

# Empowering Futures: A Systematic Review of Schoolaged Children Social Participation

*Empowering Futures: Una revisión sistemática de la participación social de los niños en edad escolar*

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### **Abstract:**

This systematic review aimed to understand and characterize the impact of social participation on the well-being of school-aged children including pre-school pupils to pre university grade, by synthesizing evidence from various participatory approaches. The review encompasses studies conducted in diverse contexts, such as schools and communities, to provide a comprehensive understanding of how participatory methods influence youth engagement and empowerment. Through an analysis of qualitative, mixed-methods, and cross-sectional studies, it was revealed that participatory approaches significantly enhance young people's engagement, empowerment, and well-being. Key themes identified include the necessity of collaborative interactions, tailored engagement strategies, supportive relationships, and skilled facilitation. The findings underscore the value of integrating participatory approaches into health and educational frameworks to foster improved outcomes for school-aged children. This review highlights the potential of participatory methods to positively transform the well-being of school-aged children, suggesting avenues for future research and policy implementation.

### **Keywords:**

School-aged Children, Social Participation, Participatory Approaches, Health Promotion, Well-being.

### **Resumen:**

Esta revisión sistemática tenía como objetivo comprender y caracterizar el impacto de la participación social en el bienestar de los niños en edad escolar, incluidos los alumnos de preescolar hasta el grado preuniversitario, sintetizando las pruebas de diversos enfoques participativos. La revisión abarca estudios realizados en diversos contextos, como escuelas y comunidades, para proporcionar una comprensión global de cómo los métodos participativos influyen en el compromiso y el empoderamiento de los jóvenes. A través de un análisis de estudios cualitativos, de métodos mixtos y transversales, se reveló que los enfoques participativos mejoran significativamente el compromiso, el empoderamiento y el bienestar de los jóvenes. Los temas clave identificados incluyen la necesidad de interacciones colaborativas, estrategias de participación adaptadas, relaciones de apoyo y facilitación cualificada. Los resultados subrayan el valor de integrar los enfoques participativos en los marcos sanitarios y educativos para fomentar mejores resultados para los niños en edad escolar. Esta revisión pone de relieve el potencial de los métodos participativos para transformar positivamente el bienestar de los niños en edad escolar, sugiriendo vías para futuras investigaciones y aplicación de políticas.

### **Palabras Claves:**

Niños en edad escolar, participación social, enfoques participativos, promoción de la salud, bienestar.

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## Introduction

Childhood is often described as a transitional period marked by complexity and challenges but also as the ideal stage for promoting specific skills essential for lifelong well-being (Cook & Coley, 2017). Developing these skills is a primary goal of numerous programs targeting the health and well-being of school-aged children. Such programs aim to provide children with personal and interpersonal resources that enhance their capacity for agency and positive change in their contexts (Matos, 2020; Matos et al., 2020; Gaspar et al., 2018a, 2018b; Tomé et al., 2017). The emphasis on skill development aligns with the broader objectives of educational and health promotion initiatives designed to foster resilience, self-efficacy, and social competence among children (Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2017).

Empowering children, motivating them, and offering opportunities for active engagement are crucial steps toward building more positive and meaningful life paths (Michie et al., 2011). Participation fosters a sense of autonomy and belonging, which are vital for healthy psychological development (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Despite these efforts, active social participation of children remains a significant challenge. According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have the right to express their thoughts and perspectives and to participate actively in society, especially in matters that concern their context (UNICEF, 2019). Recognizing the child as an active agent with unique perspectives and potential is fundamental for promoting their well-being and societal contributions (UNICEF, 2019).

Research on children's participation in political and democratic life within the European Union highlights various incentives and barriers. Incentives include the influence of organizations such as UNICEF and the EU, the establishment of dedicated offices, formulation of public policies and action plans, facilitation of idea exchange through web platforms, and provision of participation spaces. Conversely, barriers include limited language skills, lack of child-friendly documents, restrictive regulations, societal attitudes that marginalize children, and insufficient information about participation opportunities (Janta et al., 2021).

