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Research Article

# Is there a place for children in the making of public policy? Insights from the research evidence

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**Abstract**: Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates that children have a right to express their views with this article being one of the most frequently cited principles in the convention. This scoping review summarises the existing research evidence on how children participate in the making of public policy. This paper concludes that a plethora of practical guidelines and gray literature are available addressing children as policy-making partners, but the empirical research around the subject is very rare. Children's participation should be planned prior to any planned public policy reforms – and to be supported by appropriate academic research integrated into the different stages of the policymaking processes. If policymakers are willing to develop mechanisms for children's participation in the policy cycle, children's role and agency will be clarified. It seems that there is a need for new sensemaking in terms of how adults treat the value of children´s participation and how to include children in the policymaking process around the subjects that matter to them. Participatory practices should be co-created with children, not for them.

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## Introduction

From the perspective of everyday life, children´s participation in society takes place in different contexts. In everyday life, children express their views in their family life, at day care centres, schools, when using social and health care services, through their hobbies and among their friends (Thomas, 2007). Children´s views are also emphasised in other contexts, for instance as consumers of goods as well as increasingly in the making and development of public services through co-creation and co-design. This paper addresses children´s participation in the making of public policy and elaborates further the ongoing scholarly discussion and debate about children´s rights and children´s participation (e.g., Arce, 2015; Bosisio, 2012; Byrne & Lundy, 2019; Cassidy, 2016; Giesinger, 2019).

The notion of human participation is rooted in the principles of democratic societies. Participation is deeply incorporated in the *United Nations Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs) and in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRS). The SDGs consist of 17 Goals (and 169 targets) which aim to contribute to the international commitment to achieve worldwide sustainable development in its social, economic, and environmental dimensions by 2030. Glass and Newig (2019) have pointed out that the issue of governance is embedded in the domain of the SDGs in a specific way: it is essentially about the diversity of participating actors contributing to common goals and the importance of participation in policy making, policy implementation and service delivery. Their argument rests upon the idea that participation is useful, entailing that it is connected to the drafting of policy proposals and actions. Further, participation must be linked to strategy formulations and academic research that are effective in terms of mutual learning and the bundling of resources.

The analysis by Byrne and Lundy (2019, p. 362-363) provides an overview of children´s rights-based public policy making by disentangling the nature of children´s participation in policy processes, with

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reference to a common understanding of participation that is rights-based and incorporates the actions being undertaken to enable 'rights-holders' to claim their rights. Byrne and Lundy (*ibid.)* further argue that a crucial dimension of participation is that children understand their rights (to participate) and that they have opportunities to be involved in influencing the decisions that will affect their lives.

Public policy is about planning and implementing government activities. According to Hassel (2015), public policy is a set of decisions to influence, change, or frame a problem or issue that has been recognised in the political realm by policymakers and/or the wider public. Birkland (2016, p. 8-9) holds the view that there is a strong possibility that a single definition of public policy will never be developed (because of the diversity of existing government and public administration systems), but there are certain common attributes that relate to public policy making regardless of the administrative system.

To advance the theorisation of public policy and to link public policymaking to children´s participation can be done with the tools and distinctions provided by the analysis of the SDGs and in the CRC. Following the CRC, in this review children are understood as people under 18 years. They are also recognised as agents who can participate in matters concerning them despite their age (see Lister, 2007; Moosa-Mitha, 2005). This paper explores how children's participation in policymaking processes is reflected in the existing research literature. The paper focuses on the role of academic research as it relates to children´s participation in public policymaking. To this end, this paper adopts the concept of participation from Heinelt et al. (2002), who argue that participation in governing activities is not only a matter of being indirectly involved in governmental affairs (by voting, representation etc.,) but also through extended engagement in forms of policy making. The CRC's article 12, referencing various recommendations, statements and regulations shows how children should be involved but the existing research and empirical literature provides little evidence to indicate how this has been done (e.g., White, 2020). There are also models and operationalisations of participation, one of the best known is "The Lundy Model", which was originally developed to clarify varying obligations related to participation (e.g., Kennan et al., 2021) and which divides participation into five dimensions; safe space, a voice, an audience, influence and impact (Lundy, 2010). Nevertheless, there remains a lack of research evaluation in respect of how effective these models are or what kinds of participation there has been around them, although some evalution has been done (e.g., Kennan et al., 2021).

