Educational Research and Innovation

What Does Child Empowerment Mean Today?

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION AND WELL-BEING

OECD

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Foreword

The nature of childhood and how we view children has changed tremendously in the 21st century. Cultural shifts, global mega trends and technological developments have shifted what childhood looks like and the types of roles children can and do take in modern societies. Children are no longer seen as passive beings in need of protection and future citizens, but rather as citizens of today. They are increasingly seen as autonomous agents of change who can play important roles in shaping current and future democracies.

These changes beg the question: what does child empowerment mean today and what are the implications for OECD education systems and child well-being?

The authors of this report seek to answer this question by exploring the changing nature of modern childhood, and delving into some of the potential facilitators or barriers to child empowerment. They propose a definition of child empowerment, suggesting that empowered children have the opportunity and ability to act on issues important and relevant to them, can learn by making mistakes, and are key contributors to democracy.

This report looks at various ways in which OECD education systems support child empowerment. This ranges from providing them with the civic skills and knowledge to effectively participate in democracy, to supporting their social, emotional and physical well-being, and reducing inequalities that threaten the empowerment of vulnerable or marginalised groups. It looks at trends in children's lives, including how they interact with media and the digital environment, and how this can be used to support their identity development, well-being and self-expression in new ways. By presenting the state of the art of the literature, and outlining examples of promising policy and practice from OECD countries, this volume provides guidance and insights on how education systems can work together with a range of actors to support the empowerment of children while helping them realise their rights.

Child empowerment is increasingly recognised as a policy goal and priority by governments around the OECD. Many countries have taken effective steps in realising this goal. However we still have far to go in ensuring that all children are empowered today and in the future.

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This report contributes to the horizontal OECD project on Seizing Opportunities for Children in the Digital Environment, in collaboration with WISE and STI.

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Executive summary

Empowering children to be active participants in society has emerged as a critical aim of policy agendas across the OECD. Yet, achieving this aim is far from simple. Set against the backdrop of changes in the way society understands childhood and the role of the child, as well as the opportunities and challenges posed by the digital environment, this publication delves into the meaning of child empowerment today and explores its implications for education systems.

By defining key concepts and examining the roles of children as citizens, this volume provides valuable insights into how OECD countries are empowering children, amidst trends including declining physical activity, increased stress and anxiety, COVID-19, a changing media landscape and persistent digital inequalities. This volume takes stock of how these broad themes interact with the often repeated but rarely articulated call to empower children. This volume centres it's analysis around three core opportunities.

Enhanced well-being

Good things happen when children are empowered to act on issues that are important and relevant to them. Child empowerment enhances well-being, self-esteem and leadership skills, nurturing children as competent, confident members of society. When child empowerment is done well and children have authentic opportunities to participate in crafting things like school policies and practices, they tend to be better suited to contribute positively to school climates and social cohesion.

Better policy making

Child empowerment is increasingly recognised as an essential aim of educational policies within OECD countries, though it often lacks clear definition and implementation strategies. Giving children a greater role in policy making empowers them to actively participate in how decisions are taken by contributing their unique and valuable perspectives. Actively participating in society and decision-making processes that are both relevant and age-appropriate supports their personal development and ensures that educational and societal policies and practices better reflect their needs and perspectives.

Stronger democracies

It is by now well-recognised that, in order to navigate today's increasingly digital world effectively, children require critical thinking, digital literacy and ethical awareness. These competences are also crucial for participating in democratic processes. When education systems equip children with the skills to engage as informed citizens, they can enhance democracies by opening up new possibilities for people to have their say. Creating supportive ecosystems involving teachers, parents, policymakers, researchers and children themselves is essential for nurturing these competencies and supporting children's active engagement in society.

Current conditions may be hindering child empowerment

Empowering children is only possible if policy makers directly, and effectively, tackle a number of key challenges. This requires more attention to be paid to establishing a sufficient baseline of conditions such as physical health, emotional well-being, digital literacy, and access to necessary resources. At present, physical activity levels among children are insufficient and many children experience challenges to their emotional well-being including increasing loneliness and feelings of anxiety.

The digital environment offers a wide range of arenas for empowerment, yet engagement in activism, debate and peer communities remains modest with only a minority of children engaging in these behaviours. Part of this could be related to a lack of digital skills, as well as media literacy skills such as the ability to distinguish fact from opinion. This skill gap is crucial because it influences children's ability and confidence in engaging with content critically, as well as their skills to make informed decisions, which is a fundamental aspect of empowerment. While digital platforms could be powerful tools for children's civic engagement, their potential is not yet fully harnessed. Moreover, children in poorer regions or from lower socio-economic backgrounds face significant barriers to accessing digital tools and also in leveraging their (often limited) skills to seize the digital opportunities while managing risks of harm.

Addressing the challenges requires cultural and systemic change

OECD countries have been working hard for many years to empower children, and a wealth of research, educational interventions and policies exists to help, many of which are documented in this publication. However, navigating the multifaceted challenges requires a systemic shift in the mindsets of those working in education systems, including how they perform their roles and how they interact with children.

Shifting roles and responsibilities for children, who are more often these days seen as agents of change than as vulnerable beings in need of protection, can be met with apprehension by some adults. Including children as stakeholders in decision-making processes requires a rethink of how these processes might have traditionally been done in order to avoid common pitfalls such as tokenism, manipulation, decoration or simply recreating adult structures and trying to fit children into these structures. Adapting how societies and schools engage with stakeholders, including children, to ensure equitable representation, particularly of those from disadvantaged groups, and requiring all processes to uphold children's rights and safety can be resource-intensive. It requires adult buy-in and can be challenging to get right.

Structural challenges across schools, such as high staff turnover both in terms of teachers and leadership, can further complicate the goals of empowering children. Being an empowering educator is no easy task, and teachers need high-quality professional development opportunities. Greater systematic support for school partnerships with external actors may help lighten the load, for instance in the provision of consistent high-quality mental health support. Yet, partnerships between schools and external actors are often left up to individual institutions. Schools require dedicated, system-wide mechanisms to support partnerships.

Lastly, persistent digital inequalities, influenced by geographical and socio-economic factors, remain a significant barrier, necessitating focused research and policy development to ensure digital equity and inclusion for all children. This comprehensive approach must aim to transform educational practices to emphasise empowerment, address socio-economic disparities, enhance mental health support, and expand digital equity and inclusion efforts, thereby creating a nurturing ecosystem where every child can thrive and play a role in actively shaping our shared future.

Education systems need to be part of a co-ordinated, whole-of-society approach to promote children's rights and well-being both inside and out of the classroom. This means working across government and ensuring policy making processes meaningfully reflect child rights and participation. This necessitates the establishment (or strengthening) of clear legislative frameworks, strategies and evaluation practices that mandate the inclusion of children in decision-making processes at all levels of government.

1 Introduction

The nature of childhood continues to change as the world moves through the 21st century, bringing new opportunities and challenges for children. Child empowerment is a topic that is high on policy agendas in OECD countries, but what exactly does child empowerment mean today? And what are the implications for education systems? This chapter outlines key concepts and definitions related to child empowerment and sets the stage for the chapters to follow. It also outlines an innovative feature of this publication that was developed to support decision makers (including children) to mobilise their knowledge.

Setting the stage: Why child empowerment?

The last decades have seen some fundamental shifts. Mega trends such as digitalisation, increasing inequalities, globalisation, climate change and others continue to change the nature of modern childhood. International shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic have altered certain trajectories in ways that we are still unpacking today.

Attitudes to children and their roles in life and education are also changing. Children in decades past have been primarily viewed as vulnerable individuals in need of protection. Today, policy and research spheres increasingly view children as autonomous, active agents of change, who have the expertise to contribute to decision-making processes and contribute positively to society. Now is a good moment to take stock of how 21st century children are already taking an active role in shaping their own lives, their communities and their education systems and how education systems can support them in doing so in the years ahead. In some countries, children's roles in decision making have been mainstreamed and formalised. However, in others there is still a long way to go.

Ensuring children feel, and are, *empowered* to act on topics that they feel passionate about and that affect them is a key piece in their taking an active role. Increasingly, in many OECD education systems, child empowerment is an explicit aim of policies and practices. While used as an overall policy vision, child empowerment is often poorly defined (Van Mechelen et al., 2021[1]). Being clear on what is meant by empowerment is an important but often neglected facet of child-friendly language when discussing policy. Without discussing what it means, the term risks becoming a mere slogan as opposed to something that can be used to hold adults accountable. This publication asks the following questions:

What does child empowerment mean today? And what does this mean for education systems?

Where we left off: Companion volumes I and II

The first volume of the 21st Century Children project at the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) was published in 2019 (Burns and Gottschalk, 2019[2]). This volume was conceptualised with the recognition that modern children's lives have changed in various ways, in many cases for the better with increased awareness for their mental health and with social support that can be a click of a button away. However, not all changes have been positive. Increasing symptoms of anxiety and depression, and emerging risks to well-being such as cyberbullying were recognised as challenges that many children face in the digital age.

The first volume focused on the intersection between emotional well-being and digital technologies, exploring how parenting and friendships have changed in the digital age. It focused on topics at the forefront of research and policy such as digital parenting and datafied children, the interplay between digital and offline relationships, and the social contexts of adolescent well-being. It took a deep dive into the (often murky) evidence base of how children's digital engagement may be implicated in well-being outcomes, how inequalities can mediate digital interactions and well-being, and underscored important work undertaken by the OECD regarding protecting children in the digital environment. It examined children as digital citizens, and how education systems can support them to take advantage of digital opportunities while navigating the risks. It ended with a look at how education can foster digital literacy and resilience, highlighting the role of partnerships, policy and protection.

The volume underscored that we owe it to our children and youth to separate fact from fiction and help support them to get the best start in life. It outlined that one of the biggest challenges for education systems around the world is to try to stay ahead of, or at least on top of, the curve. Policy makers, educators and researchers were encouraged to consolidate their efforts and resources to continue to provide sound evidence for future decision making on the emotional well-being of students in a digital world.

In the second volume (Burns and Gottschalk, 2020[3]), published in 2020, the focus was on physical health and digital technologies. As with its predecessor, this was provoked by an urgent need to better understand the interconnections between the two areas in the context of modern childhood. When it comes to physical health, the medical profession, health ministries and professional bodies have long taken the lead. In the case of digital technologies, expertise is often concentrated in private companies and ministries of science and technology. This is not necessarily undesirable, but it does emphasise the importance for the education sector of forging the connections and partnerships required to access the relevant expertise and knowledge from other sectors.

Like the first volume, it laid out a pending agenda where supporting children's resilience required getting comfortable with an approach of managing, not eliminating, risk to children. The evidence suggests that a zero-tolerance approach to risk, particularly when it comes to developing minds and bodies, has a negative impact on how schools function, from the design of playgrounds and physical spaces to accountability and governance structures. The persistence of this attitude is at odds with the discourse of child and youth empowerment. Yet, changing this mentality is no easy task as it means addressing perceived risk and disapproval/judgement of others.

Addressing policy fragmentation, including the voices of children, supporting teachers and building and reinforcing partnerships with other sectors were seen as system-wide challenges. These issues are still highly pertinent. Strengthening the knowledge base by refining and harmonising the terms we use, improving data and measurement, selectively targeting and funding high quality and rigorous research on child physical health and digital technology use, fostering dialogue and dissemination as well as improving the interdisciplinary nature of the knowledge base, remain challenges.

Clarifying definitions and concepts

Clarifying what is meant by child empowerment can lead to more child-friendly and effective policy but a clear definition is not the same as a universal definition. On the one hand, definitions tend to be most useful when they have been adjusted to take into account contextual specificities (e.g., social, cultural). For example, in education, the definition of "learning" depends on which disciplines one approaches it from, as well as the values, priorities and preferences of the cultural setting the learning is assumed to take place in. On the other hand, having access to a generalised understanding can be an important frame of reference for developing a context-specific one.

From its beginnings in the 1950s in social services, developmental and community psychology, to the more radical discourse of various social protest movements in the 1980s, since the mid-1990s the term *empowerment* has increasingly been adopted by policy makers and educators (Van Mechelen et al., 2021[1]). The popularity of the term continues well into the 21st Century. For instance, 'Empowering People and Ensuring Inclusiveness and Equality' was the theme of the 2019 High-level Political Forum for sustainable development[1] (HLPF), to help implement the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

In the research community, child empowerment has taken on renewed emphasis as we have moved from simpler conceptions of what it means to be digitally literate (i.e., the technical skills required to use digital tools), to more complex understandings of the attitudes and values children need when interacting with the digital environment.

Empowerment happens when an individual exercises their agency and realises their rights, which is increasingly important for education systems, both from an instructional point of view and a governance point of view. The interplay between empowerment and agency can be either a virtuous or vicious cycle, depending on the context and individual. When individuals feel comfortable exercising their agency, they are better equipped to make decisions that align with their goals and values and engage in empowered actions. At the same time, empowered individuals are more likely to exercise their agency effectively, as

they may feel confident in expressing their preferences, advocating for their rights, and actively participating in decision-making processes.

In this publication, child empowerment is a multi-faceted concept. This definition was developed in co-operation with academic experts in the fields of child empowerment, and with government experts from OECD member countries. It encompasses acknowledging:

- child agency and children as rights holders and subjects (rather than objects)
- that children are entitled to engaging in processes of constructing meaning in their lives, and of acting on issues that are not only important to them but relevant to them
- the role for actors, such as education systems, to support children to take increasing responsibility for their learning and well-being, while still allowing them to be children and learn by taking risks and making mistakes
- that child empowerment and participation will depend and should be adjusted based on the age, abilities and willingness of the child to participate
- the importance of equity and inclusion, to ensure all children have the opportunity to be empowered and exercise their agency irrespective of factors such as social background, gender, age etc.

The concept of agency is of direct importance for empowerment. For instance, when it comes to play and when it comes to the digital environment (Burns and Gottschalk, 2019[2]; Burns and Gottschalk, 2020[3]). This is no coincidence, since these two themes are often where adults perceive unacceptable levels of risk of harm for children and where adults themselves often feel they lack agency. All individuals inherently have agency but not all individuals have the same opportunities to exercise this agency. If this agency is appropriately acknowledged, it could help shift the classical vulnerability narrative surrounding children to one that is more empowered (Gottschalk and Borhan, 2023[4]).

The research community has numerous ways of understanding agency. Kucirkova (2021[5]) outlines how different disciplines conceptualise agency differently. In psychology, agency is discussed in terms of self-efficacy and control. People with high self-efficacy have a high internal locus of control and believe that they have the power to alter events. These characteristics have also been identified as having a high level of evidence in terms of both teachability and labour market, quality of life and societal outcomes (Steponavičius, Gress-Wright and Linzarini, 2023[6]). By contrast, socio-cultural theorists view agency as negotiated in dialogue between people or groups. While researchers in the field of childhood studies might define agency as children's perceived or actual participation in a given activity. The 2018 OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), explored students' agency regarding global issues and defined it as a worldview in which one sees oneself as connected to the world community and feels a sense of responsibility for its members (OECD, 2020[7]). Kucirkova suggests that a sense of agency comes from the experience of consolidating rights and responsibilities to understand the kind of life an individual feels able to build and how they will feature in the lives of others. This requires self-determination and vulnerability (Kucirkova, 2021[5]).

Agency is also characterised by the interplay an individual perceives between their intentionality, values, preferences and capacity and the constraints of the social and material environment in which they can take action. Sociology scholars highlight that the extent to which children experience a sense of agency is reflective of a wide variety of intersectional variables. Bringing intersectionality to the forefront of analysis can highlight the dynamics of agency and the role of structural constraints, including policies and practices (Rebughini, 2021[8]). For example, parenting style, socio-economic background (those who have experienced poverty often tend to feel they lack agency), education, the toys and games they are permitted to play with and the extent to which they are encouraged to critique and reflect on dominant discourses and narratives all have implications for child agency and empowerment. These disciplinary perspectives are important to bear in mind when we analyse the literature and draw conclusions about child empowerment.

Empowering children to exercise their agency requires carefully balancing the need to protect them from unacceptably high levels of risk and allowing them to learn autonomous risk management strategies. This balance is constantly shifting, and over the course of their development children gradually acquire more independence and autonomy from their caregivers. An optimal balance enables older children to develop a healthy sense of self-reliance and freedom when things go well, but the ability to call on family, friends or members of the community when the risk of harm is too high. Crucially, the source of this harm may well come from others exercising their agency. As Gottschalk and Borhan (2023[4]) remind us, some authors critique the use of the term agency, due to the assumption in much of the literature that agency is inherently positive when in fact it can be problematic and open to manipulation.

Sometimes different forms of empowerment can be at odds with each other. Encouraging the active involvement of parents in the education of their children is also a priority in many OECD countries. Additionally, teachers and school leaders are often positioned as autonomous actors. But, as Burns and Gottschalk (2020[3]) ask, whose voice counts if these different views are not aligned?

Having well thought out, innovative and collaborative models that bring together parents, communities, schools, and children themselves can ensure we support children in making the most of the opportunities presented by the 21st century, realise their rights to the fullest, and ensure the conditions for children to flourish as empowered agents of change.

Structure and key content of the report

The format of this publication puts the focus on concise and accessible content. Each chapter contains a short, one-page introduction and five-page sub-sections which deal with a concrete topic within the broader chapter theme, exploring literature and highlighting examples of policy and practice in OECD education systems. It is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2 examines citizens of today, including sub-sections on understanding modern childhood and children as active participants in their own education.
- Chapter 3 looks at COVID-19 and children's well-being, including sub-sections on emotional well-being, physical activity and schools as a space to create and support relationships.
- Chapter 4 looks at children's media engagement and the implications for empowerment, including sub-sections on the state of media education in OECD systems, media engagement and emotional well-being and media engagement and identity formation.
- Chapter 5 looks at digital inequalities, including sub-sections on overcoming access barriers for digital empowerment, empowering all children to make the most of digital opportunities, and recognising digital risks and overcoming inequalities for empowerment.
- Chapter 6 presents perspectives on child empowerment from diverse authors in different OECD countries.

Integrating a policy perspective throughout the analysis

Each chapter draws on feedback from policy makers in 23 OECD education systems. This provides an overview of policy initiatives and focus areas in the different topics related to child empowerment. This overview of policies shows the state of play in 2022 when policy makers completed the 21st Century Children Questionnaire (see Box 1.1). Throughout the publication, this source is referred to as the Questionnaire (2022), to distinguish and provide an update from a previous questionnaire, carried out in 2018.

Box 1.1. OECD/CERI 21st Century Children Questionnaire (2022)

Survey design and data

The 21st Century Children Questionnaire (2022) was circulated to CERI Governing Board members for responses between April and December 2022. The questionnaire built on the format of the 2018 questionnaire (Burns and Gottschalk, 2019[2]; Burns and Gottschalk, 2020[3]). Respondents were asked to reflect their ministry or government's views along four main themes: digital technologies, emotional well-being, families and peers, and physical health. Additional cross-cutting sections of the 2022 questionnaire asked about child rights, roles and empowerment, teacher education and cross-sectoral collaborations and partnerships.

23 countries and systems responded to the questionnaire: Australia, Belgium (Flemish Community and French Community), Canada, Denmark, England (United Kingdom), Estonia, Finland, France, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Luxembourg, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, Sweden and Türkiye.

Responses were submitted by the Ministries of Education or other responsible co-ordinating body for Education of each system.

The responses to this questionnaire offer a detailed illustration of the challenges that education ministries face in working to empower children and how they are supporting them to exercise their agency with innovative solutions.

New reflection tools for decision makers

The focus of this publication has been actionable and relevant research that can support decision makers. Integrating lessons from other CERI work (OECD, 2022[9]; OECD, 2023[10]), this publication pilots a new *reflection tool* format to support readers in mobilising the evidence contained within it. At the end of Chapters 2 to 5, there is a three-page reflection tool. A reflection tool supports reader to understand and discuss knowledge, as well as to take decisions to solve identified policy challenges in their context. It does this by combining a reader-friendly summary of international evidence with a concrete suggestion for a research-informed activity that can be organised among colleagues and/or stakeholders.

Each reflection tool is composed of:

1) a one-page summary of the main messages of the chapter;
2) a one-page analysis of trends, opportunities, challenges and recommendations specific to the topic of each chapter;
3) a one-page reflection activity drawn from the literature on knowledge mobilisation (Box 1.2), to help readers who may wish to stimulate research-informed discussions to support the development of a policy or practice.

Since using research evidence is a process that requires adaptation to the local context, the tool is not intended to be directly applied but will need to be thoughtfully engaged with and tailored to the unique setting. A suggested structure and, where relevant, questions are provided to guide the reader through the elements they may wish to adapt when running the knowledge mobilisation activity in their setting.

Box 1.2. What is knowledge mobilisation?

Over the past two decades a diverse body of work has emerged to understand how we can increase the use of research evidence in policy and practice through intentional efforts, a process known as *knowledge mobilisation*. It is at the core of evidence-informed policy and practice and contributes to better decision making and high-quality professional learning.

Crucially, *knowledge mobilisation* is about much more than just disseminating research findings via accessible communication channels. Although this remains important, there is now substantive evidence showing that fostering social interaction and building relationships among people and organisations, as well as incentivising and activating different parts of an education system to use evidence, is required (OECD, 2022[9]).

Social processes can be a powerful tool for supporting evidence-informed decision making. When deliberately structured, interactions among colleagues and stakeholders can help organisations integrate evidence into their activities and stimulate professional learning. They are an important building block of a research engagement culture for both education policy and practice (OECD, 2023[10]). A strong culture of research engagement is one in which people engage with research but also help others to engage with it. This requires agreement on relevant questions and how evidence can be used to answer them, as well as mutual understanding, positive attitudes, sufficient skills and dedicated time and space for individuals to come together and tackle key questions (Langer, Tripney and Gough, 2016[11]).

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Notes

[1] See: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/MDGs/Post2015/EIEPamphlet.pdf (accessed on 06 May 2024).

2 Citizens of today

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

Citizens of today: Understanding modern childhood

Recognising children as competent social actors and rights holders

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

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

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

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

The role of education in empowering citizens of today

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

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

The changing concept of childhood

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

Children as agents

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

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

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

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

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

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

Children as a "glocal" generation

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

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

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

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

Box 2.1. Talkin' 'bout my generation…

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

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

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

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

Children as rights holders

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

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

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

Box 2.2. Ombudsman for children in Estonia

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

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

Source: Questionnaire (2022)

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

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

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

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

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

Impact assessments

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

Child-oriented budgeting

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

Source: Questionnaire (2022)

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

Children as active participants in decision making

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

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

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

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

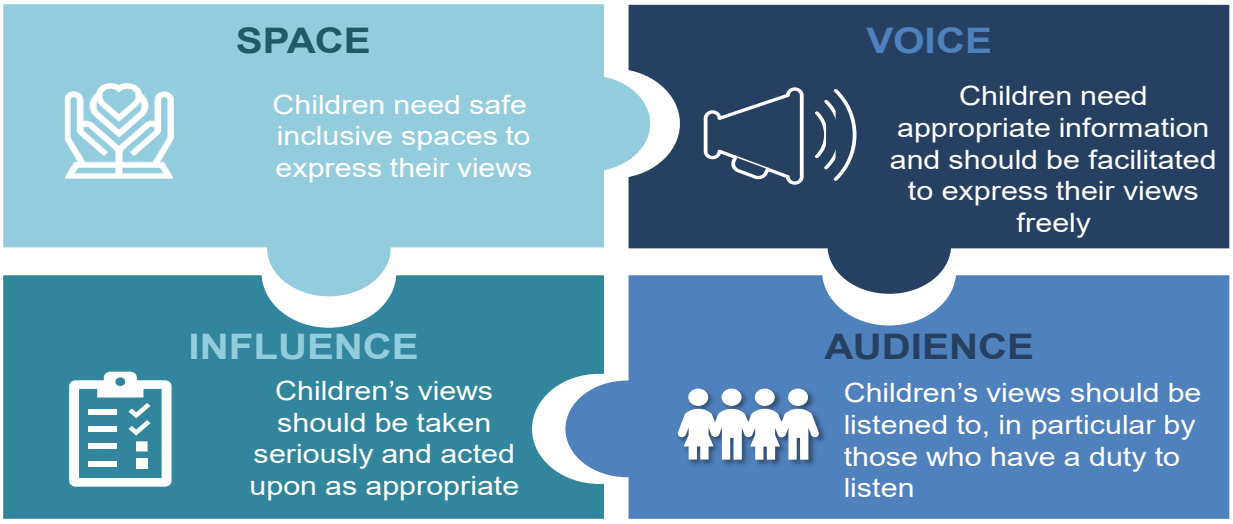
Making participation effective, meaningful, inclusive…and fun!

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

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

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

Figure 2.1. The Lundy model of child participation



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

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

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

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

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

Child participation in OECD education systems

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

Table 2.1. Examples of student participation in OECD education systems

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

Source: Questionnaire (2022)

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

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

Considerations for policy and practice

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

Implications for teachers and school leaders

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

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

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

Policy co-ordination

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

Investing time and money

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

Ensuring participation is meaningful

Education systems can and do invest time and resources into child participation approaches. However, if this is done as a “tick-the-box” exercise or in a tokenistic[3] manner, it renders child participation less or not at all meaningful. This runs the risk of undermining children’s participation rights, can be discouraging for children and it does not allow education systems and children themselves to reap the benefits associated with meaningful, authentic participation. Adults run the risk of excluding children also in cases where they believe their inclusion would be tokenistic, which does not justify their exclusion (Lundy, 2018[92]). More efforts are needed to combat tokenism first and foremost, while ensuring that children have the opportunity to participate even in instances when it could be considered tokenistic.

Breaking down barriers for participation

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

Modern citizens with a say

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

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

Box 2.4. Social and emotional skills for civic engagement

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

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

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

Civic education for empowerment

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Citizenship in the digital sphere

Increasing digitalisation has changed how individuals interact in at the local and global levels. In particular for young people, digital technologies provide opportunities including mobilisation, organisation and interaction with wider communities (Brennan, 2018[115]). Some children and young people take advantage of this opportunity. For example, according to the Global Kids Online survey[4], 13% of respondents indicated that they had been involved in an online protest or campaign, while 19% reported that they had talked about social or political issues with other people in the digital environment (Livingstone, Kardefelt Winther and Saeed, 2019[114]).

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

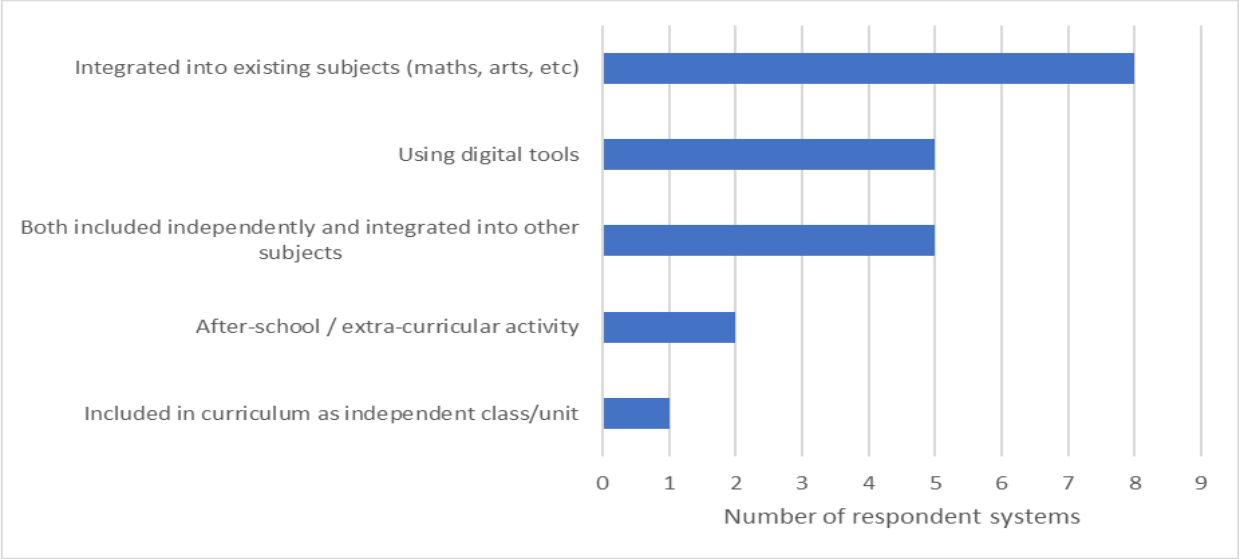
Digital citizenship is a priority topic in many OECD education systems. According to the Questionnaire (2022), 8 systems highlighted developing digital citizenship as a priority challenge. Within these systems, common features of digital citizenship were mentioned in the responses. Key ideas associated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

Digital citizenship education in OECD countries

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

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

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



Note: Systems were asked "How is this incorporated into teaching and learning process?" with multiple choice response options. 18 systems responded to this item.
Source: Questionnaire (2022)

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

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

Citizens of today – Reflection tool

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

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

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

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

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

Having the opportunity to participate in decision making can also support children in developing key skills such as leadership skills, while fostering their creativity and providing a sense of ownership and achievement.

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

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

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

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

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

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

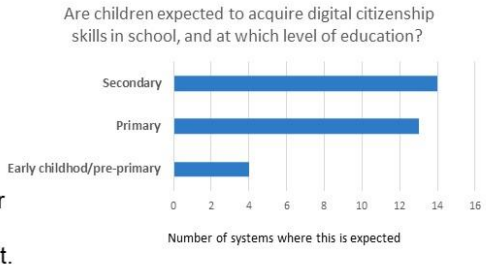
Civic and citizenship education can support children's civic participation now and in the future. This learning area is sometimes embedded in the curriculum as a standalone subject area, and in many systems is also incorporated into existing subject areas such as social sciences. Digital citizenship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

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

Reflecting on Children as Citizens

DATA & TRENDS

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



Source: Questionnaire (2022)

EMPOWERMENT

Opportunities

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

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

Challenges

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

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

What can governments do?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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[1] See: https://childstrategy.fi/ (accessed on 06 May 2024).

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

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

3 COVID-19 and children's well-being

On 5 May 2023, after more than three years, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared an end to the global Public Health Emergency for COVID-19. The research conducted during and after this crisis period means we are now beginning to piece together what the new normal looks like for children. This chapter draws on the Questionnaire (2022) and the research literature to map out what is known about three key enablers of child empowerment: Emotional well-being, physical activity and schools as social hubs. Across all three themes, pandemic measures disproportionally affected the vulnerable. Investing in children's well-being in a comprehensive manner, by not only tackling the issue at hand but addressing the background trends and larger barriers, is a crucial piece for policy makers.

Introduction

Schools are part of the social fabric of our lives. Education delivers not just academic learning, it also supports communities and develops and sustains physical and emotional well-being for students. COVID-19 led to school closures in most countries around the world and interrupted the school attendance of at least 1.5 billion students in 2020 and 2021 (Vincent-Lancrin, Cobo Romaní and Reimers, 2022[1]). Data from the 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) suggests that this exacerbated long-term academic performance and well-being issues in many countries' education systems (Schleicher, 2022[2]). Answering how and why these trends accelerated is crucial if we are to attempt to slow (or reverse) them.

Although the rush to remote learning highlighted the immense opportunities of the digital environment, school closures also reminded us of the power and importance of the physical world (Burns and Gottschalk, 2020[3]). Physical interaction with others, who have different opinions, backgrounds, and personalities, remains essential to cultivate a future society in which people are curious and compassionate to the needs of others (Vincent-Lancrin, Cobo Romaní and Reimers, 2022[1]). Many of the learning continuity programmes initiated during COVID-19 had a strong focus on social and emotional skills. These programmes attempted to assuage students' possible anxiety and allow them to feel heard (Vincent-Lancrin, Cobo Romaní and Reimers, 2022[1]). However, when schools were closed, PISA 2022 results for OECD countries show that education staff focused more on curriculum goals than on students' well-being (OECD, 2023[4]). Analysing the impact of school closures on students is complex. Many other factors impacted students, for example the quality of remote teaching and levels of support received by struggling students (Schleicher, 2022[2]). The topic of each of the sections in this chapter was selected for three reasons. Firstly, the Questionnaire (2022) revealed that each topic is an area of significant concern for many OECD countries, due to trends staying flat or heading in the wrong direction.

Secondly, each theme offers huge scope to empower children if a sufficient baseline is reached. The literature contained in this chapter reveals that emotional well-being positively impacts an individuals' self-confidence, self-regulation and sociability and helps them accomplish their goals. It also finds that being physically active is associated with a lower risk of overweight, better overall health, working memory, emotional well-being and academic outcomes. Furthermore, the research shows that high quality social relations can motivate children to engage in both in- and out-of-class activities, perform to the best of their abilities and enhance their enthusiasm for learning.

Thirdly, if there is any silver lining presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is that the disruption to each of the themes provides a unique opportunity to reimagine the role of education, rather than reverting to a (sub-optimal) status quo. The crisis period of COVID-19 was a watershed moment for the home environment. As Sheldrick et al. (2022[5]) put it, during the lockdowns the home became an "everything space". This laid bare the stark contrasts between different children's experiences of childhood. In many ways, COVID-19 reminds us of what was already known; that variables such as geographical location, age and socio-economic background give each child a unique emotional, physical and educational positioning that impacts how they see the world and how the world sees them.

The pandemic also served to highlight the commonalities across education systems regarding what is needed from policy and practice. More robust data and monitoring of trends is essential, as is building the skills of policy makers, practitioners, caregivers and others to understand this data and use it to take action. Ensuring well-resourced, long-term and meaningful partnerships between schools, external actors, parents, communities and students remains a challenge. More research into effective interventions, covering both school and non-school settings, is needed. This must be accompanied by high quality training for the practitioners who are tasked with implementing multi-dimensional interventions.

