

SOCRATES

Compass

Mechanism

Framework



1. Introduction	3
1.1 Project Vision.....	3
1.2 Project Objectives	4
1.3 From the Framework (D2.1) to the Practical Toolkit (D2.2).....	6
1.4 Target Groups: Adapting activities for different age clusters (6-8 and 9-12 years)	8
2. Theoretical Foundations	12
2.1 Children's Participation as a Right: A Human Rights-Based Approach.....	12
2.2 Ensuring Meaningful Participation	14
2.3 The Socrates Compass: A Circular Participation Model	20
3. Evidence Base: Insights from Focus Groups	27
3.1 Methodological approach	27
3.2 Key findings on children's perceptions and needs.....	32
3.3 Barriers to participation and engagement with authorities	37
3.4 Implications for the design of the SCM	42
4. The SCM Methodology: A Circular Journey	48
4.1 The 4 Compass Points: An overview of the circular process (Notice, Explore, Speak, Weigh).	48
4.2 Participatory Action Research (PAR): Empowering children as active researchers	53
4.3 Design for Change (DFC) Integration: Feel, Imagine, Do, Share.....	57
4.4 Appreciative Inquiry: A strength-based approach to problem-solving.....	63
4.5 Theory of Change: Mapping actions to intended strategic outcomes.....	67
5. Implementing the Phases (Methodological Guidelines).....	73
5.1 PHASE 1: NORTH (Notice) – Guided observation and issue identification.....	73
5.2 PHASE 2: EAST (Explore) – Child-led Co-design and Creative Investigation.....	76
5.3 PHASE 3: SOUTH (Speak) – Intergenerational Dialogue and Effective Advocacy.....	82
5.4 PHASE 4: WEST (Weigh) – Reflective Dialogue, Impact Measurement, and Feedback Loops	88
6. Cross-cutting Principles.....	93
6.1 Inclusion and Accessibility: Designing for children with fewer opportunities	93
6.2 Replicability and Sustainability: Creating low-cost, high-impact tools	98
6.3 Safeguarding and child protection	101
7. Conclusion: Moving towards the D2.2 Practical Toolkit	109
Bibliography	112

1. Introduction

The SOCRATES Framework sets out the conceptual, methodological and operational foundations of the SOCRATES Compass Mechanism (SCM), providing the basis for the development of the subsequent Practical Toolkit. It brings together children's rights principles, participatory methodologies, and evidence emerging from the project activities in order to define a coherent approach to meaningful child participation.

Rather than presenting participation as a single consultation moment, the Framework understands it as a gradual, relational and cyclical process. It aims to clarify why children's participation matters, what conditions make it meaningful and inclusive, and how the SCM can support children, facilitators and institutions in moving from listening to dialogue, feedback and shared learning.

1.1 Project Vision

The SOCRATES Project is founded on a core principle: children are not passive recipients of policies designed for them, but active agents capable of shaping the societies in which they live. Rooted in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (2009), the project envisions a Europe where every child — regardless of background, ability, or circumstance — possesses meaningful opportunities to participate in decisions that affect their lives, their communities, and their futures¹.

This vision goes beyond tokenistic consultation. SOCRATES aims to transform the relationship between children and democratic institutions by embedding participation as a continuous practice rather than an occasional event. The project recognises that early engagement in democratic processes helps children develop competencies that serve them throughout life, including critical thinking, communication, problem-solving, and the ability to act as informed and responsible citizens. Participation also fosters capacities such as articulating perspectives, listening to others, negotiating differences, and holding institutions accountable.

In this regard, theoretical frameworks such as the Lundy Model of Child Participation² provide a useful lens to understand what meaningful participation should entail. Space, Voice, Audience,

¹ United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2009). *General comment No. 12 (2009): The right of the child to be heard* (CRC/C/GC/12). United Nations

² Lundy, L. (2007). 'Voice' is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(6), 927–942.

and Influence— emphasizing that participation must ensure that children's views are heard and acted upon, not just collected symbolically. Similarly, Hart's Ladder of Participation distinguishes levels of participation, from non-participation and tokenism to child-initiated and shared decision-making³. Together, these frameworks underline the importance of moving from symbolic involvement to structured, impactful participation processes⁴.

At its core, SOCRATES addresses the gap between the acknowledged importance of children's voices and the fragmented participation mechanisms currently in place across Europe. The project's response is the SOCRATES Compass Mechanism (SCM): a structured, replicable, and adaptable framework that integrates proven participation methodologies into a coherent whole. The SCM is designed not merely to collect children's opinions but to create genuine pathways through which those opinions reach decision-makers and lead to tangible change.

Inclusion is central to the project's design. Children who face higher barriers to participation—those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, children with disabilities, migrant children, and others whose voices are systematically marginalised—are not an afterthought; they are central to SOCRATES and to the design of its mechanisms. The project commits to ensuring that the mechanisms it develops are accessible, welcoming, and responsive to the diversity of children's experiences across Europe.

1.2 Project Objectives

To translate this vision into practice, SOCRATES pursues a set of interconnected objectives spanning individual empowerment, institutional change, and systemic transformation.

1.2.1 Empowering children to express their views

The project targets children aged 6–12, enabling them to articulate opinions on matters that directly affect their lives. Early exposure to participatory practices lays the foundation for lifelong

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033>

³ Hart, R. A. (1992). *Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship* (Innocenti Essays No. 4). UNICEF International Child Development Centre.

⁴ Lundy, L. 'Voice' is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 2007; Hart, R. A., *Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship*, 1992.

civic engagement⁵. Through workshops and guided activities, children develop self-esteem and assertive communication skills, while learning to express their views in safe and inclusive spaces.

1.2.2 Enhancing children's influence on decision-making

Participation alone is insufficient; children must understand how decisions are made, who holds authority, and how to navigate institutional structures effectively⁶. SOCRATES integrates age-appropriate civic education into the SCM, fostering critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills that allow children to engage meaningfully with their communities and institutions.

1.2.3 Strengthening feedback loops and sustaining motivation

A common limitation of participation initiatives is the lack of meaningful feedback⁷. The SCM embeds structured mechanisms explaining which recommendations were adopted, modified, or could not be implemented, fostering mutual understanding and accountability. Transparent responses help children maintain motivation and trust in participatory processes.

1.2.4 Promoting a culture of participation

Sustainable change requires cultural as well as structural shifts. SOCRATES engages not only children but also the adults shaping their environments—teachers, parents, caregivers, and school administrators. By modelling participatory values, listening to children's perspectives, and creating safe spaces for expression, adults reinforce participatory lessons⁸. The project provides training and resources to support these adults in their roles as enablers of children's civic engagement.

1.2.5 Raising awareness of children's rights

SOCRATES also aims to increase awareness of children's legally protected right to participate, as established by the UNCRC. By informing stakeholders and the wider public, the project seeks to make it increasingly unacceptable to design policies affecting children without consulting them.

⁵ Percy-Smith, B., & Patrick Thomas, N. (Eds.). (2009). *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation: Perspectives from Theory and Practice* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203871072>

⁶ Lundy, L. 'Voice' is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 2007.

⁷ United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009.

⁸ Percy-Smith, B., & Patrick Thomas, N. (Eds.), 2009.

1.2.6 Advocating for systemic change

Individual empowerment and cultural change must be accompanied by structural reform. The project advocates for children's inclusion in policy development at local, national, and European levels, grounded in evidence generated through the SCM. By demonstrating the value of children's contributions and showcasing successful partnerships with authorities, SOCRATES contributes to more inclusive, responsive, and child-friendly democratic systems.

1.2.7 Reducing Barriers and Ensuring Inclusion

Participation opportunities are not equally distributed. Socio-economic background, migration status, disability, language, and access to supportive environments can all limit engagement. SOCRATES adopts an inclusive design approach, integrating accessibility, equity, and reflexivity. Materials and activities are cognitively accessible, multi-modal, and culturally sensitive, while partnerships with schools, community organisations, and grassroots actors ensure safe, familiar, and trusting environments. Inclusion is both structural and relational, attentive not only to access but also to the quality and meaning of participation.

1.2.8 Ensuring Long-Term Sustainability

Sustainable participation requires embedding practices as integral components of democratic life. SOCRATES strengthens the capacities of educators, facilitators, authorities, and organisations to independently implement the SCM, supports institutional embedding through curricula and consultation routines, and promotes knowledge transfer through digital tools and European-level exchange. More specifically, the project will develop an online space linked to the facilitators' training course, while also making use of existing initiatives, such as the EU Children's Participation Platform, as relevant reference and dissemination channels. This combination of capacity-building, institutional integration, and digital dissemination supports the sustainability and scalability of children's participation practices, contributing to a broader cultural shift in how children's engagement is understood and implemented across Europe.

1.3 From the Framework (D2.1) to the Practical Toolkit (D2.2)

The SOCRATES project is designed as a continuous journey from evidence-based theory to concrete, on-the-ground application. While the SOCRATES Framework (Deliverable 2.1) sets out the theoretical, methodological, and ethical foundations of children's civic participation, the

Practical Toolkit (Deliverable 2.2) is intended to translate these principles into concrete and usable instruments for educators, facilitators, and, potentially, policymakers.

In this sense, this Framework acts as the "blueprint" for the Toolkit. Drawing on insights emerging from the transnational Focus Groups, the Framework suggests that the Toolkit should not become a rigid, one-size-fits-all manual. Rather, it is expected to evolve as a flexible and adaptable collection of methods, able to respond to different contexts and groups of children.

More specifically, the transition from Framework to Toolkit is guided by four main design directions.

1.3.1 From Abstract Concepts to Hybrid, Modular Tools

Civic participation can often feel abstract or distant for children. For this reason, the Toolkit is expected to translate the SOCRATES Compass into a set of modular tools that combine physical and, where appropriate, digital elements. Tangible materials (such as visual cards, stickers, or interactive boards) may help younger children engage more easily, while simple digital tools (for instance, tablets for research or video for expression) might support older children in organising and sharing their ideas.

1.3.2 From Broad Inclusion to Age-Calibrated Pathways

The Framework highlights how cognitive and communicative needs may change significantly between the ages of 6 and 12. As a result, the Toolkit is designed to be age-responsive. It is supposed to provide facilitators with tools that “translate” activities for younger children (6–8), often relying on playful and embodied approaches, as well as tools that “scaffold” participation for older children (9–12), supporting more structured exploration and early forms of advocacy.

1.3.3 From Consultation to Agency-Building

Findings from the Focus Groups suggest that children often do not lack ideas but may lack confidence or a sense of agency. The Toolkit is therefore intended not only to gather children's views but also to strengthen their ability to express them. This may include guidance on creating emotionally safe spaces, managing group dynamics, and simplifying adult language, so that participation becomes a more enabling experience rather than a purely extractive one.

1.3.4 From "Speaking Up" to "Closing the Loop"

Participation processes may lose meaning if children do not receive feedback. For this reason, the Toolkit is expected to encourage practices that “close the loop”. It may include simple formats and suggestions for adults (such as teachers, local authorities, or other stakeholders) to respond

to children's proposals, explain decisions, or provide updates over time. In this way, the process is intended to support trust and a sense of reciprocity.

Overall, the Framework aims to ensure that the forthcoming SOCRATES Toolkit is grounded in evidence, attentive to children's perspectives, and practically oriented, with the broader intention of helping to bridge the gap between young citizens and local decision-making processes.

1.4 Target Groups: Adapting activities for different age clusters (6-8 and 9-12 years)

A central principle of the SOCRATES Compass is that children's engagement in civic participation evolves significantly with age. Focus groups conducted across partner countries highlight clear differences in cognitive development, emotional maturity, and communication preferences between younger and older children. Research also shows that civic engagement develops progressively across childhood and early adolescence, closely linked to changes in cognitive, emotional, and social capacities⁹. As children mature, reasoning skills, self-concept, perspective-taking, and interpersonal competencies influence how they understand social issues and participate in collective processes. Consequently, participatory approaches should be adapted to developmental characteristics rather than applying a uniform methodology. The SOCRATES Compass promotes an approach that is sensitive to these stages, ensuring activities are adapted in both content and format to meet children where they are.

While two main age clusters are identified – 6–8 and 9–12 years – it is acknowledged that development is not strictly linear. Flexibility remains essential in practice. Age should therefore be considered a guiding reference rather than a rigid classification, with facilitators encouraged to adapt dynamically depending on group composition, context, and individual capacities¹⁰.

1.4.1 The 6–8 Age Group: concrete thinking and experiential engagement

For children aged 6 to 8, participation in civic life remains largely abstract and requires simplification. Their understanding of the world is primarily rooted in immediate surroundings,

⁹ McLoughlin, S., Polizzi, G., Harrison, T., Moller, F., Maile, A., Picton, I., & Clark, C. (2024). *Measuring civic engagement in young children*. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, 42(1), 14–28.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/07342829231205070>; Castro, A.J., Fozi, A., Hung, C.-Y., Etoh, M., Bergin, C. (2025). *Civic and Prosocial Decision-Making in Early Adolescents*. *Youth*, 5, 33. <https://doi.org/10.3390/youth5020033>.

¹⁰ McLoughlin et al., 2024; Castro et al., 2025.

such as home, school, or playground. Institutional roles, including figures like the mayor or local authorities, are difficult to grasp unless connected to familiar and tangible references. Authority is typically understood through known individuals, such as teachers or parents. Similarly, problems identified by children tend to be visible and concrete, rather than broad community or societal issues.

Children in this age group prefer expressive and sensory forms of communication. They are generally more comfortable speaking or drawing than writing, and they respond positively to visual, tactile, and interactive activities. Discussion-based approaches alone are insufficient to sustain engagement. Participation should be embedded in playful and experiential formats, allowing children to explore ideas through doing, observing, and creating. Activities such as drawing, role-playing, using stickers or visual cards, and storytelling can enhance their ability to express opinions and engage with topics.

Methodologically, the SOCRATES tools translate abstract civic concepts into concrete experiences. Participation should be framed as lived and visible rather than conceptual or analytical. A key finding relates to the “explore” phase: younger children tend to propose solutions immediately, without analysing causes or perspectives. This is a developmental tendency toward immediate, action-oriented thinking. The Compass should include structured and guided ways to introduce exploration, such as concrete questions, observation exercises, or playful “detective” activities. The methodological emphasis is on scaffolding attention and curiosity rather than analytical reasoning¹¹.

1.4.2 The 9–12 Age Group: emerging abstraction and collaborative thinking

Children aged 9 to 12 show a more advanced capacity to engage with complex ideas and collaborative processes. While they still benefit from concrete examples, they increasingly understand abstract concepts, including institutional roles. They can reflect on issues beyond their immediate environment, engaging with broader community concerns and social dynamics.

This cognitive shift allows deeper engagement with participation phases, including discussion, analysis, and collective decision-making. Children in this age group are more comfortable with structured activities involving interaction with peers, such as group discussions, brainstorming, role-play, or simulations. They can justify opinions, consider alternative viewpoints, and build on peers’ ideas, making collaborative learning highly effective. Creative methods remain relevant as support for reflection and communication rather than primary engagement.

¹¹ McLoughlin et al., 2024.

The “explore” phase is more accessible: children can gather information before proposing solutions, for example through photos, interviews, or collecting opinions. The Compass should provide basic structures to guide investigation, helping children identify causes, consider consequences, and organise ideas. Encouraging constructive dialogue ensures a participatory environment where all perspectives are valued. Communication can include written messages, collaborative posters, or digital tools like videos and presentations. Flexibility remains important to ensure all children participate according to their strengths and preferences¹².

1.4.3 The transitional cohort (8–10 years): a developmental bridge

Children aged 8 to 10 form a transitional group, combining elements of concrete and abstract thinking. Some grasp complex concepts such as fairness, compromise, or collective decision-making, while others rely on concrete references and may struggle with institutional vocabulary. Facilitators should establish a shared baseline of key concepts and ensure clear, accessible explanations.

This cohort often expresses ideas through physical and spatial means, using movement, gestures, or space to demonstrate thinking. Embodied and experiential learning should be incorporated, allowing children to act out situations or physically engage with materials. Multi-modal facilitation strategies that combine verbal explanation, visual tools, and embodied participation are structurally necessary to ensure inclusion and comprehension¹³.

1.4.4 Strategic implications: age as a continuum of participation

These findings lead to an important strategic implication for the SOCRATES Compass: age should not be treated as a rigid category, but rather as a continuum of development. While the distinction between 6–8 and 9–12 provides a useful framework, facilitators must be able to adapt activities dynamically based on the specific group they are working with. This requires a flexible design that allows for different levels of complexity, multiple modes of engagement, and adjustments in pacing and support.

Ultimately, the SOCRATES Compass is designed as a progressive and adaptable framework. For younger children, it should prioritise accessibility, playfulness, and sensory engagement, helping them to express ideas and begin to understand their environment. For older children, it should provide structure and guidance to support deeper reflection, collaboration, and communication. Across all age groups, the emphasis should be on inclusion, participation, and the gradual

¹² Castro et al., 2025.

¹³ McLoughlin et al., 2024; Castro et al., 2025.

development of skills that enable children to move from expressing their views to exploring issues and, eventually, taking informed action.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Children's Participation as a Right: A Human Rights-Based Approach

Children's participation is a fundamental human right embedded in international and European legal frameworks. Within the SOCRATES Compass Mechanism, participation is both a guiding principle and a practical approach, ensuring that children are acknowledged as active agents capable of shaping decisions affecting their lives¹⁴.

At the core of this right is Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which establishes the child's right to freely express their views in all matters affecting them, with those views given due weight according to age and maturity¹⁵. This provision has been ratified by all EU Member States and is widely regarded as a cornerstone of children's rights. At the European level, Article 24 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union further confirms children's right to express their views and to have them considered in accordance with their age and maturity, establishing participation as a legally recognised right within EU primary law¹⁶.

The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child identifies participation as one of its six thematic priorities, promoting mechanisms that enable children to contribute to decision-making at local, national, and EU levels. Additionally, the European Pillar of Social Rights supports children's participation indirectly by promoting equal opportunities, inclusion, and access to quality education—conditions essential for meaningful engagement¹⁷.

Theoretical models provide operational guidance for ensuring genuine participation. Roger Hart's "Ladder of Participation" distinguishes between non-participatory practices, tokenism, and authentic participation, including child-initiated and shared decision-making¹⁸. Within the Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA), participation is characterised as voluntary, informed,

¹⁴ United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (Arts. 3, 5, 12). Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

¹⁵ United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the rights of the child* (Art. 12). United Nations Treaty Series. <https://treaties.un.org>.

¹⁶ European Union. (2012). *Charter of fundamental rights of the European Union* (Art. 24). Official Journal of the European Union, OJ C 326, 26.10.2012, pp. 391–407.

¹⁷ European Commission. (2021, March 24). *EU strategy on the rights of the child* (COM(2021) 142 final). EUR-Lex. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0142>.

¹⁸ Hart, R. A., 1992.

inclusive, and influential, aligning with the UNCRC principle of “evolving capacities” and ensuring that opportunities are adapted to children’s developmental stages¹⁹.

The HRBA offers a normative and operational framework grounded in international human rights law:

- **Universality and Non-Discrimination:** All children have equal rights to participate, regardless of gender, disability, ethnicity, migration status, or socio-economic background.
- **Best Interests of the Child:** Participation must be guided by children’s best interests, ensuring that their views are central in determining what those interests entail²⁰.
- **Accountability and Rule of Law:** Duty-bearers—educators, institutions, policymakers—are responsible for creating conditions that enable participation and must be held accountable for shortcomings.
- **Empowerment:** Children should acquire the skills, confidence, and knowledge to participate effectively, including civic education, digital literacy, and critical thinking.
- **Participation as Both Means and End:** Participation is a right itself and a means to realise other rights, such as education, protection, and health.

Operationally, the SOCRATES Compass Mechanism integrates these principles across all project phases.

Children are actively involved in **co-creating and co-designing** activities, tools, and evaluation criteria, ensuring relevance and ownership. **Communication is child-friendly**, using clear language, visual aids, and culturally appropriate formats. **Participation is safe and ethical**, compliant with safeguarding standards and data protection regulations.²¹ **Feedback** mechanisms inform children of how their input has influenced decisions, supporting trust and avoiding tokenism. **Inclusion** mechanisms actively target children with fewer opportunities, such as those with disabilities or migrant backgrounds.

¹⁹ United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the rights of the child* (Art. 5). United Nations Treaty Series. <https://treaties.un.org>.

²⁰ United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the rights of the child* (Art. 3). United Nations Treaty Series. <https://treaties.un.org>

²¹ Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Directive 95/46/EC (General Data Protection Regulation) (Text with EEA relevance). (2016). *Official Journal*, L 119, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2016/679/oj>

Meaningful participation is monitored using indicators such as the number and diversity of children involved, evidence of children's input influencing project outcomes, satisfaction levels, accessibility and inclusiveness of methods, and compliance with ethical and data protection standards. These indicators align with EU requirements for impact assessment and accountability in funded projects.

Challenges remain, including persistent tokenistic practices, power imbalances between adults and children, and resource constraints such as time, training, and funding. Addressing these requires institutional commitment, capacity-building, and continuous evaluation²².

2.2 Ensuring Meaningful Participation

Participation is often defined simply as “the fact of taking part, as in some action or attempt”²³. At first glance, this definition may seem sufficient. However, such a broad understanding can result in what researchers and practitioners call “pseudo-participation.” In these cases, children may be present in activities, yet their opinions, needs, and perspectives are not genuinely considered. Merely allowing children to attend does not ensure meaningful or influential engagement.

Meaningful participation should reflect the degree to which children can express themselves, influence decisions, and see that their contributions have a real impact. This concern is highlighted in Roger Hart's “Ladder of Participation,” which distinguishes between forms of tokenistic involvement and authentic participation. Children are sometimes included symbolically, consulted without impact, or used to support adult agendas. Hart's framework challenges adults to assess whether children are truly empowered or simply creating the appearance of inclusion²⁴.

A key reason for frequent misunderstandings of participation lies in dominant cultural perspectives on childhood. In many societies, children are viewed primarily as “future adults” rather than “citizens of today”²⁵. This view, reproduced over generations, frames children as

²² European Parliament, Council of the European Union, & European Commission. (2017). *European Pillar of Social Rights*. [Interinstitutional Proclamation]. Publications Office of the European Union. EUR-Lex Official Journal.

²³ Dictionary.com. (n.d.). Participation. In Dictionary.com. <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/participation>.

²⁴ Hart, R.A., 1992.

²⁵ Department of Children and Youth Affairs. (2015). *National strategy on children and young people's participation in decision-making, 2015–2020*. Government Publications. <https://assets.gov.ie/24462/48a6f98a921446ad85829585389e57de.pdf>.

incomplete or inexperienced, and leads adults to assume they know what is best. Authority based on age is, therefore, often accepted as legitimate and unquestioned.

This dynamic can be understood through the concept of adultism, which describes the systematic privileging of adults and discrimination against children based on age. Adultism reinforces power hierarchies, with patterns of control transmitted from one generation to the next. Even young adults who were subjected to adult authority may unconsciously replicate these behaviours when they gain authority themselves. In this sense, adultism becomes a cycle that reinforces unequal power relations between adults and children²⁶.

Adultist attitudes have significant consequences for participation. When adults see themselves as inherently superior, children's perspectives may be dismissed, minimised, or ignored. Participation then becomes limited to situations where children are expected to comply with adult expectations, rather than actively shaping processes themselves. Genuine participation requires adults to challenge these assumptions and recognize children as competent social actors with rights, experiences, and viewpoints of their own.

Promoting meaningful participation begins with a change in adult attitudes. Adults working with children must critically reflect on their behaviour, communication styles, and assumptions about childhood. Recognizing adultist tendencies is the first step. By seeing children as partners and allies rather than passive recipients, adults can foster relationships based on mutual respect, trust, and shared decision-making.

Creating meaningful participation also requires safe spaces where children feel free to express themselves, and where their contributions have a visible impact. Models such as the Lundy Framework provide guidance on structuring participation so that children's voices are genuinely heard and influence outcomes.

2.2.1 The Lundy Model: Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence

The Lundy Model of Participation, developed by Laura Lundy at Queen's University Belfast, provides a rights-based framework for implementing Article 12 of the UNCRC. It translates children's right to express their views into a structured and practical approach, supporting decision-makers, educators, and professionals in ensuring meaningful participation²⁷.

The Lundy Model provides a practical framework to ensure meaningful participation through four interconnected elements: Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence (see Figure 1).

²⁶ Kivel, P. (2024). *Working with young people as adult allies*. Taboo, Spring 2024, 86. Caddo Gap Press.

²⁷ Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015.

Space – Children must have safe, inclusive, and supportive environments in which to form and express their views freely. Participation cannot occur unless children feel secure, respected, and comfortable. Environments should actively encourage openness and trust, ensuring that all children, including those who may be marginalised due to disability, language, or socio-economic background, can participate meaningfully.

Voice – Children must be enabled to express their views effectively in ways that suit them. They should be provided with age-appropriate and accessible information to form informed opinions. A variety of expression methods—speaking, writing, drawing, digital tools, and creative or play-based activities—should be offered. Participation must remain voluntary, with no coercion.

Audience – Children's views should reach those with decision-making power. Adults must actively listen and engage with children's contributions, and children should know who is receiving their input. This transparency strengthens accountability and trust in the participatory process.

Influence – Participation is meaningful only when children's views are considered in decision-making. While not every suggestion can be accepted, input should have the potential to influence outcomes. Feedback mechanisms are essential, demonstrating respect for children's contributions and showing that their participation matters.

A key strength of the Lundy Model is that it is non-hierarchical. Unlike Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation, it does not rank participation from "low" to "high" levels. Instead, it focuses on ensuring that all four elements are present for participation to be meaningful²⁸. The model is widely applied in policy and practice and is a central part of Ireland's National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making. While originally developed for children, it is also used for young people up to the age of 24, reflecting its broader applicability.

Overall, the Lundy Model provides a clear and practical framework for turning children's rights into real participation. It ensures that children are not only given opportunities to speak but are also **heard, respected, and able to influence decisions** affecting their lives.

²⁸ Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015.