This paper is based on the literature review method (Gough et al., 2012) and more specifically, it deploys the seven-step model put forward by Fink (2013). The review process consisted of seven components, including selecting research questions, selecting article databases and sources, choosing search terms, applying practical screening criteria, applying methodological screening criteria, doing the review, and finally synthesizing the results. This paper progresses as follows. Next, we describe the methodology part which includes the identification process for the research literature and the way in which we analyse the findings. Then we report on the results of the review and continue by discussing our findings. Finally, we present our conclusions based on the findings and suggest a research agenda taking forward the academic research of children´s participation in the making of public policy.

## Methodology

### Database Search

The review was compiled from the following electronic databases: Proquest, Scopus, Wiley, Ebsco, Web of Science, Sage Journals, Emerald, ScienceDirect, JSTOR and Taylor and Francis. These databases are the most relevant to the subject of the review and have been used in similar systematic reviews (Hiilamo et al., 2021). The article search covered the period 2010-2020 which is the optimal period for summarising the existing evidence of such a phenomenon and its development. Papers older than ten years wer viewed as irrelevant from todays' perspective because of the proliferation of participation models and activity in the context of public policy practice in the past decade (e.g., Kjørholt, 2007, p. 38; Lister, 2007; Moosa-Mitha, 2005). The search was focused on academic peer-reviewed articles published in the English language. English was the primary language because it is the primary language used in the academic world. The

search included research carried out in the OECD-countries because of the assumed similarities related to children´s position in society as well as in public policy-related political-administrative traditions. Search terms were applied to abstract, titles and key word listings. Only journal articles were considered. The search was carried out in October 2020.

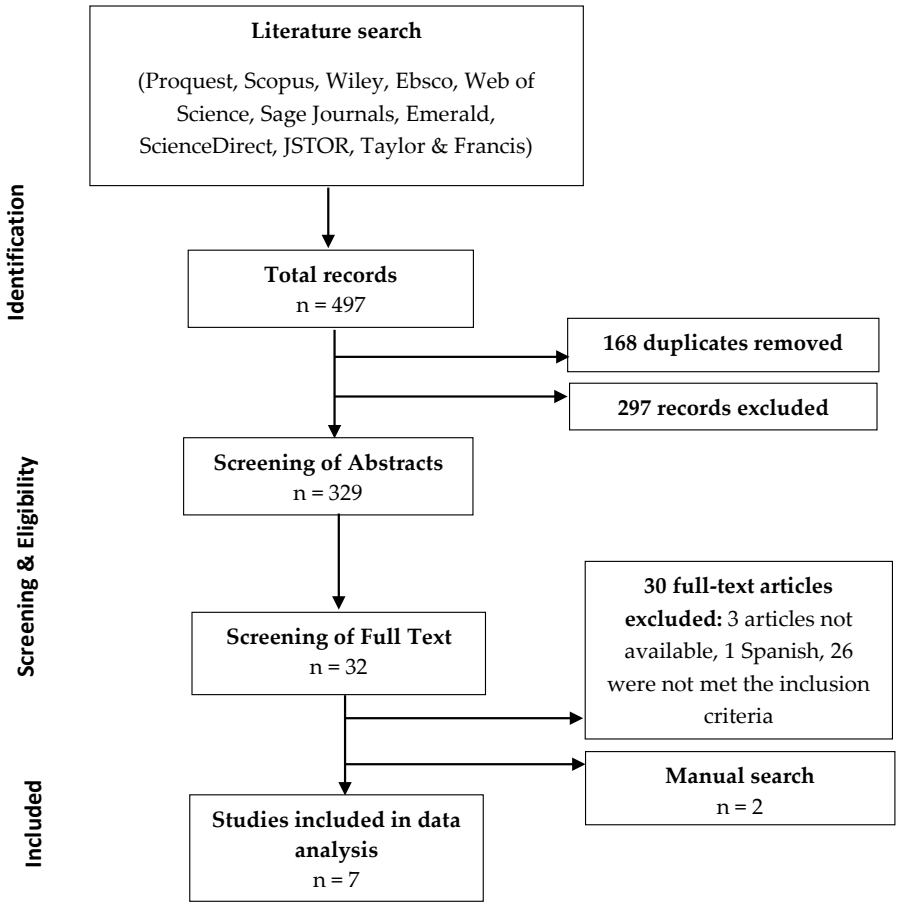


**Figure 1**. The review process based on the PRISMA flow diagram

The Boolean search term combinations used were: "children's participation" OR "children's involvement" OR "children's contribution" OR "children's influence" OR "participation of children" OR "involvement of children" OR "contribution of children" OR "influence of children" AND (strateg* OR program OR polic* AND public. The main concept, children´s participation, was thus combined with the concepts such as strategy", "policy", "program" AND "public" which refer to the context of children's participation in this review. The search then excluded articles that used only terms such as citizenship or social change.