Emotional well-being

Emotional well-being refers to the quality of an individual's emotions and experiences and is generally seen as a core component of positive mental health (for a detailed definition, see (Burns and Gottschalk, 2019, p. 54[6])). Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, empirical studies observed an increasing trend in depression and anxiety among children in OECD countries (Burns and Gottschalk, 2019[6]). Childhood is an important phase of life for emotional well-being. Positive subjective well-being is an enabling condition for psychological empowerment (i.e. an individual's belief that they can accomplish and/or fulfil their goals) and affects self-confidence, self-regulation and sociability (Diener and Biswas-Diener, 2005[7]). Insufficient awareness of, or support for, mental health during this developmental period may negatively affect life satisfaction and educational achievement, both during childhood and in later stages of life (Burns and Gottschalk, 2019[6]; Choi, 2018[8]).

Although children faced a lower risk of COVID-19 mortality, the pandemic had serious implications for their mental health. Children had to adapt to new educational arrangements, such as virtual schooling, and were often isolated from their peers and communities. For them, the pandemic and the resulting lockdowns were associated with outcomes such as increased symptoms of depression and anxiety, and decreased subjective well-being and life satisfaction (Suresh, Alam and Karkossa, 2021[9]; Steinmayr, Paschke and Wirthwein, 2022[10]; Wolf and Schmitz, 2023[11]). Beyond the immediate implications of the lockdown restrictions, the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic also negatively impacted children's mental health and was associated with increased anxiety (OECD, 2020[12]). A meta-analysis of 29 studies indicates that the rate of anxiety symptoms in children and adolescents may have doubled during the pandemic, affecting up to one in five individuals (Racine et al., 2021[13]). More recent research conducted in various OECD countries also finds increases in children's anxiety symptoms during the pandemic (Hawes et al., 2022[14]; Ravens-Sieberer et al., 2022[15]; Shoshani, 2023[16]). Children from lower socio-economic backgrounds, with limited space at home, existing physical or mental health issues, or belonging to ethnic and racial minorities and marginalised groups were disproportionally affected (OECD, 2021[17]; OECD, 2023[18]; Sonu, Marvin and Moore, 2021[19]; Wolf and Schmitz, 2023[11]).

Anxiety is high on the education policy agenda

According to the Questionnaire (2022) results, children's anxiety is an important issue for education policy makers across OECD education systems. Of the 21 systems reporting internalising mental health conditions (such as depression and anxiety) as a challenge, 13 signalled that this was a pressing challenge. Moreover, 17 systems reported that school-related anxiety/ stress pose a challenge, with eight systems highlighting it as a pressing challenge.

Some Questionnaire (2022) respondents, such as Denmark and Norway, highlighted that girls may experience higher school-related stress and anxiety than boys. PISA 2015 results found, on average, a 16.7 percentage point difference between girls and boys who felt anxious for a test they had prepared for; the difference in Denmark and Norway was 23 and 26 percentage points, respectively (OECD, 2017[20]). More recent literature suggests that mathematics anxiety could act as a mediating factor between gender and mathematical performance (Vos et al., 2023[21]). In New Zealand, the most recent edition of the Youth19 survey, funded by the Health Research Council, indicated that girls had lower levels of overall emotional well-being, higher prevalence of depressive symptoms and a higher rate of suicide attempts in 2019 (Fleming et al., 2020[22]). According to PISA 2018 results, girls also expressed lower life satisfaction and sense of meaning in life, as well as greater fear of failure (OECD, 2019[23]). The OECD Survey on Social and Emotional Skills (SSES) 2023 finds that on average girls report lower levels of all health and well-being outcomes than boys. These include life satisfaction, current psychological well-being, satisfaction with their relationships, body image, and test and class anxiety (OECD, 2024[24]). They also report lower levels of emotional regulation skills (stress-resistance, emotional regulation and optimism), trust and energy than boys (OECD, 2024[24]). These skills are those most strongly linked to students' health

and well-being outcomes, such as life satisfaction (OECD, 2024[24]). Japan reported in the Questionnaire (2022) that the number of child suicides during COVID-19 increased significantly compared to the previous year. In response, the government has increased suicide prevention education, expanded the assignment of school counsellors and school social workers, and developed consultation services by phone and social media.

Box 3.1. Green minds, strong hearts: Climate anxiety and empowerment

In addition to stressors like COVID-19, social isolation and school-related pressures, climate change and its adverse effects have become a salient issue in recent years that contributes to anxiety in children. Climate change can be a stressor that negatively impacts children's mental health (Hickman et al., 2021[25]). Children and adolescents may be more vulnerable to climate change, and its adverse effects can create a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness as well as feelings of anxiety (Sanson, Van Hoorn and Burke, 2019[26]). A survey of 10 000 children from 10 countries found that 84% reported they were moderately, very or extremely worried about climate change and more than 60% reported they felt anxious about climate change (Hickman et al., 2021[25]).

Ojala et al. (2021[27]) characterise climate anxiety as related to uncertainty. Due to the intergenerational characteristics of climate change and the limited financial and physical means of children, climate anxiety remains a salient problem for children, even for those who do not directly experience natural disasters associated with climate change. Air pollution from wildfires and the loss of biodiversity could negatively affect mental health, while access to green spaces may be protective of mental health (OECD, 2023[18]). Literature also notes the limited amount of research on children's climate anxiety compared to that of adults and suggests further exploration from a child-centred point of view is needed (Léger-Goodes et al., 2022[28]).

According to PISA 2018 results, 79% of students in OECD countries are aware of climate change and global warming but only 57% of students think they can do something about it (OECD, 2020[29]). The discrepancy may show a lack of self-confidence to act and tackle climate issues. For addressing climate anxiety and the sense of powerlessness, and helping children become engaged and empowered actors, the literature emphasises using coping techniques, which invoke beliefs, values and goals to elicit positive emotions, positive appraisal and increased trust in different actors and solutions against climate change and children's constructive engagement (Ojala, 2012[30]; Ojala et al., 2021[27]).

Education and schooling can help manage feelings of anxiety by promoting climate action (Sanson, Van Hoorn and Burke, 2019[26]). Children need to understand climate matters accurately to be empowered, as a misconception of issues at stake could lead to confusion and a lack of action (Crandon et al., 2022[31]). Moreover, youth activism may help children deal with future-related anxiety by channelling their feelings into action as well as providing them with skills for personal development and future engagement (Sanson, Van Hoorn and Burke, 2019[26]).

Poor mental health and symptoms of anxiety can negatively affect academic performance, and in severe cases can be associated with emotionally-based school avoidance (OECD, 2023[18]), which was also highlighted in the Questionnaire (2022). Research on adolescents in France, for instance, shows significant symptoms of anxiety-related school avoidance and burnout (Simoës-Perlant, Barreau and Vezilier, 2023[32]). A survey undertaken in in the United Kingdom (UK), suggests that lower levels of emotional well-being contributed to a surge in school absenteeism after the crisis phase of COVID-19 (Stem4, 2024[33]). In the United States (US), during the pandemic, absenteeism was found to increase with online schooling, and was higher for low-income households, and ethnic and racial minorities (Delgado et al., 2022[34]; Gee, Asmundson and Vang, 2023[35]). Literature also notes that absenteeism may be associated with students'

social-emotional and mental health functioning, limiting students' access to care and negatively impacting academic achievement (Kearney et al., 2023[36]; OECD, 2023[4]).

Literature tends to support the view that school closures may have been harmful for children's well-being (Viner et al., 2022[37]). Questionnaire (2022) respondents also reported that school closures and returning to school after lockdowns may have contributed to additional anxiety. PISA 2022 found that during school closures, 46.6% of students across OECD countries agreed or strongly agreed that they felt anxious about schoolwork (OECD, 2023[4]). However, the approach schools take appears to make a difference. Students who reported getting more support from their schools during closures reported greater well-being and life satisfaction, and less mathematics anxiety (OECD, 2023[4]).

Building resilience and coping mechanisms through education

Forming coping strategies and building resilience against challenges is important in supporting and maintaining emotional well-being (OECD, 2021[38]). Masten and Motti-Stefanidi (2020[39]) argue that an effective way of building resilience is to work with children for COVID-19 recovery efforts. Psychological skills and community-based support are some of the factors that may contribute to positive adaptation in a disaster context. The authors give the example of the Federal Emergency Management Administration's (FEMA) Youth Preparedness Council in the United States and its ability to involve young people in disaster responses during Hurricane Katrina, which was empowering for them and gave them hope in the face of a disaster.

Schools can give children the tools to anticipate adversities and develop coping mechanisms that can be empowering. This can be done for example, by granting access to non-academic support such as providing mental health assistance (Hoffman and Miller, 2020[40]). Capurso et al. (2020[41]) argue that post-lockdown re-entry programmes can support children to make sense of the rapid changes around them to emotionally and cognitively process what has happened in a safe and trusted environment and build resilience for future crises. They propose a programme which adapts established crisis-related intervention principles for educational settings, such as facilitated classroom discussions, structured opportunities for children to reconnect socially and with the school environment, sessions to shift attention away from stressful memories towards an awareness of coping and presentation of relevant facts and information. When paired with a teacher training component, the programme was positively evaluated in the Italian context, however the absence of a large scale trial with a control group remains a limitation (Capurso et al., 2021[42])

Empowerment is not only about building resilience and coping mechanisms. One of education's core roles is to support children to fulfil their dreams and flourish. Students who possess a "growth mindset", namely those who believe that intelligence is not fixed but improvable through effort, feel more empowered and have a greater sense of agency (OECD, 2022[43]). PISA 2022 results suggest that having a growth mindset enables students to get out of their comfort zones and take on challenges, as well as overcome performance-related anxiety and perform better in mathematics (OECD, 2023[44]). A randomised controlled trial in the Netherlands found that students with a growth mindset were more resilient against mental health setbacks during COVID-19 (Janssen and van Atteveldt, 2023[45]).

Interventions and partnerships can support children's well-being

OECD education systems use different approaches to devise policies to promote children's emotional well-being. Policy frameworks that tackle well-being comprehensively should look at both prevention and response (Burns and Gottschalk, 2019[6]). For instance, response interventions could include cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), whereas programmes aiming to build social and emotional skills are more preventative.

Table 3.1 shows a selection of such policies and interventions collected through the Questionnaire (2022). Some approaches entail new legislation or updated curricula, whereas others seek to gather data on emotional well-being to tackle it more effectively.

Despite the priority given to the topic of mental health and emotional well-being, potential challenges and gaps in the knowledge base remain. Rather than the current abundance of definitions and concepts related to well-being, a more widely accepted well-being framework is necessary to provide holistic measurement to inform policy and practice (Burns and Gottschalk, 2019[6]). Literature also notes the limited information on children younger than 12 in emotional well-being and mental health research as well as the dearth of comprehensive long-term cross-country data and longitudinal studies (Choi, 2018[8]).

Table 3.1. Policies and practices to support emotional well-being

Type of policy or practice	Country	Description
Curricular / Legislative	Iceland	The 2021 Act on the Integration of Services in the Interest of Children's Prosperity considers the best interests of children in every decision. The Act calls for provision of co-operative tools and proposals for mental health support for students, defining it as a special subject for upper-secondary level curriculum.
	Ireland	Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is a programme organised for different levels of schooling, focusing on improving well-being and confidence.
	Ontario (Canada)	Mathematics, and health and physical education curricula are designed to encompass social-emotional learning skills to foster well-being and build resilience. This is intended to help students cope with school-related anxiety and build healthy relationships.
Guidance / Professional	Mexico	*Construye T* programme: conferences and workshops targeting bullying, stress and anxiety. This programme aims to improve emotional well-being through both didactic and leisure activities.
	Sweden	State grants are provided to employ staff specialised in student health and special education in schools, including doctors, nurses, counsellors, psychologists or special education teachers.
Toolkits / Online support	Estonia	*Teeviit* is an online youth information portal tackling different topics each month, including mental health. *Teeviit* provides podcasts, discussions with specialists, tips and tools for seeking help for young people.
	Netherlands	Extra budget for schools to spend on interventions from a pre-approved list, including those focused on well-being and cultural activities to develop students' social-emotional and physical development.
Data collection	Denmark	An annual well-being survey completed by students from pre-school to the end of secondary school.
	Spain	State Observatory of School Co-existence collects data to improve school climate and devises measures promoting co-existence.

Source: Questionnaire (2022)

Partnerships with external actors can be important for supporting positive health and well-being outcomes (Burns and Gottschalk, 2020[3]). Countries can become more effective in their policy approaches to child well-being by prioritising partnerships and co-ordination with actors such as civil society organisations or allied health professions (OECD, 2023[46]). Several barriers to mental health provision exist at the school level, such as staff turnover, leadership and staff capacity (March et al., 2022[47]).

Partnerships with external actors can help alleviate some of these barriers. There are successful programmes for mental health provision at schools through partnerships, such as Te Rito Toi[1] in New Zealand. In collaboration with the University of Auckland, this art-based pedagogical tool, designed for returning to school after lockdowns or other possible disruptions, allows students to express themselves and their own narratives of the pandemic. This programme provides teachers and principals with simple and clear lesson plans, requiring minimal preparation (Vincent-Lancrin, Cobo Romaní and Reimers, 2022[1]). Upon the students' return to school following the lifting of COVID-19 lockdowns, this programme aimed to support children to explore their emotions, and give educators the chance to prioritise children's well-being (O'Connor and Estellés, 2021[48]).

Table 3.2 shows a range of partnerships with external actors to promote children's emotional well-being, some of which were implemented during the pandemic. Although involving medical and mental health-

related institutions can help ensure comprehensive and coherent policies to promote emotional well-being (Burns and Gottschalk, 2019[6]), they are far from being the only important actors in this space. International organisations and ministries at national or regional levels can fund projects, provide expertise, and devise and enforce policies thereby adding value and enabling change. Local communities can be instrumental in supporting school initiatives.

Table 3.2. Partnerships with external actors for child well-being

Country / countries	Explanation of the partnership	Type of external actor
Belgium (Flemish community)	The Institute for Healthy Living developed a package, Geluk in de klas[2], to support schools. When the first edition was released more than 3 000 teachers registered for training related to this package.	Expertise centre for health promotion and disease prevention
Belgium (French community)	Psycho-medico-social centres in schools worked actively during the pandemic to identify students' needs including for mental health.	Medical institutions
Latvia	A programme by the Children's Clinical University Hospital and the Adolescent Resource Centre for youth aged 11-18 to tackle depression, anxiety and self-harm. There is also a focus on neurodivergent youth and preventative/early intervention.	Medical institutions, mental health centres
Luxembourg	"What if it were you?" is a resource toolkit and a film, tackling (cyber)bullying, suicide, loneliness, marginalisation and violence, with working groups providing trainings to students.	Mental health centres (*Centre psycho-social et d'accompagnement scolaires*)
New Zealand	The Mana Ake programme promotes well-being and positive mental health in youth, through which almost 200 000 children receive support throughout the Canterbury region. Local organisations support the initiative.	Local community
Québec (Canada)	The "Inter-ministerial action plan for mental health" promotes mental health in schools and works on anxiety prevention and partnerships with community organisations.	Provincial ministries, local community
Türkiye	Inclusion of behavioural and social performance in the end-of-term student report cards through a partnership with United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), allowing a more consistent and precise assessment of social and emotional skills.	International organisations

Source: Questionnaire (2022)

Looking to the future

As the world unpacks the effects of COVID-19, it is prudent to prepare responses and devise suitable mitigation strategies for countering the adverse effects of new pandemics, or similar challenges. Research suggests these events may be more likely in the future (Marani et al., 2021[49]; Tollefson, 2020[50]). Effective prevention programmes that aim to bolster students' social and emotional skills could help to address mental health concerns, including symptoms of anxiety (Choi, 2018[8]; OECD, 2023[18]). Skills such as self-control, emotional intelligence and social problem-solving are among the key mental health predictors in the current research literature, although more evidence would be beneficial (Steponavičius, Gress-Wright and Linzarini, 2023[51]). Moreover, interventions that promote the development of social relationships, self-esteem and self-regulation skills can support resilience (Llistosella et al., 2022[52]).

Policy makers, educators and communities should intervene as early as possible. Most mental health concerns emerge during adolescence, but often it takes until adulthood to act upon them. By that time, the required investment in treatments is more substantial. One of the reasons for this is that children's mental health concerns, including anxiety, may get more severe and chronic as they grow up (Choi, 2018[8]). Policy makers could collaborate with other state/local institutions to devise "integrated policy plans" for a holistic well-being approach and more coherent well-being policies (OECD, 2023, p. 1[46]). For those OECD countries that already have such plans, they can be made more effective by focusing them on a smaller number of concrete cross-cutting issues (OECD, 2023[46]). As the COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures already affected vulnerable children disproportionally, investing in their well-being in a comprehensive manner, by not only tackling the issue at hand but addressing the background and larger barriers is crucial to reduce inequalities (OECD, 2021[17]).

Physical activity

Over the last half-century, there have been a number of improvements to the physical health of children. For example, on average across the OECD, there has been a reduction of rates of accidental death and injury and decline of alcohol consumption (Burns and Gottschalk, 2020[3]). However, decreasing physical activity rates and rising rates of obesity continue to be a challenge. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines physical activity as "any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that requires energy expenditure." It refers to all movement, including during leisure time, transportation time, the workday or the school day (World Health Organization, 2022[53]). In the Questionnaire (2022), lack of physical activity was identified by education systems as one of the most pressing challenges regarding children's physical health. This section seeks to understand the data on children's physical activity before, during and after the immediate crisis period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moving more can empower children

There is robust and longstanding evidence that children who are physically active have greater overall well-being and are better able to seize life's opportunities. Being physically active is associated with a lower risk of overweight, better overall health, working memory, emotional well-being and academic outcomes (Aston, 2018[54]; World Health Organization, 2022[53]). Meeting these key enabling conditions can support children in exercising their agency, engaging in processes of constructing meaning in their lives and acting on issues that are important to them. Being physically active has also been positively associated with pro-social behaviour, more positive self-perceptions of emotional regulation, and greater perceived capability to sense how others are feeling and to respond empathetically (Parise, Pagani and Cremasco, 2015[55]; Wan, Zhao and Song, 2021[56]). More specifically, participation in sport has many psychological and social health benefits for children, with the most common being improved self-esteem, social interaction and fewer depressive symptoms (Eime et al., 2013[57]; Pearce et al., 2022[58]). Some research even suggests that physical activity may be a promising alternative to conventional treatments for children with both clinical and non-clinical depression (Wegner et al., 2020[59]).

Box 3.2. Promoting healthy journeys through active travel: A chain reaction?

Initiatives and policies can promote more widespread active travel as a way of empowering children. In Denmark, there are generally high levels of active transport for children thanks to campaigns, safe routes to school programmes and a decentralised education system where children live relatively close to their schools (Aubert et al., 2022[60]). Active travel in Denmark is also supported by dedicated funding.

Funded by the Ministry of Transport, Cykelpuljen[3] is a call for proposals that runs annually since 2009 and funds cycling-related community projects under the 2035 Danish infrastructure plan. For example, in 2021, the "Students as traffic experts[4]", project was delivered by the social enterprise *Trafik i Børnehøjde*. It worked with schools and directly asked students to use their experience and problem-solving skills to come up with viable traffic solutions in four municipalities, as well as learning opportunities and inspirational material for teachers to encourage active travel to and from school. Evaluation of the project showed positive perceptions from schools and children. In 2022, DKK 200 million was used to co-finance such projects.

In addition to the positive correlates, physical activity can directly empower children when it leads them to acquire new skills, explore their talents, make friends, and reach goals in a chosen activity or sport (Fenton et al., 2017[61]). For example, there are a positive cascade of social, emotional and health benefits that start with children learning to ride a bicycle, including being less fearful, more motivated to try other physical activities, development of relational and emotional skills and exploration of the environment which enables

greater independence (Mercê et al., 2021[62]). Active travel (Box 3.2) encompasses walking, cycling and other modes of engineless transport. For most children it is financially accessible and has physical, as well as social and mental health benefits (Buttazzoni, Nelson Ferguson and Gilliland, 2023[63]; Ikeda et al., 2020[64]). Several factors may act as barriers to more widespread use of active travel: a poorly maintained or unsuitable built environment, poor traffic safety, low perception of neighbourhood safety and community trust, longer distances to school, dominant local driving culture and poor perception of self-efficacy, among others (Aranda-Balboa et al., 2020[65]; Buttazzoni, Nelson Ferguson and Gilliland, 2023[63]; Nyström et al., 2023[66]; Wangzom, White and Paay, 2023[67]).

By encouraging children to be physically active, education systems, and other actors, are supporting them to take ownership for their learning and well-being, as well giving them opportunities to forge relationships and find roles in local and wider communities, while still allowing them to be children and learn by making mistakes. All these benefits make different forms of physical activity a powerful asset for children as they grow, learn and develop.

The state of play

Even before the pandemic, the picture of physical activity in childhood was stark. Our second volume reviewed the research on physical activity and concluded that 21st century children "move less and weigh more" (Burns and Gottschalk, 2020, p. 24[3]). A review of eight intercontinental initiatives measuring physical activity levels of children found that, although there are substantial inconsistencies across and within monitoring initiatives, three findings were consistent across all eight initiatives: insufficient level of physical activity of children and adolescents across the globe, lower levels of physical activity among girls and attenuation of physical activity levels with age (Aubert et al., 2021[68]).

In terms of the available data, the Global Matrix 4.0[5] represents the largest synthesis of children's and adolescents' physical activity indicators to date, using the best available data from 59 countries. The analysis concluded that 66%-73% of children and adolescents in participating countries are currently not meeting the Global Recommendations on overall Physical Activity for Health[6] per day (Aubert et al., 2022[60]). These data were lowest in Chinese Taipei, Ethiopia, Hungary, Indonesia, Philippines, United Arab Emirates, Uruguay, Viet Nam, and Wales (United Kingdom), where more than 80% of children are failing to reach the recommended level of activity. By contrast, Finland and Slovenia performed highest, with only around 20% of children failing to meet the recommended levels.

The Questionnaire (2022) asked systems to provide brief descriptions of the physical activity challenge in their respective contexts. Systems tended to differ in the extent to which they saw low levels of physical activity as an emerging, stable or growing issue. England (United Kingdom) and Latvia, for example, described low levels of physical activity levels as a stable trend, whereas Ireland and Norway reported that their national survey data tracked decreasing activity. Many systems emphasised the connections between physical activity and healthy diet, as well as awareness of positive correlates such as higher emotional well-being and better life outcomes into adulthood. Italy and the Netherlands both explicitly mentioned equity and the goal of increasing opportunities for physical activity among marginalised students.

Many systems monitor physical activity through national surveys (Box 3.3). Some also reported having initiated policy structures to support data use in physical activity policies. For example, Spain convenes a ministerial working group, which gathers representatives of the regional governments of the Autonomous Communities and monitors physical activity levels. Although national and international monitoring of physical activity among children and adolescents has increased in recent years, there is still a global lack of data (Aubert et al., 2022[60]).

Box 3.3. Monitoring physical activity levels through surveys: Three country examples

The Physical Activity, Sedentarism and Obesity of Spanish youth (PASOS) Study in Spain was a landmark study that became the driving force behind the Spanish government's first-ever nationwide plan to address childhood obesity[7] in 2022. It was a representative survey of 3 887 children aged 8-16 in 247 schools, collected in the months of April, May and June 2019.

The Irish Sports Monitor[8] (ISM) is a large population study undertaken biennially in order to provide trends in participation in sport and physical activity in Ireland. Data collection is done by telephone among a representative sample of the population aged 16 and older. The 'Life skills[9]' survey is a data collection tool covering physical activity in primary and post-secondary education. Reports were released in 2012 and 2015.

In Canada, ways of measuring of proposed measures vary across provinces and territories. For example, the Enquête québécoise sur l'activité physique et le sport[10] (Québec survey on physical activity and sport, EQAPS) is organised by the Québec Statistics Institute. Aimed at children aged 6-17 as well as adults, it uncovered both the barriers and motivations behind physical activity in the region, publishing reports in 2022.

Although they are cost-effective, self-report surveys about physical activity levels are subject to biases and inaccuracies (Do et al., 2022[69]). There is a need for more device-based physical activity data among children and adolescents (Aubert et al., 2021[68]), for example by using accelerometers, as in a study by Salway et al. (2022[70]).

Source: Questionnaire (2022)

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

Unsurprisingly, the impact of COVID-19 on levels of physical activity was mentioned as a source of concern by several OECD countries. In terms of empirical data, although some studies find evidence of increased physical activity for certain clusters of children during and after COVID-19 (e.g. (Nathan et al., 2021[71]; Moore et al., 2020[72])), these findings are in the minority (Do et al., 2022[69]). Estimates on the scale of the decreases in physical activity during COVID-19 vary depending on the study sample, scope and method, ranging from declines of 91 minutes per day, to declines of eight minutes per day (Neville et al., 2022[73]; Salway et al., 2022[70]; Rossi, Behme and Breuer, 2021[74]). Overall, the impact of COVID-19 on children's physical activity is likely to be specific to the severity and length of each COVID-19 outbreak and restrictions on a particular geographical population (Nathan et al., 2021[71]). A systematic review by Kharel and colleagues (2022[75]) found that children and adolescents living under stricter lockdowns, for example in Brazil and Spain, saw the biggest declines in physical activity, while those in less-strict lockdowns, such as Western Australia and Germany, saw smaller declines.

An important protective factor appears to have been opportunities to take part in active play. Active play "may involve symbolic activity or games with or without clearly defined rules; the activity may be unstructured/unorganized, social or solitary, but the distinguishing features are a playful context, combined with activity that is significantly above resting metabolic rate. Active play tends to occur sporadically, with frequent rest periods, which makes it difficult to record." (Aubert et al., 2022, p. 702[60]). Despite challenges with gathering the data, findings suggest many younger children engaged in more physical activity during COVID-19, or at least experienced less of a decrease, compared to older children (Moore et al., 2020[72]; Do et al., 2022[69]; Okely et al., 2021[76]; van de Pas et al., 2022[77]). Scholars hypothesise that these age differences may be due to school and sports-based programmes being a greater source of daily physical activity for older children, compared to younger children, where active play tends to be a greater source of

daily activity (Do et al., 2022[69]). A study by Nathan and colleagues (2021[71]) in Western Australia suggests evidence of a compensation effect among younger children, who may have been replacing time lost in organised physical activity with more active play.

The physical environment is a well-known determinant of physical activity levels in both children and adolescents. Beyond active play, better accessibility to existing and new infrastructure for walking, cycling, and public transportation, as well as lower population density, higher public transportation density, better connectivity of streets, access and availability of public open spaces, and quality sports facilities are associated with increased overall physical activity levels (Aubert et al., 2022[60]). These factors also played a role during COVID-19, as closures and restrictions meant the opportunities presented by the home environment took on special importance. For some children, being in rural areas with more space, compared to cities, may have been a protective factor (Okely et al., 2021[76]). Multiple studies found that children living in apartments had greater declines in physical activity (Nathan et al., 2021[71]; Sanmiguel-Rodríguez et al., 2022[78]). For adolescents, living in low-density housing was found to increase the likelihood of outdoor activities, as did living in high-density housing provided there was access to parks (Moore et al., 2020[72]). It is important to note that socio-economic inequalities in physical activity levels were already increasing substantially in many countries in the decade prior to COVID-19 (Reilly et al., 2022[79]). The role played by environmental factors during the pandemic may have increased physical activity inequalities between those children with access to suitable outdoor spaces and those without (Rossi, Behme and Breuer, 2021[74]).

The roles played by the home environment, family members and peers are complex. During the pandemic, research in the UK concluded that the home environment was more conducive to electronic media pursuits than physical activity (Sheldrick et al., 2022[5]). For instance, the amount of media equipment in the home increased by 10% and 17% fewer parents enforced a limit on screen-time (Sheldrick et al., 2022[5]). Many parents in this study also placed more importance on having electronic media equipment at home and in the child's bedroom. Role modelling, co-participation and general support for physical activity are often found to be important when it comes to the physical activity levels of children (Aubert et al., 2022[60]; Rhodes et al., 2020[80]; Petersen et al., 2020[81]). This is also emphasised in the COVID-19 literature, where different caregiver attributes can act as barriers and facilitators to children's level of physical activity. A comparative study of European and Latin American Countries found that children whose parents had higher educational level also had higher levels of physical activity during COVID-19 (Sanmiguel-Rodríguez et al., 2022[78]). Many parents supported and encouraged their children's physical activity, for instance by co-ordinating family activities (e.g. bike rides, hikes and walks) (Perez et al., 2021[82]). In some studies though, parental restrictions were found to have inhibited physical activity through parental time restraints, safety concerns, time and costs constraints (Nally et al., 2022[83]).

Although many important correlates are already known to researchers and policy makers, physical activity as a behaviour is complex and multi-dimensional and the influence of one single individual variable (for example parental physical activity levels) may still be relatively weak (Petersen et al., 2020[81]). To respond to this complexity, parents, schools, public health professionals, communities and businesses must actively collaborate to promote physical activity wherever possible, especially for vulnerable groups (Ng et al., 2020[84]).

Policies and practices

School policies and curricula have the potential to provide opportunities for physical activity through physical education, breaks, in-class and out-of-class physical activities, active travel initiatives, practitioner role modelling and health literacy (Woods et al., 2021[85]; Gelius et al., 2020[86]; World Health Organization, 2022[87]). In the majority of countries and economies that participated in PISA 2015, most students took at least one physical education class per week, on average (OECD, 2017[20]). Students who participated in at least two physical education classes per week exercised about 0.5 days more than students who did

not take physical education classes (OECD, 2019[88]). Importantly, many children enjoy physical activity at school and recognise the benefits. For instance, in PISA 2022, 50% of all students reported that they missed sports and other physical activities organised by their school during COVID-19 school closures (OECD, 2023[4]). Yet, estimates across 59 countries suggest that over 40% of schools are currently not sufficiently supportive of children's physical activity (Aubert et al., 2022[60]). Slovenia (Box 3.4) is one of the top performers internationally when it comes to physical activity of children, with over 80% of children estimated to be reaching the WHO-recommended daily levels (Morrison and Sember, 2021[89]).

Box 3.4. Physical education in Slovenia

The physical education system in Slovenia is highly regulated and children grow up with a tradition of receiving quality physical education. In terms of instruction, attention is paid to developing dedicated teacher capacity and the law states that, from late primary through to secondary school, 100% of physical education classes are taught by teachers with a university degree (Jurak, Starc and Kovac, 2020[90]). The national education regulations also set high standards for facilities and equipment. Every primary school and secondary school must have at least one fully equipped sports hall, including additional outdoor facilities. The regulatory framework promotes accountability, and all schools in Slovenia have written, publicly accessible physical activity policies (Jurak, Starc and Kovac, 2020[90]; Morrison and Sember, 2021[89]).

Schools offer the most effective avenue to increase physical activity among adolescents. Despite longstanding evidence on effective design of physical health interventions (Aston, 2018[54]), school-based interventions are often not sustained for long enough, do not feature multi-component programmes and lack context-specific support for schools to ensure effective implementation (van Sluijs et al., 2021[91]).

In Finland, the role of physical activity in supporting growth, development, and learning of children and adolescents of different ages has been taken into consideration in numerous documents that guide education and teaching. Finland has seen positive developments in physical activity since policies began to emerge in the 2000s. In 2019, government funding allocated to enhance physical activity and sport totalled EUR 159.3 million (Active Healthy Kids Global Alliance, 2022[92]). The proportion of children and adolescents who meet physical activity recommendations has risen consistently since 2002 and the share of those who are less physically active has fallen (Active Healthy Kids Global Alliance, 2022[92]). National promotion programmes aim to foster a culture of physical activity in educational institutions (Box 3.5).

Box 3.5. Co-ordinated multi-component programmes in Finland

The On the Move programme[11], comprising sub-programmes *Families on the Move*, *Joy in Motion*, *Schools on the Move*, *Students on the Move*, *Adults on the Move* and *On the Move in Perpetuity* are the national promotion programmes for physical activity and physical exercise. The aim is to promote a physically active lifestyle for different age and demographic groups. Sports policy is managed across administrative sectors by the co-ordination body for sport policy (LIPOKO), providing inter-ministerial co-ordination and co-operation. The programmes are funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture. At present, more than 90% of Finnish schools participate in the programme.

The Finnish Model for Leisure Activities[12] is another project that aims to enable every child and young person to have a leisure activity that they enjoy in connection with the school day, free of charge. This model combines consultation of children and adolescents, co-ordination of existing good practices, and co-operation between schools and actors in leisure activities.

Schools as a space to create and support relationships

On a typical school day, the time most children spend with their school friends and teachers often exceeds the time they spend with their families (Cemalcilar, 2010[93]; Parinduri, 2014[94]). Thus, while schools' primary aim is to educate, they also serve as an integral part of the social fabric in children's lives, contributing to their psychological, social and academic development (Burns and Gottschalk, 2020[3]). Positive relationships are good for all people, laying part of the foundation for a fulfilling and healthy life (Burns and Gottschalk, 2019[6]; Holt-Lunstad, 2018[95]). Supportive social relations can be empowering for children, motivating them to engage in both in- and out-of-class activities, perform to the best of their abilities and enhance their enthusiasm for learning. These relationships can encourage good health practices and can serve as a buffer against many of life's challenges (Denham, 2007[96]; Gadermann et al., 2015[97]). The absence of healthy social connections is associated with feelings of unhappiness and loneliness, potentially contributing to mental health and socio-economic risks that can persist into adulthood (Asher and Paquette, 2003[98]; OECD, 2021[99]).

Navigating social connections in a COVID-19 affected world

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns marked the first time in decades when most children worldwide were physically separated from their primary socialisation contexts. These sudden changes were associated with increases in feelings of loneliness, mental health issues and 'touch-hunger' (the feeling individuals experience when lacking physical contact with others) (Bussières et al., 2021[100]; Golaya, 2021[101]; Serafini et al., 2020[102]). Despite opportunities for digital interactions, some adolescents reported negative impacts from a lack of in-person interactions during COVID-19, including reduced emotional connections (Rogers, Ha and Ockey, 2021[103]). Research after the peak of the pandemic suggests that some students continue to grapple with social anxiety and face-to-face interaction, which can be detrimental for social, academic and personal development of individuals (Ni and Jia, 2023[104]).

