense used here, indicates something greater than a simple change. It includes the essential point that the change brings benefits to the people involved, not just in their environment or circumstances, but in how they see themselves. This could be in their own sense of empowerment, sense of being, a belief in their own worth or abilities, or sense of belonging, for example.

These types of initiatives are particularly important for marginalised and vulnerable groups, and for communities with low socio-economic status (Bonell García and Ríos, 2014). Research indicates that these groups are more often excluded from the main areas of society (Flecha, 2015), including housing, employment and access to further education (Pilgram and Steinert, 2001; Social Exclusion Unit, 2001).

In addition, some marginalised groups, particularly ethnic or religious minorities, may be conceptualised through a negative discourse, which acts as a barrier to their opportunities within societies (Lukšík, 2019). It is also important to note that those marginalised or excluded from educational opportunities as children are more likely to become vulnerable, at risk and marginalised as adults (UNESCO, 2021a).

Families may be part of marginalised groups, such as ethnic, faith or linguistic minorities, or the families of learners with disabilities or who have had disciplinary issues with their schools, for example. Parents who themselves have learning difficulties may experience exclusion from interactions with schools due to a number of barriers. This group of adults is one of those with the least social and community participation (Bigby, 2021). Schools may work in multiple ways to address challenges and bring benefits to adults and families in the community. These initiatives may also bring reciprocal benefits to schools.

> **Bringing family partnership from the periphery to the center likewise means centering and elevating the voices of families who traditionally have been marginalized in school communities. Doing so first requires listening to families' needs and perspectives and learning about the ways families support their children's education.**
>
> (Davidson and Case, 2018, p. 52)

However, it is important to recognise the complexity of the attitudes and beliefs, the 'cultural biases' and 'layers of discrimination' (UNESCO, 2021a, pp. 20–21) that exist within societies and within some marginalised groups and individual parents. These can act as barriers to participation.

Families with children who are vulnerable to exclusion

While there is a significant body of research on parent-school involvement, where parental views are sought about different aspects of their children's education, there is relatively little in which parents and families participate meaningfully in decision-making. As indicated previously, much research tends to focus more narrowly on 'parents'. However, for the purposes of this review, 'families' includes all those closest to and who care for learners, whoever they may be.

For the families of children who are vulnerable to exclusion, much research is located within the 'silos' of thinking (Florian, 2017). Here, research is related to categories or labels assigned to groups of people, underlining the more deficit view that educational approaches and strategies are more appropriate for some, rather than for all (Florian and Black Hawkins, 2011). Thus, research is often related to particular groups, such as those with ASD or Down syndrome, or with much broader categories such as social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, living in poverty, or with an assigned label, such as migrants. This type of research tends to cast a narrow focus on certain groups of family at the expense of other groups and ignores the impact of intersectionality (Bešić, 2020).

There is some research in inclusive education around the 'voices' of families of these more marginal groups. There is also a body of research about the involvement of the families of children with existing and named categories of special educational need which indicates that these parents (often the mother) have a greater involvement with their children's schools. However, much of this is at the organisational level of daily life in school, or in discussion about the types of support that their children may need to engage with the curriculum (Frederickson, Dunsmuir, Lang and Monsen, 2004; Leyser and Kirk, 2004; O'Connor, 2008; Forlin and Rose, 2010).

Transition periods in education are known to sometimes cause difficulties for learners. Packer, Thomas, Jones and Watkins (2020) used an interpretative methodology to enable the voices of parents, learners and practitioners to be heard. The findings indicate a need for 'all involved to: prepare and plan, engage in effective communication, foster positive

relationships, and be responsive to individual needs' for successful primary transition to occur (ibid., p. 832).

Some studies seek out the views of parents or children on their educational experiences, to give them 'voice' (Sherwood and Nind, 2014) and to move away from what Hooks (1990) described as the 'colonizing' of others' stories. The research by Sherwood and Nind (ibid.) developed a participatory methodology, to enable the co-construction of stories between the researcher and the parents. Findings from this study indicated how educational support can become meaningful and more effective when there is greater listening, respect and understanding between parents and professionals working together to find solutions to the difficulties their children face.

