

2 Citizens of today

This chapter explores modern childhood and its changing nature. It looks at children as citizens of today, recognising them as rights holders and acknowledging the agency they can and do exercise. Childhood and its conceptualisations are dynamic, influenced by broader societal shifts. With the advancement of the children's rights and agency dialogues, children are also increasingly being included as stakeholders in decision-making processes. This chapter outlines some examples from OECD countries on how children can and do participate in making decisions about issues that affect them, recognising their rights to participate.

Citizens of today: Understanding modern childhood

Recognising children as competent social actors and rights holders

What is the nature of childhood today? In recent decades, the way in which children and childhood is seen by academics, policy makers and the general public has undergone a shift. This is due to a number of inter-related factors, including the emergence of sociological perspectives on childhood that emerged in the 1990s (Moran-Ellis, 2013^[1]; Wall, 2019^[2]), and notably the recognition of children as rights holders with the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989 (United Nations, 1989^[3]). This step in recognising children as rights holders, the acknowledgement of children as competent social actors, and the development of participatory research and policy-making methods have facilitated the emerging view that children can occupy different roles in society than may have been traditionally thought. Children are increasingly being acknowledged as actors in their own right, who are capable and skilled at participating in making decisions about matters that affect them (e.g. (Lundy, McEvoy and Byrne, 2011^[4]; Cornwall and Fujita, 2012^[5]; Cuevas-Parra, 2020^[6])).

Children's rights as outlined in the UNCRC tend to be split into three groups, which are often referred to as the "3 Ps": the rights to protection (i.e. to be protected from abuse, neglect and child labour), to provision (e.g. to services such as education, health etc.) and to participation (i.e. children being active in decision making within societies, communities, programmes and/or services) (Habashi et al., 2010^[7]).

Historically, the focus has been on children's provision and protection rights (Habashi, Wright and Hathcoat, 2011^[8]). However, there has been a paradigm shift in recognising that childhood offers a unique perspective. Increasingly, there is acknowledgment of the importance of children's participation rights. This shift highlights the evolving understanding that children possess not only the right but also the capability to contribute meaningfully to societal discussions and community engagements (Lundy and McEvoy, 2009^[9]). There has been increasing interest in looking at how children can and do participate in decision making, and their experiences of participation, including in local governance, at school and in areas such as policy consultations (Gal and Duramy, 2015^[10]).

Decision making is not limited to formal processes and children, like adults, also engage in autonomous actions in their everyday lives. They are active participants in their local communities and in everyday contexts, which might be more meaningful and impactful than participation in high-level decision making (Percy-Smith and Taylor, 2008^[11]). Empowering children requires recognising and acknowledging their inherent agency, while providing space and appropriate conditions for them to exercise it.

The role of education in empowering citizens of today

Education systems play a key role in empowering students as responsible, informed and engaged members of society. Preparing students effectively for the future can solidify their roles and self-efficacy as agents of change, capable of positively impacting their surroundings, understanding and anticipating how their actions affect themselves and those around them (OECD, 2018^[12]). Empowered children can actively participate at present in societal conversations and make decisions for the good of themselves and their communities (Gottschalk, 2020^[13]). Education can support learners in developing and exercising their agency, which is malleable and can be both a learning goal and a learning process in education (OECD, 2019^[14]). In recognising children as agents of change and rights holders in a complex and quickly changing world, education itself must continue to evolve (OECD, 2019^[15]).

This chapter will explore conceptions of modern childhood and the implications for OECD education systems. By providing an overview of the changing concept of childhood, of child participation and of children as citizens of today, this chapter outlines emerging areas of literature related to child rights, empowerment and agency.

The changing concept of childhood

If education policy and practice are to positively influence child empowerment, it is important to draw out and explore the assumptions behind the terms we use. Our understanding of *childhood* is intricately linked to the social institutions that define the role of a child (James, 2007^[16]). Although the study of childhood had historically been dominated by developmental perspectives, extensively focusing on how children grow up, sociological perspectives emerged in the 1990s (Moran-Ellis, 2013^[1]; Wall, 2019^[2]). These diverse academic traditions mean that mapping what we mean by the term childhood necessitates a deliberately multi-disciplinary approach, drawing from a range of policy and research traditions. This backdrop provides ample opportunity to discuss the conceptual literature which can help underpins our understanding of children as actors. The intention of this section is not to provide an in-depth account of a given research discipline but to provoke reflection on the changing concept of childhood and what this means for interpreting evidence with, for or about children.

Children as agents

For more than three decades, research on childhood has increasingly emphasised the inherent agency all children have. This perspective recognises that children are not passive recipients or mere dependents but active social beings. This agent-oriented approach is a call to action, where “children must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live” (James and Prout, 1997, p. 8^[17]). This agenda has both a normative and descriptive base. Normative in the sense that accepting that children are social actors has implications for their recognition and participation within families, communities and systems (Sutterlüty and Tisdall, 2019^[18]). Descriptive in the sense that the agenda is rooted in a desire to understand and improve the quality of the institutions that surround childhood. By emphasising children as competent, individual social actors, we can gain insights into how social structures impact their experiences and how these structures are themselves transformed through the actions of society’s members. These insights are useful for informing decision making that aims to support children. This blending serves to highlight the importance of recognising children as social actors both in theory (as an ideal) and in practice (as observed and applied in social structures). This dual rationale provides a strong foundation for practical decision-making that supports children’s active participation in society.

If children are seen as agents, then the concept of childhood is a key paradigm through which children exercise their agency. Childhood is not a blank slate, but a societal label with assumptions that have the capacity to help or hinder the exercise of their inherent agency. Furthermore, the definition of childhood varies significantly among different societies and cultures. As a result, “child” is not a universal category and the distinctiveness of children as a group is not something all societies share in the same way. It is a socio-cultural variable with a unique definition depending on the context, rather than being a biologically fixed state (Hammersley, 2016^[19]; Prout, 2011^[20]). In this framework, the child is a unit, comparable to other units in society (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998^[21]). This definition is centred on enduring, widespread patterns within a society, emphasising stability and formality (Prout, 2011^[20]). Although not a fixed state, childhood is a normal biological stage in the personal experiences of all individuals, as well as in societal discourse (Jenks, 1996^[22]). This means that childhood is a facet of one’s identity, even as individuals grow older (Qvortrup, 1994^[23]).

The narrative of children as agents provides us with at least three ways of viewing childhood and the dialogue between children and adults. The first is the “being child.” This perspective sees the child as an independent social actor with the capacity to actively shape their own childhood. Education, in this view, is student-directed, requiring teachers to create an environment that facilitates the students’ self-driven growth (Qvortrup, 1993^[24]; Uprichard, 2008^[25]).

The second is the “becoming child”. This perspective views the child as an “adult in the making”, awaiting the development of features of the adults they will become, such as rationality and competence. This perspective implies that children are unable to possess these characteristics (Uprichard, 2008^[26]). In this educational context, the focus is teacher-centred, considering students as recipients of knowledge who are expected to learn facts from adults via a professionally designed curriculum.

Finally, some scholars argue that there is a need for a third term, that of the “been child”, alongside “being and becoming” (Hanson, 2017^[27]; Cross, 2010^[28]). This assumption is not unique to children but also applies to adults. Not only do children experience their own histories during childhood, in negotiating relationships with children, adults draw on both their own memories of childhood and their past experience working with children. Children also move seamlessly through these three temporal states, drawing on, juxtaposing and combining different periods of their childhood in various ways during their engagement with adults and their environment (Kingdon, 2018^[29]).

