Voices into Action

Promoting learner and family participation in educational decision-making
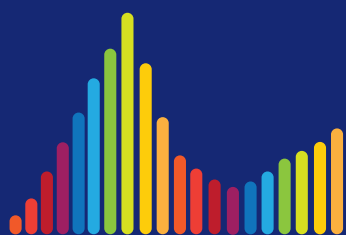
VOICES INTO ACTION

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The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency) is an independent and self-governing organisation. The Agency is co-funded by the ministries of education in its member countries and by the European Commission via an operating grant within the European Union (EU) Erasmus+ education programme.

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CONTENTS

ICONS USED

Throughout this report, different icons indicate different types of information resources. They are as follows:

Icon	Meaning
	Quotation
	Definition
	Summary of key findings

FOREWORD

An inclusive education system cannot be realised unless all stakeholders are actively involved in its development. A major step to ensure this is to safeguard children's and families' right to participation and start designing policies **with** them, not just for them. The European Year of Youth in 2022 encourages young people, including children and young adults, to engage in many different forms of civic and political participation, including educational matters that affect them (European Commission, 2021a).

Since 2003, the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency) has been taking significant steps in this direction, by providing space for learners and their families to express their voices and ensuring that their powerful messages are heard in national and international inclusive education debates and policy forums.

As a direct response to its Representative Board members' request, the Agency undertook a targeted activity, entitled Voices into Action (VIA), to explore further effective ways of including the voices of learners and families in its future work. This consisted of a literature review, an analysis of how past Agency work involved learners' and families' voices, and a collection of relevant country examples. It also included further in-depth work to identify and practise effective ways of involving learners and families in three countries: Iceland, Malta and Norway.[1]

This report provides a summary of these activities and highlights meaningful ways to involve learner and family voices in educational decision-making. It is addressed to policy-makers from Agency member countries' ministries of education and other national stakeholders who work with learners and families and impact their lives, directly or indirectly.

The report can serve as inspiration to promote and practise a more intergenerational approach to inclusive policy-making, where young learners work closely together with adults (policy-makers, families and/or other stakeholders) to address challenging educational issues.

I hope that this report will contribute positively to the work of all those who aspire to support more participatory decision-making processes and inclusive policy development in their countries.

Cor Meijer

Director of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Promoting learner and family participation in decision-making and policy development is now a key priority for European and international organisations (Council of the European Union and Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, 2018; European Commission, 2021a; 2021b; UNESCO, 2019; 2021; UNICEF, 2020). However, there continues to be variation in the extent to which learners and their families are truly considered in important decisions that affect them.

The Voices into Action (VIA) activity, carried out by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency), has focused on this important topic. It has examined how the voices of learners and their families can be meaningfully involved in educational decision-making processes.

The activity ran in two phases, in 2021 and 2022 respectively. In phase 1, desk research activities analysed key policy and research literature on why learners and families should actively participate in decision-making processes and how to involve them effectively. Activities also included collecting and analysing relevant examples from previous Agency work and from 19 Agency member countries.

Phase 1 resulted in the development of the VIA literature review (European Agency, 2022), which provides a focused rationale and key evidence on meaningful ways to involve learner and family voices in educational decision-making. It also introduces the VIA Framework for Meaningful Participation in Inclusive Education, building on a model developed by Laura Lundy (2007), as well as other theoretical models and frameworks for the meaningful involvement of learners and families.

Phase 2 activities included country cluster work with representatives from **Iceland**, **Malta** and **Norway**. The aim of their involvement was to elaborate and validate aspects of the VIA Framework and to contribute to the development of the VIA toolkit – an online, practical resource providing direction to action. In the cluster countries' interactive work with learners and families, the VIA Framework both shaped the methodology and served as a practical guide.

Overall, the evidence from the different activities shows there is a clear **gap between policy and practice** in including the voices of learners and families in decision-making processes. Although participatory approaches show positive results, the **issue of impact and sustained change** is not greatly evidenced.

The proposed VIA Framework offers a coherent and full approach to participation; it can be adapted to various contexts and stakeholders. It constitutes a critical and reflective framework to work with learners and families, including concrete ways in which participatory policy-making can become meaningful and sustainable. It is based on the four key elements of Lundy's model (2007): **space**, **voice**, **audience** and **influence**. It incorporates points for reflection at every stage of the process of planning, undertaking, evaluating and following up on 'voice-elicitation' activities with learners and families.

Overall, the VIA activity concludes with **eight key messages** for facilitating the participation of learners and their families in educational decision-making:

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1. Systematise processes for the meaningful participation of learners and families at national, local and community levels

To be effective, all relevant legislative and policy documents must systematically promote the rights of learners and families. Policies should be well aligned with processes for their implementation and developed through cross-sectoral collaboration.