The OECD measured the social and emotional skills of 10- and 15-year-olds before (2019) and after (2023) the COVID-19 emergency in two cities (Helsinki, Finland and Bogota, Colombia) (OECD, 2024[24]). In both cities, 10- and 15-year-olds reported lower levels of most skills in 2023 compared to 2019. This was particularly the case for skills such as tolerance, creativity and curiosity but also for responsibility, self-control, trust and sociability (OECD, 2024[24]).

Positive interaction and physical presence of both teachers and peers in school is important for children's developmental well-being and life satisfaction (Ansari, Hofkens and Pianta, 2020[105]; Bambaeeroo and Shokrpour, 2017[106]; OECD, 2023[4]). Physical contact can provide people with reassurance and comfort in times of distress and has positive effects on their mental health. Conversely, a lack of physical contact has been associated with symptoms of anxiety, depression or even self-injurious behaviour (Durkin, Jackson and Usher, 2021[107]). This highlights the importance of schools as physical spaces that facilitate personal connections and relationships, including long-lasting friendships and interactions between students and teachers (Ni and Jia, 2023[104]).

Making friends is a life changer

Friendships represent a form of social relationship that is essential to the development of children. Friends occupy a significant portion of their time and attention, while providing social, emotional and functional support (Burns and Gottschalk, 2019[6]). Furthermore, friends hold a crucial role as influencers on children's behaviours, goals and attitudes, whether through modelling or peer pressure (Poulin and Chan, 2010[108]; Rambaran et al., 2016[109]). For instance, during early childhood, friends play a crucial role in fostering social skills such as turn-taking, sharing, conflict resolution and interpreting social cues (Kemple, 2005[110]). The positive influence from these friendships may contribute to higher attendance rates and greater

happiness in schools, ultimately impacting a child's overall well-being (Berndt, 1999[111]; Ng-Knight et al., 2018[112]).

Friendship patterns evolve as a child grows up (Carter, 2021[113]). Friendships during early childhood often centre around shared activities and characteristics, such as playing certain games or using equipment (Dunn, 2004[114]). In early childhood, belonging to a peer group is less significant, but as children grow older, they become increasingly aware and concerned about peer acceptance, and peer rejection is linked to feelings of loneliness in childhood (Qualter et al., 2015[115]). During early adolescence, factors such as identity concerns and peer status gain prominence (Echols and Ivanich, 2021[116]). Concepts of reciprocity, loyalty and problem-solving skills emerge, leading to a more mature and selective understanding of friendship (Poulin and Chan, 2010[108]).

Facetime or face-to-face time: Friendships during the pandemic

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the digital environment had already become crucial for children forming and consolidating friendships. Activities such as liking pictures and chatting online had become a routine part of many children's lives (Burns and Gottschalk, 2019[6]). During the COVID-19 lockdowns, the digital environment continued to play a significant role in the realm of friendships, including with friends made offline, as they could connect with each other at anytime from anywhere (Scott, Stuart and Barber, 2021[117]). Research suggests that having communicated with friends and feeling supported by friends was one way that helped children to manage pandemic-related challenges (Espinoza and Hernandez, 2022[118]). However, the quality of friendship did matter. A two-year longitudinal study conducted among 250 adolescents (aged 11-16) in the Netherlands suggested that overall internalising problems increased but adolescents with higher friendship quality had fewer internalising problems during the COVID-19 lockdowns and could maintain social ties via digital tools (Koele et al., 2023[119]).

Schools play an important role in establishing relationships through face-to-face opportunities. In a qualitative study of children aged 5-14 in Québec (Canada), school emerged as the element most missed by children during the pandemic (Larivière-Bastien et al., 2022[120]). Over two-thirds of the participants expressed their eagerness to return to school, with about half of them citing the social aspects (e.g. wanting to see their friends and/or reconnect with teachers) as the primary reason for this. Older children in particular noted that school enables them to socialise beyond their families. These findings underscore the key role schools play in being a social space outside the family. Parents also value the friendships and connections formed through the school that add to the life opportunities of children (McGrath, 2023[121]).

Box 3.6. Charting the loneliness labyrinth

Loneliness is a subjective emotional state characterised by a longing for human connection (Perlman and Peplau, 1982[122]; Weiss, 1973[123]).The Questionnaire (2022) revealed that around three-quarters of respondent systems identified loneliness and isolation as a challenge. These concerns are supported by research. For instance, a survey conducted with 1 143 parents of children aged 3 to 18 in Italy and Spain revealed that parents reported noticeable changes in their child's emotions and behaviour during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Of those surveyed, 31.3% reported an increase in feelings of loneliness among their children (Orgilés et al., 2020[124]). The absence of friends is associated with children being excluded from social activities and potentially feeling estranged from their peers. This exclusion from social activities is closely linked to social isolation, which poses a risk to children's mental health and overall social and emotional well-being due to potential lasting effects on the developing brain (Brandt et al., 2022[125]).

While occasional loneliness is a universal experience, it is most prevalent during adolescence, early adulthood and old age (OECD, 2021[99]). In adolescence, the need for social approval intensifies as

adolescents seek both close friendships and broader peer group acceptance. Factors such as a lack of friends, poor friendship quality, peer rejection and victimisation can predict feelings of loneliness (Qualter et al., 2015[115]). Next to individual factors for loneliness, the school environment is likely to be the most significant socio-environmental context for adolescents and feeling lonely. Therefore, it might be unsurprising that research found an increase in feelings of loneliness for most individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic (findings did vary depending on context and method used) (Ernst et al., 2022[126]; Farrell et al., 2023[127]). PISA 2003 found that 8% of 15-year olds felt lonely while at school (OECD, 2004[128]), in PISA 2018 this figure was 15% (OECD, 2019[23]). PISA 2022 reported that 16% of students felt lonely while at school, however 40% of students reported feeling lonely when schools were closed (OECD, 2023[4]). These data point to the crucial social role played by schools for students.

More teacher support, a co-operative atmosphere at school and social support from peers are associated with a lower risk of loneliness (Morin, 2020[129]; Schnepf, Boldrini and Blaskó, 2023[130]). For instance, teaching children how to initiate, maintain, and end interactions, along with providing conflict resolution and social problem-solving skills, can mitigate loneliness (OECD, 2021[99]). Such intentional efforts to encourage co-operation, enhance self-esteem, and develop relational skills can contribute to a warmer and more inclusive school environment.

The importance of positive connections between teachers and students

Teachers occupy an important role as adult figures within the school environment and in fostering children's empowerment. Establishing positive teacher-student relationships (TSRs) characterised by mutual respect, support and care, has been strongly correlated to various positive outcomes. These include increased academic motivation and autonomy, fostering positive attitudes towards schooling, boosting self-esteem and encouraging pro-social behaviours (Li, Bergin and Olsen, 2022[131]; OECD, 2021[132]; Quin, 2017[133]; Thapa et al., 2013[134]). Moreover, PISA 2022 results show that students who reported more support from teachers and a better disciplinary climate in mathematics lessons reported higher levels of well-being (OECD, 2023[4]).

One potential explanation for the positive relationship between TSRs and student engagement and achievement is rooted in self-determination theory. According to this theory, caring relationships fulfil a fundamental, innate need for connection or a sense of belonging with others (Ryan and Deci, 2017[135]). When this need for connection is met within a specific context, such as the classroom, children tend to display higher motivation to engage in adaptive behaviours, actively participate in tasks, demonstrate persistence in the face of challenges, and respond creatively to obstacles encountered within that environment (Li, Bergin and Olsen, 2022[131]; Niemiec and Ryan, 2009[136]). It is important to acknowledge that TSRs differ between primary and secondary schools. In primary school, students typically form a close relationship with one primary classroom teacher, while at the secondary level students often interact with multiple teachers throughout the day (Quin, 2017[133]). Consequently, the roles and dynamics of TSRs are likely to differ between primary and secondary school settings.

Zoom(ed) in: Teacher-student relationships and COVID-19

The COVID-19 restrictions led to online education becoming the norm for most students during this time (OECD, 2020[137]). This transition had both positive and negative consequences for TSRs. On the one hand, during the pandemic some teachers reported that the new educational landscape allowed for more efficient and effective interactions with their students, utilising tools such as chat groups, video meetings and document sharing (Pham and Phan, 2022[138]; World Economic Forum, 2020[139]). Likewise, some students found it more convenient to contact their teachers using digital platforms. On the other hand, online classes led to limited daily physical and emotional interaction, which was associated with increased loneliness and decreased motivation for students (Mazrekaj and De Witte, 2023[140]; Tiwari et al., 2021[141]).

One explanation for this is that positive TSRs are often more effective in a physical classroom setting, where teachers can closely observe and monitor each student, thereby providing better assistance (Li, Bergin and Olsen, 2022[131]). OECD data from the 2023 Survey on Social and Emotional Skills finds that, on average, around 15% of surveyed students are not satisfied with the relationships they have with their classmates and teachers (OECD, 2024[24]). However, students with higher levels of social and emotional skills are generally more satisfied with their relationships (OECD, 2024[24]).

Box 3.7. Traditional bullying and cyberbullying

For almost 90% of respondent systems in the Questionnaire (2022), bullying and cyberbullying were reported as key challenges regarding children's emotional well-being. Traditional bullying and cyberbullying are negatively associated with emotional well-being in children, including symptoms of depression and anxiety, and low self-esteem (Gottschalk, 2022[142]; Vaillancourt et al., 2023[143]; Wolke and Lereya, 2015[144]). As per PISA 2022, 20% of students in OECD countries indicated experiencing bullying at least a few times a month (OECD, 2023[4]). This marks a very small improvement from the PISA 2018 findings, where 23% of students reported similar experiences of being bullied regularly (OECD, 2019[23]).

According to Vaillancourt and colleagues (2023[143]), several studies have shown notable decline in the incidence of bullying during the COVID-19 pandemic, both being victimised and perpetrating bullying, particularly when schools adopted online learning (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2022[145]; Repo, Herkama and Salmivalli, 2022[146]; Vaillancourt et al., 2021[147]; Yang et al., 2021[148]). However, in countries with fewer social restrictions, some studies reported an increase in bullying rates during the pandemic (Forsberg and Thorvaldsen, 2022[149]; Patchin and Hinduja, 2022[150]; Xie et al., 2023[151]).

Relationships are key factors in mitigating the effects of traditional and cyberbullying on children (Gottschalk, 2022[142]; Kendrick, Jutengren and Stattin, 2012[152]). Positive TSRs are associated with a reduced risk of traditional and cyberbullying as teachers are more motivated to assist and develop effective coping and conflict management skills, fostering a positive classroom climate (Longobardi et al., 2021[153]). Additionally, peer support plays a crucial role as a protective measure against victimisation. It can also moderate the relationship between being cyberbullied and subjective health complaints (Gottschalk, 2022[142]; Hellfeldt, López-Romero and Andershed, 2019[154]). Nurturing these relationships should form part of a whole-school approach involving policy, practice and external actors.

Shaping empowering school environments: Initiatives in OECD countries

The Questionnaire (2022) revealed that many OECD countries are actively working to improve social skills and create secure, empowering environments for students and teachers by implementing policies aimed at creating safe and inclusive school communities. One example is the "Warme scholen[13]" (*Warm Schools*) project in the Flemish Community of Belgium. This project aims to create an inclusive school environment, prioritising student well-being and development of social skills. By providing schools with established building blocks, steppingstones and tools, Warme Scholen offers the necessary support and guidance for schools to begin creating a more harmonious and inclusive learning environment. Participating schools have reported more specific help for each child, increased overall well-being, and better relations between students and teachers, ultimately leading to a more inclusive learning environment.

In Canada, the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador has adopted the Responsive Teaching and Learning Policy[14], which underscores the Department of Education's commitment to guiding education in creating a secure, inclusive and healthy school community. This policy provides opportunities for both students and teachers to engage in collaborative inquiry cycles, facilitating continuous improvement in teaching practices and pro-active responses to student learning needs. Also in Canada, the "ÉKIP[15]"

programme in Québec, jointly developed by the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health and Social Services and the National Institute of Public Health Québec, actively promotes the development of personal and social skills, with a particular focus on enhancing pro-social behaviours. It constitutes a comprehensive intervention approach designed to support action planning in schools, with co-ordination among stakeholders in the health and social services networks, education, as well as engagement with families and the broader community.

Some OECD countries have also collaborated to learn from each other. The "Learning to Be[16]" project was an experimental initiative funded by the European Union through Erasmus+, spanning from 2017 to 2020. It brought together education authorities, teachers and researchers from Finland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain. The primary focus of the project was the development of assessment methods and toolkits designed to facilitate the recognition of social and emotional skills within education systems. For example, the research design included pre- and post-intervention surveys assessing the social and emotional skills, beliefs and relationships of teachers and students (between the ages 9-10 and 13-14 years old) in the 200 participating schools. These efforts served as a foundation for further development of education policies and practices integrated into national curricula in participating systems. The project's overarching goals were to enhance the quality of social and emotional skills education, promote social cohesion and strengthen students' social and emotional skills within general education.

The Netherlands Youth Institute[17] (Nederlands Jeugdinstituut) is the national knowledge centre that collects, enriches, interprets and shares up-to-date knowledge about childhood and youth. It maintains a list of 334 proven effective interventions on different youth topics to promote evidence-based programmes that aim to create a safe social environment in schools. One such programme is KiVa[18], originally from Finland and now adopted in many Dutch schools. It is a preventive multi-component anti-bullying programme. The programme targets social skills such as emotion recognition, empathy, pro-social behaviour and how to behave in bullying situations. At the school level, the entire staff receives KiVa training. At the classroom level, KiVa offers support for adequate classroom management and positive social group formation, which is done through lessons on themes such as peer pressure, communication, respect and bullying. At the student level, social and emotional development is stimulated.

Learning from experience

The COVID-19 pandemic reaffirmed the crucial role that schools play in the holistic development, well-being and empowerment of children globally. As physical spaces for social connections, they are key focal points for educational policies targeting social well-being. Intervention and educational policies targeting loneliness reduction should address bullying in schools, encourage a more co-operative climate between student's peers and should advocate for increased teacher support for students within the school setting (Schnepf, Boldrini and Blaskó, 2023[130]). Additionally, the pandemic has accelerated the digital transformation of relationships. This brings fresh emphasis onto the need for balanced social skills development both online and offline, which had already been well-established in the research literature before the crisis (Mesch, 2019[155]).

The research supports the importance of relationships for a supportive school climate and the role of school climate in reducing disrupting issues such as loneliness and bullying (traditional and cyber) among students. However, numerous studies concentrate solely on one or two areas of school climate. This makes it difficult to determine which domains, dimensions, or combinations of dimensions have the most influence on different types of student outcomes. For instance, there is limited understanding of the impact of academic climate on emotional well-being, and even less is known about the influence of institutional features such as levels of school autonomy or teacher working conditions. Further studies are needed to explore the unique contributions of each dimension and the interactions between dimensions in shaping psychological and long-term outcomes for children (Wang and Degol, 2015[156]).

COVID-19 and children's well-being – Reflection tool

The pandemic exacerbated long term well-being issues in many countries' education systems.

Even before COVID-19, empirical studies observed increasing trends in depression and anxiety among children in OECD countries. They also observed insufficient levels of physical activity of children across the globe, especially among girls and older children.

Half of all students in PISA reported that they missed sports and other physical activities while schools were closed. Younger children were better able to compensate with more active play, compared to older children.

The pandemic has accelerated the digital transformation of relationships, highlighting the significance of balancing social skill development both online and offline.

Lockdowns reaffirmed the crucial role that schools play in the holistic development, well-being and empowerment of children.

In addition to individual factors, the school environment is likely to be the most significant socio-environmental context affecting whether adolescents feel lonely.

Schools play a key role in being a social space outside the family and positive teacher student relationships are often more effective in a physical classroom setting.

Students who reported getting more support from their schools during closures reported greater well-being, life satisfaction and less mathematics anxiety.

Children's COVID experiences highlight pre-existing psychological, social, environmental and global protective and risk factors for well-being.

Children from lower socio-economic backgrounds, with limited space at home, with existing physical or mental health issues, belonging to ethnic minorities, with an immigrant background or belonging to a marginalised group were more likely to report an increase in anxiety symptoms during the pandemic.

Better accessibility to infrastructure for walking, cycling, and public transportation, lower population density, better connectivity of streets, access and availability of public spaces, and quality sports facilities are associated with increased physical activity levels in children.

Students who possess a "growth mindset" feel more empowered, have a greater sense of agency and may be more emotionally resilient.

OECD countries are already actively working to improve social skills and create secure, empowering environments but these efforts can be reinforced.

As the lockdowns and school closures already affected vulnerable children disproportionally, investing in children's well-being in a comprehensive manner, by not only tackling the issue at hand but addressing the background and larger barriers is crucial to reduce inequalities.

Incorporating children into planning COVID-19 recovery efforts may help build resilience to future crises by encouraging the development of psychological skills and providing community-based support.

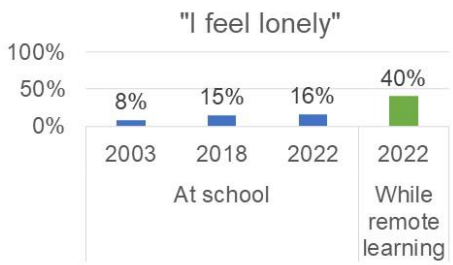
Many education systems use surveys to monitor the well-being of children. Although cost-effective, self-reported surveys are subject to biases and inaccuracies. There is a need for more robust data among children and adolescents. For example, using accelerometers to measure physical activity levels.

Reflecting on COVID-19 and well-being

DATA & TRENDS

Levels of depression, anxiety and loneliness were already increasing before the pandemic. Levels of physical activity were low for most children.

Research suggests that these trends accelerated for many children during the pandemic.



Source: OECD, PISA 2003/2018/ 2022 Databases.

EMPOWERMENT

Opportunities

Multi-component interventions working at the school, classroom and student level have been shown to be effective.

The pause from the pandemic offers an opportunity to involve children in reimagining what well-being policies in schools could look like.

Challenges

A more widely accepted well-being framework is necessary to provide holistic measurement and research-informed policy and practice.

Resources are often scarce and effective interventions require significant investment.

What can governments do?

Emotional well-being

- ❑ Prioritise **partnerships and co-ordination** with external actors and community and experts to increase the efficiency and quality of intervention delivery.
- ❑ Ensure **a repository of evidence-based effective practices** is accessible to practitioners, adapted to their context and provide capacity building for its use.
- ❑ Build **overall student resilience** by cultivating positive psychological habits, such as a growth mindset.

Physical Activity

- ❑ Coordinate a set of programmes that **target the whole of society**, including adults.
- ❑ **Incorporate more physical activity into the school day** through breaks, physical education and extracurricular activities.
- ❑ **Enhance accessibility and quality of school outdoor spaces** that encourage exercise and play.

Schools as a social space

- ❑ **Meaningfully engage** students, parents and teachers to better understand how to promote and use schools as social hubs.
- ❑ Implement **anti-bullying programmes** to create a safe and supportive school culture.
- ❑ Provide **resources and training** for teachers to create inclusive classrooms.

Why not organise a collegial consultation to talk about COVID-19 and well-being?

Principal Rodriguez leads a mid-sized primary school in a major city. The student population of the school is mixed and includes several refugee students. Pondering on the worrying results of a national survey about the impact of the pandemic on student emotional well-being, physical activity levels and teacher/ peer relationships, Principal Rodriguez recognises some of the findings in her own school context and wants to understand what can be done. She recalls a conversation with a colleague at a conference about a method called Collegial Consultation (Cain, 2018[157]). The approach seeks to solve concrete issues by combining professional knowledge and research evidence. She decides to organise such a consultation with her teaching staff and drafts an invitation, outlining the aims, agenda and the following reflection questions in the email:

- How have you observed COVID-19 impacting our students' emotional well-being, physical activity and relationships?
- What strategies have you implemented to counter negative changes among students?
- Which additional resources or research could provide valuable insights?

The day of the consultation arrives, and the teaching staff gather in the school's conference room. Principal Rodriguez asks participants to split into groups of 5-10 and assigns one member of staff to each group as a facilitator to lead them through the following agenda:

1. Each member of the group writes down an actual problem they have in their professional practice relating to students' emotional well-being, physical activity and/ or relationships. The group democratically chooses one problem for inquiry (no time limit).
2. The owner of the problem describes it in as much detail as possible (3 minutes).
3. Each person in the group then asks one question, to which the owner responds (no time limit).
4. The owner of the problem steps slightly away and takes no further part in the discussion but listens and takes notes as the other group members discuss the problem and bring in relevant research that might help (10-30 minutes).
5. Each group member then writes down a message to the owner of the problem (3 minutes).
6. The group members read this message aloud in turn, resisting the urge to expand on what they have written. The owner of the problem then reflects on all they have heard and responds to these messages, asking themselves:
    a) Does this collegial knowledge reflect my own experiences? How does it differ?
    b) How do colleagues' messages relate to what I already do? What could I change?

The teaching staff then return to plenary format (1 hour) to present the challenges and draft a school-level action plan to address them. Principal Rodriguez facilitates the process, asking:

- What research-informed, actionable steps can we take to prioritise students' quality relationships and well-being in our school?
- How can we leverage existing resources, partnerships and professional development?
- How will we measure the effectiveness of the action plan?
- What further evidence do we need before intervening and where might we find it?
- How can we meaningfully involve students in developing and implementing the plan?

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Notes

[1] See: https://www.teritotoi.org/ (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[2] See: https://www.gezondleven.be/settings/gezonde-school/mentaal-welbevinden-op-school/gelukindeklas (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[3] See: https://www.vejdirektoratet.dk/side/administration-af-cykelpuljer (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[4] See: https://cyclingsolutions.info/students-as-traffic-experts/ (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[5] See: https://www.activehealthykids.org/4-0/ (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[6] WHO guidance states that, in a 24-hour period, children aged 1-5 years should spend at least 180 minutes in a variety of types of physical activities at any intensity. For children older than three, at least 60 minutes of this should be moderate-to-vigorous- physical activity (World Health Organization, 2022[53]). For children 5-17, an average of 60 minutes per day of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity is recommended as the minimum (World Health Organization, 2022[53]). Although some scholars argue that current definitions of moderate-to-vigorous exercise are unclear, examples of moderate activity often include brisk walking, dancing, and gardening, whereas vigorous activity includes jogging, running, fast cycling, fast swimming, and walking briskly up a hill (MacIntosh et al., 2021[158]).

[7] See : https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/presidente/actividades/Documents/2022/100622-plan-estrategico-nacional-reduccion-obesidad-infantil_en-plan-bien.pdf (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[8] See : https://www.sportireland.ie/news/irish-sports-monitor-2022-mid-year-report (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[9] See : https://assets.gov.ie/24979/1a97aa08e3a04845b4e6c10bbfc17356.pdf (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[10] See: https://statistique.quebec.ca/fr/document/lactivite-physique-de-loisir-des-quebecois-en-2018-2019 (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[11] See : https://schoolsonthemove.fi/concept/ (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[12] See : http://www.harrastamisensuomenmalli.fi/ (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[13] See : https://www.warmescholen.net/inspiratie (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[14] See : https://www.gov.nl.ca/education/files/RTL-Policy.pdf (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[15] See : https://www.quebec.ca/education/prescolaire-primaire-et-secondaire/sante-bien-etre-jeunes/ekip (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[16] See : https://teachingtobe.eu/learning-to-be/ (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[17] See : https://www.nji.nl/ (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[18] See : https://www.kivaprogram.net/ (accessed on 06 May 2024).

4 Children's media engagement

Understanding how media experiences shape childhood is crucial for ensuring relevant education policies and practices. This chapter looks at three interrelated themes. The first section analyses the state of play in media education and the results of the Questionnaire (2022). The second section outlines current research on media effects and child emotional well-being. The final section draws on theoretical and empirical literature to understand how media engagement impacts children's identity formation, and the role of education in supporting the development of a coherent and stable sense of self. The chapter concludes that, although digital safety remains a cornerstone of media education, a balance with digital opportunity must be struck. Media education can - and should – be a participatory space. One where children contribute with their own lived experiences and discover benefits that are unique to childhood, while also being free to make mistakes.

Introduction

Media education is critical for empowering all citizens. Children's media[1] engagement is so pervasive in the 21st Century that it can no longer be considered an inconvenient variable in their development but a fundamental context in which each child learns about the world (Barr, 2019[1]). The outcomes associated with this engagement are related to the type of activities, individual personalities, motivations and preferences (Burns and Gottschalk, 2020[2]).

During much of the previous century, youth cultures in Western societies were articulated through engagement with mass media, such as music, film and television (Drotner, 2008[3]). The move away from mass media towards social media means their engagement is now much more individualised, dynamic and ubiquitous (Valkenburg, 2022[4]). Although the media environment has changed, public discourse around media engagement has remained squarely focused on the potential harms for both children and society at large. In many cases the prevalence of harms is exaggerated. *Moral panics* and concerns over the risks to children mask the social and cultural issues that underlie them (Buckingham and Strandgaard Jensen, 2012[5]). For example, a focus on screen time over-simplifies media engagement into a single construct, which doesn't account for the dynamic nature of digital media experiences. This mattered less in an age of mass media, since it was relatively easy to know which television shows or radio people were consuming over long periods of time. Now however, each person's media ecosystem is unique, multi-modal and ephemeral, which renders screen time a misleading indicator of the impact of media engagement. Despite the problems with its use, screen time is still found in protectionist policy discourses. Scholars have noted a socio-cultural reluctance to accept any risk to children, which in fact serves to inhibit their ability to seize opportunities (Livingstone, 2013[6]). *Moral panics* also routinely spark large investments in research, which some argue slows down development of the policy interventions necessary to ensure technologies become a benefit for society (Orben, 2020[7]).

That being said, the emergence of a diverse new media landscape has undoubtably increased the risks posed by phenomena such as cyberbullying, hate speech, and use and misuse of data. Some of the most harmful risks, such as child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) are accelerating in scale, severity and complexity (OECD, 2023[8]). These risks have been categorised in the revised OECD Typology (OECD, 2021[9]). Risk is a calculation based on probability and the likely consequences of harm (Livingstone, 2013[6]). By contrast, harm is a distinct set of negative physical, emotional, psychological or social outcomes, whether measured objectively or subjectively (Livingstone, 2013[6]). Risk does not always result in harm and, depending on the precise nature of the risk and whether an individual is properly equipped to respond to it, benefits can also be accrued. For example, a child who knows how and why to verify information in the digital environment can recognise and manage the risk posed by disinformation. As children learn from challenging or difficult experiences, recover from them and stay well, they develop resilience to future risks (Manning, 2021[10]). There is a general need for more nuanced information about the effects of media engagement to strike the right balance in policy measures and teaching practices (Science Advice Initiative of Finland, 2021[11]).

The chapter uses the framework put forward by Dahlgren and Hill (2020[12]) who argue for an expanded definition of *media engagement* as including the subjective experience, driven predominantly by emotions (affect) with some rational elements. Engagement refers to behaviour motivated by shared social experiences and identity. It is not solely about consumption but also empowerment, providing a means through which an individual can participate in society, politics and culture. This brings into scope the trajectory of media engagement and everyday experiences, rather than narrowly focusing on outcomes. Children's media engagement facilitates access to various subjective experiences, many of which are driven by distinct cultures, beliefs and practices unique to childhood but often reflecting wider societal culture. Understanding *engagement* means taking into account how and why an individual selects different media sources, as well as which factors influence how this engagement is experienced.

Media education in OECD countries

Media education has attracted renewed attention in recent years as children are spending more time engaging with digital media. Harm prevention is an important and widely discussed media education policy priority. The 2018 OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) found that on average only 47% of 15-year-olds are successfully able to distinguish fact from opinion (OECD, 2021[13]). Research has shown that media education and awareness campaigns are the most common instruments used by European governments when responding to the risk posed by disinformation (De Blasio and Selva, 2021[14]). This is a positive development, since incorporating media education into teaching and learning helps children to distinguish fact from opinion, assess the credibility of information sources, and detect biased or false information (McDougall et al., 2018[15]; Suarez-Alvarez, 2021[16]).

In addition to teaching children to manage risk in the digital environment, knowing how to navigate digital media content wisely can enhance children's exposure to new ideas and more diverse sources of information, helping them become aware of different views. It can also empower them with knowledge to make informed choices regarding their physical and emotional well-being and give them a space to discuss their thoughts and feelings with peers or professionals (Stoilova, Livingstone and Khazbak, 2021[17]; Chassiakos et al., 2016[18]). Navigation skills are recognised as a key component of reading in the digital environment, allowing an individual to locate, understand, evaluate and reflect on information across multiple sources. Yet, PISA found that, on average, over 70% of students in 70 countries and economies demonstrated limited or no navigation of digital texts (OECD, 2021[13]).

Box 4.1. Digital spot the difference

Digital citizenship: being able to understand, exercise and enhance rights through ethical interactions and informed civic participation in both the digital and non-digital environments (Cortesi et al., 2020[19]). The term often combines media literacy, respectful and responsible behaviour and digital safety (Burns and Gottschalk, 2019[20]). Recent additions include computational thinking, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and identity formation (Cortesi et al., 2020[19]).

Digital competence: being able to confidently, critically and responsibly engage with digital technologies for learning, work and participation in society. It includes information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, media literacy, digital content creation (including programming), safety (including digital well-being and competences related to cybersecurity), intellectual property related questions, problem solving and critical thinking (Vuorikari, Kluzer and Punie, 2022[21]).

Digital literacy: being able to live and work in a society where digital technologies dominate communication and access to information (OECD, 2022[22]). The number of digital literacy publications has increased rapidly between 2000 and 2020 (Audrin and Audrin, 2022[23]). The field is evolving from a focus on technical skills towards cultural and critical thinking, emphasising empowerment through access to information, freedom of expression and participation (Nascimbeni and Vosloo, 2019[24]).

Digital skills: being able to interact and collaborate through technologies, think critically about information sources and express oneself through content creation. Definitions emphasise that digital skills are about more than just possessing technical knowledge or competences but also being able to use digital technologies safely and having the capacity to tackle online risks (d'Haenens, 2022[25]).

Empowering individuals through comprehensive media education goes beyond the scope of media literacy alone and requires the simultaneous combination of multiple "literacies", brought together under a clear framework (Jones-Jang, Mortensen and Liu, 2019[26]). For example, media literacy is commonly used alongside information literacy[2] and both media and information literacy competencies are frequently

combined with digital literacy, digital skills, digital citizenship or digital competence definitions (Box 4.1). This chapter uses *media education* as an umbrella term for various policies and practices that aim to support children to be more resilient, seize opportunities and minimise the risk of harm from media engagement.

Several meta-analyses have investigated the impact of media education interventions. They generally find positive outcomes across diverse populations, age groups, settings, topics and countries (Jeong, Cho and Hwang, 2012[27]; Vahedi, Sibalis and Sutherland, 2018[28]; Xie, Gai and Zhou, 2019[29]). Interventions can be equally effective across a spectrum of settings and are more likely to be successful when reinforced through multiple sessions with fewer components. However, research has found that media education interventions may have greater effects on skills and media content knowledge outcomes, compared to behaviour-relevant outcomes. There is also a lack of diversity in the delivery methods, media and contexts in which interventions are carried out. This includes less research on the effectiveness of using images, games, and newer social media platforms in interventions (Huguet et al., 2019[30]; Edwards et al., 2021[31]; Wuyckens, Landry and Fastrez, 2021[32]).

Strategies and curricula

The Questionnaire (2022) asked ministries of education how media education features in their policies and practices. Ministries most commonly reported that media education was contained within broader strategies of curriculum/school reform and/or a broader digital strategy. The Council of Europe recommendations on media pluralism and transparency of media ownership specifically state that education systems should look to develop dedicated media literacy strategies (Council of Europe, 2018[33]). However, only three ministries reported having a dedicated system-wide media literacy policy or strategy in the Questionnaire (2022). The most common examples provided in the survey responses were those in which media education features in a wider strategy for digital literacy and digital skills. Within this category, there are generally two sub-categories: **education-specific strategies** and **society-wide strategies.**

For example, in 2020, Luxembourg adopted a **general approach to digitalisation in education**, called *Simply Digital - future skills for strong children* (einfach digital – Zukunftskompetenze fir staark Kanner[3]). This approach is centred on the skills of critical thinking, creativity, communication, collaboration and coding, which guide the priorities of educational policy. In 2022, Luxembourg updated its Media Compass[4]. This forms the basis for media education at school and goes beyond just digital skills, promoting a holistic understanding of opportunities and risks in childhood as seen through different media. It emphasises, among other things, children's health, well-being and care for the environment.

When it comes to society-wide strategies, in 2022 Denmark announced its Digitisation Strategy 2022-2026[5] **which covers all Danish citizens**. In the strategy the government proposes to allocate DKK 200 million to introduce technology in primary and lower secondary education. The strategy is centred on nine "visions". Vision nine "Danes prepared for a digital future" focuses most on media education themes. It takes a broader empowerment view of digital literacy and puts forward that all Danes must be able to use digital solutions and have the digital prerequisites to navigate safely and critically on social media in particular. It has a specific focus on the use of digital tools essential to professionalism among teachers, in particular in primary school.

Some systems have **multiple strategies touching on media education**. In Latvia for example, Media Literacy is mentioned in at least three strategies: the inter-ministerial National Development plan of Latvia 2021-2027[6], Guidelines for the Development of a Cohesive and Active Society 2021-2027[7] from the Ministry of Culture and the Digital Transformation Guidelines 2021-2027[8] from the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development.

Existing OECD data reveals that the extent to which media literacy content is found in curricula varies widely, from just 4% of media literacy competencies covered by the Portuguese curriculum, compared to

57% in Estonia. For digital literacy, the average coverage across all systems was higher, at 40% (OECD, 2021[34]). Within decentralised systems there is often variation in how media literacy is integrated into curricula. For example, in Canada, the Questionnaire (2022) revealed that media literacy is incorporated across the provincial education systems in a variety of ways (Box 4.2).