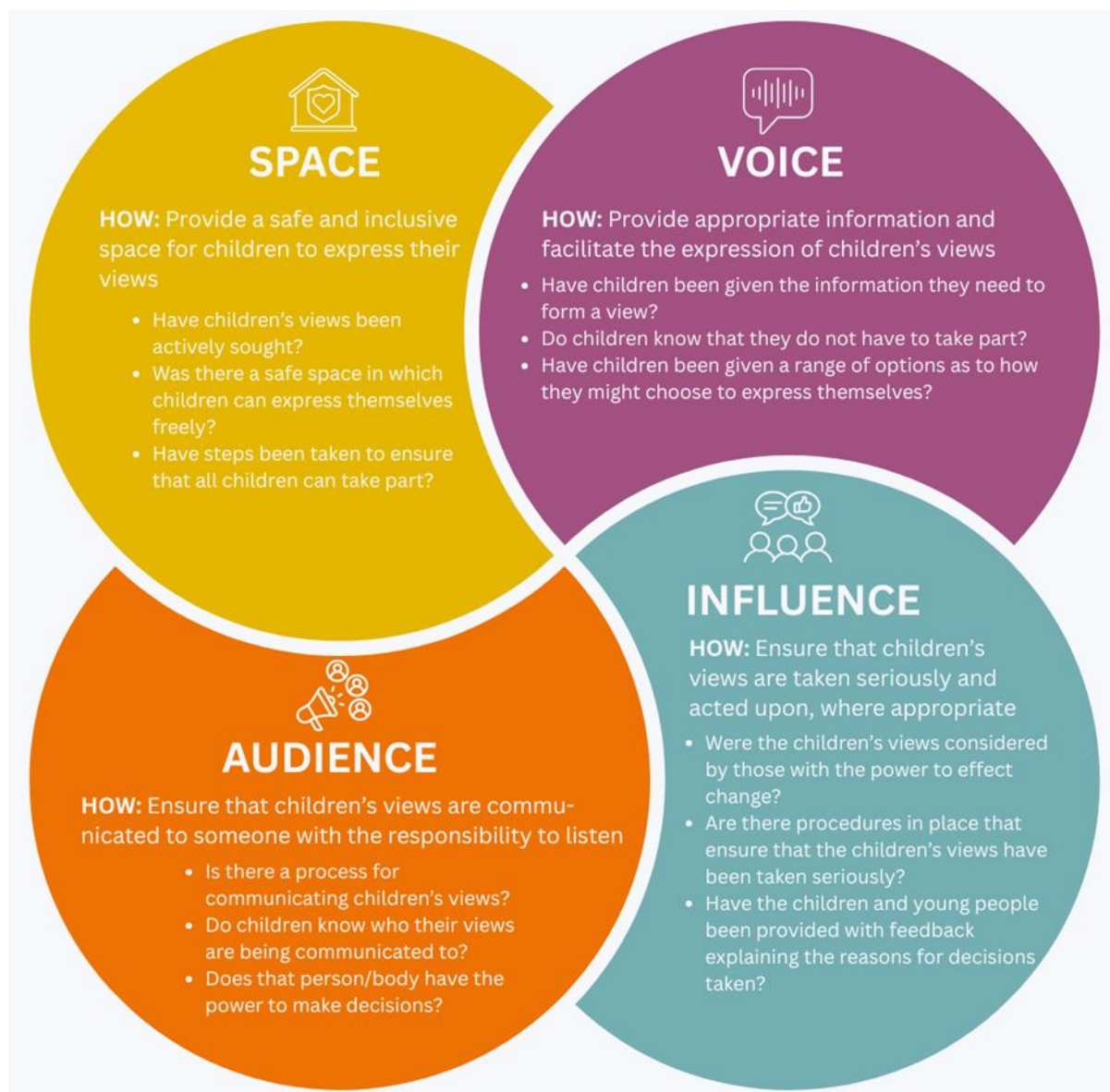


Figure 1. The Lundy Model of Participation: Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence. This diagram illustrates the four essential elements required for meaningful child participation. Adapted from Laura Lundy's framework and Ireland's National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making (2015–2020).

2.2.2 Hart's Ladder: From Tokenism to Genuine Participation

Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation is a widely used framework for understanding the different ways children can be involved in projects, decision-making processes, and community activities²⁹. It is designed to help adults reflect critically on how they involve children, promoting a shift from tokenistic inclusion to meaningful participation and citizenship.

The ladder's structure can be visualised in Figure 2, which maps the progression from non-participation to genuine child-led and shared decision-making. The ladder is organised into two broad categories. The lower three rungs represent non-participation, while the upper five describe increasing levels of genuine engagement.

At the lower levels:

Manipulation occurs when children are used to support an adult-driven cause without understanding its purpose. They may be guided to act or speak in ways that serve adult agendas, without being informed about the real context.

Decoration involves children being present for visibility, such as wearing T-shirts or attending events, without any involvement in planning or decision-making.

Tokenism describes situations where children appear to have a voice – for example, sitting on a panel – but in reality, they have little influence and no real choice over representation or contribution.

The upper levels reflect more meaningful participation:

Assigned but Informed: Adults design and lead the project, but children understand its purpose and play a genuine, non-decorative role.

Consulted and Informed: Children's opinions are actively sought and considered, although adults retain overall responsibility.

Adult-Initiated, Shared Decisions with Children: Adults start the project but share decision-making power with children.

Child-Initiated and Directed: Children themselves design and lead the process, taking full responsibility for planning and execution.

²⁹ Hart, R. A., 1992.

Child-Initiated, Shared Decisions with Adults: Children lead initiatives while actively involving adults as equal partners in decision-making.

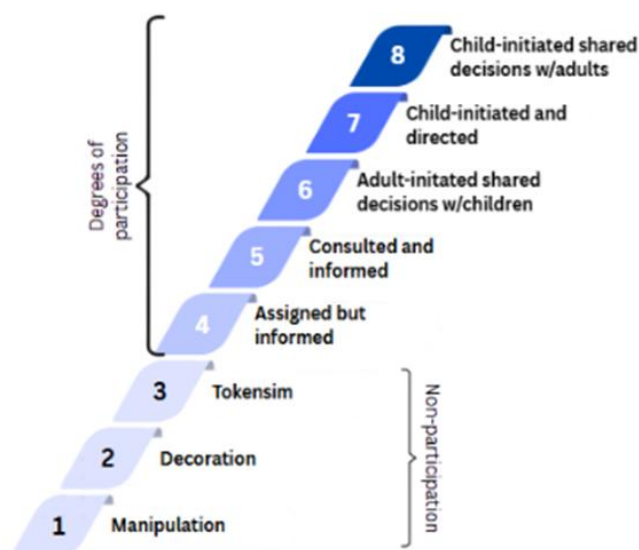
Hart later clarified several misunderstandings regarding his ladder. It is not a sequential developmental model, suggesting that children must climb rungs as they grow older. Rather, it describes the extent to which adults and institutions create participatory opportunities, rather than measuring children's competence or development. The ladder was never intended as a comprehensive assessment tool; it is meant to stimulate dialogue, reflection, and critical thinking. Hart also highlighted its limitations, noting that informal participation, such as play, peer interactions, and everyday social experiences, is often overlooked, despite its importance in shaping children's agency and identity.

Regarding power at the highest levels, Hart emphasised that child-initiated and directed projects are valuable but not the ultimate goal. Shared decision-making between children and adults is considered morally superior, reflecting an inclusive understanding of citizenship, where all individuals—children and adults—have rights and responsibilities in decision-making.

Despite its limitations, Hart's Ladder remains influential for distinguishing tokenistic from genuine participation. It encourages adults to critically examine the power and agency they provide to children, highlighting how easily participation can be symbolic without real impact. Ultimately, Hart's work shifts the perspective from seeing participation as a fixed ladder to climb

toward understanding it as a dynamic relationship between children and adults, shaped by context, culture, and shared responsibility³⁰.

Figure 2. Hart's Ladder of Participation. The ladder illustrates eight levels of children's involvement, from non-participation (Manipulation, Decoration, Tokenism) to increasing degrees of meaningful participation, including child-initiated and shared decision-making with adults. Adapted from Hart, 1992.



2.3 The Socrates Compass: A Circular Participation Model

The SOCRATES Compass Mechanism (SCM) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and implementing children's participation as a continuous, circular process. Unlike traditional linear approaches, which often end once children have shared their views, the SCM situates participation within an iterative cycle where children identify issues, explore them collaboratively, communicate their perspectives, and receive accountable feedback.

This model integrates insights from international child rights frameworks, empirical research, and focus group findings across multiple countries. It is designed to be child-centred, developmentally accessible, and relational, ensuring that participation is meaningful, inclusive, and empowering. The Compass conceptualizes participation not as isolated events, but as a dynamic interplay of experiences, relationships, and structured engagement with adults and institutions.

³⁰ Hart, R. A. 2008. "Stepping Back from 'The Ladder': Reflections on a Model of Participatory Work with Children." In *Participation and Learning*, edited by A. Reid, B. Bruun Jensen, J. Nikel, and V. Simovska, 19–31. Dordrecht: Springer.

This framework guides the reader through the SCM's core principles and operational phases, illustrating how participation can be experienced as a continuous, circular process. The following sections explore the limitations of linear models, the four interconnected Compass points—NOTICE, EXPLORE, SPEAK, and WEIGH—and how feedback, adaptability, and agency-building are integrated to support meaningful, inclusive, and context-sensitive engagement in educational, social, and community settings.

2.3.1 Beyond Linear Participation Models

Children's participation is widely recognised as a fundamental right within international and European child rights frameworks³¹. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) establishes children's right to express their views freely in matters affecting them and to have those views taken seriously according to their age and maturity. However, despite growing institutional attention to participation, many participatory processes remain largely consultative in practice³².

Traditional approaches often follow a linear logic: children share opinions, adults collect feedback, and the process ends without continuity or sustained engagement³³. Frequently, children are "heard" without knowing whether their views influenced decisions or whether any action followed.

Findings from the SOCRATES focus groups confirm these limitations. Across all participating countries, children described situations where adults appeared to listen formally but failed to provide visible follow-up. Many referred to what can be described as a "fake yes": adults responding positively or vaguely without subsequent action or explanation. Children consistently emphasised the importance of receiving clear, respectful, and understandable feedback. They generally accepted disagreement or negative decisions if communicated honestly, but rejected silence, ambiguity, or absence of explanation. The principle of the "explained no" therefore emerges as central within the SCM framework.

³¹ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, November 20, 1989, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>; European Commission, 2021.

³² Lundy, L., 2007.; Council of Europe. (2022). *Council of Europe strategy for the rights of the child (2022-2027)*. Council of Europe Publishing. <https://edoc.coe.int/en/children-s-rights/11015-council-of-europe-strategy-for-the-rights-of-the-child-2022-2027.html>.

³³ Hart, R.A., 1992; Shier, H. (2001). Pathways to participation: Openings, opportunities and obligations. *Children & Society*, 15(2), 107–117.

Participation is also deeply relational³⁴. Children's willingness to engage is shaped by past experiences of being listened to, ignored, encouraged, or dismissed. When contributions are acknowledged and respected, children are more likely to participate in the future. Conversely, symbolic or ineffective participation can lead to disengagement and the belief that their voices have limited value within institutional settings. Across Austria, Greece, Italy, Romania, and Spain, many children expressed scepticism toward institutional participation but valued the role of trusted adults as facilitators, mediators, or supporters. These findings highlight the fundamental connection between participation and trust-building.

Focus group results further showed that participation cannot rely exclusively on formal verbal consultation formats. Younger children, and those with language, cognitive, or confidence-related barriers often require visual, collective, and emotionally safe approaches to engage meaningfully³⁵.

In response to these limitations, the SOCRATES Compass Mechanism (SCM) adopts a circular understanding of participation. Rather than a single moment of consultation, the SCM conceptualizes participation as an ongoing process: children identify issues, explore them collaboratively, communicate their perspectives, and receive visible, accountable responses that inform future engagement.

This circular logic underpins the SCM and informs its four interconnected phases: NOTICE, EXPLORE, SPEAK, and WEIGH.

2.3.2 The Four Compass Points of the SCM

The SOCRATES Compass Mechanism is structured around four interconnected phases—NOTICE, EXPLORE, SPEAK, and WEIGH—which together form a circular participation process. Rather than functioning as isolated steps, these phases represent interconnected dimensions of participatory experience through which children gradually strengthen confidence, agency, and engagement with their communities and decision-making processes.

The model is designed to reflect how children themselves experience participation³⁶. The focus group findings showed that children do not approach civic engagement through abstract

³⁴ Percy-Smith, B., & Patrick Thomas, N., 2010.

³⁵ United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child., 2009; Lansdown G (2010) The realisation of children's participation rights. Critical reflections. In: Percy-Smith B, Thomas N (eds) *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation: Perspectives from Theory and Practice*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 11–23.

³⁶ Clark, A., & Moss, P. (2011). *Listening to young children: The mosaic approach* (2nd ed.). National Children's Bureau.

institutional logic, but through lived experiences, relationships, emotions, and everyday interactions³⁷. The Compass therefore translates participation into a child-centred and developmentally accessible journey.

NOTICE represents the starting point. In this phase, children identify issues, situations, or experiences that affect their daily lives and communities. The SCM recognises that children notice problems primarily through direct observation, emotional responses, and lived experience rather than abstract political concepts. The purpose of this phase is to support children in recognising that their everyday experiences and observations are legitimate entry points for participation.

EXPLORE focuses on deepening understanding through collaborative reflection and investigation. Children move beyond immediate reactions to explore causes, perspectives, and possible solutions. Focus groups highlighted that exploration is most effective when creative, interactive, and collective, rather than purely formal or discussion-based.

SPEAK represents the phase in which children communicate ideas, concerns, and proposals to adults and decision-makers. Advocacy within the SCM is approached not as individual performance or formal debate, but as supported intergenerational dialogue. Findings show that children prefer collective, prepared, and emotionally safe forms of communication when interacting with authority figures³⁸.

WEIGH focuses on reflection, feedback, and accountability³⁹. Children consider how their contributions were received and the resulting impact. Focus groups consistently highlighted that feedback is central to children's perception of meaningful participation, particularly when adults provide clear and respectful explanations.

Together, the four Compass points form a **continuous participatory cycle** rather than a fixed sequence of activities. Each phase informs the next, while the quality of the WEIGH phase directly

³⁷ Thomas, N. (2007). Towards a Theory of Children's Participation. *The International Journal of Children's Rights*, 15(2), 199-218. <https://doi.org/10.1163/092755607X206489>; James, A., & Prout, A. (Eds.). (1997). *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203362600>.

³⁸ Lundy, L., McEvoy, L., & Byrne, B. (2011). Working With Young Children as Co-Researchers: An Approach Informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *Early Education and Development*, 22(5), 714-736. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2011.596463>.

³⁹ Hart, R. A., 1992.

shapes children's future willingness to NOTICE, explore, SPEAK, and engage again. This circular structure reinforces long-term agency, confidence, and a sense of democratic belonging.

2.3.3 Circularity, Feedback Loops, and the Reconstruction of Agency

A central innovation of the SOCRATES Compass Mechanism lies in its circular understanding of participation. Unlike linear models that conclude once children express their views, the SCM recognises that participation becomes meaningful only when children receive visible, understandable, and accountable responses from adults and institutions.

Focus group findings indicate that children evaluate participation not merely based on whether they were allowed to speak, but on what happens afterwards. For this reason, the WEIGH phase is not a final or optional step. Instead, it reconnects directly to NOTICE, shaping children's future willingness to engage and reinforcing the participatory cycle.

Within the SCM, feedback is understood not simply as communication of outcomes, but as a core participatory practice that fosters recognition, accountability, and mutual trust⁴⁰. Each participatory experience influences future confidence, motivation, and engagement, creating a dynamic, self-reinforcing process.

Through this approach, the SCM not only facilitates individual participation activities⁴¹ but also gradually reconstructs children's sense of agency. By demonstrating that their perspectives can enter into genuine dialogue with adults, institutions, and community processes, children learn that their contributions are meaningful and have a tangible impact.

2.3.4 Flexibility and Adaptability Across Contexts

The SOCRATES Compass Mechanism is designed as a flexible and adaptable framework rather than a fixed set of activities. Focus group findings highlight that children's participation is shaped by age, cognitive development, social context, confidence levels, and the specific environment in which activities occur. Consequently, a "one-size-fits-all" approach risks excluding children with diverse needs, communication styles, and levels of prior experience.

To address this, the SCM adopts a modular and non-prescriptive structure, allowing facilitators to adjust methods, tools, and levels of complexity according to each group's characteristics. This

⁴⁰ Cook-Sather, A. (2006). Sound, Presence, and Power: "Student Voice" in Educational Research and Reform. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 36(4), 359-390. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-873X.2006.00363.x>; Fielding, M. (2004). Transformative approaches to student voice: Theoretical underpinnings, recalcitrant realities. *British Educational Research Journal*, 30(2), 295-311. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0141192042000195236>.

⁴¹ Shier, H., 2001.; Lundy, L., 2007.

flexibility is especially important across the three developmental clusters identified during the focus groups:

Younger children (6–8 years): Participation relies heavily on visual, playful, and concrete experiences. Abstract civic concepts are challenging at this stage, making drawings, role-play, storytelling, movement, and tactile materials essential for engagement⁴².

Transitional group (8–10 years): This group benefits from a gradual shift between concrete and abstract thinking. Embodied learning, guided examples, and collaborative exploration are supported while maintaining strong visual and interactive methods.

Older children (9–12 years): Children demonstrate greater capacity for structured reflection, collaborative investigation, and intentional communication with adults and decision-makers. Creative and peer-based approaches remain important as complementary methods.

The SCM is designed to function across diverse educational and social environments, including formal schools, non-formal education spaces, and community-based contexts. Focus groups highlighted differences between public schools, bilingual or highly structured educational environments, and informal after-school centres, particularly regarding children's confidence, perceived agency, and relationships with adults. This underscores the need for adaptability over standardisation.

Finally, inclusion and accessibility are embedded throughout the SCM design. Children facing language barriers, cognitive difficulties, lower confidence, or vulnerable social conditions may require additional support to participate meaningfully. The framework promotes collective formats, emotionally safe environments, simplified language, and integration of visual, spatial, and experiential methods, reducing reliance on purely verbal communication and ensuring that all children can engage fully.

2.3.5 The SCM as an Agency-Building Framework

The SCM is not primarily designed to produce formal civic proposals or to simulate institutional decision-making processes. Its central objective is to strengthen children's sense of agency by

⁴² Piaget, J. (1952). *The origins of intelligence in children*. (M. Cook, Trans.). W. W. Norton & Company. <https://doi.org/10.1037/11494-000>; Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society: Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Edited by Michael Cole et al., Harvard University Press. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjf9vz4>.

creating meaningful opportunities for expression, dialogue, reflection, and influence within environments that are accessible, supportive, and responsive⁴³.

Focus group findings indicate that children already possess a strong awareness of fairness, safety, well-being, and community issues affecting their daily lives. Yet many participants expressed doubts about whether their voices would be taken seriously by adults or institutions. Some described themselves as “too young” to make a difference or expected that adults would ignore their views regardless of what they said. These findings highlight that one of the main barriers to participation is not a lack of interest, but limited confidence in the value and impact of children’s contributions.

Within this context, the SCM approaches participation as a gradual process of building confidence and participatory literacy. Through the four Compass phases, children are supported in recognising that their experiences and perspectives are valid, learning how to explore issues collaboratively, communicating with others in safe and meaningful ways, and understanding how dialogue with adults and institutions functions in practice.

Importantly, the framework does not position children as isolated actors expected to navigate participation independently. Instead, it emphasises the role of supportive relationships, collective expression, and intergenerational dialogue. Participation is understood as a shared process in which adults act as facilitators, listeners, and enablers rather than gatekeepers of legitimacy.

The SCM also recognises that meaningful participation is closely connected to trust. Children are more likely to engage when adults respond respectfully, communicate transparently, and demonstrate genuine consideration for their contributions. The framework, therefore, emphasises not only children’s ability to speak, but also adults’ capacity to listen, explain, and provide accountable feedback.

Through this approach, the SCM contributes to a more inclusive and relational culture of participation, in which children are recognised not as passive recipients of decisions, but as legitimate social actors capable of contributing to discussions that affect their lives and communities.

⁴³ Bandura, A., Barbaranelli, C., Caprara, G. V., & Pastorelli, C. (2001). Self-efficacy beliefs as shapers of children's aspirations and career trajectories. *Child development*, 72(1), 187–206.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8624.00273>; Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press.
[Development as freedom | Kuangalia.](#)

3. Evidence Base: Insights from Focus Groups

The design of the SOCRATES Compass Mechanism (SCM) is grounded not only in legal and theoretical frameworks but also in empirical evidence drawn from children's lived experiences. This chapter presents the evidence base developed through transnational focus groups, providing insights into how children perceive their rights, opportunities for participation, and the barriers they encounter across diverse European contexts.

The focus groups were intentionally designed to be participatory, qualitative, and child-centred, ensuring that the data reflect authentic experiences rather than adult assumptions. By capturing children's perspectives across multiple countries and educational contexts, the evidence provides a robust foundation for designing a participatory framework that is inclusive, adaptable, and sensitive to developmental and contextual differences.

The following sections first describe the methodological approach used to gather and interpret data (Section 3.1), then outline the key findings regarding children's perceptions, needs, and preferred modes of participation (Section 3.2). Subsequent sections examine the barriers that hinder meaningful participation (Section 3.3) and conclude with an analysis of implications for the SCM design (Section 3.4). This structure ensures a clear link between evidence and the practical and conceptual development of the Compass Mechanism.

3.1 Methodological approach

This section presents the methodological approach used to build the evidence base of the SOCRATES Compass Mechanism (SCM). The methodology should not be understood only as a description of how data were collected. It plays a more strategic role within the Framework, as it explains how the SCM was grounded in children's lived experiences, rather than being developed only from theoretical assumptions or adult interpretations of participation⁴⁴.

The approach was designed to capture children's perceptions, needs and participation patterns across diverse European contexts. At the same time, it needed to remain sufficiently structured to allow comparison between countries, while also being flexible enough to preserve the richness, spontaneity and diversity of children's expression. This balance between structure and openness is particularly important in a project such as SOCRATES, where the objective is not only

⁴⁴ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009.

to understand what children think, but also to observe how they participate, what supports their engagement, and what may limit their ability to express themselves meaningfully.

3.1.1 A Participatory and Qualitative Design

A qualitative and participatory research design was adopted across the consortium, using focus group discussions as the main method for data collection. This approach was considered particularly appropriate because it allowed children to interact with one another, exchange experiences, and reflect collectively on issues related to participation, rights, community life and relationships with adults⁴⁵.

The use of focus groups also made it possible to observe group dynamics, not only individual responses. This was important because children's participation is often shaped by peer interaction, confidence levels, trust, and the emotional atmosphere of the group. In this sense, the methodology reflected the same principles that underpin the SCM itself: participation, dialogue, inclusion and co-construction of meaning⁴⁶.

Across the consortium, focus groups were implemented in different educational and social settings, including both formal and non-formal environments. This diversity made it possible to collect insights from children participating in different institutional, cultural and socio-economic contexts. The findings therefore do not represent a single or uniform experience of participation, but rather a set of recurring patterns and context-specific differences that can inform the development of an adaptable mechanism.

3.1.2 Balancing Structure and Flexibility

A key methodological feature of the focus groups was the use of a guided conversation approach. The sessions were not structured as rigid interviews, but they were also not entirely open-ended. Facilitators used thematic prompts to guide the discussion while leaving space for children to introduce their own experiences, examples, concerns and interpretations.

This balance was important for two reasons. On the one hand, it ensured that all partners explored comparable themes, allowing the consortium to identify common patterns across countries. On the other hand, it allowed facilitators to respond to the specific dynamics of each group, including differences in age, communication style, confidence, attention span and educational context.

⁴⁵ Morgan, D.L. (1997). *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*. 2nd Edition, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412984287>; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009.

⁴⁶ Morgan, D.L., 1997.

This methodological choice directly informs the design of the SCM. Like the focus groups, the Compass requires a clear structure, but it cannot function as a rigid script. It needs to provide facilitators with a recognisable pathway while allowing them to adapt tools, language, pacing and interaction formats to the children they are working with.

3.1.3 Age-Responsive and Context-Sensitive Implementation

The methodology was intentionally adapted to different age groups and implementation contexts. Particular attention was given to the 6–8 and 9–12 age clusters, while recognising that children's development does not always follow fixed categories. Facilitation styles, communication strategies and activities were therefore adjusted according to children's developmental stage, cognitive readiness and preferred forms of expression.

In practice, younger children tended to engage more easily through visual, interactive and play-based methods. Older children were generally more able to participate in discussion-based activities, collaborative reflection and structured idea generation. However, the focus groups also showed that age alone does not determine participation needs. Confidence, previous experience, language, educational setting and group dynamics also shaped how children engaged.

For this reason, facilitators created age-appropriate entry points into the discussion, ensuring that concepts such as community issues, dialogue, decision-making and participation remained accessible and meaningful. The methodology therefore confirms one of the central principles of the SCM: participation cannot rely on a one-size-fits-all model. It requires differentiated pathways and flexible tools that can respond to the developmental and contextual realities of each group.

3.1.4 Creating Conditions for Authentic Participation

Creating a safe and supportive environment was a central methodological priority throughout the focus group process. Authentic participation depends not only on giving children an opportunity to speak, but also on creating the conditions in which they feel comfortable, respected and genuinely encouraged to contribute⁴⁷.

Several methodological choices supported this objective. The face-to-face format helped facilitate trust-building, engagement and spontaneous interaction among participants. Each session involved two facilitators, which allowed one person to guide the discussion while the other monitored group dynamics, inclusion and children's wellbeing. This was particularly important for ensuring that quieter or less confident children were not overlooked.

⁴⁷ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009.

Facilitators also used active participation strategies to encourage contributions from children who might otherwise remain silent. This included adapting questions, using visual or creative prompts, supporting small-group interaction, and maintaining an atmosphere where different ways of expression were accepted.

These elements proved important because the focus group findings repeatedly suggested that children's willingness to participate is shaped by trust in adults, fear of judgment, peer dynamics and previous experiences of being listened to or dismissed. Participation cannot therefore simply be invited. It needs to be facilitated through supportive relationships, inclusive environments and carefully designed interaction processes.

