Children's experiences of meaningful participation in child protection decision-making: A systematic literature review

Maaike van Bockhooven

S3473929

Master's program Youth 0-21, Society and Policy

Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences

University of Groningen

Abstract

English

Article 12 of the UNCRC articulates that children have the right to participate in matters affecting their lives. Research has underlined the importance of children's participation in child protection (CP) services specifically. Nevertheless, practical barriers impede children from utilizing their participatory rights. Also, children's experiences of participation are underexposed within this context. Therefore, this review aims to synthesize existing knowledge on children's experiences of participation in decision-making processes of CP services. From the concept of *meaningful participation*, it is examined whether and how children experience being informed, heard and involved in CP decision-making. To address the research questions, this study employs a systematic review. A literature search was carried out using the databases SocINDEX, Web of Science and Scopus. After the screening process, 15 studies were eligible for the analysis. The findings revealed children being informed, heard and involved to a limited extent. The relationship with their social worker, the emphasis on children's competences and the protective nature of the CP system may influence these experiences. Implications arising from the results relate to including children and CP professionals in policy making and keeping in mind the diverse needs of children in practice.

Dutch

Artikel 12 van het IVRK stelt dat kinderen het recht hebben om te participeren in kwesties die hun leven beïnvloeden. Onderzoek heeft het belang van kinderparticipatie binnen de jeugdbescherming benadrukt. Desondanks zijn er praktische barrières die kinderen hinderen in het gebruik maken van hun recht op participatie. Ook zijn de ervaringen van kinderen in deze context onderbelicht. Daarom is het doel van deze studie om bestaande kennis over ervaringen van kinderen met hun eigen participatie in besluitvormingsprocessen binnen de jeugdbescherming te duiden. Vanuit het concept *betekenisvolle participatie* wordt onderzocht of en hoe kinderen ervaren geïnformeerd, gehoord en betrokken te worden in deze processen. De onderzoeksvragen worden beantwoord door middel van een systematische literatuurstudie. Er werd een literatuursearch uitgevoerd met behulp van de databases SocINDEX, Web of Science en Scopus. Na het screeningsproces kwamen 15 studies in aanmerking voor de analyse. De resultaten tonen aan dat kinderen slechts in beperkte mate worden geïnformeerd, gehoord en betrokken. De relatie met hun maatschappelijk werker, de focus op de competenties van kinderen en de beschermende aard van het jeugdbescherming systeem kunnen deze ervaringen beïnvloeden. Implicaties die voortkomen uit de resultaten relateren aan het betrekken van kinderen en professionals bij het maken van beleid en het rekening houden met de diverse behoeften van kinderen in de praktijk.

Contents

1. Introduction

In recent times, there has been a growing emphasis on engaging children in all matters that affect them (Plunkett, 2023). The importance of child participation is increasingly stressed within policy and practice internationally (Crowley, 2015). Central in this development is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Article 12 of the UNCRC articulates that children have the right to engage in matters profoundly affecting their lives (United Nations, 1989). Additionally, Article 2 of the UNCRC stipulates that the right to participate applies universally to all children, irrespective of their race, color, sex, language, religion, political opinions, nationality, ethnicity, social origin, property, disability or birth status (United Nations, 1989). The Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) complemented this by discouraging the imposition of age limits in legislation or practices related to the participatory rights of children, as stated in their General Comment on Article 12 (CRC, 2009).

Looking at the field of child protection (CP) specifically, recent developments have also shown a growing recognition of the child's right to participate. Many countries like the Netherlands and the United Kingdom have paid special attention to including children in CP decision-making in their legislation, policy making and practice communities (Bouma et al., 2018). This focus goes hand in hand with a growing body of research dedicated to the concept of children's participation in the CP system, underscoring its significance. Common research topics within this domain include CP professionals' views on children's participation (e.g. Toivonen et al., 2021; Woodman et al., 2018), methods and strategies for enabling children's participation (e.g. Dixon et al., 2019; Toros & Sindi, 2022), and analyses of policies and legislations related to children's participation in CP services (e.g. Schiller et al., 2023; Zodins et al., 2021).

In this context, the UNCRC and recent scientific literature on children's participation in the CP system have conceptualized children as 'beings'. This child image has been crucial for recognizing children's right to participate, thereby supporting their potential to evolve into full citizens (Heimer & Palme, 2016). Simultaneously, a prevailing perspective has characterized the child as 'becoming'. Long-standing societal views have emphasized that children require protection, lack the competence to make important decisions and are still in the process of developing into complete human beings (Krappmann, 2010). Consequently, this viewpoint has influenced policy making. Policies related to children's safeguarding often emphasize children being dependent on adults, automatically limiting their opportunities to participate (Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2017). This is unfortunate, as a focus on participation is

closely tied to protection. Kosher and Ben-Arieh (2020) demonstrated that the rights to participation and protection can coexist, by arguing that facilitating children's participation leads to enhanced protection. When children had a voice in family matters that impact their lives, they were better shielded from harm (Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2020).

In addition to the emphasis on children's right to participate in the UNCRC and the recognition that it enhances their protection, research is shedding light on the benefits and significance associated with participation opportunities. A scoping review by Vis et al. (2011) explored the relationship between health and participation. The analysis concluded that participation yielded positive side effects for children, such as enhanced feelings of safety and improved success of care arrangements (Vis et al., 2011). The latter was also identified by Ángeles Balsells and colleagues (2017), as they found that involving children in understanding their parents' efforts and accomplishments toward returning home led to a more successful and stable family reunification. Moreover, several studies identified positive effects of participation on children's personal development, including their self-esteem (Burgund Isakov & Hrncic, 2021; Skauge et al., 2021; Van Bijleveld et al., 2015; Vis et al., 2011), (emotional) well-being (Husby et al., 2018; Skauge et al., 2021; Vis et al., 2011), feelings of empowerment (Burgund Isakov & Hrncic, 2021; Husby et al., 2018; Van Bijleveld et al., 2015), feelings of autonomy (Van Bijleveld et al., 2015) and adaptive skills (Burgund Isakov & Hrncic, 2021).

Although the many benefits of children's participation are underlined in research, children still encounter barriers to utilize their participatory rights. A recent literature review by Falch-Eriksen and colleagues (2021) revealed that children experienced feeling unable to express themselves throughout CP procedures. The barriers children face might be caused by several factors. First, social workers have impeded children's participation by labeling many situations as inappropriate for child participation (Van Bijleveld et al., 2015). Furthermore, social workers often focus more on protecting children rather than empowering them (McCafferty, 2017; Vis et al., 2012) and they lack a comprehensive understanding of what children's participation actually involves (Van Bijleveld et al., 2015). When social workers are interested in involving children in CP decision-making, they often encounter organizational structures that hinder participation opportunities (Seim & Slettebø, 2017). An example of this is that many organizations involved in CP procedures prioritize risk management in their approaches (Bolin, 2018). Related to this is the persisting culture of *protectionism* and *adultism* within the CP system (Bruce, 2014). Often, it is believed that problems in CP cases are adult centric, leading to limited involvement of children in decision-

making procedures (Vis et al., 2012). Together, these research findings indicate that there is room for improvement when it comes to facilitating children's participation rights in CP decision-making.

Although research has explored the benefits of child participation and identified barriers and facilitating factors for this right, the concept of *meaningful participation* remains underexposed. For participation to become meaningful, Bouma and colleagues (2018) argued that children's participation should consist of three dimensions: informing, hearing and involving. They further elaborated this in their Model of Meaningful Participation. Based on Article 12 of the UNCRC, this model was conceptualized from the perspective of the child's right to participate (Bouma et al., 2018). The first dimension is *informing*, which entails that the child must be informed about all aspects relevant to decisions being made. The second dimension is *hearing*, which refers to the child being encouraged to voice their opinion and is really listened to. The third dimension is *involving*, which means that children's views are carefully considered and included in decision-making processes. By taking into account these three dimensions, certain standards are set for practitioners and decision-making systems (Bouma et al., 2018). This is important as guidelines for promoting participation are often missing and implementing these guidelines in the CP practice would improve children's opportunities to participate (Vis et al., 2012).

Since the development of the Model of Meaningful Participation, several studies have used it as a foundation for conducting their analyses (e.g. Lätsch et al., 2023; Slaatto et al., 2023). Furthermore, a systematic review by Toros (2021) used the concept of meaningful participation to research CP social workers' perspectives on children's participation in decision-making. The findings indicate that children often faced limited or non-existent opportunities to voice their opinions, which was attributed to organizational constraints and social workers' communication skills. Additionally, social workers found it challenging to engage with younger children and the child's age was considered a crucial factor for determining their participation in CP decision-making (Toros, 2021). Despite this review providing useful insights into children's participation in CP processes, missing remains an in-depth understanding of children's own experiences of meaningful participation.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 Historical overview of children's right to participate

The evolution of children's participation through time reflects changing societal attitudes towards the rights of young individuals. Before the 18th century, children were

generally viewed as the personal property of their parents. Mainly fathers were given power and control over their offspring, allowing them to punish and mistreat their children (Kosher et al., 2016). The parent-child relationship was characterized as distant, due to high rates of infant and child mortality. Herewith connects that children were not yet recognized as unique human beings with their own identities. The needs and rights of children were ignored and their position in society had very low value (Weisberg, 1978).

The 18th and 19th century were symbolic of rapid industrialization. Although the Industrial Revolution brought important organizational and social changes, children faced miserable conditions. They were subjected to labor from a very young age, which was justified around the idea of teaching them discipline (Scott, 1993). As awareness grew, societies became more concerned about children's welfare (Weisberg, 1978). The agenda regarding children's status shifted towards a humanitarian stance, focusing on protecting children and facilitating their rights (Kosher et al., 2016). Moreover, provision rights for children gained more attention. As populated cities gave rise to crime and the spread of diseases, schools were viewed as a solution to isolate children from these problematic developments (Kosher et al., 2016).

The late 19th and early 20th century portrayed childhood as a protected phase. Society began to perceive children as a unique group requiring protection from potential childhood hazards (Hart, 1991). During this shift, state, private and religious agencies started intervening in family life to safeguard children. This was achieved through the establishment of three elements. First, compulsory education laws created new educational opportunities and shifted the responsibility for children to the public by legitimizing family interventions (Weisberg, 1978). Second, professional CP services were installed with the aim of protecting children from parental abuse and neglect (Kosher et al., 2016). Third, the juvenile justice system was established to address the specific needs and circumstances of young offenders (Scott, 1993).