There is evidence to suggest that additional challenges and complexities around the enactment of children's rights in decision-making occur within the family relationship, where competing interests are at stake. In families where children have a greater dependency on their parents at an age when other children are gaining independence, conflicts may emerge. Furthermore, systems in place at local, regional and national level may marginalise some young people by inadequately seeking their views or incorporating them in discussions. Tisdall (2017) working in child protection, indicates that at-risk children face additional challenges in influencing decisions in their lives, particularly in relation to adult power.

Sinson (2020) writes extensively about how education and associated professionals can work to support and guide parents' active involvement in developing the decision-making abilities of their children with special educational needs. Movingly, Sinson dedicated the book to her sister's memory, writing that she presented her 'with the challenge of accepting what, in my view, were her unwise choices, but they were her decisions' (ibid., p. vii).

Research with families

A variety of approaches to educational research include the voices of parents and families. Families are often in very different sets of circumstances. Researchers find ways to enable these families to participate actively in research, to avoid the notion of families becoming research 'objects' who have no voice and to enable the participants to engage meaningfully with the research.

Just as with learners, there are families who are marginalised and whose voices are seldom heard in research. They may be from minority groups or be perceived as lacking ability, knowledge or standing. Research can become a means of enabling these voices to be heard and of challenging perceptions and assumptions that many educators hold about the ability of some minority groups to engage meaningfully in their children's education.

To challenge these assumptions, McKenna and Millen (2013) undertook research with mothers from low-income, ethnically diverse families. Their research methods ensured that perceived barriers to participation were addressed. This study's findings enabled a greater understanding of parents' actions and thinking in relation to school involvement. Despite their positioning as marginalised, the parents were highly motivated and actively committed to supporting their children's education. It was clear that, given the means and

the opportunity (space and voice), they had much to bring to teachers and to schools (audience, influence), 'should they be open to listening' as the researchers pointed out (ibid., p. 18). This interesting comment puts the responsibility back on teachers to enable marginalised families to contribute and participate in their children's education, as noted by Epstein (2018).

In some cultures, the parents of children with some types of additional need are themselves often marginalised and seldom heard in the educational research. Policy states that parents are important actors in the school context. However, when they are given the opportunity to participate in research, it is clear that they do not always feel they are viewed as equal or competent, nor as potential resources who can contribute in various ways to enhance children's social, academic and behavioural outcomes. This identifies a deficit and loss in educational and community terms, which should be addressed in practice. This finding emerged from research with the parents of children with special educational needs in Russia. These parents all wished to be included in their children's education to a greater extent (Bahdanovich Hanssen and Erina, 2021).

In a similar way, families with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties can find that they are marginalised by schools. They can often find themselves positioned as at fault and to blame for their children's behaviour, accused of ineffective parenting and a lack of discipline. As Broomhead (2013) indicates, there is relatively little research which gives parents an opportunity to voice their own opinions about blame and to speak back to these accusations.

Research has also highlighted some of the ways in which schools work with parents and families to overcome particular challenges. These approaches can bring together the voices of parents, professionals and learners, crossing intergenerational and professional divisions. One challenging area for learners occurs at times of transition in education. Packer et al. (2020) used an interpretative methodology to enable the voices of parents, learners and practitioners to be heard. The findings indicate a need for 'all involved to: prepare and plan, engage in effective communication, foster positive relationships, and be responsive to individual needs' for successful primary transition to occur (ibid., p. 832). This kind of school-home interaction can be extended to include the community, to bring benefits to schools, learners and families.

Where families are in some way marginalised from schools, community involvement can act as a bridge between schools and families. Brooks, Kandel-Cisco and Bhathena (2021) used a critical participatory action research approach by working with 10 first-generation immigrants from different countries. They interviewed families in their communities about their experiences with family engagement and how they would like to engage with schools. This gave the families the space to voice their concerns, in a way which was familiar and trusted and overcame any language or cultural barriers. The information from these interviews later became the basis for co-developing and delivering training on family engagement for pre- and in-service teachers. The teachers learnt new ways of connecting with immigrant and refugee families to build relationships of mutual trust and understanding.