### Screening Process

A three-step selection process was applied. In the first stage, the search produced 497 articles; this was reduced to 329 after removing duplicates (168) using RefWorks. The remaining 329 articles were scrutinised by reading their abstracts in the screening phase of the analysis. The selection process was conducted by two authors (reviewer M. K. and E. S.) to determine the paper's relevance for the review as assessed by title and abstract. The articles were sorted into two file sets which were reviewed independently by the two authors (E. S. and M. K.). After independent scrutiny, the authors reflected on the set inclusion citerias and made decisions on the inclusion/exclusion, paper by paper. The focus was on empirical or theoretical studies addressing children's and adolescents' participation in public policy making processes or public reforms at the national, regional, and local levels of governance in the OECD-

countries.

In the second stage, based on the screening of full-texts 32 articles were included as selected studies. Both reviewers read all the full-text articles which were available (n=28) and assessed for the eligibility. In the second stage, 32 articles were included for detailed analysis. At this stage, both reviewers read all the full-text articles which were available (n=28) assessing the eligibility of each paper. After this process, altogether 23 articles were excluded since there were no explicit references to children's participation in public policy or reforms. These articles did not meet the inclusion criteria (e.g., focus on children's participation in service development, methodological or register study or literature reviews not guided by the research question). The reviewers then read all available full texts which were available and to confirm the validity of the selection process. A shared template was used (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Inclusion criteria for the articles

| | **Criteria** |
|---|---|
| **Search terms** | • children's participation OR children's involvement OR children's contribution OR "children's influence OR participation of children OR involvement of children OR contribution of children OR influence of children<br>• strategy OR program OR policy<br>• public |
| **Databases** | • Proquest, Scopus, Wiley, Ebsco, Web of Science, Sage Journals, Emerald, ScienceDirect, JSTOR, Taylor & Francis |
| **Publication years** | • Year 2010-2020 |
| **Target group** | • Children under age 18 year |
| **Type of study** | • Theoretical and empirical, peer-reviewed scientific articles |
| **Language** | • English |
| **Context** | • Public strategy and program level and public policy making and processes in western countries |

After the screening process, five articles were included in the analysis since only these studies related to children´s participation in public policymaking and government reforms. Since the surprisingly low amount of relevant research, an additional manual search (e.g., Google Scholar, reference lists) was undertaken to make sure that all the relevant research was included. This was conducted by two authors (E. S. and M. K.) to confirm that all relevant articles had been found. This resulted in two additional articles being included in the selected complitation of articles. These two additional articles were not initially found in the selected papers because they were not published in academic journals but were nevertheless considered important for our analysis. At the third stage, the reviewers then established the final sample, consisting of seven articles. These articles were scrutinised from several points of view to understand what participation could mean in policymaking. From these articles we collected information on who participated and how, what was the context, the research questions, methods, main findings and implications. With that information in hand, the review then focused on the threefold classification related to public policy participation: type of participation, type of policy-reform and outcome of participation.

In analysing the article data, this threefold classification consisted of multiple participation dimensions, for example, an orientation towards the solving of societal problems and the government's contribution, made on the public's behalf, ostensibly for the betterment of society. Of the reviewed articles, only one included both aspects, children's direct involvement in public policymaking and an analysis of that. An additional three studies included evidence of children's participation in policymaking or public matters while the final three were theory-based and did not analyse children's participation in policymaking but instead created theoretical approaches to understand children's participation as *part* of policymaking. We will briefly review these seven papers in turn.

## Results

The only article that fell into the category of public policymaking and included an analysis of direct children's participation, was about children's participation in political processes in Israel's Knesset committee (Perry-Hazan, 2016). In Israel, Parliamentary (Knesset) Committees are policymaking 'arenas'

where different views and opinions are heard and where participants can bring issues and ideas to the table - with the idea that these opinions can subsequently be taken into consideration in policymaking. Every participant has a couple of minutes to promote their views. Committee work is part of an ongoing pattern to promote children's participation in Israel.