Box 4.2. Media Literacy in the curriculum in Canadian provinces

Alberta: Social Studies is a mandatory element of the curriculum from ages 5 to 18. Media literacy is listed as a communication skills outcome of the social studies course and includes identification and comparison of information, detection of media bias, creating media and discussing different viewpoints.

Ontario: Media Literacy is well-established as a core competency of the English language curriculum in both primary and secondary school. The expectations in the language curriculum are organised into four strands: Oral Communication, Reading, Writing and Media Literacy.

Saskatchewan: The Policy Planning Guide for School Divisions and Schools to Implement Citizenship Education includes media education. Digital citizenship education is not intended to be a stand-alone unit, course or lesson. It includes digital literacy and elements of media and information literacy such as information searching, evaluating content collaborating in networks, organising information and using social media. This document does not provide a prescriptive policy but guides conversations and provides resources as teachers integrate citizenship into their teaching. It states that digital citizenship education is essential for all Saskatchewan students from age 5 to 18.

Source: Questionnaire (2022)

Certain aspects of media education are yet to be incorporated in some OECD countries. Despite having a long tradition of mass media education, digital literacy will only formally and explicitly become part of the new Dutch education curriculum in the coming years. Planning documents for this place media literacy conceptually as one of four skills within digital literacy, the others being basic information and communication technology (ICT) skills, Information Skills and Computational Thinking. The Dutch Learning Plan Development Foundation[9] (SLO) is developing core objectives for digital literacy, in collaboration with teachers, subject didactics, schools and educational organisations. These core objectives are scheduled to be completed by 2024.

Actors and initiatives

There are a wide variety of actors delivering media education initiatives in respondent systems and some systems have a statutory actor with primary responsibility for co-ordinating the media literacy ecosystem. This is the case in the Flemish Community of Belgium, where actors including the ministry of education and individual schools have their own programmes and initiatives, but Mediawijs[10] is the designated Knowledge Centre for Digital and Media Literacy in the system. Established in 2013, Mediawijs implements the Flemish media literacy policy through training and capacity building in schools, campaigns, projects, research (such as the MediaNest Figures[11]), and advocacy work such as development of policy tools and white papers. In France, the Centre for Media and Information Education (CLEMI[12]) was established in 1983 and performs a similar function. In Finland, the National Audiovisual Institute (KAVI[13]) is the main public institution co-ordinating the delivery of Media Education. However, not all education systems have a statutory or dedicated co-ordination body (European Digital Media Observatory, n.d.[35]).

Many of the actors involved in co-ordinating media education have education as part of a complementary media portfolio. In this instance, a network may exist to bring them together on the topic of education specifically. For example, the Information and media literacy network Iceland[14] was created in 2022 as a

co-ordination network for future policy planning, intended to provide an overview of the current status of media literacy efforts. It aims to develop a comprehensive policy for Iceland in the field of information and media literacy. The network participants include the national Media Committee of Iceland, child, parent and family organisations, various libraries and universities, the national broadcaster, international organisations, and national, regional and local government bodies. Statutory bodies and networks are useful for co-ordinating system-wide capacity-building initiatives, such as Box 4.3.

Box 4.3. Scaling up expertise: the case of MediaCoach Programmes in Europe

MediaCoach is a programme which began in the Netherlands[15] in 2008 and trains individuals to work mainly in schools, libraries and special youth care. Participants learn how to inspire and help colleagues to use digital media and/or to implement digital and/or media literacy policies in their organisation. They also act as a point of contact for questions about media literacy and digital literacy. More than 2 400 media coaches have been trained in the Netherlands and abroad and coaches must have refresher courses to keep their title.

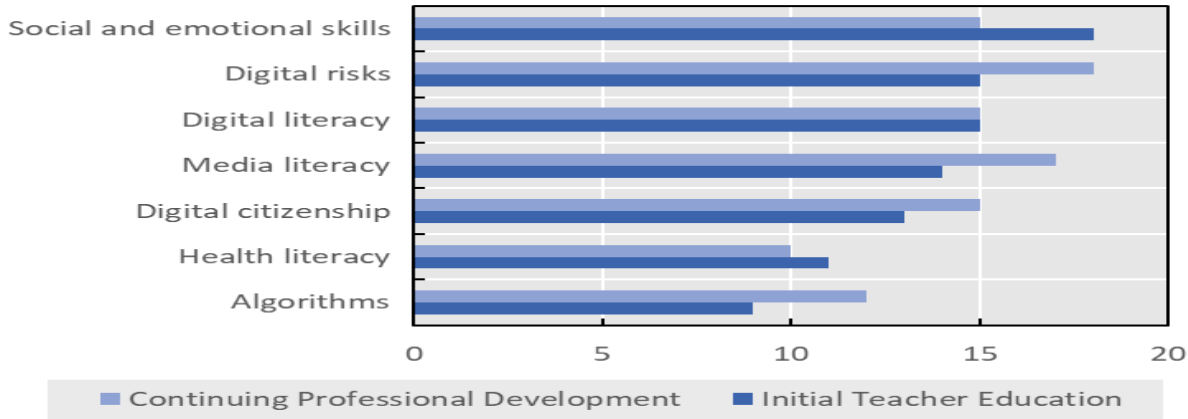
The programme has been replicated in the Flemish Community of Belgium, which offers several tailored trainings for education, youth work, local authorities and libraries. Between 2017 and 2020, the European Commission co-funded a scale-up project called the European Media Coach Initiative[16]. This project brought together key stakeholders in Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Portugal and Romania to scale-up across regions and countries. The impact of the media coach training in each of these systems varied widely[17], and included preparation of a full-scale media literacy training programme, general promotion of media literacy, creation of university courses and influencing political and public opinion regarding the importance of media education.

Although the evaluations that do exist generally find positive results, there is a clear need for more systematically applied methodologies that evaluate the effectiveness of media education interventions. Many media education actors are non-governmental organisations who bring highly relevant external expertise to school settings but often lack resources to be able to monitor and evaluate their initiatives beyond simple metrics such as the number of intervention participants, number of events, or post-intervention questionnaires. In order to overcome this challenge in the United Kingdom (UK), the UK Statutory Media Education body (Ofcom) published a toolkit in 2023[18] to help guide evaluations of media literacy interventions.

Skills and capacity

Although the above initiatives are promising, it is not enough to add media education to strategies and curricula; practitioners require training to increase their knowledge and confidence in teaching complex media topics. The Questionnaire (2022) revealed that media literacy is included as part of initial teacher education (ITE) in around two-thirds of respondent systems, with coverage in continuing professional development (CPD) more widespread (Figure 4.1). Complementary and important aspects of contemporary media education are less frequently included. For example, ITE which includes the role of algorithms is covered by less than half of respondent systems. Yet, algorithm education should not be seen as an “optional extra” but an integral part of media education, alongside the classic media education topics (e.g. audiences, power structures, source analysis) (Hill, 2022[36]).

Figure 4.1. Skills taught in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and Continuing Professional Development (CPD)



Note: N = 22. Number indicates the number of respondent systems selecting a given item in a given form of teacher education in response to the question "Are the following issues embedded in teacher training, either in initial teacher education (ITE) or continuing professional development (CPD)?"
Source: Questionnaire (2022)

Despite the enhanced policy emphasis, there remains a distinct lack of data on how media education is incorporated into teacher preparation programmes in OECD countries. Although there is a plethora of approaches to professional development, there is also a relative paucity of literature pertaining to teacher education in media literacy instruction (Hobbs, 2017[37]). The research that does exist finds that more attention needs to be paid to teacher education and professional development when it comes to supporting media education efforts (Gretter and Yadav, 2018[38]; Botturi, 2019[39]; Mateus, 2021[40]). In many European countries, media education is often treated as a cross-curricular topic in teacher professional development, with little systematic attention to its contents, including the digital nature of contemporary media (Ranieri, Nardi and Fabbro, 2019[41]). Media education is part of a broader challenge regarding teacher self-efficacy with digital topics. The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) revealed that, although the vast majority of teachers report high levels of self-efficacy when it comes to classroom management and instruction, almost one-third are less confident when it comes to supporting student learning through the use of digital technology (OECD, 2019[42]).

Both pre-service and in-service teachers in various education systems have expressed a lack of confidence in highly relevant media education themes, such as the role of algorithms and data in social media, or contemporary forms of media production and participation (Erdem and Bahadir, 2018[43]; Cherner and Curry, 2019[44]; McNelly and Harvey, 2021[45]). In the EU, Ranieri and colleagues (2017[46]) found that the policy emphasis on media education had not yet resulted in sufficient levels of digital skills, and teacher training on digital education fails to meet their needs. The challenge also affects teacher educators, who are sometimes unsure about the extent to which different media education topics should be taught to pre-service teachers (Örtegren, 2022[47]). Further work can be done to build the capacity of teacher educators and teacher training curricula to enable teachers to effectively embed media education into the classroom via pedagogies and lesson structures (Gretter and Yadav, 2018[38]). This does not have to be through dedicated media education courses but could be integrated via existing teacher training curriculum and coursework (Meehan et al., 2015[48]). Enhanced involvement of wider stakeholders, such as not-for-profits, is thought to raise the quality of implementation of media literacy education in teacher training (Ranieri, Nardi and Fabbro, 2019[41]). These partnerships may also make teacher resources more relevant for use in the classroom (Hill, 2022[36]).

Media engagement and emotional well-being

Although the study of media and children is not confined to any specific discipline, theory or methodology, well-being outcomes have been an area of common focus for *media effects* (Box 4.4) researchers (Bickham, Kavanaugh and Rich, 2016[49]). The last decades saw huge numbers of children subscribing to social media platforms and a proliferation of research exploring social media use, yet longitudinal studies in particular remained scarce (Gottschalk, 2019[50]). Some scholars now argue that the longitudinal studies conducted in the past few years have convincingly shown how using a wide range of media, both digital and non-digital, is not generally bad for children and there is no need for policy makers to encourage or discourage media use on the basis of well-being alone (Johannes et al., 2022[51]). Although promising, this conclusion comes with important caveats.

Box 4.4. Media effects and emotional well-being

The term *media effects* is defined by Valkenburg, Peter and Walther (2016, p. 316[52]) as "the deliberate and nondeliberate short-and long-term within-person changes in cognitions (including beliefs), emotions, attitudes, and behaviour that result from media use". It has been recognised for many years that the *effects* of media use are multifactorial, dependent on the type of media, type of use, amount and extent of use and individual characteristics of the child or adolescent (Chassiakos et al., 2016[18]). Individuals' media practices often lead to concomitant effects in the form of harms and benefits, which impact overall well-being (Büchi, 2021[53]). Stable psychological characteristics (for example levels of self-esteem) may moderate media effects (Verduyn, Gugushvili and Kross, 2021[54]). Media effects may also be more ephemeral and dependent on in-the-moment factors (Griffioen et al., 2022[55]). Valkenburg (2022[4]) suggests three categories of effects for adolescents when it comes to emotional well-being:

- adolescents who mainly experience positive effects (i.e. *positive susceptibles*)
- adolescents who mainly experience negative effects (i.e. *negative susceptibles*)
- adolescents who are predominantly unaffected (i.e. *non-susceptibles*)

Research has found a curvilinear relationship between media use and well-being, where moderate engagement with a variety of digital media (for example, via computers or smartphones) is not harmful but well-being does suffer at the extremes of both high and low-intensity media use (Przybylski and Weinstein, 2017[56]). Looking at social media specifically, at least three different studies have analysed the same multi-wave, large-scale and representative UK panel dataset of children aged 10 to 15 years (the UK Household Longitudinal Study) to understand the long-term well-being implications of social media use (Orben, Dienlin and Przybylski, 2019[57]; Twigg, Duncan and Weich, 2020[58]; Plackett, Sheringham and Dykxhoorn, 2022[59]). The results indicate that social media use is generally not a strong predictor of life satisfaction in adolescents, although gender plays an underexplored role. This gender difference has also been found in other studies of different datasets. For example, Brooker, Kelly and Sacker (2018[60]) found that increases in girls' life satisfaction predict slightly lower social media use and increases in their social media use predict tenuous decreases in life satisfaction. Interestingly, the negative effect in this study was found to be a similar magnitude to the positive effect that a supportive family has on children's life satisfaction. Media engagement does not happen in a vacuum and the wider environment of childhood moderates their experiences of media.

In addition to large-scale longitudinal studies, meta-analytic summaries have shown no strong linear link between the intensity of social media use and loneliness, self-esteem, life satisfaction, or self-reported depression (Appel, Marker and Gnambs, 2019[61]). Most of the systematic reviews included in the umbrella review by Valkenburg, Meier and Beyens (2022[62]), interpret the associations between social media use and mental health as weak or inconsistent. In Odgers and Jensen's review (2020[63]) of large-scale

preregistered studies, there was often a lack of sizable or practically meaningful associations between adolescents' digital technology usage and well-being. Yet, there remains much disagreement among scholars about the relationship between social media and emotional well-being, suggesting a heterogeneous and complex relationship that depends on multiple factors. Specific modalities of media engagement, including different forms, genres, styles and themes contain both affective and cognitive content which are thought to have different effects on children and adolescents.

We know that some children who engage with media do experience lower levels of emotional well-being. However, analyses generally find little evidence to suggest a causal relationship between the use of social media and mental health issues. Research has found a small but significant relationship between social media use and depression in adolescence and wider factors such as poor sleep are likely to act as mediators (Ivie et al., 2020[64]). Poor sleep and online harassment have also been identified in UK longitudinal data of children as the most important routes from social media use to depressive symptoms. Kelly et al (2018[65]) found that the route from social media use to depressive symptoms via poor sleep was relatively simple, whereas the role of online harassment was more complex, with multiple pathways through poor sleep, self-esteem and body image. Some scientific and professional organisations now suggest that adolescents should limit use of social media for social comparison, particularly around beauty- or appearance-related content because of concerning associations (American Psychological Association, 2023[66]). For instance, representative data from Canada found that the frequency of social media use is significantly associated with prevalence of eating disorders in boys and girls (Kerr and Kingsbury, 2023[67]). Media education intervention programmes focusing on body image in youth have been developed and show initial promise (Burns and Gottschalk, 2020[2]). The complexity of moderating factors and generally inconsistent associations with emotional well-being mean that broad conclusions about the amount of screen time are not evidence based. Even researchers with different analyses regarding the magnitude of effect social media has on child well-being (e.g., (Twenge et al., 2022[68]) and (Orben and Przybylski, 2019[69])), find common ground in the view that the way a child uses different media platforms may matter more than overall screen time. Empowering children through media engagement requires supporting them to understand their subjective experiences and construct their own meanings from media.

Eudaimonic media experiences

Gaining more precise and actionable knowledge about children and media requires studying what forms of media engagement can enhance well-being for different individuals (Ito et al., 2020[70]). Understanding what makes a positive media experience is a promising avenue of research. Media psychology scholarship has increasingly explored the concept of eudaimonic well-being (Box 4.5) to answer questions regarding positive media experiences. For example, why having other people to talk to when an individual is feeling lonely is reported to be the social media experience mostly related to *flourishing* in adolescents (Marciano and Viswanath, 2023[71]).

Inspiring content

Eudaimonic well-being can be enhanced by media that provokes perceptions of the self as having purpose and meaning. It may also be enhanced by transcendent media experiences, focused on the journeys of others finding purpose and meaning. For simplicity, both formats can be thought of as "inspiring media." Research on inspiring media tends to define it as content that demonstrates moral virtues or transformation, for example portraying an individual overcoming adversity through perseverance (Chang, 2022[72]). The themes of these inspiring portrayals can include nature, love, beauty, art, kindness, encouragement, perseverance, gratitude and the overcoming of obstacles. These themes are very common in contemporary media landscapes, but they are not always easy to find or recognise. Research has shown the human proclivity to attend more to negative stories than to positive stories (Soroka, Fournier and Nir, 2019[73]). False stories that provoke fear, disgust and surprise are far more successful in going viral in the digital environment compared to true stories (Vosoughi, Roy and Aral, 2018[74]). Algorithms used

by digital media platforms often determine that provoking and polarising content results in higher levels of engagement and are more likely to promote it, especially to those who have engaged with it in the past (Valtonen et al., 2019[75]). In order for children to engage purposefully and playfully, the digital environment, including algorithms, must be designed with their needs and rights in mind (5Rights, 2023[76]).

Box 4.5. Euda-what?

Eudaimonia describes the feeling that the things an individual does in life are worthwhile (OECD, 2021[77]). Someone experiencing eudaimonia may have self-perceptions of autonomy, competence and purpose (OECD, 2021[77]). Eudaimonic well-being is based on the assumption that goal-orientated development of personal skills will lead to happiness by providing challenges and opportunities for growth (Casas and González-Carrasco, 2021[78]). This personal growth can include greater self-esteem, resilience and self-awareness by learning from decisions, actions, and behaviours as part of a deliberate move towards self-realisation and fulfilment (Sharma-Brymer and Brymer, 2020[79]). Eudaimonic well-being is often placed in contrast to hedonistic well-being, characterised by the maximisation of pleasure and minimisation of pain (Nelson-Coffey and Schmitt, 2022[80]). *Flourishing* is related to the concept of eudaimonic well-being (OECD, 2021[77]). It is arguably broader, and definitions in empirical studies often contain both hedonistic and eudaimonic well-being indicators (Sharma-Brymer and Brymer, 2020[79]). A systematic review of the literature of adolescents aged 13-19, found no single definition of *flourishing* (Witten, Savahl and Adams, 2019[81]). Measurements can include finding connectedness, civic participation, positive social comparison, authentic self-presentation and self-control (Rosič et al., 2022[82]).

Although children's emotional well-being is a high priority for policy makers and practitioners, there remains a distinct lack of data collection from children and young adolescents on eudaimonia or how social media can influence *flourishing* in adolescence (Casas and González-Carrasco, 2021[78]; Marciano and Viswanath, 2023[71]). This appears to be a somewhat missed opportunity, since existing literature tentatively suggests that adolescents who are more frequently motivated to pursue eudaimonic well-being perform better across a range of domains, compared to adolescents who report less frequent eudaimonic motives (Gentzler et al., 2021[83]).

Agentic engagement

Cultivating eudaimonic well-being does not mean only consuming positive media content (Oliver, 2022[84]). If a media environment provides a safe space to understand negative content or experiences, these can still be beneficial for well-being (Raney et al., 2020[85]). This environment is influenced both the technical affordances of media and how an individual uses it. Children engaging with social media should be encouraged to use platform functions that create opportunities for social support, online companionship, and emotional intimacy, which can promote healthy socialisation (American Psychological Association, 2023[66]). Although there is the common perception that active media engagement (e.g. commenting, posting, messaging) is superior to passive engagement (e.g. scrolling, watching, reading), recent research suggests the picture is less convenient than that (Valkenburg, 2022[86]; Griffioen et al., 2022[55]). Active engagement features such as "like" buttons, may be less appropriate for some children. While passive social media use, such as recommended content and scrolling, can have benefits for some groups of adolescents in terms of entertainment, inspiration and relaxation (Winstone et al., 2022[87]). Rather than the traditional active versus passive dichotomy, recent scholarly work has highlighted the relevance of *agentic* social media use.

The *intentionality* behind media engagement is crucial for ensuring there is purpose behind the user's relationship with media and assertion of control over specific elements of social media use, such as

curating content and refining algorithmic recommendations (Lee, Ellison and Hancock, 2023[88]). Decisively engaging with media for a purpose results agentic personalisation. Kucirkova (2021[89]) posits five aspects that can tap into children's motivation, creativity and empowerment: autonomy, attachment, authenticity, aesthetics and authorship. The presence or absence of agency in these five aspects determines whether personalisation is bottom-up, led by users, or imposed top-down by providers or platforms. In the digital age, these 5As can be easily delivered through algorithmic personalisation systems. Without agentic personalisation, automation can turn authorship into consumption and autonomy into dependency (Kucirkova, 2021[89]).

Agentic media use is inherently connected to the well-known concept of critical thinking. Critical thinking involves carefully evaluating and judging statements, ideas and theories relative to alternative explanations or solutions, to reach a competent, independent position that may require action (Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2019[90]). Essentially, paying attention to whatever holds one's attention. Yet, the volume of low-quality information in the digital environment makes critical thinking highly inefficient when used alone. Thoughtfully and strategically allocating attention can increase the efficiency of critical thinking, in a process Kozyreva and colleagues call *critical ignoring* (2022[91]).

Prosocial behaviour

Prosocial behaviour refers to actions intended to benefit others, such as sharing and co-operating, and can provoke a sense of eudaimonic well-being. It fosters, among other things, greater feelings of connectedness and heightened motivations to help others (Raney et al., 2020[85]; Oliver, 2022[84]). The role of prosocial behaviour in adolescents' positive development has gained greater attention in the scholarly literature since the 1990s (Brittian and Humphries, 2015[92]). Adolescents who display high levels of prosocial behaviour report better educational outcomes and higher levels of emotional well-being (Armstrong-Carter and Telzer, 2021[93]). Contextual factors affect levels of prosocial behaviour in children. For instance, a two-wave study of 16 893 children with an average age of 14 across more than 250 schools in Germany found that individuals' prosocial behaviour increased if they were surrounded by prosocial classmates (Busching and Krahé, 2020[94]). Witnessing prosocial behaviour in the media can also encourage prosocial behaviour in daily life (Greitemeyer, 2022[95]). One of the foundational meta-analyses on this topic, analysing 72 studies involving 17 134 children, adolescents, young adults and older adults, revealed that exposure to prosocial media was related to higher levels of prosocial behaviour and empathy, as well as lower levels of aggressive behaviour (Coyne et al., 2018[96]). Yet, the prosocial effects of different media content are not assured and vary between individuals based on their attitudes and values (de Leeuw et al., 2022[97]).

Many children already circulate prosocial media content, offer guidance to one another around difficult topics, and promote a sense of community around marginalised interests and identities (Ito et al., 2020[70]). Dezuanni (2019[98]) describes relationships between children, where they learn how to interact with, use and conduct themselves in different media communities, as *peer pedagogies*. Some children have mentors, older peers, siblings, or adults who can model and socialise prosocial behaviour, whereas other children may not (Armstrong-Carter and Telzer, 2021[93]). This may partially explain why media role models are comparatively more important for certain children from less advantaged backgrounds (Orben, Dienlin and Przybylski, 2019[57]; Paus-Hasebrink, Kulterer and Sinner, 2019[99]).

Social and emotional skills underpin, and develop through, prosocial behaviour. Yet, they play an underexplored role in media effects. Digital media is a specific context where social and emotional learning can take place (Campos, 2023[100]). This is one reason why it can have important implications for emotional well-being (Box 4.6). On a broader level, there is widespread recognition among policy makers that social and emotional skills are essential for students to be able to succeed at school, participate in society, protect their mental health and improve their labour market prospects (OECD, 2021[101]). However, scholars have remarked on a lack of longitudinal studies analysing how social and emotional skills contribute to media

education outcomes (Tsortanidou, Daradoumis and Barberá-Gregori, 2020[102]). When social and emotional skills are insufficiently incorporated into media education frameworks, there are implications for the ways in which children are taught, for example, how to have ethical conversations in the digital environment (Cortesi et al., 2020[19]). This situation is made more precarious with how each topic is integrated into formal education. Although widely reported as being taught in OECD countries, schools mainly embed social and emotional education into existing practices. This means they are at risk of being abridged or skipped (OECD, 2023[103]) in a similar way to cross-curricular media education.

Box 4.6. Too much of a good thing?

Positive emotions are generally considered more appropriate by adolescents than expressions of negative emotions across a variety of social media platforms (Waterloo et al., 2017[104]). This positivity bias means children and adolescents strategically post self-related content which is highly selective, to present themselves in a positive light (Schreurs and Vandenbosch, 2020[105]). The bias has also been found to apply to adolescents' private Direct Messages (DMs) (Verbeij et al., 2022[106]).

The effects of the bias on well-being appear to be moderated by the emotional regulation skills of an individual. Emotional regulation (which includes concepts such as optimism) is a core social and emotional skill (Chernyshenko, Kankaraš and Drasgow, 2018[107]). Those who are more media literate may use positively biased content as a source of inspiration, increasing emotional well-being. Less media literate individuals may simply attempt to control negative emotions, such as jealousy and envy, rendering it neutral. For the least media literate, the temptation for comparison may be too great and the media may negatively affect their emotional well-being (Schreurs and Vandenbosch, 2020[105]). Adolescents who discuss this positivity bias with their parents show greater critical awareness (Schreurs and Vandenbosch, 2023[108]).

Research limitations

Current evidence has several challenges. Firstly, most studies are correlational and cross-sectional and the direction of causality often cannot be inferred (Kelly et al., 2018[65]; Appel, Marker and Gnambs, 2019[61]). For example, it remains unclear whether some adolescents who struggle to pay attention are more attracted to media multitasking, or whether media multitasking has a negative impact on attention control over time (Baumgartner, 2022[109]).

Secondly, although most adolescents do not experience short-term changes in well-being related to their social media use, small subsets of adolescents do (Beyens et al., 2020[110]). This is symptomatic of the considerable heterogeneity in samples, as behaviours, platforms and emotional responses vary widely (van der Wal, Valkenburg and van Driel, 2022[111]). Many scholars maintain that the true effects of social media reported in existing studies have probably been diluted across these highly heterogeneous samples of individuals (Beyens et al., 2020[110]; Ivie et al., 2020[64]; Valkenburg et al., 2022[112]). Groups of individuals sharing similar psychological characteristics can show very different relationships between social media use and emotional well-being (Griffioen et al., 2022[55]).

Lastly, some scholars argue that the field is dominated by work that is generally of low quality (Orben, 2020[113]). There is a strong need to collect more fine-grained data with objective measures of different types of behaviour, as well as content and motivations for interacting with media (Johannes et al., 2022[51]). Current measurements of media effects on well-being often do not take into account the specificities of media content or quality of interactions on social media (Valkenburg, Meier and Beyens, 2022[62]). Furthermore, although there are by now more longitudinal studies on short and medium-term media effects, there is still a lack of longitudinal research exploring the associations between adolescents' social media use and long-term outcomes into adulthood (American Psychological Association, 2023[66]).

Media engagement and identity formation

The search for identity starts in childhood, accelerates into adolescence and extends into adulthood (Klimstra and van Doeselaar, 2017[114]). Around the age of three or four, children begin to develop a sense of personal history (Fivush, 2011[115]) and start to attain insights into their own motivations and the motivations of others, attributing different traits to individuals (Calero et al., 2013[116]). They also begin to imagine events that might take place in the future (Ferretti et al., 2017[117]). These cognitive skills allow an individual to build a personal narrative throughout childhood and adolescence to explain who they are (McAdams, 2019[118]). Early childhood is a period defined by a need to identify with, and conform rigidly to, social norms, where the desire for social acceptance often takes precedence over other psychological needs. In adolescence, it becomes more important to gain peer acceptance while also asserting personal agency, and media engagement provides an opportunity to do this (Granic, Morita and Scholten, 2020[119]). Expressions of identity (for example self-assigned labels) are integrated into an overarching life story over the course of adolescence. Even if these expressions are later dropped, they remain an important descriptor of who an individual has been (Bates, Hobman and Bell, 2019[120]). Eventually, adolescents reflect on these experiences and integrate their values and beliefs with those of broader society.

Successfully navigating this balancing act has long been considered a basic psychological need and provides a sense of identity coherence (Granic, Morita and Scholten, 2020[119]). Experiencing a coherent identity is associated with lower anxiety, depression and aggression and higher levels of self-esteem, life satisfaction, supportive relationships and civic engagement, as well as academic and career success (Crocetti, 2017[121]; Klimstra and van Doeselaar, 2017[114]). The concept of *narrative identity* provides a framework which helps researchers to better understand this process of identity formation and has attracted significant empirical study over the past decade (Branje et al., 2021[122]). It helps researchers to understand how individuals integrate their version of past experiences and imagined futures and find purpose, life story and a sense of place in the world (McAdams and McLean, 2013[123]). Narrators who find redemptive meanings by overcoming adversity, and who construct life stories featuring themes of personal agency, tend to report higher levels of emotional well-being (McAdams and McLean, 2013[123]; Adler et al., 2015[124]).

Cultural participation is an important construct for narrative identity, as individuals borrow from ubiquitous *master narratives* found in their respective cultures (Manago et al., 2021[125]). Culture refers to the core beliefs, conventions and practices associated with a given group of people (OECD, 2020[126]). Participation in culture allows children to navigate childhood while also providing a framework for engaging with the adult world (Woodfall and Zezulkova, 2019[127]). An individual can belong to numerous cultures, which intersect, giving them a unique cultural positioning. *Master narratives* refer to most widely shared images, metaphors and popular stories. One example of a *master narrative* is traditional gender roles, which persist despite being increasingly challenged by cultural shifts regarding gender and sexuality in recent decades (Barsigian et al., 2023[128]). The right to participate in culture is enshrined in article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989[129]). Communication tools and aesthetic expressions can be a powerful vehicle for the cultural participation envisaged in the UNCRC (Aspán, 2023[130]), supporting or constraining identity development in different individuals (McLean et al., 2017[131]).

In the previous age of mass media, those who used the most popular *master narratives* were often those in positions to influence media production, as well as positions of political and economic power (McLean et al., 2017[131]). The rise of algorithmically-powered digital media has fragmented media audiences according to behavioural data, personalising media production and further diversifying people's experiences. This can be empowering for some children. For example, if an individual does not identify with a *master narrative*, the wider cultural access social media offers can empower adolescents to find *alternative narratives* which they feel fit them better (Bates, Hobman and Bell, 2019[120]). In this case, finding an *alternative narrative* can be a positive and social experience if it empowers an individual to look for a group, community, or subculture where they feel they belong. For instance, research shows that if

adolescents questioning their gender or sexual identity can use media to access peers to provide support and share accurate health information with one another, this can enhance resilience to stress (American Psychological Association, 2023[66]). Media are storytelling devices, rich with cultural and identity expressions. In the digital age, cultural expression takes place seamlessly across media through circulation of content, information and narratives and media engagement provides a wealth of stories through which adolescents can craft their own identity and positively impact emotional well-being (González-Martínez et al., 2019[132]; Granic, Morita and Scholten, 2020[119]). As such, media provides both opportunities and risks to individuals searching for a stable personal narrative. An important part of identity development is finding belonging within a given group, which can foster a sense of empowerment (Syed and McLean, 2022[133]).

Agency, influence and community

All human beings are born with agency. This agency is exercised when a person is driven to discover the kind of life they wish to build (for example, by making choices, setting goals or taking actions) and how they would like to feature in the lives of others (for example, what kind of friend, partner or caregiver they would like to be) (Kucirkova, 2021[89]). This requires self-determination, a sense of belonging and openness to being vulnerable with others. It is exercised by showing up, being brave, forgoing comfort and investing in one's own worthiness (Kucirkova, 2021[89]). When children have a sense of agency, they are more likely to engage in self-expression as they feel their thoughts and preferences are valued. Cultural norms, family expectations, and societal attitudes can influence how children perceive their ability to assert themselves and express their individuality. Fostering a child's sense of agency can empower them to express themselves more confidently. Providing opportunities for self-expression can contribute to the development of a child's sense of agency. Mid-adolescence is a period that prioritises the need for personal agency but adolescents who remain fixated on conforming, or do not develop coping strategies which provide a strong sense of agency, often get stuck in their identity development and emotional well-being can suffer (Granic, Morita and Scholten, 2020[119]).

Social media *influencers*[19] have become important ambassadors of both master and alternative narratives. Since 2016 the global value of *influencer* marketing is estimated to have increased by 700% (Collini et al., 2022[134]). Empirical data show that the more an *influencer* can strengthen a followers' sense of self in relation to their influencer community, for example through storytelling, the more effective the marketing is (Farivar and Wang, 2022[135]). Finding one's place in a community can provide connectedness, belonging, and acceptance, and is a crucial component of narrative identity (Granic, Morita and Scholten, 2020[119]). Yet, the relationships children have with the *influencers* themselves are parasocial, non-reciprocal and one-way (Ballantine and Martin, 2005[136]). Instead, two-way relationships more often occur between followers within a community that is actively cultivated by an influencer (Hoffner and Bond, 2022[137]). *Influencers* are often young people themselves, making it easier for children to identify with them and feel represented, validated and motivated to engage (Scolari, 2018[138]). Many *influencers* focus on creating content that portrays them in a high-status light (Marwick, 2015[139]) and when adolescents create their own media content, they often do so by following some of the *influencers' strategies* (Masanet, Guerrero-Pico and Establés, 2019[140]). This reproduction is the exercise of agency and can be empowering, even if the content is not original.

Box 4.7. World apart: Risks and opportunities for identity exploration in digital communities

Media, masculinity and "the manosphere"

The *manosphere* is a fragmented group of digital communities that use constructions of masculine identity, gender traits, critiques of feminism and victimisation storytelling to promote misogynist discourses (Han and Yin, 2022[141]). The narratives within the manosphere can attract young boys into

strong antifeminist responses (Van Valkenburgh, 2019[142]) which feed into contemporary conceptions of *toxic masculinity*, a term that lacks a coherent or consistent definition (Reeves, 2022[143]). In their categorisation of these discourses in the digital environment, Han and Yin (2022[141]) identified a number of different subcultures, one of which is *incels.*

Incel is a portmanteau of "involuntary celibates", a group of people who feel the frustration of being unable to find a sentimental or sexual partner (Jaki et al., 2019[144]). Although it is difficult to get an accurate estimation, evidence suggests that incels represent the youngest portion of the *manosphere*, with many under 18 and some as young as 12 years old (Woodward et al., 2021[145]). *Incel* forums appear to provide short-term positive experiences for self-identified *incels* but can be destructive in the longer-term. Language on these forums is much more likely to be grossly negative, derogatory and violent against women, society or other users compared to more mainstream social media platforms (Pelzer et al., 2021[146]). Although the incel community contains much violence and hatred, it is mostly concentrated on self-loathing (Sugiura, 2021[147]). Research has found that most incels report a history of emotional problems and being bullied (Moskalenko et al., 2022[148]). These lower levels of emotional well-being are associated with incels' lower levels of social support and higher feelings of loneliness (Sparks, Zidenberg and Olver, 2023[149]). This can be a vicious cycle, as research demonstrates that adolescents' exposure to digital prejudice and hate predicts increases in anxiety and depressive symptoms (American Psychological Association, 2023[66]).