International cross-country research can also indicate how challenges emerge and are addressed in different ways, across contexts and cultures. Davis, Ravenscroft and Bizas (2015) used mixed methods to enable the voices of parents, learners with additional

support needs and professionals from different sectors to be heard across different age groups, backgrounds, languages and ethnicities. Interestingly, their findings identify a number of similar challenges which occur across very different countries. These included the privileging of knowledge between the different groups. This exposes entrenched views and assumptions, which act as barriers in educational transition processes. Cross-country research of this type presents challenges to the researchers but is valuable in the manner in which it can include diverse voices, enabling knowledge and increased understanding to emerge.

The following initiative from Serbia is an indicative example of active family engagement and participation in schools and wider local communities:

Country example: Partnership between parents and teachers in Serbia

Context: The National Association of Parents and Teachers of Serbia (NARNS) was established on 24 March 2017 as a result of the 'Through Partnership to Education' initiative, started in 2015 by the Open Society Foundations and UNICEF to improve co-operation between schools and families. NARNS comprises a network of 12 city clubs of parents and teaching staff. The city clubs co-ordinate with local networks of clubs established in schools and pre-school institutions. So far, more than 80 school clubs, with over 4,500 active members, have been involved. NARNS's key focus and mission are to develop a culture of respect and co-operation between parents and teaching staff.

Implementation: NARNS acts as a 'broker' between parents, teachers and the education system. The network facilitates on-going interaction. There is mutual trust between parents and teachers through joint activities, shared ownership and joint organisation of activities in schools. A team of regional counsellors has been established within NARNS to support parents and teachers in establishing new clubs and strengthening the existing clubs and city networks throughout Serbia. Regional counsellors are individuals selected via a transparent procedure, through an internal contest, at the proposal of their city clubs. They have completed a range of training courses on educational policies, social inclusion, advocacy, and strengthening and maintaining volunteer networks. This makes them competent associates for a number of important education topics. Parents and teachers work together on topics such as social inclusion, children's health and safety, children's transition from pre-school to school, tolerance, fostering inter-culturalism, and emotional literacy. Together, these favour the development of a positive school climate and improve education. The city clubs co-ordinate with local networks of clubs established in schools and pre-school institutions. They also work with the Roma community on issues around education and poverty.

Impact: This was the beginning of a new phase of development in the democratisation and modernisation of Serbia's education system. Considerable resources and examples of good practice have been created to motivate parents and teaching staff to get involved and implement over 70 programmes at school, local and national levels. The association is part of a regional dialogue organised by Open Society Foundations in Berlin, which continuously brings together parent associations from Tajikistan, Ukraine, Armenia and Georgia. This format enables the exchange of examples of good practice and spreads NARNS's mission and vision to partner countries.

Voices, participation and the role of technology

The issue of voice, empowerment and opportunities provided by the digital world is crucial. There is an increasing amount of research around digital education, a term which encompasses both teaching and learning and the use of digital devices, including extensive research in relation to disability and minority groups. Particularly for those vulnerable to exclusion, digital technology can be empowering. It can provide further opportunities to interact with others (Mosito, Warnick and Esambe, 2017), to engage in education and the world, and to have influence and agency. This became more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, where remote, digital education was the preferred first response to the crisis in all European countries (European Agency, 2021a).

Over the last two decades, online technology and digital media have provided a space for learners and their families to access learning sources in a global platform. Technology allows them to communicate and share their work with a broad audience in the online community and to have their voices heard (Yuan, Wang and Eagle, 2019; Kim and Searle, 2017). As Selwyn and Facer note, digital inclusion is linked to both 'informed and empowered choices' as well as 'access to the resources required to enable them to act on these choices' (cited in Seale and Dutton, 2012, p. 319). Passey, Shonfeld, Appleby, Judge, Saito and Smits (2018) link learner agency with the concept of 'digital agency', which they view as a fundamental requirement for and through education. For them, digital agency is concerned with 'choice, action, and making a difference to an individual's life' (ibid., p. 431).

Learners have also recently been invited to offer their unique perspectives to shape the design of digital tools and devices. Research recommends adopting such an inclusive and intergenerational approach in the research and design of digital technologies (Borg, Boulet, Smith and Bragge, 2019). Including learners and young adults in the design and use of tools contributes not only to the creation of meaningful learning experiences, but also to their potential as future producers of digital learning technologies (Kim and Searle, 2017). Moreover, innovative learner voice initiatives can support teachers' professional development with ICT, promoting trust and empathy between learners and teachers and thereby enhancing their relationships (Morris, 2019).