While the previous periods led to global acknowledgement of children's rights, it was not until the second half of the 20th century that children were viewed as citizens capable of participation and entitled to rights (Kosher et al., 2016). The origin of the UNCRC in 1989 can be seen as an important milestone in the development of children's rights and participation. As described earlier in this introduction, Article 12 of the Convention states that all children who are capable of forming their own views have the right to participate (United Nations, 1989). Although the UNCRC has been ratified by 196 countries and globally impacted legislations and policies, criticism suggests that it has predominantly implemented a

Western image of childhood (Quennerstedt et al., 2018). This is why certain countries have also adopted policies that are more in line with regional beliefs (Johnson et al., 2020).

The UNCRC has laid the foundation for the presence of children's participation in today's society. Right now, there are about two billion children living on Earth (United Nations Population Fund, 2023). This number is only expected to increase in the future, making it especially important to focus on the rights of children. This is why the United Nations created the function Envoy of Youth in 2013. Its main goal is to strengthen the bond with youth and promote mechanisms for child participation (Lee, 2013). The establishment of the Envoy of Youth can be seen as the start of a period that placed a renewed focus on involving children in decision-making (Dyers & Giroux, 2022).

In the last decade, the focus of children's participation has shifted towards active citizenship and themes of advocacy and activism. For example, many young people engage in the fight against global warming. Today's generation experiences more environmental concerns, because they have to cope with stronger negative consequences of climate change in the future than previous generations (Wallis & Loy, 2021). This results in children and young people participating in large demonstrations and school strikes all over the world. Next to this, social justice is an important topic for children's participation. Young people are key actors in efforts to address equal rights and opportunities for all human beings. Examples include the Black Lives Matter movement protesting racial injustice, and the #MeToo movement against sexual abuse and harassment (Wray-Lake, 2019).

1.1.2 Models for children's participation

Because Article 12 of the UNCRC remains quite undefined, researchers have developed a number of models for children's participation over the years. Although these models vary in their design and implementation, they collectively address a continuum of participation in decision-making processes (Kosher et al., 2016). This section outlines three child participation models that are well known and widely used.

One of the most popular models is the Ladder of Children's Participation developed by Hart (1992). This model contains eight levels of participation, ranging from the first level of 'manipulation' to the highest level of 'child-initiated, shared decisions with adults'. At this highest level, children are in control of decision-making processes with the support of adults. With this model, various professional groups and institutions have reconsidered their approaches when working with young people (Hart, 2008). Like Hart's Ladder, Shier's 'Pathways to Participation' Model (2001) includes two core dimensions: hearing the child and

giving the child the opportunity to influence decision-making. The model of Shier is based on five levels of participation, which focus more on the roles adults have in the process of empowerment. At the highest level, children share decision-making powers and responsibilities with the organization. In addition, Shier (2001) distinguishes between three degrees of commitment at each level: openings, opportunities and obligations.

Similar to the Model of Meaningful Participation, which serves as the basis for this analysis, the Lundy model (2007) is grounded in Article 12 of the UNCRC. This model was conceptualized from a right's perspective and includes four key elements. The first element 'space' means that children must receive the opportunity to express views. In the second element, 'voice', children must be facilitated to express these views. The third element 'audience' means that the views of children must be listened to. Lastly, the fourth element is 'influence', which focuses on children's views being acted upon. Besides existing separately, these elements overlap with each other. Notable is that Lundy's model (2007) has been used and adopted by several (inter)national organizations, agencies and governments. An example of this is the Irish National 2015-2020 Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015).

1.2 Aim and research questions

Recognizing the significance of children's participation in CP decision-making and its potential positive outcomes is crucial. Participation has many benefits for children and taking their views into account can lead to a better understanding of children's needs, and quality improvements in decision-making and outcomes. Therefore, this study aims to explore children's experiences of meaningful participation in CP decision-making processes. The analysis seeks to clarify whether and how children are heard, informed and involved within these processes. The following research question will be answered: *(How) do children experience meaningful participation in decision-making processes of child protection services?*

The research question is divided into three sub-questions:

1. *(How) are children being informed in decision-making processes of child protection services?*
2. *(How) are children being heard in decision-making processes of child protection services?*

3. *(How) are children being involved in decision-making processes of child protection services?*

1.3 Relevance

Conducting research about children's experiences of meaningful participation in CP decision-making is important for several reasons. First, taking children's experiences into account is essential to better understand their interests and desires and how to engage them in participation opportunities (Bouma et al., 2018). Moreover, children bring additional information that is valuable for the CP process. Therefore, including children's knowledge about their own family situations can contribute to the quality of CP decision-making and outcomes (Enroos et al., 2017). With this, the provided interventions and services are more tailored to meet children's individual needs. Second, the findings are important in the broad context of emerging CP systems (Kirka & Tamutiené, 2023). As involving children in matters that affect them can be seen as a moral obligation (Enroos et al., 2017), it is important for policy makers and CP professionals to get an overview of children's experiences. This allows for a better understanding of the impact of decision-making processes on children's well-being, which is essential for assessing CP decisions and making improvements in policies and practices to ensure meaningful participation.

2. Methodology

The present study employs a systematic review in order to address whether and how children experience meaningful participation in CP decision-making. This research method enables the systematic collection and synthesis of prior research, and thereby establishes a robust foundation for advancing knowledge (Snyder, 2019). This study followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic review and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) protocol and its most recent guideline for reporting systematic reviews (Page et al., 2021). The PRISMA protocol was used for this systematic review, because following the PRISMA checklists and conducting a flow chart map provides complete transparency and more clarity to the data (Munn et al., 2018).

2.1 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The inclusion criteria were English written peer-reviewed academic journal articles focusing on the participation of children in CP decision-making, published between 2013 and 2023. This time period was chosen to include the most recent knowledge and developments in the research area. The review included studies that examine children that were under 18 years old when the data was collected. Only qualitative studies that focused on current or recent experiences of children in care were included. When a study focused on the experiences of multiple actors (e.g. children and social workers), it was only included when the children's outcomes could be clearly distinguished from other outcomes. When a study also included youth participants from 18 years old, it was only included if their experiences could be clearly distinguished from children's experiences. When it came to geographical location, there were no criteria for where the data in the study must be collected.
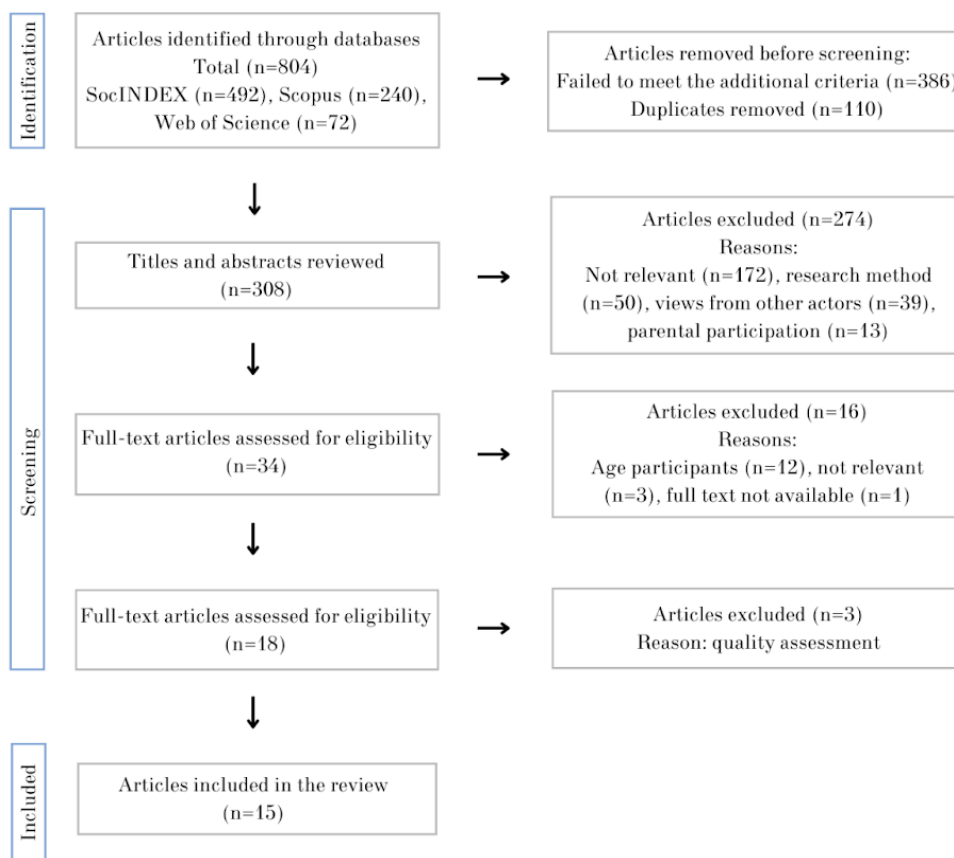
2.2 Search strategy

A literature search was carried out using the following databases: SocINDEX, Web of Science and Scopus. SocINDEX is a well-known bibliographic database for the field of sociology and provides good coverage of peer-reviewed journal articles (Tyler et al., 2017). Web of Science is another citation database with multidisciplinary coverage of journals, providing high-quality, peer-reviewed literature (Schnell, 2017). Scopus holds the distinction of being the world's largest abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed articles (Schotten et al., 2017). The following terms were combined for the search of the articles: "child participation" AND "child protection" or "child welfare". Although this study focused on "decision-making", it was decided to not add this specific concept to the search terms. This

was done to ensure that relevant studies lacking this term were not excluded from the search results. The first search was performed on January 2, 2024 and the last search was implemented on January 7, 2024.

