

Political representatives' experiences of child participation in decision-making processes: A qualitative interview study

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Abstract

The aim was to explore political representatives' experiences of child participation in decision-making processes in municipalities. Interviews were conducted with Swedish politicians ($n = 7$) representing four municipalities. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the data. Politicians had experiences in child participation and methods for involving children and young people in the practice. However, methods were not formalized within the organizations, underlining that work lies ahead to ensure children's participation in decisions that concern them. Further research should focus on methods for including child participation at the municipal level and on following the implementation of the UNCRC.

KEYWORDS

child participation, children's rights, decision-making, municipality, political representatives, young people's participation

INTRODUCTION

Child participation in decision-making has long been a matter of discussion in governmental organizations. The topic was highlighted in Sweden when the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was incorporated into Swedish law in 2020 (SFS 2018:1197, *n.d.*).

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Links between participation and health outcomes have been seen in health development and health research where shared decision-making was reported (Wong et al., 2010). Children's participation in health research holds valuable insights into the development of both health practices and society (Arunkumar et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2010). Participation may improve children's safety, increase the success of care arrangements and increase feelings of well-being for the children involved (Vis et al., 2011).

This study focused on child participation in decision-making in the experiences of elected political representatives at the municipal level. The nature of the decisions can be on both group and individual levels. The findings of this study provide insight into how the matter is dealt with in the sampled organizations.

The Swedish Parliament, the Riksdag, approved in 2018 a National Public Health Policy focusing on equality in health throughout the population, with a goal of reducing avoidable health inequities within a generation (Government Offices of Sweden, 2018). The policy covers national, regional and municipal levels of government and has eight target areas to strengthen public health in Sweden. Two areas of importance for this study are 'Conditions in early life' and 'Control, influence, and participation' (Government Offices of Sweden, 2018). The policy's target area of 'Control, influence, and participation' highlights that more effort is needed for Sweden to ensure equal participation in the political arena and in civic society and that the area is important at all levels of health government (Government Offices of Sweden, 2018).

Articles 1–42 of the UNCRC were incorporated into Swedish law in 2020 (SFS 2018:1197, n.d.), strengthening children's rights with an emphasis on the articles in the convention identified by the committee as general principles: 1) Article 2: all state parties shall ensure the rights outlined in the convention; 2) Article 3: the best interest of the child should be of primary consideration when any action is taken considering the child; 3) Article 6: all children have the right to life and development; 4) Article 12: children have the right to form and voice their opinions in matters that concern them. The UNCRC, as law, requires structures to ensure compliance by local governments, including committees and administrations.

Levels of government in Sweden

Sweden has three levels of government: national, regional and local. The national level is governed by the Swedish parliament, the regional level by 21 self-governed counties, and the local level by 290 self-governed municipalities (Government Offices of Sweden, 2015a). This study focused on the municipal level, where an elected municipal assembly holds the highest standing in the hierarchy, with committees below it that govern specific areas of the municipality (Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, 2020). Given the benefits of child participation and the UNCR as law, child participation is highly actualized in municipal government.

The municipal government

The municipalities provide, among other services, education, childcare, health and social services, libraries and recreational activities that are important to the well-being of children (Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, 2021). In the municipalities sampled for this study, the areas are partly governed by the Social Welfare Committee, which is responsible for the health and social services covering the whole of the population, and the Childcare

and Education Committee, which is responsible for education and healthcare for children at school. The committees are responsible for the Social Services Department and the Childcare and Education Department, both operated by municipal officers at the civil level.

Child and youth participation

This study adopts the UNCRC definition of a child as a person under 18 years old (SFS 2018:1197, [n.d.](#)). In this research on participation, the terms 'children' and 'young people' are used to describe the Word target group.

Riekkinen (2011) defined participation as *'the meaningful involvement of children in decision-making processes concerning those political matters which affect them with the goal of exchanging views between children and public officials'*. Participation should be a shared relationship between children and adults, according to Wong et al. (2010), and involves input from children in decision-making processes, which entails access to the processes (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006). Child participation can be practised in decisions on an individual level, such as in health and social care, but also on democratic and political levels that entail group decisions.

Forums and methods used for participation vary and depend on the organization and its purpose. Literature on participation and how participation has had an impact on issues and decisions on group and individual levels follows.