The notion of 'digital competence', particularly in relation to digital inclusive education, refers more closely to an individual learner's sense of self. This is also closely linked with the notion of communication through a digital platform, as a 'digital person' or a 'digital

citizen' who has the digital competences required to express a personal voice, in a way that represents one's own interests but respects social interaction with others. Thus, digital competence can be empowering, while also requiring the ability to protect oneself in the digital environment (Kim and Searle, 2017; UNESCO, 2021b).

'For individual learners, inclusion in digital education is reflected in terms of […] being present and visible, being actively socially involved, interacting and collaborating with one another and feeling appreciated and included in the learning community' (European Agency, 2022, p. 10).

The importance of ICT for developing inclusive education systems and as a key tool to improve equity in education is now widely recognised, in relation to all aspects of education, including teaching, learning and administration (European Agency, 2011). As expressed in UN propositions, access to appropriate ICT in this sense should not be considered an educational enhancement, but an entitlement for learners (United Nations, 2006). A body of research gives evidence of the wide benefits of ICT in education, as well as guidelines on its development in policy and the diversity of uses in educational contexts (European Agency, 2013).

In the past 20 years covered by this review, there have been enormous advances in meeting a wide range of communication needs. These advances facilitate access and engagement in education. Medical advances, together with greater understanding of human communication, have brought about an enormous increase in what is broadly known as assistive and augmentative technology (AAT).

'Assistive Technology (AT) is an umbrella term indicating any product or technology-based service that enables people of all ages with activity limitations in their daily life, education, work or leisure […] The field of AT is highly interdisciplinary, encompassing […] research, development, manufacture, supply, provision and policy' (Encarnação, Azevedo, Gelderblom, Newell and Mathiassen, 2013, p. v).

Technology and devices more closely associated with communication specifically are known as augmentative and alternative communication (AAC). The principle behind augmentative communication systems is to move away from a deficit notion of the methods of communication a person does not have, to a positive starting point of building

on the communication methods the individual has or prefers to use (Millar and Scott, 1998).

'Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) is a term that's used to describe various methods of communication that can help people who are unable to use verbal speech to communicate' (CALL Scotland, no date).

These systems have brought huge benefits for many in their lives and in terms of enhanced social inclusion. In the context of education, the systems are a major resource to enable meaningful participation and to include those who may previously have had no means of making their voice heard. The range of devices and services available to enable communication, accessibility and participation includes: visual, auditory, physical, voice output, synthesised or recorded speech, text-to-speech, speech-to-text, ebooks and audiobooks, touch technology, switches, and numerous other access devices. This is in addition to adaptations to a large range of existing software and computer applications (European Agency, 2015). These are constantly under development and improvement (CALL Scotland, no date).

Research conducted with learners in schools and other educational contexts aims to create devices which meet their individual needs and enable access and participation in all aspects of school life. Working with technology's end-users and gaining their feedback ensures that they are actively participating in decisions around what is made and how it may fit best their needs, similar to a universal design approach (Nisbet, 2021).

The following example from Finland illustrates how digital technology can indeed promote learner voice at national level. In this example, remote consultation workshops gave learners the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the public dialogue about planned legislative changes:

Country example: An innovative learner consultation process in Finland

Context: The national initiative 'Pupil consultation in the Right to Learn programme' contributed to the preparation of a legislative proposal which aimed to consolidate the use of positive discrimination funding in early childhood education and care and comprehensive school education in Finland. Learners were asked for their opinions on the need for positive discrimination

financing in schools in general and, more specifically, on the desired outcomes and purposes of funded activities.

Aims: This process had three main qualitative goals:

- to provide views from learners in grades 4–9 on how equality and educational equity are realised in schools, and how to support an equal educational path for children and young people;
- to experiment and develop methods to help children and young people to be heard in classrooms and learner bodies;
- to arrange hearings to enable as versatile a group of children and young people as possible to participate.