Perry-Hazan (2016) reviewed children's participation in these meetings by looking at the meeting protocols and interviewing an advisory group of children. Perry-Hazan notes that although children have a role in policymaking meetings, power remains with the adults. Adults can take children's concerns into consideration or leave them out. Children's opinions can become part of the policymaking process, but, according to Perry-Hazan, the adults involved usually focused on evaluating the children's appearance in committee more than on seriously considering their point of view. The article nevertheless enhances our understanding of children's participation in policymaking: even though there is a clear pattern here in terms of children's role in policymaking which remains, effectively, a 'box-ticking' exercise with no statuary need to take their perspectives forward into the policy making process. Perry-Hasan also notes that adults' attitudes towards the children's arguments need to be improved. Attitudes are too often 'fawning or dismissive' and can 'elicit extreme responses' as Perry-Hazan puts it. The article does however provide several important insights into how practitioners, who specialise in children's participation, can improve effective practices for children's participation.

A second empirical article also concerned Israel. Uziely (2018) explored the difficulties of government reforms from the professional's point of view. The Israeli Special Education Law determined that all pupils have the legal right to participate and Uziely analysed the implementation of the educational reform that included young people's voices. What was found was that adults' attitude played the key role in implementation. Uziely used an eight-step linear scale to measure pupil satisfaction. In the research Uziely also analysed various socioeconomic, cultural and occupational variables.

According to his findings, if adults do not already believe in children's participation, there is little likelihood of such participation succeeding. As his main finding, Uziely discovered that many of the adults responsible for the implementation of the reform did not believe in its core principles. As such, Uziely noted that legislation alone is not enough when implementing a reform. Additionally, the concept of child participation has itself to be promoted among those adults tasked with implementing it.

The third empirical article is from Forde et al. (2017) where they studied children's and young people's participation in communities. In their study, participating children were aged 7 to 17. They also studied adult's perspectives in these same communities. In total 74 children and 34 adults participated. What they found was that children were involved in their communities in many ways but at the same time had little knowledge of how they can participate in local decision making. Children had better opportunities to participate if they were part of youth clubs or projects. Children also recognised negative or dismissive attitude in adults. At the same time, adults recognised community support as organised activities rather than spaces for children to participate. What is noteworthy here is that there is also a lack of communication between different adults in the community. Adult attitudes towards children's participation is also addressed in this article. If children's participation is taken seriously and understood as a relational matter, adults should have more dialogue with children and other adults concerning the ways in which children can be involved.

Interestingly, Forde et al. (2017) discovered that children and adults see participation very differently. Whereas adults felt that there were a lot of opportunities for children to participate, children considered their opportunities to participate inadequate or superficial. From the children's point of view, schools are hierarchical institutions where their opinions are not heard. Forde et al. also pointed out that good relationships between students and teachers helps to create an atmosphere where the exercise of participation is possible. They also noted that in schools, children felt that they had at least some opportunity to participate. The findings also noted that if authentic participation is taken seriously, efforts should be focused on promoting structures at the policy making level, including children's participation.

In the fourth empirical article, Vanhaeght and Bauwens (2016) explored in a case study how children

experienced their participation in a TV cultural policy project where children participated by performing on the TV show. The studied children were between 9 and 13 years old when participating and 10 to 14 when interviewed. All 17 participating children were from families with high-level cultural capital. Their main finding was that children had little say in the production process. At the same time, they were concerned about how they and their art, such as songs, was used in the production but felt that there were few ways to influence the matter. Children in general recognised that the decisions were made by adults, but they also criticised the situations where adults were disrespectful towards their art. As Vanhaeght and Bauwens (2016) showed, that while the TV cultural policy project was viewed as a participatory project, it nevertheless illustrated how the children's role in participatory projects can be seen as paradoxical when they are, at the same time, given the opportunity to participate and but not given the power to impact decisions.

The last three analysed articles were each theoretical in their approach. In these articles, the researchers focused on understanding where and in what ways children can be political actors (Kallio & Hakli, 2011), what the core-elements are in children's rights-based politics (Byrne & Lundy, 2019) and how national strategy has improved children's lives (Hanafin et al., 2012).