3.1.5 Data capture and interpretive approach

Data collection relied primarily on facilitator notes taken during and immediately after the focus group sessions. Rather than using formal recordings, the consortium prioritised creating a natural and comfortable environment in which children could interact freely with peers and facilitators. This choice was intended to reduce pressure and support more spontaneous participation⁴⁸.

The notes captured recurring themes, shared concerns, significant statements, illustrative examples, and observations related to engagement levels and group dynamics. After each session, facilitators consolidated and reflected on their notes in order to organise the material and preserve the meaning of children's contributions as accurately as possible.

At consortium level, the qualitative data were brought together through a comparative transnational analysis. This made it possible to identify patterns that appeared across different countries, as well as differences shaped by educational, social, cultural and institutional contexts. The analysis also helped highlight recurring barriers to participation and the conditions that seemed to support more confident and meaningful engagement.

The resulting synthesis forms the empirical basis of the SCM. It ensures that the mechanism is grounded in observed participation dynamics and children's lived experiences, rather than relying only on theoretical models or adult assumptions about what participation should look like.

3.1.6 Methodological Strengths and Strategic Value

The adopted methodology offers several strengths for the development of the SCM. First, it allows for comparison across countries while still respecting contextual diversity. This is

⁴⁸ Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2015). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.

important because the SCM is intended to be replicable across different European settings, but not applied in exactly the same way everywhere.

Second, the methodology is strongly child-centred. It prioritises children's voices, experiences and preferred forms of expression, ensuring that the Framework is informed by what children actually expressed and how they engaged during the activities. This helps reduce the risk of designing tools based only on adult expectations or institutional interpretations of participation.

Third, the methodology mirrors the participatory logic of the SCM itself. The focus groups were not only a way to collect information; they also reflected principles of dialogue, inclusion, co-construction and active engagement. In this sense, the research process anticipated some of the methodological choices that the SCM later develops more fully.

The aim was not to produce statistically generalisable data. Rather, the methodology generated rich and actionable qualitative insights. These insights are particularly useful for designing participatory tools, facilitation strategies and adaptable processes that respond to real participation dynamics observed across the project.

3.1.7 Limitations and Design Considerations

Some methodological limitations should also be acknowledged, as they are important for interpreting the findings and for designing the SCM. The reliance on facilitator note-taking helped preserve a natural and non-intimidating environment, but it may have limited the capture of certain nuances or exact formulations used by children. As in all focus group methodologies, group dynamics may also have influenced individual contributions, with some children participating more actively than others⁴⁹.

The findings are also context-dependent. They should not be interpreted as universally representative of all children's experiences across Europe. Rather, they provide indicative patterns and practical insights grounded in the specific contexts explored through the project activities.

These limitations do not weaken the value of the findings. Instead, they reinforce an important design consideration for the SCM: the mechanism must remain flexible, adaptable and responsive to the characteristics of each group and setting. Facilitators should be encouraged to adjust tools, language, pacing and participation strategies according to children's developmental levels, communication needs and group dynamics.

⁴⁹ Morgan, D. L., 1997; Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A., 2015.

3.1.8 Operation Implications for the SCM

The methodological approach provides a credible and practical foundation for the development of the SOCRATES Compass Mechanism. By combining structured guidance with flexibility and by prioritising children's lived experiences, it ensures that the SCM is grounded in real participation dynamics observed across diverse European contexts.

More importantly, the methodology informs not only what the SCM should address, but also how it should be designed. It shows the importance of creating safe spaces, adapting participation methods to age and context, supporting different forms of expression, and recognising that children's participation depends on relational, emotional and practical conditions. These principles are therefore embedded in the SCM as core operational elements, rather than treated as secondary considerations.

3.2 Key findings on children's perceptions and needs

The SOCRATES Compass Mechanism is grounded not only in legal and theoretical frameworks, but also in empirical evidence drawn from children's lived experiences. The focus groups conducted across the participating countries provide important insights into how children perceive their rights, how they understand participation, what conditions make them feel safe or excluded, and which forms of engagement they find most meaningful⁵⁰.

These findings are essential because they help ensure that the SCM responds to real needs rather than assumed priorities. In line with a Human Rights-Based Approach, the methodology aimed to provide children with a safe, inclusive, and meaningful space to express their views⁵¹. The results presented in this section, therefore, reflect recurring themes identified across different contexts, while also recognising that children's experiences are shaped by their age, environment, background, confidence, and previous encounters with adults and institutions.

3.2.1 Awareness of Rights

Across the focus groups, children appeared to have a partial but meaningful awareness of their rights. They often connected rights to broad ideas of fairness, safety, respect and protection, rather than to formal legal concepts. Some children were able to identify specific rights, such as the right to education or the right to be protected from harm. However, fewer children seemed

⁵⁰ United Nations, 1989, Art. 12.; European Commission, 2021.

⁵¹ United Nations, 1989, Art. 12; European Commission, 2021.

to recognise participation itself as a right, particularly the right to be involved in decisions that affect them⁵².

This suggests a gap between the formal recognition of children's participation rights and children's everyday understanding of those rights⁵³. For the SCM, this finding is important because participation cannot be assumed to be self-evident. Children may need structured, age-appropriate activities that help them understand not only that they have rights, but also that their views matter in decision-making processes. Rights education should therefore be introduced through concrete examples, familiar situations and participatory methods, so that legal principles become meaningful in children's daily lives⁵⁴.

3.2.2 Perception of Participation

Children consistently expressed a desire to share their opinions, especially on issues that directly affect their daily lives. These included school rules, classroom environments, peer relationships, public spaces and community activities. At the same time, many children seemed uncertain about whether adults would take their views seriously⁵⁵.

In several contexts, children described participation as something that may happen formally, but does not always lead to visible change. Expressions similar to "they ask us, but nothing changes" reflected a perception that adults may collect children's views without acting on them or explaining what happens afterwards. This indicates that children's willingness to participate is closely linked to whether they perceive participation as meaningful and consequential⁵⁶.

For the SCM, this finding reinforces the importance of designing participation as a continuous process rather than a one-off consultation. Children should be able to understand why they are being involved, how their contributions will be used, and what kind of response they can expect. Clear feedback loops and visible follow-up are therefore essential to avoid reinforcing perceptions of tokenism⁵⁷.

⁵² United Nations, 1989, Art. 12.

⁵³ United Nations, 1989, Art. 12; European Commission, 2021.

⁵⁴ United Nations, 1989, Art. 12; European Commission, 2021.

⁵⁵ United Nations, 1989, Art. 12; European Commission, 2021.

⁵⁶ European Commission, 2021.

⁵⁷ European Commission, 2021.

3.2.3 Safe Spaces

A strong and recurring theme across the focus groups was the importance of feeling safe when expressing opinions. Safety was understood not only in physical terms, but also emotionally and socially. Children referred to the need for respectful and non-judgmental environments, trust in facilitators, freedom from bullying or peer ridicule, and confidentiality when sensitive issues are discussed⁵⁸.

Fear of negative reactions from adults, peers or family members appeared to limit participation in several contexts. Some children were reluctant to speak because they feared being laughed at, corrected, misunderstood or dismissed. This suggests that participation cannot be reduced to giving children the opportunity to speak. It also requires creating the conditions in which they feel comfortable enough to do so⁵⁹.

For the SCM, safe participation spaces should therefore be treated as a methodological requirement. This includes trained facilitators, clear ground rules, safeguarding procedures, small-group formats where appropriate, and facilitation styles that actively reduce fear of judgment. A safe space is not created only by inviting children into a room; it is created through relationships, rules, tone, pacing and attention to group dynamics⁶⁰.

3.2.4 Inclusion and Diversity

The focus group findings suggest that participation is not experienced equally by all children. Children facing structural disadvantages, including disability, migration background, socio-economic vulnerability, language barriers or lower confidence, may encounter additional obstacles when trying to express their views⁶¹.

Some children appeared to have fewer opportunities to participate, while others struggled to understand activities because of language, cognitive or contextual barriers. In group settings, children with lower confidence or fewer communication resources may also feel less visible or less legitimate. This finding is consistent with the principle of non-discrimination and reinforces the idea that equal access is not sufficient on its own⁶².

⁵⁸ European Commission, 2021; European Parliament and Council, 2016.

⁵⁹ United Nations, 1989, Art. 12; European Commission, 2021.

⁶⁰ European Commission, 2021; European Parliament and Council, 2016.

⁶¹ European Commission, 2021; European Parliament, Council and Commission, 2017.

⁶² United Nations, 1989; European Commission, 2021; European Parliament, Council and Commission, 2017.

For the SCM, inclusion should therefore be understood as equitable participation. This means adapting methods, tools, language and facilitation strategies to ensure that all children can engage meaningfully. Accessible materials, visual supports, small-group work, alternative forms of expression and proactive attention to marginalised children are not additional components, but central features of the mechanism⁶³.

3.2.5 Preferred Modes of Participation

Children showed a clear preference for interactive, creative and engaging participation formats rather than traditional adult-led discussions. Games, role-play, drawing, storytelling, digital tools, videos and small-group discussions were frequently identified as formats that can make participation more accessible and motivating⁶⁴.

Digital participation was perceived as potentially empowering, especially when it allowed children to express themselves creatively or with some degree of distance from direct public exposure. At the same time, children also appeared aware of possible online safety risks, which means that digital methods should be used carefully and with appropriate safeguarding measures⁶⁵.

These preferences suggest that the SCM should adopt blended and multimodal participation approaches. Offline tools such as drawings, maps, role-play and group discussion can be combined with simple digital formats where appropriate. The aim is not to use creative or digital tools as decorative elements, but to broaden the ways in which children can communicate, especially when verbal discussion alone may exclude some participants⁶⁶.

3.2.6 Trust and Relationships with Adults

The quality of relationships between children and adults emerged as a key factor influencing meaningful participation. Children appeared more willing to engage when adults listened actively, avoided judgment, responded respectfully and communicated openly. Conversely, hierarchical, dismissive or authoritarian approaches seemed to reduce children's confidence and willingness to contribute⁶⁷.

⁶³ European Commission, 2021; European Parliament, Council and Commission, 2017.

⁶⁴ European Commission, 2021.

⁶⁵ European Commission, 2021; European Parliament and Council, 2016.

⁶⁶ European Commission, 2021.

⁶⁷ United Nations, 1989, Art. 12; European Commission, 2021.

Trust appears to develop over time rather than through one-off consultations. Children need to experience consistency between what adults say and what they do. If adults invite children to participate but do not listen carefully, do not explain decisions, or fail to provide follow-up, trust may be weakened. If adults respond with patience, clarity and respect, children are more likely to perceive participation as worthwhile⁶⁸.

For the SCM, this means that capacity-building for educators, facilitators and other adults is essential. Adults need practical skills in child-centred communication, active listening, group facilitation, accessible explanation and feedback. Their role is not only to manage activities, but to create the relational conditions that allow participation to become meaningful⁶⁹.

3.2.7 Connection Between Participation and Well-Being

Children frequently linked participation with emotional well-being, confidence and a sense of belonging. Being listened to and taken seriously can make children feel valued, included and more motivated to engage in school or community life. Participation may therefore support not only democratic learning, but also wider dimensions of well-being and inclusion⁷⁰.

This finding suggests that participation should not be framed only as a civic or procedural practice. It also has a protective and developmental dimension. When children experience that their voice matters, they may develop greater confidence, stronger social connection and a more positive relationship with the environments around them⁷¹.

For the SCM, this means that participation should be understood both as a right and as a process that can support well-being. Activities should therefore pay attention not only to what children say, but also to how participation affects their sense of confidence, recognition and belonging⁷².

3.2.8 Cross-Cutting Needs Identified and Implications

Several core needs emerged consistently across the focus groups and form an important empirical foundation for the SCM. Children expressed a need for recognition, wanting their voices to be acknowledged and valued. They also expressed a need for influence, expecting that their contributions could lead to some form of visible response or change. Clarity was another

⁶⁸ European Commission, 2021.

⁶⁹ European Commission, 2021.

⁷⁰ United Nations, 1989, Art. 12; European Parliament, Council and Commission, 2017.

⁷¹ European Commission, 2021; European Parliament, Council and Commission, 2017.

⁷² United Nations, 1989, Art. 12; European Parliament, Council and Commission, 2017.

recurring need: children should understand why they are participating, what is expected from them, and what will happen with their input⁷³.

Support also emerged as essential. Children may need guidance, encouragement, skills and reassurance in order to participate confidently. Finally, equity was a cross-cutting concern, as children's participation opportunities should not depend on background, ability, confidence or social position⁷⁴.

Taken together, these needs point to several implications for the SCM. Participation should be embedded as a continuous and transparent process, rather than a one-time activity. The framework should provide child-friendly, flexible and age-appropriate tools. Participation structures should be inclusive and accessible, with feedback and accountability mechanisms that make the impact of children's contributions visible. Adults working with children should also be supported through capacity-building, so that they can facilitate dialogue, trust, and shared decision-making effectively⁷⁵.

Overall, the evidence suggests that children are willing and capable participants, but that systemic, relational, and methodological barriers may limit the full realisation of their participation rights. The SCM integrates these insights by creating a framework in which children's voices are not only collected, but are supported, communicated, responded to, and connected to the environments and systems that affect their lives⁷⁶.

3.3 Barriers to participation and engagement with authorities

Before exploring the specific barriers identified through the focus groups, it is important to recognize that children's experiences of participation are shaped by a complex interplay of emotional, relational, cognitive, and structural factors. Across the participating countries, certain challenges appear recurrent, including difficulties in understanding institutional processes, fear of judgment, unequal access to opportunities, and variations in group dynamics⁷⁷. This section, therefore, presents the barriers as they were observed and interpreted during the activities, highlighting patterns that may affect children differently depending on age, confidence, previous

⁷³ United Nations, 1989, Art. 12; European Commission, 2021.

⁷⁴ European Commission, 2021; European Parliament, Council and Commission, 2017.

⁷⁵ European Commission, 2021.

⁷⁶ United Nations, 1989, Art. 12; European Commission, 2021; European Parliament, Council and Commission, 2017.

⁷⁷ European Commission, 2021.

experience, social background, and contextual factors. The aim is to provide a nuanced understanding of the factors that influence participation and to inform the design of the SCM in ways that are responsive, inclusive, and adaptable.

3.3.1 Understanding the participation gap through children's experiences

Based on focus groups conducted across Austria, Greece, Italy, Romania, and Spain, the gap between children's right to participate and their experience appears not to result from a lack of interest or willingness to contribute. Across contexts, children consistently expressed curiosity, strong opinions, and a desire to improve their environments. Barriers seem to emerge instead from the interaction of emotional insecurity, inaccessible systems, institutional cultures, and participation methods that are not fully adapted to children's realities.

Evidence from the focus groups suggests that participation barriers rarely operate in isolation. Technical challenges can amplify emotional insecurity, while institutional inaccessibility may contribute to feelings of powerlessness. Negative group dynamics sometimes discourage children from speaking, even when formal opportunities exist. This combination creates a "participation gap," in which children may be invited to contribute but are not consistently enabled to do so in a safe, understandable, and meaningful way⁷⁸.

The findings indicate that these barriers affect children differently depending on age, confidence levels, prior participation experiences, social background, and group dynamics. Participation should therefore be approached as the creation of conditions in which children feel capable, legitimate, and secure enough to engage.

3.3.2 Cognitive and technical barriers: The complexity and jargon trap

Language and conceptual accessibility emerged as key factors limiting engagement. Children often disengaged when participation processes relied on abstract, institutional, or adult-centred vocabulary that was not sufficiently explained or contextualised⁷⁹. In Austria, facilitators reported that even basic civic terms, including references to local authorities or institutional actors, were sometimes misunderstood by younger participants. Children occasionally interpreted these concepts through unrelated personal references or remained silent to avoid appearing confused. Similar patterns were observed in Spain, especially among younger children who struggled with participation activities involving institutional roles, civic procedures, or decision-making processes without concrete examples.

⁷⁸ Lundy, L., 2007; European Commission, 2021.

⁷⁹ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009.

Confusion was often subtle, manifesting indirectly through disengagement, distraction, silence, or disruptive behaviour. Children who did not fully understand an activity sometimes withdrew without explicitly expressing difficulty. This suggests that low participation does not automatically indicate a lack of motivation; it may reflect insufficient adaptation of concepts.

Technical accessibility extends beyond simplifying language. Children appear to benefit from participation processes that are cognitively scaffolded, connecting abstract civic ideas to daily experiences, familiar environments, or concrete examples. In Spain, activities linked to school spaces, playgrounds, or visible community issues seemed to generate higher engagement than abstract discussions about governance or institutions. Participation tools may therefore function not only as consultation instruments but also as mechanisms that translate institutional language into children's everyday realities⁸⁰.

3.3.3 Emotional and relational barriers: fear of adult judgment

Across countries, children described participation as emotionally risky when interactions with adults were perceived as evaluative, hierarchical, or unpredictable. Fear of adult judgment appeared to be a significant barrier. In Greece, children described concerns about saying something “wrong,” being corrected publicly, or being perceived as “silly.” Adults were often seen as impatient or dismissive, particularly when children struggled to articulate ideas. In Italy, children perceived adults as naturally assigning less value to their opinions, discouraging participation before it began. Children sometimes self-censored, simplified ideas, or avoided speaking when anticipating that their contributions would not be taken seriously.

These findings suggest that emotional safety is a prerequisite for participation. Children were more likely to contribute when facilitators demonstrated active listening, patience, curiosity, and non-judgmental behaviour⁸¹. In Greece, participants highlighted relational behaviours that helped them feel respected, including maintaining eye contact, asking follow-up questions, avoiding interruptions, and responding calmly to uncertainty or mistakes. Participation appears to be deeply relational, and methodological approaches alone may not overcome adult behaviours that reinforce hierarchy or intimidation. Facilitators require both technical and relational competencies to support genuinely inclusive participation⁸².

⁸⁰ Lundy, L., 2007; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009.

⁸¹ Lundy, L., 2007; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009.

⁸² Lundy, L., 2007.

3.3.4 Peer dynamics and the need for safe participation spaces

Barriers also arise from horizontal dynamics among children themselves. In Romania and Greece, children reported fear of being laughed at, criticised, or judged by classmates, particularly in large groups. This concern was more pronounced among quieter participants or those with lower social dominance. In Austria, facilitators observed that when dominant participants mocked or dismissed others, more reserved children withdrew, leaving participation concentrated among the most confident.

These insights suggest that participation should be approached as a group dynamic that requires active facilitation rather than passive moderation. Safe participation spaces appear to depend on deliberate facilitation, careful management of group dynamics, and reinforcement of respectful interaction norms⁸³. Small-group formats of three to five children consistently appeared to reduce anxiety and increase participation, while co-developed ground rules regarding listening, respect, and mistakes helped establish emotionally safer and more predictable environments.

3.3.5 Structural and institutional barriers

Structural factors also seem to limit participation, even when children are motivated. In Austria and Spain, children frequently expressed uncertainty about which institutions were responsible for addressing community issues or how to contact decision-makers. Many lacked understanding of institutional responsibilities and participation channels, contributing to a sense of institutional distance. In Greece, rigid school schedules and limited time allocation further constrained participation, as activities competed with curriculum demands, often resulting in rushed or superficial engagement.

These findings suggest that meaningful participation may require visible, accessible, and continuous structures, supported institutionally through time allocation, facilitator preparation, and organizational commitment. Without structural continuity, participation appears dependent on individual adult motivation rather than embedded democratic practice⁸⁴.

3.3.6 The agency gap and participation disillusionment

A cross-cutting finding relates to children's perception of their ability to influence change. Many expressed doubts about whether adults would genuinely listen or act. In Romania, this sometimes appeared as internalised self-doubt, with children believing they were "too young" to make a difference. In Austria and Greece, older children described explicit scepticism toward

⁸³ Lundy, L., 2007; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009.

⁸⁴ European Commission, 2021.

institutions and adult responses, expecting ideas to be ignored or handled superficially. Past experiences of being unheard contributed to perceptions of symbolic participation.

This “agency gap” seems to affect motivation even before participation begins. Children emphasised that receiving honest explanations, visible follow-up, and evidence that adults seriously considered their contributions mattered more than having all ideas accepted⁸⁵. Participation and trust appear mutually reinforcing: when children perceive genuine consideration and transparent communication, they are more likely to engage again; symbolic or silent responses seem to reduce willingness to participate⁸⁶.

3.3.7 Barriers affecting vulnerable and marginalised children

Participation barriers are further compounded for children facing additional vulnerabilities, including language barriers, cognitive differences, disability, migration experiences, or socio-economic disadvantage⁸⁷. In Austria, facilitators noted that some children with an immigration background struggled to follow discussions from the start, initially appearing shy but reflecting limited understanding of the content. Linguistic and cognitive barriers appear to lead to exclusion if participation in activities is not continuously adapted and supported.

Inclusion cannot be treated as an additional component; accessibility must be integrated into the participation design⁸⁸. Multimodal communication strategies—including visual supports, embodied activities, simplified explanations, demonstrations, repetition, and alternative expressive forms – seem essential⁸⁹. Children from migrant backgrounds may experience institutional distrust or unfamiliarity with participation cultures, making relational trust-building critical. Socio-economic factors, such as limited access to digital tools or transportation, also affect participation and require proactive adaptation beyond formal inclusion alone.

3.3.8 Gender dynamics and participation styles

Gender does not appear to determine which issues children care about, but may influence participation styles, communication patterns, and group dynamics. In Romania, boys participated more spontaneously in verbal exchanges, whereas girls engaged more through structured and visual activities. In Greece, girls tended to adopt collaborative communication styles, building on

⁸⁵ Hart, R.A., 1992; Lundy, 2007.

⁸⁶ Hart, R.A., 1992; Lundy, 2007.

⁸⁷ European Commission, 2021.

⁸⁸ European Commission, 2021.

⁸⁹ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009.

peers' ideas and seeking consensus, while boys more frequently interrupted or competed for speaking space.

Participation inequalities often relate less to gender itself than to the interaction between dominant and reserved communication styles. In Austria and Spain, unbalanced group compositions intensified these dynamics, with girls in male-dominated groups sometimes becoming more reserved. These findings indicate that active facilitation, structured turn-taking, small groups, collaborative activities, and varied communication methods are important to ensure accessibility for different communication styles. Equal participation does not necessarily mean identical contributions; frameworks should value multiple forms of expression equally⁹⁰.

3.4 Implications for the design of the SCM

The qualitative evidence gathered through the transnational focus groups, and analysed in the previous sections, offers important methodological indications for the design of the SOCRATES Compass Mechanism (SCM). While the findings should not be interpreted as exhaustive or statistically representative of all children's experiences across Europe, they provide a strong empirical basis for identifying conditions that appear to support meaningful, inclusive, and child-sensitive participation⁹¹.

Taken together, the findings suggest that the SCM should not be designed as a fixed consultation model, but as a flexible participatory framework rooted in children's lived experiences. The evidence highlights that children's participation depends not only on the opportunity to express opinions, but also on emotional safety, accessible language, supportive adult behaviour, inclusive group dynamics, visible pathways to decision-makers, and clear feedback after participation has taken place⁹².

On this basis, the following design implications translate the evidence from the focus groups into operational directions for the SCM Framework and the subsequent Toolkit.

3.4.1 From consultation to agency-building

The SCM is intended to function primarily as an agency-building process rather than as a consultation tool alone. Across the participating countries, one recurring barrier appears not to be the absence of ideas among children, but rather their limited perception of being able to

⁹⁰ Lundy, L., 2007; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009.

⁹¹ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009; European Commission, 2021.

⁹² Lundy, L., 2007; European Commission, 2021.

influence decisions. Many children described feeling “too young,” insufficiently credible, or unlikely to be taken seriously by adults and institutions. This suggests that the SCM should create conditions that help children gradually build confidence, recognise the value of their perspectives, and perceive participation as a process that can lead to a response⁹³.

In practice, this means that the initial stages of the Compass should pay particular attention to psychological safety, trust-building and group preparation. Before children are asked to identify problems, explore them or formulate proposals, facilitators may need support in creating safe spaces, co-defining simple ground rules and managing group dynamics. This is especially important for quieter children, children with lower confidence, and children who may feel exposed or vulnerable in front of peers⁹⁴.

The design of the SCM should therefore avoid treating participation as a single moment in which children are simply asked for their views. Instead, it should support a gradual process through which children can recognise that their experiences matter, explore issues with others, and communicate their perspectives in ways that feel safe, supported and meaningful.

3.4.2 From one-size-fits-all to a modular and age-sensitive architecture

Findings suggest that the SCM should move away from a uniform approach and adopt a **modular, hybrid, and age-sensitive architecture**. A standardised methodology may not fully account for diversity in age, cognitive development, communication styles, vulnerabilities, or social context. The SCM may therefore allow facilitators to combine various tools—visual, verbal, embodied, creative, and digital—according to the characteristics of each group⁹⁵.

For younger children, especially those aged 6–8, tools should primarily help translate abstract concepts into concrete and familiar experiences. Visual supports, drawings, stickers, toys, playful tasks and simple expressive methods may make participation more accessible and reduce reliance on verbal explanation.

For children in the transitional age range, approximately 8–10, the SCM should allow for embodied and spatial forms of expression, while gradually introducing more structured reflection on causes, consequences and possible solutions. This age group may require particular flexibility, as children can differ significantly in their ability to move from concrete experience to more abstract reasoning.

⁹³ Hart, R.A., 1992; Lundy, 2007.

⁹⁴ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009; Lundy, L., 2007.

⁹⁵ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009; European Commission, 2021.

For older children, especially those aged 9–12, tools may include more structured forms of collaborative investigation, such as peer interviews, simple evidence collection, group brainstorming, visual presentations or digital outputs. In this sense, digital tools should not be understood as technically complex instruments, but as possible scaffolds to help children organise ideas, document observations and reduce the anxiety of direct interaction with adults.

This modularity is essential because the findings from 3.1 and 3.2 indicate that children's participation is shaped not only by age, but also by confidence, language, social background, educational environment and previous experiences of being listened to or ignored. The Toolkit should therefore provide adaptable pathways rather than fixed instructions.

3.4.3 Accessible language and shared understanding

The SCM should systematically address the barrier of abstract institutional language. The findings indicate that younger children, children with cognitive or language difficulties, and children from vulnerable backgrounds may struggle with terms such as public authority, decision-making, policy, feasibility, or budget constraints. If these concepts are not clearly explained, children may disengage, remain silent, or behave disruptively in ways that mask misunderstanding⁹⁶.