Four examples of forums aimed at youth participation in promoting health equity on a group level, as reviewed by Ozer et al. (2020), are: (1) a national youth researcher network in Portugal that conducted recruitment through municipal youth councils; (2) a method to include children and young people by using a photovoice method to promote physical activity in the USA; (3) the Arab Spring uprising in which young people were a driving entity in the protest for social change; (4) a student union, started by students in Philadelphia, aimed at achieving equal education opportunities (Frasquilho et al., 2016; Ozer et al., 2016; Lindquist-Grantz & Abraczinskas, 2018).

Pösö (2022) explored children's consent to child welfare services in Finland and found that instead of approaching children as individualistic rights-holders, it is crucial to acknowledge the social, emotional and power relations in child welfare. A child's consenting to a care order proposal does not exist in social isolation (Pösö, 2022).

Studies suggest connecting links between the emerging health and well-being of children and the promotion of shared decision-making. Participation from children in health research can be beneficial, as children's input can hold valuable insights into the development of health practices and the development of the society (Vis et al., 2011). However, it is important to keep the level of development in mind. It is not ethical to overload young children with a responsibility they cannot bear (Wong et al., 2020; Arunkumar et al., 2018). Nilsson Lindström et al. (2022) found that child participation in health could effectively be enhanced with an action-orientated school health promotion project. However, to ensure the validity and significance of the methods used for child participation, the methods should reflect the nature of the decision as well as who is responsible for the outcome. The methods used should not pressure children to participate whether they do not wish to (Shier, 2001).

The UNCRC requires ensuring children's rights. A study on children's rights and participation in healthcare settings found that children must feel secure and be well-informed to be able to participate in their own care. The same study concluded that nurses had the competence to include children's participation but not always the time required, and organizational aspects hindered the work. The conclusion of the study underlined the importance of management and politicians

obtaining information on children's rights and requirements when deciding on matters that affect children (Sahlberg et al., 2020).

Child participation in child-protection proceedings can result in better-arranged and more successful care measures and increase the feelings of security and well-being of the child. Participation in such proceedings was found to be complex, since many regulations must be considered in childcare, not only the child's view (Vis et al., 2011). The benefits of child participation in health promotion include positive health development and better-designed solutions for the identified issues (Wong et al., 2010). Participation in health promotion in school settings is seen as a core value, according to Buijs (2009). A study on child participation in health promotion programmes in schools suggested a positive link among the participation of students and healthy development, sense of ownership and the students' perspectives on health (Griebler et al., 2017).

Studies show that child participation can have positive effects on psychological and health development, since participation can empower children and develop their decision-making skills, therefore facilitating health decisions (Jensen, 1997; Simovska, 2006). Toros (2021) concluded that children in care have limited opportunities to practise participating in decisions that influence their lives. Gunn (2008) found that local politicians in England responsible for social services supported children's and young people's participation, but uncertainties on how the participation could be facilitated in practice were noted. Organizations with traditional hierarchies may have difficulties initiating and sustaining participation (Gunn, 2008). Shier et al. (2012) explored how young people influence policy-makers in Nicaragua and found that children and young people highlighted the importance of their own spaces or groups where they could participate and influence the municipal level. Shier et al. (2012) also listed methods and approaches the target groups found effective to enable children to influence policy-makers, one of which was to work in schools, as most children can be found in that arena.

Rational

The UNCR, as Swedish law, has strengthened the right of children to form and voice their opinions in matters that concern them (SFS 2018:1197, n.d.). Elected politicians are among the most influential people in public policy-making; therefore, exploring how children and young people can influence politicians is central to increasing their participation in policy decisions. All citizens 18 years and over can vote to elect these politicians (Government Offices of Sweden, 2015b). Children under 18 cannot vote, which makes it important to find appropriate ways for children and young people to influence politicians. The study's rationale was based on the benefits of participation in health on individual and group levels to offer insights that could give an understanding of how municipalities work regarding child participation in decision-making processes.

Aim

The aim of this study was to explore political representatives' experiences of child participation in decision-making processes at the level of the municipal committee in charge of child and youth services.