2.3 Data extraction and analysis

Firstly, the search terms were inserted in the database SocINDEX which resulted in n=492 hits. After this, the criteria for language, peer-reviewed status, year of publication, and source type were applied, resulting in n=239 articles. Hereafter, two duplicates were discovered in the search results, leaving n=237 hits to scan. After scanning the titles n=81 articles remained. Reading their abstracts led to n=24 articles eligible for full text analysis. The database Web of Science showed n=72 hits and after applying the additional criteria n=28 articles remained. Despite filtering on English written articles only, one Spanish written article still showed in the results list, leaving n=27 articles. As follows, the duplicates were removed and n=15 articles remained. After scanning all titles n=10 articles were left to read their abstracts, resulting in n=3 articles eligible for full text reading. Inserting the key terms in the database Scopus led to n=240 hits. After the application of the additional criteria, n=154 articles remained. Despite filtering on academic journal articles only, two results did not meet this criterion, leaving n=152 articles. Hereafter, all duplicates were removed and n=56 articles remained. Scanning all titles reduced the results to n=20 and after reading these abstracts n=7 were left for full text analysis. After reading the full texts of n=34 articles from the three databases, n=18 remained for the evaluation of their scientific quality. The selected quality assessment tool for qualitative studies was drawn directly from Hawker et al. (2002). A detailed explanation of this quality assessment can be found in Appendix A. The quality assessment reduced the final study selection for this systematic review to n=15 articles. A more detailed process of the identification, screening and inclusion of studies is presented in the flow chart below (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Flow chart of the included articles

Identification	Articles identified through databases Total (n=804) SocINDEX (n=492), Scopus (n=240), Web of Science (n=72)	→	Articles removed before screening: Failed to meet the additional criteria (n=386) Duplicates removed (n=110)
Screening	Titles and abstracts reviewed (n=308)	→	Articles excluded (n=274) Reasons: Not relevant (n=172), research method (n=50), views from other actors (n=39), parental participation (n=13)
	Full-text articles assessed for eligibility (n=34)	→	Articles excluded (n=16) Reasons: Age participants (n=12), not relevant (n=3), full text not available (n=1)
	Full-text articles assessed for eligibility (n=18)	→	Articles excluded (n=3) Reason: quality assessment
Included	Articles included in the review (n=15)		

Additionally, it was necessary to place the search terms between brackets in Web of Science and Scopus to ensure a correct search. This was not required for the database SocINDEX. Besides, the identification and screening of the articles was only done by the main researcher and not checked by a second researcher.

2.4 Risk of bias

The included studies might present a risk of bias due to the fact that most studies were conducted in Western countries. Tobin and Cashmore (2020) stated that the realization of children's rights, including their participation, is deeply connected to and dependent on the community and culture in which children live. This provides the context which determines whether their participatory rights will be accessible. Because perspectives on children's participation may differ between countries and cultures, it was expected to lead to bias in which areas this topic is researched. Nevertheless, the included studies represent data extracted from five different European countries. Also, two studies that extracted data from

South Africa and one study that conducted research in Australia were included. This allowed for some diversity to the geographical locations.

Another risk of bias might occur due to the focus of this systematic review on studies with child participants. Children that share their current or past experiences with CP services could experience stress or re-traumatization during the participation process (Kiili & Moilanen, 2019b). This might lead to a biased representation of the experiences that children choose to share and how they express these experiences. Nevertheless, a recent systematic review found that the methodological and ethical emphasis in qualitative CP research lies on ensuring children's anonymity and privacy, avoidance of children's harm and acquiring informed consent from children who participate in the research (Kiili & Moilanen, 2019a[1], as cited in Kiili & Moilanen, 2019b). By this, research involving children in care considers their vulnerable position. Furthermore, children's perspectives on matters that affect them hold importance as they are the ones most capable of providing information on their own lives (Schenk & Williamson, 2005). Taking this into account, I decided to include current and recent experiences to allow for a more diverse and representative display of children's experiences of meaningful participation.

3. Results

[1] This is a previous book chapter by the same authors, only available in the Finnish language. The English written study by Kiili & Moilanen (2019b) looks back to the Finnish written book chapter.

The eligible studies included for the analysis were investigated for their findings on children's experiences of meaningful participation in CP services. An overview of the included articles can be found in Table 2 (see Appendix B). The 15 studies are presented in alphabetical order by the first author's last name, followed by the categories: country, sample, method, study domain and key findings relevant to the present study.

Of the 15 included studies, 12 were conducted in European countries (i.e. England/United Kingdom, Norway, Estonia, Lithuania and Germany), two were produced in South Africa and one in Australia. Looking at the study population, 11 studies solely focused on child participants and four studies also included other actors' views (e.g. social workers or foster carers). Because these data could be clearly distinguished from children's experiences, it was decided that these studies were eligible for inclusion. The methods used to collect data from children were individual (semi-structured) interviews (n=10), focus groups (n=1), a mixture of the above (n=2), and activity-based interviews (n=2). Lastly, the key findings in the table all relate to one or more dimensions of the Model of Meaningful Participation (Bouma et al., 2018).

The synthesis of the findings was divided into three sections, based on the dimensions of meaningful participation. These are sequentially; informing, hearing and involving. I aimed to provide valuable insights based on the three dimensions' subcomponents. The first section (informing) reflected on whether and how children experience being informed about the right to grow up in safety, the right to participate, the participation process (i.e. possibilities to participation, consequences, focus and aim and potential impact of participation), content: what is happening and what to expect, decisions, and how perspectives are given weight in decision-making (Bouma et al., 2018). The second section (hearing) addressed whether and how children experienced possibilities to express views and opinions, information being gathered from them, professionals' willingness to listen to them, dialogue and individual meetings with the child (Bouma et al., 2018). The third section (involving) analyzed whether and how children experienced their views and opinions being heard before decisions are made, their involvement in decision-making, and consideration of their perspectives in decision-making (Bouma et al., 2018). Furthermore, the 13 questions of the Meaningful Participation Assessment Tool, stemming from the Model of Meaningful Participation, were used as guidance to structure the results (for more information, see Middel et al., 2021).

3.1 Informing

3.1.1 Right to grow up in safety

Following Article 19 of the UNCRC, children have the right to grow up without violence (UNCRC, 1989). This right matters even more to children involved in CP services, as they have experienced forms of child abuse or neglect. Although it is crucial for these children to be aware of their right to grow up in safety, no study reflected on children's experiences of being informed about this right. Despite this, the following study illustrated that some children were already aware of their right to a safe upbringing. Saarnik et al. (2023) aimed to gather children's experiences of participation from Estonian children who were involved in CP removal practices. The findings indicate that these children already possessed knowledge about their rights to proper care and protection from abuse (Saarnik et al., 2023).

3.1.2 Right to participate

Next to the right to grow up in safety, Article 12 of the UNCRC describes that children have the right to voice their views and opinion in matters that affect their lives (UNCRC, 1989). Unfortunately, no study reflected on children experiencing being informed about their participation rights. Kirka and Tamutiené (2023) illustrated this by investigating Lithuanian children's participation in the CP process. Children's experiences indicated that they did not talk much about their right to participate, but just answered formal questions from social workers (Kirka & Tamutiené, 2023). The study by Saarnik et al. (2023) adds to this by showing that children were not informed adequately about their right to express themselves freely. Despite this, some children already had knowledge about their participation rights. Johannisen and colleagues (2019) researched children, living in a child and youth center, to explore how they experienced their participation in multidisciplinary meetings. They found that children had a (good) understanding of their right to participate during these meetings. Moreover, Race and Frost (2022) explored children's participation in the English safeguarding context. A 16-year-old participant strongly emphasized his right to contribute to processes that impacted his life. Understanding and articulating this right to participate may be fostered by the child's age and the amount of time spent in care (Race & Frost, 2022).

3.1.3 Participation process

None of the included studies addressed whether and how children experienced being informed about components of the participation process. Without this information, children cannot make a considered decision about if they want to participate and in what form (CRC, 2009). Besides children making their own decision on whether they want to participate or not,

professionals should ask children about their preferences regarding participation. The study by Dillon and colleagues (2016), on how children with a current or previous CP plan experienced their participation opportunities, discussed this issue. One male participant described that he was not inquired by social workers on whether or not he wanted to be involved in the decision-making process. This made him feel left out from matters that concerned his life and discouraged him to participate (Dillon et al., 2016).

3.1.4 Content: what is happening and what to expect

Meaningful participation requires children to be well-informed about their current situation and what they can expect from CP services (Cossar et al., 2016). First, children should receive information about the content of the report. There was only one study that described children experiencing knowing much about their family's situation (Race & Frost, 2022). Other studies showed a trend of ignorance among the participating children regarding concerns and CP involvement in their families. The study by Lauri et al. (2021), exploring Estonian children's views of participation within the CP assessment context, illustrated this. One participant explained not knowing why she and her mother had to visit the CP office regularly and another child stated that the social worker gave no explanation for her visits at the family home (Lauri et al., 2021). Children in other studies similarly lacked information on their cases: participating children did not receive sufficient details from professionals regarding concerns and reasons for separation (Saarnik et al., 2023), and issues related to suspicion of child maltreatment (Søftestad et al., 2013). Furthermore, three studies discussed the subject of children being informed about their CP plan. In Cossar and colleagues' (2016) study, nearly all children knew of the existence of a CP plan. Despite this, another study showed that some children were unsure about the purpose of their CP plan (Dillon, 2021). Furthermore, the majority of children did not see or read these reports (Dillon, 2021; Dillon et al., 2016). However, a few children did read all or part of their CP plan and even discussed these reports with their social worker before a meeting (Cossar et al., 2016).

Second, the question is whether and how children received content-related information about the investigation (process). Initially, three studies highlighted positive experiences of children being informed about what they could expect. Participating children described receiving advance information upon referral to CP services (Husby et al., 2018) and explanations on the subsequent protection measures (Kirka & Tamutiené, 2023; Søftestad et al., 2013). Unfortunately, these experiences were overshadowed by children who shared more negative stories. Children expressed not receiving adequate information about the CP process

(Dillon et al., 2016; Saarnik et al., 2023) and the potential outcomes (Dillon et al., 2016). This became more clear from two studies describing children getting unexpectedly confronted with a CP intervention. All child participants in Dillon and colleagues' (2016) study shared being surprised by CP services after returning home from school, resulting in feelings of distress, fear and anger. Furthermore, one participant narrated getting picked up from school by a social worker without receiving an explanation and getting to see her mother before the separation (Lauri et al., 2021). These experiences show that children were often excluded by adults from receiving information about the process. This issue was also highlighted by Nunes (2022), aiming to explore the participation opportunities of German children in care within their out-of-home placement. Many participating children felt that the cooperation between their caregivers and public services was inadequately communicated to them. They expressed a desire for transparency and preferred open communication from other stakeholders to have a voice in the process (Nunes, 2022). These findings reflect children experiencing not receiving much information about the content of the CP process.

3.1.5 Decisions

It is crucial for children in care to be informed about the outcomes of the decision-making process and the impact of these decisions on their lives (Cossar et al., 2016). This implies that children should know whether support is provided and what they can expect from this support. While some children had the decision to relocate to a safe place explained by social workers, generally, children received minimal information about the decisions made (Kirka & Tamutiené, 2023). This was also found by Husby and colleagues (2018), who explored Norwegian children's experiences of their collaboration with CP professionals. The results showed that the participating children could not remember being properly informed about the services provided to them (Husby et al., 2018). A notable narrative involved a girl's experience with manipulation by the responsible professionals; she was lied about the placement decision and location where professionals would take her (Saarnik et al., 2023).