Books, being and belonging

Concern over rates of literacy remains high on the policy agenda in many OECD countries. A wide range of influencers on social media, many of whom are adolescents or young adults, cultivate reading through dedicated book culture accounts (Flood, 2021[150]). These accounts provide recommendations, allow exploration of experiences and emotional responses, generate community and identity and discuss, develop and promote writing (Merga, 2021[151]). *By* searching for *#bookstagram, BookTube or #booktok* a child can access the reading corners of Instagram, YouTube and TikTok. #booktok alone has more 50 billion views worldwide and a significant impact on book sales (Reddan, 2022[152]).

Accounts centred on reading culture seek to produce feelings of belonging and connection (Reddan, 2022[152]). Accounts use images – known as *shelfies* (Instagram) and *selfies* (TikTok) - to position reading and book culture as desirable, social, cultured and pleasurable (Dezuanni et al., 2022[153]). Typical activities on book culture media accounts include book cover reveals, book reviews, recommendations, critiques, pictures of *to-be-read* piles of books, *Hauls* showcasing books recently purchased and live reading events (Dezuanni et al., 2022[153]; Perkins, 2017[154]). *Book Tags/Challenges* are also used, providing creative prompts shared to the community to stimulate conversation (Perkins, 2017[154]). These communities provide an opportunity for children to explore what it means to be "a reader" although the effect on actual reading behaviour warrants further research (Dezuanni et al., 2022[153]).

More broadly, longitudinal research has found that *influencers* often serve as role models for disadvantaged children, more often boys; embodying success, wealth and upward social mobility (Orben, Dienlin and Przybylski, 2019[57]; Paus-Hasebrink, Kulterer and Sinner, 2019[99]). Social media is an important outlet for adolescents when it comes to coping with stress, as stigmatised individuals are able to find similar others and role models who provide support and guidance (Wolfers and Utz, 2022[155]). Although all human beings have agency, the stakes for self-determination and self-expression are not the same for every child. For example, research has found that children in low-income communities may temper their digital self-expression to a greater extent than more advantaged children, in favour of adhering to social rules where there is the perception of greater penalties (including economic costs and the threat of physical harm) for not doing so (Way and Malvini Redden, 2020[156]). Social media has obvious benefits

in the search for belonging and connection but it can equally lead children into difficulties as they try to explain why their sense of self deviates from the identity of their peers, families or mainstream celebrities.

Box 4.8. "Did you see their Finsta?"

Although expressing an ideal self is important across age groups, the importance of expressing an authentic self to peers increases during adolescence (Macek and Osecká, 1996[157]). Media provides prompting and elaboration for this collaborative peer-led identity development. Some adolescent Instagram users maintain two profiles: a "real Instagram" or *Rinsta* and a "fake Instagram" or *Finsta.* A *Rinsta* is used for broad social interaction via an ideal, curated self. A *Finsta* is a safe space to express negative emotions and share unflattering pictures with close friends (Ellison, Pyle and Vitak, 2022[158]). A *Finsta* often is often kept private (i.e. not publicly accessible) with fewer, but more intense, connections with peers (Huang and Vitak, 2022[159]).

These spaces may provide relief from the pressure to be constantly self-marketing and presenting a coherent and palatable personal brand (Xiao et al., 2020[160]). *Rinsta* satisfies the social pressures many children feel to look good and serious, *Finsta* satisfies the need to be genuine and playful (Kang and Wei, 2020[161]). On *Rinsta*, people perceive their personality as less neurotic and extraverted. On *Finsta*, users see themselves as less agreeable and conscientious (Taber and Whittaker, 2020[162]). Although popularity of *Finsta* appears to have piqued around 2018, more recent apps such as BeReal[20] have put authenticity and spontaneity at their core, giving users a randomly selected two-minute window every day to share a video. Balancing the need for agency and community is an essential part of identity formation. From a narrative perspective, a *Finsta* offers a way for a child to exercise their agency, but in a controlled environment. By contrast, a *Rinsta* gives access to the broader community values against which they can view their own evolving sense of self.

The increasingly professionalised and commercialised digital media environment raises the stakes for children to exercise their agency. Digital media are important communication tools for the social justice movements both in and out of the digital environment (Manago et al., 2021[163]). However, recent surveys found that the vast majority of children's social media feeds are dominated by competitive, expertly produced *influencer* content (Revealing Reality, 2023[164]). This environment of professionalised perfection means public social interactions, such as liking, following and sharing content, carry significant risk of negative feedback. Most children remain passive consumers of digital media rather than active participants or content creators (Scolari, 2018[138]; Rideout, et al., 2022[165]; Ofcom, 2022[166]). Although digital media are not the primary driver, and social comparison has its roots in so-called "success culture" more broadly (Burns and Gottschalk, 2020[2]), the ubiquity of the media environment provides an efficient means through which this culture can be reinforced. Children have found creative ways of lowering the stakes of identity exploration in the digital media environment. For example, by creating what Wilson (2020[167]) calls *digital campfires*. These are alternative social spaces co-created by young people interested in finding like-minded peers with shared values and goals. They are less public and exist on private messaging platforms, through shared experiences (e.g. multiplayer games) or through the creation of micro-communities. Crucially, *digital campfires* are built through agency, not automation. Consequently, they may have more promising outcomes for young people's identity development and empowerment (Granic, Morita and Scholten, 2020[168]).

The role of education

School is among the most important contexts where identity formation unfolds. However, little is known about how school environments can support children in this key developmental task (Abbasi, 2016[169]). Existing research suggests that practitioners are often unaware of the ways in which their practices may

impact identity development (Verhoeven, Poorthuis and Volman, 2018[170]). This gap has important ramifications. Research shows that adolescents belonging to ethnic minority groups often need to consider and reconsider different identity alternatives to a greater extent than ethnic majority adolescents (Crocetti, 2017[121]). Offering adolescents at risk of marginalisation the opportunity to critically assess societal inequalities can support identity development and enhance resilience (Verhoeven, Poorthuis and Volman, 2018[170]). Exploring aspects of identity around marginalisation requires a safe school environment (Bates, Hobman and Bell, 2019[120]). Cultivating an atmosphere where adolescents feel respected, appreciated and secure enough to make mistakes, for example by having teachers share their own doubts and mistakes, can reassure students (Verhoeven, Poorthuis and Volman, 2018[170]). Identity formation interventions often take place in extracurricular activities. However, the formal school curriculum may also provide opportunities (e.g. (Pinkard et al., 2017[171])). Initiatives that mix informal and formal learning may be especially effective in encouraging students to engage with identity processes as they support the development of complimentary relationships with peers and teachers (Meerts-Brandsma, Melton and Sibthorp, 2023[172]).

When it comes to scope, Verhoeven, Poorthuis and Volman's (2018[170]) review categorises identity development approaches into *broad, deep and reflective*. *Broad* educational initiatives provide adolescents with the opportunity to adopt new interests, identify talents, and to try out new identity positions using on-site and hands-on activities. *Deep* learning experiences support adolescents in further exploring and specifying existing identity positions, using expert role models from the community who can help adolescents to challenge stereotypes that may otherwise inhibit identity exploration. *Reflective* learning experiences help adolescents explore existing self-understandings and determine a comfortable balance between societal norms and individual aspirations of who they want to become. The role of educators in fostering connections between educational practices and the world outside school is a common theme across the literature (Abbasi, 2016[169]). This can make learning more meaningful by providing space for, and valuing, adolescents' out-of-school knowledge and experiences in class to come together.

Many media education resources already include competencies related to identity formation. For example, the Digital Citizenship Curriculum[21] of CommonSense Media in the United States, which includes activities intended to help teachers guide students to reflect on the most important parts of their personal identity, consider how to best reflect this in the digital environment and discuss the benefits and drawbacks of having multiple digital identities. Yet, media education in practice often still lacks a rigorous examination of issues related to representations of different personal identities with students (Share, Mamikonyan and Lopez, 2019[173]). Critical engagement with questions of identity in education practice has historically been limited to, for example, questioning who owns and makes editorial decisions in relation to mass media (Cannon, Connolly and Parry, 2020[174]). This is because the knowledge base that supports media education is informed mainly by mass media research and the conceptual frameworks used are often far away from children's everyday media experiences (Dezuanni, 2020[175]).

Education systems have a crucial role in teaching children about digital safety. However, opportunities for empowerment do not automatically emerge from enhanced safety. Furthermore, overprotection can actually undermine empowerment. Media engagement is not simply a rational calculation of risks versus rewards; it is driven by emotions and, for most children, it is an essential arena for their development. Education must consider how key developmental needs in childhood, such as the search for stable and coherent identity development, anchored in a sense of community, quality relationships and agency, affect their media engagement. Simply providing a child with knowledge about digital hate speech will not necessarily mean they make a rational assessment about participating in harmful digital communities. Similarly, equipping a child with the skills to detect disinformation will not necessarily stop them from sharing information they know to be false. The perceived utility of the digital environment might not be found in the accuracy of the information it contains but rather in the opportunities it provides for the key developmental tasks of childhood. Media education must safely take these factors into consideration by incentivising children to bring their everyday experiences of media into the classroom.

Children's media engagement – Reflection tool

Screentime is not a meaningful indicator of the effects of media engagement on well-being, as it does not consider who is engaging and what they are engaging with.

Media education needs an enhanced focus on fostering learning about how different media can positively affect well-being, for example by supporting identity development, the exercise of agency and prosocial behaviour.

Some children who engage with media do experience lower levels of emotional well-being.

Much research now suggests that some adolescents should limit use of social media for social comparison, particularly around beauty- or appearance-related content.

Current media education interventions positively impact children's knowledge and skills but have more limited effects on actual media behaviours.

Learning about digital risks can support positive decision making in the digital environment. Yet, media engagement as a behaviour is often irrational and based on emotions. Knowledge and skills are not enough.

Bringing in children's lived media experiences and including the motivations which lie at the core of their engagement behaviours is crucial.

Social and emotional skills are essential for media education but risk being sidelined.

Despite widespread recognition of the importance of social and emotional skills, there is a lack understanding of how they are actually being taught in schools and how they can contribute to media education.

There is need for more fine-grained data with objective measures of different behaviours.

Most studies are correlational and cross sectional and the direction of association and causality often cannot be inferred.

The true effects of media have probably been diluted across heterogeneous samples of individuals that differ in their susceptibility to media effects.

There is a distinct lack of data on how teacher preparation programmes incorporate media education into teacher training.

Although the majority of systems report media education is covered by initial teacher education and continuing professional development, there are scarce examples of how this is actually implemented.

Studies have shown that both pre-service and in-service teachers in various education systems have expressed a lack of confidence in media education themes.

Media education often still focuses on traditional concepts of mass-media audiences, narratives and power structures and neglects individual lived experiences.

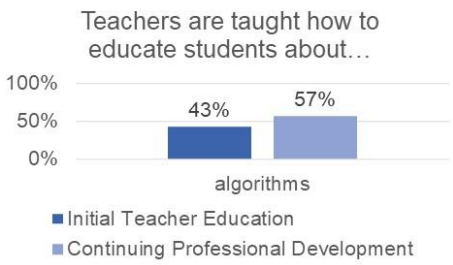
School is already a key space where identity formation takes place, and media education should empower children in this journey.

Yet, there remains a lack of robust research on the best ways to instigate self-reflective classroom interventions that bring in children's everyday media experiences and rich cultural knowledge to discuss what this means for their identity and participation in society.

Reflecting on Media Engagement

DATA & TRENDS

Algorithms dominate children's media experiences and most children remain passive consumers of media. Yet, many teachers are not taught how to educate students about the role these algorithms play.



Source: Questionnaire (2022)

EMPOWERMENT

Opportunities

Critical engagement with media narratives can encourage the development of a sense of purpose, personal agency, inspiration and prosocial behaviour. This is likely to positively impact well-being and requires a broad media education composed of both technical and non-technical competences.

Challenges

Integrating algorithm education into teacher training so teachers can support students.

Empowering schools to support key developmental tasks, such as identity formation.

Bringing children's rich cultural knowledge of media into the classroom.

What can governments do?

- Further attention should be paid **to system-wide coordination**, **teacher education** and working with actors to **evaluate and scale up** media education mechanisms, even though the **strategic policy landscape** of media education is well-developed in many education systems.
- Media education should **expand its scope** to more comprehensively include **positive**, **agentic** and **prosocial** use of media to promote well-being in children.
- Media education can empower children in identity formation by moving beyond traditional media and communications concepts focused on mass media and **provide greater scope for exploration, self-reflection and individual storytelling** that personalised media offers.
- Governments must ensure collaboration across sectors and lower the stakes **for children to exercise their agency in the digital environment by encouraging authentic community building and digital play among peers**. It is widely recognised that policy makers have a duty to promote child safety by design in the digital environment. However, they can also promote **opportunity by design**.

Why not start a learning conversation about children's media education?

Tina is a Senior Analyst in her Education Ministry's Policy Research and Analysis Team. Her unit operates as an internal knowledge broker, working across the Ministry to develop the evidence base in education by offering analytical support and identifying policy and practice-relevant studies. The Deputy Secretary General of the Ministry recently announced that they will update the teacher training framework to strengthen newly trained teachers' media education competence and pedagogical skills. The context is highly politicised and Tina wishes to deepen the understanding of the evidence base for media education in the Ministry to support decision making.

She recently read about *Learning Conversations*, a collaborative process that has helped education practitioners to engage with knowledge in a high-quality way. She wants to explore the benefits of this process in a policy context. Following the examples outlined in (Brown and Poortman, 2023[176]) she brings together a small group of ministerial advisers, municipal policy makers and policy and implementation administrators, as well as researchers from two universities in her system and relevant stakeholders from allied professions such as health and social care. Tina assumes the crucial role of facilitator and structures the learning conversations in four workshops, lasting four hours each, over the course of one year. Each workshop mixes the steps below, going back and forth where required to fine-tune ideas and take account of evolving contexts:

1. Establishing a baseline
- What pre-existing assumptions do participants have about children's media engagement and what does the research evidence say?
- What research evidence exists on successes and challenges in improving teacher training in media education?
- What change in student outcomes (and thus teaching practice) is required in our context?
2. Co-creating solutions
- How can we break down the themes of the evidence base into focused, relevant and measurable policy goals to guide further activities and ensure we can evaluate their success?
- For each policy goal, what can we find out about the root cause of challenges and the factors that can help achieve the goal?
- Where are the knowledge gaps and what still needs to be learnt to achieve the goals?
3. Approaching implementation
- Who needs to be involved and can positively influence factors that help achieve the goals?
- How might we secure the engagement of these stakeholders and what are their motivations?
- What activities and resources are needed and when?
4. Reflections and *ex-ante* evaluation of process and outcomes.
- What have learning conversation participants learnt together and as individuals?
- How can we meaningfully involve a diverse range of students in the next steps?
- What barriers might prevent the policy goals being achieved and how might we adapt the goals?

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Notes

[1] The methods of communication used to store and deliver information

[2] Information literacy emphasises the skills needed to find, validate and deploy information but does not explicitly focus on media messages (Leaning, 2019[177]). It focuses specifically on information provided through digital sources, rather than building the skills to use digital technologies (Jones-Jang, Mortensen and Liu, 2019[26]).

[3]See:https://men.public.lu/fr/actualites/communiques-conference-presse/2020/02/06-einfach-digital.html(accessed on 06 May 2024).

[4] See: https://www.edumedia.lu/ (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[5] See: https://en.digst.dk/media/27861/national-strategy-for-digitalisation-together-in-the-digital-development.pdf (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[6]See: https://www.pkc.gov.lv/sites/default/files/inline-files/Summary_Latvian%20National%20Development%20Plan%202021-2027_final_pdf.pdf (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[7]See: https://www.km.gov.lv/en/media/32853/download?attachment (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[8] See: https://www.varam.gov.lv/en/article/latvian-digital-transformation-guidelines-2021-2027-accellation-digital-capacities-future-society-and-economy?utm_source=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[9] See: https://www.slo.nl/thema/meer/actualisatie-kerndoelen-examenprogramma/#:~:text=De%20landelijk%20vastgelegde%20kerndoelen%20en,toekomst%2C%20moeten%20deze%20worden%20geactualiseerd.(accessed on 06 May 2024).

[10] See: https://www.mediawijs.be/ (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[11] See: https://www.medianest.be/ (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[12] See: https://www.clemi.fr/ (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[13] See: https://kavi.fi/en/ (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[14] See: https://fjolmidlanefnd.is/2022/01/24/tengslanet-um-upplysinga-og-midlalaesi-a-islandi/ (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[15] See: https://www.nomc.nl/ (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[16] See: https://mediacoacheurope.com/project (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[17] See: https://mediacoacheurope.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/European-MediaCoach-Initiative-Methodology-and-Results.pdf (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[18] See: https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/approach/evaluate/toolkit (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[19] The term *influencer* denotes a monetisable status and a potential career that is created as a result of digital celebrity and intentionally aims to sustain attention (Abidin, 2020[178]). The term *celebrity* simply represents the quality of visibility. *Influencers* are a broad group, containing mainstream celebrities, as well as *micro-celebrities*. *Micro-celebrity* is a term that indicates small-scale or narrowly focused visibility, which is often ephemeral.

[20] See : https://bereal.com/en/ (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[21] See : https://www.commonsense.org/education/digital-citizenship/curriculum?topic=digital-footprint--identity (accessed on 06 May 2024).

5 Digital inequalities and child empowerment

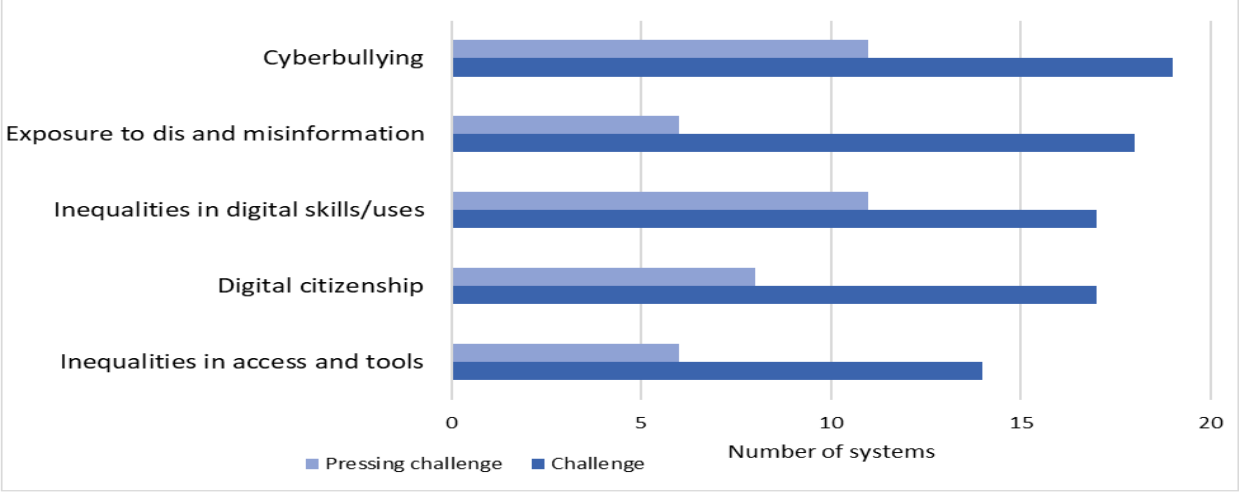
This chapter gives an overview of some challenges faced by OECD countries regarding children and digital inequalities. Despite a narrowing gap in terms of access to digital tools and the Internet, inequalities are persistent and pervasive. Many children in OECD countries lack adequate access to digital tools and the Internet that can impede their participation in an increasingly digital world. Furthermore, disparities in digital skills are stark and some students risk being left behind. Mitigating these disparities is a key policy objective in many education systems, as is supporting all children to safely navigate the digital environment while minimising risk of harm.

Mitigating digital inequalities is a policy priority in OECD countries

The links between social and digital inclusion are clear. Offline disadvantage has implications for disadvantage in digital environments and vice versa. This is because digital inequalities re-integrate 'into social structure, rejecting the strict opposition between online and offline spheres of activity' (Calderón Gómez, 2020, p. 3[1]). This means that digital inequalities can reinforce and amplify existing social inequalities, and that digital exclusion contributes to social exclusion (Reisdorf and Rhinesmith, 2020[2]). Individuals who can seize digital opportunities are likely to have advantages over those who are digitally disadvantaged, and digital exclusion tends to map onto different types of offline disadvantage (Robinson et al., 2015[3]).

Mitigating digital inequalities is a social imperative not only to minimise social exclusion, but also so that children can benefit from digital learning opportunities including informal learning (Ferguson et al., 2014[4]). The United Nations (UN) High-level Panel on Digital Co-operation has underscored that digital tools can be leveraged to help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. To do so, it argues that a multistakeholder approach must be used to promote digital inclusion and equality for all (UN High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation, 2019[5]). Reducing digital inequalities and promoting a digital environment that is safe for all children is high on the policy agenda in OECD education systems. This was a main finding that emerged in the 2018 iteration of the 21st Century Children Policy Questionnaire (Burns and Gottschalk, 2019[6]), and was also identified in the 2022 iteration (see Figure 5.1). OECD education systems in both survey cycles reported that challenges such as inequalities in digital skills and uses, and inequalities in access were pressing policy challenges, alongside various digital risks.

Figure 5.1. Pressing digital technology challenges in OECD education systems



Note: 22 systems responded to this item
Source: Questionnaire (2022)

Digital inequalities discussions have become more nuanced, advancing to the point that many scholars have moved beyond a dichotomous description of "haves and have-nots". The "digital divide" in the singular as a term is seen by some as outdated, and many scholars refer to divides plural, "digital inequalities" or "levels of digital divides" which provide a more nuanced understanding of the complex digital inequalities landscape (for an overview, see (Gottschalk and Weise, 2023[7])). This section will explore some of these nuances and give an overview of policy and practice in some OECD countries to mitigate the digital inequalities that can hinder the empowerment of children.

Please mind the gap (in access to digital tools and the Internet)

Despite high rates of connectivity in many OECD countries and a narrowing gap in access to digital tools and the Internet, inequalities within and between countries persist. Even in countries that are considered affluent and technologically advanced, there are differences in physical and material[1] access (van Deursen and van Dijk, 2018[8]). Inequalities in access were highlighted in the Questionnaire (2022) as a policy challenge by OECD countries throughout compulsory education, and in the ECEC in a Digital World policy survey in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings as well (OECD, 2023[9]).

Using 2019 European Union – Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) data, Ayllón and colleagues (2023[10]) report that 5.4% of school-aged children in Europe were digitally deprived. This means that they lived in a household that cannot afford to have a computer and/or that they co-habit with adults who cannot afford to provide an Internet connection. Rates in OECD members ranged from 0.4% in Iceland and 0.7% in Estonia to 11.6% in Hungary (Ayllón, Holmarsdottir and Lado, 2023[10]). Post pandemic rates of digital deprivation could be lower due to an emphasis by OECD governments on establishing programmes to support Internet and device access in particular for low-income groups. According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) 98% of young people (aged 15-24) in high-income countries used the Internet in 2023 versus 93% of the rest of the population (ITU, 2023[11]).

In terms of gaining access to the digital environment, in the majority of countries a higher proportion of households can afford Internet access than can afford a computer. Access to devices and the Internet is one side of the story, whereas ensuring this access is adequate or fit for purpose is more complicated. For example, in the United Kingdom, the 2021 Ofcom survey of households with children (0-17) showed that 99% of these households had Internet access and used it in the home and that the majority of children used a tablet or mobile device to access the Internet (Ofcom, 2022[12]). However, more than one-third of young children (primary school-aged) did not have access to an adequate device for learning at home. This was also the case for 17% of secondary school-aged children (Ofcom, 2022[12]).

Nowadays access to digital tools and the Internet has become a critical part of learning and participating in society. A systematic review reported a positive relationship between home Internet use and academic achievement in 17 studies, and a negative relationship in only 2, with improved outcomes for both students from low and high-income backgrounds (Daoud et al., 2020[13]). Home Internet access was also positively associated with children's social skills. The authors of the literature review concluded that the value added of home Internet access is influenced by variables including socio-economic status, and how the technology is used (i.e. for educational or non-educational purposes) (Daoud et al., 2020[13]). This is the case in schools too, where connectivity and access are necessary but not sufficient conditions to realise the potential of digital education (OECD, 2023[14]). Inadequate access to digital tools and the Internet can hinder children from making the most of digital opportunities including participating fully in digital education, which is on the rise in OECD countries. The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 found a negative association between student performance and a lack of or inadequate/poor-quality digital resources in schools (OECD, 2023[15]). There is thus an increasing need for Internet connections that are more reliable, faster, and with higher bandwidth and less latency (OECD, 2023[14]).

Box 5.1. When simply being connected isn't enough: Under-connectedness

In the digital inequalities discourse, there are often distinctions made between "haves" and "have-nots". Conceptualising individuals in these two camps can, however, undermine the nuances that exist regarding digital inequalities, and do not account for differences in connection quality, and factors such as device quality, quantity and suitability for individual users. For example, in a nationally representative survey of parents in the United States, many reported being under-connected in some way. Around half of surveyed parents reported having home Internet access that was too slow to do the things they

wanted to, and about one-quarter reported that their computer was shared among too many people in the household for them to have enough time on it (Katz, Gonzalez and Clark, 2017[16]). Many parents also reported cuts to Internet access due to factors such as non-payment or reaching data limits (ibid). PISA 2022 results showed that only three out of four students reported that they never or only a few times had problems with access to a digital device when they needed it, suggesting almost a quarter were under-connected in some way (OECD, 2023[15]).

Consequences of under-connectedness include: decreased likelihood in applying for jobs or services families qualify for online, constrained access to services such as medical resources. For children, under-connectedness can impede them playing educational games, searching for information in the digital environment or even doing homework and collaborating with other students (Katz, Gonzalez and Clark, 2017[16]). Under-connectedness can exacerbate social inequalities in a myriad of ways, thereby affecting child well-being and education outcomes.

COVID-19 shone a spotlight on inequalities in digital access

The COVID-19 pandemic posed additional challenges for countries regarding digital inequalities, despite a narrowing gap in access in recent years. Responses from the Questionnaire (2022) highlighted that, as schools shifted to distance learning, more households than expected did not have sufficient access to digital tools nor to a fast enough Internet connection. For example, a 2021 report looking at digital trends in the Flemish Community of Belgium highlighted disparities in ability to afford high-speed Internet between low and high-income households. Furthermore, almost one in five (19%) households reported a need for an additional computer in the home, while the figure for low-income households rises to 26% (Sevenhant et al., 2021[17]). In Spain, the Questionnaire (2022) response identified that the COVID-19 pandemic emphasised inequalities, underscoring the inequality of opportunities among students.

The Children's School Lives study, a national longitudinal study of primary school students in Ireland, reported that principals and teachers were concerned about the access to remote learning of their students (Symonds et al., 2020[18]). Variation across schools was observed, and while many teachers and principals reported high levels of access among students, approximately one-third of teachers and principals reported that one-quarter of students in their classrooms and schools were unable to access remote learning. The most commonly perceived barriers were a lack of digital devices in the home, as well as factors such as parental work responsibilities, and lack of parents' interest and/or knowledge. Interestingly, from the parental perspective, the main reported barrier to assisting their children's distance learning was a lack of time due responsibilities such as child-care and work demands (Symonds et al., 2020[18]). PISA 2022 results suggest that on average across OECD countries, high-performing students reported fewer problems with remote learning such as less difficulty accessing the Internet (OECD, 2023[15]).

While the trend data on access in general is quite promising and shows an overall reduction in inequalities in access, the COVID-19 pandemic was an urgent reminder of the fact that there is still much progress to be made in many OECD countries. Minimising inequalities in the rate of digital uptake and access, especially within more disadvantaged populations, should be embedded in policy goals.

Which factors affect connectivity?

Barriers to device and Internet access have largely remained unchanged in recent years. For example, geography is still a barrier to suitable Internet connectivity. Children living in rural or remote communities tend to have more limited access to the Internet and digital tools than those living in urban or suburban communities (Gottschalk and Weise, 2023[7]). This is the case especially in countries with large geographical areas and low-density populations in more remote settings, such as Australia and Canada,

as highlighted in the Questionnaire (2022). PISA 2022 data supports this, with disparities in digital resources observed between urban and rural schools (OECD, 2023[15]).

Socio-economic status and material deprivation represent important barriers to Internet and device ownership and access. Rates of children living in material deprivation and severe material deprivation vary across European countries, from 3% and 0.5% respectively in Iceland to 33% and 18.1% in Greece. When factoring in the inability to afford access to the Internet and/or a computer, the figures worsen (Ayllón, Holmarsdottir and Lado, 2023[10]). A 2020 study of 15-year-olds in Australia reported that 18% of students from low socio-economic backgrounds did not have a computer for schoolwork, compared to only 3.5% of students from mid socio-economic backgrounds and 0.4% of students from high socio-economic backgrounds (Lamb et al., 2020[19]). Affordable and high-quality connection to the Internet is also unequally distributed in many OECD member countries. For example, fibre connections tend to be key for high-quality and speed Internet. In some countries, such as Germany, less than 10% of broadband connections were fibre-based as of June 2023, compared to an OECD average of 41% (OECD, 2023[20]). At the school level, those with a more advantaged student body tend to suffer less from shortages of digital resources than socio-economically disadvantaged schools (OECD, 2023[15]).

According to the Questionnaire (2022), economic inequalities in Mexico result in difficulties in accessing the Internet, with some schools and households lacking infrastructure and equipment. Literature suggests that access to digital tools in Mexico is mediated by socio-economic status, with higher access in more affluent households (Martínez-Domínguez and Fierros-González, 2022[21]). In this context, like in Australia and Canada, geography also plays a role as infrastructure development is lagging in more rural parts of the country (Martínez-Domínguez and Fierros-González, 2022[21]). Parental education level is also associated with connectivity in OECD countries. For example, an analysis conducted in Italy suggests digital inequalities are widening for those with lower educational attainment (Di Pietro, 2021[22]). More educated households tended to have higher access to digital technologies than their less educated counterparts. Among households with poor educational attainment, growth in computer and Internet access lagged behind households where at least one person had attained a lower secondary level of education.

Regarding barriers to digital access, there are compounding factors. Research from Australia suggests that access issues associated with rurality are often exacerbated by other factors such as educational levels and employment status (Park, 2017[23]). Therefore, individuals who live in remote areas with low educational attainment and without regular employment are less likely to have home Internet access, which reinforces both digital and social exclusion. A German study suggests that small, rural schools may have particular challenges regarding digitalisation due in part to geography, but also that smaller schools may lack the financial resources that larger, urban institutions have (Rundel and Salemink, 2021[24]). The interplay between supply-side factors (such as infrastructure, or lack thereof in more remote areas) and demand factors (such as educational levels, socio-economic status) should be considered in conceptualising and implementing digital policy (Park, 2017[23]).

Policies and practices to mitigate digital access disparities

Many OECD countries have strategies to improve quality access to digital technologies and the Internet, thereby reducing the first-level digital divide. Mitigating access disparities requires a number of factors, including financial, personnel and material resources (OECD, 2021[25]).

As seen in Table 5.1, systems employ various approaches to mitigate inequalities in access to the Internet and digital tools. In many systems, schools and students benefit from digital strategies that aim to equip the population in general with broadband. According to the Questionnaire (2022), this is the case in Mexico with the implementation of the National Digital Strategy across the country. Some broadband initiatives are more focused on equipping schools and education institutions with adequate connectivity, as is the case

in Ireland and in Italy. The National Plan for Digital Schools in Italy will focus on ensuring connectivity for all secondary schools in the country, as well as in some primary and kindergarten institutions.

Table 5.1. Increasing students' access to digital technologies and the Internet

Strategy	System examples
Ensure/improve Internet access in schools	**Ireland:** The Digital Strategy for Schools – to 2027 aims to provide appropriate broadband connectivity to all schools. **Italy:** The National Plan for Digital Schools will increase connectivity in schools and educational institutions, providing Internet speeds of 1 Gigabit per second (Gbps). The goal of the plan is to connect 35 000 school buildings in total. **Mexico:** Although not specific to education, the National Digital Strategy aims to increase connectivity throughout the country.
Equipping students, teachers and schools with digital tools and devices	**Australia:** The University of Adelaide has a National Lending Library that lends digital equipment to schools, particularly those in rural and remote parts of the country. The equipment is free of charge to borrow and is accompanied by lesson plans that are mapped onto the Digital Technologies section of the Australian Curriculum. **Flemish community (Belgium)**: The Digisprong Action Plan aims to provide schools with digital devices for each student. It was approved by the government in 2020, with implementation in 2021 and 2022. **Ireland:** Some objectives of the Digital Strategy for Schools – to 2027 are to establish sustainable funding mechanisms for purchase and maintenance of digital infrastructure in schools, and to make technical support solutions appropriate and accessible for schools. **Mexico**: An annual plan of new equipment rentals for students has been implemented. **Spain:** Programme to provide laptops to students has been implemented and there has been installation, updating and maintenance completed on interactive digital systems in schools and classrooms.

Source: Questionnaire (2022)

In Ireland, the Digital Strategy for Schools – to 2027 has objectives to provide high speed broadband and device access, and appropriate support, to schools. Pillar 2 of the Strategy deals with access, and the main objectives concern establishing sustainable funding mechanisms for digital infrastructure, providing broadband and advice on how to embed digital tools in the teaching and learning process, making technical support solutions available and accessible for all schools, and working with relevant stakeholders for the procurement and purchase of appropriate digital equipment and services. An important step in the development of the strategy is the involvement of students (see Box 5.2).