METHODOLOGY

Study design

A qualitative interview study design was chosen to explore the experiences of the political representatives in promoting the participation of children and young people in decision-making on issues concerning children and/or young people in municipalities. The chosen design opens up opportunities for inquiring about and exploring the experiences of the interview participants (Bryman, 2011; Mark, 1996).

During the interviews, the researcher asked ‘listening questions’ and paid careful attention to the responses, exploring what had been said and heard. This social constructionism approach features an awareness of how language constructs our social world (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 2002). The interviews were conducted as dialogical interviewing with the support of an interview guide. In the analysis, the researchers read written transcriptions, listening to what had been said and told and constructed themes. In writing this article, we chose striking citations, examples of utterances in the dialogues illustrating the different themes constructed.

Participant selection procedure and study sample

Representatives from the municipal level of government were sampled based on the services they provided to children and young people in their everyday life. The first author opted to invite sample politicians from the same level of government. Seven participants representing four municipalities in mid-Sweden, chosen through purposive sampling, accepted the invitation to participate. A total of 15 politicians were contacted; of them, eight agreed to participate. Seven completed the interview, and one cancelled due to illness.

When the content of the interviews seemed to have reached a level of saturation—that is, when participants began to repeat answers already given in earlier interviews—it was concluded that the sample would be sufficient to accomplish the aim of the study (Table 1).

Data collection

Data were collected through interviews conducted by the first author with the support of a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix A). This type of interviewing can be suitable for identifying and exploring the experiences of respondents (Bryman, 2011; Creswell, 2014). The method allows for adapting the wording of questions and follow-up questions (Barriball & While, 1994). The interviewees were also given the opportunity to provide shorter narratives about aspects of their experiences (see Elliot, 2006).

The data were collected during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Zoom and regular voice phone interviews were suggested as alternatives to meeting in person. Six of the interviews were conducted over the phone and one in person. They lasted between 30 and 45 min. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim in full. All municipal-specific content was coded, and certain content was omitted from the transcription to ensure that the participant and the municipality in question could not be identified.

TABLE 1 Information on the study sample.

| Background characteristics | |
|---|---|
| Number of municipalities represented (<i>n</i>) | 4 |
| Number of participants (<i>n</i>) | 7 (4 female, 3 male) |
| Median age (range) | 49 (40–65) |
| Committees represented | Social welfare committee Childcare and education committees Executive board Health advisory board |
| Functions represented | Heads of selected committees Head of advisory board Executive board representatives Opposition representatives |

Data analysis

The analysis was carried out in accordance with the qualitative content analysis described by Graneheim and Lundman (2004). Initially, the first and last authors read through the transcripts several times to get an overview of the data collected. Key meaning units were identified in the material and then condensed and coded. Sub-themes and themes were constructed. The transcripts were revisited to better understand the themes and sub-themes before putting the results in writing. The result of the analysis was discussed among all three authors until consensus was obtained. The themes, sub-themes and selected key meaning units were translated from Swedish to English.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Both procedural and situated ethics were heeded (Tutenel et al., 2019). Ethical considerations were made in procedures with the current context of the research setting in view, in this case a political arena of municipalities. New ethical issues arose linked to this particular time and health situation, the outbreak of a pandemic (COVID-19).

Thus, the study followed guidelines from the Swedish Research Council (2019) to ensure all ethical considerations were considered and in place. The project proposal was approved by the Faculty of Health Sciences, Kristianstad University, prior to data collection.

As the study included collecting data from participants, all over the age of 18, written informed consent was obtained (see Mark, 1996). Every participant was assured of confidentiality and voluntary participation. They were invited to the study via a personal telephone call as well as in an informational letter. The letter, sent by post, included a request for consent to participate in the research study, which formalized the participation and the collaboration. The letter also included information about ethical considerations, confidentiality and research secrecy. A signed consent form was then returned by post.

To prevent the identification of any of the participants, we included in the published study only the median age and range, omitting political affiliation, professional background and active years as a politician. All research data and material have been kept stored in secure locations with no unauthorized access.

RESULTS

Discussion within the municipal organizations in regard to child participation became apparent to be ongoing and to focus on how children and young people are invited to participate in decision-making processes in matters concerning them. The narratives of the interviews indicate that the experiences of the politicians were mainly through visiting student councils or talking to children directly at the children's everyday venues.

Four themes and nine sub-themes were constructed in the analysis (see [Table 2](#)).