To address this, the SCM may adopt a **de-jargonisation principle**. Facilitators should be guided to introduce concepts through everyday examples, familiar situations, and simple language. Each phase of the Compass should begin from a shared and accessible baseline, ensuring that all children understand the purpose of the activity, the role of the adults involved, and the meaning of the steps they are invited to take⁹⁷.

This is particularly relevant for the NOTICE and EXPLORE phases, where children need to move from their direct experience of a problem towards a more structured understanding of its causes and possible responses. Participation tools should therefore function not only as consultation instruments, but also as translation mechanisms between institutional language and children's everyday realities.

3.4.4 Institutional literacy and local civic orientation

The SCM should also respond to children's limited familiarity with institutional structures and concrete access points. The findings discussed in 3.3 suggest that the distance between children and decision-makers is not only emotional or relational, but also practical and cognitive. In some contexts, children were uncertain about which institution or adult actor would be responsible for

⁹⁶ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009.

⁹⁷ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009; Lundy, L., 2007.

a given issue, or had not previously considered that local authorities could play a role in listening to their concerns. This indicates that participation cannot rely only on children's willingness to speak; it also requires a basic understanding of the local civic and institutional environment⁹⁸.

For this reason, the SCM should include an institutional literacy component, introduced in an age-appropriate and experiential way. Rather than presenting institutions as abstract hierarchies, the Toolkit could help facilitators map with children the local actors and places that shape their everyday lives: the school, the municipality, the mayor's office, local social services, the police station, community centres, libraries, health services, or other relevant local bodies.

This component should be progressive. With younger children, the focus should remain on familiar and nearby places, helping them understand who can help with concrete issues in their school, playground, neighbourhood, or community. With older children, the SCM may gradually introduce more complex institutional levels, including municipal departments, local councils, regional authorities, or other public bodies, always linking them to practical examples and real-life situations.

In this way, the SCM would not only support children in expressing concerns but also help them understand where those concerns can be addressed and how civic participation is connected to the structures around them.

3.4.5 Collective expression and the role of adults

The SCM should prioritise collective advocacy and supported forms of expression. The findings suggest that individual and unmediated interaction with decision-makers can generate anxiety and may discourage participation, particularly among children with lower confidence or limited previous experience of formal dialogue. Children often appear to feel safer and more legitimate when they prepare and express their views collectively⁹⁹.

The SPEAK phase should therefore support group-based forms of expression, including role-play, rehearsed presentations, visual outputs, videos, collective messages or facilitated dialogue sessions. These formats can reduce pressure on individual children while strengthening peer support, shared responsibility and collective ownership of the message.

At the same time, the role of adults should be carefully defined. Adults should not replace children's voices or speak on their behalf. Rather, they should act as facilitators, mediators or guarantors of the process. Their role is to help create the conditions for children to express

⁹⁸ European Commission, 2021.

⁹⁹ Lundy, L., 2007; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009.

themselves with confidence, to access appropriate communication channels, and to ensure that interaction with decision-makers remains respectful, understandable and safe¹⁰⁰.

This also implies that adults themselves need preparation. Teachers, facilitators, local representatives and other stakeholders should understand how to listen, ask clarifying questions, avoid dismissive language and provide responses in ways that children can understand. The quality of adult listening is therefore part of the methodology, not an external condition.

3.4.6 Feedback, accountability, and the “explained no”

The WEIGH phase is intended as a central component of the participatory cycle rather than a final or optional step. Children appear to expect feedback after sharing their views and are generally able to accept a negative outcome when accompanied by a clear, respectful, and understandable explanation. What undermines trust is often perceived silence, vague promises, or a “fake yes”¹⁰¹.

The SCM should therefore include mechanisms to ensure that children receive accessible updates on what happened to their proposals, why certain decisions were taken, and whether any partial or alternative action is possible. This implies that adults and institutions involved in the process should be supported in communicating decisions in child-friendly language, explaining constraints without using overly technical terms, and making visible any small or partial change resulting from children’s contributions¹⁰².

Feedback should not be understood as a procedural formality. It is one of the main conditions through which participation becomes credible. When children receive a visible and respectful response, they are more likely to understand participation as meaningful and to remain willing to engage in future cycles. Conversely, when participation produces silence or unclear responses, it may reinforce disengagement and weaken trust.

3.4.7 From Evidence to Methodological Design

Taken together, these implications conclude the analytical reading of the focus group findings and provide a bridge towards the methodological chapters of the Framework. They suggest that the SOCRATES Compass Mechanism should be developed as a flexible, inclusive, and cyclical model of participation, capable of supporting children not only to express their views, but also to

¹⁰⁰ Lundy, L., 2007.

¹⁰¹ Lundy, L., 2007; Hart, 1992.

¹⁰² Lundy, L., 2007; European Commission, 2021.

experience listening, feedback, and accountability as integral parts of the participatory process¹⁰³.

The design of the SCM should therefore remain grounded in children's lived experiences, while also addressing the barriers that may limit participation in practice: lack of confidence, inaccessible language, unequal group dynamics, institutional distance, fear of judgment, and absence of follow-up. In this sense, the Compass does not simply organise activities. It creates a structured but adaptable pathway through which children can gradually build agency, communicate with adults, and recognise that their perspectives can enter into meaningful dialogue with the environments and systems that affect their lives.

¹⁰³ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009; Lundy, L., 2007; European Commission, 2021.

4. The SCM Methodology: A Circular Journey

Before detailing the four implementation phases, it is important to provide an overview of the SCM methodology as a whole. The SOCRATES Compass is intended as a flexible and cyclical framework for participation, combining structured guidance with adaptability to different ages, contexts, and developmental stages. It operationalizes participation not as a one-off activity, but as a continuous process in which children progressively engage, explore, communicate, and receive feedback. The methodology is designed to be sensitive to children's lived experiences, promoting inclusion, agency, and trust, while allowing facilitators to tailor approaches to local conditions and the specific needs of each group. This section presents the SCM phases in detail, illustrating how the cycle supports a participatory journey grounded in evidence and reflective practice.

4.1 The 4 Compass Points: An overview of the circular process (Notice, Explore, Speak, Weigh).

The SOCRATES Compass Mechanism (SCM) operationalises participation through four structured implementation phases: NOTICE, EXPLORE, SPEAK, and WEIGH. Each phase has its own objectives, facilitation approaches, participatory methods, and expected outputs. Together, these phases support children's progressive engagement throughout the participation cycle, helping them move from the identification of an issue to reflection on the responses received¹⁰⁴.

Rather than prescribing a fixed set of activities, the SCM provides a flexible implementation structure that facilitators can adapt according to age group, communication styles, confidence levels, and local contexts. The methodology combines creative, reflective, collaborative, and dialogical approaches in order to support participation among diverse groups of children, including children with fewer opportunities¹⁰⁵.

Within the SCM, each phase generates concrete outputs that inform the following stage of the process. Issues identified during NOTICE become the basis for collaborative investigation during EXPLORE. The ideas and proposals developed during EXPLORE are communicated during SPEAK, while the reflections and responses emerging from WEIGH inform future participation cycles and

¹⁰⁴ Lundy, L., 2007; Shier, 2001.

¹⁰⁵ Shier, H., 2001; Tan, P. (2019). Listening to Young Children: A Mosaic approach: Research Perspectives from two children and dinosaurs. *SFU Educational Review*, 12(2), 64–78. <https://doi.org/10.21810/sfuer.v12i2.932>.

methodological adjustments. In this way, the Compass works as a continuous cycle rather than a sequence of isolated activities¹⁰⁶.

NORTH – NOTICE: Recognising and Articulating Issues

The NOTICE phase functions as the entry point into the participation cycle. Its primary objective is to help children identify issues, situations, or experiences that affect their daily lives and communities. Rather than beginning with abstract civic concepts or predefined policy themes, this phase focuses on concrete realities that children already recognise through everyday experience¹⁰⁷.

Activities during this phase are designed to support observation, recognition, and articulation of concerns in accessible ways. Depending on the age group and context, facilitators may use drawings, storytelling, image-based activities, emotion cards, group mapping, role-play, photography, or guided discussion exercises. For younger children, methods may rely more heavily on visual and playful interaction, while older groups can engage more comfortably with collaborative discussion and issue-prioritisation exercises¹⁰⁸.

The focus groups showed that children frequently identify issues connected to bullying, exclusion, fairness, environmental concerns, school rules, public spaces, and communication with adults. The NOTICE phase therefore provides structured opportunities for children to transform personal observations into shared discussion topics.

Facilitators are responsible for creating supportive participation conditions and helping children articulate ideas clearly, without directing them towards predetermined conclusions. At this stage, particular attention should be given to participation dynamics, inclusion of quieter children, and the establishment of simple communication agreements for the group¹⁰⁹.

The main outputs of the NOTICE phase are shared themes, prioritised concerns, and initial questions that children wish to investigate further during the next stage of the cycle.

EAST – EXPLORE: Collaborative Investigation and Co-Construction

The EXPLORE phase focuses on helping children investigate the issues identified during NOTICE in greater depth. The objective of this stage is to support collaborative reflection, understanding

¹⁰⁶ Shier, H., 2001.

¹⁰⁷ Tan, P., 2019.

¹⁰⁸ Tan, P., 2019.

¹⁰⁹ Lundy, L., 2007; Shier, 2001.

of different perspectives, identification of possible causes, and development of potential responses or proposals¹¹⁰.

This phase is designed as a structured but flexible inquiry process, adapted to children's developmental stages. The focus groups demonstrated that children tend to engage more effectively with exploration activities when these are interactive, collaborative, and supported through visual or experiential methods, rather than based mainly on long verbal discussions¹¹¹.

Facilitators may therefore use methodologies such as problem trees, collaborative brainstorming, scenario-building, guided observation, role-play, visual mapping, small-group workshops, or creative design activities. Younger children may explore issues through movement, storytelling, or tactile materials, while older children can engage more actively in structured reflection, comparison of ideas, and collaborative proposal-building.

The EXPLORE phase also allows children to organise ideas collectively before communicating them externally. Throughout the focus groups, children consistently expressed greater confidence when participating in groups rather than individually, particularly when discussing sensitive topics or preparing proposals for adults. The methodology therefore prioritises peer-supported exploration and shared decision-making processes¹¹².

Facilitators support the process by helping children structure discussions, manage participation balance within groups, and ensure that all participants have opportunities to contribute. Importantly, the role of the facilitator is not to provide solutions, but to guide reflection and support collaborative investigation¹¹³.

The outputs of this phase may include prioritised proposals, visual materials, identified solutions, action ideas, or collective recommendations that children wish to communicate during the SPEAK phase.

SOUTH – SPEAK: Communication and Intergenerational Dialogue

The SPEAK phase focuses on communication between children and adults. During this stage, children present the concerns, ideas, or proposals developed during the previous phases to wider

¹¹⁰ Shier, H., 2001.

¹¹¹ Tan, P., 2009.

¹¹² Shier, H., 2001; Lundy, 2007.

¹¹³ Shier, H., 2001.

audiences, including teachers, parents, facilitators, local authorities, community representatives, or other decision-makers¹¹⁴.

The SCM approaches this phase as a facilitated communication process rather than a formal debate exercise. The focus groups showed that many children experience anxiety or insecurity when speaking directly to authority figures, particularly in unfamiliar or highly formal environments. For this reason, the methodology prioritises collective preparation and communication formats adapted to children's confidence levels and communication styles¹¹⁵.

Depending on the context, children may communicate their proposals through posters, presentations, drawings, storytelling, exhibitions, letters, videos, recorded messages, group advocacy sessions, or facilitated meetings with adults. Digital tools may also support the preparation and organisation of ideas, particularly for older children.

Facilitators support children in organising presentations, preparing communication materials, structuring discussions, and managing interactions with adults. Their role is to reduce barriers to participation while ensuring that children remain the primary communicators of their own ideas and proposals¹¹⁶.

The SPEAK phase also creates opportunities for intergenerational dialogue rather than one-directional communication. Adults participating in this stage are encouraged to engage with children respectfully, ask clarifying questions, and respond in accessible language appropriate to the children's developmental level¹¹⁷.

The expected outputs of this phase include communicated proposals, documented dialogue sessions, presentations, campaigns, or exchanges between children and adult stakeholders.

WEST – WEIGH: Feedback, Reflection, and Follow-Up

The WEIGH phase focuses on feedback, reflection, evaluation, and follow-up. Within the SCM, participation is not considered complete once children have communicated their views. Instead, this phase ensures that children receive responses on how their contributions were considered and what outcomes emerged from the process¹¹⁸.

¹¹⁴ Lundy, L., 2007.

¹¹⁵ Shier, H., 2001; Lundy, 2007.

¹¹⁶ Shier, H., 2001.

¹¹⁷ Lundy, L., 2007; Shier H., 2001.

¹¹⁸ Lundy, L., 2007.

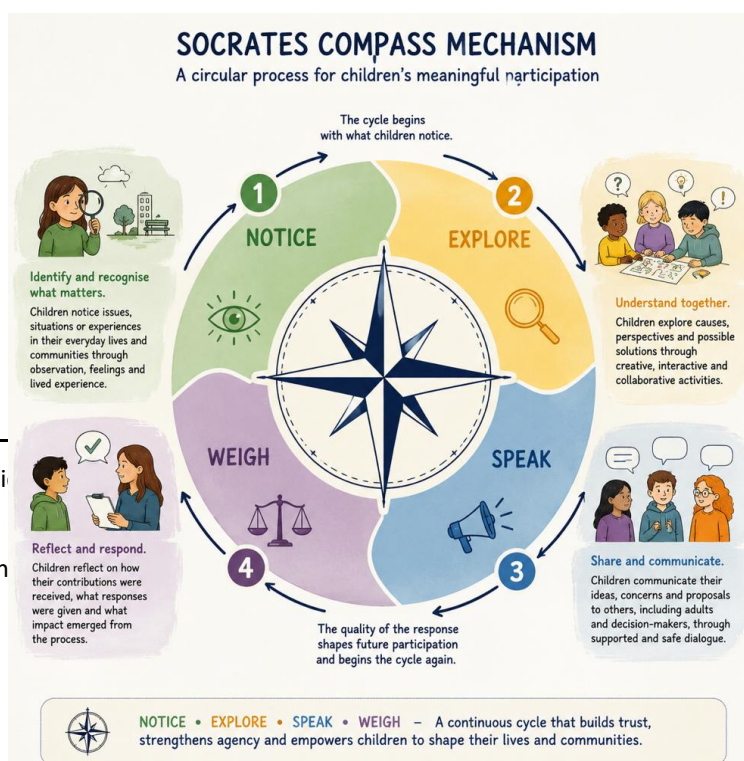
The focus groups repeatedly demonstrated that children place significant importance on visible and understandable feedback. Children consistently stated that they can accept disagreement or non-implementation of proposals when explanations are communicated clearly and respectfully. What appears to undermine participation most strongly is silence, ambiguity, or lack of visible response¹¹⁹.

For this reason, the SCM integrates structured feedback mechanisms throughout the WEIGH phase. Facilitators and adult stakeholders are encouraged to provide updates, explanations, reflections, or examples of actions taken following children's participation. Responses should distinguish clearly between accepted proposals, partially implemented ideas, and proposals that could not be implemented, while explaining the reasons behind each outcome in accessible language¹²⁰.

The WEIGH phase also includes reflection on the participation process itself. Children evaluate what they found meaningful, difficult, useful, or frustrating throughout the cycle. Facilitators may use reflection circles, visual evaluation tools, feedback cards, collaborative discussions, or creative reflection activities depending on the age group¹²¹.

The outputs of this phase may include documented feedback, evaluation summaries, identified adjustments for future cycles, and new issues or concerns emerging from the reflection process. These outputs then inform the planning and issue-identification process of the following NOTICE phase, ensuring continuity across participation cycles¹²².

The circular relationship between the four Compass points is illustrated in Figure 3, which shows how each phase contributes to a continuous participation cycle.



¹¹⁹ Lundy, L., 2007; Shier, H., 2001.

¹²⁰ Lundy, L., 2007.

¹²¹ Shier, H., 2001; Tan, H., 2001.

¹²² Shier, H., 2001.

Figure 3. The SOCRATES Compass Mechanism. The figure illustrates the four interconnected phases of the SCM — NOTICE, EXPLORE, SPEAK, and WEIGH — as a circular process for meaningful child participation. It shows how children move from identifying issues in their everyday lives to exploring them collaboratively, communicating their ideas to adults and decision-makers, and receiving feedback that informs future participation cycles.

4.2 Participatory Action Research (PAR): Empowering children as active researchers

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a collaborative research approach that positions those directly affected by an issue as co-researchers rather than passive subjects. It is grounded in the idea that people who live with a problem are often well placed to investigate its causes, understand its effects, and contribute to meaningful solutions.

In contrast to traditional research approaches, where external experts usually define the questions, select the methods and control the interpretation of findings, PAR emphasises shared decision-making, joint knowledge production and concrete action to improve real-life conditions. At its core, PAR is based on collective inquiry, empowerment of participants, recognition of multiple ways of knowing, and a clear orientation towards social change¹²³.

Within the SOCRATES Compass Mechanism, PAR is particularly relevant because it offers a methodological basis for treating children not only as participants, but as active interpreters of their own environments. This is consistent with the broader purpose of the SCM: supporting children to observe, explore, communicate and reflect on issues that affect their lives.

¹²³ Hocevar, R. (2023). Participatory action research (PAR). *EBSCO Research Starters: Social Sciences and Humanities*. [Participatory Action Research \(PAR\) | Social Sciences and Humanities](#).

4.2.1 PAR as a cyclical process

Methodologically, PAR is often described as a cyclical or “spiral” process. A commonly used model distinguishes four recurring phases: **plan, act, observe, and reflect**. These phases are not intended as a rigid sequence, but as a repeated cycle in which learning and action inform one another over time.

In the planning phase, participants and facilitators identify a problem together, clarify what they want to understand or change, and decide how to proceed. During the action phase, the agreed strategy is implemented within a specific context, such as a classroom, school, after-school centre, or community space. The observation phase involves gathering information about what happens through methods such as interviews, group discussions, drawings, mapping, observations, or other child-friendly tools. Finally, in the reflection phase, the group interprets what has been observed, considers what has changed, and decides whether the plan needs to be adjusted.

This cyclical structure is closely aligned with the SCM. Children notice an issue, explore it through collaborative inquiry, communicate their findings or proposals, and then reflect on what happened afterwards. In this sense, PAR reinforces the idea that participation is not a one-off activity, but a continuous process of learning, action and reflection.

This cyclical structure is closely aligned with the SCM. Children notice an issue, explore it through collaborative inquiry, communicate their findings or proposals, and then reflect on what happened afterwards. In this sense, PAR reinforces the idea that participation is not a one-off activity, but a continuous process of learning, action and reflection¹²⁴.

4.2.2 Children as active researchers of their own environments

When PAR is applied with children, it can offer a concrete framework for empowering them as active researchers of their own lives and learning environments. Empowerment, in this context, involves a fundamental shift in perspective. Children are not seen primarily as objects of research, recipients of adult interventions, or sources of information to be extracted. Rather, they are recognised as competent social actors who can investigate questions that matter to them and contribute to change.

This requires a deliberate redistribution of power within the research process. In conventional research, adults usually decide what counts as relevant knowledge and how that knowledge

¹²⁴ Pineda, H. et al. (2022). Development and evaluation of a professional development program on designing participatory action research projects for basic education teachers. *Advanced Education*, 21, 161-184.
<http://doi.org/10.20535/2410-8286.266663>.

should be collected and interpreted. In a participatory action research approach, children's experiential and community-based knowledge is treated as a central resource. Their understanding of school life, peer relations, family experiences, community spaces, safety, exclusion, or fairness is not something to be filtered or corrected by adults, but something to be taken seriously¹²⁵.

This does not mean that adults withdraw from the process. Their role remains important, but it changes. Adult facilitators and educators are expected to listen without judgment, reflect on their own assumptions, and create spaces where children feel safe expressing their views, doubts, uncertainties, and critiques. They support the process, but do not take ownership of it.

4.2.3 Shifting power and valuing children's expertise

A key dimension of PAR is the recognition of children's expertise. Children often know things about their everyday environments that adults may not see, or may interpret differently. They may notice how safe or unsafe a space feels, which rules are perceived as fair or unfair, where exclusion happens, or how peer dynamics influence participation.

For this reason, PAR values diverse ways of knowing. Children may express knowledge verbally, but also through drawings, movement, emotions, gestures, stories, maps, role-play or visual choices. These embodied, emotional, and tacit forms of knowledge are especially important when working with younger children or those who may find formal verbal discussion difficult.

Within the SCM, this principle is particularly relevant for the NOTICE and EXPLORE phases. Children are supported to begin from what they observe and experience, and then to investigate these observations more deeply. The aim is not to make children imitate adult research practices, but to create child-friendly forms of inquiry that recognise their own ways of understanding the world¹²⁶.

4.2.4 Children's involvement in research design

Children are not empowered simply by taking part in activities that adults have already fully designed. Empowerment grows when children are also involved in the intellectual work of the process. In PAR, this may mean that children help to frame the research problem, formulate guiding questions, decide what they want to find out, and choose how they want to explore it.

¹²⁵ Semathong, S. (2023). Participatory action research to develop the teachers on classroom action research. *Shanlax International Journal of Education*, 11(3), 29–36. <https://doi.org/10.34293/education.v11i3.6118>.

¹²⁶ Howard, J., 2024.

For example, children may decide whether a problem is better explored through drawings, photovoice, mapping, interviews, digital tools, observation walks or group discussions. They may also be involved in analysing the material they helped to generate: sorting ideas, identifying patterns, grouping observations, interpreting what they found and discussing what it might mean¹²⁷.

Because children have lived experience of the issues under discussion, their interpretations can deepen the relevance and practical usefulness of the findings. When exploring topics such as school climate, safety, inclusion, peer relations or public spaces, children's analysis can reveal aspects that may not emerge through adult-led interpretation alone¹²⁸.

4.2.5 PAR and the development of children's agency

The cyclical PAR process offers a concrete structure for developing children's agency over time. In the planning phase, children can brainstorm issues in their school or community, prioritise them and design a small-scale inquiry. For example, they may decide to explore noise levels in classrooms, document barriers to participation, map safe and unsafe spaces, or understand why certain areas of a playground feel uncomfortable.

During the action phase, children implement their ideas. They may conduct short surveys, interview peers, create posters, take photos, observe specific spaces, or present their concerns to teachers or local actors. In the observation phase, they record what happens: who responds, what changes, what remains the same, and how others react. In the reflection phase, they discuss the outcomes together, consider what they have learned, and decide on possible next steps.

Moving through these cycles allows children to experience that their ideas can lead to visible effects, even if change is partial or gradual. It also helps them understand that participation involves adjustment. When something does not work as expected, children can reflect, revise their strategy and try again. This supports a more realistic and sustained sense of agency¹²⁹.

4.2.6 Skills, confidence and collective learning

Engaging in PAR can foster specific skills and forms of confidence. Children practise asking questions instead of only following adult instructions. They learn to observe carefully, compare perspectives, organise information, discuss evidence and reflect on possible solutions. These

¹²⁷ Howard, J., 2024.

¹²⁸ Chikkatur, A. and Oliver, E. (2025) 'Embodying PAR: A reflection on building trust across institutional hierarchies', *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 29(4), pp. 123–138.

¹²⁹ Saisin, B., & Suphakach Supakitjo, P. (2026). Teachers and participatory management to develop students' responsibility skills. *International Education Studies*, 19(1), 15. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v19n1p15>.

processes support critical thinking, communication, cooperation and a stronger sense of responsibility for shared environments.

Adult facilitators can provide scaffolding by modelling research skills, ethical reflection and collaborative decision-making. Over time, this support should gradually allow children to take more ownership of the process. The aim is not to leave children without guidance, but to help them progressively become more confident in shaping the direction of inquiry.

Working together on shared questions can also strengthen teamwork and solidarity. Children learn to listen to one another, negotiate differences, and recognise that their individual experiences may be part of broader patterns. This is particularly important within the SCM, where participation is understood not only as individual expression but as a collective and relational process¹³⁰.

4.2.7 Operational implications for the SCM methodology

Overall, PAR provides a framework in which children are not merely consulted, but actively involved in shaping the knowledge and decisions that affect them. By focusing on process, relationships, and reflection, rather than only on a final research product, PAR supports children in developing voice, agency, and a sense of themselves as capable contributors to social change.

Within the SCM, this means that children should be supported to investigate issues in ways that are accessible, ethical, creative, and meaningful. Facilitators should create opportunities for children to define questions, choose methods, interpret findings, and connect their learning to action. In this way, PAR strengthens the circular logic of the Compass and reinforces the transition from participation as expression to participation as inquiry, dialogue, and shared transformation.

4.3 Design for Change (DFC) Integration: Feel, Imagine, Do, Share

The SOCRATES Compass Mechanism (SCM) adopts a circular and iterative methodology that places children at the centre of learning, participation, and social action. Within this structure, the integration of the Design for Change (DFC) model – **Feel, Imagine, Do, Share** – offers a practical and pedagogical pathway for operationalising children's participation as a right¹³¹.

DFC is widely recognised as a child-centred approach that supports learners in identifying real-world challenges, developing solutions, and taking action. Its alignment with European values on

¹³⁰ Saisin, B., & Suphakach Supakitjo, P., 2026.

¹³¹ Design for Change. (n.d.). *Design for Change*. <https://www.dfeworld.org/SITE>; European Union, 2012, Art. 24.

participation, inclusion, education, and active citizenship makes it particularly relevant for the SCM framework. Within SOCRATES, DFC is not introduced as a separate or parallel methodology, but as a complementary model that helps translate the circular logic of the Compass into child-friendly action.

In this sense, DFC supports the operational dimension of the SCM. It helps children move from recognising issues that affect them, to imagining possible improvements, testing ideas, and communicating what they have learned or achieved. This structure reinforces the idea that participation is not limited to expressing opinions, but can also involve creativity, action, reflection, and shared responsibility¹³².

4.3.1 Alignment with EU Policy and Human Rights Frameworks

The DFC methodology reflects key principles set out in international and European child rights frameworks. In particular, it is closely connected to Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which recognises children's right to express their views in matters affecting them, and Article 29, which frames education as a process aimed at developing children's personality, talents, abilities, and sense of responsibility¹³³.