Box 5.2. Working with learners: Irish Digital Strategy for Schools consultation process

Launched in 2022, the Irish Digital Strategy for Schools aims to increase digital access in schools. Funds will be distributed to school leaders, and under the guidance of their Digital Learning teams, they choose how to spend them based on the unique context and needs of their school. Additional funding will be invested in the Schools Broadband Programme.

A consultation process underscored that more needed to be done in reducing digital inequalities, and addressing the needs of students who were subsequently at risk of educational disadvantage. It included a questionnaire for teachers, principals and students, and focus groups that included students. The questionnaire asked students about their confidence in using digital technologies to learn, whether they had access at school and at home, and how digital devices were incorporated into teaching and learning. While most students responded that digital devices were used in many subject areas, that they felt confident in and liked using them for learning, very few reported that they or their fellow students had been involved in developing policies on the use of digital technologies in their schools. Schools can capitalise on students' enthusiasm and self-reported comfort in using digital technologies by including them in decision making on these topics. This can give them a sense of ownership over their digital learning, and helps realise students' right to have a say in matters that affect them.

Source: Questionnaire (2022)

The Flemish Community of Belgium and Spain also have action plans to improve connectivity within schools. In the Flemish Community of Belgium, the Digisprong Action Plan had an implementation goal in 2022 targeting all primary and secondary schools. The main pillars of this plan include providing one-to-one access to digital devices in schools and equipping teachers with the tools and skills to incorporate digital tools into the teaching and learning process. There is an emphasis on continuous professional learning to improve and maintain skills, and on supporting schools to digitise the curriculum. Within the National Plan for Digital Capabilities in Spain, the proposal for the Digitisation of the Educational Ecosystem (#EcoDigEdu) was approved in 2021 for implementation between 2021 and March of 2025. This strategy aims to reduce gaps in digital use and access while promoting equal opportunities in education. One objective is to improve access to mobile devices for disadvantaged students, while another is to ensure access to sufficient digital tools in classrooms along with support and training for teachers. A budget of almost EUR 150 million was allocated towards the provision of portable devices, and EUR 821 million to installing, updating and providing maintenance to interactive digital systems in classrooms.

In ensuring all children have suitable access to digital tools and the Internet, systems can help level the playing field when it comes to digital education and digital outcomes more generally. While this is only one part of the digital inequalities puzzle, it is an important hurdle to be overcome in mitigating other inequalities that can become further entrenched when children have inadequate access. Evaluating policy effectiveness is an important step also in ensuring their success and continuation, which can include measuring the number of devices distributed and the schools equipped. For example, these metrics will be monitored as part of the #EcoDigEdu initiative in Spain. This is an important step, yet simple metrics such as these can miss important details that are crucial to ensure equity and inclusion, such as quality of devices and Internet speed (Gottschalk and Weise, 2023[7]).

In Ireland, oversight and consultation structures will be established to assist the implementation of the Digital Strategy for Schools – to 2027 and to establish effectiveness measures. A Steering Group will provide guidance and oversee the implementation of the strategy, while a Consultative Group with a large stakeholder group will also be established. Strategic partnerships like this can be important for effective design, implementation and continuing improvement and monitoring. Industry actors in particular can be key players in supporting the digital transformation in schools and in building equitable, high-quality digital capacity for all children.

To the Internet and beyond

Reducing inequalities in access to digital tools and the Internet is a key step in moving towards a digital future that is equitable for all children. However, the rapid pace of technological development and emergence of tools from robotics to artificial intelligence has implications for these inequalities. There is a risk that children face exclusion due to uneven distribution of access to emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (UNICEF, 2021[26]).

Funding challenges are already rampant with regards to the purchase, maintenance and upgrading of devices in schools. As technology evolves, and with the obsolescence of different tools, education systems have difficult decisions to make regarding the allocation of scarce resources. There are also implications for teachers, who require support in effectively implementing digital tools into the teaching and learning process. Teachers have reported teaching with digital technologies as a high-need area of their professional development across cycles of The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) (OECD, 2019[27]). Furthermore, their self-efficacy and willingness to incorporate digital tools in the classroom varies widely (Gottschalk and Weise, 2023[7]). While inequalities in access to devices such as computers, tablets and the Internet might be narrowing, there are important considerations with regards to accessing advanced technologies both inside and out of education.

Empowering all children to make the most of digital opportunities

Despite a narrowing gap in many systems in terms of access to digital tools and the Internet, a prominent policy concern across OECD countries is inequality in digital skills. With the continued permeation of digital tools into children's daily lives, those who can safely and effectively navigate the digital environment will be able to maximise the opportunities this affords, while those who are unable to do so risk being left behind. Some scholars argue that children should be supported to adopt a proactive and, importantly, a critical stance towards digital technologies, considering how they can be used to better their lives and the world around them (Iivari, 2020[28]). Digital skills are crucial to do this effectively, alongside knowledge, attitudes and values.

The ITU defines digital skills as "the ability to use information and communication technologies in ways that help individuals to achieve beneficial, high-quality outcomes in everyday life for themselves and others' and that 'reduce potential harm associated with more negative aspects of digital engagement" (ITU, 2018, p. 23[29]). A classification by Helsper and colleagues (2020[30]) suggests four broad digital skills categories:

- Technical and operational skills: abilities to manage and operate digital tools, ranging from the knowledge of using buttons to adjusting and managing settings to programming.
- Information navigation and processing: abilities to find, select and critically evaluate sources of information in the digital environment.
- Communication and interaction: abilities to use digital tools to interact with others, build social networks, and evaluate the impact of digital communication/interactions on others.
- Content creation and production: abilities to create digital content, understanding how it is produced/published and how it impacts others.

A systematic review of the literature linked digital skills to opportunities in the digital environment as well as information benefits, however the relationship with other beneficial outcomes including academic grades and civic participation were more mixed and the authors were unable to draw reliable conclusions based on the limited available evidence (Livingstone, Mascheroni and Stoilova, 2023[31]). Supporting children to develop digital skills is important, as is gaining the necessary skills to cope with the problems children may encounter in the digital environment (Livingstone, Stoilova and Rahali, 2023[32]).

The literature in this domain is clear: digital skills are a key pillar of children's participation in modern life, including digital education, and can support their social inclusion and realising their rights. Many factors are associated with disparities in digital skills. Higher levels of skills in children tend to be associated with things such as parental mediation, age, gender, amount of time spent in the digital environment, self-efficacy, and attitudes towards the Internet and digital technologies (Haddon et al., 2020[33]; Mascheroni et al., 2022[34]). Factors such as perceived discrimination[2] may also affect the relationship between some of these aforementioned factors and digital skills, whereby perceived discrimination may weaken the positive effects of factors like age and self-efficacy on acquiring digital skills (Mascheroni et al., 2022[34]).

There is some association between family socio-economic background and how children interact with the digital world. Findings from a meta-analysis suggest that higher socio-economic status is related to stronger information and communication technology (ICT) literacy, but that this association was weak and that the relationship varied across included samples (Scherer and Siddiq, 2019[35]). Socio-economic status is also associated with the types of digital activities children participate in, with advantaged children tending to use digital tools more than their disadvantaged peers for educational and school-related purposes for example (Micheli, 2015[36]; Weber and Becker, 2019[37]).

A focus on digital skills in OECD education systems

Education systems across the OECD recognise the importance of developing digital skills in compulsory education for many reasons, including promoting inclusion, supporting children in seizing digital

opportunities and in realising their rights. OECD education systems implement different strategies targeted at improving digital skills in student populations, examples of which are outlined in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2. Strategies to promote children's digital skills

Initiative	Country examples
National strategies, action plans and frameworks	**Denmark:** In December 2021, the government made an agreement across a range of political actors focusing on improving digital formation of children. Initiatives within this agreement include establishing a digital traffic club to improve children's critical awareness and competence of digital tools, and developing materials for teachers and educational institutions on digital formation that can be used in teachers' practice. **Flemish community (Belgium)**: The Digisprong Action Plan supports schools in various ways regarding digitalisation of education. Measures within this framework target access, provision of digital resources to students and teachers, a range of training courses for teachers and more emphasis on digital competence in teacher training, and improving access to high-quality digital teaching material. **Ireland:** The Digital Strategy for Schools – to 2027 is a multi-pronged strategy that aims to empower students to be confident and competent digital learners, who are critically engaged and can participate as global citizens in an increasingly digital world. **Italy:** The National Strategy for Digital Skills aims to double the population with advanced digital skills by 2025. This strategy is multi-pronged, aiming to support digital skill development for populations including working adults, retired individuals, immigrants and students in compulsory education. It does so through different means such as formal and informal trainings, use of e-learning platforms and public communications. **Norway**: A national strategy on digital skills was implemented in 2017, followed up by an action plan in 2023. Some of the measures in the 2017-2021 strategy included implementing coding into the curriculum and spreading knowledge of digital tools and teaching aids available for students with special education needs. **Québec (Canada):** The Ministry of Education in Québec developed a Digital Competency Framework that aims to foster digital skills in students. Education stakeholders are helped in undertaking pedagogical planning or educational projects to develop digital competencies. The website, competencenumerique.ca was developed in relation to the Digital Reference Framework as a resource to help individuals develop digital competences.
Curriculum	**Australia:** The current Australian Curriculum includes Digital Technologies learning areas, guiding schools on which digital skills and knowledge should be taught. Digital literacy is recognised as a general capability, and as an essential skill required for students both at school and beyond. **Finland**: A new literacies development programme aims to strengthen media literacy, programming skills and overall digital skills for children from early childhood through comprehensive education. **Luxembourg:** The "Media Compass" (*Medienkompass*) curricular framework was introduced in 2022. Competence areas include information and data, communication and co-operation, content creation, and data protection and security. Coding and computational thinking have also been introduced as transversal skills in primary education. In lower secondary education, digital science has been introduced as a new curricular area. **Saskatchewan (Canada):** The Ministry of Education created a support document for schools and for curriculum writers to help identify a continuum of knowledge and skills for students.
Teachers and teacher education	**Australia:** The Digital Technologies Hub was established to provide materials to support teachers in planning, teaching and assessment of the Australian Curriculum: Digital Technologies. There are also materials suitable to integrate into other learning areas such as English, science and mathematics. **Ireland:** The Digital Strategy for Schools embeds appropriate and effective use of digital tools for teaching, learning and assessment during initial teacher preparation, induction and continuing professional learning. **Israel:** Online professional development courses are available for teaching staff, as is the "Online Academy" programme that hosts interactive broadcasts for teachers, parents and students with guidance from leading experts and academics. **Italy:** The National Strategy for Digital Skills has a specific goal to improve the digital skills of teachers. By 2020, 70 000 teachers had received specialised training. **Luxembourg:** Teachers specialised in digital competence have been introduced in primary schools. **Norway**: Teacher education was an important focus of the national Digital Strategy from 2017-2021. Proposed measures included providing digital education for teachers on the pedagogical use of digital tools, strengthening digital competence in initial teacher education and improving research and communication around topics on digitalisation and learning. **Spain:** Developing digital competence of teachers, both individually and collectively, is a focus of the strategy to boost the use of digital technologies for learning and the development of digital skills in students. Teachers will be helped to achieve at least an intermediate level of digital competence, with more advanced levels for certain teachers responsible for digital planning. An objective of the programme is to certify the degree of teachers' digital competence.
Extra-curricular activities	**Denmark:** Coding Pirates is an initiative where children meet weekly to participate in workshops on coding, inventing and design that is present in around 100 departments in the country in locations like schools and libraries. It is led by adult volunteers such as programmers and teachers, and aims to foster creativity and design thinking, while spending time with others and playing. **Israel:** Initiatives such as digital camps are available for students from primary to high school, and digital workshops are

	offered for students aged between 6 and 15 years in both Hebrew and Arabic. The Skillz Championship is another initiative, where students learn about robotics, computer science and mathematics in a fun way. The goal of the Championship is to expose students to different digital content in an experiential and challenging way, to increase their motivation and desire to learn about mathematics and technological subjects. **Luxembourg:** Activities like robotics challenges and contests are organised, offering teams of children the chance to compete in challenges involving real-world problem solving and to develop science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) competences. For example, in April 2022 a regional final of the 'First LEGO League Challenge[3]" was hosted at Lycée Aline Mayrisch for teams of students aged 9-16 from different schools in the region.

Source: Questionnaire (2022)

Many of these strategies are general, and do not target specific groups of students. One barrier to developing policies focusing specifically on digital inclusion of disadvantaged young people is the lack of research in this specific domain, with few studies outside of the small collection of single-country and qualitative studies (Helsper, 2017[38]). Developing and implementing targeted programmes, for example aiming digital skills education at students from disadvantaged backgrounds or at younger girls can, however, help mitigate digital inequalities related to social and demographic factors (Helsper, 2021[39]).

Box 5.3. Digital Education Action Plan 21-27 in the European Union (EU)

The Action Plan[4] focuses on improving digital literacy, skills and capacity, at all levels of education and training and for all levels of digital skills. It sets out measures for high-quality and inclusive digital education and training. The action plan aims to deploy different digital technologies to improve, support and extend education and training. In doing so, it seeks to equip all learners with the competences to live, work, learn and thrive in an increasingly digital world.

Guiding principles of the Action Plan are set out to ensure improvements in equity and quality of education, adjusting to the ongoing digital transformation. The principles encompass adequate investment in digital infrastructure to reduce inequalities in access, fostering digital literacy and skills from basic to advanced levels, increasing equality and inclusiveness, and the important roles of teachers, school leaders and society in general in transforming education.

Source: (European Commission, 2020[40]), Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027: Resetting education and training for the digital age, https://education.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document-library-docs/deap-communication-sept2020_en.pdf

In the Questionnaire (2022) some countries identified how they evaluate or intend to evaluate digital skills programmes. For example, in Spain, the number of teachers with a certification of their level of digital competence is used as a metric to understand policy reach and success. In Italy, a dashboard of over 60 indicators monitors milestones, results and impacts of the actions under each strand of the National Strategy for Digital Skills. In Ireland schools will be required to perform self-evaluations, while other mechanisms include establishing a Steering Group to oversee guidance and implementation of the Digital Strategy for Schools – to 2027, and a Consultative Group comprising key stakeholders (parent/guardians, learner representatives, education partners) as well as an Industry Group to be consulted on implementation and programme evaluation. In Australia, an evaluation of the Digital Technologies Hub was conducted in 2018, and a further evaluation was planned for 2022. Outcomes of the 2018 evaluation suggest that the available resources were high quality and engaging.

Evaluating outcomes of digital skills programmes can be challenging, as there are many different conceptions of - and methods used to measure - digital skills. An evidence review suggests that in some cases different dimensions of digital skills in tandem are emphasised whereas others are more focused on a particular area, for example programming or information literacy (Haddon et al., 2020[33]). This adds some complexity in assessing the outcomes of digital skills strategies. Harmonising definitions and

methodologies in measuring certain digital skills or digital skill dimensions is important to ensure more consistency in research and policy making.

Adults are key actors in empowering children in the digital environment

Supporting teachers to support their students

Schools and teachers are important players in mitigating the digital skills gap. As highlighted by Canada in the Questionnaire (2022), usage and expertise of digital technologies can vary widely among teaching staff even within institutions. TALIS 2018 data suggests that the distribution of teachers who are trained in and feel capable of using ICT and who regularly let their students use ICT for projects or class work are not randomly distributed across schools. In fact, there is a higher share of teachers who feel they can support student learning using digital technologies in private than in public schools in about a quarter of TALIS-participating countries and economies, and this share is also larger in socio-economically advantaged than disadvantaged schools in seven education systems (OECD, 2022[41]). However, in some education systems teachers who were trained in the use of ICT are more concentrated in socio-economically disadvantaged schools. This is the case in countries like Australia, England (United Kingdom), France and Sweden (OECD, 2022[41]). In others such as Alberta (Canada), the Flemish Community of Belgium, Latvia and Türkiye, the percentage of teachers who have been trained in ICT during their initial education is higher in schools with a higher share of students whose first language is different from the language of instruction.

Data from TALIS Starting Strong 2018 suggests similar patterns in ECEC settings, whereby a large percentage of ECEC staff in all participating countries report having low self-efficacy in their capacity to use digital tools to support children's learning (OECD, 2020[42]). This could be related to factors such as the paucity of digital infrastructure in ECEC settings or their relatively low expectations on the extent to which they should incorporate digital tools into their practice.

According to the Questionnaire (2022) teachers in countries such as Finland and Spain need additional support in strengthening digital competences, as this is sometimes not a major focus in initial teacher preparation. This is consistently a highly reported area of need for teacher professional development, and is especially relevant for older teachers who often express problems with or barriers to their use of digital tools in the teaching and learning process (Scherer, Siddiq and Teo, 2015[43]). Additionally, teachers in many systems do not receive training regarding digital risk mitigation (Burns and Gottschalk, 2019[6]), and according to a report on countries in the European Union, few countries offer training on how to use digital tools for supporting inclusion (European Commission Directorate-General for Education et al., 2021[44]). Even when teachers receive training on using digital technologies in the teaching and learning process, sometimes this can be of poor quality (Gudmundsdottir and Hatlevik, 2017[45]), and when teachers have limited knowledge, interest and willingness to incorporate digital tools into their practice they are less likely to do so (Rundel and Salemink, 2021[24]). Despite this, since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic many education systems have emphasised training for teachers in this area.

The power of parents

Alongside teachers, parents are important actors in supporting children's digital skill development. Enabling mediation, whereby parents actively mediate and moderate their child's use of digital tools and online safety also potentially using parental controls, tend to be associated with higher chances of encountering both digital opportunities and risks, as well as developing digital skills. The more digitally skilled a parent is, the more likely they are to employ enabling mediation with their children, and this type of medication can support children in exercising agency in the digital environment and is also positively associated with requests from children to their parents for support (Livingstone et al., 2017[46]). In contrast, more restrictive approaches tend to hinder children's access to opportunities, while also potentially

sheltering them from risk (Livingstone et al., 2017[46]). This more restrictive mediation is negatively associated with child-initiated requests for support (Livingstone et al., 2017[46]). Parents from disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to have lower levels of digital skills, which runs the risk of perpetuating cycles of digital disadvantage.

Early development of digital skills has been associated with beneficial outcomes later in childhood such as academic outcomes, however simply spending time online at young ages without developing skills was a marginally negative predictor of later academic achievement (Hurwitz and Schmitt, 2020[47]). This suggests that parents supporting their children in developing digital skills from a young age may help to mediate the potential impacts of early Internet use on later outcomes, while also providing benefits.

Digital decision-makers promoting child participation

Decision-makers can support digital empowerment of children by providing learning opportunities for digital skills and involving children as key stakeholders in developing, designing, and implementing digital skills strategies (OECD, 2022[48]). Research shows that children are keen to be consulted about the digital skills and digital literacies they want to develop, and to determine the ways these should be delivered (Livingstone, Stoilova and Rahali, 2023[32]). Something to keep in mind is that participatory processes tend to favour children who are advantaged, and risk excluding children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Gottschalk and Borhan, 2023[49]). When involving children in making decisions on policy issues in general but also in particular in relation to inequalities, special attention should be paid to ensure there are adequate opportunities for children from socially disadvantaged or underrepresented backgrounds to participate. The ways in which the different needs or abilities of these children can affect their participation must be taken into account. Considerations include time or geographical constraints, access to adequate digital devices for online consultations, availability of assistive technologies for those who need them, and language accommodations for non-native speakers.

The future of digital skills inequalities

In OECD countries there is currently a policy emphasis on improving digital skills for all children. Considering the persistence of inequalities in digital skills between advantaged and disadvantaged groups, targeting interventions at those who are disadvantaged may help mitigate this gap. However, assessing whether targeted or general measures have the intended impact still proves difficult with varying definitions and methodologies used to quantify digital skills within a given population.

An important measure that clearly needs to be adopted in digital skills strategies is building the capacity of adults who can provide support and guidance to children. Supporting teachers to gain a critical understanding of how digital tools can be incorporated into the teaching and learning process is key, as is providing learning opportunities for both teachers and parents to improve their digital skills. This will allow the trusted adults in children's lives to assist them appropriately and effectively in navigating the digital environment. As with inequalities in access, special attention should be paid to how children use (or do not use) advanced digital technologies, ensuring that those who may have limited access to these tools still have opportunities to learn about how they can be useful for their education and their futures. Doing so may reduce the risk of perpetuating disadvantage.

Finally, including children in developing and implementing programmes to support their digital skills development is important. As children tend to be among the most avid users of digital technologies (International Telecommunication Union, 2021[50]), they have keen and important insights into their own digital habits and the skills they may need to engage in the activities that interest and motivate them. Harnessing this enthusiasm for digital technologies, and their apparent willingness to participate in developing digital skills strategies, could promote developing more comprehensive, effective and inclusive policy measures.

Recognising digital risks and overcoming inequalities for empowerment

Children can encounter risks when navigating the digital environment that can be categorised under four broad categories within a "4C" typology: contact, content, conduct and consumer risks (OECD, 2021[51]). Cross-cutting risks that span across these categories include privacy, advanced technology, and health and well-being risks. Examples of risk manifestations within this typology include: encountering content that is harmful, hateful, illegal or disinformation (content risk); encounters with others that are harmful, hateful or illegal (contact risk); commercial profiling and financial risks (consumer risk); behaving in a way that is harmful, hateful or illegal (conduct risk); or risks that can be classed in different categories depending on the child's role, such as cyberbullying (contact risk for the cyberbullying victim, conduct risk for the perpetrator, content risk for bystanders) (OECD, 2021[51]). Risk and harm are related yet distinct with risk exposure not necessarily always resulting in harm and various protective and vulnerability factors that mediate the relationship between the two (Livingstone and Stoilova, 2021[52]).

The first iteration of the Questionnaire (2018) identified cyberbullying, access to harmful content, security and privacy concerns, and sexting as pressing policy challenges in education systems (Burns and Gottschalk, 2019[6]). The 2022 iteration saw a similar pattern with cyberbullying as the most pressing policy challenge among respondents. Other pressing concerns include exposure to dis and misinformation, exposure to harmful content, security and privacy concerns, sexting and datafication. Risks such as these can hinder child empowerment due to implications for well-being and children's right to privacy.

Cyberbullying remains a pressing challenge for OECD education systems

Cyberbullying was identified as a pressing policy challenge in both the 2018 and 2022 iterations of the Questionnaire. A commonly cited definition is "wilful and repeated harm inflicted through computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices" (Hinduja and Patchin, 2015, p. 11[53]). Policy makers around the world have expressed concern over cyberbullying for many reasons including well-being implications for victims (Gottschalk, 2022[54]). There are also important ramifications to consider regarding the perpetrators. For example, Questionnaire (2022) responses suggest that in France there is concern that cyberbullying perpetrators and bystanders have low levels of empathy, that they might belong to friendship circles that are aggressive and that there can be a lack of awareness of how their actions affect the victims.

Many governments have made combatting cyberbullying a policy priority. This is the case for example in the French community of Belgium, which has included bullying and cyberbullying as priorities in the Policy Statement of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation 2019-2024[5], within the context of education and childhood matters. The Ontario (Canada) Ministry of Education in 2021 also implemented a policy/programme memorandum on bullying prevention and intervention (see Box 5.4). In 2022 the Minister for Education in Ireland launched a steering committee to review the 2013 Action Plan on Bullying[6], with plans to specifically consider cyberbullying, gender identity bullying and sexual harassment. Despite cyberbullying being a priority for many policy makers, Questionnaire (2022) results suggest that some countries struggle with finding solutions that can be scaled at a national level.

According to the Questionnaire (2022), some systems such as the Flemish Community of Belgium, and provinces in Canada including Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario and Saskatchewan, report concerns regarding the prevalence of cyberbullying rates among children. The prevalence and severity of cyberbullying in some countries has prompted help-seeking behaviour from children, parents, teachers, social workers and other actors. For example, a network of Safer Internet Centres exists across the EU, Iceland and Norway. This network offers an Insafe helpline, which is accessible through means including phone, SMS, online form etc and 14% of contacts made in 2022 were concerning cyberbullying (Stoilova, Rahali and Livingstone, 2023[55]). This was the most frequently reported problem, although there is a heterogeneity of concerns that individuals may contact a helpline about including sex and relationships, harmful content, e-crime, media literacy, data privacy and more. This heterogeneity in the risk landscape

can prove challenging for policy makers when considering courses of action to take. Furthermore, children and the adults close to them do not report or seek help for all the risks they encounter, which makes estimating overall prevalence or severity a challenge. Countries take a range of approaches to tackle cyberbullying, as outlined in Table 5.3.

Table 5.3. Select examples of policies and programmes targeting cyberbullying

Approach	System examples
National strategies, approaches and campaigns	**France:** The CyberNAH programme was developed with the mission of combatting cyberbullying. Measures include digital monitoring to anticipate viral cases of cyberbullying and strengthening capacities of schools to manage cyberbullying cases among others. In 2022, a law was passed to combat bullying in schools (*Loi Balanant*), reinforcing measures the country has taken in the fight against bullying. **French community (Belgium):** A school climate observatory was developed that is responsible for ensuring monitoring and supplying schools with references and educational tools to improve school climate with the goal of reducing (cyber)bullying. A reference programme was also designed for schools to implement aimed at preventing and accounting for cases of (cyber)bullying. **Latvia:** The Ministries of Health, Education and Science, and Welfare have proposed a national approach to bullying and cyberbullying, with common guidelines and recommendations to be used in settings such as educational institutions to tackle bullying. **Luxembourg:** The Bee secure programme co-ordinates a number of measures to combat cyberbullying including campaigns, classroom interventions, a helpline and a stopline.
Support in schools	**Estonia**: School psychologists are available for consultation regarding cyberbullying cases. **Flemish community (Belgium):** Training has been provided for school care agents on how to handle cyberbullying cases. **Ireland:** There are professional learning opportunities and curricular supports available to schools to assist them in the development of policies and practices on the safe use of the Internet including on the prevention of cyberbullying. Schools are also advised to have acceptable use policies governing students' use of digital tools.
Online resources	**Ireland:** Webwise promotes the autonomous, effective and safer use of the Internet by young people through a sustained information and awareness strategy targeting school leaders, teachers, parents/guardians and learners themselves with consistent and relevant messages. **Saskatchewan (Canada)**: The Be Kind Online website provides resources to support educators, students and families to address bullying and cyberbullying, and the affiliated youth grant programme encourages youth to make positive change in their schools and communities.
Data collection and monitoring	**Estonia:** Well-being questionnaires and surveys, including at the school level, provide insights on cyberbullying and measuring effectiveness of interventions. **Latvia:** PISA results are used to benchmark bullying rates and set targets for improvement. The goal in the Education Development Guidelines 2021-2017 is to reduce reported rates of bullying from 35% of students in 2018 to 23% by 2025. PISA 2022 results show the rate has decreased to 29%. **Ontario (Canada):** School boards must monitor, review and evaluate effectiveness of policies and guidelines using indicators established in collaboration with teachers, school staff, students, parents and school councils. School boards need to develop/enhance strategies to track and monitor instances of (cyber)bullying and every two years they must conduct anonymous school climate surveys of students, staff and parents.

Source: Questionnaire (2022)

Box 5.4. Providing (cyber)bullying support in Canada to diverse groups

In 2021, the Ontario Ministry of Education implemented a new Policy/Program Memorandum on Bullying Prevention and Intervention. In doing so, a framework was provided for school boards to adopt regarding issues such as violence at school, including bullying and cyberbullying. The province allocated funding to various initiatives that provide targeted support for certain student groups who may be more at risk for victimisation.

One such initiative was for the Ontario Native Education Counselling Association (ONECA[7]) to provide opportunities for Indigenous students to inform the Ministry and school boards in identifying needs regarding bullying prevention. Funding was also allocated to Egale[8], an organisation dedicated to

improving the lives of 2SLGBTQI[9] people in Canada, to develop a digital platform to support 2SLGBTQI students that includes access to counselling services, and support resources on topics such as mental health and anti-bullying. The Canadian Centre for Gender and Sexual Diversity[10] was allocated funds to develop training workshops and a virtual youth summit that was aimed at supporting the mental health of 2SLGBTQI+ students.

Other initiatives that were supported under this programme include providing funding to the White Ribbon[11] organisation to develop a programme targeted at boys in secondary school to counteract issues such as sexual exploitation and violence against women.

Source: Questionnaire (2022)

Mitigating mis/disinformation and datafication are also pressing concerns

False and misleading information (mis and disinformation)

The 2022 iteration of the Questionnaire included an item on exposure to mis and disinformation, asking respondents if this was a challenge or pressing policy challenge in the education policy context. This was the second most highly reported challenge in responding education systems. Misinformation refers to false or misleading information, not intended to deliberately deceive, manipulate or inflict harm and the spreader does not create the initial content (Lesher, Pawelec and Desai, 2022[56]), while disinformation means the content is intentionally false or misleading and spread with the intention of deceiving or causing harm (European Commission, 2020[57]) (for an overview, refer to (Hill, 2022[58])).

While this is an issue of growing concern among policy makers around the world, there is still a lack of large-scale data that shows the extent to which children engage with false and misleading information in the digital environment. Some research identifies that children report being exposed to this type of content on a weekly or sometimes daily basis, and that sometimes they engage with it by sharing or liking content posted by others (Hill, 2022[58]). The potential for false and misleading information to spread rapidly and widely is a concern, as is the fact that this content can have a certain shock value or novelty factor for the reader thereby increasing the likelihood that it is consumed and spread further.

Respondents to the Questionnaire (2022) identified the ways in which children's exposure to mis and disinformation has manifested as a pressing policy concern. In Estonia, there are concerns about radicalisation and polarisation, and a recognised need for critical thinking skills and abilities to recognise fake information. In Iceland, the Icelandic Media Commission has been at the forefront of raising awareness of mis and disinformation and how individuals can reach to phenomena such as fake news and information chaos. The Commission administered a survey in which respondents aged 15-17 were identified as the least likely to be critical of information they encountered on the Internet. In response, the Commission initiated a media literacy programme in co-operation with education stakeholders. Similarly in Sweden, a main finding of the National Agency for Education is that students need more support in developing a critical perspective to online messaging and information. In the Flemish Community of Belgium, a recent curriculum reform placed media literacy as one of the core three elements of the Digital Education Key Competence framework. There are various programmes in place to support schools, teachers and pupils regarding information processing and how to evaluate news sources (see Chapter 4 for related programmes and information on media education).

Datafication of children

While less reported among respondent systems, datafication of children is also a rising concern in policy and research spheres. Trends in children's digital activities suggest they are spending more time engaging

in digital activities and from younger ages (Burns and Gottschalk, 2019[6]; Burns and Gottschalk, 2020[59]). When children spend time in the digital environment, commercial providers of digital technologies can generate, collect and process large amounts of personal data which can result in children being increasingly 'datafied' (Lupton and Williamson, 2017[60]). Based on children's digital practices, and those of their parents, they may be exposed to data practices from early ages, even from before the time they are born (Barassi, 2020[61]; Siibak, 2019[62]; OECD, 2022[48]).

Data can be used to support children's well-being and education outcomes, for example by providing information that can assist in personalising learning experiences or offering interventions that can enhance educational opportunities for children (Siemens and Gašević, 2012[63]; Shute and Rahimi, 2017[64]). Big data can also be used to improve the provision of services such as healthcare, through identifying the services certain children may need or by tracking communicable disease spread and provision of vaccination coverage (OECD, 2019[65]; Okomo, 2022[66]). Despite the potential uses of data for good, there are risks, in particular with the collection of sensitive or private data. These concerns about privacy are related to how this can affect their rights and potentially perpetuate existing inequalities (Livingstone, Stoilova and Nandagiri, 2018[67]; Barassi, 2020[61]), and there are issues around transparency regarding how, where and by who children's data might be used (Milkaite and Lievens, 2020[68]). Children's data can be collected and processed through various tools and means, and can be used by advertisers, content developers or other third parties for purposes such as commercial profiling and/or automated decision making that is beyond the child's capacity to control (Selwyn and Pangrazio, 2018[69]). Safeguarding children's digital privacy and protecting their personal data is crucial for the well-being and autonomy of children, and for meeting their needs in digital spaces (OECD, 2021[70]).

According to the Questionnaire (2022), some countries are increasingly concerned with datafication of children. For example: in Israel, there are concerns that children may inadvertently share information about themselves or others that could endanger them. In Estonia, one concern is the lack of awareness of parents and children about the consequences of datafication and how this can affect things such as a child's future relationships or working life. To combat these concerns, the Israeli Ministry of Education has issued a website[12] with guidance for teachers on how to safeguard students' sensitive information and digital privacy. Information is provided about securing accounts through two-step authentication processes, using caution when downloading applications on students' personal devices, and guidance for how to identify and react when facing a potential security or privacy breach. Teachers are advised to handle and report privacy and security incidents as quickly as possible. In Estonia, there is an emphasis on raising awareness of data security and datafication issues, and there is a government initiative to develop a personal data protection framework that empowers digital users to be in control of their data.

Who might be more susceptible to risk of harm in the digital environment?

Different factors affect children's digital risk exposure and can also mediate potential harm. Offline vulnerability correlates with vulnerability in digital environments. Vulnerable or disadvantaged children are more likely to face digital risks, to experience harm and tend to be less able or likely to find support (Stoilova, Livingstone and Khazbak, 2021[71]). Older teenagers, those who identify as LGBTQI+[13], and children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to engage in risky behaviours such as sexting, which has been associated with outcomes such as sexual extortion[14]. Girls are more susceptible to experiencing risks such as cyber-dating violence and online sexual solicitation (Stoilova, Livingstone and Khazbak, 2021[71]). Children with special education needs are more likely to experience contact risks (El Asam and Katz, 2018[72]), and they report higher levels of cyber-victimisation (Didden et al., 2009[73]).