Kallio and Hakli (2011) concluded in their article that children can be conceived of as political actors in everyday life. They approached the ways in which children undertake political actions from a theoretical standpoint. They develop a theory-based conceptualised model that set out to 'conceptualise children's political agency'. They also look at spaces where politics can occur both in official settings and everyday spaces. In their analysis, children created space for their actions without adults' approval. When considering children and policymaking together, adults should widen their perspective to understand children's own ways of acting and participating in political matters. Their paper is based on research concerning child and youth policies and the politics occurring in children's everyday lives. Kallio and Hakli discovered three different ways through which children can act politically: First, children's political agency unfolds in planning, decision-making and policymaking processes. They articulated that in these contexts children can be supported by educating them in relation to performing the democratic exercise and in promoting active citizenship. Children can also be involved in official and semi-official politics, offering them opportunities to speak. Second, children are engaged in events and issues known to have political significance in their lives, such as war or racial struggles. Usually, children are seen in these circumstances as social or cultural actors but also as being unlikely to understand their actions as political. Third, children practice politics in their 'seemingly apolitical everyday environments'. They might for example try to challenge positions offered to them by adults.

Byrne and Lundy (2019) discussed some of the core elements of children's rights-based policy. They create a framework for understanding children's rights-based approaches to policy based on the principles/provisions of the CRC. Rights-based understanding includes the core-elements in children's participation which are: 1) Making sense of CRC's participation principles, 2) The creation of a process to impact children's rights, 3) Putting participation and partnership into practice, 4) Involving budgetary issues in the participatory process, and 5) Raising awareness and enhancing publicity to make public policies better known to children. In their study Byrne and Lundy point out that the ways in which children can be part of the policymaking processes should rely on children and adults being partners in the same process.

The Hanafin et al. (2012) article shows how important it is to evaluate the impacts of public policies and service delivery on children after the policy planning phase. In their study, the authors deployed multidimensional and multi-methodological approaches. They discuss how the National Children's Strategy has improved children's lives and understanding of child wellbeing in Ireland. They also analysed the actions undertaken to implement the National Children's Strategy. What was done here was to create an understanding of the different systems around children, identifying improvements in terms of evaluating and monitoring children's lives.

Hanafin et al. (2012) underline that the children´s role is essential in policy learning even though

their role in policy planning remains minimal. The effects on children´s wellbeing is, nevertheless, significant, they argue. Focusing on how, why and when children should be considered participants is important in generating a fuller understanding of the processes around children's participation, although there is also a need here to widen the scope in policymaking to create practices supporting more structured ways for children to participate.