Implementation: The Ministry of Education and Culture, in co-operation with the 'Opinkirjo' Development Centre and Youth Academy, implemented the initiative with a budget of EUR 54,000. It lasted for seven months (1 December 2020 – 30 June 2021). The hearings were organised as remote-facilitated workshops. There were 23 classroom workshops and a national-level workshop for learners from 12 different schools. In the workshops, learners considered equality in their own schools, composed ideas of a perfectly equal school, and developed solutions to barriers to equity in schools. The consultation process reached 35 schools, about 640 learners and 60 school staff. Of the 23 classroom workshops, 12 took place in lower-secondary schools and 11 in primary schools. The learners ranged mainly from ages 11 to 15. In learner workshops, there were approximately 120 learners from 12 different schools nationwide, representing 14 provinces and 23 municipalities.

The remote facilitation due to COVID-19 brought additional value to this process, as it made geographical participation and workshop schedules more flexible (for example, facilitating two classrooms from different parts of Finland simultaneously). Twenty-one workshops took place in Finnish, one in Swedish and one in Northern Sami. The participants represented over 20 different native tongues (including English, Russian, Finnish sign language, Somali, Arabic and Kurdish). The different language versions also made the process more accessible for learners. The workshop contents were differentiated for younger and older learners. Learners with special educational needs had their own, modified versions of the tasks. The remote-facilitated workshops with differentiated tasks were accessible and easy to adapt to different learner needs.

Impact: The Ministry has acknowledged the results of the hearings, which will be used further in all programmes supporting school work. The methods will be further developed and used, so that these good practices continue to have benefit in the future. The goal is to test and use the methods in multiple situations to develop even more general methods for hearing the voices of children and young people.

While there are clearly opportunities and benefits arising from digital technology in education, it is by no means a universally positive picture. Research conducted in the context of health identified a number of barriers alongside more positive advantages. Findings from a systematic review (Borg et al., 2019) indicate that access is a major barrier to digital inclusion. However, it also finds that providing access to resources is not an immediate solution, as barriers remain in relation to negative attitudes and a lack of digital knowledge, which all contribute to a 'digital divide'. The researchers note that collaborative learning and design are key to overcoming these digital barriers, as well as social support and opportunities to engage with digital resources.

This digital divide is also evidenced in the educational research, particularly regarding access to technology. Those particularly vulnerable to digital exclusion are associated with a range of intersectional disadvantages, such as socio-economic status, income, education level, ethnicity, age and geography. These are all consistently found to affect levels of technology access and use (Seale and Dutton, 2012).

'Digital illiteracy' and 'digital poverty' are frequently used terms that refer to lack of access to hardware, software, internet or assistive technology, as well as a lack of opportunity to gain digital knowledge and skills.

Digital illiteracy further marginalises and isolates communities and individuals from social interaction and educational opportunities. The gap in digital skills has been referred to as the 'disability digital divide' (Conley, Scheufler, Persichini, Lowenthal and Humphrey, 2018; Johansson, Gulliksen and Gustavsson, 2021), or the 'digital disability divide' (Dobransky and Hargittai, 2016), implying that people with disabilities are more frequently found to be digitally excluded compared to those without disabilities (Borg et al., 2019).

The rapidly emerging fields of game-based learning and mobile learning applications are attractive to the present generation of learners, and offer learning opportunities for some marginalised children. However, as the COVID-19 pandemic has clearly indicated, remote and online learning do not favour all children **equally** (Cachia, Velicu, Chaudron, Di Gioia and Vuorikari, 2021). Those already vulnerable to exclusion have been at a greater disadvantage, with learning loss and social disadvantage greatest among the most vulnerable (European Agency, 2021a; OECD, 2020).

> **The vast majority of young people, lost out on opportunities to have their voice heard and to learn the competences to assert their rights as a result of the pandemic. Student decision-making regarding school life was deeply impacted, with about one-third of teachers saying that students were never given the opportunity to participate in decision-making during lockdown.**
>
> (UNESCO, 2021b, p. 3)

Social media and digital technology can give learners and families a powerful collective voice and greater opportunities for individual participation and presence. However, a greater reliance on virtual communication can also contribute to disadvantage and harm to some individuals or groups. This can be in the form of greater marginalisation and increased educational disadvantage, or through the more immediate effects of the 'darker' side of the internet and social media. These can put learners and others at significant risk, despite the existence of internet safety courses in schools (Finkelhor, Walsh and Jones, 2021). It should be noted that many of the negative aspects of the internet and social media take place within the context of the school itself (ibid.).