At EU level, the integration of DFC supports the objectives of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, particularly in relation to participation, inclusive education, and civic engagement. It also relates to the European Pillar of Social Rights, especially the principles concerning education, training, lifelong learning, childcare, and support to children¹³⁴.

The experiential and competence-based nature of DFC is also consistent with the Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning. Through its emphasis on observation, creativity, collaboration, action, and reflection, DFC may contribute to the development of civic competence, personal and social competence, cultural awareness and expression, and entrepreneurship competence¹³⁵.

For this reason, DFC should not be understood as an external addition to the SCM. Rather, it can be seen as a coherent extension of European educational and rights-based priorities, offering a

¹³² Design for Change., n.d.; Council of the European Union. (2018). Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning. *Official Journal of the European Union*.

¹³³ United Nations, 1989, Arts. 12 and 29.

¹³⁴ European Commission, 2021; European Parliament, Council and Commission, 2017.

¹³⁵ Council of the European Union, 2018.

practical structure through which children's participation can be connected to learning, agency, and community engagement¹³⁶.

4.3.2 The Circular Logic of SCM and DFC

The SCM methodology conceptualises participation as a continuous and reflective cycle rather than a linear process. The DFC model integrates naturally into this structure because it is also based on iterative learning and action. Children first observe and reflect on an issue through the **Feel** phase. They then generate ideas and possible solutions through **Imagine**. These ideas are tested or implemented through **Do**, and the process is communicated and reflected upon through **Share**.

This cycle can then begin again. Children may discover new questions, identify further needs, adapt their proposals, or deepen their understanding of the issue. In this way, DFC reinforces the SCM's circular approach and supports participation as a process that develops over time.

Each phase of DFC can strengthen children's agency in a different way. **Feel** helps children recognise that their experiences and emotions are valid starting points for participation. **Imagine** encourages them to see themselves as capable of proposing alternatives. **Do** allows them to experience the possibility of action, even at a small scale. **Share** gives visibility to their learning and creates space for feedback, recognition, and accountability¹³⁷.

Phase 1: Feel – Building Empathy and Awareness

The **Feel** phase focuses on understanding real-life issues affecting children and their communities. It promotes empathy, critical observation, and emotional engagement. Children are encouraged to begin from their own lived experiences, noticing what feels unfair, unsafe, exclusionary, missing, or in need of improvement.

This phase may involve the identification of issues relevant to children's everyday realities, the exploration of feelings, perspectives and contexts, and the use of participatory tools such as storytelling, mapping, drawings, group discussions, or observation activities. The aim is to ensure that participation begins from children's own realities rather than from externally defined agendas.

From a rights-based perspective, the Feel phase directly supports children's right to express their views and experiences. It creates a space in which children can name what matters to them and begin to understand that their perceptions are legitimate and relevant.

¹³⁶ Design for Change., n.d.; Council of the European Union, 2018.

¹³⁷ Design for Change., n.d.; European Union, 2012, Art. 24.

Operationally, this phase requires facilitators to create safe and inclusive environments, use child-friendly language and tools, and ensure that diverse voices are represented, particularly those of children who may be marginalised or less confident. Within the SCM, Feel corresponds closely to the NOTICE phase, and partly to the initial dimension of EXPLORE, because it supports issue identification and the first understanding of children's needs and concerns.

Phase 2: Imagine – Co-Creation and Solution Development

The **Imagine** phase enables children to generate ideas and envision possible solutions to the challenges identified. It moves participation beyond expression alone and supports children in thinking creatively about what could change, who could be involved, and what kind of response might be possible.

This phase includes creative brainstorming, ideation, collaborative decision-making, and encouragement of diverse and innovative perspectives. Children should be supported to express ideas freely, without immediate judgment or premature filtering by adults. At this stage, the aim is not necessarily to identify a perfect or fully feasible solution, but to open a space where children can imagine alternatives and develop confidence in their own capacity to contribute.

From a rights-based perspective, Imagine operationalises children's right to participate actively in decision-making processes. It supports the transition from being heard to being involved in co-creation. This is particularly important because meaningful participation should not only collect children's concerns, but also enable them to contribute to the development of possible responses.

Operationally, facilitators should avoid adult dominance in idea selection, validate all contributions, and provide tools for creative expression. Depending on the group, these may include digital tools, drawing, modelling, storytelling, verbal discussion, role-play, or collaborative posters. Within the SCM, Imagine aligns with the EXPLORE phase and with the early preparation of SPEAK, as children begin to organise their ideas into possible proposals or messages.

Phase 3: Do – Action and Implementation

The **Do** phase translates ideas into concrete actions, allowing children to experience participation as something that can lead to visible effects. The scale of action may vary considerably depending on context, age group, available resources, and institutional conditions. It may involve a small classroom initiative, a school-based activity, a community action, a campaign, a presentation to adults, or the testing of a simple solution.

The key point is that children are supported to move from imagining change to trying something in practice. This can strengthen their sense of agency, because it helps them experience that their ideas can be connected to action, even when the action is modest or partial.

This phase involves implementation of selected solutions, teamwork, shared responsibility, and engagement with real-world contexts such as schools, community spaces, local stakeholders, or institutions. From a rights-based perspective, Do embodies participation as influence and action. It responds to one of the recurring gaps identified in participatory processes: the distance between consultation and meaningful impact.

Operationally, this phase requires adequate logistical and institutional support. Adults may need to help children access spaces, materials, permissions, or relevant stakeholders. At the same time, safeguarding and ethical standards must remain central, including attention to data protection where images, stories, digital tools, or public communication are involved. Within the SCM, Do corresponds to the action-oriented dimension that may emerge between EXPLORE and SPEAK, and can also support the transition towards WEIGH when actions are assessed and reflected upon.

Phase 4: Share – Reflection, Communication, and Scaling

The **Share** phase focuses on communicating results, reflecting on experiences, and expanding the impact of what has been learned or achieved. Children may present outcomes to peers, educators, families, communities, or local institutions. They may also share their process through events, posters, videos, digital media, reports, exhibitions, or facilitated dialogue.

This phase is not only about dissemination. It is also a moment of reflection. Children are encouraged to consider what worked, what was difficult, what they learned, and what could be improved. In this sense, Share helps transform action into learning and creates the conditions for a new participation cycle.

From a rights-based perspective, this phase reinforces children's right to be recognised as contributors to society. It gives visibility to their ideas and efforts, while also supporting transparency and accountability. Sharing outcomes can help adults and institutions understand children's perspectives more clearly, and can create opportunities for feedback and follow-up.

Operationally, sharing processes should remain accessible and inclusive. Not all children may wish to speak publicly, and different formats should be offered to accommodate different communication styles and confidence levels. Feedback should be constructive and supportive, and where possible, outcomes should be connected to broader community or policy discussions.

Within the SCM, Share aligns closely with the SPEAK and WEIGH phases, as it involves communication, recognition, reflection, and preparation for future cycles¹³⁸.

4.3.3 Cross-Cutting Principles in DFC Integration

The integration of DFC within the SCM is guided by several cross-cutting principles. First, it reinforces child-centredness: children should lead the process as much as possible, while adults act as facilitators rather than directors. Second, it strengthens inclusivity, because all children, particularly those with fewer opportunities, should be supported to participate through methods adapted to their needs, capacities, and preferred forms of expression¹³⁹.

Ethical participation is also essential. Safeguarding, consent, data protection, and emotional safety must be ensured throughout the process, especially when children share experiences, images, or public outputs. Reflection and iteration are equally important, as the DFC cycle encourages continuous learning rather than a one-off activity. Finally, DFC maintains an orientation towards impact, helping children connect their ideas to tangible outcomes, even when these outcomes are small, gradual, or partial¹⁴⁰.

These principles ensure that DFC remains aligned with European standards on quality education, child participation, inclusion, and social engagement¹⁴¹.

4.3.4 Added Value of DFC within SCM

The integration of DFC strengthens the SOCRATES Compass Mechanism in several ways. It helps translate abstract rights into practical action, making participation more understandable and concrete for children. It also bridges the gap between voice and impact, because children are not only invited to express concerns but are supported to imagine, test, and share possible responses¹⁴².

DFC may also enhance children's motivation, confidence, and civic engagement. By moving through a process where their observations can become ideas, actions, and shared outcomes, children may experience participation as more meaningful and less symbolic. At the same time,

¹³⁸ Design for Change., n.d..

¹³⁹ Design for Change., n.d.; European Commission, 2021.

¹⁴⁰ European Parliament and Council, 2016; Design for Change., n.d.

¹⁴¹ European Commission, 2021; Council of the European Union, 2018.

¹⁴² Design for Change, n.d.; European Union, 2012, Art. 24.

the model provides a replicable and scalable methodology that can be adapted across different educational, social, and community contexts¹⁴³.

Importantly, DFC also supports the development of key competences for lifelong learning. Through the cycle, children practise communication, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, reflection, and responsibility. These competences are relevant not only for the project itself, but also for children's longer-term educational and social development¹⁴⁴.

4.3.5 Operational implications for the SCM methodology

Integrating the Design for Change model within the SCM circular methodology provides a rights-based and action-oriented framework for children's participation. Through the Feel, Imagine, Do, Share cycle, the SCM can support children not only to be heard, but also to recognise challenges, imagine alternatives, contribute to action, and reflect on outcomes¹⁴⁵.

This integration is particularly useful because it connects participation with learning and agency. It helps children understand that their views can be part of a broader process, where ideas are explored, tested, communicated, and revisited. Grounded in European legislation and policy frameworks, DFC therefore supports the SCM's broader aim of moving beyond tokenistic participation towards meaningful, sustained, and context-sensitive engagement with children as active contributors to their communities¹⁴⁶.

4.4 Appreciative Inquiry: A strength-based approach to problem-solving

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a participatory, strength-based methodological approach that focuses on identifying existing resources, positive experiences, and possibilities for improvement, rather than concentrating solely on problems or deficits¹⁴⁷. Within the context of the SOCRATES Compass Mechanism (SCM), AI is not treated as an isolated methodology but as an integrated

¹⁴³ Design for Change, n.d.

¹⁴⁴ Council of the European Union, 2018.

¹⁴⁵ Design for Change, n.d.; European Union, 2012, Art. 24.

¹⁴⁶ Design for Change, n.d.; Council of the European Union, 2018.

¹⁴⁷ Cooperrider, D. L., & Srivastva, S. (1987). Appreciative inquiry in organizational life. In R. W. Woodman & W. A. Pasmore (Eds.), *Research in organizational change and development* (Vol. 1, pp. 129–169). JAI Press; Cooperrider, D. L., Whitney D., & Stavros, J. M., 2008; Bushe, G. R., & Kassam, A. F. (2005). When is Appreciative Inquiry transformational? A meta-case analysis. *The Journal of Applied Behavioural Science*, 41(2), 161–181. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021886304270337>; Cooperrider, D. L., Stavros, J. M., & Whitney, D. (2008). *The appreciative inquiry handbook: For leaders of change*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

strategic perspective that responds directly to the participation patterns identified through transnational focus groups conducted across the consortium.

Evidence gathered from children across the five participating countries suggests that participation is shaped not only by structural barriers but also by emotional and relational dynamics. Many children expressed fear of being judged, uncertainty about whether their ideas matter, and scepticism regarding the willingness of adults or institutions to genuinely listen to them. In several contexts, participation was associated with the risk of criticism, embarrassment, or disappointment, especially when previous experiences had not resulted in visible change or meaningful feedback. This demonstrates that children may perceive participation as a complex and emotionally charged process, influenced by past experiences and the behaviour of adults.

In this context, an exclusively problem-oriented approach may unintentionally reinforce passivity or disengagement, as children might focus primarily on limitations and frustrations rather than possibilities. Appreciative Inquiry, instead, appears to provide a more constructive and emotionally accessible entry point into participation¹⁴⁸. By beginning with positive experiences, existing strengths, and achievable possibilities, the approach supports children in engaging more confidently, collaboratively, and in a solution-oriented manner within the SCM process.

4.4.1 Appreciative Inquiry as a Response to the Focus Group Findings

The integration of AI within SCM is strongly informed by transnational findings. Across all contexts, children seemed more willing to participate when they perceived the environment as safe, respectful, and supportive. Participation appeared closely linked to confidence, trust in adults, and the sense that their contributions could be taken seriously. At the same time, many children expressed doubts about the real impact of participation, often anticipating that adults would ultimately make decisions without genuinely considering children's perspectives.

The focus groups also revealed a strong preference for collective rather than individual participation. Children frequently reported feeling more comfortable sharing ideas within a group, where responsibility and visibility are shared among peers. This tendency was particularly evident in contexts where children experienced lower perceived agency or greater anxiety regarding authority figures.

Appreciative Inquiry responds to these patterns by framing participation as a collaborative and constructive process. Rather than positioning children as passive complainants identifying problems for adults to solve, the approach encourages them to become active contributors

¹⁴⁸ Cooperrider, D.L., & Srivastva, S., 1987; Reed, J. (2007). *Appreciative Inquiry: Research for change*. SAGE Publications, Inc., <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412983464>.

capable of identifying strengths, imagining improvements, and developing realistic proposals. In doing so, AI appears to reduce emotional barriers to participation and strengthens children's sense of competence and ownership within the process¹⁴⁹.

Another aspect emerging from the focus groups concerns children's strong need for meaningful feedback and transparency. Across countries, children consistently indicated that they are willing to accept limitations or negative responses if these are communicated honestly and respectfully. AI aligns with this expectation by emphasizing dialogue, reflection, and shared understanding throughout the participation process.

4.4.2 Core Principles of Appreciative Inquiry within the SCM

Within SCM, AI is operationalised through several interconnected principles that align with children's developmental and emotional needs. A central principle is the focus on lived experience and existing strengths¹⁵⁰. Children appear to engage more naturally and confidently when discussions start from familiar situations and concrete experiences rather than abstract institutional concepts. Reflecting on moments when they felt safe, listened to, or supported provides a more accessible and emotionally secure starting point for participation.

Psychological safety is another essential principle. Given that fear of judgment and concern about "saying something wrong" emerged consistently across contexts, AI encourages a positive framing that allows exploration without placing children in defensive positions. This is particularly important for children with fewer opportunities, lower confidence, or limited prior experience in participatory settings.

AI also supports collective co-creation, reflecting children's clear preference for group-based participation identified throughout the focus groups. Working collaboratively allows children to share responsibility, negotiate ideas together, and gain confidence through peer support. Participation, therefore, becomes a shared social process rather than an individual performance.

Simultaneously, the approach fosters constructive engagement with adults and decision-makers. Children are guided to formulate ideas as proposals for improvement grounded in concrete observations and shared goals, rather than complaints. This helps reduce the perceived distance between children and authority figures and supports productive intergenerational dialogue.

¹⁴⁹ Cooperrider, D. L., Whitney D., & Stavros, J. M., 2008; Bushe, G. R., & Kassam, A. F. (2005). When is Appreciative Inquiry transformational? A meta-case analysis. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 41(2), 161–181. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021886304270337>.

¹⁵⁰ Cooperrider D. L., & Srivastva, S., 1987; Reed, 2007.

Finally, AI emphasises possibilities, outcomes, and visible action. As many children expressed frustration with symbolic participation that does not lead to change, AI supports children in moving gradually from reflection toward realistic and actionable solutions.

4.4.3 The 4D Cycle as a Structuring Logic

The AI 4D cycle – Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver – provides a coherent and adaptable structure throughout SCM¹⁵¹. In the Discover phase, children identify positive aspects of their environment, relationships, or experiences. Starting with what already works well helps reduce participation anxiety and builds confidence, particularly among children who initially feel uncertain about expressing opinions. This phase also helps facilitators establish a constructive and trusting atmosphere before engaging with more challenging discussions.

The Dream phase invites children to imagine how situations, environments, or relationships could be improved. Focus group findings suggest that children are often highly capable of imagining positive alternatives when given supportive conditions and concrete prompts. This stage appears to counter feelings of helplessness or scepticism by reinforcing the idea that change is possible.

During the Design phase, children collaboratively transform ideas into structured proposals or strategies for action. This aligns closely with children's preference for shared ownership, allowing negotiation of priorities, a combination of perspectives, and collective responsibility for proposed solutions.

The Deliver phase focuses on defining concrete actions, next steps, and feedback mechanisms. This addresses children's expectations that participation should result in visible outcomes and transparent follow-up. Even if large-scale change is not immediately possible, identifying realistic actions helps reinforce accountability and sustains trust in the participation process¹⁵².

4.4.4 Integration within the SCM Phases

AI is not implemented as a separate methodological layer but integrated across all four SCM phases¹⁵³. In NOTICE, AI supports recognition of both problems and existing positive elements, making issue identification more balanced and accessible. During EXPLORE, the Dream and Design dimensions guide collaborative investigation, idea generation, and creative reflection, complementing child-led exploration. In SPEAK, AI contributes to confident, solution-oriented communication with adults and decision-makers. Within WEIGH, the Deliver dimension

¹⁵¹ Cooperrider, D. L., Whitney, D., & Stavros, J. M., 2008.

¹⁵² Bushe, G. R., & Kassam, A. F., 2005.

¹⁵³ Cooperrider, D. L., Whitney, D., & Stavros, J. M., 2008.

reinforces reflection, accountability, and feedback, consistent with children's emphasis on transparency and responsive engagement.

4.4.5 Operational implications for the SCM methodology

AI suggests that activities begin with positive reflection and familiar experiences before identifying areas for improvement, supporting emotional safety and engagement. Tools and activities should support a gradual progression from reflection to action. Group-based formats appear to reduce individual pressure and align with children's preference for peer-supported participation. Facilitators play a critical role in maintaining a constructive atmosphere, guiding discussions, and helping children transform ideas into realistic actions while ensuring all participants feel respected, safe, and encouraged.

Visible and meaningful feedback mechanisms are essential and should be considered a core component of participation rather than optional. This supports children's trust, strengthens engagement, and helps sustain meaningful participation.

Overall, Appreciative Inquiry provides a coherent, evidence-informed, and strength-based foundation for SCM. By addressing emotional, relational, and structural factors identified through focus groups, it supports a shift from hesitant or symbolic participation toward more confident, constructive, and meaningful engagement¹⁵⁴. Children are supported to recognise strengths, imagine alternatives, co-create solutions, and engage in dialogue with adults and institutions in an empowered and collaborative manner.

4.5 Theory of Change: Mapping actions to intended strategic outcomes

To ensure that the SOCRATES Compass Mechanism (SCM) goes beyond tokenistic consultation and supports meaningful participation, its methodology can be read through a Theory of Change perspective. In this context, the Theory of Change does not simply describe a sequence of activities, but clarifies the causal pathways and assumptions through which the SCM is expected to contribute to more inclusive, child-friendly democratic processes¹⁵⁵.

For the SOCRATES project, the COM-B model provides a useful interpretative framework. According to this model, behaviour change occurs through the interaction of three necessary

¹⁵⁴ Cooperrider, D. L., & Srivastva, S., 1987; Bushe, G. R., & Kassam, A. F., 2005.

¹⁵⁵ Mayne, J. (2017). Theory of change analysis: Building robust theories of change. *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, 32(2), 155-173.

conditions: **Capabilities**, **Opportunities** and **Motivation**¹⁵⁶. Applied to the SCM, these three dimensions help explain how the mechanism can support change both among children and among adults, including educators, facilitators and decision-makers.

4.5.1 Capabilities: Equipping children and adults with knowledge, skills and tools

Capability refers to the psychological and practical capacity to engage in a given behaviour, including the knowledge, skills and confidence required to act¹⁵⁷.

For children, the focus group findings show that participation is often limited by the difficulty of understanding abstract civic and institutional concepts. Younger children in particular tend to struggle with roles such as “mayor” or “municipality”, while children with lower prior knowledge or language difficulties may disengage when concepts are not clearly explained. The report also highlights that a lack of shared vocabulary can exclude children from participation, especially when institutional terminology is not translated into concrete and familiar examples.

The SCM responds to this by building children’s capabilities progressively, especially through the **NOTICE** and **EXPLORE** phases. Visual, playful-educational and embodied methodologies can help translate complex ideas into accessible experiences. At the same time, children can gradually develop critical thinking, communication, problem-solving and simple investigation skills, enabling them to identify issues, explore causes and formulate proposals in a structured but child-friendly way.

A specific capability that should be strengthened is **institutional literacy**. The focus groups suggest that some children do not know who is responsible for what, which institutions can be approached, or through which channels a concern can be raised. For this reason, the SCM should not only explain participation in general terms, but also help children understand the local civic environment around them: the school, the municipality, local services, the mayor’s office, the police station, community centres or other relevant local actors. This can be done through child-friendly maps, simple “who does what” charts, local walks, guided visits, role cards or meetings with local representatives.

This component should be introduced progressively. With younger children, the focus should remain on familiar and nearby places, helping them understand where they can go and who can help with concrete issues in their school, playground or neighbourhood. With older children, the SCM can gradually introduce more complex institutional levels, including municipal departments,

¹⁵⁶ Mayne, J. (2016). The COM-B theory of change model.

http://www.researchgate.net/publication/314086441_The_COM-B_Theory_of_Change_Model_V3.

¹⁵⁷ Mayne, J., *The COM-B Theory of Change Model*, 2016.

local councils, regional bodies or other public authorities, always connecting these structures to practical examples.

For adults, capability-building is equally important. Educators, facilitators and decision-makers need specific skills to support child-led participation without dominating the process. The SCM Toolkit and related training should therefore equip adults with methods for facilitating discussion, managing group dynamics, simplifying institutional language, supporting vulnerable children, and ensuring that children's views are documented and communicated without being filtered or replaced.

4.5.2. Opportunities: Creating safe, accessible and structured spaces for participation

Opportunity refers to the external conditions that make a behaviour possible, including the physical environment, social norms, institutional procedures and available channels¹⁵⁸.

For children, the focus groups show that participation is often constrained by fear of peer judgement, anxiety towards adults in positions of authority, and the absence of clear or accessible channels. Children tend to feel safer when they can express themselves in small groups, protected settings and collective formats, rather than through individual and exposed forms of public speaking. The report also identifies co-created ground rules, respectful facilitation and small-group work as key enablers of participation.

The SCM therefore creates opportunities by structuring participation as a safe and gradual process. In the **NOTICE** and **EXPLORE** phases, children are supported to recognise problems and investigate them within familiar environments. In the **SPEAK** phase, they are offered protected formats to communicate their ideas collectively, through role-play, visual outputs, videos, rehearsed presentations or mediated dialogue with adults. The presence of trusted adults can help create access to decision-makers, but their role should be that of facilitators or guarantors, not substitutes for children's voices.

For institutions, the SCM can create opportunities by embedding child participation into school and local governance routines. Rather than relying on occasional consultations, the mechanism can provide structured moments and formats through which children's views are regularly collected, discussed, transmitted and answered. This contributes to shifting the institutional environment from one in which children are seen mainly as passive recipients of decisions to one in which they are recognised as active rights-holders and contributors to community life.

¹⁵⁸ Mayne, J., 2016.

4.5.3. Motivation: Addressing the agency gap and sustaining participation over time

Motivation refers to the emotional, reflective and habitual processes that energise behaviour and make people willing to act¹⁵⁹.

For children, the most significant motivational barrier identified by the focus groups is the **agency gap**: the belief that they are too young, not credible enough, or unlikely to be taken seriously by adults and institutions. The report repeatedly shows that children's reluctance to participate is not due to a lack of ideas, but to fear of being ignored, judged or exposed to a "fake yes", where adults appear to listen but do not take any visible action afterwards.

The SCM addresses this motivational barrier especially through the **WEIGH** phase. Children are more likely to remain motivated when they receive clear, respectful and accessible feedback on what happened to their proposals. The focus groups show that children can accept a negative response when it is explained transparently; what undermines trust is silence, ambiguity or vague promises. For this reason, the "explained no" is not only a communication principle, but a motivational condition for sustaining children's trust in participation.

For adults, motivation can be strengthened by making children's contributions easier to understand, respond to and integrate into decision-making processes. When proposals are developed collectively, supported by simple evidence and communicated through structured formats, decision-makers may be more likely to perceive children's participation as meaningful and actionable rather than symbolic or disruptive. At the same time, adults need to understand that their response is part of the participatory process itself: listening without feedback is not sufficient to sustain trust.

4.5.4 Addressing at-risk assumptions

A Theory of Change also requires identifying the assumptions that must hold for the causal pathway to work¹⁶⁰. In the case of child participation, one central at-risk assumption is that adults and institutions will not only listen to children, but also respond in a visible, respectful and understandable way.

The focus groups show that this assumption cannot be taken for granted. Children are highly sensitive to situations where adults appear to agree but do not follow up, or where no explanation is provided after children have expressed their views. In such cases, participation risks reinforcing disillusionment instead of building agency.

¹⁵⁹ Mayne, J., 2016.