Although it is an established right, the road to children's full participation in society and their contexts (home, school and community) is still a long way off. The work that has been conducted in this area in recent years is groundbreaking, showing that children and young people have the skills to develop their ideas, identify needs and solutions to their problems, and should, therefore, play an essential and active role in society (Branquinho et al., 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2020; Gibbs et al., 2018; Tisdall et al., 2014). This generation offers ideas and valuable insight into their experiences (Checkoway, 2010), so promoting children's participation is valuable and beneficial for children and society in general (Farthing, 2015; Gal, 2017; YEG Team, 2014).

The development of the Learn to Fly project, a program aimed at promoting social participation and intergenerational dialogue, alongside the encouragement of socio-emotional and life skills such as psychological flexibility, openness, curiosity, autonomy, and self-regulation, motivated the present work (Matos et al., 2023).

This study aimed to conduct a systematic literature review to understand and characterize school-aged children's participation and engagement promotion and the consequent impact on their health and well-being, including pupils from pre-school to pre-university levels.



## Methods

This systematic review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, Altman, & PRISMA Group, 2009).

### Search strategy

A comprehensive search strategy was implemented to identify relevant studies examining the impact of social participation on school-aged children's health and well-being within school and community settings. The search was conducted across three databases/collection of databases: Web of Science, EBSCO-Host, and B-on. The search terms included combinations of the following keywords: child\* OR kid\* AND involvement OR voice OR empower OR participation OR leadership OR advocacy OR decision-making OR participatory-action research OR engage OR led AND school OR community AND health OR well-being OR wellbeing. Searches were performed in March 2024 by title and abstract.

### Study selection

After the identification of possible relevant articles in the database search, duplicates were removed, and title and abstracts were screened and full texts assessed for eligibility. For that purpose, the following inclusion criteria were used: population, the studies must focus on children; publication date, only articles published in the last five years were included (from 2019 to 2024); peer review, only peer-reviewed articles were considered; language, articles must be published in English.

Regarding the screening process, two reviewers independently screened the titles and abstracts of the retrieved articles to exclude those that did not answer the research question and there were duplicates. The two reviewers independently assessed the full texts of the remaining articles to confirm their eligibility. Any reviewer discrepancies were resolved through discussion or consulting a third reviewer.

### Data extraction and analysis

Articles included in the systematic review were incorporated into the data extraction process, carried out by two authors. To extract data, a spreadsheet was generated with the following fields as columns: first author, year and title; study design; age range; intervention; setting; outcomes measured; measurement tools; and key-findings. Both authors completed the spreadsheet by inputting the information for each article, and the two authors deliberated upon the extracted data to create the final data extraction spreadsheet.

### Study quality assessment

The study results were evaluated using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) – 2018 (Hong et al., 2018), developed explicitly for appraising qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods studies. The MMAT - 2018 includes criteria for five distinct categories: qualitative

research, randomised controlled trials, non-randomised studies, quantitative descriptive studies, and mixed methods studies. The overall quality of each study can be assessed based on the quantity and severity of unmet criteria, allowing for classification as high (meeting most or all criteria with minor issues), moderate (meeting some criteria with moderate issues in others), or low (failing to meet several criteria with significant issues).