**Table 2.** A Summary of included studies.

| Study | Aim (including sample and methods) | Type of research | Results |
|---|---|---|---|
| Byrne & Lundy, (2019). Children's rights-based childhood policy: A six-P framework. | Aim: to discuss and clarify core elements of children's rights-based policy. | Theoretical | A framework for understanding children's rights-based approaches to policy based on the following six 'Ps': 1) the *principles*/provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC); 2) the *process* of children's rights impact assessment; 3) the *participation* of children and young people; 4) *partnership* to ensure joined up working; 5) *public budgeting* to ensure that the resources are in place for implementation; and 6) *publicity* to make policies known to children and young people. |
| Forde et al. (2017). Children and young people's participation in the community in Ireland: Experiences and issues. | Aim: to study children's and young peoples experiences about participating in their communities. Sample and methods: (N= children 74, adults 34) were living in location, children age 7-17, parents with experience of children aged 7-17, community stakeholders working with children aged 7-17. | Empirical | Children and young people are active participants in the community. They express interest in having a greater voice and influence in their communities. They are in general dissatisfied with decision making processes. There need to be more spaces in communities for children's participation and in public policy spaces for participation and children's right to participate are uneven. There should also be a change in adults' attitudes and there should be training for adults in different community settings. |
| Uziely. (2018). Professionals' attitudes toward children's participation: Implementing educational reforms. | Aim: to examine the implementation of the liberal reform that let young people's voices be heard. Sample and methods: The professionals (N=115) from all over Israel who participated in the deliberations of placement committees. An online questionnaire was used to investigate desired and actual levels of children's participation in the committee's discussions, and the pupils' satisfaction with the discussion process. | Empirical | After four years the regulations were published, the new norms were not widely spread: about half of the professionals involved in implementing the reform were not convinced that every pupil has the right to voice his or her opinions or concerns in the course of the committee's discussion. The major finding was that many of the adults responsible for the implementation of the reform do not believe in its principles and are even opposed to child participation. |
| Perry-Hazan.(2016). Children's participation in national policymaking: "You're so adorable, adorable, adorable! I'm speechless; so much fun!". | Aim: to examine children's participation in national policymaking meetings. Sample and methods: 116 protocols of committee meetings in the Israeli Knesset that frequently discussed issues affecting children: The Education, Culture and Sport Committee and the Committee on the Rights of the Children during the period Jan 2012–Jul 2015 were analysed. Four semi-structured interviews were conducted with two girls and two boys who had participated in meetings when they were 16 to18 years old. | Empirical | The findings exemplify the potential benefits of children's participation in national policy discussions in promoting policy changes and contributing unique perspectives that contextualise the discussions and produce dialogue. Children's contextualising comments can contribute important perspectives, exemplifying for the adults how policies are translated into practice, and can stimulate significant discussions. Children's comments in national policy discussions may elicit extreme responses, expressed as either fawning or dismissive behaviour. Patterns of children's participation in policy making meetings were clarified**.** The lack of minority participants was identified. |
| Vanhaeght & Bauwens. | Aim: to explore in case study how children experienced a | Empirical | Children's views were minimally involved in the production process. The children also expressed |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| (2016). That's my at: A case study on children's views of cultural policy. | participatory TV cultural policy project and, related to that, which views did they share on cultural policy matters? Sample and methods: Children (n=17) 9 to 13 years old when they participated in the show, a year later, eleven of the 17 children, all of who came from a family with a high level of cultural capital, were interviewed. | | concerns about how their art and cultural practices were represented. They showed a strong sensitivity about democratic access to culture and diversity of culture. Quite a few children recognised their lack of decision-making influence and carefully criticised the disrespectful representation of their art form. Children involved in this TV programme still held rather traditional ideas about cultural education and adults' role in it. |
| Hanafin et al. (2012). Advancing understandings of child well-being through the strategic development of a National Children's Research Programme. | Aim: to discuss how the National Children's Strategy has improved children's lives in Ireland and whether it is coherent with recent understandings of child wellbeing. | Theoretical | Strong evidence-base for policy makers; seek an understanding of the complexity of children's lives, incorporate understanding of the multiple systems surrounding children, improvements of evaluating and monitoring children's lives. |
| Kallio & Hakli. (2011). Tracing children's politics. | Aim: to conceptualise children's political agency and the spaces of children's politics by addressing children's politics in official settings and everyday contexts. The study is based on research concerning child and youth policies and the politics played out in children's everyday life practices. | Theoretical | Three distinct ways in which children can be found to act politically: 1) children's political agency unfolds in planning, decision-making and policymaking processes. In these contexts, children are empowered by educating them in the democratic exercise and active citizenship, involving them in official and semi-official politics and offering them opportunities to voice their concerns publicly. 2) Children are engaged in events and issues known to have political significance in their *quotidian* lives, such as war, political economy and racial struggles. 3) Children practice politics in their seemingly apolitical everyday environments by exercising a degree of autonomy in their mundane practices, whichever they may be. A model for identifying different modes and spaces of children's agency in terms of political involvement and political presence was proposed. |

The composition of the reviewed articles suggests that children´s role in the in policy making remains unclear and children´s participation often only takes place in the context of adult-led processes. If participation is considered important, policy planners and implementers should also consider the ways in which children's participation in such processes could be included and evaluated more fully rather than simply being viewed as an element of functional or administrative practice.

## Discussion

One motivation for this paper – based on the seven identified articles - was to make sense of how children's participation in policymaking has been studied by reviewing the existing body of academic research and discerning what can be learned from that. At first, our search for research evidence related to articles where children actively participated in policymaking, but the lack of such articles was a surprise. Consequently, we then focused on collating data about children's participation in policymaking by looking at theories and conceptual models of children´s participation in public policymaking in various textbooks.

To answer the questions around how children's participation has been facilitated, it is clear that children's participation in adult-led processes remains rare and that where it does exist, it is governed by adults. For instance, the case analysis concerning Israel (Perry-Hazan, 2016) makes explicit the difficulty in finding the best and most appropriate way in which children's views can be taken 'seriously' and included in, or incorporated into, the making of public policy. Interestingly however, in the Israeli Knesset,

children´s perspectives have produced reciprocal dialogues between adults and children and thus stimulated significant societal discussion (Perry-Hazan, 2016). Drawn from the experiences reported in the Perry-Hazan (2016) and Uziely (2018) articles it seems that if adults do not support children's participation, even the most important reforms, from a children´s perspective, remain 'untouched'. This view is supported by the analysis of Forde et.al. (2017), and Vanhaeght and Bauwens (2016), who claim that children themselves are keen to participate but are not taken seriously by adults. As Byrne and Lundy (2019) note, in understanding children's role in policymaking, it is also important to look at the issues and aspects guiding the adult's perspectives.