Behaviours in the digital environment and offline can influence risk of harm. For example, traditional bullying victimisation is highly correlated with cyberbullying victimisation, and the same pattern is found for perpetration (Gottschalk, 2022[54]). In the digital environment, children who have seen one type of harmful content are more likely to have also seen others (Stoilova, Rahali and Livingstone, 2023[55]). This can

include content such as hate messages, gory or violent images and content suggesting ways in which to be thin or lose weight, among others (Smahel et al., 2020[74]) Understanding the factors that can compound risks in both digital and physical environments are important when establishing efforts for harm mitigation.

PISA 2018 results suggest that socio-economically advantaged students in all participating countries and economies were more adept at assessing credibility of sources than their disadvantaged peers (Suarez-Alvarez, 2021[75]). Systems with a higher proportion of students who were taught whether information was subjective or biased were more likely to be able to detect fact from opinion in the PISA reading assessment, even when accounting for factors such as country GDP per capita and reading performance, underscoring the power of learning opportunities in this domain (Suarez-Alvarez, 2021[75]). Children from disadvantaged backgrounds may also be more exposed to privacy risks and surveillance (Gangadharan, 2017[76]), and less able to leverage the benefits of newly emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence systems (Lutz, 2019[77]). Data driven systems and advanced technologies may also perpetuate structural biases, favouring individuals from more advantaged backgrounds (Selwyn and Jandrić, 2020[78]). If the data used to train digital systems does not reflect the diverse backgrounds and characteristics of children, built-in biases can further disadvantage already disadvantaged children. Additionally, an uneven knowledge of algorithms can exclude those with low algorithmic awareness from the various opportunities, thereby deepening existing social inequalities (Shin, Rasul and Fotiadis, 2021[79]).

The research on digital risk is much more developed than the research on protective factors, however there is some evidence outlining what can protect children from harm. For example, those who lack social support systems are more likely to face digital risks and are less likely to have people they can turn to for help (Stoilova, Livingstone and Khazbak, 2021[71]). Children who are aware of digital risks are also more likely to employ safety strategies.

Moving towards a harm-averse (not necessarily risk-averse) future

Moving forward, it is essential for policy makers and the research community to coordinate efforts on appropriately defining and measuring digital risks. Inconsistent definitions create challenges in identifying which risks should be targeted by policies and practices, and in measuring their prevalence. Further research is also necessary about which groups of children are more likely to encounter which digital risks, and who is more vulnerable to harm. Targeting policy measures to at-risk groups, or to students who may lack support in the digital environment (e.g. children lacking in digital skills, parents or teachers with low levels of digital literacy, children who face overly restrictive mediation techniques and cannot speak openly with adults about risks they encounter etc.) could benefit the most disadvantaged.

While the focus in this report is child empowerment, providing children with digital learning opportunities and improving their digital skills is only one part of the policy puzzle in ensuring a safe and equitable digital future for all children. Embedding digital safety into the curriculum can be empowering, as is embedding learning about digital safety in professional development opportunities for teachers. However, placing the safety burden on children in a digital world that has been built by adults, often with limited interests in mind, needs to be avoided. Government regulation is key in promoting a safe digital future by ensuring that strong data protection laws are appropriately implemented and adhered to, that mechanisms for reporting and acting upon serious risk exposure such as cyberbullying are accessible for all children (and their teachers and parents), and that digital platforms are accountable for the propagation of false and misleading content. These are just a few examples of ways in which regulation and oversight can support a safer digital space for children to explore.

Finally, eliminating digital risk is likely impossible and impractical. Exposure to risk can help children build resilience (Burns and Gottschalk, 2019[6]), and they can develop necessary skills such as critical thinking and discerning fact from opinion. Limiting children's exposure to the digital environment can limit their exposure to risks, but it also limits their abilities to profit from the various opportunities and to exercise some of their human rights such as their rights to information and to play.

Digital inequalities – Reflection tool

Despite a narrowing gap in terms of access to digital tools and the Internet, inequalities remain pervasive across OECD systems.

While the trend data on access is quite promising, showing an overall reduction in inequalities, the COVID-19 pandemic was an urgent reminder of the fact that there is still much progress to be made and a significant proportion of children still lack adequate access.

Barriers to adequate connectivity have largely remained unchanged in recent years. Individuals who live in remote areas and from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to have adequate digital access, which reinforces both digital and social exclusion.

Disparities in digital skills are stark and some students risk being left behind.

The literature in this domain is clear: digital skills are a key pillar of children's participation in modern life, including digital education, and can support their social inclusion and realising their rights.

Socio-economic status is associated with the types of digital activities children participate in, with advantaged children tending to use digital tools for educational and school-related purposes more than their disadvantaged peers.

If the data used to train digital systems does not reflect the diverse backgrounds and characteristics of children in increasingly diverse societies, built-in biases can further disadvantage already disadvantaged children.

A multistakeholder approach must be used to promote digital inclusion and equality for all, especially the most disadvantaged.

Industry actors in particular can be key players in supporting the digital transformation in schools and in building equitable, high-quality digital capacity for all children.

When involving children in making decisions on policy issues, special attention should be paid to ensuring there are adequate opportunities for children from socially disadvantaged or underrepresented backgrounds to participate, while also accounting for how different needs or abilities can affect their participation.

Capacity-building for adults who are expected to provide support and guidance to children is required.

Parents supporting their children in developing digital skills from a young age may help to mediate the potential impacts of early Internet use on later outcomes, while also providing benefits. It is important to consider that parents from disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to have lower levels of digital skills, which runs the risk of perpetuating cycles of digital disadvantage.

Supporting teachers to gain a critical understanding of how digital tools can be effectively incorporated into the teaching and learning process is key. Providing learning opportunities for both teachers and parents to improve their digital skills will allow the trusted adults in children's lives to better assist them appropriately, safely and effectively in navigating the digital environment.

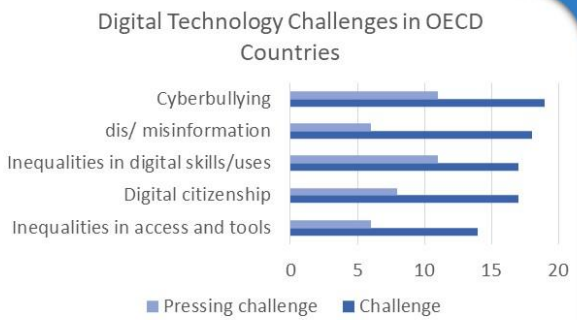
Embedding digital safety into the curriculum can be empowering.

Placing too much responsibility on children for their safety in a digital world that has been built by adults needs to be avoided. Limiting children's exposure to the digital environment can limit their exposure to risks on the one hand, but on the other it limits their abilities to profit from the various opportunities and to exercise some of their human rights such as their rights to information and to play. Supporting children in navigating risks and building resilience is key.

Reflecting on Digital Inequalities

DATA & TRENDS

Inequalities in digital skills and uses and inequalities in access are often listed as pressing policy challenges by OECD countries, alongside various digital risks.



Source: Questionnaire (2022)

EMPOWERMENT

Opportunities

Mitigating digital inequalities means that children can benefit from digital learning opportunities including informal learning.

Children show willingness and enthusiasm in participating in making decisions about their digital learning and digital engagement more broadly.

Challenges

Funding challenges with regards to the purchase, maintenance and upgrading of devices in schools.

Teachers require support in effectively implementing digital tools into the teaching and learning process, including adequate professional learning opportunities.

What can governments do?

- Minimising inequalities in the rate of digital uptake and access, especially within more disadvantaged populations within societies, should be embedded horizontally in policy goals with dedicated and targeted resources.
- Ensuring all children have suitable access to digital tools and the Internet can help level the playing field when it comes to digital education and digital outcomes more generally.
- Harmonising definitions and methodologies in measuring certain digital skills or digital skill dimensions can make evaluating outcomes of digital skills programmes more practical and support evidence-based policy making.
- Decision-makers can support digital empowerment of children by providing learning opportunities to bolster their digital skills. Children should also be involved as key stakeholders in developing, designing and implementing digital strategies and curricular approaches to support their digital learning.
- Building the capacity of adults who can provide support and guidance to children is an important measure that needs to be adopted in digital skills strategies.
- Embedding digital safety into the curriculum can be empowering, as is embedding learning about digital safety in teacher education and professional learning opportunities.

Why not have an arts-informed evidence discussion with stakeholders?

Marvin is a 17-year-old student president for the national students' union of a medium-sized OECD country. He sits on an official advisory committee to the Ministry of Education. Mounting concern over digital inequalities has led the Ministry to announce the creation of a new Digital Competency Framework that aims to foster digital skills in all students.

Concerned about the lack of diversity on the committee, Marvin has been researching innovative methods to engage communities about policy issues in an evidence-informed way and capture varied perspectives to advance digital equity in schools. Arts-informed approaches have been shown to be particularly promising for discussing equity issues (Cooper et al., 2023[80]) and reaching underserved communities (Siregar et al., n.d.[81]). Marvin suggests to the committee that such an approach should form part of the framework development process. The Ministry agrees, and the committee provides resources to organise such a consultation. Dr. Tanaka, a respected university researcher in educational equity, offers to help shape the agenda and provide a plain language 2-page evidence synthesis, which is circulated to participants two weeks before.

When the day arrives, 60 people from community organisations, students (of different grades and backgrounds), teachers and policy makers are in attendance. The agenda is highly engaging:

Introduction and setting the stage (15 minutes)

Marvin opens the meeting and welcomes participants. Dr. Tanaka then guides the audience through a presentation on key findings from recent studies and presents what they might mean for education policy and practice. Crucially, each piece of evidence is broken down into a one sentence simple language summary, called an evidence statement.

Interactive Artistic Activity (30 minutes)

With colored pencils and blank canvases in hand, participants immerse themselves in a creative expression exercise, led by local artists. Marvin watches with pride as students, teachers and community members channel their thoughts and emotions into vibrant artworks that capture the essence of educational equity.

Sharing and Dialogue (1 hour)

Marvin, Dr. Tanaka and the local artists then facilitate a lively discussion, inviting participants to share their artistic creations and reflect on the connections with the one-sentence evidence statements. Stories unfold, perspectives collide, and bonds strengthen as everyone contributes their unique insights to the dialogue. The facilitators bring together the different themes within the artistic works and how lived experiences of community members connect with the evidence statements on equity.

Collective story-building (1 hour)

After lunch, participants split into groups of 5-10 people. Each group works with a local artist and, using their artistic creations as a basis of discussion, constructs a 3-5-minute-long narrative on the topic of digital equity. This narrative could be a spoken story, a poem, a song, a play or any format that can be recorded with words and shared with an audience. Importantly, the characters in the narrative must benefit from making evidence-informed decisions linked to the evidence statements.

Storytelling, Action Planning and Next Steps (30 minutes)

After a short break, participants, led by the local artists, perform their stories. Afterwards, Marvin and committee members lead a collaborative brainstorming session to try and identify priority areas for action. For example, further refining and performing the stories in underserved community settings.

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Notes

[1] Material access "includes the means required to maintain the use of the Internet over time, such as computer devices (e.g. desktops, tablets, Smart TVs), software (subscriptions), and peripheral equipment (e.g. printers, additional hard drives)" (van Deursen and van Dijk, 2018[8]).

[2] This refers to children who are perceived to be discriminated against at an individual or social level. At an individual level this could entail being treated badly because of factors such as appearance, sexual orientation, opinions etc. At a social level this could be due to factors such as SES, ethnicity, religious beliefs etc. (Mascheroni et al., 2022[34]).

[3] See: https://www.firstlegoleague.org/ (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[4] See: https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/digital-education/action-plan#:~:text=The%20Digital%20Education%20Action%20Plan%20(2021%2D2027)%20is%20a,States%20to%20the%20digital%20age.(accessed on May 2024).

[5]See: https://gouvernement.cfwb.be/files/Documents/Déclaration%20de%20Politique%20Communautaire%202019-2024.pdf (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[6] See: https://assets.gov.ie/24758/0966ef74d92c4af3b50d64d286ce67d0.pdf (accessed on May 2024).

[7] See: https://oneca.com/ (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[8] See: https://egale.ca/ (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[9] 2SLGBTQI in Canada 2S (referring to Two Spirit) is often included in the LGBTQI+ acronym, and individuals sometimes use this acronym instead of or in addition to identifying as LGBTQI+. According to Egale, 2S "encompasses the many Indigenous traditional identities forcefully suppressed by colonization. The term honours the fluid and diverse nature of gender and attraction and its connection to community and spirituality. An individual may choose to use this term instead of, or in addition to, identifying as LGBTQI" (Egale, n.d.[82]).

[10] See: https://ccgsd-ccdgs.org/ (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[11] See: https://www.whiteribbon.ca/ (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[12] See: https://pop.education.gov.il/sherutey-tiksuv-bachinuch/data-security-e-learning/ (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[13] LGBTQI+ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and the '+' signifies other sexual identities that are not encompassed by this acronym.

[14] According to the Luxembourg Guidelines, Sexual extortion refers to blackmailing someone (a child or an adult), often with the help of self-generated images of that person, in order to extort them for sexual favours, money or other benefits. It can also involve coercing individuals to continue producing sexual material under the threat of exposure to others of the material that depicts them (Interagency Working Group, 2016[83]).

6 Perspectives on child empowerment

This chapter presents perspectives on child empowerment from diverse authors in different countries. They were invited to contribute short opinion pieces on what child empowerment means to them, based on their respective policy, research or practice contexts. This chapter weaves a narrative of these different perspectives, highlighting similarities and differences among the diverse responses. It concludes by reiterating a common finding that is presented throughout this publication: Child empowerment requires adults to break traditional silos, and to work with a range of actors including children who should be seen as key stakeholders in these discussions. Effective policy and practice requires a multi-sectoral and multistakeholder approach.

Child empowerment: A key topic for discussion

In international research and policy spheres, discussions surrounding empowerment have skyrocketed in recent years. A simple Internet search of "child empowerment" or any of its associated terms (agency, voice etc.) will bring up a wide variety of results, ranging from research studies to academic articles, opinion pieces and blog posts, educational strategies, self-help parenting websites and more. In the early stages of preparing this publication, the editors were faced with an interesting dilemma. Despite the quantity of information on child empowerment, the quality and cohesiveness of this information varied. Very few sources provided a definition or working definition of what child empowerment means or should mean. This is a common issue with associated terms as well, such as agency. There is also a varying understanding of what child empowerment can and should look like depending on the area of research or policy under study.

It was decided that part of this publication would be dedicated to presenting a diverse range of perspectives on child empowerment, in the attempt to both find common ground and uncover differences in what child empowerment can and does mean in different research, policy and practice spheres. Presenting expert perspectives from different contexts provides a powerful learning opportunity, and having a discussion with different actors at this table, who all have an interest and have been working towards an empowered present and future for children, has inherent value. The authors invited to participate in this chapter were chosen deliberately to represent different national contexts, research backgrounds, policy contexts, and to discuss some of the more practical aspects of child empowerment in the classroom and the participation of children themselves in decision making.

The following section presents five short pieces from individuals or groups whose work seeks to empower children in different but interrelated ways. Invited experts were prompted to reflect on "What child empowerment looks like in the 21st century and what this means for modern education systems" by answering one or more of the questions in Box 6.1. Authors also had the option of bringing in new questions they thought were more important, based on the prompt and scope of the chapter.

Box 6.1. Food for thought: Questions for discussion

- What does child empowerment mean to you in your research/policy and/or national context?
- What are the main barriers to child empowerment in your research/policy and/or national context? How do you think these can be overcome or managed in the near, medium and/or long-term future?
- Mega-trends like globalisation, digitalisation, changing family structures, increasing inequalities and others are affecting the ecosystems in which children are and can become empowered agents of change. How can child empowerment be supported in times of rapid change and in light of these trends?

Navigating child empowerment: Breaking down barriers for youth participation in policy[1]

Box 6.2. Irish Second Level Students' Union

The Irish Second Level Students' Union (ISSU) is the national representative body for school students in the Republic of Ireland. The ISSU is run for students, by students. The ISSU was established in 2008, to contribute to the advancement of second-level education of all second-level students in order to improve and enrich the education of each student and to support the involvement of students at all stages of their education so that they achieve their full potential.

My name is Caitlin Faye Maniti, and I have been involved in some kind of activism since I was 8 years old. It all started when I was encouraged to provide input to create a greener campus at my primary school. Since then, I have never looked back. I have been part of numerous committees and advisory groups where significant policies were developed including anti bullying policies, state examinations adjustments for COVID-19 and even changes within the curriculum.

In 2022/23, I served as the Uachtarán (President) of the Irish Second Level Student Union (ISSU), representing second-level students in the Republic of Ireland. In this capacity, I held the ISSU seat on the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), Senior Cycle Redevelopment Partners forum, and many more. Currently I am a first-year undergraduate student in Maynooth University, studying Entrepreneurship. In terms of advocacy, I am a delegate on the National Youth Assembly with the Department of Children and the Shared Island Youth Forum under the Department of the Taoiseach. I am dedicated to advocating for and amplifying the voices of children and young people in decisions that impact them. Additionally, I consistently seek ways to inspire confidence in fellow youth advocates, encouraging them to recognise and utilise their capacity to contribute meaningfully. I have attained no PhDs, or master's to be in these committees and groups. My qualification and expertise come from simply being a student on the ground, and that is my unique but very important perspective.

How can we nurture child empowerment and what does that look like?

To me, child empowerment is represented by the global climate action movement, the protests against gun violence in schools in the United States of America, the Vote@16 negotiations in the European Union. Leadership in these campaigns comes primarily from children and young people, with supportive collaboration from adults. Unfortunately, in my experience, the majority of these movements only gain traction after the unaddressed issues have triggered a crisis point and there is an urgent need for change. Whether it was the anxiety and frustration of the lack of action taken surrounding climate change, or the disregard of young people's rights in Vote@16, children and young people's futures were on the line and we had to step in to ignite change as we felt nothing would have been done if we did not.

Children and young people have successfully campaigned on various issues, which has been phenomenal. On one side it is extremely inspiring and really shows the power of child voice, but on the other it is not always fostered. This needs to change.

In Ireland, there is a positive shift towards including children's voices in policy development such as through the National Youth Assembly, establishing a student participation unit within the Department of Education and other measures. Not only will these developments make policy even more inclusive of young people, they will also provide children and young people with an environment where they can gain confidence in their abilities to voice their opinions on issues that affect them. As a result of a lot of these initiatives the

attitude of children and young people participating in policy development is changing and will continue to change for the better.

The importance of one good adult

I am an ordinary student fulfilling my role as an advocate, with my expertise coming from living life as a young person in Ireland. Having that perspective at the table is extremely important for highlighting issues that might not be seen through policy or by policy makers. I worked hard to be in the position that I am in today but I give a lot of credit to a teacher I had in secondary school. She played a crucial role in encouraging me to apply for leadership roles including the roles within the ISSU and provided guidance when I came across any challenges. Every student, including myself, starts off slowly and does not necessarily understand their potential to influence and to be a leader. That teacher was my "one good adult" who sparked not only my desire to participate but she also shared opportunities with me, supporting and encouraging me along the way. I always had someone to lean on, and once I got more comfortable on my own, I then found young people who were like-minded and was then able to rely on them and vice versa. This journey into activism and advocacy can be a very isolating one, and I am so grateful to have my "one good adult" and I wouldn't be where I am without them. I only hope that others were also lucky enough to experience the support I had.

To all the teachers reading this, never underestimate the influence you have, even if it's as simple as sharing a workshop opportunity with a student. That could build their confidence and in turn open many doors for them to endless possibilities!

On being the only young person in the room

During my role as ISSU Uachtarán, I often found myself as the only young person in the room. Now, there are many times where a singular young person is able to fully participate but actually doing so isn't as simple as that. Personally, I had to build up my own capacity by giving myself time to prepare for a meeting and debrief afterwards which took a lot more time and effort than if there had been more of us. This included reading the material beforehand, preparing some potential speaking points and writing down any questions I had, as well as research on some existing policies. Then the debrief would include a look back on anything I said and the answers to them, anything that any of the other members said that stuck out to me and research them, and more. Being the only young person in a room full of adults is extremely intimating and the capacity is not built there systematically to encourage that young person to meaningfully provide input especially if there aren't any supports given. If the facilitator is not actively encouraging the young person to provide input, it is more likely for that young person to be ignored.

If you are currently reading this and are part of a committee or advisory group with only one young person, please change this.

I was participating in a group whose sole purpose was to better encourage the voices of children and young people in policy development. I walked in for the first meeting and I was the only young person sitting at that table. The very first point I made was to introduce another young person into the group. If you are creating policy or taking decisions that affect young people, it is important to have children and young people at the centre of these conversations and to make space for them.

Moving towards an empowered future for children and young people

Using simple language

My number one recommendation is to write reports/policy papers in simple and accessible language. Otherwise providing a version of the reports/policy papers in concise and simple language could be an option. There have been too many times where we had to read and summarise 100+ page documents for

myself and other young people before a meeting. Or even to read what policies affect us in our daily lives is written in difficult language with a lot of jargon for example; abbreviations, long filler words and long paragraphs. Complex language and jargon in lengthy documents make it challenging for young people to understand. Additionally, if you are publishing a report targeting children and young people, I would also recommend adding some colour and visuals to enhance accessibility and make it appealing to read.

Avoiding decoration

One of the things I see that needs to change is improving the process of including the voices of children and young people to ensure that they can motivate a change in policy or action. There have been so many times that I have been involved in many consultations for children and young people, where we had no idea where our voice was being used or if it was lifted off the pages of the report. Ireland is very dedicated when it comes to initiatives to consulting our voices, but if it's not considered in policy actions, that is all it is; decoration. It is crucial to ensure that our voices are not just symbolic but impactful in policy or action.

Confronting manipulation

Manipulation is used when, during the consultation, adults or facilitators in the room influence the opinion of children too much, with a result that does not represent the children's genuine perspectives. Consultations should avoid undue influence from adults or facilitators, allowing genuine voices to be heard and considered in policymaking.

I have participated in many consultations and I know what the routine is. One particular consultation I was part of recently included others who were also very experienced in participating in consultations. As soon as my group was finished discussing the problems and had finalised our recommendations, we then spent the next hour phrasing the recommendations to seem more appealing to the politicians and decision makers this was made for. We did this by adding words like *economy, business, greener, European Union funding* etc. We are very much aware that our voices can be used as a tool further push a change in policy but we also knew that only if we made it relevant to an agenda our voice would have a better chance of not only heard but listened to and acted upon. Upon reflection, that was a very smart but disappointing thing I witnessed and participated in. Our voice should not need to be branded or manipulated to seem more appealing for it to be heard or taken seriously.

Shaping a shared future

In the quest for child empowerment and meaningful youth involvement in policy, my experiences underscore the need for tangible changes. While positive steps are being taken in Ireland to include children's voices in policymaking, there is room for improvement.

The impact of one good adult, often a teacher, is crucial in shaping young advocates. The challenge of being the sole young person in a room of adults calls for systematic changes to build the capacity of children and young people to contribute.

For an empowered future, simplicity in language and accessible reports is vital. Genuine youth participation should go beyond symbolic gestures by avoiding manipulation in consultations. It's a collective effort to create environments that actively integrate and amplify the voices of the younger generation, ensuring their influence in shaping our shared future.

Nurturing potential amidst adversity[2]

Box 6.3. María Francisca Elgueta

María Francisca Elgueta is a high school history teacher in Santiago, Chile. She was the 2022 the recipient of the Global Teacher Prize Chile and is the founder of EscuelaGlobal.org. She has worked for 12 years in high-vulnerability contexts in Santiago. These communities have a history of exclusion and limited opportunities, often characterised by poverty and marginalisation. This situation leads to a lack of access to essential services, and many children in these areas have their childhoods disrupted by child labour, drug trafficking and abuse.

Child empowerment, especially in contexts marked by vulnerability and adversity, is a multifaceted concept that transcends mere education. It signifies the cultivation of a child's innate potential, instilling in them the belief that they can achieve great things and challenging them to realise these aspirations.

My experience teaching in 2022, with schools reopening coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighted the transformative impact of empowering children and the urgent need for changes in our educational system.

My journey as a teacher in 2022

Throughout my 11 years working in high-vulnerability contexts, 2022 marked the first time I seriously considered leaving my profession. In my role as a history teacher, I worked in a school focused on educational re-integration, catering to students who had been systematically excluded from the mainstream education system due to years of educational backlog. Despite thinking that nothing could be more demanding than educating during quarantine, the post-pandemic scenario proved to be far more complex than I could have ever imagined.

The aftermath of the pandemic exposed the harsh reality of high-vulnerability contexts and the significant barriers they pose to child empowerment. The school environment was in absolute chaos. Distinguishing between class hours and breaks became impossible as students couldn't be effectively directed into classrooms. The prevalence of drug consumption and trafficking within the school was alarming. Criminal gangs and drug dealers were menacing the school on a weekly basis, leading to gunfire and fights at our doorstep. Teacher morale was low, and the school's leadership was overwhelmed. The situation reached a point where we spent more time dealing with the aftermath of disturbances than actually teaching. We were fearful that our students would drop out of their education, this time with no turning back.

Amid this adversity, a chance encounter with a former student provided a spark of insight. She suggested that perhaps the students' reluctance to engage was rooted in fear – fear of learning, fear of failure, fear of being seen as incapable. This revelation struck a chord, leading me to recognise a common thread in all of my years' experience working as a teacher: beneath the defiance, misbehaviour and apparent demotivation lay a profound lack of academic self-esteem.

Empowering children in such contexts demands a fundamental shift in approach. It begins with entering the classroom with unwavering belief in their potential, crafting challenging lessons that reflect high expectations, and inviting their questions to shape the learning process. Designing meaningful and relevant curriculum content is paramount to honing the skills needed for them to thrive. Furthermore, it requires the classroom to be a safe and nurturing space where students feel they can express their opinions and participate because their voice matters, they feel loved, and it's a protected space for learning.

In my effort to empower my students, I crafted a curriculum unit that bridged their life experiences with global events. Focusing on the fragility of democracy and incorporating the hate speech that was rampant

during the second World War and the Holocaust, this unit was designed to spark their critical thinking and emotional involvement. I knew that my students' personal histories - their encounters with exclusion and prejudice - could enable them to readily empathise with these historical events. The inclusion of Anne Frank's diary in graphic novel format promoted reading and fostered emotional connections. In order to encourage my students to actively participate, share their opinions, and their experiences, we collaboratively created a course agreement. This agreement, prominently displayed in the classroom, delineated the guidelines to guarantee that our classes and discussions occurred in a secure and respectful environment.

The impact was transformative. Initially hesitant, my students began to actively participate, eagerly attending classes and exploring complex historical topics. We delved into the power of the stories we tell about ourselves and others, understanding their capacity to humanise or dehumanise. We engaged in discussions about the concept of race, scrutinising it in the context of Chilean reality, prompting reflection on our own beliefs. Additionally, we explored how socio-political-economic crises trigger the quest for solutions or "miracles." We learned to analyse political propaganda and applied this knowledge to contemporary propaganda. We delved into the historical value of testimonies and contemplated how art and poetry serve as vehicles for expressing emotions and ideas that are challenging to articulate in words. Furthermore, we addressed how democracy necessitates upholding human rights to protect minorities and how hate speech can easily infiltrate society. With particular emphasis, we highlighted the value of democracy, recognising its fragility, as well as the role each of us can play in the face of injustices and our capacity to be agents of change.

The impact within the school community was impressive, with even family members seeking recommendations for further learning and students from other classes requesting copies of the graphic novel we had used. Witnessing the transformative effects of this unit on my students, numerous teachers were motivated to adopt similar approaches to promote reading and create meaningful learning experiences. The school underwent a remarkable shift, fostering a culture of learning driven by elevated expectations. This transitioned the atmosphere from one marked by violence and mere assistance, prevalent at the beginning of the year, to an environment characterised by rigorous academic standards, active learning and empowerment of teachers and students.

Overcoming barriers to child empowerment

This experience made me reflect on how children and students in socially marginalised contexts often struggle to recognise themselves as individuals with rights and responsibilities because they frequently feel unseen. It seems that all facets of society remind them of their exclusion. They lack access to adequate housing, quality healthcare, green spaces, safe environments, and the opportunity to enjoy a carefree childhood. Consequently, they grapple with a profound sense of invisibility.

Furthermore, it made me think about how, throughout history, education has been designed and delivered from positions of power, often rendering it irrelevant to students from different backgrounds. Empowering students must begin with posing open-ended questions, teaching them to rigorously select their sources of information, enabling them to construct their own questions, interpretations, and explanations of their learning. To truly empower them, we must expose them to real-world challenges, helping them develop cognitive, ethical, social, emotional and intercultural skills to construct their solutions. Empowerment entails valuing subjectivity while ensuring that interpretations are rooted in shared values. When learning is constructed in this manner, students become active participants in their own education, and the classroom takes on profound relevance in their lives.

In alignment with these principles, it is imperative that the classroom serves as a nurturing environment where students experience feelings of safety, affection and significance. Students will only be motivated and genuinely committed to challenging themselves, to embracing their fallibility, and to immersing themselves in the learning process when they are assured that the love and support extended to them is

unwavering and when the classroom offers a secure haven for the exchange of their questions, beliefs and ideas. To facilitate this, it is crucial that the school culture radiates a deep sense of respect, empathy, and affection for its students and their families, irrespective of their diverse backgrounds and unique circumstances. When a student senses that they are both respected and cherished, they come to believe that they are capable of achieving anything.

This is how I learned that child empowerment is not simply about telling children they are important; it's about empowering them to lead and drive their own learning, fostering their identities, interpretations, and understandings of the world in a loving and safe space. It's about helping them realise that they can be active agents in shaping history, which, in turn, helps them feel valued and motivated to contribute to society.

Transforming education for child empowerment

To truly empower children, we must recognise that more traditional models of education, designed in the industrial era, fall short in the 21st century. Memorisation-centred learning is no longer sufficient. Additionally, curriculum rigidity can pose a barrier to the development of higher-order skills, which are essential for nurturing self-esteem in students, enabling them to build critical reflections and personal opinions. In a rapidly changing world, we must prioritise critical and creative thinking skills over rote memorisation and repetition. The curriculum must evolve to foster depth over breadth.

Additionally, school culture and classrooms need to continue changing in order to create environments where students can reach their full potential and enjoy the learning process. The strict and rigid educational systems of the past should give way to nurturing and secure places for gaining knowledge. Empowering students is only possible when they feel seen, loved and valued.

Conclusion

Child empowerment is not merely an educational concept; it is a societal imperative. It requires instilling in children the belief in their own potential, fostering their skills and abilities, and re-imagining education to prepare them to be active, informed and engaged citizens in a rapidly changing world. By empowering children, especially those in vulnerable contexts, we are not only preparing them for the future but also nurturing active and engaged citizens who can positively impact our world.

The Norwegian context and children as rights holders[3]

Box 6.4. The Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs

The Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufdir) is an expert and administrative state body tasked with implementing government policy on youth, children and families, violence and abuse in close relationships, and equality and non-discrimination. The directorate is also responsible for services relating to state-funded child welfare and family counselling services and operates care centres for unaccompanied asylum-seekers under the age of 15.

Norway performs consistently well on global children rights indexes. Ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has led to several legal and institutional reforms over the years. Significantly, a provision to the Norwegian constitution states that children have the right to respect for their human value, that they have the right to be heard in matters relating to them, and that their opinion must be given importance in accordance with their age and development. Children are recognised as subjects and rights holders in legislation pertaining to early childcare and education, health, child welfare and protection, and local planning. Consequently, a child rights-based approach is increasingly recognised in Norwegian policy making and service provision. Attention is also placed on cross-sectoral approaches, particularly to address the needs of vulnerable children, young people and their families, with the acknowledgement that the right to information and participation cuts across sectors and policy fields.

Children's roles in decision making have been formalised both within education and municipal planning. Student participation in school is regulated by the Education Act[4] and includes participation in democratic processes within the school environment, including through formal bodies such as pupils' councils. But children's agency and participation are also an interdisciplinary topic within the core curriculum which stipulates that student participation must characterise the school's practice, and that students must both participate and take a share of responsibility for their learning environment. Knowledge and competence related to democracy and democratic participation have long been emphasised in Norwegian curricula and were further strengthened in the curriculum reform of 2020. Norwegian students learn about democracy and participation in several subjects. School elections are held at upper secondary schools in connection with parliamentary, municipal and county council elections with the purpose of providing students with a practical introduction to the foundations of democracy.

From 2019 and with the revision of the Local Government Act[5], formal consultative bodies/youth councils for youth at municipal and county levels have become mandatory. National authorities also allocate funds to child and youth organisations every year with the aim of stimulating children and young people's participation and democratic practice.

Ongoing challenges

Despite a largely favourable judicial and policy environment for child rights, there are several ongoing and emerging issues that pose challenges to children and young people's agency and empowerment. This contribution will reflect on four specific challenges and propose a way forward from the Norwegian perspective.

The COVID-19 pandemic

The independent commission appointed by the Norwegian government to conduct a comprehensive review and assessment of the authorities' management of the COVID-19 pandemic has emphasised the heavy burden borne by children and young people during the pandemic, which for many may prove long-lasting.

Strict infection control measures further exacerbated the vulnerability of children living in families with financial difficulties, families affected by drug addiction or mental illness as well as violence and neglect. Chronically ill and disabled children faced exclusion and isolation. The commission has also specifically stressed that children's right to be heard in matters that affect them was undermined during the authorities' management of the pandemic, including through the formal structures for participation mentioned above. Some of the negative effects of the pandemic might have been mitigated if children had been provided with the opportunity to voice their opinions and concerns.

Increasing inequalities

The number of children growing up in low-income families is rising in Norway. In 2020, 11.7% of children in Norway lived in households with persistent low-income.[6] Among these households, 60% had an immigrant background in 2020. Not only does this lead to inequalities in overall health and well-being, but it may also affect children's opportunities to flourish as active participants in society. Adolescents living in households with persistent low-income are more likely to experience social exclusion and loneliness and participate to a lesser extent in organised out of school activities than other children, missing out on further on opportunities to engage with peers.