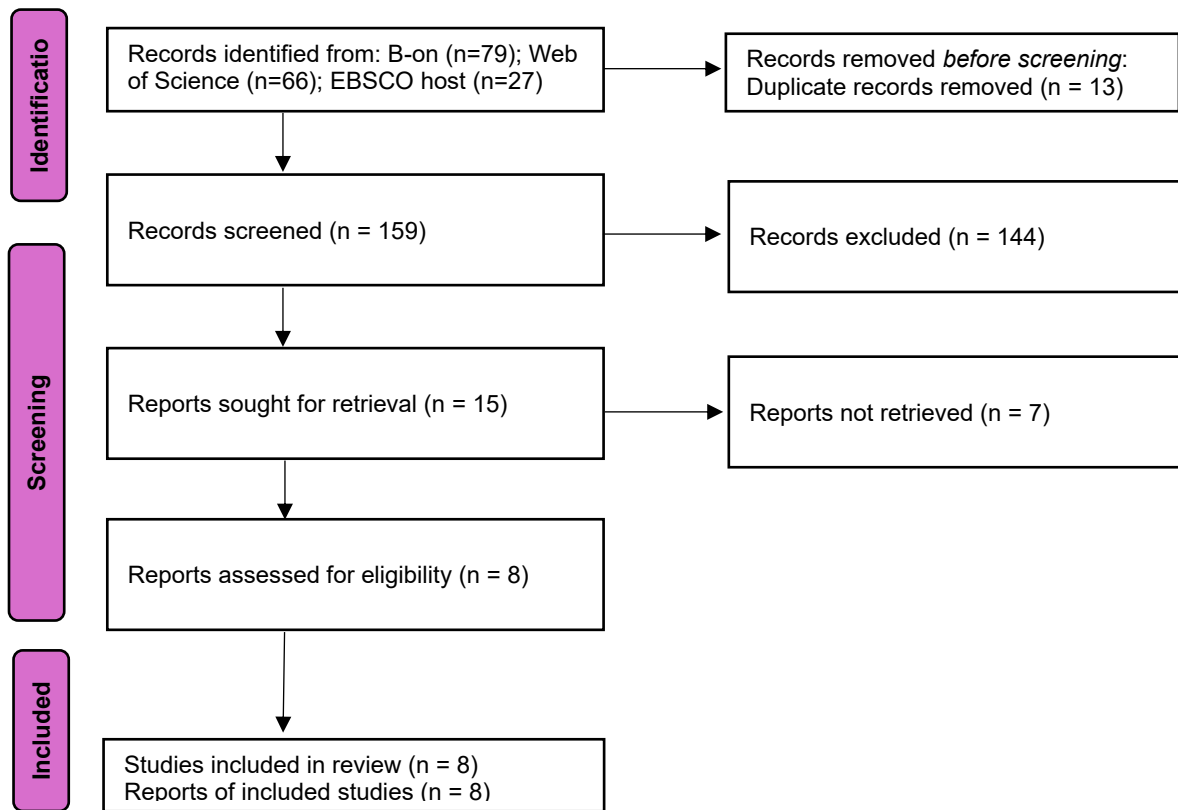
## Results

### The Literature Search

The initial search was filtered using advanced tools, including and excluding specific criteria. This yielded a total of 172 records from 3 databases: B-on (n = 79), Web of Science (n = 66), and EBSCO host (n = 27). After removing 13 duplicate records, 159 unique records were screened based on titles and abstracts; during this screening process, 144 records were excluded for not meeting the inclusion criteria. Consequently, 15 reports were sought for retrieval. However, seven of these reports could not be retrieved. The remaining eight reports were then assessed for eligibility, and all eight met the criteria for inclusion in the systematic review. A diagram of this process is presented in figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*PRISMA Flowchart. Source: Moher et al. (2009)*



## Overview of Included Studies

The systematic review encompassed eight studies examining school-aged children's social and community participation. An overview of the included studies is presented in table 1. These studies employed various designs, including qualitative meta-syntheses, qualitative studies, mixed-methods, and cross-sectional surveys, and involved participants primarily within the age range of 6-17 years. The research settings varied from schools to community-based programs, spanning multiple countries, including Australia, the USA, Japan, and several European countries. The interventions encompass asset-based community development (ABCD), participatory health research, community-based participatory research (CBPR), surveys on health behaviours, participatory school activities, transition programs, and child-centred frameworks. The primary outcomes assessed included participation levels, health behaviours, engagement in research, subjective well-being (SWB), community participation, and transition outcomes. Data collection methods comprised interviews, focus groups, self-reported questionnaires, clinical interview tools, electronic medical records, and document reviews.

## Narrative synthesis of the main findings

Due to the qualitative nature of most included studies, a meta-analysis was not feasible. However, common themes and findings were synthesised narratively. Despite differences in methodologies and contexts, several key themes emerged regarding the effectiveness and impact of these participatory approaches.