Parents and guardians responsible for digital safety are beginning to recognise the need to improve their own knowledge in a non-formal or informal way (Tomczyk, 2018). In the light of the previous discussion, adaptive technology skills and more careful engagement with digital information, with considerable guidance for child protection and rights of accessing media, are deemed critical (Huda et al., 2017).

In terms of digital education, it is clear that adult involvement is needed as regards being aware of how the digital environment 'works'. This is not just so that teachers are themselves digitally competent to use technology to the best effect for teaching and learning. It is also to ensure that they are aware of the online world that many young people inhabit. This calls for teacher education on hardware and software and how best technology can be used to include all learners. Several large-scale research projects are planned or underway, linked to the rise of digital technology in education and its role in increasing participation (European Agency, 2022).

Summary of key findings from the research literature

- There are a number of different **conceptualisations** of 'voice/voices' in the literature, with an overall definition lacking. The concept of voice is frequently used as a synonym for other concepts, such as autonomy, engagement, involvement, participation or agency.
- There is a body of literature which **criticises** the 'voice' movement as tokenistic, inauthentic or a 'bandwagon', and which raises ethical issues around how the voices of learners and families may be accessed and used.
- There is a significant amount of research literature on the **inclusion of 'voices'**, but less about participation in decision-making. There continues to be a **research-practice gap**, despite the existence of a significant literature around voice and the need for raised awareness of the voices of learners in the educational rhetoric.
- There is more research on children than on intergenerational participation and voices. **Community involvement** in education is not greatly developed in the research literature.
- There continue to be '**silos**' in research, with learners or adults who are vulnerable to exclusion generally included in research based on a range of classification and labels.
- The **voices of families** are much less present in the research literature. The focus of research is generally on involvement at school or class level, with less on involvement in decision-making at policy level. Families and parents who are themselves vulnerable to exclusion, particularly those with physical or cognitive difficulties, are under-researched.
- Participatory research is more focused on learners and teachers. The active participation of multiple groups vulnerable to exclusion in this type of research is limited, despite recognition of **absent and marginalised voices** in the literature.
- The opportunities offered by the **use of assistive and digital** communication technology, devices and resources do not appear to have made a significant change to research methods around voices.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND KEY MESSAGES

This review provides the theoretical background of the VIA project, which has an overarching aim to provide a focused rationale and concrete ideas on how to meaningfully include learners and families in decision-making. It summarises important European and international policy information on the topic and provides key research knowledge on the issue of the voices of learners and families, building on existing theoretical models to create a new framework for meaningful involvement in decision-making.

While the concept of 'having a voice' in educational policy and research is not a new one, there remain many whose voices have not been heard, despite the existence of treaties and charters ratified by many countries, and with a strong evidence base in the academic literature.

In a broad interpretation, policy and practice recognise families' role as an essential factor in supporting and enabling the voices of learners to be heard and their meaningful participation in decision-making. Exercising in full **all** learners' and families' rights, as these are promoted in relevant legislative and policy documents, requires first and foremost the development of more systematic and effective processes for their participation, as well as well-aligned policies and cross-sectoral collaboration. Therefore, **policy-makers should focus on systematising and developing further processes for meaningful participation of learners and their families at national, local and community level**.

The policy analysis also highlighted families' fundamental role in developing and affirming learners' voices in educational matters. To facilitate participation, both families and learners require appropriate guidance and support, which different institutions and communities could provide. In this respect, it might be beneficial for **policy-makers to consider how to provide appropriate guidance and support to families and learners to facilitate their more active participation**.

The evidence from literature around participation indicates not only that there is a **research-practice gap** in education, but that the **focus is generally on participation at school or class level, rather than on meaningful participation in decision-making at policy level**. Many voices have not been able to influence decisions in the matters that affect them, and their experience and ideas have not been shared with others to bring about change for themselves, their peers, their schools or communities. The possibility of change is now a greater reality, as organisations at every level can no longer ignore the importance of the contributions of those previously unheard voices and must seek to include them in meaningful and authentic ways. It is clear that education can only be described as inclusive if all voices can be present and can participate meaningfully in decision-making on topics which matter to them.