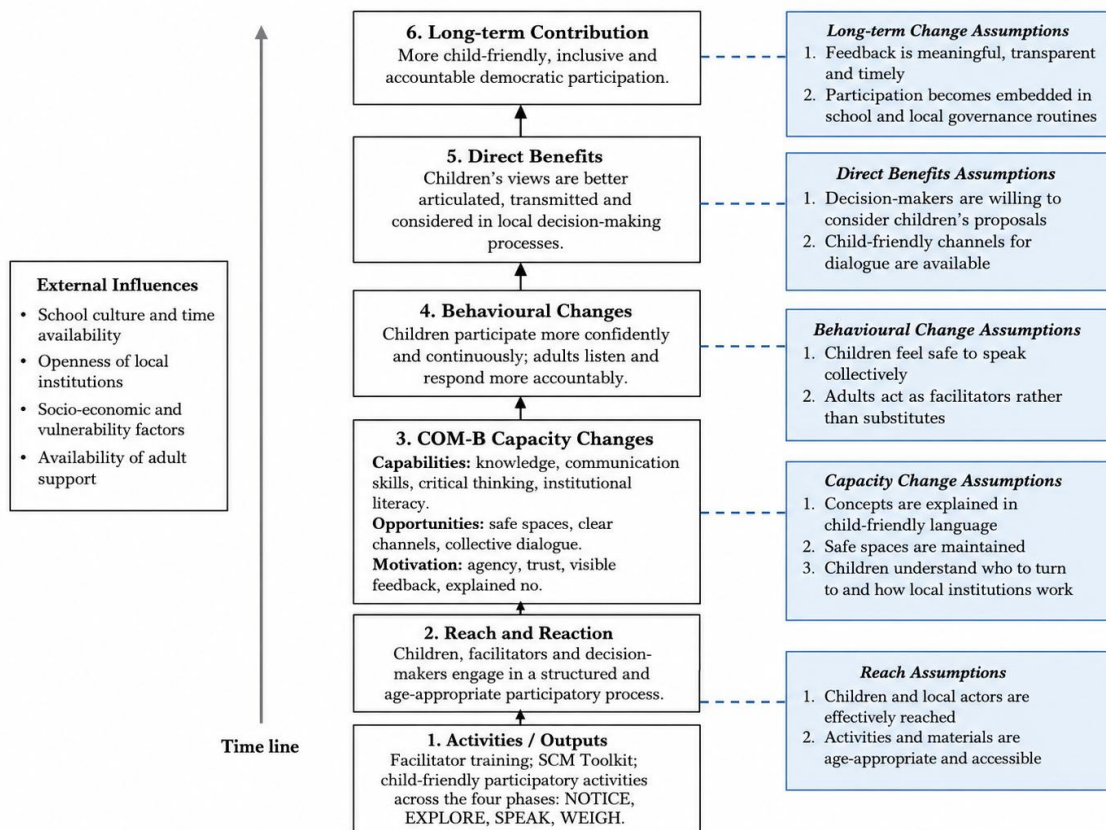
¹⁶⁰ Mayne, J., 2017.

The SCM mitigates this risk by ensuring that the participatory cycle does not stop at the **SPEAK** phase. The **WEIGH** phase introduces accountability as an integral part of the methodology, requiring clear feedback loops, child-friendly explanations, and visible updates on whether and how children's contributions have been considered. In this way, the SCM connects the development of capabilities, the creation of opportunities and the strengthening of motivation within a coherent pathway from initial awareness to sustained democratic participation¹⁶¹.

4.5.5 Visualising the SCM Theory of Change Pathway

The overall pathway is summarised in Figure X, which adapts Mayne's behaviour-change based Theory of Change structure to the SCM. The figure presents the expected progression from activities and outputs to reach and reaction, COM-B capacity changes, behavioural changes, direct benefits and long-term contribution, while also making explicit the assumptions that need to hold at each stage.

Figure X. SCM Theory of Change pathway based on the COM-B model



¹⁶¹ Mayne, J., 2017; Mayne, J., 2016.

Figure 4. SCM Theory of Change pathway based on the COM-B model. Adapted from Mayne's behaviour-change based Theory of Change structure.¹⁶²

¹⁶²Adapted from John Mayne, The COM-B Theory of Change Model, Working Paper, 2016, and John Mayne, "Theory of Change Analysis: Building Robust Theories of Change", Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation, 32(2), 2017.

5. Implementing the Phases (Methodological Guidelines)

The following section outlines practical guidance for applying the SCM phases in real-world settings. Each phase is designed to be child-centred, flexible, and responsive to developmental, social, and emotional needs. The guidelines provide a structured pathway for facilitators while preserving space for adaptation based on context, group dynamics, and children's capacities. They translate the theoretical and empirical foundations of SCM into actionable practices that support meaningful participation.

5.1 PHASE 1: NORTH (Notice) – Guided observation and issue identification

The NORTH phase marks the beginning of the SCM. In this initial stage, children are invited to act as “explorers” of their everyday environment, identifying, observing, and naming issues that affect their daily lives. The aim is not to start from abstract civic concepts or institutional problems, but from children's concrete experience of places, relationships, and situations.

Focus group findings suggest that children generally do not perceive problems through systemic or abstract analysis. Rather, awareness is often triggered by what they see, experience physically, or feel emotionally in familiar environments such as school, playgrounds, after-school centres, streets, or neighbourhoods. For this reason, the NOTICE phase begins from the child's immediate reality, avoiding institutional jargon.

This phase supports children in moving from an initial perception— “something feels wrong,” “something is unsafe,” “something is unfair,” “something is missing”—toward a shared and visible identification of issues that can later be explored collectively.

5.1.1 Methodological anchors

The NOTICE phase is grounded in four complementary methodological references:

Lundy Model (Space) – Children need a safe, inclusive, and non-judgmental environment to identify or express concerns. Facilitators should pay attention to the physical and relational setting to encourage listening, respect, and equal participation¹⁶³.

Participatory Action Research – Children are active observers rather than passive respondents. Facilitators guide observation, support reflection, and help children document their findings

¹⁶³ Lundy, L., 2007.

without imposing topics or interpretations¹⁶⁴.

Hart's Ladder of Participation – The phase seeks to avoid tokenistic consultation. Issues should emerge from children's own perceptions and priorities, with adults helping to structure and name observations without predetermining what matters¹⁶⁵.

Child Rights Situation Analysis – Children's observations are gradually connected to rights, needs, and standards of wellbeing, translating abstract concepts into tangible questions, such as: Is this place safe? Is it fair? Is everyone included? Can children play, learn, speak, and feel protected here?¹⁶⁶

5.1.2 Implementation guidelines for facilitators

The NOTICE phase is operationalised through a gradual, child-sensitive process. The purpose is not to push children immediately towards solutions, but to help them observe, name and share what they experience in their everyday environments. Facilitators should therefore support children step by step, ensuring that the process remains accessible, inclusive and emotionally safe.

Step 1: Establishing the baseline and creating the space

Facilitators should not assume that children already share the same understanding of participation, rights, institutions or community issues. The activity should begin by creating a safe and welcoming space, where children understand what they are being invited to do and why their observations matter. Rather than using political or institutional terminology, facilitators should start from familiar situations: places children know, people they interact with, and everyday experiences of safety, fairness, exclusion or discomfort.

At this stage, managing group dynamics is essential. Ground rules for respect should be co-created with children, including listening to one another, avoiding ridicule, allowing different ways of expression and respecting silence. This is particularly important for quieter children, children with language or cognitive difficulties, and children who may feel exposed in front of peers. The aim is to ensure that all children feel they can participate in a way that is comfortable for them.

Step 2: Guided observation: the “detective” approach

The core of the NOTICE phase is guided observation. Especially with younger children, purely

¹⁶⁴ Hocevar, R., 2023.

¹⁶⁵ Hart, R.A., 1992.

¹⁶⁶ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009.

verbal discussion may not be sufficient to identify issues. Playful and experiential methodologies can help children observe their environment more actively and confidently.

Facilitators may use “detective missions”, short walk-arounds, visual prompts, drawings, photo-based activities, maps, observation cards or other simple tools to invite children to notice what feels safe, unsafe, fair, unfair, welcoming, excluding, broken, missing or important. These tools should not be used as decorative activities, but as mediators that help children translate perception into expression.

For younger children, observation should remain strongly connected to familiar and concrete spaces, such as the classroom, playground, street, after-school centre or neighbourhood. With older children, the same process can gradually become more structured, encouraging them to distinguish between what they observe, what they feel, and what they think may be the underlying issue. In this way, children are supported to move from immediate impressions towards a more conscious identification of concerns.

Step 3: Recognising emotional and somatic signals

The focus group findings suggest that children often recognise problems not only through what they see, but also through emotional and bodily reactions. Feelings of fear, anger, sadness, embarrassment, tension or discomfort may be the first signals that something is perceived as unfair, unsafe or exclusionary.

Facilitators should therefore validate emotional and somatic responses as legitimate starting points for participation. Instead of asking only abstract questions such as “What is the problem?”, facilitators can use more accessible prompts, for example: “How does this place make you feel?”, “Where do you feel safe or unsafe?”, “Is there a place where you feel excluded?”, or “What would you like adults to understand about this situation?”

This helps children move from feeling to naming, without forcing them too early into adult categories or technical language. It also recognises that children’s perceptions are not only cognitive, but also emotional, relational and embodied.

Step 4: Child-led issue selection and consolidation

After the observation phase, children should be supported to share and organise their findings in small groups. Visual tools such as sticky notes, drawings, stickers, rights cards, simple maps or thematic clusters can help children group individual observations into broader patterns.

The role of the facilitator is to help the group identify connections between different observations, while preserving children’s own language and priorities. The phase should conclude with a simple and transparent child-led selection process, through which the group agrees on

one or two priority issues to carry forward into the EXPLORE phase. This may be done through visual voting, tokens, ranking activities, consensus-building or other accessible methods, depending on the age and characteristics of the group.

The selected issue does not need to be the most complex or institutionally relevant one. It should be an issue that children recognise as meaningful, understandable and connected to their lived experience. This ensures that the following phases of the Compass remain grounded in children's own perception of reality.

5.1.3 Expected outcome of the NOTICE phase

By the end of the NOTICE phase, children should have identified and prioritised one or more issues that matter to them and that can be further explored in the next phase. More importantly, they should have experienced that their observations, feelings and everyday knowledge are valid starting points for participation.

The NORTH phase therefore lays the foundation for the entire SCM process: it supports children in moving from passive recipients of adult-defined concerns to active observers of their own environments, capable of recognising and naming issues that affect their daily lives.

5.2 PHASE 2: EAST (Explore) – Child-led Co-design and Creative Investigation

The EAST phase, or EXPLORE phase, represents the moment in which children move from having “noticed” an issue to beginning to understand it more deeply. Within the SOCRATES Compass Mechanism (SCM), this phase is intended to support children, with appropriate adult guidance, in exploring the causes, effects and possible meanings of the issues identified during the NOTICE phase.

The focus group findings suggest that children often tend to move directly from identifying a problem to proposing a solution. For many of them, the idea of an intermediate “investigation phase” is not immediately intuitive. At the same time, the findings also show that children can engage meaningfully with exploration when this is organised in concrete, playful, visual, embodied and collaborative ways. For this reason, EXPLORE should not feel like a formal research exercise or a school task. Rather, it should be designed as a structured but flexible process that helps children slow down between NOTICE and SPEAK, while still keeping the activity accessible, creative and engaging.

In this sense, the EXPLORE phase reflects the logic of Participatory Action Research. Children are not treated merely as “informants” who provide answers to adult questions, but as co-researchers who can observe, question, compare, interpret and make sense of their own environments¹⁶⁷. The role of adults is therefore to support children’s investigation without taking control of it.

5.2.1 Creating safe conditions for exploration

Before children can explore an issue in depth, facilitators need to create safe and inclusive participation conditions. The focus group findings suggest that many children may feel afraid of being judged by classmates, corrected by adults, or exposed in front of others. Children appear to participate more openly when they work in small groups rather than in large plenary settings.

For this reason, EXPLORE should preferably be organised in groups of around three to five children. At the beginning of the work, each group should co-create simple rules for participation. These may include: no laughing at others, everyone gets a turn, it is acceptable not to know, different ideas are welcome, and the group listens to one another. These rules should be written, drawn or otherwise made visible, so that children can refer back to them during the activity.

Facilitators should adopt an “ally” stance. This means listening carefully, avoiding interruptions, using simple and accessible language, and making it clear that there are no “wrong” observations. This approach operationalises the Lundy Model’s dimension of **Space**, by creating a safe setting for participation, and prepares the ground for genuine **Voice**, by helping children feel able to express what they think, feel, and observe.

5.2.2 Overall process logic in EXPLORE

The focus group findings suggest that children usually perceive problems through concrete experiences and emotions. These may include dirty playgrounds, unsafe equipment, bullying, unfair rules, environmental degradation, or feeling unsafe in public spaces. EXPLORE should therefore start from these lived experiences, rather than from abstract civic or institutional concepts.

Once children have identified an issue during NOTICE, the EXPLORE phase helps them ask a series of simple but important questions: What exactly is happening? Who is affected? Why does it happen? What could be changed? How do we know? These questions translate the logic of Participatory Action Research into child-friendly terms.

¹⁶⁷ Hocevar, R., 2023.

The process should be cyclical rather than strictly linear. Children may first define or refine the problem, then choose ways to explore it, such as photos, drawings, role-play, peer interviews, simple counting exercises or observation cards. They then collect observations and come back together to reflect on what they have found. Facilitators can support this reflection through questions such as: What did we learn? Did anything surprise us? Did we notice the same things or different things? Do we need to look more closely at something?

The aim is not to produce “perfect data”. Rather, the objective is to help children deepen their understanding and experience that they are capable of analysing their environment. The materials generated during EXPLORE — maps, drawings, photos, tallies, short statements, role-plays or group posters — become a shared evidence base. Children can draw on this evidence when deciding what they want to communicate to adults during SPEAK, and can return to it during WEIGH when reflecting on whether responses or changes have taken place.

5.2.3 Methods that work: active, visual and embodied exploration

Across the project, children appeared to respond more positively to active, creative and embodied methods than to purely verbal or teacher-like discussions. EXPLORE should therefore use methods that allow children to show what they mean, not only to explain it verbally.

Visual methods are particularly important. Children can draw the place or situation they are discussing, create simple maps of their school or neighbourhood, and mark “OK” and “not OK” areas. They can use stickers, colours or symbols to indicate where they feel safe, excluded, uncomfortable or unsafe. These drawings and maps then become shared reference points for discussion. They help the group remain anchored in concrete experiences, rather than moving too quickly into abstract talk.

Embodied and spatial methods are also important. Instead of only describing a situation, children can act out typical scenes, use their bodies or simple objects to recreate spaces, or physically show distances, danger zones, crowded areas or calm areas. This can be particularly useful for younger children, children with language barriers, or children who find it difficult to express complex experiences through words alone.

EXPLORE should also introduce simple, child-friendly forms of evidence gathering. Children can take photos of relevant places or objects, make tally marks to record how often something happens, dictate short statements, or conduct brief peer-to-peer conversations using a small set of accessible questions. These activities help children move from individual impressions towards shared observations, without making the process heavy or overly technical.

Finally, group organising tools can help children make sense of what they have collected. Small groups can create posters, visual charts or simple clusters under headings such as “what

happens”, “who is affected”, “how we feel” and “why we think it happens”. This helps structure their thinking and produces collective materials that can later be used in the SPEAK phase to communicate concerns and priorities to adults.

The key methodological principle is to offer multiple channels of expression: visual, bodily, oral, and, where appropriate, written. This allows children of different ages, abilities, confidence levels, and communication preferences to participate meaningfully and to recognise their own ways of knowing within the EXPLORE phase.

5.2.4 Age-sensitive design: 6–8, 8–10 and 9–12

The developmental findings from the focus groups are essential for designing the EXPLORE phase. The complexity of the investigation should be adapted to children’s age, cognitive development and communication preferences.

For children aged **6–8**, thinking is often concrete, visual and closely linked to immediate experience. Children in this age group may struggle with abstract roles such as “mayor” or “municipality”, and may not immediately understand investigation as a separate step between identifying a problem and proposing a solution. For them, EXPLORE should be short, playful and highly concrete. “Detective” games in familiar spaces, simple icon checklists, drawings, happy/sad faces, thumbs up/down symbols, and sorting pictures into “OK” and “not OK” can all support participation. Questions should remain simple and connected to what children see or produce: What happens here? Who is there? How do you feel in this picture? The main aim is to help children slow down enough to observe and name what is happening, without overloading them with explanation.

For children aged **8–10**, the phase should respond to a transitional developmental moment. Some children begin to engage with more abstract ideas, such as rules, fairness or even democracy, while others still require strong concrete support. This age group may respond well to embodied and spatial exploration: role-playing scenes, building a floor map of the playground or classroom, or physically moving around to show where things happen. Facilitators can gently introduce investigative questions such as: Why do you think this happens? When is it worst? Is it the same for everyone? However, these questions should remain linked to maps, drawings, role-plays or other concrete materials, and facilitators should regularly check comprehension. At this stage, children can begin to understand “looking more closely” or “checking what really happens” as a distinct activity, without needing formal research language.

For children aged **9–12**, many can engage with more structured forms of mini-inquiry, provided that these remain rooted in real-life situations and group work. EXPLORE can more explicitly follow a simple PAR cycle: defining one or two focused questions, choosing small inquiry

methods, collecting findings and reflecting on patterns, causes and possible changes. Children may use peer interviews, simple counts, mapping exercises, short observation sheets, group brainstorming, posters, storyboards, simple slides or audio recordings. Facilitators can also make the link to action more explicit by asking: What could these findings help us ask for? What could they help us change? At the same time, the phase should remain exploratory, not become a premature advocacy exercise.

Across all age groups, the key design rule is to match the complexity of investigation to children's developmental level: concrete and playful for the youngest, embodied and comparative for the transitional group, and more structured but still creative for the oldest children.

5.2.5 Inclusion and group dynamics

The focus group findings suggest that vulnerability — including poverty, migration background, learning difficulties, low literacy or limited confidence — can lower children's sense of agency and make them more likely to withdraw when language or tasks feel too difficult or too school-like. In the EXPLORE phase, inclusion cannot therefore be treated as an additional concern. It needs to be built into every methodological choice.

Facilitators should consistently use simple, jargon-free language and avoid complex institutional terms unless these are explained through concrete examples linked to children's everyday lives. Instead of referring immediately to “policy” or “municipality”, facilitators may speak about “the people who make rules for this place” or “the adults who decide about the park”. Activities should also offer visual and embodied alternatives to purely spoken or written tasks. Drawing, pointing on maps, placing stickers or symbols, building simple models, or acting out situations are not optional “fun” additions; for many children, they are essential ways to express knowledge, feelings and observations.

Group composition and dynamics also require careful attention. In mixed groups, a few confident children can easily dominate the conversation, while quieter or more vulnerable children may remain silent or be talked over. Small-group work helps facilitators notice who has not yet contributed and makes it easier to use turn-taking tools. More reserved children should be invited to participate in the way they prefer: through a short comment, a drawing, a gesture, a symbol, or a role-play scene.

It should be clear from the beginning that participation is voluntary and that there are different valid ways to contribute. No child should be forced to speak in plenary if they feel uncomfortable. Children can choose to draw, work in pairs, use symbols, or have their ideas read aloud by a peer or trusted adult. When these principles are applied consistently, inclusion becomes a core design feature of EXPLORE, rather than a corrective measure added later.

5.2.6 Facilitator stance and link to SPEAK and WEIGH

The way adults behave during EXPLORE is as important as the tools they use. To move beyond tokenism and adultism, facilitators should act as allies. They should explain their role clearly, be transparent about what will happen with children's work, ask open questions, and avoid steering children towards pre-set conclusions. Their role is not to provide "correct" answers, but to model curiosity: Let's see what we find out.

Facilitators should also support children in comparing different perspectives within the group. Children may not all experience the same place or situation in the same way. One child may perceive a space as safe, while another may feel excluded there. These differences should not be treated as contradictions to be solved too quickly, but as part of the exploration process.

Throughout the phase, facilitators should continuously make the link to the next stages clear. The investigation carried out in EXPLORE will directly inform what children choose to communicate during SPEAK. Maps, photos, role-plays, tallies, drawings and short statements can become the concrete stories, examples and arguments that children may later present to decision-makers. The same materials can also be revisited during WEIGH, when children reflect on what responses were received, whether any changes occurred, and whether further action is needed.

This helps children understand that EXPLORE is not an isolated activity. It is a meaningful step in a larger cycle where their observations and analysis can have value, visibility and consequences.

5.2.7 Expected outcome of the EXPLORE phase

By the end of the EXPLORE phase, children should have developed a deeper and more shared understanding of the issue selected during NOTICE. They should have explored what is happening, who is affected, how different children perceive the situation, and what possible causes or patterns may be involved.

The expected outputs may include maps, drawings, photos, role-play scenes, observation notes, simple counts, posters, short statements or collective proposals. More importantly, children should have experienced themselves as capable co-researchers: not only able to identify a problem, but also to investigate it, discuss it with others and begin to imagine possible responses.

Taken together, these elements suggest that EXPLORE should be a safe, age-sensitive, inclusive, and genuinely participatory investigation phase. Grounded in children's concrete realities and supported by creative methods, it provides the evidence and confidence needed for the following phases of the SOCRATES Compass.

5.3 PHASE 3: SOUTH (Speak) – Intergenerational Dialogue and Effective Advocacy

The SPEAK phase focuses on transforming the ideas, concerns and proposals developed during NOTICE and EXPLORE into structured communication and dialogue with adults, institutions and community actors. Within the SOCRATES Compass Mechanism, this phase is not understood as a public speaking exercise, nor as a test of children's performance. Rather, it is a facilitated process through which children communicate perspectives that have already been observed, explored, and refined collectively.

The primary objective is to support children in expressing themselves in ways that are developmentally appropriate, emotionally manageable, and adapted to different participation contexts. The methodology, therefore, does not prioritise polished speeches or formal advocacy skills. Instead, it emphasises clarity, authenticity, preparation and reciprocal dialogue.

The focus group findings suggest that children are more willing to communicate with adults when participation formats feel familiar, collaborative and sufficiently prepared in advance. For this reason, the SPEAK phase relies on gradual preparation, peer-supported expression and communication methods that reduce the pressure often associated with direct interaction with authority figures.

5.3.1 Why Speaking to Authority is Emotionally Difficult

Across the participating countries, children described communication with authority figures as emotionally demanding, particularly when adults were perceived as distant, judgmental, or difficult to approach. Many participants associated speaking to adults with fear of embarrassment, fear of being ignored, or uncertainty about whether their opinions would be taken seriously.

The focus groups also suggested that communication anxiety increases in highly formal environments. Structured seating arrangements, institutional vocabulary, direct questioning or large audiences may create additional pressure, especially for younger children and for children with lower confidence levels. In some contexts, children appeared to prefer indirect or mediated communication formats rather than speaking individually in front of adults.

For this reason, the SPEAK methodology should include preparatory activities before any intergenerational dialogue takes place. Facilitators may use role-play simulations, mock conversations, peer rehearsal activities or visual planning exercises to familiarise children with dialogue situations in advance. For example, children may first practise presenting ideas within small peer groups before moving towards communication with teachers, local representatives or

other adult stakeholders. Similarly, facilitators may invite children to collectively prepare “possible questions adults may ask” and discuss how they would like to respond.

These preparatory stages can reduce unpredictability and help children enter dialogue situations with greater confidence and emotional readiness.

5.3.2 Principles of intergenerational dialogue

The SPEAK phase is grounded in the principle that participation should function as dialogue rather than one-directional consultation¹⁶⁸. Communication between children and adults should therefore be approached as a reciprocal process in which children are given time to explain ideas, ask questions, clarify perspectives and receive understandable responses.

Methodologically, this requires adults to communicate in accessible and developmentally appropriate ways. The focus group findings repeatedly highlighted that children place strong importance not only on decisions themselves, but also on how adults communicate. Children asked for explanations that are clear, respectful and understandable, rather than overly formal, vague or dismissive.

Within the SCM, intergenerational dialogue activities should therefore be designed to minimise hierarchy and encourage exchange. Instead of positioning children opposite adults in highly formal settings, facilitators may organise spaces that support proximity, interaction and shared attention. These may include moderated roundtable discussions, rotating small-group conversations, collaborative exhibitions where adults move between children’s workstations, or “question corners” where children and adults respond to prompts together.

The methodology should also pay attention to the pace of dialogue. Children need enough time to explain their ideas without interruption and should be allowed to reformulate or clarify what they mean when needed. Adults involved in the process should be encouraged to ask clarifying questions rather than evaluative or corrective ones. This helps maintain the dialogical character of SPEAK and reduces the risk that the exchange becomes an adult-led assessment of children’s ideas.

5.3.3 Collective advocacy and peer-supported expression

The focus groups showed a clear preference for collective communication formats over highly individualised advocacy approaches. Many children appeared to feel more comfortable speaking

¹⁶⁸ Lundy, L., 2007.

“with others” rather than alone, particularly when discussing sensitive topics or interacting with authority figures.

For this reason, the SPEAK phase should prioritise peer-supported advocacy methodologies. Rather than relying mainly on individual speeches or direct questioning, facilitators can structure communication activities around collaborative expression and shared responsibility. This may include co-created posters or visual campaigns, collaborative storytelling where different children contribute different parts of the message, group presentations with visual supports, recorded video messages developed in teams, role-play scenarios illustrating specific community issues, or gallery-style exhibitions where children explain materials informally to adults in smaller interactions.

These formats can reduce pressure on individual participants while strengthening cooperation and collective ownership of the communication process. They are particularly important for children who are quieter, less confident, or reluctant to engage in confrontation with adults.

Peer-supported expression also allows children to negotiate and refine ideas collectively before communicating externally. Small-group preparation sessions, therefore, function not only as organisational moments, but also as spaces where children build confidence through shared participation.

5.3.4 Role of Facilitators and Adults

Facilitators play a mediating and structuring role throughout the SPEAK phase. Their task is not to speak on behalf of children or translate children’s perspectives into adult-centred language. Rather, they support communication processes so that children can express themselves in ways that remain accessible, organised, and emotionally safe¹⁶⁹.

This support may involve helping children organise key points visually, preparing creative materials, structuring presentation order, moderating discussions or identifying communication formats appropriate to the group’s developmental level. Facilitators should also monitor group dynamics carefully, ensuring that more confident children do not dominate communication opportunities while quieter participants withdraw from the process.

At the same time, the methodology recognises that adults also require preparation before participating in intergenerational dialogue. The focus group findings suggest that dismissive reactions, interruptions, overly formal language or rapid judgement from adults can significantly undermine the quality of participation.

¹⁶⁹ Lundy, L., 2007; Hart, R.A., 1992.

For this reason, adults participating in SPEAK activities should receive a brief orientation on the objectives of the SCM and the principles guiding child participation. Facilitators may provide short briefing sessions, practical communication guidance or reflection prompts before meetings with children. This preparation helps ensure that dialogue remains respectful, constructive and understandable for all participants.

5.3.5 Communication formats and tools

The SCM does not prescribe a single communication format for the SPEAK phase. Instead, facilitators should select tools according to age group, context, communication preferences, available resources and the emotional comfort of participants.

The focus group findings suggest that creative and multimodal communication approaches may be more effective than highly verbal or institutional formats alone. SPEAK activities can therefore combine visual, oral, performative and digital elements.