### Participation and Empowerment

A common theme in the research is the use of participatory approaches to enhance the involvement and empowerment of school-aged children. Agdal et al.'s (2019) review showed that Asset-based Community Development (ABCD) approach in school health promotion projects led to higher participation levels among school-aged children. The open-ended nature of asset mapping allows participants to recognise personal and communal resources, promoting a stronger sense of engagement and empowerment. Similarly, Goto et al. (2022) discovered that participatory workshops in Fukushima, Japan, improved students' satisfaction with their health and local foods, increased positive perceptions of health and food within their community, and fostered creativity and autonomy among the students. Samir et al. (2021) stressed the importance of using personalised methods to effectively involve children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds in health research. Their study showed that children from disadvantaged populations offer valuable insights when involved through participatory and collaborative approaches. Sharing power, two-way learning, and using culturally sensitive staff were crucial in boosting involvement and improving health outcomes.

### Collaborative Interactions in School and Community Contexts

Collaborative interactions between children, teachers, parents, and community members were central to the effectiveness of the participatory interventions. Arnold et al. (2019) reported that involving youth as advocates in Community-based participatory research (CBPR) on the health effects of farm work in Eastern North Carolina improved the research's relevance and



implementation. Youth participation ensured that the research addressed pertinent issues and was conducted in a manner that resonated with the community.

### **Impact on well-being and social-emotional skills**

Several studies have highlighted the positive impact of participatory approaches on children's well-being and social-emotional skills. Barrance et al. (2023) found a positive association between subjective well-being (SWB) and participation in decision-making at school across 13 EU and former EU countries. Supportive teacher-student relationships and involvement in school decisions influenced SWB, highlighting the importance of relational aspects in participatory approaches.

Mukherjee et al. (2019) examined community participation and transition outcomes in youth with spina bifida and other chronic health conditions in a Chicago urban children's hospital. The study revealed that youth with spina bifida had lower levels of community participation compared to their peers with other chronic conditions. However, those involved in community activities exhibited greater independence, social competencies, and quality of life.

Dolton et al. (2019) focused on the voices of primary school children with social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) difficulties in the East Midlands, UK. The study emphasised integrating children's perspectives in educational research and practice. Findings indicated that the quality of relationships with adults was a determinant of emotional well-being and behavioural regulation among children with SEMH difficulties. Positive relationships fostered a sense of security and effective emotional regulation, while strained relationships led to increased anxiety and frustration.

### **Role of Facilitation and Support Systems**

The role of skilled facilitation and supportive systems was identified as crucial for the success of participatory approaches. Agdal et al. (2019) highlighted that effective facilitation by skilled professionals who supported rather than led the projects was vital to successful implementation. Barrance et al. (2023) and Tomokawa et al. (2020) emphasised that the relationship with the teachers predicted a good outcome. Additionally, Tomokawa et al. (2020) concluded that participatory activities in Japanese schools promoted children's voluntary participation and heightened their awareness of community and environmental responsibilities. The presence of supportive systems with clear guidelines and an understanding of the pedagogical benefits among stakeholders was crucial for fostering engagement.

The synthesis of the eight studies reveals that participatory approaches in health promotion and research significantly enhance engagement, empowerment, and well-being among school-aged children. Collaborative interactions, tailored engagement strategies, supportive relationships, and skilled facilitation underpin the effectiveness of these approaches. These findings support integrating participatory methods in health and education to foster better outcomes for young populations.



## Quality assessment results

The overall quality of the literature on child participation in health promotion and community projects is generally high (table 2). The studies consistently demonstrate clear research questions, appropriate methodologies, and well-substantiated findings. The coherence between data sources, collection methods, analysis, and interpretation are well-maintained across the studies. While some studies could benefit from better integration of findings and more robust synthesis, most adhere to high methodological standards, providing reliable and valuable insights into children's participation in health-related initiatives.

## Discussion

This systematic review encompassed eight studies focusing on enhancing social and community participation among school-aged children. The studies, conducted across diverse settings and methodologies, underscored the developmental significance of promoting active participation. As the literature emphasises, childhood is a critical period for acquiring essential skills and capacities that promote agency and adaptability in various life contexts (Cook & Coley, 2017; Matos et al., 2020). Programs that foster children's participation equip them with personal and interpersonal resources and empower them to influence their life trajectories positively (Matos et al., 2018; Gaspar et al., 2018a, 2018b; Tomé et al., 2017).