It should be noted, also, that there is a body of literature which **criticises the 'voice' movement** as tokenistic and inauthentic, or a 'bandwagon'. It claims that organisations and policy-makers have incorporated 'voice' without careful and detailed attention to the important **consideration of ethical issues around eliciting learners' and families' views**. These issues concern the need for more democratic and socially just approaches. They relate to the **power imbalance** in enabling participation, through **access** to knowledge and

the means of participation. Furthermore, the **authenticity of the voices** of learners and families may be lost through representation and interpretation of their intended meaning.

The research evidence supports the finding in relation to policy that the **voices of some marginalised groups continue to be absent**, and that this area is particularly important to address. These groups include communities and families in their interaction with learners and schools, as well as diverse groups known to be vulnerable to exclusion. The evidence points to a clear **need for a participatory and intergenerational approach** that includes all families, but also the wider communities in which they are situated. Policy-makers might consider this approach as a means of enabling the **unheard and silenced voices** of those in diverse marginalised groups to be heard and included in educational decision-making.

While there is an **emphasis on intersectionality** in policy and international reports, indicating the multiple barriers to participation for those who are vulnerable to exclusion, this approach itself may act contrary to the principles of inclusive education. Where inclusive educational approaches aim to work for all or most, rather than for some, intersectionality may serve to break societies down into different types of marginalised groups, for whom different approaches may be seen as necessary. This may be an unintended consequence of this approach.

The literature indicates 'dilemmas of difference' (Norwich, 2007): individual differences remain, but may continue to be overlooked or be conflated with other types of needs. The VIA project recognises that human life is diverse and that people live in a range of circumstances and environments. As such, **a range of approaches should be available to all, without prejudice**, to ensure that meaningful participation in educational decision-making is possible through the voices of all learners and their families. The different **frameworks and models for participation** presented in the review offer a basis for developing, implementing and evaluating policy and practice. Importantly, the four aspects of space, voice, audience and influence (Lundy, 2007) indicated in the '**VIA framework for meaningful participation**' developed for this review, encapsulate the essential elements of any such approach.

In addition, policy-makers could provide more **equitable and accessible opportunities through the use of modern ICT**, which does not, as yet, appear to have made significant changes to methods around enabling voices in education. Finally, there is also a wide range of **accessible resources**, produced by NGOs and civil society, which can be adapted for use in the contexts of inclusive education. The possible benefits of **developing synergies and ways of working** with these sectors is an important further consideration.

This literature review's key findings bring to the fore important considerations for involving learners and families more systematically in educational decision-making. They can contribute to creating a more participatory and child-friendly culture in relevant processes and activities.

This review is the first in a series of outputs from the VIA project. Its findings, along with the 'VIA framework for meaningful participation' will inform the project's second phase (2022). During this phase, the project will work with different stakeholder groups (policy-makers, practitioners, learners and families) to develop a toolkit to facilitate their implementation into practice.

It is hoped that this review will facilitate the work of policy-makers across Europe aiming to develop more inclusive, participatory decision-making processes in their education systems.

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ANNEX: METHODOLOGY

This section details the methodology used to identify and analyse international, European and national documents and other sources considered in the desk research.

The following methodological steps were taken to carry out the literature review:

1. Reviewing international policy and research literature

As a first step, the project team collected and analysed targeted European and international policy and research literature that focused on effective ways to involve learners and families in inclusive education policy debates.

The policy review focused on English-language policy documents published in the last 30 years (from the UNCRC onwards), both by EU institutions (European Commission, European Parliament, Council of the European Union, Fundamental Rights Forum) and international organisations (United Nations, Council of Europe, UNICEF). However, the most significant production of documents starts from 2000 onwards.

Keyword searches were:

- Voice/voices
- Learner voices/children voices/student voices/young people voices
- Participation/involvement/engagement
- Families/parents/carers/guardians.

The academic research literature focused on peer-reviewed journals and books from academic publishers, written in English, over the past 20 years. Papers on conceptual research were not time limited. Some grey literature was consulted, in the form of charity or NGO reports, newspaper reports, blogs and organisation websites, where these were in relation to, or evidenced by, the academic literature. Research from around the world was included, but the main focus was Eurocentric and located in schools. Research with a specific focus on higher education was excluded as being beyond compulsory education and not located in schools.