All three paradigms are useful to explore how an individual experiences their life trajectory. It is more accurate to use the three together in complementary ways. Perceiving children as “beings, becomings and having beens” provides space for them to exercise agency over their past, present and future. For instance, it can help us to understand specific forms of activism as they emerge in children’s everyday lives. To do this, Nolas, Varvantakis and Aruldoss (2016^[30]) stress the importance of the notion of *generation*.

Children as a “glocal” generation

Generational discourses often position children rather paradoxically as apolitical troublemakers (Nolas, Varvantakis and Aruldoss, 2016^[30]). Part of the paradox arises from the very nature of generational discourses, which necessitate treating all individuals within a given generation as homogenous. In fact, childhood is not a uniform experience but rather a dynamic process influenced by a range of interconnected factors (James and James, 2001^[31]). These interconnected factors exert influence at global, regional and local levels. For example, although the understanding of childhood varies widely across diverse cultures and countries (Nieuwenhuys, 2013^[32]), in the age of globalisation there are certain shared elements that define the contemporary childhood experience across geographical boundaries. Children in the 21st century have pervasive exposure to shared media, brands and celebrities in a way that has never before been experienced. Yet, the norms, ideals, conditions and daily routines of childhood remain heavily influenced by local realities. This diversity at global, regional and local levels, modulated by cultural and economic conditions, counters the universalisation of children’s lived experiences (Bühler-Niederberger and van Krieken, 2008^[33]).

The discussion on childhood’s dynamic nature, shaped by interconnected factors and experienced diversely across culture, economic status, ethnicity etc., resonates with the concept of *glocalisation*. *Glocalisation*, at its core, involves the blending of global and local layers, emphasising the coexistence of shared experiences and specific nuances (Robertson, 2012^[34]). For example, Buckingham (2007^[35]) argued that global media is a universalising force for “children’s culture” which could be empowering for children themselves. Yet, media can also further fragment children’s culture. For example, unique algorithms from social media sites recommend content based on users’ digital footprints and trends in the place and region of users’ locations. Research finds that this allows children to engage with unique local *vernacular cultures* and continue their offline peer-group cultures in the digital environment (Sarwatay, Lee and Kaye, 2022^[36]).

The growing influence of *glocalisation* in 21st century childhood can be seen in the changing power dynamics around generational identity (Box 2.1). The term “generation” has numerous definitions in different disciplines, some of which overlap. For example, in the case of “family generation” and “welfare generation”, where the term “child” means someone who has not yet entered into the labour market and “adult” may refer to the family role of being a “parent” and active in the labour market (Arber and Attias-Donfut, 2002^[37]). Some scholars argue that *age* as a label with hierarchies, discrimination, inclusions,

exclusions, ideas and norms is useful as a method of control for adults (Sundhall, 2017^[38]). This age label often marginalises children, limits the exercise of their agency and hinders the realisation of their rights.

Box 2.1. Talkin' 'bout my generation...

Research, media articles and interventions on generational stereotypes abound. For instance, the silent generation (born 1925-1945) has been described as conservative and disciplined (Strauss and Howe, 1991^[39]), Generation Y, also known as millennials (born 1981-1996), is seen as socially conscious yet cynical and narcissistic (Twenge et al., 2010^[40]), and Generation Z (born 1997-2013) is reported to be the most technologically sophisticated and environmentally conscious, but also individualistic, materialistic and lacking ambition and attention control (Singh and Dangmei, 2016^[41]). These generational profiles are highly prevalent in media, often as satirical caricatures based on western middle-class stereotypes (Kingstone, 2021^[42]). For example, the privileged “baby boomer” (born 1946-1964) or the often-forgotten Generation X (born 1965-1980). These stereotypes are mirrored in the research literature by the normative dominance of “northern childhood” and a dearth of studies focused on the Global South (Nieuwenhuys, 2013^[32]).

Although generational identity is not a new concept, how, why and by whom it is used is changing. Historically it has been ascribed in a top-down manner as a broad unit of measurement for preferences, attitudes and behaviours (e.g., by researchers, demographers, advertisers). However, the digital environment has provided a platform for global, bottom-up, self-definition opportunities to use generational identity. Today’s children adapt, socialise and share their generation’s cultural products to an extent that was unthinkable for previous generations (Stahl and Literat, 2022^[43]).

This process can be empowering for a generation exercising agency by defining their own characteristics. Generation Z discourse on social media platforms is marked by a particularly strong sense of generational identity. For instance, by comparing themselves to other generations, or by referencing a shared sociocultural, political, and emotional heritage (Stahl and Literat, 2022^[43]). The digital environment means children are increasingly involved in intergenerational politics, which serves to construct and imagine generational consciousness around various social issues, such as populism and climate change (Zeng and Abidin, 2021^[44]).

Although generational identity is subject to globalisation, local conditions are still strong determinants of the generational contract between the state, children, working adults and older people (Zechner and Sihto, 2023^[45]). Children growing up in different societies experience different generational contracts, and the characteristics and perceptions of their childhood also differ. For example, in terms of additional work obligations placed on children, the amount of time and money invested by parents and the support parents expect from their children in old age (Bühler-Niederberger, 2021^[46]). Urban childhoods in OECD countries tend to have a heavy focus on school and leisure time, while children in the Global South and rural settings often still have high workloads. Rather than thinking of age as a biological category, generational identity uses age as predominantly a cultural category (Vittadini, Siibak and Reifová, 2013^[47]). The cultural category is determined by the process of experiencing age, gender, socio-economic background and technology through both global and local variables. This results in a unique cultural positioning for each generational member.

Children as rights holders

Recognising children as agents implies acknowledging their entitlement to a broad range of rights, encompassing social, economic, cultural and political aspects, extending beyond protection and provision to include participation and power. Realisation of these rights implies empowering children to engage in decision-making processes and fostering their sense of agency. Although children’s rights have long been

a matter of academic debate, they have become a significant field of study and policy following the adoption of the UNCRC in 1989 (Reynaert, Bouverne-de-Bie and Vandeveld, 2009^[48]). The UNCRC encompasses an extensive range of rights, social and economic as well as civil and political, the implications of which vary in different countries. The UNCRC asserts children's right to have a voice in decision making, as well as rights including freedom of thought and expression. States that have ratified the UNCRC commit to implementing those rights and are accountable for doing so (Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010^[49]). Many OECD countries have dedicated mechanisms to protect and empower children to realise their rights.

A children's ombudsperson, or equivalent body, is a public authority charged with the protection and promotion of the rights of children and young people. The creation of these authorities is promoted by the UNCRC. They are independent agencies handling individual complaints of child rights violations. They also intervene with other public authorities, conduct research, and engage in advocacy to promote children's rights in policy making and practice. A large number of states have Children's Ombudspersons. The European Network of Ombudspersons for Children counts 44 institutions in 34 countries, mostly in Europe, among its membership (ENOC, 2023^[50]).

Box 2.2. Ombudsman for children in Estonia

Since March 2011, the Estonian Chancellor of Justice performs the functions of the ombudsman for children (Estonian Chancellor of Justice, n.d.^[51]). The Chancellor of Justice in Estonia is responsible for protection and promotion of children's rights. This includes the safe use of digital tools, education outcomes, emotional well-being, health and relationships. Before 2011, much of the role of an ombudsman for children was not fulfilled by any institution in Estonia.

To carry out the duties of the Ombudsman for Children, the Office of the Chancellor of Justice has a children's rights department, which employs five people who work to ensure the rights of the child are respected, resolve conflicts concerning the rights of the child, check the compliance of legislation concerning children, draw attention to the importance of child rights and child protection, conduct studies related to the rights of the child and help children and young people to raise discussions in society on issues that are important to them. The Ombudsman in Estonia has a direct mandate for conflict resolution for individuals, as well as monitoring public institutions such as childcare facilities, schools, hospitals and other child health care providers, government departments, agencies and authorities and the police.