2. Focus on increasing participation in shaping legislation and policy

While there has been some learner and family participation at school or class levels, the evidence shows their participation at policy level is limited. Participation at this level must be genuine and not tokenistic. It should actively include the many individuals who have not yet been able to influence decisions at policy level.

3. Use ethical approaches at all stages of participation

Ethical approaches should always be integral to all aspects of participation in decision-making. This is not only in relation to issues of consent, safety and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), but also to the ways in which views are obtained and used, the clarity of their use for the direct benefit of learners and/or families, the openness of the transfer of information, and accurate and authentic reporting.

4. Identify and include marginalised, unheard and silenced voices

As some voices continue to be absent, it is particularly important to include those that come from within diverse groups of learners or families known to be vulnerable to exclusion in particular contexts.

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5. Be aware of the complexities of diverse groups, assigned labels and intersecting identities

The multiple identities and contexts of learners and families and how these intersect can have an impact on voices. It is important to consider that a group of learners or families who share a characteristic or 'label' may still have different experiences and views they wish to convey. Thus, it is essential to attend to the individual voices within different groups of learners and families.

6. Use a wide range of models, approaches and resources to enable all to participate meaningfully

A range of approaches and resources should be available to ensure that meaningful participation is equitable and possible at every stage. Modern information and communication technology (ICT) offers great potential for significant change in the ways diverse voices may be heard in education.

7. Build capacity for meaningful participation and active listening

Learners and families need to receive appropriate support to develop knowledge, skills and understanding on how to participate actively. Policy-makers also need to access opportunities to build capacity and to understand how to set up a safe environment, listen responsibly, and understand and interpret the views expressed.

8. Create synergies and ways of working with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations

Advocacy groups, associations, NGOs, civil society and major international organisations are important actors in raising awareness of the rights and needs of overlooked groups of children, young people and adults. The possible benefits of developing synergies and ways of working with these sectors is an important further consideration.

These messages can be seen as a set of guidelines for policy-makers working to fill the policy-practice gap. Finally, as a means of addressing this gap, the VIA work suggests focusing more on **intergenerational approaches**. This includes recognising the interdependence between young people and adults, creating more opportunities for working together to address common issues, overcoming barriers, raising awareness of vulnerable and excluded groups, and increasing participation in education.

This suggests a **top-down policy approach supported by bottom-up initiatives at local and school level** as a way forward. This combined approach is a more democratic way of designing and implementing policy by directly engaging policy-makers in interactive voice-oriented activities with learners and families.

1. INTRODUCTION

Listening to learners and their families is crucial for developing more inclusive schools and education systems (European Agency, 2016a; Mangiaracina, Kefallinou, Kyriazopoulou and Watkins, 2021; Soriano, 2016). All stakeholders, including parents, families or guardians, should be active agents in creating equitable learning experiences for all learners (UNESCO, 2021).

The current global challenges in education reinforce this idea. The COVID-19 pandemic has created one of the biggest educational crises in history, affecting access to learning, widening inequalities and limiting opportunities to hear the voices of the most vulnerable learners and families (European Agency, 2021).

As a response to the growing education crisis, the concept of 'intergenerational solidarity' (World Youth Alliance, 2014) has been re-introduced as key to transforming young people's lives and communities. Approaching policy-making from an intergenerational perspective is based on an understanding of the interdependence and common concerns of young people and adults. Intergenerational participation starts at the level of the communities of home and school, where young people grow and learn; their families, as well as the wider community, are genuinely involved (European Agency, 2022).

This approach calls for identifying effective ways to include learner and family voices in decision-making processes. During their exchanges on the Agency's future role and work, Representative Board members from Agency countries prioritised the issue of considering the voices of learners and their families in Agency work and in their own policy-making processes. As a direct response to the Representative Board members' request, the gaps identified in the Agency's mapping analysis exercise and the reflections from the Agency team, the Agency undertook a desk research activity during 2021–2022 to ensure that Agency work meaningfully incorporates the voices of learners and their families.

The Voices into Action (VIA) activity explored key policy and research evidence on why it is necessary to involve learner and family voices in decision-making, and how best to accomplish this. It had two phases.

In the first phase (2021), desk research activities consisted of a research and policy literature review. Activities also included collecting and analysing examples from 19 Agency member countries and from previous Agency work involving learners and families. The Agency team and Agency member countries were provided with evidence-based recommendations to ensure the meaningful participation of learners and families in their future work. The review's key findings informed the second phase (2022), where a small group of country representatives from **Iceland**, **Malta** and **Norway** engaged with learners and families in interactive country-based activities.