Attention was given to EU and international examples, tools, mechanisms and processes of learner and family participation in decision-making. Research with a focus on 'voice' with no indication of any type of participation in decision-making was excluded. Papers where education was a factor of consideration, but not necessarily the main factor, were included where there was an emphasis on the importance of the voices of learners and families for positive educational outcomes. The quality of the methods used by researchers and authors was not directly a consideration for inclusion or exclusion, but was implicit in the accepted authority of the sources of the texts, journals and websites searched and consulted.

Keyword searches identified a lack of clarity and universally accepted definitions for many of the main terms in the educational research literature. These included:

- Voice/voices

- Learner voices/pupil voices/student voices
- Participation/involvement/engagement
- Disability/SEN/ASN/learning disabled
- Families/parents/carers/guardians
- Vulnerable/hard-to-reach/minority
- Agency/autonomy.

The analysis considered all learners, including those from vulnerable and 'hard-to-reach' groups (such as those out of formal education, pre- and post-school learners and learners with complex needs).

Table 4 indicates the main keywords, together with a selection of sub-terms. These were used in conjunction with each of the main search terms.

Table 4. Selected keyword search terms

Main search terms	Sub-terms
Voice(s)	listening, speech, silence, assistive technology, digital technology, accessibility
Participation	engagement, involvement, agency, impact, level, type, rights, justice, equity, legal, ethics, politics
Decision-making	agency, transformation, change, improvement, benefit
Education	school, mainstream school, special school, special needs, early years, pre-school, primary, middle, secondary, alternative provision, out of school, in care, teachers, head, director, governance
Learners	pupils, students, children, young children, youth, young people, additional needs, special needs, vulnerable to exclusion, minority, impairment, disability
Families	parents, mother, father, siblings, relatives, grandparents, extended family, guardians, carers, no family, community, leaders, additional needs, special needs, vulnerable to exclusion, minority, impairment, disability

2. Collecting country information

A second step was collecting targeted information from Agency member countries using a short country information template. This aimed to identify national examples of effective practice (country-specific case studies, guidelines, methodologies and tools, including information about their implementation and impact). The country information template also requested direct input from learners and families.

In total, 19 countries submitted their examples: Belgium (Flemish community), Czech Republic, Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, UK (England), UK (Northern Ireland) and UK (Scotland). The examples were analysed according to the following criteria:

- **Participation**: the extent to which the example provides meaningful opportunities to learners and/or families to share their views and perspectives, as well as the degree to which these views are considered, included, listened to and acted upon in any policy decisions made at local (school), regional (district) or national level.
- **Impact**: the level of change, improvement or outcomes the example had in the particular context where it was enacted.
- **Feasibility**: all the example's practical elements (i.e. time, budget, recruitment of participants, etc.) that made it easy and possible to implement.
- **Adaptability/transferability**: the extent to which the example could be adapted and/or transferred to other contexts and/or situations.
- **Inclusiveness**: the extent to which the example provides equal participation opportunities to learners and/or families who might otherwise be excluded or marginalised from decision-making.
- **Sustainability**: the extent to which the example produced sustainable outcomes that can be continued.
- **Innovation**: the extent to which the example included any approach, methodology, idea, product (tool, guideline), etc., that has the element of novelty.

These criteria were developed based on previous work that has examined effective examples of practice (see Inclusive Education in Action; Raising the Achievement of All Learners in Inclusive Education; PandPAS project).

Following the analysis, **five indicative** country examples were selected to illustrate practical evidence that accompanies this review's theoretical discussion. These examples refer to a variety of conditions and different opportunities for learner and family participation. More specifically, they provide indicative examples of:

- An initiative with one discrete learner group (Slovenia)
- A national, high-level initiative with more budget (UK – Northern Ireland)
- An initiative involving families, teachers and communities (Serbia)
- A local, low-cost initiative (Spain)
- An innovative initiative involving learners (Finland).

All country examples received will be available for use and dissemination on the VIA web area as a separate output at the end of the VIA project.

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