Moreover, it is crucial for children to receive information about any changes in decisions concerning their safety. From all studies, only one child participant shared a positive story; she experienced receiving information about future changes in visitation arrangements with her father (Søftestad et al., 2013). Two studies, focusing on children in foster care, show a different picture. Despite adapting well to a temporary care facility and becoming familiar with the procedure, one participant unexpectedly faced a decision to move to another location

(Kirka & Tamutiené, 2023). A similar experience was found by Saarnik et al. (2023), as some children expressed not receiving any information about their new foster home. In summary, children were often inadequately informed about the outcomes of or changes in decision-making and their impact.

3.1.6 How perspectives are given weight in decision-making

Another condition for meaningful participation is that children must receive feedback on how their interests are given weight during the decision-making process (CRC, 2009). No included study reflected on children's experiences of whether or not they were informed about this issue. However, certain interactions with professionals and experiences of children indicate that their perspectives were not highly valued in the decision-making process. An example was found by Johannisen et al. (2021), who aimed to establish guiding principles for stimulating and facilitating child participation in multidisciplinary meetings. One participant recounted being told by social workers that she could not make her own decisions due to her young age (Johannisen et al., 2021). Through this, the significance of age and maturity in determining the weight given to children's perspectives becomes evident. This was also reflected in Dillon and colleagues' (2016) study, including children's experiences of being assessed for their abilities to contribute in decision-making regarding their protection.

Furthermore, participants from two studies were dissatisfied with the outcomes of the decision-making process. Pert and colleagues (2017) explored English children's feelings toward their participation in review meetings. They discovered that children felt disconnected from the decisions made, as professionals did not consider their views and perceived their participation as futile (Pert et al., 2017). A similar outcome was found by Sæbjørnsen and Willumsen (2017), detailing the experience of a participant who felt that professionals appeared to listen, but never took any action based on what he shared with them. These findings suggest that the child's perspective was not given much weight in decision-making.

3.2 Hearing

3.2.1 Possibilities to express views and opinion

Following the CRC (2009), children should be provided with opportunities to express their views and opinions. In this context, professionals' efforts to empower children in decision-making processes are crucial. This was illustrated by Lauri and colleagues' (2021) study, in which child participants experienced supportive actions by social workers to enhance their participation and collaboration. Conversely, other studies addressed children's

experiences with infrequent invitations by the social worker to share their views (Stafford et al., 2021), dealing with social workers who decided everything for them (Cossar et al., 2016), and having their rights to contribute to decision-making restricted (Johannisen et al., 2019; Saarnik et al., 2023). These experiences were related to the relationship children had with their social worker. A positive relationship was emphasized by eight studies as essential for children to voice their wishes and feelings (e.g. Cossar et al., 2016; Dillon et al., 2016). Children who trusted their social worker felt more at ease sharing information (e.g. Lauri et al., 2021; Saarnik et al., 2023) and received greater support throughout the decision-making process (Johannisen et al., 2021). Hence, a strong and trusting relationship could positively impact children's participation. Conversely, children experiencing deficiencies in the relationship with their social worker were less likely to characterize their participation as meaningful (Cossar et al., 2016).

Children described several factors that could influence the relationship they had with their social worker. First, changes in social workers was an important issue. For example, all participating children in the study by Dillon (2021) had had two or more social workers. When the assigned social worker was changed frequently, it could lead to children feeling frustrated and angry (Dillon et al., 2016), less willing to disclose their wishes and feelings (Kirka & Tamutiené, 2023), and less able to build meaningful relationships with social workers (Saarnik et al., 2023). Second, social workers' efforts to get to know the child was considered crucial for a positive relationship (Lauri et al., 2021). Children experienced more open communication when social workers engaged with them in various activities (Lauri et al., 2021) and visited them outside of CP service hours (Saarnik et al., 2023). Third, the accessibility of social workers played an important role. Only a few children had direct access to their social workers' contact information (Dillon et al., 2016). More often, children had to seek assistance from others to connect with their social workers when wanting to share something personal (Dillon et al., 2016; Saarnik et al., 2023). When social workers did not reach out to the children on a regular basis, it made children feel less secure to share their views (Saarnik et al., 2023). In summary, these factors could impact the relationship children had with their social workers, influencing their opportunities to participate.

3.2.2 Gathering information from the child

Children found it important to participate in CP services as they had extensive knowledge and firsthand experience with their own situation (Race & Frost, 2022; Stafford et al., 2021). This is why children emphasized the importance of social workers gathering

information directly from them (Lauri et al., 2021). However, children frequently encountered situations in which social workers did not ask them any information. Dillon and colleagues' (2016) study exemplified this, as one participant felt that the social worker had already determined his family's problems without receiving the opportunity to provide input. Often, social workers only asked things to parents when gathering information on the specific situation (Lauri et al., 2021). When children were asked to share personal information, feeling safe was crucial. Multiple children emphasized the importance of confidentiality, as they experienced that details shared in private conversations were discussed with other actors without their consent (e.g. Saarnik et al., 2023; Sæbjørnsen & Willumsen, 2017). These experiences highlight children's concerns about social workers not directly seeking from them and the lack of confidentiality in the child - social worker relationship.

3.2.3 Willingness to listen to the child

For meaningful participation to arise, professionals must show the willingness to listen to children's views and opinions (CRC, 2009). A participant from Race and Frost's (2022) study highlights this by sharing that children's opinions should be acknowledged and social workers should genuinely listen to what they had to say. This was important for children, as it contributed to them feeling more valued and happier during the CP process (Stafford et al., 2021). Four included studies shared experiences of children getting listened to (e.g. Pert et al., 2017). In these instances, it was crucial for children that social workers dedicated time to listen to them and ask about their feelings (Husby et al., 2018; Kirka & Tamutiené, 2023).

Unfortunately, several studies showed children's experiences of not getting listened to. Dillon's (2021) study, exploring how English children participated in their own CP planning, illustrates this. One child felt that social workers frequently brought up his past, despite discussing a preference not to discuss it (Dillon, 2021). Moreover, multiple children conveyed feelings of not being listened to, taken seriously, or supported in expressing their views (Husby et al., 2018). Some children even reported that social workers expressed a lack of interest in listening, because it did not matter what children said (Race & Frost, 2022). Consequently, some children felt limited in their ability to participate when professionals demonstrated an unwillingness to listen (Sæbjørnsen & Willumsen, 2017).

A prominent topic was children perceiving their social worker as ingenuine. Two children from Johannisen and colleagues' (2019) study expressed feeling that social workers had to force themselves to listen and provide genuine support. Furthermore, some children experienced that social workers asked questions without having any interest in the child's

thoughts, wishes and/or feelings (Lauri et al., 2021; Saarnik et al., 2023). These experiences show that social workers' willingness to listen to children is not a natural thing.

3.2.4 Dialogue with the child

Good communication is crucial when professionals gather information from children and when children express their views (CRC, 2009). Nunes' (2022) study highlighted this, showing that children found it important to participate in an open dialogue when discussing decisions with their social worker. Effective communication skills were essential for professionals to achieve this (Sæbjørnsen & Willumsen, 2017). Child-friendly circumstances also played a vital role, as evidenced by two child experiences in Husby and colleagues' (2018) study. Social workers explored several options, including combining activities and play with group discussions, to engage children in conversations (Husby et al., 2018). This study also underscored the importance of mutual respect in dialogues to make children feel acknowledged. Conversely, a lack of respect led to feelings of rejection, frustration and unwillingness to engage in following dialogues (Husby et al., 2018; Nunes, 2022). This disrespect often manifested in one-sided communication. Pert et al. (2017) illustrated this, describing that most participating children felt that professionals did not invite them to join discussions and only focused on seeking children's (dis)agreement on certain topics. These findings indicate that children's experiences of dialogues with social workers vary widely.

3.2.5 Individual meeting with the child

Facilitating individual meetings with children is crucial for enabling them to freely express their views and opinions (Bouma et al., 2018). Two studies found that most children had one-on-one meetings with their social worker (Cossar et al., 2016; Husby et al., 2018). These individual meetings focused on children expressing their wishes and feelings (Dillon, 2021) and preparing them for decision-making meetings (Johannisen et al., 2021). However, some studies revealed that certain child participants did not meet their social worker individually. For instance, children reported that their social workers did not make an effort to meet them outside of multidisciplinary meetings (Johannisen et al., 2019). Furthermore, participants in Saarnik and colleagues' (2023) study mentioned never having individual meetings with their social worker, as their foster parents mediated every conversation.

While individual meetings are essential for children's meaningful participation, not all children may prefer this approach. For example, one child participant expressed feeling scared when left alone with the social worker, but felt comfortable meeting when accompanied by

her mother (Lauri et al., 2021). Therefore, it is crucial to always check with children to understand their individual needs and preferences.

3.3 Involving

3.3.1 Hearing opinion and views before decisions are made

For meaningful participation, the child's views and opinions must be heard before a decision is made (Cossar et al., 2016). The value of having a say during these processes was emphasized by Stafford and colleagues (2021), aiming to capture children's experiences of participation in Australian family support services. When asked why their voices should be heard, the participating children responded that it could genuinely help them to get the support they need (Stafford et al., 2021). Additionally, children expressed a desire to have the choice to provide feedback first in decision-making meetings (Johannisen et al., 2021). Some personal experiences aligned with this desire, as three studies included participants who were given opportunities to voice their opinions on planned decisions, interventions or services (Kirka & Tamutiené, 2023; Lauri et al., 2021; Søftestad et al., 2013). Furthermore, social workers played a crucial role in facilitating these opportunities for children to be heard. This was emphasized by Sæbjørnsen and Willumsen (2017), outlining one participant's story of her social worker making sure everyone listened to her, and no decisions were made without first asking for the child's opinion.

Unfortunately, not all studies reported such positive experiences. Despite some children from Saarnik and colleagues' (2023) study being given options and opportunities to articulate their views, they expressed that these options were not preferable for them. Moreover, in the study by Lauri et al. (2021), most children were not asked for their opinions on future decisions. Consequently, when children perceived they were not allowed to have a say, they felt discouraged from voicing their opinions (Johannisen et al., 2021). In summary, children emphasized the value of having their voices heard before decisions are made, but this was not consistently translated into practice.