Theme 1: perspectives on child participation

The participants expressed their perspectives on child participation describing the methods of participation they used and the emerging meaning in the use of the word 'participation'.

Participation really is that they [children] are part of initiatives, that they know where to go. During my years, they have been invited to the committee to talk about their initiatives and how they can be participating in the process.

(IP6)

The importance of letting children be heard, inviting them to committee meetings and creating channels for them to affect their own lives through participation was stressed. Experiences of visiting student councils and meeting children at their venues were explored, along with the use of results of health and lifestyle surveys in making decisions.

This theme includes three sub-themes, see below.

Responsibilities and methods

In the municipal organizations, ongoing discussions were conducted about where the responsibilities lay in involving children and how and whether the focus should be on the child's own perspective or the adults' perspectives of the child's point of view.

TABLE 2 Themes and sub-themes identified in the analysis.

| Themes | Sub-themes |
|--|---|
| Perspectives of the concept 'child participation' | Responsibilities and methods Child participation generates important information and understanding Motivation and enablement of children to participation |
| The municipal organization and child participation | Factors within the municipality hinder children from participating Decision-makers influence the process of participation |
| Visions on child participation within the municipal organization | Develop methods and simplify processes Focus on health promotion |
| The UNCRC as Swedish law in practice | Awareness and attitudes The UNCRC law is new and unexplored |

Thus, under exploration and discussion were whether children should be directly involved in decision-making or if adults' perspectives of the child's view would be sufficient. Experience in using the results of surveys as a method was mentioned, but such a method was labelled as indirect involvement since qualitative analyses were often lacking.

A position on how children's views are part of decision-making was expressed by a participant as follows:

They [the children] always become involved because we [the politicians] have the perspective of the child, but with the child's own perspective, they [children] get more influence.

(IP1)

In the experience of the politicians, children were always considered in decisions, but how they should be considered and the level of influence on the decisions they should have, were talked about as a constant topic of ongoing discussion. Whether the administrative level or the political level took measures to involve children, depended on which issue was under discussion or where in the process the decision lay. The comment below reveals the untold expectations of a politician in relation to the administration:

Depending on the issue, if I tell the administration, for example, that we should have safer schools, it may not be included in my decision to have children's perspectives considered, but I expect the administration to include the perspective.

(IP3)

Participants justified the methods chosen by referring to their own views on how children should be involved and by whom. Another question was whether to proceed from the perspective of the child or from the child's own view and whether and how the child's opinion should be considered.

When in the process of decision-making, methods differed on including child participation and which part of the organization should be involved.

Child participation generates important information and understanding

The importance of understanding the views of children in decision-making processes with bearings on their lives and everyday activities was expressed as significant at the municipal political level. The adverse effects of excluding children from decisions could damage trust in the decision-makers and the quality of the decision. The outcome risked a lack of engagement from members of the target group if they were not invited to express their views when or before the decision was made. The importance of listening to children's views was expressed, see an example below:

If you do not have the young with you when making a decision about something that concerns them [children], it will not be of interest to them. It is not certain that they want the same thing that we [decision-makers] do or what we think they want.

(IP7)

This utterance illustrates that the views of the participants hold important clues in how well a product or service will fit the group for which it was designed. To exclude children from decisions could

damage their trust not only in the decision-makers but also in the quality of the decisions. An experience is illustrated below:

To be in charge and not understand the issues and, perhaps even less, understand the issues of young people, can be really devastating.

(IP3)

The statement stresses that if the target group is included, the product or service will suit the intended purpose.

Motivation and enablement of children to participate

Children's own interests and engagement were assumed to be significant for ensuring participation. The key to enabling participation was described as motivating children by showing them how to participate. For example, children could be invited to committees, and the politicians could visit the arenas where young people spend time, for example schools, to enable, invite and motivate.

We [decision-makers] must attend student councils; we must let children come to board and committee meetings; we must visit sports clubs and the youth centres. We must be where the young people are; otherwise, you do not know what is happening...

(IP4)

Measures to secure children being invited and arrangements to ensure that invited children feel like participating were identified to be of the utmost importance according to the experiences of the politicians.