For younger children, communication tools may include drawings, puppetry, storytelling circles, symbolic objects or guided role-play. Transitional groups may engage effectively through collaborative posters, visual presentations, photo-based discussions or moderated small-group dialogue. Older children may feel more comfortable using recorded interviews, digital storytelling, structured presentations or co-developed proposal boards.

The use of visual and creative methods should not be understood as simplification. Rather, it is a way to broaden participation opportunities and reduce dependence on advanced verbal communication skills. This is particularly important when children have different levels of confidence, language ability or familiarity with formal communication settings.

5.3.6 Age adaptations

The SPEAK methodology should remain adaptable across developmental stages. The focus group findings suggest that communication preferences and confidence levels vary significantly between age groups and even within the same cohort.

For younger children, aged approximately **6–8 years**, communication activities should remain concrete, short, interactive and strongly supported through visual or embodied methods. Long verbal explanations or formal presentations should generally be avoided. Facilitators may instead use storytelling, symbolic objects, guided drawing explanations or movement-based activities that allow children to communicate ideas more naturally.

For children aged approximately **8–10 years**, facilitators can gradually introduce more structured collaborative communication activities, while maintaining strong visual support and shared

participation formats. Children in this transitional age group may benefit from preparing messages collectively, using drawings or posters as prompts, and practising short explanations in pairs or small groups before any wider exchange.

Older children, aged approximately **9–12 years**, may engage more comfortably with structured discussions, collaborative presentations, recorded advocacy materials or facilitated meetings with adults. However, the findings suggest that even older children often prefer collective communication over highly individualised speaking tasks. For this reason, SPEAK should continue to offer peer-supported formats and avoid assuming that older children are automatically ready for formal public speaking.

5.3.7 Inclusion and safe participation

The SPEAK phase must remain accessible to children with different communication styles, confidence levels and support needs. The focus groups suggest that vulnerability often affects children's willingness to speak, rather than the relevance or value of their perspectives.

Facilitators should therefore ensure that participation does not depend on advanced verbal ability, confidence in public speaking, or familiarity with institutional language. Offering multiple communication options is particularly important for children facing language barriers, cognitive difficulties, social vulnerability, or communication anxiety.

In practice, inclusion may involve allowing children to communicate through visual supports, pairing children during presentations, using recorded rather than live communication formats, organising smaller dialogue groups, or allowing children to choose their preferred level of visibility during activities. Some children may wish to speak directly; others may prefer to contribute through drawings, written messages, group posters, symbols, video, or having a peer or trusted adult read their words aloud.

Safe participation also requires careful attention to emotional dynamics throughout the process. Children should not feel exposed, ridiculed, pressured to perform, or forced into communication situations for which they are not prepared. Participation within the SPEAK phase should remain gradual, flexible, and responsive to the needs of the group.

5.3.8 Preparing Adults to Listen

A central methodological principle of SPEAK is that meaningful participation depends not only on children's ability to communicate, but also on adults' willingness and capacity to listen constructively.

Adults participating in dialogue sessions should therefore be prepared in child-friendly communication, active listening and accessible explanation practices. The focus group findings repeatedly highlighted that children are highly attentive to adult tone, body language and sincerity during interactions.

Within the SCM, facilitators are encouraged to prepare adults to avoid interrupting children unnecessarily, ask clarifying rather than confrontational questions, acknowledge children's contributions visibly, explain limitations or disagreements respectfully, and communicate in language appropriate to the developmental level of the group.

Preparing adults should therefore be treated as a necessary methodological component of the SPEAK phase, rather than as an external or optional activity. Without adult preparation, there is a risk that even well-prepared children may encounter responses that feel dismissive, confusing or discouraging.

5.3.9 Expected outcomes of the SPEAK phase

The SPEAK phase aims to generate both practical and developmental outcomes within the participation cycle.

At a participatory level, the phase creates structured opportunities for children's perspectives, concerns and proposals to enter into dialogue with adults, institutions and community actors. Outputs may include presentations, exhibitions, recorded materials, collaborative campaigns, documented meetings or proposal summaries developed by the children.

At a developmental level, SPEAK supports communication confidence, collaborative expression, familiarity with dialogue processes, and children's ability to organise and present ideas collectively. The phase also helps children experience that communication with adults can be prepared, supported, and dialogical, rather than intimidating or purely evaluative.

The outputs and responses generated during SPEAK become the basis for the following WEIGH phase. In that next stage, children will be supported to evaluate feedback, adult responses, and the visible impact of their participation over time. In this way, SPEAK does not stand alone: it connects children's explored ideas to adult dialogue and prepares the ground for accountability, reflection, and follow-up.

5.4 PHASE 4: WEST (Weigh) – Reflective Dialogue, Impact Measurement, and Feedback Loops

The WEST phase, or WEIGH phase, represents the moment in which children are supported to reflect on what happened after they expressed their views. Within the SOCRATES Compass Mechanism, this phase should not be understood as a simple concluding step, but as a central part of the participation cycle¹⁷⁰. It is the phase that helps determine whether children experience participation as meaningful, credible, and worth repeating.

The focus group findings suggest that children do not evaluate participation only on the basis of whether their ideas are accepted or rejected. What appears to matter most is whether they receive a response that is clear, honest, and understandable. Across the different contexts, the absence of feedback — or what children perceived as a “fake yes” — emerged as one of the most damaging outcomes for trust and motivation. By contrast, a refusal can be accepted when it is explained respectfully and in a way children can understand.

For this reason, the WEIGH phase reframes feedback as a core component of participation. Children’s contributions should be visibly acknowledged and taken seriously, regardless of the final decision. Methodologically, this means that no participatory process should end without a response loop. The WEIGH phase, therefore, helps the SCM move away from symbolic participation and towards a model based on relational trust, transparency, and accountability.

5.4.1 Reframing feedback as a core component of participation

The WEIGH phase gives structure to the moment after children have spoken. In many participation processes, this stage is either weak, informal or absent. Children may be invited to share their opinions, but then receive little information about what happened afterwards. The focus group findings suggest that this can create disappointment and may reinforce the belief that children’s voices do not really matter.

In the SCM, feedback is treated as a necessary part of the methodology. It should not be added only when something positive happens, nor should it depend on the goodwill of individual adults¹⁷¹. Even when children’s proposals cannot be accepted or implemented, they should receive an explanation. This helps children understand that participation does not always mean getting what they asked for, but it should always involve being listened to and receiving a respectful response.

¹⁷⁰ Lundy, L., 2007; Shier, H., 2001.

¹⁷¹ Lundy, L., 2007.

This has an important pedagogical value. When children understand how their contribution was considered, they can learn more about decision-making, constraints, priorities and possible alternatives. Feedback therefore becomes part of the learning process, not simply an administrative closure.

5.4.2 The “explained no” and the ethics of transparent decision-making

A key methodological principle of the WEIGH phase is the distinction between different types of outcomes. A proposal may be accepted, partially accepted, postponed, modified, or rejected. For children, these differences matter. What appears to undermine trust is not necessarily the fact that an idea cannot be implemented, but the absence of an explanation or the impression that adults agreed only superficially.

The concept of the “explained no” is therefore central to this phase. Children seem able to understand constraints, limitations and competing priorities when these are communicated clearly, concretely and respectfully. In Austria and Greece, participants contrasted this kind of response with situations in which adults appeared to agree but did not follow up. In those cases, frustration was not only linked to the lack of action, but also to the lack of honesty and clarity.

The “explained no” should therefore be understood not only as a communication technique, but as an ethical standard. It requires facilitators and decision-makers to make their reasoning visible¹⁷². Institutional or practical constraints should be translated into language that children can understand, avoiding abstract or overly technical explanations. Whenever possible, adults should use examples connected to children’s everyday realities.

In this way, rejection does not become the end of participation. It can become an opportunity to understand how decisions are made, why certain actions may not be possible, and what other options could still be explored. This supports children in developing a more realistic and nuanced understanding of participation and decision-making.

5.4.3 Making impact visible: continuity, updates, and tangible change

Beyond the first response, children also seem to expect continuity. The focus group findings suggest that children want to know what happens after they have spoken. They do not necessarily expect immediate or large-scale change, but they do expect some form of visible follow-up.

In Spain, children highlighted the importance of receiving regular updates. In Austria, children suggested simple communication channels, such as messages or school-based announcements.

¹⁷² Lundy, L., 2007; Shier, H., 2001.

In Greece, participants emphasised that even small or partial changes can be meaningful when they are visible and clearly connected to children's original input.

For this reason, the WEIGH phase should extend over time. Impact should not be understood only as a final result, but as a process that unfolds gradually. The toolkit should therefore include simple practices that help facilitators and adults track progress, communicate intermediate steps and make the evolution of ideas visible. These may include visual timelines, update boards, short follow-up meetings, child-friendly messages, or simple "what happened next" summaries.

Importantly, visibility does not require major transformation. A small adjustment, a pilot activity, an attempt to respond, or even a clear explanation of why change is difficult can show children that their contribution has been considered. Some children also suggested the value of celebrating successful outcomes. Moments of recognition can reinforce motivation and create a sense of collective achievement, especially when children can see that their ideas contributed to something concrete.

5.4.4 Building accountability through tone, language, and accessibility

Accountability depends not only on whether feedback is provided, but also on how it is communicated. A consistent finding across the focus groups is that children pay close attention to tone, language and attitude. Respectful, calm and non-judgmental communication can foster openness and trust. Formal, distant or overly institutional language, on the other hand, may create barriers and reinforce power imbalances.

For this reason, feedback in the WEIGH phase should be adapted to children's perspectives and developmental levels. Explanations should be clear, concrete and connected to familiar contexts. Jargon and abstract formulations should be avoided wherever possible¹⁷³. Examples, analogies, visual supports or simple diagrams can help children understand decisions, especially younger participants or children who face language or cognitive barriers.

At the same time, communication should not be overly simplified in a way that feels dismissive. Children value clarity, but they also value authenticity. They should be treated as capable of understanding real explanations when these are offered respectfully and in accessible language.

This is particularly important where trust in institutions may already be fragile. In Romania, for example, some children reportedly expressed surprise at the idea of receiving any response at all. This suggests that, in some contexts, children may have very low expectations of institutional

¹⁷³ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009.

feedback. Consistent and high-quality responses can therefore become a key mechanism for rebuilding trust and demonstrating that participation is meaningful and reliable.

5.4.5 From feedback to reciprocity: sustaining engagement over time

The WEIGH phase also creates the possibility for a more reciprocal model of participation. Feedback should not be seen only as the end of the process. It can also become the starting point for a new cycle of engagement.

When children receive clear and transparent responses, they may be more willing to remain involved, reflect on their ideas and adapt their proposals. In Austria, participants noted that explanations can help them rethink their perspectives. In Spain, some children suggested that they could also contribute to the implementation of accepted ideas. These findings indicate that feedback can serve as a bridge between participation and co-creation.

Methodologically, this means that the toolkit should include opportunities for children to re-engage after feedback has been provided. This may happen through follow-up activities, collaborative implementation, renewed reflection, or a new NOTICE phase based on what has changed or what remains unresolved. In this way, participation is not treated as a one-off consultation, but as an ongoing dialogue in which children's roles can evolve over time.

Embedding reciprocity within the WEIGH phase can also support the development of important competences, including critical thinking, adaptability and collective responsibility. Children can learn that participation involves not only expressing a view, but also listening to responses, considering constraints, revising ideas and contributing to shared solutions.

5.4.6 Designing feedback loops as continuous structures

The focus group findings point to the need to design feedback loops as continuous and structured elements of the SCM. Feedback should not be optional, informal, or postponed indefinitely. Every participatory¹⁷⁴ action should lead to some visible response, even when the response is partial, provisional, or negative.

This requires practical tools that support continuity. Facilitators and adult stakeholders may use simple tracking systems, visual timelines, regular check-ins, child-friendly update sheets, or collective reflection moments. These tools should be adapted to the age group and context. For younger children, feedback may need to be visual, concrete, and immediate. For older children,

¹⁷⁴ Lundy, L., 2007.

it may include more detailed explanations, comparison between proposals and responses, or discussion of possible next steps.

Flexibility remains important. Not every process will require the same level of follow-up, and not every proposal will lead to immediate change. However, the principle remains constant: silence should not be treated as an acceptable outcome of participation. If children have contributed their views, they should be able to understand what happened to those views.

By embedding feedback loops into the methodology, the WEIGH phase becomes a space where participation is validated, relationships are strengthened, and learning is consolidated. It transforms feedback from a procedural requirement into a meaningful experience of dialogue and accountability.

5.4.7 Expected outcome of the WEIGH phase

By the end of the WEIGH phase, children should have received clear and accessible information about how their ideas were considered, what decisions were taken, and what actions, if any, followed. They should also have had the opportunity to reflect on the process itself: what felt meaningful, what was difficult, what they learned, and what they may want to explore further.

The expected outputs may include child-friendly feedback summaries, visual timelines, update boards, reflection notes, evaluation activities, records of adult responses, or new questions emerging from the process. These outputs should not remain separate from the rest of the Compass cycle. They should inform future participation, including possible new NOTICE activities.

The WEST phase, therefore, closes the cycle while also reopening it. It helps children understand that participation does not end when they speak. It continues through listening, explanation, follow-up, and reflection. In this sense, WEIGH is the phase that protects the credibility of the whole SCM process and supports children in experiencing participation as something that can be trusted, repeated, and improved over time.

6. Cross-cutting Principles

The SCM is not only defined by its four phases, but also by a set of cross-cutting principles that should guide its implementation across different contexts. These principles are intended to ensure that the methodology remains inclusive, adaptable, safe, and sustainable, rather than becoming a fixed sequence of activities applied in the same way to all groups.

The focus group findings suggest that children's participation is strongly influenced by the conditions in which it takes place: the language used, the level of emotional safety, the role of adults, the accessibility of tools, the time available, and the degree to which children can understand what is expected from them. For this reason, the SCM should be implemented through a flexible and reflective approach, allowing facilitators to adapt methods while preserving the core logic of the Compass: noticing, exploring, speaking, and weighing.

6.1 Inclusion and Accessibility: Designing for children with fewer opportunities

Inclusion and accessibility are fundamental design principles of the SOCRATES Compass Mechanism and represent essential conditions for meaningful participation. The transnational focus group findings suggest that participation cannot be understood simply as providing children with opportunities to speak. Rather, participation depends on whether children feel capable, safe and legitimate in expressing their views within a given social and educational environment¹⁷⁵.

Although children across the participating countries shared many common concerns related to safety, fairness, relationships and community wellbeing, their ability to participate appeared to vary significantly depending on contextual factors. These include socio-economic background, previous experiences with authority, cognitive readiness, communication skills, language, confidence and the emotional climate of the environment in which participation takes place.

The SCM therefore adopts an inclusion-oriented approach that moves beyond the idea of equal access alone. Instead, the mechanism is based on the principle of equitable participation, recognising that different children may require different forms of support, communication, pacing and facilitation in order to engage meaningfully. Inclusion is therefore embedded not only

¹⁷⁵ United Nations, 1989, Arts. 2 and 12; European Commission, 2021.

in the values of the SCM, but also in its methodological design, facilitation strategies and implementation logic¹⁷⁶.

6.1.1 Vulnerability and participation: insights from the focus groups

One important insight emerging from the focus groups is that vulnerability does not necessarily change what children care about, but it can strongly influence whether they feel able to participate and whether they believe their participation matters.

In more vulnerable contexts, particularly in Romania and Italy, children frequently expressed a reduced sense of agency. Many described themselves as “too young” to influence decisions or expected that adults and institutions would not take their ideas seriously. As a result, participation was often imagined or experienced as something mediated through trusted adults, such as parents, teachers or educators, rather than through direct communication with authorities. This highlights the importance of designing participation processes that actively build confidence and legitimacy, rather than assuming that children will naturally feel empowered to contribute.

The findings also show how cognitive and linguistic complexity may become a barrier to participation. In Austria, and to a lesser extent in Spain, children with lower prior knowledge or language difficulties sometimes struggled to engage with abstract civic concepts or institutional terminology. In some cases, this appeared to result in withdrawal and silence; in others, children reacted through disruptive behaviour that may have masked uncertainty or lack of understanding. These patterns suggest that participation can unintentionally exclude children when tools rely too heavily on abstract language, complex instructions or assumed prior knowledge.

Another recurring finding across countries concerns psychological safety. Children repeatedly referred to fear of judgment, embarrassment, criticism or negative reactions from peers and adults. Participation appeared closely linked to trust in facilitators, the quality of peer dynamics, and the emotional atmosphere of the activity. In several contexts, children indicated that they felt more comfortable participating in smaller groups or when supported by familiar adults. These findings suggest that inclusion is not achieved only by opening access to activities, but by creating conditions that make participation emotionally safe and socially meaningful.

¹⁷⁶ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009; European Commission, 2021.

6.1.2 From equal access to equitable participation

Within the SCM, inclusion is understood as the possibility for all children to understand the participation process, engage with it confidently and express themselves through accessible and meaningful formats¹⁷⁷. This requires moving away from uniform participation models and adopting flexible approaches that can respond to different developmental, emotional, cognitive and contextual needs.

Equitable participation means recognising that children do not all begin from the same starting point. Some children may need more visual support, more time for reflection, smaller discussion groups or alternative forms of expression. Others may need additional reassurance, clearer structure or more active facilitation in order to overcome fear of judgment or lack of confidence.

The findings therefore reinforce the need for the SCM to remain adaptable rather than prescriptive. Participation pathways should be shaped around the realities of each group, rather than around rigid assumptions about age, confidence, or communication ability.

6.1.3 Design principles for inclusive SCM implementation

The transnational evidence suggests several core principles that can guide the inclusive implementation of SCM activities.

First, participation should begin from children's lived experiences and immediate environments. Across countries, children seemed to engage more naturally with concrete and familiar situations than with abstract institutional or political concepts. Activities that begin from school life, peer relationships, neighbourhood spaces, or daily experiences can create more accessible entry points into participation.

Second, the SCM should support multiple modes of expression. Children communicate and process ideas in different ways depending on age, confidence, cognitive style, and context. Some children engage more comfortably through verbal discussion, while others respond better to drawing, visual supports, storytelling, role-play, movement, or collaborative activities. An inclusive mechanism, therefore, cannot rely only on discussion-based or written formats¹⁷⁸.

A further principle concerns the reduction of cognitive load. Complex terminology, unclear instructions, and abstract concepts may unintentionally exclude children from participation. The SCM should therefore use simple and accessible language, provide visual examples and step-by-

¹⁷⁷ United Nations, 1989, Art. 12; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009.

¹⁷⁸ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009.

step guidance, and introduce key concepts gradually through concrete experiences and practical activities.

The findings also suggest that participation needs to be intentionally structured in ways that support all voices. Group dynamics can strongly influence children's willingness to contribute, and more confident participants may unintentionally dominate discussions. Facilitators therefore need strategies that encourage balanced participation, including small-group work, guided turn-taking, collaborative tasks and targeted encouragement for quieter children.

Finally, emotional safety should be embedded throughout the process. Inclusion depends on children feeling respected, listened to and protected from ridicule or dismissal. Establishing clear ground rules, validating contributions, using non-judgmental facilitation styles and maintaining supportive peer interactions are therefore essential components of inclusive practice within the SCM¹⁷⁹.

6.1.4 Inclusion across the SCM phases

Inclusion should be understood as a cross-cutting principle integrated throughout all phases of the SCM, rather than as a separate methodological component.

Within the NOTICE phase, children benefit from concrete and visual tools that support the identification of issues through direct observation and lived experience. This is particularly important for younger children and for participants who may struggle with abstract reasoning.

During the EXPLORE phase, inclusion is strengthened through collaborative and creative methods that allow children to investigate ideas using different forms of expression and varying levels of complexity. Activities should remain flexible enough to accommodate different communication styles, confidence levels and developmental stages.

In the SPEAK phase, the SCM should provide multiple communication formats and reduce the pressure associated with individual exposure. The findings indicate that many children feel more confident presenting ideas collectively rather than individually. Group presentations, visual outputs, videos, role-play or mediated communication can therefore support more inclusive participation.

Finally, in the WEIGH phase, feedback and reflection processes should remain transparent, accessible and easy for children to understand. Since children place strong value on explanations and visible follow-up, inclusive participation requires ensuring that all children can understand outcomes, decisions and next steps, regardless of age, language level or communication ability.

¹⁷⁹ European Commission, 2021.

6.1.5 The Role of Facilitators in Enabling Inclusion

Facilitators play a central role in translating inclusion from a general principle into a practical reality. Their role goes beyond managing activities. They actively shape the emotional, relational and communicative conditions that enable children to participate.

This includes adapting activities in real time according to group needs, recognising signs of disengagement or discomfort, ensuring balanced participation and maintaining a supportive atmosphere throughout the process. Facilitators should also be attentive to differences in confidence, communication style and comprehension, adjusting pacing and methods accordingly.

The findings suggest that inclusive participation depends as much on facilitation quality as on the tools themselves. In this sense, inclusion is embedded not only in the design of activities, but also in the attitudes, responsiveness and relational practices of the adults leading the process.

6.1.6 Monitoring Inclusion and Participation

Inclusive participation requires continuous reflection and adaptation throughout implementation. Facilitators should monitor participation patterns during and after activities, paying attention to who participates actively, who remains silent, and which children may appear disengaged or excluded from the process.

This reflective approach allows facilitators to identify barriers early and adjust strategies accordingly. Inclusion should therefore be understood as an ongoing and dynamic process, not as a fixed condition established at the beginning of an activity.

6.1.7 Toolkit implications

Inclusion and accessibility are foundational to the effectiveness and credibility of the SOCRATES Compass Mechanism. The transnational findings suggest that meaningful participation depends not only on offering opportunities to children, but also on creating environments, processes and relationships that enable them to engage confidently and authentically.

By integrating flexible, responsive and child-centred principles throughout its design and implementation, the SCM seeks to ensure that participation is not limited to the most confident, articulate or advantaged children¹⁸⁰. Instead, the mechanism aims to create conditions in which diverse groups of children can contribute meaningfully, strengthening both the quality of participation and the democratic value of the process itself.

¹⁸⁰ United Nations, 1989, Art. 2; European Commission, 2021.

6.2 Replicability and Sustainability: Creating low-cost, high-impact tools

The SCM is designed as a framework that can be replicated across different educational, social, cultural and institutional contexts without requiring highly specialised infrastructures or extensive financial resources¹⁸¹. Rather than functioning as a fixed programme tied to one implementation environment, the SCM is structured as a flexible participation model that can be adapted to the realities of different groups, organisations and communities.

The focus group findings suggest that participation conditions vary significantly across contexts. Differences emerged not only between countries, but also between public schools, private educational settings, informal learning environments, after-school centres and organisations working with children in vulnerable situations. In some settings, children were already familiar with collaborative discussion and participatory activities, while in others participation appeared more strongly shaped by hierarchy, communication anxiety or limited confidence in institutional listening.

For this reason, the SCM has been developed as a methodology that can function across multiple implementation environments while maintaining the same core participatory structure. The framework can be adapted for formal school environments, non-formal education programmes, youth and community centres, child protection and social inclusion organisations, municipal participation initiatives, after-school programmes, local awareness campaigns and extracurricular citizenship or democratic engagement activities.

Importantly, the Compass does not require a dedicated curriculum structure or a specialised civic education setting in order to be implemented. The methodology can be integrated into existing educational activities, thematic projects, school councils, community workshops or child participation initiatives already operating at local level.

6.2.1 Modularity and adaptation

Replicability is strengthened by the modular structure of the framework. Institutions and organisations are not expected to reproduce identical activities in identical ways. Instead, facilitators are encouraged to adapt methods according to available time, physical space, group size, developmental level, communication preferences and local realities.

For example, in highly structured school environments, the Compass may be implemented through shorter classroom-based activities integrated into weekly learning schedules. In youth

¹⁸¹ European Commission, 2021.

centres or non-formal settings, facilitators may organise longer collaborative workshops with greater flexibility and movement-based activities. In community or municipal contexts, the SPEAK and WEIGH phases may be linked directly to consultations with local authorities or awareness campaigns connected to local issues.

This modularity allows the SCM to remain recognisable in its overall logic while being responsive in its practical application. The phases remain the same, but the tools, pace, depth and communication formats can change according to the context.

6.2.2 Low-cost and accessible tools

The SCM is also intended to remain replicable across different resource conditions. Most activities can rely on low-cost and widely accessible materials such as paper, markers, printed visuals, photographs, sticky notes, stickers, simple maps or basic digital tools where available. This allows organisations with limited budgets or limited technological infrastructure to implement the framework without major financial barriers.

The low-cost nature of the methodology should not be understood as a reduction in quality. On the contrary, the focus group findings suggest that children often engage strongly with simple, tangible and creative tools when these are used meaningfully. Drawings, maps, visual cards, role-play, collective posters and short messages may be more accessible and effective than complex platforms or highly formal participation formats.

This is particularly relevant for organisations working with children with fewer opportunities. Participation barriers are often linked not to lack of interest, but to communication complexity, emotional safety, confidence levels or accessibility of activities. Low-cost tools, when designed inclusively, can therefore support participation more effectively than expensive or overly technical instruments.

6.2.3 Facilitation accessibility

Another important aspect of replicability concerns facilitation accessibility. The methodology is intended to be usable by teachers, youth workers, facilitators, social workers and community practitioners without requiring advanced expertise in participation theory or specialised technical training.

For this reason, the toolkit should prioritise practical guidance, adaptable examples and implementation flexibility rather than rigid procedural requirements. Facilitators should be able to understand the purpose of each phase, select appropriate tools, adapt them to the group and reflect on what worked or needs adjustment. This makes the SCM easier to adopt in everyday educational and community settings.

At the same time, accessibility does not mean that facilitation is unimportant. The focus group findings repeatedly suggest that the quality of adult facilitation has a direct influence on children's willingness to participate. Replicability therefore depends not only on simple tools, but also on clear guidance for adults on how to create safe spaces, manage group dynamics, use accessible language and provide meaningful feedback.

6.2.4 Cultural and contextual adaptability

The SCM is also designed to support replication across culturally diverse contexts. The focus groups showed that communication styles, participation confidence and relationships with authority vary significantly across countries and environments. For this reason, the SCM does not prescribe uniform communication formats or fixed activity sequences.