Source: Questionnaire (2022)

Children's Ombudspersons or other national human rights agencies have tools such as Child Rights Impact Assessment's (CRIA) at their disposal to support the implementation of the UNCRC. A small but growing number of jurisdictions internationally have piloted CRIA or use them at central, regional, local or municipal government levels (Payne, 2020^[52]). They are an *ex-ante* inquiry into potential effects (positive and/ or negative) of a particular course of action, policy or programme. They usually result in a report detailing potential impacts and options for decision makers to reduce or shift this impact. When these evaluations are carried out after a policy or programme has been implemented (*ex-post*), they are often known as impact evaluations.

CRIA is a methodology which supports the systematic assessment and communication of the impact of a proposal or measure on the rights, needs and interests of children and young people. This methodology varies depending on the system and there is no single, universal model of CRIA in place. There is also very little research on the value of implementing CRIA and most states that produce them do not make the outcomes publicly available, preferring to keep them as confidential documents (Payne, 2020^[52]). The evaluative data that exists, for example on the use of CRIA in Scotland (United Kingdom) to assess whether

COVID-19 policies recognised children’s human rights adequately, suggests that CRIA are useful to highlight systematic disadvantages experienced by children and suggest ways to mitigate them (Tisdall and Morrison, 2022^[53]). However, lack of widespread adoption means that much of the potential of CRIA is still unmet (Mukherjee, Pothong and Livingstone, 2021^[54]). A key policy question therefore revolves around how to increase both the quantity and quality of these assessments, as well as the quality of their use, to better ensure children’s rights. *Child strategies* are one method jurisdictions can seek to do this. Finland explicitly mentions CRIA in its national child strategy (Box 2.3). Scholars note that there needs to be a marked shift away from child rights being seen as “optional”, in order for mechanisms such as CRIAs to be more widely adopted (Reid, Tisdall and Morrison, 2022^[55]).

Box 2.3. Reforming child impact assessments and child budgeting in Finland

In 2021 Finland launched its [National Child Strategy](#)¹. This strategy explicitly aims to implement the UNCRC. Reforming the child impact assessment methodology and expanding child-orientated budgeting are two important tools for doing so.

Impact assessments

Although Finland already carries out impact assessments to clarify the effects and possible consequences of decision-making and various actions on the well-being of children, youth and families with children, these are often produced in a non-committal fashion. As such, reforms to the child impact assessment process are foreseen under the 2021 strategy to improve their overall quality and reduce policy fragmentation. Strong local government autonomy in Finland means that many municipalities have introduced good practices, especially in relation to child impact assessment and promoting children’s well-being in the context of decision-making. The strategy intends to find and scale up such good practices across the whole jurisdiction (The Parliamentary National Child Strategy Committee, 2022^[56]).

Child-oriented budgeting

As part of the 2021 strategy, child-orientated budgeting is currently being piloted in Finland (Government Communications Department; Ministry of Education and Culture; Ministry of Finance; Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2021^[57]). A total of EUR 260 000 has been allocated with funding applications opened in 2023 and grants running until 2024. The aim is to implement pilot programmes in three municipalities to trial methods that improve the effectiveness of well-being services for children, young people and families by strengthening their role in the allocation of resources.

Source: Questionnaire (2022)

More broadly, child strategies are a useful tool for co-ordinating efforts to ensure child rights. In the Questionnaire (2022), Iceland reported the adoption of the [Child-friendly Iceland Strategy and Action Plan](#)², to further implement the UNCRC following its direct adoption into Icelandic legislation in 2013. The Strategy and Action Plan was based on a wide-ranging consultation, including with 785 children from around the country. It mandates 27 concrete actions, with responsibility for implementation divided among the Prime Minister’s Office, Ministry of Social Affairs, Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs and Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Action Plan includes diverse, scheduled and financed actions, that aim at increasing child participation, the development and implementation of a CRIA for the government, as well as education and awareness-raising on children’s rights. For example, the establishment of child-friendly municipalities and creation of a dashboard to give a comprehensive overview of childhood indicators.

Children as active participants in decision making

Around the world, countries and economies are increasingly involving children in decision making processes. The meaningful participation of children in making decisions that affect them is important from a human rights perspective; the UNCRC outlines that children have the right to be heard on matters affecting them, alongside a suite of other rights including freedom of expression, the right to information, among others (United Nations, 1989^[3]). Article 12 in particular outlines that states shall ensure that children can form and express their own views in all matters affecting them, and that their views will be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. Other rights included in the suite of participation rights include the freedom of expression, freedom of association and peaceful assembly and access to information.

From a policy perspective, participation can contribute to social cohesion and ensure that policies are responsive, well-informed and child-friendly (OECD, 2017^[58]; Gottschalk and Borhan, 2023^[59]). Involving stakeholders such as children in decision and policy making can ensure that policies are more tailored to specific needs and interests, while capitalising on the expertise and knowledge of different parties. This can support trust among policy makers and stakeholder groups, and can contribute to more effective implementation as stakeholders have a better understanding of the policy, resulting in an increased feeling of legitimacy and sense of ownership (Burns, Köster and Fuster, 2016^[60]).

When children are able to meaningfully participate in decision making processes, there are benefits at the school level as well. For example, their inclusion in decision making is positively correlated with outcomes such as school climate (Voight and Nation, 2016^[61]), well-being (Lloyd and Emerson, 2016^[62]; John-Akinola and Nic-Gabhainn, 2014^[63]), motivation and achievement (Helker and Wosnitza, 2016^[64]). Importantly, authentic forms of participation, such as having influence over outcomes, being able to make choices and working together with others, rather than simply being able to exercise their “voice” is associated with positive outcomes including better well-being (Anderson et al., 2022^[65]).

Opportunities to participate can empower children to exercise agency and can set them up with the skills for effective civic and political participation in the future (OECD, 2018^[66]). For example, when students are given the opportunity to lead their own initiatives, they are able to exercise autonomy and agency. This can foster creative expression, give them a chance to develop leadership skills and provide a sense of achievement or accomplishment as they are able to witness the impact of their actions (Gottschalk and Borhan, 2023^[59]). Other approaches, such as participatory budgeting in schools, have been associated with self- and teacher-reported outcomes such as increased critical thinking skills, opportunities to develop collaboration and communication skills, and students feeling genuinely heard by their teachers and peers (Crum et al., 2020^[67]).

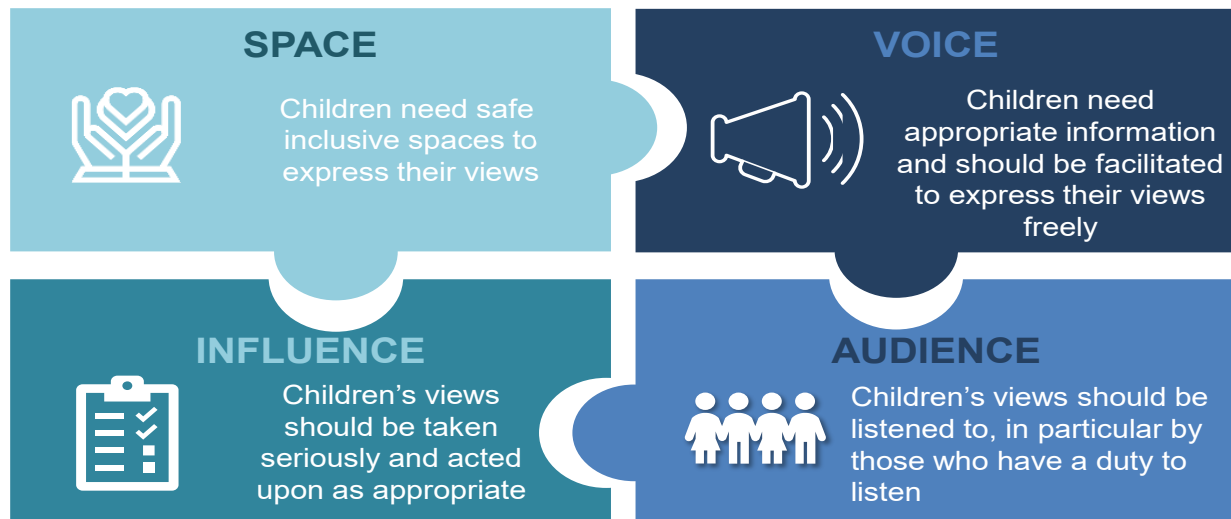
Making participation effective, meaningful, inclusive...and fun!