3.3.2 Involving in decision-making

Following the CRC (2009) children should be actively involved in decision-making. More specifically, children expressed the right to be present in decision-making meetings (Johannisen et al., 2021). Nine out of the 15 studies included stories of children attending such meetings, showing very different experiences. On a positive note, several participants in Race and Frost's (2022) study shared that they were able to participate during decision-

making meetings. Moreover, they emphasized the crucial support provided by their social worker to get their points across. This supportive role of social workers was also underscored by children in Johannisen and colleagues' (2021) study, in which social workers played a vital role as advocates for children during decision-making meetings. Some children expressed feeling comfortable in the venues where meetings were held and demonstrated a good understanding of the discussions that took place during these meetings (Dillon et al., 2016; Johannisen et al., 2019).

Conversely, children shared negative experiences regarding their participation in decision-making processes. Several children expressed not being involved in decision-making meetings they attended (Stafford et al., 2021; Søftestad et al., 2013). Also, three studies reflected on children's experiences of not understanding the language used by adults during these meetings (Cossar et al., 2016; Johannisen et al., 2019; Johannisen et al., 2021). Furthermore, children felt overwhelmed by the number of other attendees (Husby et al., 2018; Pert et al., 2017). Child participants described the meetings as daunting and expressed a desire for more choice in selecting who attended the decision-making meetings (Pert et al., 2017). This was echoed by one child in Johannisen and colleagues' (2019) study, who did not feel comfortable participating when her sister was present at the meeting. Another child experienced discomfort answering questions honestly about her family situation in front of her parents (Cossar et al., 2016).

Some included studies also highlighted experiences in which children were not allowed to be present at decision-making meetings. Child participants shared that they had to wait outside during meetings (e.g. Kirka & Tamutiené, 2023; Cossar et al., 2016) or leave the meeting after their personal issues were discussed (Dillon et al., 2016). This exclusion made children feel like their opinions did not matter (Johannisen et al., 2021). The fact that children were excluded from decision-making meetings is concerning, as these meetings play a crucial role in facilitating children's participation (Johannisen et al., 2019). Although some children were actively involved in decision-making, children's negative experiences with decision-making meetings predominated.

3.3.3 Considering child's perspective in decision-making

For participation to become meaningful, the child's perspective should be considered and taken seriously (CRC, 2009). Children participating in Nunes' (2022) study affirmed this by expressing they felt acknowledged and respected when social workers gave value to their views. Aligning with the child's perspective in CP decisions made children feel that their

views were considered important (Kirka & Tamutiené, 2023). Similar sentiments were shared by children participating in various studies, including Dillon et al. (2016) and Sæbjørnsen and Willumsen (2017). In Dillon and colleagues' (2016) study two participants expressed that their input to social workers mattered, recognizing that voicing their wishes led to positive changes. This sense of efficacy made them comfortable to rase any concerns they might have (Dillon et al., 2016). Furthermore, two children acknowledged their social workers' genuine efforts to consider the child's perspective by discussing possible scenarios together (Lauri et al., 2021; Nunes, 2022).

In Johannisen and colleagues' (2021) study, some participants expressed contrary experiences, stating that professionals excluded them from discussions on decision-making and did not consider their views. Children felt that age and maturity were important factors causing adults to disregard their opinions (Johannisen et al., 2021). This sentiment was echoed by one participant in Lauri and colleagues' (2021) study. She felt that social workers would not consider her opinion in difficult situations, because 'she was just a child'. These examples illustrated the unequal status of children in relation to adult professionals, causing uncertainty about the validity of their views (Race & Frost, 2022). Sæbjørnsen and Willumsen (2017) further elaborated on this, reflecting on children's experiences of feeling unsure about whether or not they were allowed to make objections in decision-making meetings.

In Saarnik and colleagues' (2023) study, a notable child experience highlighted the potential negative consequences of disregarding children's views. The story revolved around two siblings who were denied contact with each other. Despite expressing their desire to change this situation to their social worker, no adjustments were made. This frustration led the siblings to run away, resulting in their placement in another institution (Saarnik et al., 2023). This case illustrates how the lack of children's participation in decision-making could lead to conflicts with social workers and undesirable repercussions.

4. Discussion

This section points out the key findings and patterns identified in the data regarding whether and how children experience being informed, heard and involved in CP decision-making processes. Following this, it discusses this systematic review's strengths and limitations, and outlines implications for research, policy and practice.

4.1 General interpretation of the findings

4.1.1 Relationship with the social worker

The analyzed studies highlight the importance of children's relationship with their social worker. Children from multiple studies (n=8) identified this relationship as a crucial facilitator for their participation (e.g. Dillon et al., 2016). A positive relationship with their social worker made children more likely to get support throughout the decision-making process (Johannisen et al., 2021). This was also emphasized in earlier research by Falch-Eriksen et al. (2021), stating that children have more positive experiences regarding their participation when having a good relationship with their social worker. However, children face multiple barriers in creating this relationship. As found by Van Bijleveld and colleagues (2015), children participating in the included studies identified changes in social workers and social workers' lack of effort to stay in touch with the child as main reasons for an underdeveloped relationship (e.g. Lauri et al., 2021; Saarnik et al., 2023).

The question arises as to what extent social workers may be held responsible for the quality of their relationship with the children they supervise. Prior insights suggest that social workers genuinely aspire to facilitate child participation, yet they often encounter organizational barriers that hinder them from involving children (Seim & Slettebø, 2017). Social workers may face high workloads and time pressure, making it challenging to devote sufficient attention to their relationship with children and the facilitation of participation. Conversely, an opposing insight from Vis and colleagues (2012) suggests that social workers might not be interested in facilitating children's participation. Findings from this study indicate that social workers often considered child participation unnecessary, restricting children from having a say (Vis et al., 2012). It can be inferred that factors operating on multiple levels influence the relationship between children and their social worker and, consequently, children's participation.

4.1.2 Competence bias

The results indicate that professionals consider children's competences as an important factor in either hindering or facilitating participation. While the concept of competence lacks a clear definition, it is commonly utilized as a basis for determining when children are capable of participating (Tisdall, 2018). In the context of CP services, professionals might make assumptions about children's capacities to have a say in matters affecting their lives. Hinton (2008) termed this phenomenon as the *competence bias*, wherein adults perceive children as less competent, thereby limiting their participation opportunities. The analyzed studies confirm this bias as children experienced that social workers used their age and maturity to impede their participation. Social workers did not consider children's views important due to their young age (e.g. Johannisen et al., 2021). In this regard, the child's development stage plays a significant role in the barriers they face to participate. This was illustrated by older children having a larger network of social workers to turn to, providing more opportunities to voice their opinions (Cossar et al., 2016). Conversely, younger children experienced their perspectives being doubted more frequently (Johannisen et al., 2021).

Next to age and maturity, professionals may hold assumptions regarding other child characteristics. Johannisen and colleagues (2019) stated that children's gender could influence how they experience their participation. Among the participating children in this study, more boys than girls had positive experiences. While this could be coincidental, it might be connected to the potential assumption of girls being more fragile and, thus, more in need of protection (Keddell, 2023). This highlights the importance of how social workers perceive their own and the child's position in life from a gender perspective (Johannisen et al., 2019). Moreover, Cossar and colleagues' (2016) study included two participants with learning difficulties. The findings indicate that these children were provided with fewer opportunities to participate. In this sense, children with special needs are not allowed to have a say, because CP professionals view their 'incompetence' as individual deficit. Following Tisdall (2018), the focus should rather be on determining the support necessary to ensure that these children have equal access to their participation rights. The importance of this approach is emphasized by Berg and colleagues (2018), demonstrating that facilitating disabled children's participation in CP services positively impacted their mental health.

An important addition is that the concept of *intersectionality* can enhance the competence bias. Keddell (2023) argued that a child's culture, ethnicity and socio-economic status intersect with existing assumptions of children's capacities. Lätsch and colleagues (2023) illustrated this by researching predictors of child participation. The results show that

social workers were less willing to include children's views when they were young and when they came from a poor family. When these two characteristics intersected in a child, they were even less likely to make their voices heard (Lätsch et al., 2023).

4.1.3 Protection paradox

Professionals tend to overlook children's input, as children did not identify many opportunities of being present with social workers to participate in decision-making processes (Stafford et al., 2021). Even when present, children felt their voices were not truly heard during meetings (Kirka & Tamutiené, 2023). These experiences relate to more wide-ranging concerns of children's participation in CP decision-making. Existing concepts of *protectionism* and *adultism* prioritize safeguarding over empowering children, perpetuating a CP system centered around adults (Bruce, 2014; Vis et al., 2012).

The analyzed studies include children's experiences consistent with these concepts. First, social workers tended to exclusively discuss issues with parents and other adults, neglecting asking children for information on their family's situation (Lauri et al., 2021). Children also frequently felt excluded from crucial information, and discussions regarding their safety took place without their participation (Nunes, 2022). Second, children referred to professionals who considered themselves 'experts' on the child's situation. These social workers tended to make decisions without involving children in CP decision-making, assuming they already knew what was in the child's best interest (Johannisen et al., 2019; Lauri et al., 2021).

These instances illustrate a protective approach, wherein social workers aim to shield children from challenging 'adult' conversations, marginalizing their participation in CP services (Le Borgne & Tisdall, 2017). This perspective is influenced by how professionals perceive their primary responsibilities, with many viewing safeguarding children as their core task (Race & Frost, 2022). While ensuring children's protection rights is crucial, there can be unintended consequences. Quarles van Ufford (2023) described this theme as the *protection paradox*. When children are shielded from participation, it may result in them feeling less protected. Conversely, granting children a voice in relevant matters enhances their connection to interventions and provides better protection from harm (Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2020).

4.1.4 Conclusion

The purpose of this systematic review was to explore whether and how children experience meaningful participation in decision-making processes of CP services. From the

analysis, it became clear that children value their own participation and have the desire to be included in decision-making (e.g. Kirka & Tamutiené, 2023). Nevertheless, these interests were not well applied in practice. The findings suggest that children generally experienced being informed, heard and involved to a limited extent.