Theme 2: the municipal organization and child participation

Even if children's rights were a dynamic idea in the municipalities, not all the political committees seemed to include child participation in decision-making in a systematic way. Discussions on whether the municipal system was designed to enable the inclusion of child participation were continuously ongoing within the organizations. Here an example of used comments on the system within the municipality:

The process [of participation] has been terribly formalized; I think it scares away citizens from getting involved, and through that we get a "we-and-them" society.

(IP4)

Formalized systems not adapted for young people's involvement could affect how well a municipality could collect views from children in decision-making processes, which could affect how children and young people view politicians.

The theme includes two sub-themes, see below.

Factors within the municipality hinder children from participating

The ways to participate in the municipal political organization as a citizen could be complex and not adapted or designed to naturally include children. The processes were described as formalized and could hinder children from participating. The politicians noted that the most formalized processes were to be found within the political level; the administration level was described as the place where children could be heard more easily.

If it [the system on the administrative side to collect children's views] does not work, then they [the children] have hardly any influence [on decisions], and if it [the system] works, then they have opportunities.

(IP2)

The administration was identified as key for collecting views, yet the methods on how the views would be incorporated into decision-making processes were unclear. Since the administration holds an important position in ensuring child participation, the politicians themselves become important in ensuring participation in decision-making processes at the political level.

Decision-makers influence the process of participation

The participants spoke about the politicians within the municipalities, their attitudes and their willingness to include children which enables or hinders child participation. The culture and habits within the system could lead to a distance between the children and the decision-makers:

I really think that it is due to old habits and how we differentiate between different parts of life: children are children, and it is the adults who decide. I think that is the biggest obstacle.

(IP5)

The accessibility of the decision-makers becomes key, as methods in the municipality cannot compensate for a lack of accessibility of the elected representatives.

Theme 3: visions on child participation within the municipal organization

The narratives given were based on how best to engage children in participation and what would be needed from the municipality to ensure child participation. Meeting in real life was described as a key determinant, as over the past years, online participation forums have been the only way to interact, and such forums are not suited to all meetings.

I believe that people are scared to talk online, that they don't dare to say what they think or feel. I believe it is important that we can meet physically and discuss, and that they get to see actual people and not just faces behind a computer screen.

(IP1)

Examples of functioning forums were student councils, and the need to ensure that the structures around these councils were in place within schools was emphasized as a vision.

More committed student council work and that it results in something. Then it becomes like a form of training in the possibility of participation.

(IP2)

Improving the process after a discussion with a student council was highlighted as a vision. This would involve feedback on the issues voiced by children to ensure interest and a way to respect the time put in by the students.

The theme includes two sub-themes, see below.

Develop methods and simplify processes

Through developing channels for child participation, like existing student councils, or through civic dialogues to which the decision-makers invite the public, the target group can get more involved.

For children to participate, the processes must be simple and adapted to them, and the politicians must be readily available. To further involve the existing student councils, the work of the committees was seen as a way to ensure participation.

I think that you [as a decision-maker] can use the available committees but broaden them or redesign them a little. [...] But if you only want young people to participate in political decisions that concern them [the children/young people], then I think it is the student councils that on the first hand [should be included].

(IP1)

Collaboration efforts among committees, student councils and the administration were identified as important. Many children lack channels for accessing decision-makers at all levels. Creating new channels designed especially for child participation was raised as an important factor for moving forward.

Focus on health promotion

Developments within the municipality with a focus on the underlying factors affecting health and well-being that could impact child participation and children's abilities were identified.

We must protect children and young people so that they feel well and feel that they have space to develop, then I also believe that if the political arena is open and has a forum where children and young people can get access to different political parties and talk and also that we have such a forum in the executive board where young people can come and talk, then I think we are on the right track.

(IP3)

Theme 4: the UNCRC as Swedish law in practice

Narratives suggest that the law is new and not fully implemented or realized in everyday work. Experience of the work done to date reveals training in the practice of the law and a stronger focus on children in processes.

The thing that we [the committee] have begun to consider is that we need to include the children. But there is nothing in the process of the committee that is different. But it is the decisions that come in; it is really the last step [in the decision-making process]. Then we must ensure that it [the consideration with a basis in law] has been included.

(IP6)

No change in the systems of the specific committee had been made, but the committee members had become more aware that the law needs to be considered and children's views need to be included. Other experiences with the law reveal that attitudes have changed and that awareness has increased both within the municipality and in the society at large.