As countries are grappling with how to implement child participation strategies in national or sub-national frameworks, there are several resources available to stimulate thinking and depict the ways in which children can be (or may not be) involved. Various theoretical models of child participation exist, often in the form of ladders or lattices that depict different entry points for children to participate (e.g., at lower levels such as through consultation, to higher levels where children share roles as decision makers with adults or even direct and initiate projects themselves (e.g. (Hart, 2008^[68])). The Lundy model of child participation (Figure 2.1) is currently being used as a reference framework in countries such as Ireland and Denmark in developing child participation strategies or approaches.

This model presents the four elements that must be put in place to facilitate child participation: space, voice, audience and influence (Lundy, 2007^[69]). Ensuring spaces are safe means that they are inclusive and non-discriminatory, to ensure all children who wish to participate may do so. Children should be facilitated to express themselves without fear of rebuke by their peers, teachers or other stakeholders. The

voice component requires children to be provided with appropriate, child-friendly information, as well as time and adequate resources to understand the issues at hand to form a view. This can be facilitated for different children in different ways using play, puppets, videos and drawing projects. For participation to be meaningful, children need an audience who not just hears them but actively listens to them, which includes noticing and reading non-verbal cues and body language, or creative ways in which children might non-verbally express themselves. Finally, for participation to truly be effective, children's perspectives should be taken seriously and acted upon as appropriate (Lundy, 2007^[69]).

Figure 2.1. The Lundy model of child participation



Source: Adapted from Lundy (2007), 'Voice' is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033>.

Alongside these interrelated factors that facilitate meaningful participation are some key considerations to ensure that child safety is upheld and that their participation is also effective and ethical. Child participation should be (ChildFund Alliance, Eurochild, Save the Children, UNICEF and World Vision, 2021^[70]): transparent; voluntary; respectful; relevant; child friendly (i.e., there should be adequate time and resources and approaches should be adapted to the capacities of those participating); supported by adults who are appropriately trained; inclusive, safe and risk-sensitive; and accountable.

These factors can prove challenging when implementing effective and meaningful child participation strategies. A common hurdle is how to ensure that approaches are inclusive. Children are already a group of individuals who are frequently excluded and exposed to high levels of societal inequality, while also being dependent to some extent on adults to advocate for their interests and structure experiences (Ito et al., 2021^[71]). Within this group, certain sub-groups are particularly vulnerable to being excluded. For example, in consultations on youth policy, youth with disabilities or those who are not engaged in education, employment or training are at higher risk of exclusion (OECD, 2020^[72]). In education settings, participatory approaches such as student councils might favour the participation of more popular students from higher socio-economic backgrounds (Lyle, Hendley and Newcomb, 2010^[73]), with other factors such as age, gender and special education needs affecting students' chances to participate in, and be appropriately represented by a student council (Committee for Education, 2012^[74]; Lyle, Hendley and Newcomb, 2010^[73]). To ensure approaches are inclusive, teachers and school leaders can encourage diverse groups of students to participate in different programmes or support their participation in creative or helpful ways (e.g. using digital tools to facilitate distance or anonymous participation, using art as a

creative way of expressing opinions or ideas, providing different fora for students to participate). This should all be done while ensuring that participatory approaches maintain safety for all students involved.

An important factor to keep in mind regarding participatory approaches is that children can find them fun, enjoyable, social and they appreciate having opportunities to develop new skills (Lundy, Marshall and Orr, 2015^[75]; Orr et al., 2016^[76]). For example, research on participatory design with children suggests that children can have fun in different ways throughout a design process, such as by overcoming challenges, working towards objectives, interacting and socialising with others and experimenting (Schepers, Dreessen and Zaman, 2018^[77]). While some children might find a certain participatory process fun, others might find them challenging or boring (Lindberg and Hedenborg, 2021^[78]). Considering how participatory processes can draw on a range of different activities or methods for children to express themselves may help more children find them fun and enjoyable can promote inclusion for different groups of children of various ages and abilities.

Child participation in OECD education systems

Children are increasingly participating in different domains of public life, including but not limited to public governance, the digital environment and research (Gottschalk and Borhan, 2023^[59]). Child engagement in formal structures, such as youth councils at local or national levels is common in many countries although not consistent across the OECD (OECD, 2018^[79]). These structures function to represent the interests of young people and can perform advocacy or lobbying functions. In recent years children have more opportunities to engage in research processes as co-researchers rather than simply as research subjects and have more opportunities for engaging in design processes. As mentioned in the previous section, many states have implemented action plans and strategies that include performing child rights impact assessments and establishing Ombudsperson offices to safeguard and promote children's rights, including their participation rights.

Table 2.1. Examples of student participation in OECD education systems

Participatory practice	Country examples
Student organisations	<p>Belgium (French Community): There are participation councils organised in each school which include student representatives. Student representatives meet within student councils, which centralise and relay questions, requests, opinions and proposals from the student body to the participation council.</p> <p>Iceland: School councils are required in all compulsory schools.</p> <p>Italy: Student councils exist at the national and regional levels. The National Students' Advisory Council is an assembly composed of the presidents of the Regional Councils. Youth are also consulted in the contexts of different initiatives. For example, the Ministry of Education established a youth panel within the context of the Safer Internet Project where youth are consulted on issues related to media literacy and digital security.</p> <p>Latvia: Students participate in decision making through student organisations, which are self-governing bodies.</p> <p>Luxembourg: Representative organisations are a way in which students can participate in decision making.</p> <p>Netherlands: Each school has a participation council where parents and students can have their say.</p>
Consultation processes	<p>Belgium (French Community): Schools are recommended to encourage the participation of students in developing internal rules.</p> <p>Ireland: Primary and post-primary students were consulted as stakeholder groups in the development of the Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027.</p> <p>Sweden: The National Agency for Education consults with student unions before suggesting or making changes regarding things such as the curriculum or syllabus.</p>
Policy/legal approaches	<p>Belgium (French Community): Student participation is governed by the Code of Basic Education and Secondary Education, adopted in 2019.</p> <p>Ireland: The Minister for education signed a Statutory Instrument in 2022 requiring the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment to include the President of the Irish Second Level Students' Union on the Council.</p> <p>Sweden: The Education Act stipulates that students are to have influence on issues concerning their education in accordance with their age and maturity and are to be consulted when decisions about rules of conduct are made in schools.</p>

Source: Questionnaire (2022)

The number of opportunities for children to contribute and impart change is also increasing within education systems. Student councils, participatory budgeting schemes, student-led projects, whole-school approaches, and student involvement in processes such as designing assessment and redesigning curricula are examples of ways in which students can be meaningfully involved in crafting their educational experiences (Gottschalk and Borhan, 2023^[59]). The Questionnaire (2022) asked OECD education systems to provide concrete examples of how students are involved in decision making, in particular about the digital tools they use at school. However, this item garnered answers on a broad range of topics, shedding insights on the different ways in which students can engage in making decisions (see Table 2.1).