This report presents and discusses in detail the activities and outcomes of phases 1 and 2 of VIA. It is part of a series of outputs, which include:

- A literature review (European Agency, 2022), which provides a focused rationale and key policy and research evidence on effective ways to include learner and family voices in educational decision-making.

- An Agency review, which provides targeted information on how previous Agency work has included the voices of learners and their families. This is a non-public, internal document, addressed to the Agency team.

- An open-access online toolkit, which will be a guide on how to involve learner and family voices in future work. It will be available on the VIA web area in 2023.

- A final summary report on the activity's rationale, methodology and main outcomes. This will be available on the VIA web area in 2023.

- An infographic conveying the activity's key messages.

The direct target groups for the activity outcomes are:

- decision-makers at national, regional and/or local levels aiming to promote learner and family voices in decision-making;

- the Agency team, aiming to inform future Agency work.

Another target group that may benefit from the VIA outcomes are other stakeholders involved in implementing programmes for learner and family participation, empowerment and decision-making (i.e. stakeholders from partner organisations and other civil society organisations).

1.1 VIA aims and questions

The VIA activity's overall goal was to examine the critical issue of involving the voices of learners and their families in decision-making. Its added value was to identify and highlight key messages that can ensure the voices of learners and their families are included effectively in educational decision-making. To this end, it explored the following questions:

1. What suggestions does key policy and research literature make for meaningfully engaging the voices of learners and families in decision-making?

2. How has previous Agency work included the voices of learners and their families?

3. What aspects of Agency member countries' existing approaches, guidelines, tools and/or methodologies enable learners and families to participate meaningfully in decision-making?

4. In what ways can these approaches inform future participatory activities?

1.2 VIA methodology

This section summarises the methodology used for the different VIA activities. It outlines the main activities of phases 1 and 2 and connects them to the outputs. The Annex provides more detailed information.

Phase 1: Desk research activities (2021)

In phase 1 (2021), the VIA team carried out desk research activities following three analytical steps.

First, the team collected and analysed targeted European and international policy and research literature focusing on effective ways to involve learners and families in inclusive education policy debates. This analytical step provided a focused rationale for including learner and family voices. It resulted in the VIA literature review.

The second step consisted of analysing previous Agency work that involved learners and families in any way. This included final project reports and outputs, methodology reports and other raw material, where available. Selected information was incorporated into an internal Agency review, addressed to the Agency team. Section 3 presents some key findings from this step.

As a third step, the VIA team collected examples of effective practice from Agency member countries, using a short country information template. Nineteen countries [2] submitted examples. The team analysed the examples against specific criteria (refer to the Annex for details). Following the analysis, **five indicative country examples** were selected for inclusion as evidence of current practice, to support the VIA literature review.

Phase 1 concluded with the development of the VIA Framework for Meaningful Participation in Inclusive Education, through an analysis and amalgamation of the key features of models of participation evidenced in the literature. The Framework's main elements underpinned all aspects of phase 2 activities.

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[2] Belgium (Flemish community), Czech Republic, Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom (England), United Kingdom (Northern Ireland) and United Kingdom (Scotland) submitted examples.

Phase 2: Country cluster activities (2022)

Phase 2 activities were carried out in 2022 and included country cluster work with representatives from **Iceland**, **Malta** and **Norway**. The countries were invited based on their stated interest in the topic and the type of examples they submitted in phase 1.

The purpose of their involvement in phase 2 was to elaborate and validate different practical aspects of the VIA Framework. They would also contribute to developing the VIA toolkit in response to their needs. In the interactive work with the three cluster countries, the VIA Framework both shaped the methodology and served as a practical guide.

Following discussions and the Agency's suggestions, the countries developed and undertook their planned activities in their national contexts. All three national projects included 'voice-elicitation' activities – in the form of learning walks, focus groups, individual/group interviews, or observations – with the aim of exploring learners' and families' experiences of participation. During the reflection and analysis stage, countries jointly identified and consolidated conditions and essential elements for meaningful participation. Section 5 presents the country cluster work.

In 2023, the VIA team will embed all practical material and available resources (key elements of existing policy frameworks, tools, methodologies and innovative practices) in an open-access online toolkit. This toolkit will provide practical ways to involve learners and families and indicate how to act upon and truly embed their voices in decision-making. It will also include the 19 country examples received during phase 1. More information about the toolkit will be available on the VIA web area in 2023.