The theme includes two sub-themes, see below.

Awareness and attitudes

Awareness of the UNCRC as law has, according to the participants' experiences, increased within the represented organizations. Much work to date has been focussed on training, and the experiences show that little has changed within the municipality other than the knowledge base.

I do not think that work around the matter has changed much this far, but I do think that the knowledge base is broader than it used to be.

(IP5)

Societal changes in awareness and attitudes have been seen when citizens have questioned politicians about how the UNCRC has been considered in connection to decisions.

Even though changes have been noted in attitudes, the changes were not as apparent within the municipality as within the society.

A change in attitudes [can be seen], and I think that the change is in the media not the least, and that is very important for it [the law] to have an impact in society...

(IP3)

Experiences of increased awareness and changed attitudes were not unified among the participants, as some could not identify any changes since the law was enacted.

I do not see that the society has changed after the convention became law. Many times, it is up for discussion, but not just because it became law....

(IP4)

The narratives include discussions on progress being made and whether awareness has increased since the UNCRC became law.

The UNCRC law is new and unexplored

Regarding the complexity of implementation, participants were unanimous that the law needs clarity, and the municipalities need more experience. Difficulties at the political level were found in assessments made when the articles were incorporated and accounted for in decisions.

It [the UNCRC as law] is, of course, not simple legislation. We [the municipal organization] will certainly encounter one thing or another from time to time, but then it is there to follow up. I mean, this is about children's rights...

(IP3)

In putting the law into practice, the political level has the final call on whether a decision process has taken children's views into account and how well the decision would stand if tried against the articles of the convention—a task that is not easy when simultaneously exploring how the law should be practised.

DISCUSSION

What stands out in this study's results is the now prevailing uncertainty around who is responsible for ensuring children's participation in decision-making processes—the administration or the politicians. Systematic methods or policies to ensure child participation were not in place in all represented committees. Different methods were in use, depending on which type of decision was being made. The most common method for those at the political level was to visit arenas and student councils, where issues can be raised by elected representatives. These results are similar to results in a study by Ozer et al. (2020), who found that there were many methods and forums in use for participation, and they varied depending on the organization and its purpose.

Nordlind et al. (2021) found, in a study about how paediatric departments in Sweden facilitate giving children a voice in their experiences of healthcare, that there is no one and only possible systematic, coordinated way to collect children's opinions—at least not thus far. Nordlind et al. (2021) suggest a validated national patient-reported experience measure to be developed with and aimed at children, which could provide them with equal opportunities to voice their experiences in healthcare, regardless of their diagnoses or which paediatric department they visit.

In our study, the importance of collecting and understanding the views of children was stressed by the politicians interviewed, underlining the importance of ensuring a structured way for them to participate.

The product or service resulting from the decision risked a lack of engagement or lack of addressing the actual issue if the target group was not able to express their views. This finding is in line with a study by Sahlberg et al. (2020), who reported similar results. They argued it was vital that management and politicians focus on the needs and rights of the children in the organization, enabling sufficient care for the individuals.

The structure of the municipalities does not naturally provide for child participation in a structural way based on the design of the system. Sahlberg et al. (2020) found that the structure

of healthcare organizations was not designed to provide for children's participation, as time was lacking for the staff to ensure participation even though knowledge of the nurses, in this case, was sufficient to include children. This finding could also be applicable to the administration of municipalities, where time constraints could be a limitation to ensuring participation in all decisions that concern children, even though available knowledge may suffice.

In our study, developing methods to systematically include child participation was highlighted since many non-formalized methods are currently in use. Decision-makers' attitudes and willingness to include children were put forward as factors enabling or hindering child participation. Culture and habits within the system and among the elected political representatives could provide for distance between the children and the decision-makers, as the culture does not naturally include children due to longstanding practice. Cultural hindrances, such as ways a child could be viewed, have been identified as important to be aware of when facilitating the participation of children (Riekkinen, 2011). These hindrances did not come up frequently in reports about Sweden but were said to occur in local municipalities, nonetheless, based on the politicians' experiences.