Discrimination

The inclusion of children with disabilities remains a challenge in the Norwegian context. This does not only pertain to equal access to rights and services, including in education. Children with disabilities may in many circumstances be excluded from out of school activities as well as formal or informal spaces for participation and community engagement.

Self-reported discrimination and hate speech against the indigenous Sámi young people and other national minorities in Norway poses a threat to their participation in public life. There is little data about hate speech against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex (LGBTQI+) children, but we know that LGBTQI+ people are twice as likely to experience hate speech than the population in general. Recent data from Oslo indicates that adolescents with a sexual orientation other than heterosexual experience lower life satisfaction than those who are heterosexual. They are less optimistic about the future, lonelier, have worse relationships with school and parents, score worse on health indicators and are more often exposed to bullying and sexual abuse.

The digital environment

Children in Norway are growing up with access to a digital environment offering a multitude of opportunities for learning and civic expression. Digital spaces and social networking platforms are used to access information as well as express and advocate for issues of importance to children themselves. Yet emerging opportunities for learning and expression through the digital environment are also mediated by age, gender, socio-economic status, as well as digital skills. Children do not benefit equally from digitalisation and powerful commercial actors profit from personal data obtained through children and young people's internet use, which in turn may limit both access to information and possibilities for free speech and open dialogue. The digital environment also poses challenges for parents and caregivers in respecting children's right to privacy.

A way forward

Now more than ever, maintaining service equity in a context of increasing inequality and persistence of 'wicked' policy problems requires cross-sector collaboration and innovative partnerships. There is no one 'end all' solution; new possibilities must be continuously forged. The Norwegian government has initiated a process at the ministerial level to achieve better interaction and co-ordination between sectors in policy

development and policy implementation for vulnerable children, young people and their families. At the level of public administration, 13 agencies have joined forces to explore new ways of working to solve cross-sectoral collaboration challenges.

Young people need more digitalised access to information and services. Public sector collaboration and innovation has led to the development of health-promoting cross-sector digital interventions for young people aged 13 to 20 years on one common platform, ung.no. Through this platform young people can gain access to information and services tailored to their age and needs.

The fostering of agency and democratic practice in Norwegian schools must be accompanied by real opportunities for children and young people to have a say in the development of public policies and services. This means stimulating research and generating new data on the practice of children and young people's participation in decision making, particularly at the municipal level.

National authorities have a specific responsibility to generate and disseminate data and research on discrimination. An improved knowledge base also involves showcasing examples of good practices and local initiatives that promote children and young people's empowerment and agency.

In a world where children's lives and life chances are increasingly affected by digital technologies, public policy cannot stay behind the curve. The Norwegian government is now in the process of implementing a national strategy for safeguarding children's rights within the digital environment. This is only possible through the active participation and engagement of children and young people themselves, including through child and youth led initiatives and organisations.

Empowering children to learn through play[7]

Box 6.5. The LEGO Foundation

The LEGO Foundation is dedicated to building a future where learning through play empowers children to become creative, engaged, lifelong learners. Its work is about re-defining play and re-imagining learning. In collaboration with thought leaders, influencers, educators and parents the LEGO Foundation aims to equip, inspire and activate champions for play. www.learningthroughplay.com

Children are curious, creative and imaginative. They embrace discovery and wonder, and have a natural hands-on, minds-on approach to learning. These are precious qualities that must be nurtured and stimulated throughout life, and with this childlike urge to learn, they are best equipped to thrive in a fast paced and constantly changing world.

To navigate and learn in such a world, children should be empowered to become creative, engaged and lifelong learners, equipped with the curiosity, creativity and motivation to learn, which is desperately required for society and the workforce to flourish (Masterson, 2023[1]).

Over the past decade, the science of learning has taught us that quality education, where children develop both the knowledge and the breadth of skills to apply that knowledge to real-life practices, requires pedagogies that give more choice and agency to children. At the LEGO Foundation, we define agency as children making choices and decisions to act for themselves in a self-motivated way that positively influences their own lives and the world around them.

Children develop agency through playful experiences that are actively engaging, enjoyable and meaningful to their own background and interests (Zosh et al., 2018[2]). It is a process where children are empowered

to make choices, set goals and affect change; through play, they take ownership of their own learning by testing and trying out strategies and engaging with real-life materials in collaboration with others.

The main barrier to child empowerment is to truly recognise the potential in children's ability to learn through play. Children have immense potential as creative problem-solvers from birth, but they face systemic barriers and adult mindsets that keep them from thriving and exercising agency. When teachers are unable to exercise agency, have confidence, and knowledge to be more flexible in their pedagogical approaches, they also give children less control and fewer opportunities to exercise agency. Parents, who live under very constrained circumstances, with less opportunity and agency due to socio-economic conditions, conflict, and crisis, are also less likely to give agency to children. And when educational systems are insisting on narrow academic outcomes, such as in educational outcomes, and not embracing whole learner approaches for children to demonstrate what they are good at, they are also limiting the opportunity for school leaders and communities to give more agency and choice in education solutions.

There are five changes we need to consider for our education systems, which will empower children to be self-directed learners, equipped to address today and tomorrow's challenges, and take action to benefit themselves and their societies:

A change in mindset towards truly listening to children

Children are part of society from the day they are born. Any transformation of education needs to provide space for children's voices, and consider their perspectives by listening to, acknowledging, and acting on their thoughts and ideas. Recent research indicates that children expect education to be more experiential, joyful and practical by integrating play, and social and emotional learning (The LEGO Foundation and Tænketanken Mandag Morgen, 2021[3]; OECD, 2021[4]).

A change in pedagogy towards more guidance and less direct instruction

Education systems can empower children, be more effective in achieving learning outcomes, and support a broader and more holistic learning environment by integrating a broader spectrum of instructional opportunities. Traditional lecturing and instructions have served a very narrow purpose of memorising facts and principles, educators should also be supported in facilitating student learning through guidance, games and more creative opportunities to learn through playful experiences (The LEGO Foundation, n.d.[5]; Parker, Thomsen and Berry, 2022[6]).

A change in assessments to be authentic and child-driven

The traditional standardised assessments were not developed to support children's learning and holistic development. They serve a very narrow purpose, which is inadequate to grow the rich and diverse competencies of children. New types of assessments are much more integrated, portfolio-based and child-driven with self-assessments, peer-based dialogues, children demonstrating projects and engaged in playful challenges. They require adults to take the perspectives of children and give the space and opportunity to exercise agency to document, share and reflect on own experiences, while equipping them with personal examples illustrating what they are excited about and capable of (The LEGO Foundation, n.d.[7]; The LEGO Foundation, n.d.[8]).

A change in space and materials to foster many ways to play

Our education systems have favoured one way to learn, where children are taught the same thing, at the same time, at the same place, with the same approach. Children should be empowered to express themselves through multiple materials and technologies, by supporting many ways to play and using the

rich resources and experiences from outside the classroom, in the community and with local partners (Whitebread et al., 2017[9]; WISE, 2020[10]).

A change in outcomes towards creativity and critical thinking

Creativity and critical thinking are among the top skills most requested by education systems and companies. These skills are developed through children's natural ways to be inquisitive, curious and learn through play. Education leaders need to fully recognise creative thinking as part of the outcomes, to adapt and integrate these as part of national reforms, and put in place the assistance needed for teachers to apply it in classrooms (OECD, 2023[11]; The LEGO Foundation, n.d.[12]).

The LEGO Foundation aims to implement these by identifying and dismantling barriers to systemic change; to reimagine learning and catalyse partnerships to realise a positive mindset and a more meaningful purpose of education. The impact of play on education has suffered from a narrow definition focused on play activities, but where new research illustrates that the characteristics of being playful are associated with a holistic approach outcomes that also benefits education (Parker, Thomsen and Berry, 2022[6]; The LEGO Foundation, n.d.[13]).

Empowering children to learn through play is more motivating, engaging and effective than traditional classroom teaching, especially for the lower age groups. In formal education, learning through play takes the form of more innovative pedagogies like project or problem-based learning, debate discussions, brainstorming, role-playing stories, field visits, hands-on and experiential activities, addressing real-life challenges and building prototypes of everyday objects. The research and examples are growing, but we need to invest in more research to fully understand what works for which children, under which circumstances.

By having children as our role models, we can make education much more meaningful, engaging and enjoyable, while nurturing the most durable skills for lifelong learning across any disciplines and subjects. If we want children not only to remember knowledge, but be curious about knowledge, capable of finding, sorting, and validating knowledge, and not least use it actively to create change, drive active citizenship, and find creative solutions in local contexts, then it is critical to create space for children's agency.

We can start by listening to children:

> 'A good teacher is someone who helps you, whose lessons are fun and interesting, and if anyone gets angry, the teacher helps them to become friends again.' EBBE, 11 (The LEGO Foundation and Tænketanken Mandag Morgen, 2021, p. 57[3]).

Less *for,* but much more *with* youth: Realising youth empowerment through scientific research[8]

Box 6.6. Dynamics of Youth

Dynamics of Youth[9] (DoY) is one of the four multidisciplinary themes of Utrecht University's (UU) research strategy. Harnessing the power of interdisciplinary teamwork, DoY bridges the gap between science and society to foster a resilient younger generation[10], ranging from infants to young adults up to 24 years. Driven by real-world challenges, experts from a wide range of fields merge their knowledge. Spanning across all seven faculties of UU — Social and Behavioral Sciences, Humanities, Medicine, Geosciences, Veterinary Medicine, Science, and Law, Economics, and Governance — DoY embraces interdisciplinary collaborations. Our partnerships, rooted in trust and the principles of team science, connect researchers with a wide range of stakeholders to build meaningful, lasting collaborations. This multidisciplinary approach enables us to generate robust science that strengthens resilience in youth. By empowering them to become catalysts for change, we aim to increase inclusivity, reduce social inequalities, and improve youth health, well-being, and education.

Rapid societal changes such as climate change, migration, war and pandemics are profoundly affecting youth development. For some, they provide opportunities to thrive and realise their potential. For many others, however, they create barriers to social and educational resources that impede developmental opportunities across the life course and widen social inequalities. These global changes raise the stakes for improving the development, health, resilience, and well-being for all youth. As Lindy Elkins-Tanton aptly puts it, "the collective future of humankind requires that we hear all the voices at the table, not just the loudest." (Elkins-Tanton, 2021[14]).

This necessitates a shift in the way we think about and conduct youth research. This shift is offered by the "not for, but with" approach often used in the context of participatory design, co-design, citizen science, and community-based initiatives. The basic idea behind this approach is that for solutions to be successful, the people who will be directly affected by a solution must be part of the process of creating it. In our experience, youth are extremely insightful and eager to find creative solutions to the challenges they are confronted with. Hence, we propose that a shift from research for youth toward more research with youth offers a great opportunity to truly realise the empowerment of young people, both in current and future generations.

Traditionally, in youth research, researchers, and sometimes other experts, aim to understand and solve problems for another group of people, whom we will call *end-users*. In our case, these end-users are children, adolescents and young adults, and/or others who interact with them, such as parents, teachers or professionals. This traditional approach to research *for* end-users – in which end-users mainly have a role as passive research participants – can lead to solutions that do not (fully) meet the needs or expectations of the end-users. Even worse, in many cases, the intended solutions backfire or are not used by the end-users who need them the most. For example, government officials in Germany sought to combat childhood obesity, a major global health problem. They wanted to get third graders, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to exercise more. To avoid discrimination, they distributed vouchers for free membership in a sports club to all third graders. Not only did the program have no effect, but the children from advantaged backgrounds benefited the most. This was likely because parents and children from disadvantaged backgrounds could not afford the extra costs (e.g., equipment) (Marcus, Siedler and Ziebarth, 2022[15]).

Research *with* end-users involves them throughout the research process, from design to dissemination, and incorporates their understanding and experience of their specific social and socio-political contexts.

End-users are not seen as passive recipients of solutions, but as active contributors with valuable insights, knowledge, and perspectives that complement those of the researchers. The approach is collaborative, democratic and iterative, with continuous feedback and adjustments. The resulting interdisciplinary teams listen to all voices, which, put simply, allows teams to paint a more complete picture of both people and their circumstances. Although end-user participation, especially with children, often requires additional time for planning, consultation, collaboration, and adapting method, research *with* end-users produces more meaningful outcomes that benefit both researchers and end-users in multiple ways.

Researchers, for example, can gain new skills, improve participation and retention rates (e.g., by adapting wording and dissemination), and get inspired for new research questions. End-users get the opportunity to exercise their right to have a say in decisions that affect their lives, and to feel heard, seen and respected (UN General Assembly, 1989[16]). At a time when researchers are being encouraged to ensure the impact of their research, the involvement of end-users at all stages of the scientific research is particularly relevant. After all, the solutions provided by scientific insights can have a significant impact on children's lives. Preliminary evidence of the benefits of research *with* end-users can be found in research on Disaster Resilience Education (Krishna et al., 2022[17]). In a qualitative study, children and their parents in India were involved in the development of an intervention designed to teach skills needed for future hazards. Not only did children and parents report learning the skills, but their involvement in the development and delivery of the intervention also increased their confidence, self-worth, and self-efficacy.

End-users have a deep understanding of their own needs and contexts, which is invaluable at all stages of most research projects. In the face of rapid societal change and environmental emergencies (e.g., heat waves, wildfires, floods), science must generate more knowledge where it is needed, and only with the help of the end-users can we enable deeper understanding and faster adoption of solutions that build resilience and empower young people to act as agents of change. Their energy, determination, and willingness to challenge existing systems can bring revolutionary insights to research and society as a whole.

Involving young people and empowering them as catalysts for change is particularly important for research on vulnerable or marginalised youth. Although it typically takes more effort to reach these youth, actively involving them in research projects can be key to addressing some of the most important issues facing society today (e.g., poverty, racism, social and educational inequalities). Our team's research has shown that involving youth increases the equal inclusion of diverse voices and inclusivity (e.g., wheelchair accessible locations) and creates sustainable and equitable relationships (Nguyen et al., 2022[18]). Crucially, the research projects *with* end-users provide concrete recommendations on how to ensure youth participation in research teams. These experiences leave little doubt that empowering end-users to influence research at all stages of the scientific process provides an additional opportunity to effectively teach, learn, and advocate for scientific solutions that improve the health and well-being of youth based on a foundation of respect and trust.

Research *with*, rather than *for*, young people and other stakeholders draws on the diverse perspectives needed to address the complex issues facing youth. Teams of researchers and end-users are formed around problems and challenges. Rather than being defined by researchers or disciplines, the teams of researchers and end-users collaboratively identify and develop the research questions, objectives and methods that address end-users' needs and concerns. At the same time, the teams ensure the use of robust science. Science that is reliable, transparent and replicable. They build meaningful relationships in which team members support each other to achieve their goals and uncover new knowledge. Progress can be accelerated because research findings and solutions to challenges are better tailored to meet the needs of end-users because they are more respectful of the cultural backgrounds, expertise, and agency of all team members. This increases the likelihood of adoption and implementation. Involving youth and other stakeholders in all stages of research not only makes our research better and more meaningful, but it also provides a unique opportunity to give youth a sense of ownership and empowerment, and to help ensure that the solutions are effective, ethical, fair and equitable.

In sum: Moving collectively towards an empowered future for all children

The preceding pages present a rich discussion with diverse perspectives, presenting often optimistic yet realistic perspectives on the realities child empowerment in policy, practice and research. Despite the diversity in voices, national contexts and backgrounds of the authors, some main themes and common threads emerged throughout the pieces of this chapter. Some of these themes can also be found woven into the discussions in other sections of this publication.

Each contribution to this chapter underscores or reiterates in some way parts of (or all of) the definition of empowerment that was proposed in Chapter 1 of this publication. Child agency and how this can be nurtured is highlighted, as is the right of children to engage in processes of constructing meaning in their lives and on acting on issues that are important to them. This comes through strongly in each of the pieces, where children are positioned as active beings who have the ability and expertise to contribute to their educational journeys, and to society more broadly. Each author or group of authors also highlights the importance of different actors, from teachers to parents to governments, in supporting children as we endeavour to reach a more empowered future. Issues such as equity, inclusion, accessibility and safety are also echoed throughout the perspectives. Points that the authors bring our attention to as well, that are crucial for child empowerment include thinking about how we can best stimulate their interest in topics that could be important or relevant to them (how can we ground children's engagement in learning or in decision making in their own lived experiences?) and how can we potentially do this in a playful, creative or child-driven way?

Child empowerment brings in unique perspectives, adding value to those of adults

The pieces in this chapter overwhelmingly support the narrative that child empowerment is something to be valued in and of itself. María Francisca Elgueta refers to empowerment of children as a social imperative, which is reiterated by Bo Stjerne Thomsen who states that children are part of society from the moment they are born, and that educational transformation should look to them for their input. Colleagues from Bufdir and from Dynamics of Youth underscore the importance of child empowerment from a human rights perspective in reference to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Some authors in this chapter outline the benefits children and young people can enjoy when they feel they are empowered and are in environments in which they can act in an empowered way. Child empowerment can also provide important benefits to processes in which they have been traditionally excluded, such as research and policy making. The perspectives of children are often unique, and their empowerment adds value to policy, research and even classroom settings that adults alone cannot make up for.

Caitlin Faye Maniti explains how participating in decision making at the policy level was an invaluable learning experience for her and other involved students, but also that when done appropriately and taken seriously students can impart real change on crucial decisions related to their education and their lives in general. She underscores that there are young people who want to be active participants in making decisions that affect them, and that when given the chance can effectively and passionately represent student interests.

Similarly, the Dynamics of Youth colleagues outline that experiences of research with young people suggest they are motivated, insightful and eager to participate. They underscore that certain issues, in particular those that are complex in nature, can only be understood properly by engaging end-users (in this instance, children and young people) in the research process. The Dynamics of Youth authors also highlight how having diverse voices in discussions and research processes can benefit researchers by providing inspiration and helping them to learn new skills. Bo Stjerne Thomsen highlights that children are inherently creative, curious and imaginative, and that they can be role models in thinking through ways in which education can be made more meaningful, engaging and enjoyable.

Empowerment can't happen in a vacuum: Adults are important allies

A key commonality throughout the pieces in this chapter are that child empowerment cannot happen in a vacuum. Adults are important allies for this to occur. Caitlin Faye Maniti brings up the importance of "one good adult", or someone who acts as a mentor and inspires a young person to seize opportunities. María Francisca Elgueta echoes this by underscoring the importance of teachers and their role in providing safe, warm and inviting spaces for their students to express themselves, challenge the ways they think, and fully immerse themselves in the teaching and learning process. She alludes to the capacity of teachers to create safe and nurturing environment where students feel valued and cared for, and that teachers' actions can and do speak louder than their words.

The Dynamics of Youth colleagues highlight the importance of narrative shifts in including young people in the research process. This narrative of how we view children and childhood has been shifting for some time, as was highlighted in Chapter 2, of children as vulnerable or seen as objects in need of protection to rights holders who also have certain social responsibilities. In the shift of research *for* to research *with* children, researchers can further move the needle on these discussions by supporting the inclusion of children and young people as researchers or active participants in research processes on topics that concern and are relevant to them.

Caitlin Faye Maniti and the Bufdir colleagues emphasise that child rights, and child participation/empowerment can be enshrined and formalised into practice and policy, which tends to be done with agreement from adults in positions of power. Caitlin described participatory processes that she and other students were involved in, often in an official capacity on decision-making bodies or committees. In some instances, there was a designated seat for one student at the table (although as she states, this is often not enough!). Colleagues from Bufdir describe instances in which child participation in decision making is required, or mechanisms in which funding is allocated specifically to initiatives led by children and young people.

In order for adults to be effective allies, they also need support. María Francisca Elgueta describes some of the barriers she encountered when teaching in a high-vulnerability context, where teachers had low morale and the school leadership was overwhelmed. While some of the details might be particular to this context, teachers around OECD countries are increasingly expected to do more, have high workloads, and tend to report high levels of stress and burnout. This underlines the importance of supporting teachers in school so that they can focus on teaching, learning and supporting their students, rather than in the case in this school where the emphasis was on disciplinary and safety measures. Providing flexibility in curricula can also be empowering for teachers to root their teaching in the experiences of the students in their classroom, as they are in the best position to do so. Bo Stjerne Thomsen advocates for support for educators in facilitating student learning through providing playful experiences and creative opportunities.

Innovation and partnerships are key ingredients for child empowerment

Innovation and flexibility

Some contributors to this chapter underline the need for challenging the status quo in traditional education systems and focusing on fostering skills such as creativity and critical thinking. For example, throughout his contribution Bo Stjerne Thomsen underscores the rigidity within many education systems that still follow very traditional models of teaching and learning. Innovating these systems and changing mindsets, pedagogies, and even the physical spaces in which we learn can be steps towards fostering student agency and in supporting skill development necessary to thrive in the 21st century. María Francisca Elgueta also calls for a transformation in education by introducing curricula that are flexible and focus on depth over breadth. She emphasises that school environments should be transformed to support nurturing and caring relationships among those in the school community. Bufdir colleagues remind us of the importance of the digital environment for children and young people. When risks are appropriately

managed, digital tools can be leveraged for child empowerment by promoting access to information, learning and civic expression.

The 21st Century Children project has long advocated for the notion of flexibility in education systems, to ensure they are fit for purpose given the changing nature of modern childhood (e.g. (Burns and Gottschalk, 2019[19]; Burns and Gottschalk, 2020[20])). Proactive and innovative policy needs to be supported by evidence. Investing time and resources in research, and effectively mobilising the best available evidence, should be top priorities.

Breaking silos and working together

A common thread among many of the contributions was the importance of a range of stakeholders working together to achieve the goal of an empowered future for children. The authors in this chapter unanimously advocate for the active participation of children in learning processes and in decision making. Caitlin Faye Maniti highlights the importance of children and young people as stakeholders in policy making processes. Systematically ensuring that children are included in decision making, creating space for them to express their views and ideas, and ensuring that these views and ideas hold weight in the final decisions that are made is essential. Bo Stjerne Thomsen reiterates the importance of viewing children as members of society with a role to play in making decisions and acting as role models. He also highlights that parents face a number of constraints that can impact the agency their children can express.

María Francisca Elgueta underscores the important role teachers play in supporting child empowerment. She advocates for the use of pedagogical approaches that root content in children's experiences and ensuring methods empower children to be active participants in their learning process, thereby supporting the notion of children working with their teachers as active stakeholders in their learning journeys.

Bufdir colleagues highlight various cross-cutting challenges to child empowerment in Norway, including discrimination, inequalities, the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, and digitalisation. The remit for handling these challenges falls under various government ministries and departments, and can require co-ordination across ministries of education, youth affairs, social affairs, health and economy, among others. A joining up of government services and ministries in tackling these challenges is essential, and ensuring co-ordination across policy and judicial branches can be key in promoting child rights and empowerment. Finally, Dynamics of Youth colleagues show the importance of working together with researchers and end-users to gain new insights, to learn from one another, and to ensure science is reliable, transparent and equitable. This is done with the intent of finding solutions that are equitable, but also ethical, fair and effective.

The importance of overcoming silos and finding ways of working together across policy and research disciplines is also not a novel concept (e.g. (Burns and Gottschalk, 2019[19]; Burns and Gottschalk, 2020[20])). However, it does seem to be easier said than done and there are serious practical considerations. These considerations bring up many questions, including: Which role do certain stakeholders need to take, and should some take a more central role? How do we effectively pool resources such as financial resources, knowledge, expertise? Child empowerment is a common goal among many different stakeholders both inside and out of education systems as evidenced even in this short discussion chapter. Governments should consider how to capitalise on the knowledge, expertise, energy and commitment to child empowerment of different stakeholders in order to ensure policy is inclusive, proactive, fit for purpose, and considers the nature of modern childhood in order to move forward together towards an empowered future for children.

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Notes

[1] This section has been authored by Caitlin Faye Maniti, 2022/23 Uachtarán (President) of the Irish Second Level Students' Union, Ireland.

[2] This section has been authored by María Francisca Elgueta, History teacher and winner of the Global Teacher Prize Chile 2022, Chile.

[3] This section has been authored by Hege Nilssen, Director General of the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs; Anne Magdalena Solbu Kleiven, Division Director of Statistics, Research and Equality at the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs; Marianne Salomonsen Øyfoss, Head of Department at the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs; Miriam Poulsson Kramer, Senior Advisor at the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs.

[4] See: https://www.regjeringen.no/en/dokumenter/education-act/id213315/ (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[5] See: https://www.regjeringen.no/en/dokumenter/the-local-government-act/id2672010/ (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[6] In the Norwegian context households with persistently low income are defined as households that have a total income that is below 60 per cent of the median income in the population over a period of three years.

[7] This section has been authored by Bo Stjerne Thomsen, 2020-2023 Chair of Learning through Play, The LEGO Foundation.

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[9] See : https://www.uu.nl/en/research/dynamics-of-youth (accessed on 06 May 2024).

[10] See : https://doy-community.sites.uu.nl/ (accessed on 06 May 2024).

7 Towards an empowered future for all children

This volume has explored what child empowerment means today through various policy and research lenses. This concluding chapter provides a summary of why empowering children is important in the 21st Century and gives an overview of cross-cutting themes that emerged throughout the chapters of this volume. The chapter highlights some key considerations and conditions necessary in ensuring an empowered future for all children.

What does child empowerment mean today?

The pursuit of child empowerment is a critical endeavour for education. This publication set out to discuss the implications of current research and policy measures, offering insights to inform how OECD countries empower children as we move further into the 21st Century.

Empowered children have the opportunity and ability to act on issues important and relevant to them, can learn by making mistakes, and are key contributors to democracy. Children are not just adults in the making, they are part of the fabric of society and are able to help shape our shared future. Reaching this goal requires the right adults, institutions, opportunities and conditions.

Empowerment of children is more than just a buzzword; it is - quite rightly - at the very core of education systems. Schools are perfectly positioned to provide children with the skills and mindsets they need to take action on issues that are important and relevant to them, and to be productive members of modern societies. But education cannot be expected to take on that responsibility alone. Nor should children themselves be held solely responsible for their own empowerment or exercising agency in ways adults think they should. Children have the right to participate, and also have the right to choose not to participate. Childhood is a time to learn by taking risks and having the space to be free to make mistakes. The liberty to do this is one facet of empowerment.

Emerging cross-cutting themes: The importance of adults, institutions, opportunities and the right conditions

While the topics covered in this publication are varied, there are some main themes that consistently emerge. These themes, and how they relate to empowerment, are summarised below and in Table 7.1.

Table 7.1. Main themes of child empowerment

Empowered children act on issues important and relevant to them, can learn by making mistakes, and are key contributors to democracy. Children are not just adults in the making, they are part of the fabric of society and are able to help shape our shared future.		
They can be supported by…		
Adults	**Institutions**	**Opportunities**
Hold much of the power in how to make spaces accessible, safe and open for children to truly participate. Require appropriate skills, knowledge, capacities and mindsets. For example, valuing child perspectives. Should not underestimate the important role they can take in inspiring, supporting and encouraging children to seize opportunities.	Can collaborate across sectors to better support children. Set meaningful incentives so that empowering children is part of the work, not extra work. Co-ordinate approaches and ensure consistency both within and between schools to support all children to seize opportunities to learn and participate in relevant experiences.	Are relevant and age-appropriate to facilitate participation from children with different backgrounds, affinities and perspectives. Can bring children's lived experiences into policy and practice to ensure they are more tailored to children's wants and needs. To see children as competent actors, capable of making decisions about their lives.
Conditions: Equity, physical and emotional well-being, realisation of child rights, and development of the research base.		

Source: Author's elaboration

Adults are needed as allies in the push for child empowerment

Adults including teachers, parents, policy makers and researchers all have a role to play in empowering children. Adults hold much of the power in how to make spaces accessible, safe and open for children to truly participate, and can work with children to ensure that their learning experiences and participation is rooted in contexts that they understand and are relevant for them. The research suggests that this is not a zero-sum game, but that child empowerment benefits processes that are typically seen as adult-centric. This might vary between different cultural contexts, but the message that children should be empowered and their rights fully realised and supported should be consistent across all OECD countries.

Adults should not underestimate the important role they can take in inspiring, supporting and encouraging children to seize opportunities and pave their unique paths forward through life. As Caitlin Faye Maniti reminds us in Chapter 6, sometimes all it takes is “one good adult” to give a push in the right direction to encourage a child to potentially face their fears, maybe take a risk and make the most of the opportunities they may have before them. This can be intimidating for anyone, adults or children, to do alone. Having the support of a trusted mentor can open many doors for children that they may not have had knowledge of or access to otherwise.

It cannot be assumed that adults automatically have the skills, knowledge and mindsets to empower children by virtue of simply being older. Systematic supports need to be in place to build these capacities so they are comfortable with this responsibility and can recognise opportunities to make a difference. For instance, adults need to understand that children’s perspectives, although different to adult perspectives, have real value for how we approach societal challenges and craft innovative solutions.

Institutions must address fragmentation in the policy and practice landscapes

A common thread that emerges throughout this publication is that child empowerment strategies sometimes lack coherence, co-ordination and buy-in from all essential stakeholders. Some countries are more advanced on this front than others, such as Ireland which has established a child participation unit in the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and implemented a National Strategy on child and youth participation in decision making. In many countries however, initiatives for empowerment or participation are neither comprehensive nor coherent and require initiative to be taken at the school or even individual classroom level. This means approaches may be ad-hoc, and depend on teachers or school leaders who are particularly interested or able to implement them, on top of already very high workloads. Co-ordinating approaches and ensuring consistency both within and between schools will support all children seize opportunities to learn and participate in empowering experiences. Policies that champion student involvement, seek their perspectives, and integrate their lived experiences are vital for creating an education system that truly empowers.

In addition to the educational institutions where children spend so much of their time, child empowerment requires collaboration across policy, research, business and beyond. Although empowerment looks different in different contexts, the principles of involving children and making space for them is not just a moral call, it is based on research showing that this can improve processes. Empowerment can be a part of the work, not extra work.

Seizing opportunities means recognising children as competent social actors

One of the strongest messages that has emerged from this work is that children can and should be seen as competent actors who are capable of making decisions about their lives, including their education and within their societies. This is essential from a human rights perspective, but also because their empowerment is associated with a whole host of positive externalities such as higher levels of well-being, confidence and civic participation. Involving children as stakeholders and learning from their lived

experiences can benefit policy and practice, ensuring they are more tailored to children's wants and needs while also more effectively targeting the issues that are faced by children in the 21st Century.

This requires relevant and age-appropriate opportunities to participate and an education that gives space for children to see how the skills, mindsets and knowledge they are expected to acquire are reflected in their context. It is important to keep in mind that empowering children to participate in decision making does not mean children always have the final and/or only say on things that are important to them. It means that they have the opportunity to contribute and are listened to, and that policies and practices should be shaped with their interests, and what is in their best interests and the interests of relevant stakeholders, in mind.

Co-ordinated policies and more research can improve conditions for child empowerment

This publication outlines a number of challenges and threats to child empowerment. This includes worrying trends in child well-being such as decreasing physical activity, increasing rates of anxiety and higher levels of loneliness. Children also face barriers to empowerment when they experience social and digital exclusion, and can lack adequate support in navigating a media environment that is increasingly complex yet deeply interwoven into their daily realities. These issues are high on the policy agendas of countries around the world, and many have developed policies and practices, often in co-ordination with other actors (ministries, research bodies, teachers, parents and children themselves) to improve the conditions children face at school and at home. Empowering environments are safe, not sterile. Children can benefit from exposure to a manageable level of everyday risk to support the development of their resilience, well-being and crucial skills such as media and digital literacy.

This report outlines a number of promising policies and practices employed by OECD member countries to promote child empowerment, ranging from ways to include them in decision making, to supporting their well-being and providing learning opportunities to help them seize opportunities in civic and digital spaces. However, we need more research about which practices and policies are most effective and how these can be implemented at scale across entire education systems. Often the links between the various policies and practices and their intended outcomes are weak, or further research is needed to ascertain whether they can support all students, including the most disadvantaged. For instance, some policies or practices to encourage child participation may favour students from more advantaged backgrounds. Finding ways to extend opportunities to all students and ensure all groups can benefit from these policies and practices is key.

Another gap in the literature is how best to support teachers and school leaders to promote child empowerment in their classrooms and schools. There are some promising examples of teacher education programmes, practices teachers can employ in their schools, and how teachers can root their classroom teaching in the lived experiences of their students to involve them and get them excited about their learning journeys. However, more research on effective professional development and the supports teachers need in implementing the specifics of child empowerment approaches would be welcome.

Much of this report explores policies and practices that target older children and adolescents. There is less literature on younger children and how empowerment strategies can better target them. The same stands for children from marginalised or vulnerable backgrounds. Ensuring that opportunities for empowerment are equitable and inclusive, as well as proactive regarding children's ages, stages and abilities is key.

Educational Research and Innovation

What Does Child Empowerment Mean Today?

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION AND WELL-BEING

Childhood is changing in ways that we are still unpacking, affected by digitalization, globalization and climate change, as well as shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In many OECD education systems, child empowerment is increasingly an explicit aim of policies and practices. But it is often poorly defined, which risks turning it into a mere slogan. With the advancement of children's rights, children are increasingly being included as stakeholders in decision-making processes. This report gives examples of how children in OECD countries can and do participate in making decisions about issues that affect them. The report examines children's emotional well-being and physical activity, and the role of schools as a physical space to create and support relationships. It also underlines the untapped potential of media education when it comes to seizing opportunities in childhood. Empowering all children to make the most of digital opportunities starts with further narrowing the gap in terms of access to digital tools and the Internet, where inequalities are persistent and pervasive. So, what does child empowerment mean today? Empowered children have the opportunity and ability to act on issues important and relevant to them, can learn by making mistakes, and are key contributors to democracy.

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