Byrne and Lundy (2019, p. 363) somewhat pessimistically conclude that even though there are now numerous examples of children and young people being involved in public decision-making, significant challenges remain. In their words (ibid.) "…participation is not always routine, nor is it always meaningful". The lack of meaning in participation refers to the adults' understanding of the process as children's participation is generally viewed from the adult's point of view, for instance through the sensemaking lenses of parents, professionals and adults in general (e.g., Philips et al., 2019; Schalkers et al., 2016; Vogts et al., 2010). Focusing on the adult's point of view however narrows significantly our understanding of children's participation and leans on adult conceptualisations of participation (see also Kallio & Hakli, 2011).

Even though formal models for children´s participation in societal activities exist (e.g., Shrier, 2001), there is little evidence that these models are followed in practice – or that any significant body of scholarly research exists around this topic. Arnott (2008), for instance, has argued that children have seldom featured in these kinds of policy analyses and that while children´s participation in public policy initiatives have been used as a means of (re)building 'trust' and 'renewing democracy', such endeavours are generally lacking in concrete efforts to incorporate children´s views in public policy formulations and strategy building.

Building upon Perry-Hasan´s (2016) conclusions, it seems that children's participation should be approached and evaluated from at least two points of view. First, policymakers need guidance on the ways in which they hear children's views and how best they can then take those views into consideration. Second, there are multiple and diverse approaches through which children´s participation can be organised and maintained. Furthermore, and from the Israeli Knesset case, it is clear that children also need guidance in terms of what kinds of matters can be brought into parliamentary committees or other policy-making arenas and what would be a kind of optimal way to accomplish this. Perry-Hazan (2016) advocates for the view that children's participation does not happen on its own, nor does it take place automatically: instead, in policymaking, participation takes place when children and adults work together to create a common understanding related to what matters, what makes the difference and how different aspects are taken into consideration.

As an example, in the home country of the authors of this paper, children were invited to participate in the making of the first National Child Strategy in late 2020 by creating a questionnaire and organising working groups in which children could participate. The questionnaire attracted 1 344 children to respond to the survey. Moreover, more than 40 children participated in the working groups that put together the National Child Strategy document. The outputs of the workshops were presented to the Parliamentary Committee and were warmly appreciated by the members of the Committee yet, despite this, there remains little academic interest in the process. Another example relates to Scotland, where the Scottish Government explored the nature of children and young people's participation. However, the findings which were based on six case studies, were reported only as a national report (Ross et al., 2018). This is an important point in terms of the need to better understand the role that children's participation plays in both academic and political processes. A concerted academic research effort is therefore required to give children's participation the mandate it needs to become part of every political process. Researchers working with children have many good insights in respect of how, under what terms and in what ways, children can be involved but without the codification that academic research brings to the field, this knowledge remains

piecemeal and *ad hoc*.

In conclusion, children´s rights are an important element of societal development, promoting the betterment of society. This paper suggests, however, that significant gaps remain between practice (practical participation) and the ideals and commitments undertaken globally, particularly in respect of the CRC. This is not to say that children´s participation in the making of public policies is non-existent or that it seldomly takes place. Clearly however the body of relevant academic research around children's participation at the strategic level remains scarce.

It would, in this light, be interesting to know whether leading politicians and senior civil service staff have any real interest in developing children's participation. It would also be interesting to know why academic interest in children´s participation in public policymaking is so limited. Is it because, in existing policymaking processes there is, generally, so little room for any participation given the nature of complex societal problems and the turbulent time-cycles of public policy reforms (e.g., Virtanen & Tammeaid, 2020)? As government reforms are complex and multifaceted in nature, could it also be that children´s participation in policymaking is difficult to grasp for researchers because children's participation simply takes a lot of time and effort, as highlighted in the Scottish example (Ross et al., 2018)? Or is it so that children do take part in public policy making processes, but that scholarly research has simply neglected to view this as a research issue? It is also important to ask whether policymakers – leading politicians and senior civil service staff – have a genuine interest in developing children's participation through different phases of the policy cycle and if so, in determining how the children´s role should best be clarified and how best to get academics to study it (on the practical problems related to this assumption, see Alfandari, 2015).