In some countries, child involvement in decision making is supported by different ministries or government bodies. For example, in Latvia the Ministry of Welfare monitors the level of child participation in decision making and implements the Child Participation Evaluation tool. In Ireland, child participation is co-ordinated by multiple government departments, including the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, the Department of Education and the Ombudsman for Children's office.

Considerations for policy and practice

This section provides insights into what is the tip of the iceberg regarding child participation in decision making (for a more comprehensive overview, see (Gottschalk and Borhan, 2023^[59])). Given the information presented here, the following section presents a few key considerations for education policy and practice.

Implications for teachers and school leaders

Teachers and school leaders are key players in ensuring students are listened to, that their opinions hold weight, and to a large extent they can be the gatekeepers of participatory approaches. They can provide space for children to exercise their voices and agency. Given their daily interactions with students from diverse backgrounds and their expertise in presenting material in a developmentally appropriate and engaging manner, teachers and school leaders are ideally positioned to provide relevant information and support to children when addressing important issues. They are also adults with a particular responsibility to listen to students, to take their points of view into account and act appropriately.

While this might be perceived as a challenge to traditional power dynamics among teachers, school leaders and students and result in fear of teachers' authority being undermined (in (Lundy and Cook-Sather, 2016^[80])), it seems that this is not the case (Arnot et al., 2004^[81]; Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007^[82]). Research suggests that child participation in decision making at school, and aligning teacher and student rights, can serve in the interests of both groups without disadvantaging teachers (Lundy, 2012^[83]). However, institutions that are structured in very traditional, hierarchical ways may not support partnerships with children (Lundy and Cook-Sather, 2016^[80]), despite the potential to create more democratic school cultures and the positive impacts on teaching and learning (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004^[84]). Teachers and school leaders who are supportive of child participation can have a big influence on practices within the school. Factors such as teacher-student ratios, teachers' professional skills, their ability to manage their workload and schedules, and student characteristics (e.g. age, communication skills, special education needs) can affect the practices teachers use to support child participation (Venninen et al., 2013^[85]).

There is much evidence that children can effectively participate by developing and putting forward their views and that adults have become more skilled in helping them do so (Johnson, 2017^[86]; Le Borgne and Tisdall, 2017^[87]). However, it cannot be assumed that all adults are capable of hearing what children have to say and giving their views due weight, thereby limiting the influence children have (Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra, 2021^[88]). Ensuring teachers and school leaders have adequate support in implementing student participation strategies will be an important factor contributing to the success of participation policies.

Policy co-ordination

While some OECD education systems have comprehensive child participation strategies, for example Ireland, in many systems child participation is the responsibility of individual schools to interpret and implement as they see fit. Approaches to participation might be inconsistent within an education system, and also across different domains such as education, health and welfare. Policy siloes are seen commonly in many OECD countries (Burns and Gottschalk, 2019^[89]), and co-ordination can help ensure consistency in approaches and that all children have opportunities to choose to participate. This point is very closely linked to the previous point on teachers and school leaders. Because the policy landscape is fragmented or responsibility lies in individual schools or classrooms, participatory approaches can be quite ad-hoc, requiring buy-in from individual teachers and school leaders (Graham et al., 2018^[90]), and depend on factors such as school culture and leadership, all of which are key factors that can support participation. Policy co-ordination is key in supporting consistent approaches across education systems, and even in individual schools. Additionally, providing support for teachers and school leaders to implement participatory approaches in a consistent way in their classrooms and schools is important.

Investing time and money

Participatory approaches with children require resources. While this is not limited to only time and money, these are two of the more frequent resource limitations that can impede the development or implementation of participatory approaches. There can be financial and time considerations regarding the approaches themselves, such as with the development and use of flexible methods that are adapted to the needs and preferences of child participants in research (Bailey et al., 2014^[91]). There can also be implications for factors such as the provision of teacher professional learning opportunities.

Ensuring participation is meaningful

Education systems can and do invest time and resources into child participation approaches. However, if this is done as a “tick-the-box” exercise or in a tokenistic³ manner, it renders child participation less or not at all meaningful. This runs the risk of undermining children’s participation rights, can be discouraging for children and it does not allow education systems and children themselves to reap the benefits associated with meaningful, authentic participation. Adults run the risk of excluding children also in cases where they believe their inclusion would be tokenistic, which does not justify their exclusion (Lundy, 2018^[92]). More efforts are needed to combat tokenism first and foremost, while ensuring that children have the opportunity to participate even in instances when it could be considered tokenistic.

Breaking down barriers for participation

Factors that can limit the implementation of children’s participation rights include institutional, social, political, cultural and economic contexts that are linked to tokenism, inequalities, exclusion, power imbalances among adults and children or among children, as well as factors such as lack of sustainability and accountability (Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra, 2021^[88]). It is also relevant to mention that Article 12 of the UNCRC (which is a basis for many countries’ child participation policies or strategies) is quite a modest right to participation (Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra, 2021^[88]), and that decision-makers who are typically adults will make judgements on the child’s age and maturity (Moran-Ellis and Tisdall, 2019^[93]). Ensuring adults have the appropriate tools to promote participation that respects children’s rights, while also ensuring that opportunities are age and developmentally appropriate, is important. This can be facilitated through training opportunities for teachers, school leaders, and any other adults who work in fields that interact (or should interact) with children. Despite the emphasis on upholding children’s rights and formalising participation approaches in many OECD countries, there is much work still to be done.

Modern citizens with a say

To thrive and function well, modern democracies rely on active and engaged citizens. This is something that can be developed throughout childhood and adolescence (Metzger et al., 2016^[94]). As outlined earlier in this chapter, there have been many changes in how societies around the OECD view children and childhood. The highly protectionist view of children as future citizens is increasingly challenged by the view that they are competent social actors and citizens of today. This implies a certain level of civic responsibility and potential for meaningful child engagement in society from the local to the global level. The changing views of childhood over past decades has been spurred by various social and political changes including the ratification of the UNCRC, and a shift in discourse to one that is more empowered and empowering.

Alongside these changes, mega trends such as globalisation, digitalisation and increasing diversity in OECD societies have altered the ways in which children and adults engage with their communities. This changing social, political and rights landscape has implications for children's roles in society, and also for their education systems, which play a key role in supporting children to develop the skills and competences to actively engage in productive ways in society and democracy today and in the future. Education systems in OECD countries are emphasising learning areas such as civic education, global competence and digital citizenship, which can empower children with some of the tools to skilfully navigate their quickly changing local, global, and increasingly digital landscapes. Within these domains, there is also increasing importance placed on related competence areas such as social and emotional skills (see Box 2.4). The following section will outline some of the ways in which education systems empower children as modern citizens with a say through different routes including civic education and digital citizenship education.

Box 2.4. Social and emotional skills for civic engagement

Developing students' social and emotional skills is high on the policy agenda in many countries. These skills can contribute to a number of positive outcomes including academic success, labour market outcomes and quality of life. Certain skills are also related to civic engagement, and vice versa. For example, some research has shown a positive association between student volunteering and students' level of perspective-taking and stress resistance (Sewell et al., 2023^[95]).

Empathy has also been strongly related to civic engagement, and negatively correlated with some maladaptive outcomes. Empathy refers to understanding and caring about others and their well-being. One who has a high level of empathy will also value and invest in close relationships (OECD, 2015^[96]). A systematic review and meta-analysis found a negative correlation between empathy and political violence in adolescents and young people (Jahnke, Abad Borger and Beelmann, 2021^[97]), and other evidence has found empathy to be predictive of all types of civic engagement (Metzger et al., 2018^[98]). Evidence at the primary and lower secondary levels suggests that empathy is very teachable and that it is a frequent target of social and emotional learning interventions. Empathy is highly predictive of civic engagement, and only moderately predictive of outcomes such as job performance and life satisfaction, as well as anti-social behaviour (Steponavičius, Gress-Wright and Linzarini, 2023^[99]).