First, no study addressed children's experiences regarding being informed about their rights to a safe upbringing and participation. Also, children's ignorance about the investigation process and the involvement of CP services in their families emerged as a recurring theme in 11 out of 15 studies. These findings align with prior research, indicating that children often receive inaccurate and incomplete information about their own protection (Ángeles Balsells et al., 2017). Furthermore, in multiple studies (n=10), children reported feeling that social workers were unwilling to listen to their perspectives. Additionally, findings from this review reveal that, while most children were allowed to attend CP meetings, their perspectives were often overlooked or excluded during decision-making (e.g. Race & Frost, 2022). The discussed concepts of the child – social worker relationship, competence bias and protection paradox may have influenced children's overall experiences with their meaningful participation.

In addition to the interpretation of the results, the Model of Meaningful Participation underscores that participation is a continuous process, emphasizing that children should have opportunities to participate at every stage (Bouma et al., 2018). While some children in the analyzed studies reported being informed, heard or involved at specific points, systematic participation throughout the entire process was missing. Altogether, making sure children's participation in CP decision-making becomes meaningful is still a work in progress.

4.2 Strengths and limitations

One strength of this review is that it only includes recent peer-reviewed studies, with the majority (n=9) published within the last five years. Thereby, it outlines an up to date picture of children's experiences and contributes to the knowledge of their meaningful participation within the current CP context. From this, important lessons can be learned for how to improve children's participation opportunities. While the scope of this review is limited to CP decision-making processes, it may also yield valuable lessons for professionals working in the broader context of youth work. Another strength is that this review uses an established model to structure and interpret children's experiences of meaningful participation (Bouma et al., 2018).

Nevertheless, the limitations of this study must be acknowledged to ensure a nuanced interpretation of the findings. First, only a small number of studies were eligible for this review's analysis and most of these studies were performed in Nordic and other Western countries. This can be explained by the understandings of children prevailing in the modern Western world, emphasizing the value of children's liberty and human rights (Skauge et al., 2021). As these values may not have the same position in other parts of the world, this study's findings are specific to the particular study context and there is no intention to make broad generalizations. Moreover, this review only includes peer reviewed journal articles. A search strategy that also incorporates grey literature may offer a more comprehensive portrayal of children's experiences of their meaningful participation in CP decision-making.

4.3 Implications

4.3.1 Research

This review includes studies that share the focus of decision-making in CP services, but differ in their care context (e.g. foster care, residential care). These differences were not taken into account in interpreting the results. In future research, it may be useful to categorize the results on care contexts and explore whether and how children's experiences of meaningful participation vary across different types of CP services. Furthermore, current literature researching the participation of children mostly focuses on whether children get the opportunity to participate. By this, interpreting the findings of the current review is only based on temporal experiences. In future research, it would be beneficial to focus more on longitudinal follow-ups with children to observe changes and developments over time. This provides a more nuanced understanding of the factors influencing children's participation opportunities in CP decision-making.

4.3.2 Policy

In the pursuit of enhancing CP policies, it is crucial not only to focus on the incorporation of Article 12 of the UNCRC, but also to address the gap between developing policy and its practical implementation. Recent studies indicate that the transition from policy to the CP practice still encounters challenges (Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2020; Middel et al., 2021). One explanation for this is that CP organizations and their employees have competing interpretations of children's participation in practice (Michail et al., 2023). This can be dissolved by engaging a diverse palette of CP professionals when developing or evaluating policies. With this, an existing model for children's participation that professionals agree with

needs to be included in CP policy documents to clarify the guidelines for practice. As it is important for children's participation to become a continuous process (Bouma et al., 2018), CP policies also need to address how children are involved in every stage of decision-making processes. Furthermore, policy makers should make an effort to engage children to ensure that CP policies regarding children truly align with the needs and wishes of these children.

4.3.3 Practice

For CP professionals, it is important to be aware of the fact that all children are unique, keeping in mind their diverse needs (CRC, 2009). This means that social workers should be open to shaping opportunities for children's meaningful participation in various ways. This was emphasized by one participant in Lauri and colleagues' (2021) study, recommending that social workers must use different methods to explore what works best to enhance children's participation. For younger children, drawing their feelings and wishes may work better than having a personal conversation with their social worker. Moreover, as some children feel comfortable to participate in decision-making themselves, this review also includes three studies showing that children benefited more from social workers acting as advocates to facilitate their participation (Dillon, 2021; Johannisen et al., 2021; Race & Frost, 2022). Lastly, as emphasized in the review by Van Bijleveld and colleagues (2015), professionals should view children as knowledgeable social actors and ensure their central position in the entire process of decision-making.

References

Ángeles Balsells, M., Fuentes-Peláez, N., & Pastor, C. (2017). Listening to the voices of

children in decision-making: A challenge for the child protection system in Spain.

Children and Youth Services Review, *79*, 418–425.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.06.055

Berg, K. L., Medrano, J., Acharya, K., Lynch, A., & Msall, M. E. (2018). Health impact of

participation for vulnerable youth with disabilities. *The American Journal of

Occupational Therapy*, *72*(5), 1–8. https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2018.023622

Bolin, A. (2018). Organizing for agency: Rethinking the conditions for children's

participation in service provision. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on

Health and Well-being*, *13*(1), Article 1564515.

https://doi.org/10.1080/17482631.2018.1564515

Bouma, H., López López, M., Knorth, E. J., & Grietens, H. (2018). Meaningful participation

for children in the Dutch child protection system: A critical analysis of relevant

provisions in policy documents. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *79*, 279–292.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.02.016

Bruce, M. (2014). The voice of the child in child protection: Whose voice? *Social Sciences*,

3(3), 514–526. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci3030514

Burgund Isakov, A., & Hrncic, J. (2021). Resilience among youth in the process of

preparation for leaving alternative care. *Journal of Social Service Research*, *47*(1),

88–103. https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2020.1717716

Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (2009). General comment no. 12. The right of

the child to be heard. Geneva: United Nations.

Cossar, J., Brandon, M., & Jordan, P. (2016). "You've got to trust her and she's got to trust

you": Children's views on participation in the child protection system. *Child & Family

Social Work, 21*(1), 103–112. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12115

Crowley, A. (2015). Is anyone listening? The impact of children's participation on public

policy. *International Journal of Children's Rights, 23,* 602–621.

https://doi.org/10.1163/15718182-02303005

Department of Children and Youth Affairs. (2015). *National strategy on children and young

people's participation in decision-making, 2015–2020.*

https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/9128db-national-strategy-on-children-and-young-

peoples-participation-in-dec/

Dillon, J. (2021). "Wishes and feelings": Misunderstandings and missed opportunities for

participation in child protection proceedings. *Child & Family Social Work, 26*(4),

664–676. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12847

Dillon, J., Greenop, D., & Hills, M. (2016). Participation in child protection: A small-scale

qualitative study. *Qualitative Social Work, 15*(1), 70–85.

https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325015578946

Dixon, J., Ward, J., & Blower, S. (2019). "They sat and actually listened to what we think

about the care system": The use of participation, consultation, peer research and co-

production to raise the voices of young people in and leaving care in England. *Child

Care in Practice, 25*(1), 6–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2018.1521380

Dyers, B., & Giroux, M. P. (2022). *Child participation: The voices of youth in the last

decade.* https://files.kidsrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/05161116/Child-

participation-the-voices-of-children-in-the-last-decade.pdf

Enroos, R., Helland, H. S., Pösö, T., Skivenes, M., & Tonheim, M. (2017). The role and

function of the spokesperson in care order proceedings: A cross-country study in

Finland and Norway. *Children and Youth Services Review, 74*, 8–16.
https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.01.017

Falch-Eriksen, A., Toros, K., Sindi, I., & Lehtme, R. (2021). Children expressing their views in child protection casework: Current research and their rights going forward. *Child & Family Social Work, 26*(3), 485–497. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12831

Hart, R. A. (1992). Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship, Innocenti Essays, 4. Florence: UNICEF.

Hart, R. A. (2008). Stepping back from 'the ladder': Reflections on a model of participatory work with children. In A. Reid, B. Bruun Jensen, J. Nikel & V. Simovska (Eds.), *Participation and learning: Perspectives on education and the environment, health and sustainability* (pp. 19–31). Springer.

Hart, S. N. (1991). From property to person status: Historical perspective on children's rights. *American Psychologist, 46*(1), 53–59. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.46.1.53

Hawker, S., Payne, S., Kerr, C., Hardey, M., & Powell, J. (2002). Appraising the evidence: Reviewing disparate data systematically. *Qualitative Health Research, 12*(9), 1284–1299. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732302238251

Heimer, M., & Palme, J. (2016). Rethinking child policy post-UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: Vulnerable children's welfare in Sweden. *Journal of Social Policy, 45*(3), 435–452. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279415000744

Henriksen, A.-K. (2022). "It's my life they are talking about" – on children's participation in decision-making for secure placement. *Qualitative Social Work, 21*(4), 783–799. https://doi.org/10.1177/14733250211036173

Hinton, R. (2008). Children's participation and good governance: Limitations of the theoretical literature. *The International Journal of Children's Rights, 16*(3), 285–300. https://doi.org/10.1163/157181808X311141

Husby, I. S. D., Slettebø, T., & Juul, R. (2018). Partnerships with children in child welfare: The importance of trust and pedagogical support. *Child & Family Social Work, 23*(3), 443–450. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12435

Johannisen, J. C., Van Wyk, C., & Yates, H. (2021). Facilitating children's participation within multidisciplinary meetings: Guiding principles for child and youth care centres. *Social Work / Maatskaplike Werk, 57*(3), 376–392. https://doi.org/10.15270/57-3-953

Johannisen, J. C., Yates, H., & Van Wyk, C. (2019). Multidisciplinary meetings: Listening to the experiences of children in a child and youth care centre. *Theological Studies / HTS Teologiese Studies, 75*(1), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i1.5493

Johnson, V., Lewin, T., & Cannon, M. (2020, December). *Learning from a living archive: Rejuvenating child and youth rights and participation.* (Working Paper No. 1). https://doi.org/10.19088/REJUVENATE.2020.001

Keddell, E. (2023). Recognising the embedded child in child protection: Children's participation, inequalities and cultural capital. *Children and Youth Services Review, 147,* Article 106815. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.106815

Kiili, J., & Moilanen, J. (2019a). Children in international child protection research – research ethics perspective. In K. Vehkalahti & R. Rutanen (Eds.), *From research ethics regulation to lived encounters. Ethics of research on children and young people II* (pp. 35–57). Youth Research Network.