Thus, we found that a variety of methods are being used and that more could be done to ensure that children can be heard. The study of Nordlind et al. (2021) found that national coordination can be improved, a finding that could be applied to municipal organization as well. Participation involves access to the process and actual impact from the children's input (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006). Inviting children to access the process of decision-making could be developed in accordance with the given experiences and the voices of the politicians in our study. Forming special channels for use in collaboration with children and young people was also suggested as a way forward for the municipal committees.

The study suggests that forums of importance, such as school councils, be developed to ensure participation—in line with the findings in the study by Shier et al. (2012), which also highlighted that work in schools to facilitate child and young people's participation had been successful.

The views collected revealed a variety of experiences on how the UNCRC, as Swedish law, has to date affected the way committees approach participation by children. That the law is new and not fully implemented into everyday work became apparent, even though the convention had been practised or known prior to becoming law. Change can be seen in municipal organizations and in society, though some participants voiced that no change had been noted and that the conventions had already been implemented in practices prior to the incorporation of the law.

Strengths and limitations

A strength identified was that prior to data collection, an interview guide was constructed and piloted to ensure the questions suited the study aim. Limitations identified were that the interviewer (the first author) could have an impact on a respondent who was answering questions and could possibly misinterpret the answers. The interviewer reflected on the position and asked confirmative questions to ensure that the answers were correctly understood. Other identified limitations were that the interviews could not be held in person due to the pandemic and that the sample size was relatively small in consideration of the number of total politicians in the municipality as well as the number of municipalities in Sweden. However, the participating politicians had vast experience in the municipal organization and structures surrounding child

participation and could offer key insight that was conveyed well over the phone. A further limitation identified was that politicians and children are described in broad terms, and individual differences and differences within the political parties have not been explored. The study offers no insight into these potential differences.

Identified strengths were that the analysis was conducted by all three authors, increasing the understanding of the data. The method used for analysis followed a set of rules to ensure reliability, which can lower the risk of misperceptions (Bengtsson, 2016). The methods used were considered to suit the aim of the study, and the results can provide insight into the topic of child participation.

CONCLUSION

The results suggest that local politicians have experience in child participation and methods to include this practice. However, the methods have not been formalized within the organizations, underlining that work is needed to ensure children's participation in decisions that concern them. Implementation of the UNCRC as law strengthens children's right to participate and has made an impact on society and the way work was being brought forward in the committees.

Active work and ongoing discussions were being held within the municipalities to ensure child participation and the implementation of the UNCRC as law. The importance of understanding the views of the target group in decisions aimed at them was identified to be of foremost importance at the municipal political level. A will to further develop methods and adapt processes to allow access for children to decision-making processes concludes the experiences of the politicians interviewed.

Further research, specifically studying other levels of government along with potential differences in political groups, could illuminate politicians' experiences of child participation. Further research on suitable methods for implementing child participation at the municipal level, along with monitoring the implementation of the UNCRC, could pave the way to further ensure equal practices in municipal organizations where child participation is concerned.

FUNDING INFORMATION

None.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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How to cite this article: JuliusSEN, A. K., Garmy, P., & Olsson, A.-M. (2023). Political representatives' experiences of child participation in decision-making processes: A qualitative interview study. *Children & Society*, 00, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12786>

APPENDIX A

1. Interview guide

Information about the interviewed person.

Age:

Gender:

Committee and function:

How long have you served on the committee?

Occupation (if other than politician):

Interview guide, English

- When I say child participation, what do you associate with the term?
- Describe your experiences associated with the work on child participation.
 - Describe your experiences on how the municipality/committee you represent views child participation.
 - Describe your experiences using the policy documents (or similar documents) that are in place in the committee.
 - Describe how, in your experience, the decision-makers take in the opinions of children in cases within the committee.
 - Describe your experiences of using methods utilized in the committee to assess what is best for every child.
- Describe your experience on the connections among child participation and health, well-being and development of children.
- Describe your experience of the incorporation of the UNCRRC into Swedish law.
 - Can you describe your experiences on the work within the committee that has been put in place to ensure that the new law is followed?
 - Has the new law changed anything, in your experience? In that case, what or how?
- According to your experiences, can you describe whether you see anything that can hinder or accommodate children in participating in decision-making processes in the area of the committee?
- Describe how you would like to see future work with child participation develop in terms of the committees areas of responsibility—including at the political level.

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