Not all social and emotional skills are equally teachable or responsive to interventions. Evidence suggests that the effectiveness of learning interventions can vary based on a number of factors including the context and the quality and implementation of the programme (Steponavičius, Gress-Wright and Linzarini, 2023^[99]). Understanding that some skills can be malleable but not necessarily teachable is also important for education policy makers and teachers to keep in mind. Therefore, that skills like empathy emerge as highly teachable is promising, in particular for education systems with goals of bolstering civic engagement in young people.

Civic education for empowerment

Developing civic knowledge by creating an understanding of processes such as political and civic participation and an awareness of the potential benefits for individuals and communities goes hand in hand with developing the skills that can make this knowledge operational for civic engagement (OECD, 2017_[100]). Ensuring that children have opportunities to develop civic knowledge and skills, which include organisation, communication, decision-making and critical thinking (Kirlin, 2003_[101]), can support them in effectively engaging in public life. Current trends in democracy and political participation indicate decreasing voter turnout rates in many countries around the world and decreasing rates of trust in governments especially among young people (OECD, 2019_[15]; Cho, Byrne and Pelter, 2020_[102]). Many education systems are concentrating their efforts on promoting civic education and engagement, particularly among young people.

Civic and citizenship education tends to be incorporated in various ways in different education systems. In some systems, it is included as a distinct subject area, whereas in others it is incorporated into different areas or the curriculum including subject areas such as history or social studies (Council of Europe, 2018_[103]; Malak-Minkiewicz and Torney-Purta, 2021_[104]). For example, in Australia Civics and Citizenship is incorporated in the curriculum for students in years 3-10, and covers concepts such as government and democracy, laws and citizenship, and diversity and identity (OECD, 2021_[105]). In some countries, such as Korea, civic awareness is a key value that is explicitly embedded into the curriculum, while in others including Ireland, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland (United Kingdom), Ontario (Canada), Portugal and Wales (United Kingdom) citizenship or active citizenship is the embedded term (OECD, 2021_[105]). From OECD countries that participated in the 2022 round of the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS), Civic and Citizenship education is taught as a separate subject in Denmark, Estonia, France, Italy, Latvia, Poland, the Slovak Republic and Slovenia (Schulz et al., 2023_[106]). In most of the ICCS participating countries, including in those where it is a standalone subject, it is also incorporated into other subject areas such as human and social sciences, or in all subjects in the curriculum.

In keeping with the changing concepts of childhood today, some scholars argue for the teaching of critical civic education which positions children as civic beings, rather than more traditional models of civic education that may position children as future citizens (Swalwell and Payne, 2019_[107]). Critical civic education can support students in developing a spirit of activism, which means that they are both capable of participating in social movements and have knowledge on the current state of social injustices (Wheeler-Bell, 2012_[108]) (see Box 2.5).

There are also many examples of civic education learning opportunities for students in OECD countries that do not necessarily occur in the classroom. For example, experiential learning programmes such as service learning or community service can provide opportunities for students to gain hands-on learning experience in their local environments (OECD, 2023_[109]). Community involvement programmes can offer authentic forms of learning outside of the classroom, while giving students the opportunity to discover new passions while also strengthening the relationships between schools and the local community (Furco, 2010_[110]). Volunteering and required community service in secondary school has been studied as a predictor of adult voting and volunteering (Hart et al., 2007_[111]). Practices such as participatory budgeting, as mentioned in the previous section, are also helpful in supporting students to develop leadership skills, understand democratic processes and voice their opinions on matters that are important to them (Crum et al., 2020_[67]). The goals of these programmes are often to promote democratic values and skills, to support a sense of responsibility in students and to encourage students to think critically about wider societal issues and how they can improve them (OECD, 2023_[109]).

Box 2.5. Well behaved children rarely make history: Child activism and participatory politics

Around the world, there are examples of children and young people organising to fight for their rights and for social causes that are important to them. McMellon and Tisdall define child activists as those who “start conversations rather than relying upon adults to invite them into existing ones; activists take up and take over spaces rather than waiting to be given them” (McMellon and Tisdall, 2020, p. 174_[112]). In OECD countries in particular there are examples of young people galvanising movements in support of greater climate action, for racial justice and equality, and for improved safety measures such as increased gun control legislation. Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra highlight these, and other examples from non-OECD countries concerning issues such as child marriage and the fight for quality education, and suggest that children and young people can and do take a more ‘active’ role than what is seen more generally in examples of child participation (2021_[88]). 57% of students responding to the 2022 ICCS survey indicated they expect to participate in organised protests to demand environmental protection (Schulz et al., 2023_[106]).

Young people view leadership as a key characteristic of those who engage in actions such as protest. They may see leadership skills and qualities, including speaking out and encouraging others, as necessary for those who are bold enough to participate in political activities that may be less mainstream (Metzger et al., 2016_[94]). Factors that can also affect children’s participation in activism include having civic spaces that are accessible and inclusive, whether these are physical or digital spaces (Cho, Byrne and Pelter, 2020_[102]). Interestingly, students’ expected participation in legal protest activities has not been associated with factors such as civic knowledge, whereas expected participation in illegal protest activities (e.g. spray-painting protest signs on walls, blocking traffic) was negatively correlated with civic knowledge in the 2022 ICCS survey (Schulz et al., 2023_[106]).

Children and young people also engage in a range of other political practices. One way in which this is facilitated is through digital means, which can include creating, circulating and/or commenting on political content, or through actions such as signing petitions or contacting companies or political figures in an effort to influence them. Using nationally representative survey data of youth in the United States (aged 15-27), it was found that young people who had opportunities to learn about creating and sharing digital content were more likely to engage in digital forms of political engagement (Kahne and Bowyer, 2019_[113]). The more substantial the learning opportunities, the more sizable their engagement, however the overall proportion of youth who were actively engaged was small (10-11% on a weekly basis) suggesting most youth were not active participants. Evidence from a cross-national sample also suggests that children become more engaged in social issues when they reach older adolescence, and 15-17-year-olds are more likely than their younger counterparts to be politically engaged (Livingstone, Kardefelt Winther and Saeed, 2019_[114]). Another interesting finding emerging from the literature is that young people who participate more in the digital environment, even if their participation is not explicitly political and can include things such as generating content, are more likely to be politically engaged in digital and offline spaces (Cho, Byrne and Pelter, 2020_[102]).

Citizenship in the digital sphere

Increasing digitalisation has changed how individuals interact in at the local and global levels. In particular for young people, digital technologies provide opportunities including mobilisation, organisation and interaction with wider communities (Brennan, 2018_[115]). Some children and young people take advantage of this opportunity. For example, according to the Global Kids Online survey⁴, 13% of respondents indicated that they had been involved in an online protest or campaign, while 19% reported that they had talked about social or political issues with other people in the digital environment (Livingstone, Kardefelt Winther and Saeed, 2019_[114]).

MediaSmarts, Canada's Media Centre for Digital Literacy, defines digital citizenship as “the ability to navigate our digital environments in a way that's safe and responsible and to actively and respectfully engage in these spaces” (MediaSmarts, n.d._[116]). It outlines four categories under which individuals can contribute to a positive culture in the digital space: empathy and community; positive technology use; sharing information (from the perspective of fact-checking and sharing information that is known to be useful and reliable); and ethics and privacy. The Council of Europe describes digital citizens as “individuals able to use digital tools to create, consume, communicate and engage positively and responsibly with others” (Council of Europe, n.d._[117]). Some scholars underscore that there are various definitions used in research and policy, with little consensus on the definition (Cortesi et al., 2020_[118]). Cortesi and colleagues advocate for the term “digital citizenship+ (plus)” which they define as “the skills needed for youth to fully participate academically, socially, ethically, politically and economically in our rapidly evolving digital world” (2020, p. 28_[118]). They argue that modifying the term to digital citizenship+ can broaden its scope, that using a new term can help bring different stakeholders and communities that use their own terminology to the same table, that the term can be universal and flexible, and finally that it is more encompassing of different social, cultural and regional contexts. Importantly, the notion of digital citizenship places an emphasis on the roles and responsibilities of the digital technology users which is consistent across many definitions.