In summary, a plethora of practical, theoretical, and conceptual guidelines – or ideal models – already exist in terms of treating children as policymaking partners. This is clearly a positive thing. To improve further children's role in policymaking, adults should however widen their perspectives both on what is considered 'political', including how children's views can better be taken into consideration and on how best to research this. Currently, for the professionals who work on the frontline in terms of public services, children's participation seems to be merely something that needs to be executed – a 'tick in the box' exercise – rather than something that is happening based on an agreed pedagogic process. If there is no fundamental base knowledge of how children should be involved, children's participation processes can, for practitioners, quickly come to be seen as 'too difficult to execute' in relation to wider political processes. It is important then to extend the scope of research related to children´s participation in policymaking processes to create a better collective understanding among policymakers of how to use academic research in the development of children´s participation. If participation is seen as being essentially unattached to policymaking, it will not be viewed as a vital part of the policy process and will not attract interest in terms of academic research. Policymakers thus need convincing that children's participation is something to invest in.

## Conclusions

According to Article 12 of the CRC, children have a right to express their views. For McCafferty (2017), this remains one of the most frequently cited principles in the UN convention in question. Reynaert et al. (2009) have stated that the focus of research on Article 12 has concentrated on three specific topics: firstly, on autonomy and participation rights as the new norm in children's rights practice and policy, secondly on children's rights *vs.* parental rights and thirdly on the global children's rights industry (i.e., on the diversity of conceptual dimensions regarding participation). From the perspective of public administration and public services then, the question of service-user involvement deserves further attention. The research literatures in respect of the abovementioned issues have proliferated over the last decade indicating the importance of considering service users´ views in upgrading and co-creating public service delivery (Alves, 2013).

The aim of this review was to focus on the role of academic research when discussing participation in order to discover how children's participation in policy-making processes is analysed in academic

research. The problem seems to be that although there is a lot happening in relation to children's participation, there remains a lack of academic studies evaluating this participation. This leads us to question; What do we know about chidlren's participation in policymaking processes? The answer being, not very much. Do children take part as autonomous subjects in the making of public policies and are children recognised as partners in public policymaking in the various phases of public policy protocols? Perhaps, but we cannot be sure because it is not documented by systematic research. Although the analysis in this paper has limitations (e.g., comprising only a handful of studies published in academic journals, and confined only to the English language, focusing on western OECD-countries and with only a limited knowledge of the possible gray literature), this review suggests that the answers to both these questions are negative. The reviewed articles indicate that children are not part of policymaking process in ways that support and consider their views and opinions or their ideas around participation more generally. Instead, children tend to have only a perfunctory/superficial role in participatory processes while adults retain the power to either take children's views into consideration or leave them out.

The issue of children's participation does however have significant connotations for adult's democratic and participatory methods but remains too often viewed solely from an adult point of view. There is evidence that participation is seen as something that adults are creating for children when it should perhaps be understood and calibrated through the topics children themselves want to be involved in. On the other hand, it seems that children's participation depends on the attitudes, good will and understanding of the adults involved. How adults conceive of the value of participation and the opportunities it affords, as well as the connotations it has and how participatory practices are created, represent crucial decision-making 'points' in the future evolution of children´s opportunities to participate in the making of public policies.

The main findings of this study can be summarised as follows. First, more systematic ways to explore and research children's participation in policymaking processes should be adopted, since the topic (children as participants) in academic terms, clearly remains under-researched. Second, based on the analysed articles, it is clear that policymakers need to change their attitudes towards children's participation and acknowledge that children can be active agents within the policymaking process. Children's role in policymaking should thus be defined more clearly and systematically. To do this however we need more academic research. Based on the articles reviewed for this research paper, it is obvious that the topic of children´s participation in policymaking processes is under-utilised as a research focus and thus that policymakers are unaible to easily access and test the pragmatic tools required to help improve children's participation. A lot is going on in terms of actual participation but the lacuna in terms of academic research makes it difficult to evaluate what works and what does not. Without the necessary embedding research effort the possibility exists that participation remains *ad hoc*, unscientific and unstructured.

Finally, it should be questioned why this is so: what explains this paucity in terms of participation studies as a part of public policymaking focusing on how and when children could and should participate? We believe we have identified a two-dimensional lacuna in relation to this topic: firstly, the scarcity of participation cases (as reported in reviewed articles) and secondly the scarcity in relation to the evaluation of already existing participation practice.

## Declarations

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