Kiili, J., & Moilanen, J. (2019b). Participation as a methodological and ethical issue in child protection research. *Journal of Children's Services, 14*(3), 143–161. https://doi.org/10.1108/JCS-02-2019-0009

Kirka, V., & Tamutienė, I. (2023). Exploring child participation in protecting them from maltreatment: Lithuanian insights. *Children and Youth Services Review, 152,* Article 107080. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.107080

Kosher, H., & Ben-Arieh, A. (2017). What children think about their rights and their well-being: A cross-national comparison. *The American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 87*(3), 256–273. https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000222

Kosher, H., & Ben-Arieh, A. (2020). Children's participation: A new role for children in the field of child maltreatment. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 110*, Article 104429. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2020.104429

Kosher, H., Ben-Arieh, A., & Hendelsman, Y. (2016). *Children's rights and social work.* Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-43920-4

Krappmann, L. (2010). The weight of the child's view (article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child). *International Journal of Children's Rights, 18*(4), 501–513. https://doi.org/10.1163/157181810X528021

Lätsch, D., Quehenberger, J., Portmann, R., & Jud, A. (2023). Children's participation in the child protection system: Are young people from poor families less likely to be heard? *Children and Youth Services Review, 145*, Article 106762. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2022.106762

Lauri, K., Toros, K., & Lehtme, R. (2021). Participation in the child protection assessment: Voices from children in Estonia. *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal, 38*(2), 211–226. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-020-00724-x

Lee, J. (2013, August 12). *UN youth envoy: Working with & for youth.* United Nations Foundation. https://unfoundation.org/blog/post/un-youth-envoy/

Lorenc, T., Petticrew, M., Whitehead, M., Neary, D., Clayton, S., Wright, K., Thomson, H., Cummins, S., Sowden, A., & Renton, A. (2014). Crime, fear of crime and mental health: Synthesis of theory and systematic reviews of interventions and qualitative evidence. *Public Health Research, 2*(2), 1–398. https://doi.org/10.3310/phr02020

Lundy, L. (2007). "Voice" is not enough: Conceptualising article 12 of the United Nations

    Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal*, *33*(6),

    927–942. https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033

McCafferty, P. (2017). Implementing article 12 of the UNCRC in child protection decision-

    making: A critical analysis of the challenges and opportunities for social work. *Child*

    Care in Practice, *23*(4), 327–341. https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2016.1264368

Michail, S., Baird, K., Fattore, T., & Grace, R. (2023). Operationalising children's

    participation: Competing understandings of the policy to practice "gap". *Children &*

    Society, *37*(5), 1576–1595. https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12708

Middel, F., Post, W., López López, M., & Grietens, H. (2021). Participation of children

    involved in the child protection system – validation of the Meaningful Participation

    Assessment Tool (MPAT). *Child indicators research*, *14*(2), 713–735.

    https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-020-09772-2

Muench, K., Diaz, C., & Wright, R. (2017). Children and parent participation in child

    protection conferences: A study in one English local authority. *Child Care in Practice,*

    23(1), 49–63. https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2015.1126227

Munn, Z., Peters, M. D. J., Stern, C., Tufanaru, C., McArthur, A., & Aromataris, E. (2018).

    Systematic review or scoping review? Guidance for authors when choosing between a

    systematic or scoping review approach. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, *18*(1),

    Article 143. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-018-0611-x

Nnama-Okechukwu, C. U., Anazonwu, N. P., & Okoye, U. O. (2018). Vulnerable children,

    alternative care system and placement decision in Nigeria: In who's best interest?

    African Population Studies, 32, 4215–4227. https://doi.org/10.11564/32-2-1194

Nunes, R. R. (2022). Participation in child protection: Empowering children in placement

    processes. *The International Journal of Human Rights, 26*(3), 420–436.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2021.1931137

Page, M. J., McKenzie, J. E., Bossuyt, P. M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T. C., Mulrow, C. D.,

    Shamseer, L., Tetzlaff, J. M., Akl, E. A., Brennan, S. E., Chou, R., Glanville, J.,

    Grimshaw, J. M., Hróbjartsson, A., Lalu, M. M., Li, T., Loder, E. W., Mayo-Wilson, E.,

    McDonald, S., … Moher, D. (2021). The PRISMA 2020 statement: An updated

    guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *Journal of Clinical Epidemiology, 134*,

    178–189. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclinepi.2021.03.001

Pert, H., Diaz, C., & Thomas, N. (2017). Children's participation in LAC reviews: A study in

    one English local authority. *Child & Family Social Work, 22*, 1–10.

    https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12194

Plunkett, D. (2023, September 19). *Joining Forces' call to action on children's participation.*

    Joining Forces. https://joining-forces.org/news/call-to-action-childrens-participation/

Quarles van Ufford, S. (2023). The protection paradox: A study of children's rights to

    participation and protection against violence in Swedish child welfare practice. *The*

    International Journal of Children's Rights, 31(3), 756–776.

    https://doi.org/10.1163/15718182-31030008

Quennerstedt, A., Robinson, C., & L'Anson, J. (2018). The UNCRC: The voice of global

    consensus on children's rights? *Nordic Journal of Human Rights, 36*(1), 38–54.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/18918131.2018.1453589

Race, T., & Frost, N. (2022). Hearing the voice of the child in safeguarding processes:

    Exploring different voices and competing narratives. *Child Abuse Review, 31*(6), 1–9.

    https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2779

Saarnik, H., Sindi, I., & Toros, K. (2023). 'Well, the child can't choose, right?': Foster

children's participation experiences of child protection removal practices. *Child and

Adolescent Social Work*, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-022-00911-y

Sæbjørnsen, S. E. N., & Willumsen, E. (2017). Service user participation in interprofessional

teams in child welfare in Norway: Vulnerable adolescents' perceptions. *Child & Family

Social Work, 22,* 43–53. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12242

Schenk, K., & Williamson, J. (2005). *Ethical approaches to gathering information from

children and adolescence in international settings: Guidelines and resources.*

https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pnade872.pdf

Schiller, U., Strydom, M., Lombard, A., & Rademeyer, C. (2023). An analysis of policies and

legislation relating to child participation by children in alternative care in South Africa.

Social Work / Maatskaplike Werk, 59(1), 112–128. https://doi.org/10.15270/59-1-1096

Schnell, J. D. (2017). Web of Science: The first citation index for data analytics and

scientometrics. In F. J. Cantu-Ortiz (Ed.), *Research analytics: Boosting university

productivity and competitiveness through scientometrics* (pp. 15–30). CRC Press.

Schotten, M., El Aisati, M., Meester, W. J. N., Steiginga, S., & Ross, C. A. (2017). A brief

history of Scopus: The world's largest abstract and citation database of scientific

literature. In F. J. Cantu-Ortiz (Ed.), *Research analytics: Boosting university

productivity and competitiveness through scientometrics* (pp. 31–58). CRC Press.

Scott, S. (1993). From major to minor: An historical overview of children's rights and

benefits. *Journal of Law and Social Policy, 9,* 222–257.

https://doi.org/10.60082/0829-3929.1119

Seim, S., & Slettebø, T. (2017). Challenges of participation in child welfare. *European

Journal of Social Work, 20*(6), 882–893. https://doi.org/mfqd

Shier, H. (2001). Pathways to participation: Openings, opportunities and obligations. *Children & Society, 15*(2), 107–117. https://doi.org/10.1002/chi.617

Skauge, B., Storhaug, A. S., & Marthinsen, E. (2021). The what, why and how of child participation – a review of the conceptualization of "child participation". *Child Welfare Social Sciences, 10*(2), Article 54. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10020054

Slaatto, A., Baugerud, G. A., & Mellblom, A. V. (2023). 'I never win': How children and staff in residential facilities experience meaningful participation. *Child & Family Social Work*, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.13090

Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research, 104*, 333–339. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039

Søftestad, S., Toverud, R., & Jensen, T. K. (2013). Interactive regulated participation: Children's perspectives on child–parent interaction when suspicion of child sexual abuse is raised. *Qualitative Social Work, 12*(5), 603–619. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325012454913

Stafford, L., Harkin, J., Rolfe, A., Burton, J., & Morley, C. (2021). Why having a voice is important to children who are involved in family support services. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 115*, Article 104987. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2021.104987

Tisdall, E. K. M. (2018). Challenging competency and capacity? Due weight to children's views in family law proceedings. *International Journal of Children's Rights, 26*(1), 159–182. https://doi.org/10.1163/15718182-02601003

Tobin, J., & Cashmore, J. (2020). Thirty years of the CRC: Child protection progress, challenges and opportunities. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 110*, Article 104436. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2020.104436

Toivonen, V., Muhonen, J., Kalliomaa-Puha, L., Luhamaa, K., & Strömpl, J. (2021). Child participation in Estonian and Finnish child welfare removals – professionals' perceptions and practices. *International Journal of Children's Rights, 29*(3), 701–730. https://doi.org/10.1163/15718182-29030009

Toros, K. (2021). Children's participation in decision making from child welfare workers' perspectives: A systematic review. *Research on Social Work Practice, 31*(4), 367–374. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731520984844

Toros, K., & Sindi, I. (2022). Storytelling: A method for enabling a child to become an active participant in child protection assessment in the example of substitute care. *Journal of Family Social Work, 25*(1), 3–7. https://doi.org/10.1080/10522158.2022.2025969

Tyler, D. C., Cross, J., & DeFrain, E. (2017). Sociological Abstracts vs. SocINDEX for graduate students in sociology: Comprehensive enough to satisfy? *Library Philosophy & Practice*, 1–25.