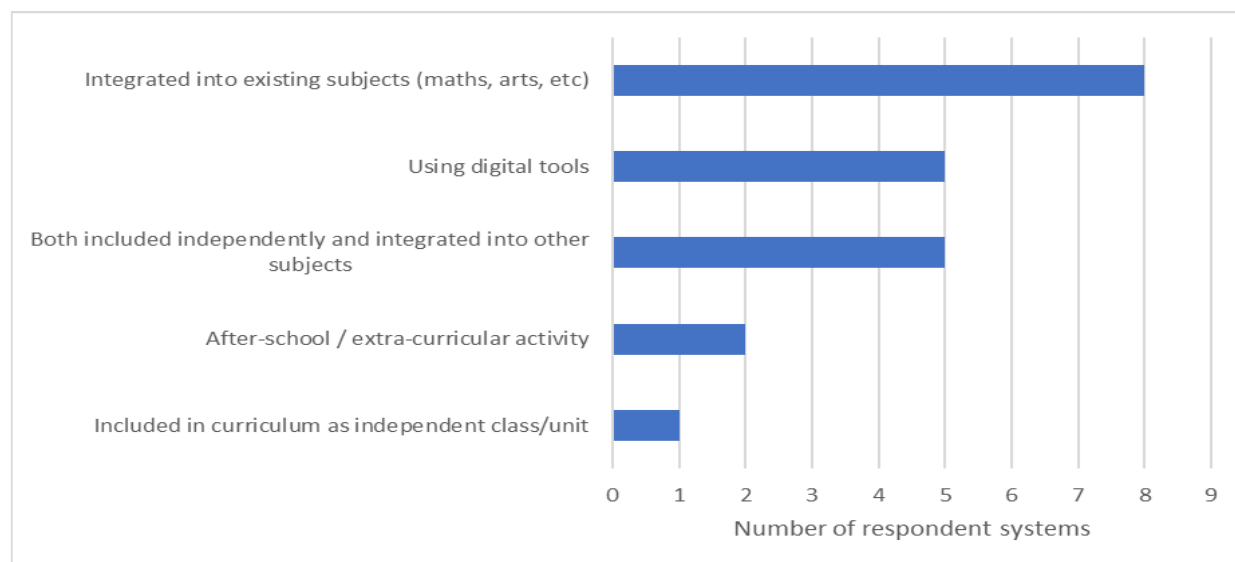
Digital citizenship is a priority topic in many OECD education systems. According to the Questionnaire (2022), 8 systems highlighted developing digital citizenship as a priority challenge. Within these systems, common features of digital citizenship were mentioned in the responses. Key ideas associated with digital citizenship that emerged across responses include engaging with digital tools and society in ways that are responsible and respectful, emphasising safety, protecting personal data, forming a critical and informed stance in the digital environment, and developing a healthy digital identity. Research suggests that developing digital citizenship is associated with different positive outcomes. For example, online respect and digital civic engagement have been negatively associated with digital harassment perpetration, while they are positively correlated with engaging in helpful bystander behaviours (Jones and Mitchell, 2016_[119]).

Digital citizenship education in OECD countries

Education systems have implemented various strategies to promote digital citizenship in children. In some instances, this has been incorporated into general digital literacy strategies or media literacy strategies, but in some systems specific programmes or policies target digital citizenship. Systems also integrate digital citizenship education into the teaching and learning process at different stages of education and in various ways. For example, the majority of systems that responded to the Questionnaire (2022) expect students to acquire digital citizenship skills in school at the primary and secondary levels, while only a minority (4) mentioned that this would begin at the early childhood or pre-primary level. While the inclusion of digital citizenship learning opportunities in many systems is promising, the lack of focus on this topic for young children could be concerning in particular because young children are increasingly exposed to and using digital tools. Some scholars have advocated for focusing on digital literacy and digital citizenship skills in early childhood for some time now (e.g. (Rogow, 2015_[120])). In a nationally representative sample of educators in the United States teaching young children (from kindergarten to grade 5), many reported that they included some digital citizenship competencies, such as topics around digital safety in their classrooms (Lauricella, Herdzina and Robb, 2020_[121]). However, this type of content was more often introduced in elementary grades than in the younger years.

According to the Questionnaire (2022), many respondent systems integrate digital citizenship education into existing subject areas in the curriculum, while including this as an independent class or study unit is not currently widespread (see Figure 2.2). Questionnaire results also suggest that digital citizenship is more commonly embedded into continuing professional development for teachers than it is in initial teacher education (in 15 versus 13 systems respectively).

Figure 2.2. Developing digital citizenship education in the teaching and learning process



Note: Systems were asked “How is this incorporated into teaching and learning process?” with multiple choice response options. 18 systems responded to this item.

Source: Questionnaire (2022)

There are many examples of curricular approaches to digital citizenship. In New Zealand’s curriculum refresh of 2023, it was incorporated specifically in the technology learning area. Some provinces and territories in Canada define digital citizenship as one of the Broad Areas of Learning. For example, in Saskatchewan digital citizenship education is supported by providing instruction to students from kindergarten through secondary school on appropriate and responsible behaviour in the digital environment. The Ministry of Education has also considered and infused digital citizenship skills when developing and renewing the curriculum in areas such as information processing, life transitions and financial literacy. The Digital Citizenship Continuum for kindergarten through secondary school addresses digital citizenship by asking two questions: “What rights and responsibilities do students have in a digital society? How do we make students more aware of their rights and responsibilities when using technology?” In Ontario, secondary students are required to complete two online learning credits as part of their graduation requirements that focus on developing digital literacy and digital skills to effectively navigate an increasingly digital world. In the French community of Belgium, the Common Core Framework requires the teaching of both technical and civic skills under the digital skills umbrella from the 6th year of primary school. Specific areas of focus include digital etiquette, responsible attitudes towards oneself and others, respect for rights in the digital environment, and the active management of digital safety. In Ireland, the Digital Strategy for Schools 2027 aims to empower schools in supporting students to become competent, critically engaged and active learners who can reach their potential while also participating fully as global citizens in a digital world.

Despite the focus on digital citizenship education in many OECD education systems, there may be a discrepancy in terms of how well students can put this knowledge and skill to the test. Some research suggests for example that students may appreciate certain elements related to digital citizenship, such as access, communication, literacy and security, more than others such as digital etiquette (Hui and Campbell, 2018^[122]). One challenge is evaluating digital citizenship strategies. This can be due to lack of consistency of definitions across policy, research and practice, although is essential to ensure policies are successful and have the intended outcomes.

Citizens of today – Reflection tool

Children today are recognised as competent social actors and rights holders.

In the past few decades, the way in which children and childhood is seen by academics, policy makers and the general public has undergone a shift. This is due to various factors, notably the recognition of children as rights holders with the ratification of the UNCRC, the most widely adopted international human rights treaty. Research on children and childhood has emphasised the agency that children inherently have, positioning them as active social beings.

Recognising children as agents implies acknowledging their entitlement to a broad range of rights, encompassing social, economic, cultural and political aspects, extending beyond protection and provision. Different mechanisms to uphold children's rights are used in OECD countries, including the establishment of ombudsperson offices and performing child rights impact assessments.