The synthesis of findings highlighted the transformative impact of participatory approaches on children's empowerment and engagement. Aligning with UNICEF's framework, which recognises children as active agents with distinct perspectives and potential, the reviewed studies demonstrated that participatory methodologies, such as Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) and participatory workshops, effectively enhance participation levels and foster a sense of empowerment among school-aged children (UNICEF, 2019; Michie et al., 2011). These approaches enable participants to identify personal and communal resources, promoting autonomy and engagement in community and school settings (Agdal et al., 2019; Goto et al., 2022).

Collaborative interactions emerged as pivotal in enhancing the relevance and effectiveness of participatory interventions. As Arnold et al. (2019) noted, involving youth as advocates in Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) ensures that research addresses community-specific issues while empowering youth participants. This collaborative approach bridges the gap between research and community needs and nurtures a sense of civic responsibility among school-aged children (Janta et al., 2021). Such initiatives align to foster children's active participation in decision-making processes and societal activities, as advocated by UNICEF and the EU (UNICEF, 2019).

Moreover, the reviewed studies underscored the positive impact of participatory approaches on children's well-being and social-emotional skills. Barrance et al. (2023) found a significant association between participation in school decision-making and subjective well-being (SWB) across multiple countries, highlighting the role of supportive teacher-student relationships in promoting SWB. Similarly, studies by Mukherjee et al. (2019) and Dolton et al. (2019) emphasised that community participation and supportive relationships contribute to improved



social competencies and emotional regulation among children with chronic health conditions and socio-emotional difficulties (Cook & Coley, 2017; Matos et al., 2015).

However, successfully implementing participatory approaches depends significantly on effective facilitation and supportive systems. Insights from Agdal et al. (2019) and Tomokawa et al. (2020) underscore the pivotal role of skilled facilitation and clear guidelines in ensuring the smooth execution and sustainability of participatory programs. These findings emphasise the critical importance of creating supportive educational environments that foster children's voluntary engagement and awareness of community responsibilities (Tomokawa et al., 2020; Farthing, 2015; Gal, 2017).

This study underscores the importance of integrating participatory frameworks into educational and health policies to foster inclusive decision-making processes and environments conducive to children's development and participation rights (Matos, 2020; Branquinho et al., 2020). Promoting children's active involvement in societal activities enhances their developmental outcomes and contributes to broader societal goals of equity and social justice (Gibbs et al., 2018; Tisdall et al., 2014).

#### **Strengths and limitations**

This systematic review offers valuable insights into the connection between social participation and children's health and well-being. The study utilised a robust search strategy encompassing various databases and recent peer-reviewed publications (past five years). Additionally, it incorporated research with diverse methodologies and contexts, presenting a broad picture of this impact across different settings.

However, it acknowledges limitations. Various methodologies and contexts precluded quantitative meta-analysis, hindering the ability to draw universal conclusions. Furthermore, several studies involved relatively small samples or specific settings, potentially limiting the applicability of findings to broader populations.

### **Conclusions and Strategies for Public Policies**

- 1. Integrate Participatory Approaches:** Incorporate participatory methodologies within educational and health policies to ensure children's voices are included in decision-making processes affecting their lives.
- 2. Supportive Relationships and Skilled Facilitation:** Emphasize the importance of strong relationships between children and educators, and the need for trained facilitators. Establish training programs to equip educators with the skills necessary to effectively guide and support children's participation.
- 3. Address Diversity and Inclusion:** Develop engagement strategies tailored to the diverse backgrounds and needs of children, particularly those from marginalized communities, to ensure equitable participation.
- 4. Promote Longitudinal Research:** Support and fund longitudinal studies with standardized outcome measures to understand the long-term impacts of participatory approaches and inform more effective programs.



5. **Foster Collaborative Interactions:** Encourage collaborations among children, educators, parents, and community members to integrate children’s voices into meaningful actions and promote community-based participatory research.
6. **Promote Equity and Social Justice:** Ensure that all children, regardless of their circumstances, have the opportunity to participate in shaping their futures, contributing to broader goals of equity and social justice.

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