Instead, the methodology focuses on common participatory principles while allowing facilitators to adapt communication approaches, pacing, group dynamics and interaction styles according to local realities. In some contexts, direct dialogue with authorities may be appropriate and motivating. In others, mediated or collective formats may be necessary to reduce anxiety and build trust gradually.

This adaptability is particularly important when working with children who face language barriers, cognitive difficulties, social vulnerability or reduced confidence in institutional environments. The SCM therefore includes methods that can be adjusted through visual supports, embodied activities, simplified language, small-group formats and gradual preparation.

6.2.5 Institutional integration and sustainability

Sustainability within the SCM is closely linked to institutional integration. The framework is not intended only as a temporary project activity, but as a methodology that institutions and organisations can gradually embed into everyday practice.

Schools may integrate Compass activities into citizenship education, class projects or student councils. Municipalities may incorporate selected phases into local consultation processes or youth participation initiatives¹⁸². Youth organisations may adapt the cycle for thematic community engagement activities, awareness campaigns or non-formal education programmes.

The cyclical structure of the SCM also contributes to sustainability. Each implementation cycle generates feedback, methodological adjustments and new participation experiences that can

¹⁸² Council of the European Union, 2018; European Commission, 2021.

inform future applications. In this way, the framework is not simply repeated, but gradually refined according to what facilitators and children learn through practice.

6.2.6 Toolkit implications

The sustainability of the SOCRATES Compass Mechanism depends on its ability to remain usable, adaptable and meaningful across diverse implementation realities. By combining low-cost methods, flexible facilitation structures and adaptable participatory tools, the SCM aims to create a participation framework that can continue beyond the project itself.

Its value lies not in requiring identical replication, but in offering a coherent participatory logic that can be translated into different educational and community environments¹⁸³. This makes it possible for schools, organisations and local actors to implement the Compass in ways that are realistic, context-sensitive and responsive to the children they work with.

6.3 Safeguarding and child protection

Safeguarding and child protection are essential foundations of the SOCRATES Compass Mechanism (SCM). Any framework that promotes children's participation must also ensure that participation takes place in safe, respectful and protective environments¹⁸⁴. Children should be encouraged to express their views, explore issues and engage with adults only within settings where their dignity, wellbeing, privacy and protection are actively safeguarded.

Within the SCM, safeguarding is therefore not treated as a separate administrative requirement, but as a cross-cutting principle embedded across all activities, methods and interactions. This is particularly important because participatory processes may involve discussion of sensitive experiences, group dynamics, interaction with adults, use of images or digital tools, and moments in which children may feel exposed or emotionally vulnerable¹⁸⁵. Safeguarding should consequently be considered at every stage of the Compass cycle: when activities are designed, when spaces are prepared, when children communicate, and when feedback is provided.

The safeguarding approach of the SCM is grounded in international and European standards on children's rights and child protection. It should support full alignment with relevant EU legislation, international human rights frameworks and programme requirements, while

¹⁸³ European Commission, 2021.

¹⁸⁴ United Nations, 1989, Arts. 3 and 19; European Union, 2012, Art. 24.

¹⁸⁵ European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2016.

remaining practical and applicable in different educational, community and organisational contexts.

6.3.1 Legal and Policy Framework

Safeguarding obligations are grounded in a broad set of international and European legal instruments. At international level, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child provides the primary reference. Article 3 establishes the best interests of the child as a primary consideration in all actions concerning children. Article 19 requires protection from all forms of violence, abuse and neglect, while Article 34 addresses protection from sexual exploitation and abuse¹⁸⁶. Together, these provisions underline that children's participation must always be accompanied by protection.

At EU level, Article 24 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union recognises children's right to the protection and care necessary for their wellbeing¹⁸⁷. This reinforces the responsibility of institutions and organisations to ensure that activities involving children take place in safe and appropriate environments.

Directive 2011/93/EU on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography is also highly relevant¹⁸⁸. It establishes minimum standards for prevention, protection of victims and prosecution of offenders across EU Member States. For organisations working with children, this implies the need for clear preventive measures, safe recruitment practices, reporting procedures and adequate responses to safeguarding concerns.

The General Data Protection Regulation also plays a central role in safeguarding, particularly where children's personal data, images, stories or digital outputs are collected or shared¹⁸⁹. Children's data must be processed lawfully, fairly and transparently, with particular attention to their vulnerability and to the need for age-appropriate information and consent procedures.

The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child further reinforces the importance of safe environments for children, both offline and online, and promotes integrated child protection systems across sectors¹⁹⁰. Within the SCM, these frameworks provide the legal and ethical basis for ensuring that participation is not only meaningful, but also safe and rights-compliant.

¹⁸⁶ United Nations, 1989, Arts. 3, 19 and 34.

¹⁸⁷ European Union, 2012, Art. 24.

¹⁸⁸ European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2011.

¹⁸⁹ European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2016.

¹⁹⁰ European Commission, 2021.

6.3.2 Safeguarding as a holistic responsibility

Within the SCM, safeguarding is understood as a preventive, protective and responsive system. It is not limited to reacting when harm occurs. It also involves anticipating potential risks, creating safe conditions, promoting respectful relationships, and ensuring that clear procedures exist if concerns arise.

This approach is consistent with a Human Rights-Based Approach, where children are recognised as rights-holders and adults, organisations and institutions are understood as duty-bearers¹⁹¹. In practical terms, this means that adults are responsible for creating the conditions that allow children to participate safely, without exposure to avoidable harm, pressure, discrimination or exploitation.

Safeguarding within the SCM should therefore be proactive, systemic and child-centred. It is proactive because risks should be considered before activities take place. It is systemic because protection should be embedded across all levels of implementation, from planning to facilitation and follow-up. It is child-centred because the child's safety, dignity and wellbeing must remain the primary reference point throughout the process.

6.3.3 Core safeguarding principles within the SCM

The SCM adopts a set of safeguarding principles that should guide all activities involving children.

The first principle is the **best interests of the child**¹⁹². All decisions and actions should prioritise children's safety, wellbeing and dignity, in line with the UNCRC. This applies not only to major protection concerns, but also to everyday methodological choices, such as how groups are formed, how sensitive topics are discussed, and how children's outputs are shared.

The second principle is **do no harm**. Activities should be designed and implemented in ways that avoid physical, emotional or psychological harm, including unintended consequences of participation. For example, children should not be pushed to disclose personal experiences, exposed to ridicule, or placed in situations where they feel judged or unsafe.

The third principle is **zero tolerance for abuse, neglect and exploitation**. Any form of abuse or exploitation must be strictly prohibited, with clear procedures and consequences. This principle should be reflected in organisational policies, codes of conduct and staff responsibilities.

¹⁹¹ United Nations, 1989; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009.

¹⁹² United Nations, 1989, Art. 3.

A further principle is **participation with protection**. Children's right to participate must be respected, but participation should never expose them to unnecessary risks¹⁹³. This means balancing openness and expression with careful attention to emotional safety, privacy, group dynamics and safeguarding procedures.

The SCM also places strong emphasis on **confidentiality and privacy**¹⁹⁴. Children's personal information, disclosures, images and contributions should be handled carefully and in compliance with data protection rules. Children should understand, in age-appropriate language, how their information or outputs may be used.

Finally, safeguarding must be **inclusive and non-discriminatory**. Protection measures should be responsive to the needs of all children, including those who may be more exposed to risk because of disability, migration background, language barriers, poverty, trauma, social exclusion or other forms of vulnerability.

6.3.4 Safeguarding policies and codes of conduct

To translate these principles into practice, organisations implementing SCM activities should have clear safeguarding policies and codes of conduct. These documents should define acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, clarify staff and facilitator responsibilities, and provide guidance on how to prevent and respond to concerns.

Safeguarding policies should be aligned with national legislation, EU standards and the organisation's own child protection procedures. Codes of conduct should apply to all adults involved in activities with children, including staff, educators, facilitators, volunteers, external experts and, where relevant, representatives of institutions or community actors.

These documents should not remain internal or purely formal. They should be communicated to all relevant stakeholders and, where appropriate, adapted into child-friendly formats. Children should know who is responsible for their safety, who they can speak to if they feel uncomfortable, and what will happen if they raise a concern.

6.3.5 Safe recruitment and training

Adults involved in SCM activities should be appropriately selected, prepared and supported. Where legally required, personnel should undergo background checks before working with children¹⁹⁵. However, safe recruitment should not rely only on formal checks. It should also

¹⁹³ United Nations, 1989, Arts. 12 and 19.

¹⁹⁴ European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2016.

¹⁹⁵ European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2011.

include clear role descriptions, reference checks where applicable, and attention to attitudes, communication style and suitability for working with children.

Safeguarding training should be mandatory for staff and facilitators involved in SCM implementation. Training should help adults recognise signs of abuse, distress, discomfort or exclusion, and understand how to respond appropriately. It should also address power dynamics, adult-child communication, boundaries, confidentiality, ethical participation and the importance of not pressuring children to disclose personal experiences.

This is particularly relevant for the SCM because participation activities may create moments in which children speak about difficult situations, unsafe spaces, bullying, exclusion or relationships with adults. Facilitators should therefore be prepared not only to guide activities, but also to recognise when a safeguarding concern may be emerging.

6.3.6 Risk assessment and management

Before any SCM activity, facilitators and organisations should consider potential safeguarding risks. This does not mean making participation overly restrictive, but ensuring that risks are identified and managed before children are involved.

Risk assessments should consider the physical environment, including accessibility, supervision, equipment, movement between spaces and emergency procedures. They should also consider emotional and social risks, such as bullying, peer judgment, exclusion, pressure to speak, or the possibility that sensitive topics may arise. Where digital tools are used, risks related to online exposure, image sharing, data misuse or inappropriate communication should also be assessed.

For each identified risk, appropriate mitigation measures should be defined. These may include adapting group size, increasing adult supervision, preparing ground rules, using anonymous or indirect forms of expression, avoiding unnecessary collection of personal data, or ensuring that a safeguarding focal point is available during activities.

Risk assessment should be understood as a living process. Facilitators should continue observing group dynamics and children's wellbeing during implementation, adjusting activities when needed.

6.3.7 Reporting and response mechanisms

SCM implementation requires clear, accessible and child-friendly reporting mechanisms. Children, staff and facilitators should know how safeguarding concerns can be raised, who is responsible for receiving them, and how confidentiality will be managed.

Each implementing organisation should identify designated safeguarding focal points. Procedures should allow confidential reporting and should provide clear steps for responding to disclosures, concerns or incidents. These procedures must be aligned with national child protection systems and legal obligations, including those related to Directive 2011/93/EU¹⁹⁶.

Reporting mechanisms should also be communicated to children in a way they can understand. Children should know that they can speak to a trusted adult if something makes them feel unsafe, uncomfortable or worried. They should also understand that adults may need to act if there is a concern about their safety or the safety of another child.

A child-friendly reporting system should avoid placing responsibility on children to manage complex procedures. Instead, it should ensure that trusted adults are visible, approachable and prepared to respond.

6.3.8 Safe physical and digital environments

Safeguarding applies equally to offline and online participation spaces. Physical spaces used for SCM activities should be supervised, accessible, appropriate to children's age and needs, and organised in ways that reduce risks. This includes considering privacy, visibility, movement, seating arrangements, accessibility for children with disabilities, and the emotional atmosphere of the setting.

Digital environments require the same level of care. If children use online tools, digital platforms, photos, videos, recordings or shared documents, these must comply with data protection and online safety standards¹⁹⁷. Facilitators should avoid collecting unnecessary personal data and should ensure that images, voices or stories are not shared without appropriate consent and safeguards.

Children should also be supported in understanding safe online behaviour. This is especially relevant when the SCM uses blended participation formats or digital outputs during the SPEAK phase. Digital tools can support creativity and inclusion, but they should be used carefully, transparently and proportionately.

6.3.9 Child-friendly communication and consent

Children should receive clear, age-appropriate information about the activities in which they are invited to participate. They should understand the purpose of the activity, what they will be asked

¹⁹⁶ European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2011.

¹⁹⁷ European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2016; European Commission, 2021.

to do, whether their contributions will be documented, who may see them, and whether any images or digital outputs will be used.

Informed assent from children should be obtained alongside parental or guardian consent where required¹⁹⁸. Consent should not be treated as a one-off formality. Children should understand that participation is voluntary and that they have the right to withdraw, pause, or choose not to answer specific questions at any time.

This approach supports children's autonomy while ensuring protection. It also reinforces the wider SCM principle that participation should be meaningful, informed, and respectful, rather than imposed or assumed.

6.3.10 Safeguarding within participatory processes

A key challenge for the SCM is ensuring that participation itself does not introduce risks. Activities should therefore be designed in ways that avoid unnecessary exposure to harmful or sensitive content. Children should not be pressured to share personal experiences, disclose private information, or speak publicly about issues that may cause distress.

When discussions involve difficult topics, facilitators should provide emotional support and should be prepared to pause, redirect or adapt the activity if children become uncomfortable. Appropriate adult-to-child ratios should be maintained, and facilitators should ensure that no child is left isolated, ridiculed or visibly distressed without support.

This is particularly important in activities where children identify unsafe spaces, bullying, exclusion, discrimination or concerns involving adults. Participation should remain empowering rather than harmful. Children should feel that their voices matter, but also that they are protected throughout the process.

6.3.11 Monitoring and accountability

Safeguarding within the SCM should be subject to continuous monitoring and review. Organisations should regularly review safeguarding policies, codes of conduct, training practices and reporting procedures. Any incidents or concerns should be documented and addressed according to agreed protocols.

Children's feedback can also provide important information about whether they felt safe, respected and comfortable during activities. This can be collected through age-appropriate reflection tools, informal check-ins, anonymous feedback methods or visual evaluation activities.

¹⁹⁸ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009; European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2016.

Monitoring should also include compliance with EU and national regulations, particularly in relation to child protection and data protection. This helps ensure that safeguarding is actively implemented, rather than simply stated as a principle.

6.3.12 Challenges and risk mitigation

Even when strong safeguarding frameworks are in place, challenges may arise. National child protection systems vary, and organisations may have different levels of experience, resources and capacity. Some settings may face limitations in training, monitoring or access to specialised support. Underreporting of safeguarding concerns may also occur, especially when children do not know whom to approach or do not feel confident that adults will respond appropriately.

Another challenge is balancing participation with protection. Overprotective approaches may limit children's agency, while insufficient safeguarding may expose them to avoidable risks. The SCM should therefore seek a balanced approach: enabling children to participate actively while ensuring that activities are carefully designed, facilitated and monitored.

These challenges can be addressed through capacity-building, shared procedures, clear communication, cross-country coordination and regular reflection among partners. Consistency across implementation contexts is important, while still allowing adaptation to national legal frameworks and local safeguarding systems.

6.3.13 Toolkit implications

Safeguarding and child protection are fundamental to the integrity and credibility of the SOCRATES Compass Mechanism. By embedding safeguarding across all phases and activities, the SCM aims to ensure that children's participation is safe, ethical and respectful of their rights.

This integrated approach does more than prevent harm. It also creates the trust and security needed for meaningful engagement. Children are more likely to participate confidently when they understand the process, feel emotionally safe, know that adults are responsible for their protection, and trust that their privacy and dignity will be respected. In this sense, safeguarding is not external to participation; it is one of the conditions that makes participation possible.

7. Conclusion: Moving towards the D2.2 Practical Toolkit

The SOCRATES Compass Mechanism (SCM) provides a human rights-based and child-centred framework for supporting children's participation in decisions and processes that affect their lives. Grounded in the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, particularly Article 12, the Framework recognises children as active social actors whose views should be heard, taken seriously, and connected to visible responses¹⁹⁹.

Throughout the document, participation has been understood not as a single consultation moment, but as a gradual, relational, and cyclical process. This approach responds to some of the main limitations identified both in the literature and through the SOCRATES Focus Groups: tokenistic participation, limited institutional accessibility, fear of judgement, adult-centred communication, unequal participation opportunities, and weak or absent feedback. The SCM therefore aims to create conditions in which children can participate in ways that are safe, meaningful, developmentally appropriate, and adapted to different contexts.

The four Compass points — NOTICE, EXPLORE, SPEAK, and WEIGH — translate this vision into a clear methodological pathway. Through NOTICE, children are supported to identify issues rooted in their lived experiences. Through EXPLORE, they investigate these issues creatively and collaboratively. Through SPEAK, they communicate their views and proposals through supported forms of intergenerational dialogue. Through WEIGH, they receive feedback, reflect on the process, and understand how their contributions have been considered. In this sense, the SCM places feedback and accountability at the centre of meaningful participation, recognising that children's trust depends not only on being listened to, but also on receiving clear and respectful responses²⁰⁰.

The Framework also shows that the strength of the SCM lies in the integration of complementary methodological approaches. Participatory Action Research supports children as active co-researchers of their own environments²⁰¹. Design for Change offers

¹⁹⁹ United Nations, 1989, Art. 12.

²⁰⁰ Lundy L., 2007; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009.

²⁰¹ Hocevar, R., 2023.

a practical pathway for moving from observation to imagination, action, and sharing²⁰². Appreciative Inquiry helps frame participation through strengths, possibilities, and emotionally accessible entry points²⁰³. The Theory of Change perspective clarifies how the SCM is expected to contribute to changes in children's capabilities, opportunities, and motivation, as well as in adult and institutional practices²⁰⁴. Together, these approaches help ensure that the Compass is not only a conceptual model, but also a practical structure for supporting participation in educational, social, and community settings.

Cross-cutting principles of inclusion, accessibility, safeguarding, replicability, and sustainability are essential to this process. The Framework highlights that participation cannot be meaningful if it is accessible only to the most confident, articulate, or advantaged children. For this reason, the SCM is designed to support equitable participation, with particular attention to children with fewer opportunities, children facing language or cognitive barriers, children with lower confidence, and those whose previous experiences may have reduced their trust in adults or institutions. At the same time, safeguarding and child protection remain fundamental conditions for participation, ensuring that children's dignity, privacy, wellbeing, and safety are protected throughout the process.

This Framework therefore serves as the conceptual, methodological, and ethical foundation for the next phase of the SOCRATES project: the development of the D2.2 Practical Toolkit. The Toolkit will translate the principles and methodology described here into concrete, modular, and low-cost tools that can be used by educators, facilitators, youth workers, organisations, and local actors. It will provide practical activities, guidance notes, templates, and adaptation suggestions for each Compass phase, while remaining flexible enough to respond to different age groups, contexts, resources, and participation needs.

Particular attention will need to be given to age-sensitive design. As highlighted in the Framework, children aged 6–8, children in the transitional 8–10 age range, and children aged 9–12 may require different levels of support, abstraction, communication methods,

²⁰² Design for Change, n.d.

²⁰³ Cooperrider D. L. and Srivastva S., 1987.

²⁰⁴ Mayne J., 2017.

and facilitation. The Toolkit should therefore help adults adapt the same participatory logic to different developmental stages, using concrete, visual, playful, embodied, collaborative, or more structured tools according to the needs of each group.

Finally, the transition from D2.1 to D2.2 represents a key step in making the SOCRATES Compass usable beyond the Framework itself. The value of the SCM will depend on its ability to be understood, adapted, and applied in real educational and community settings. By translating the Framework into practical tools, the SOCRATES project aims to support adults and institutions in creating participation processes where children are not only invited to speak, but are supported to observe, explore, communicate, receive feedback, and engage again. In this way, the Practical Toolkit will contribute to the broader objective of strengthening meaningful, inclusive, and sustainable child participation across different European contexts.

Bibliography

- Bandura, A., Barbaranelli, C., Caprara, G. V., & Pastorelli, C. (2001). Self-efficacy beliefs as shapers of children's aspirations and career trajectories. *Child development*, 72(1), 187–206. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8624.00273>
- Bushe, G. R., & Kassam, A. F. (2005). When is Appreciative Inquiry transformational? A meta-case analysis. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 41(2), 161–181. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021886304270337>.
- Castro, A.J., Fozi, A., Hung, C.-Y., Etoh, M., Bergin, C. (2025). *Civic and Prosocial Decision-Making in Early Adolescents*. *Youth*, 5, 33. <https://doi.org/10.3390/youth5020033>.
- Chikkatur, A. and Oliver, E. (2025) 'Embodying PAR: A reflection on building trust across institutional hierarchies', *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 29(4), pp. 123–138.
- Clark, A., & Moss, P. (2011). *Listening to young children: The mosaic approach* (2nd ed.). National Children's Bureau.
- Cook-Sather, A. (2006). Sound, Presence, and Power: "Student Voice" in Educational Research and Reform. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 36(4), 359-390. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-873X.2006.00363.x>.
- Cooperrider, D. L., & Srivastva, S. (1987). Appreciative inquiry in organizational life. In R. W. Woodman & W. A. Pasmore (Eds.), *Research in organizational change and development* (Vol. 1, pp. 129–169). JAI Press.
- Cooperrider, D. L., Stavros, J. M., & Whitney, D. (2008). *The appreciative inquiry handbook: For leaders of change*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Council of the European Union. (2018). Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning. *Official Journal of the European Union*.
- Council of Europe. (2022). Council of Europe strategy for the rights of the child (2022-2027). *Council of Europe Publishing*. [Council of Europe strategy for the rights of the child \(2022-2027\)](https://www.coe.int/en/web/council-of-europe-strategy-for-the-rights-of-the-child).

Department of Children and Youth Affairs. (2015). *National strategy on children and young people's participation in decision-making, 2015–2020*. Government Publications.
<https://assets.gov.ie/24462/48a6f98a921446ad85829585389e57de.pdf>.

Design for Change. (n.d.). *Design for Change*. <https://www.dfeworld.org/SITE>.

Dictionary.com. (n.d.). Participation. In Dictionary.com.
<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/participation>.

European Commission. (2021). *EU strategy on the rights of the child* (COM(2021) 142 final).
<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0142>.

European Parliament, Council of the European Union, & European Commission. (2017). *European Pillar of Social Rights*. [Interinstitutional Proclamation]. Publications Office of the European Union. *EUR-Lex Official Journal*.

European Union. (2012). *Charter of fundamental rights of the European Union* (Art. 24). Official Journal of the European Union, OJ C 326, 26.10.2012, pp. 391–407.

Fielding, M. (2004). Transformative approaches to student voice: Theoretical underpinnings, recalcitrant realities. *British Educational Research Journal*, 30(2), 295–311.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0141192042000195236>.

Hart, R. A. (1992). *Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship* (Innocenti Essays No. 4). UNICEF International Child Development Centre.

Hart, R. A. 2008. "Stepping Back from 'The Ladder': Reflections on a Model of Participatory Work with Children." In *Participation and Learning*, edited by A. Reid, B. Bruun Jensen, J. Nikel, and V. Simovska, 19–31. Dordrecht: Springer.

Hocevar, R. (2023). Participatory action research (PAR). *EBSCO Research Starters: Social Sciences and Humanities*. [Participatory Action Research \(PAR\) | Social Sciences and Humanities](#).

James, A., & Prout, A. (Eds.). (1997). *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203362600>.

- Kivel, P. (2024). *Working with young people as adult allies*. Taboo, Spring 2024, 86. Caddo Gap Press.
- Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2015). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Lansdown G (2010). The realisation of children's participation rights. Critical reflections. In: Percy-Smith B, Thomas N (eds) *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation: Perspectives from Theory and Practice*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 11–23.
- Lundy, L. (2007). 'Voice' is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(6), 927–942. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033>.
- Lundy, L., McEvoy, L., & Byrne, B. (2011). Working With Young Children as Co-Researchers: An Approach Informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *Early Education and Development*, 22(5), 714–736. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2011.596463>.
- Mayne, J. (2016). The COM-B theory of change model. http://www.researchgate.net/publication/314086441_The_COM-B_Theory_of_Change_Model_V3.
- Mayne, J. (2017). Theory of change analysis: Building robust theories of change. *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, 32(2), 155–173.
- McLoughlin, S., Polizzi, G., Harrison, T., Moller, F., Maile, A., Picton, I., & Clark, C. (2024). Measuring civic engagement in young children. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, 42(1), 14–28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07342829231205070>.
- Morgan, D.L. (1997). *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*. 2nd Edition, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412984287>
- Percy-Smith, B., & Patrick Thomas, N. (Eds.). (2009). *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation: Perspectives from Theory and Practice* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203871072>

- Piaget, J. (1952). *The origins of intelligence in children*. (M. Cook, Trans.). W. W. Norton & Company. <https://doi.org/10.1037/11494-000>
- Pineda, H. et al. (2022). Development and evaluation of a professional development program on designing participatory action research projects for basic education teachers. *Advanced Education*, 21, 161-184. <http://doi.org/10.20535/2410-8286.266663>.
- Reed, J. (2007). *Appreciative Inquiry: Research for change*. SAGE Publications., Inc., <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412983464>.
- Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Directive 95/46/EC (General Data Protection Regulation) (Text with EEA relevance). (2016). *Official Journal*, L 119, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2016/679/oj>.
- Sen, A. (1999). Development as freedom. *Oxford University Press*. Available at: [Development as freedom / Kuanqalia](#).
- Saisin, B., & Suphakach Supakitjo, P. (2026). Teachers and participatory management to develop students' responsibility skills. *International Education Studies*, 19(1), 15. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v19n1p15>.
- Semathong, S. (2023). Participatory action research to develop the teachers on classroom action research. *Shanlax International Journal of Education*, 11(3), 29–36. <https://doi.org/10.34293/education.v11i3.6118>.
- Shier, H. (2001). Pathways to participation: Openings, opportunities and obligations. *Children & Society*, 15(2), 107–117.
- Tan, P. (2019). Listening to Young Children: A Mosaic approach: Research Perspectives from two children and dinosaurs. *SFU Educational Review*, 12(2), 64–78. <https://doi.org/10.21810/sfuer.v12i2.932>.

Thomas, N. (2007). Towards a Theory of Children's Participation. *The International Journal of Children's Rights*, 15(2), 199-218. <https://doi.org/10.1163/092755607X206489>

United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2009). *General comment No. 12 (2009): The right of the child to be heard* (CRC/C/GC/12). United Nations.

United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (Arts. 3, 5, 12). Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

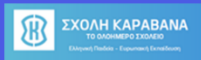
Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society: Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Edited by Michael Cole et al., Harvard University Press. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjf9vz4>.



Co-funded by
the European Union



**RED
DEPORTE**



Kinderbüro



**Innovation
Hive**

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them Project Number: 101252695.