United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child.* https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/crc.pdf

United Nations Population Fund. (2023). *SWP report 2023: 8 billion strong.* https://www.unfpa.org/swp2023/8-billion-strong

Van Bijleveld, G. G., Dedding, C. W. M., & Bunders-Aelen, J. F. G. (2015). Children's and young people's participation within child welfare and child protection services: A state-of-the-art review. *Child & Family Social Work, 20*, 129–138. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12082

Vis, S. A., Holtan, A., & Thomas, N. (2012). Obstacles for child participation in care and protection cases – why Norwegian social workers find it difficult. *Child Abuse Review, 21*(1), 7–23. https://doi.org/10.1002/car.1155

Vis, S. A., Strandbu, A., Holtan, A., & Thomas, N. (2011). Participation and health – a

    research review of child participation in planning and decision-making. *Child & Family*

    Social Work, 16(3), 325–335. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2010.00743.x

Wallis, H., & Loy, L. S. (2021). What drives pro-environmental activism of young people? A

    survey study on the Fridays for Future movement. *Journal of Environmental*

    Psychology, 74, Article 101581. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2021.101581

Weisberg, D. K. (1978). Evolution of the concept of the rights of the child in the Western

    world. *International Court of Justice Review, 43*(21), 43–51.

    http://repository.uchastings.edu/faculty_scholarship/1271

Woodman, E., Roche, S., McArthur, M., & Moore, T. (2018). Child protection practitioners:

    Including children in decision making. *Child & Family Social Work, 23*(3), 475–484.

    https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12439

Wray-Lake, L. (2019). How do young people become politically engaged? *Child*

    Development Perspectives, 13(2), 127–132. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12324

Zodins, J. M., Morley, L., Collings, S., & Russ, E. (2021). Children's rights in adoption from

    out-of-home care: How well do legislative frameworks accommodate them? *Australian*

    Journal of Human Rights, 27(2), 293–310.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/1323238X.2021.1996759

Appendix A

The quality assessment tool for qualitative studies of Hawker et al. (2002) consists of nine questions which can be answered with 'good', 'fair', 'poor' or 'very poor'. Following the procedure of Lorenc and colleagues (2014), these four answer categories were converted into numeric scores: 1 point (very poor), 2 points (poor), 3 points (fair) and 4 points (good). After answering all questions, this produced a total score for each study of a minimum of 9 points and a maximum of 36 points. The overall quality grades were then divided into the following categories: high quality (A), 30–36 points; medium quality (B), 24–29 points; low quality (C), 9–23 points. For this study, I decided to only include studies that received an overall quality grade belonging to category A (high quality) or category B (medium quality) and received a minimum score of 2 points for every individual question. Studies that were labeled as a low quality study (category C) or scored 1 point (very poor) on one or more questions were excluded. The exact formulation of the nine questions in the quality assessment tool can be found in Lorenc and colleagues' (2014, p. 175–176) study.

The results of the quality assessment are shown in Table 1. The overall quality grades of the studies are as follows: n=6 studies belong to category A (high quality) and n=12 studies fall into category B (medium quality). Although no studies received an overall grade belonging to category C (low quality), the study by Muench et al. (2017) received 1 point for *data analysi*s and the studies by Henriksen (2022) and Nnama-Okechukwu et al. (2018) received 1 point for *ethics and bias*. This resulted in n=15 articles to be included in this systematic review.

Table 1

Results of the quality assessment for qualitative studies (n=18)

Study	Abstract/ title	Introduction/ aims	Method/ data	Sam- pling	Analysis	Ethics/ bias	Results	Generali zability	Implicat ions	Total	Grade
Cossar et al., 2016	4	3	4	4	4	3	3	4	3	32	A
Dillon, 2021	3	4	4	2	2	3	4	2	2	26	B
Dillon et al., 2016	2	3	4	2	4	4	4	2	3	28	B
Henriksen, 2022	4	4	4	2	3	1	4	2	3	27	B
Husby et al., 2018	3	4	4	3	2	2	3	3	3	27	B
Johannisen et al., 2019	3	4	3	4	2	3	3	4	4	30	A
Johannisen et al., 2021	3	4	4	4	2	3	3	4	2	29	B
Kirka & Tamutiené, 2023	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	3	4	33	A
Lauri et al., 2021	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	3	4	33	A
Muench et al., 2017	4	3	2	4	1	2	3	4	3	26	B
Nnama-Okechukwu et al., 2018	2	4	2	3	3	1	3	3	3	24	B
Nunes, 2022	3	2	3	2	4	2	4	2	3	25	B
Pert et al., 2017	4	3	3	3	2	2	4	3	2	26	B
Race & Frost, 2022	3	2	3	2	3	3	3	2	3	24	B
Saarnik et al., 2023	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	4	4	34	A
Sæbjørnsen & Willumsen, 2017	4	4	3	2	3	3	3	2	4	28	B
Søftestad et al., 2013	3	2	3	3	4	3	3	3	3	27	B
Stafford et al., 2021	4	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	34	A

Appendix B

Table 2

Overview of the studies included in the analysis (n=15)

Study	Country	Sample		Method	Study Domain	Key findings relevant to the present study
		Size	**Age**			
Cossar et al., 2016	England	26	6-17	Individual activity based interviews	Children's participation in the CP system	- Some children were familiar with reports and assessments and discussed these with their social worker (SW). - Some children struggled to make sense of what was going on, while others knew their CP plan well. - Children felt that establishing a trusting relationship with their SW was significant for them to express their opinions. - Not all children were invited to CP meetings and children that did attend CP meetings found it difficult for their voices to be heard.
Dillon, 2021	United Kingdom	6	8-12	Individual semi-structured interviews (with novel methods)	Children's participation in CP proceedings	- None of the children had seen or read their own CP plan, causing feelings of uncertainty. - Most children had positive feelings towards their SW. - Common changes of SW's led to children having to retell their story, causing negative feelings.
Dillon et al., 2016	England	5	12-17	Individual semi-structured interviews	Children's participation in CP / child in need planning	- All children were surprised with and uninformed about the CP intervention. - Children had experiences of SW's manipulating and excluding them. - Most children felt secure in the relationship with their current SW. - All children had no or limited access to contact information of their SW. - All children had attended at least one CP meeting and most of them understood the language used. - Two children felt they really had an impact on the decision-making process.
Husby et al., 2018	Norway	10	9-17	Individual semi-structured interviews	Children's collaboration with CP professionals	- Overall, children were not informed well about the services provided. - Some children felt like they were not being listened to, while others felt supported and heard in dialogues with their SW. - Four out of ten children had attended a CP meeting and found it difficult to recall their own involvement in decision-making processes.
Johannisen et al., 2019	South Africa	15	13-17	Individual semi-structured interviews	Children's participation in multidisciplinary meetings	- Overall, children were aware of their right to participate. - Children often felt unprepared for their multidisciplinary meetings. - All children experienced negative interactions with their current SW.

Study	Country	Sample		Method	Study domain	Key findings relevant to the present study
		Size	**Age**			
						- Most children felt anxious, uncomfortable and not heard by adults during their meetings. - Some children felt empowered during their meetings because of their maturity and/or positive relations with family members.
Johannisen et al., 2021	South Africa	15	13-17	Individual semi-structured interviews and focus groups	Children's participation in multidisciplinary meetings	- Children wanted to be more informed about the content and other attendants of the multidisciplinary meetings. - Not all children were invited to the meetings, but did feel like they had the right to be present at these meetings. - Children felt more comfortable sharing their views when they had a positive relationship with their SW. - Children did not feel listened to during meetings, even when their opinions were asked. - Some children felt like their age was a reason for adults to exclude their perspectives.
Kirka & Tamutiené, 2023	Lithuania	21	10-17	Individual semi-structured interviews	Children's participation in the CP process	- Children did not talk much about their rights with their SW's. - Most children only received short information about and felt unprepared for decisions made by the SW. - Children recognized the importance of their participation in the protection process. - Overall, communication with the CW was described by the children as one-sided and lacking sincerity. - A few children were consulted in the decision-making process, but often the SW's just stated their decisions to the children.
Lauri et al., 2021	Estonia	14	10-17	Individual semi-structured interviews	Children's participation in CP assessment practice	- Some children were surprised by the involvement of child protection and not properly informed about what was going to happen. - Some children recognized the efforts of their SW's to let them participate, while others had experiences with SW's who considered themselves as experts on children's lives. - Only children's opinions regarding easier topics would be taken into consideration.
Nunes, 2022	Germany	28	10-17	Focus groups	The inclusion of children's opinions in CP decision-making	- The cooperation between parents and public services was perceived as not transparent by children. They would have liked more open communication and information. - Children wanted an open dialogue with SW's, but refused to enter into these conversations when they felt uninvolved during the process. - Many children experienced nonparticipation and felt that their opinions did not matter. - Children want to be involved in decision-making processes that deal with their protection.

Study	Country	Sample		Method	Study domain	Key findings relevant to the present study
		Size	Age			
Pert et al., 2017	England	25	8-17	Individual semi-structured interviews (with several creative methods)	Children's participation in LAC reviews	- Most children knew that they had review meetings, but their understanding of the reviews' purpose varied. - Children who reported having positive relationships with their SW also reported less negative feelings about review meetings. - Often, only the (dis)agreement of children was sought during the review meetings. - All children reported disliking the meetings, wanting to end the meetings early and feeling dissatisfied afterwards. - Some children said that their foster carer was key to their voices being heard during meetings.
Race & Frost, 2022	England	21	6-16	Individual semi-structured interviews	Children's participation in CP processes	- Only one child was fully aware of children's rights to receive information during a CP investigation. - Children experienced power differences and felt like they had to listen to adults because of their age. - Some children had positive experiences with meetings and felt like they could influence decision-making. - Other children experienced the meetings to be a stressful process that reminded them of their unequal status in relation to adults.
Saarnik et al., 2023	Estonia	31	10-16	Individual semi-structured interviews and focus groups	Foster children's participation in CP removal practices	- Overall, children were aware of their rights, even though these were not specifically mentioned to them by SW's. - Children did not receive clear or valid explanations about the issues and were not well prepared for the separation. - Most children had negative relationships with their SW, describing them as not having much interest in talking to and helping children. - Children did not talk to their SW individually and distrusted their SW for sharing information about them with others. - Children's views were not taken seriously and therefore decisions could lead to situations in which children felt uncomfortable.
Sæbjørnsen & Willumsen, 2017	Norway	5	13-16	Individual semi-structured interviews	Adolescents' participation in interprofessional teams in child welfare	- Children felt like they were not listened to and disliked that their SW passed on personal information without permission. - Some children had SW's who focused on getting the child's views heard during meetings. - Some children felt fully included in the decision-making and others felt like they were not allowed to voice their opinions.
Søftestad et al., 2013	Norway	13	7-15	Open-ended research interviews	Child–parent interaction during suspicion of child sexual abuse	- Children felt like they were not informed properly on the situation, leading to feelings of unsafety and lack of control.

Study	Country	Sample		Method	Study domain	Key findings relevant to the present study
		Size	**Age**			
						- Some children were informed about future changes and involved in decisions regarding these changes. - Most children did not seem to be involved in decision-making processes.
Stafford et al., 2021	Australia	17	6-16	Activity-based interviews (6 siblings groups and 2 individual interviews).	Children's participation in family support services	- Children found it important to have a say, as this makes them feel heard. - Children felt like their knowledge was valuable and can be used to help children to get the support they need. - Children did not identify many opportunities with SW's where they could voice their opinions.

Note. This table only demonstrates child participants' characteristics and experiences. When a study also included other actors, their characteristics and experiences were not listed here due to irrelevance to the present study.