Child participation in decision making is high on the policy agenda in many countries.

An important way in which OECD countries uphold children's rights is by honouring their participation rights. The meaningful participation of children in making decisions that affect them is important from a human rights perspective, and much research suggests that including children in these processes can result in outcomes that are more responsive to their needs.

Having the opportunity to participate in decision making can also support children in developing key skills such as leadership skills, while

fostering their creativity and providing a sense of ownership and achievement.

Some groups of children are more likely to be excluded from participatory processes, which risks further undermining their rights.

Certain groups are more at risk of exclusion in participation. This includes children who are excluded from education, as well as those with special education needs or those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

In education settings, participatory approaches such as student councils might favour the participation of more popular students from higher socio-economic backgrounds. Factors such as age, gender and special education needs affect students' chances to participate in, and be appropriately represented by, a student council. Encouraging students from all backgrounds to participate, and supporting them to do so in creative and helpful ways, is key.

Supporting teachers and school leaders to help their students is required.

Teachers and school leaders are important players in encouraging child participation and upholding children's rights. Providing high quality training opportunities and support materials for implementation in schools is essential.

Embedding civic and citizenship education in the curriculum, including digital citizenship education, can be empowering for children.

Civic and citizenship education can support children's civic participation now and in the future. This learning area is sometimes embedded in the curriculum as a standalone subject area, and in many systems is also incorporated into existing subject areas such as social sciences. Digital citizenship education has also been an area of interest in OECD education systems, and systems are incorporating this learning area into curricular frameworks as well.

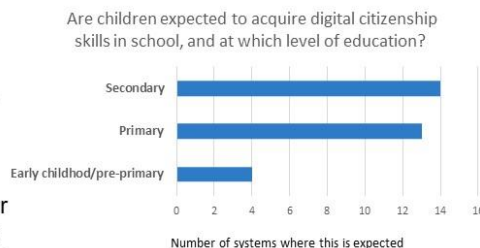
However, not all civic education takes place in the classroom. Many education systems employ other learning opportunities, including service learning in the local community or programmes such as participatory budgeting to boost children's civic knowledge

Reflecting on Children as Citizens

DATA & TRENDS



Supporting children in exercising their agency and participating in society as competent social actors is a goal in many OECD education systems. Increasingly civic participation and citizenship is practiced in the digital sphere, underscoring a greater need for digital citizenship education for children, including the youngest.



Source: Questionnaire (2022)

EMPOWERMENT

Opportunities

Views of childhood have shifted from being highly protectionist, to recognising children as rights holders and agents of change.

Education can provide learning opportunities to bolster children's civic and citizenship skills and knowledge, and also to include them in decision making processes.

Challenges

Upholding child rights and overcoming traditional adult/child power dynamics can be difficult. Adults may require support in this domain.

Regarding child participation, challenges include tokenism, guaranteeing equity and inclusion, and investing adequate resources to ensure participation is meaningful.

What can governments do?

- ❑ Implementing processes to acknowledge and uphold children's rights is essential. Establishing a public authority charged with the protection and promotion of the rights of children and young people, such as an ombudsperson office, can be an effective way of doing so. Evaluation methods, such as child rights impact assessments, when adopted widely and done effectively can help ensure policies and practices uphold the rights and support the needs and interests of children. There needs to be a marked shift away from child rights being seen as "optional" for mechanisms such as CRIAs to be more widely adopted.
- ❑ Acknowledging children as active agents of change is essential in establishing coherent and effective participation strategies. Governments need to include children as stakeholders in relevant decision making processes, while ensuring their participation is meaningful.
- ❑ Harmonising definitions and methodologies in measuring outcomes such as digital citizenship can make evaluating outcomes of these programmes more practical and support evidence-based policy making.
- ❑ Incorporating topics such as civics, citizenship and digital citizenship into the curriculum, while also providing experiential learning opportunities can help children develop these important skills and knowledge. Providing learning opportunities in and out of the classroom are key in supporting children's development of civic skills and competence.
- ❑ Building the capacity of adults who can provide support and guidance to children is an important measure that needs to be adopted in all empowerment strategies.

Why not organise a deliberative dialogue for the citizens of today?

Otis is a local policy maker working on municipal education provision (publicly funded, publicly run education) in a medium-sized town. He has influence over resource allocation and manages support for schools relating to developing their pedagogical programmes and school development plans. The national government recently published a national school participation strategy, which emphasises that communities, including children, should take a greater role in how their schools are run. The strategy requires municipalities to draft individual local implementation plans and Otis leads this task.

He is aware that other municipalities have experimented with whole school approaches including participatory budgeting, youth panels, student-led projects and community design of assessment and curricula. He wants to learn what these experiences, and international evidence, might mean for the local context. He also wants the process for drafting a plan on participation to be an empowering one for communities. To achieve these aims, he organises a deliberative dialogue (OECD, 2020^[123]) and places evidence and community values at the centre by adapting some principles of a model used in the healthcare sector (OECD, 2023^[124]). This requires around 30 stakeholders, plus an expert advisory committee with a mandate to prepare a diverse evidence base, to answer two policy questions: 1) Which actions should be taken when we implement the national school participation strategy, considering our local context and needs? 2) What might effective and impactful implementation of the strategy look like for our schools and communities?

He gathers a willing expert advisory committee of 2 relevant university researchers, 2 practitioners with a passion for evidence, 2 policy makers working in analytical roles and 2 local students. The expert panel helps with outreach to the local community, ensuring broad representation including children of different ages. They also prepare 2-page evidence summaries (using child-friendly language) on various topics and circulate them with participants a month before the first dialogue. In line with the literature, Otis structures the dialogue agenda over eight half-day meetings spread across three phases: Month 1 - learning (1.5 days); month 2 - deliberation (1.5 days) and; month 3 - recommendation (1 day).

The learning phase (3 half-days) ensures that each participant shares a common understanding of the process, relevant context, and subject matter to make informed recommendations. During this phase, participants are split into stakeholder groups (student, practitioner, policy maker, community member etc.) to become familiar with the policy questions and evidence. The advisory committee presents the evidence summaries to each group and answers their questions. Participants are given the chance to request additional information, experts or stakeholders if they feel they are missing information or need additional clarifications.

The deliberation phase (3 half days) is when evidence is discussed, options and trade-offs are assessed, and a long list of recommendations are collectively developed by stakeholders. The process is led by impartial trained facilitators and carefully designed to ensure that every participant is given the chance to express their opinion and no stakeholders dominate the discussion. To this end, the first part of the deliberation phase takes place in stakeholder groups (student, practitioner, policy maker, community member etc.). In the second part of the deliberation phase these group are mixed.

In the final phase (2 half days), a long list of detailed recommendations is drafted beforehand based on the deliberation and voted on by all participants by simple majority vote. The results are written up in a detailed report by the advisory committee, which also acknowledges other opinions that were expressed but did not achieve majority consensus. Final recommendations are made publicly available and presented to the local municipality, which responds to recommendations, provides feedback to the participants and the broader public and uses them for the draft local implementation plan.

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Notes

¹ See: <https://childstrategy.fi/> (accessed on 06 May 2024).

² See: <https://www.stjornarradid.is/library/02-Rit--skyrslur-og-skrar/Mannrettindaskyrslur/Concluding%20Observations%20CRC%20-%20English.pdf> (accessed on 06 May 2024).

³ A process is considered tokenistic for example when children and young people are consulted but their input has no impact on the decision made (Tisdall, 2015^[125]).

⁴ A survey of 9-17-year-olds in Albania, Argentina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Ghana, Italy, Montenegro, the Philippines, South Africa and Uruguay.



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