The toolkit and the other VIA outputs will be disseminated and discussed at an in-person VIA event in 2023.

Figure 1 gives a visual overview of the VIA activities and outputs.

Development and validation of the VIA Framework for Meaningful Participation in Inclusive Education
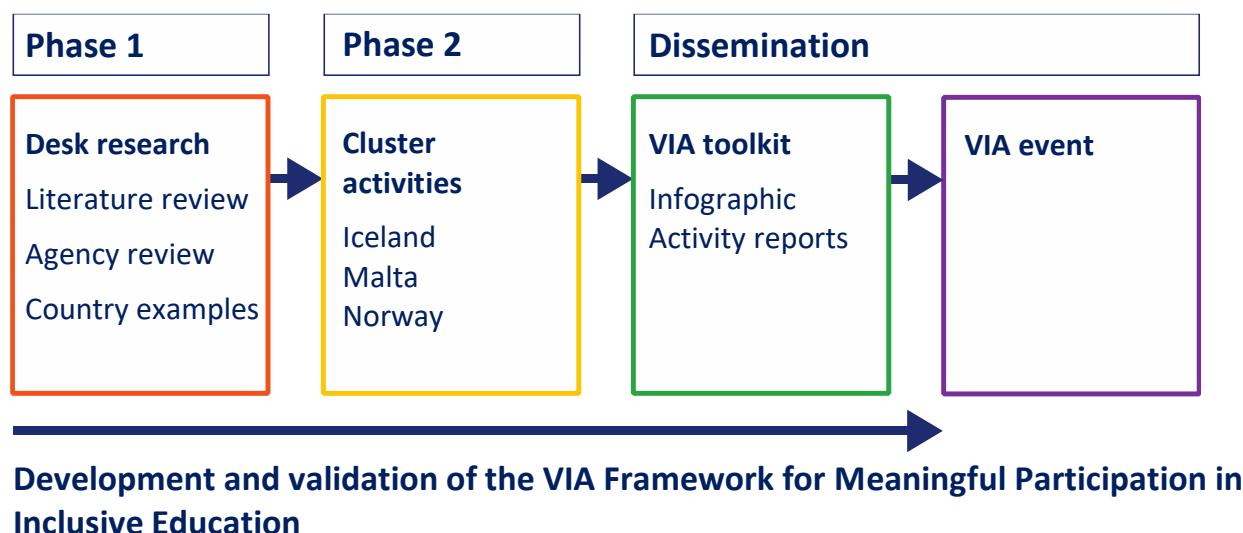
Figure 1. Overview of VIA activities and outputs

1.3 Synthesis report overview

This synthesis report provides an overview of the VIA work, combining the activities and outcomes of phases 1 and 2. It has six main sections:

- Section 1 (this section) introduces the VIA activity and outlines its aims and scope.

- Section 2 discusses the rationale of the VIA activity and explains key terms and concepts in relation to the topic.

- Section 3 provides an overview of the policy and research review, and the internal Agency review.

- Section 4 discusses the development of the VIA Framework for Meaningful Participation in Inclusive Education.

- Section 5 presents the country cluster work and the country representatives' overall reflections on different aspects of the Framework.

- Section 6 sets out the final key messages for the future work of policy-makers and organisations that aspire to meaningfully involve learners and families.

2. VIA BACKGROUND

2.1 The importance of including the voices of learners and families

For many years, the voices of young people and their families were not sought or considered in educational decisions. The prevailing view was that education is the province of the experts and that vulnerable individuals, such as learners with disabilities, are not 'competent' enough to have views worthy of sharing, or to know what is right for them.

Gradually, young people have acquired opportunities to share their views and opinions or to act as learner representatives on school boards. However, though their views may be voiced and listened to, these still tend to be tokenistic gestures that rarely have an impact on educational decisions (Fielding, 2004; Kefallinou and Howes, 2022; Mangiaracina et al., 2021).

National and international policies and recommendations reflect this growing awareness of the importance of giving young people a say in decisions made about them. The European and international policy debate on children's and families' voices is rooted in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989). The Convention views both children and parents (legal guardians or family members) as active stakeholders and agents.

Recent policy documents aim to foster youth participation in democratic life and to focus on the relationship between inclusion and civil society, youth, families and communities. One example is the European Union Youth Strategy. This is the framework for European Union (EU) youth policy co-operation for 2019–2027 and is based on a Council Resolution (Council of the European Union and Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, 2018). Another example is the Cali commitment to equity and inclusion in education (UNESCO, 2019).

The European Commission's latest commitments include the adoption of a Strategy on the Rights of the Child (European Commission, 2021a), along with a Proposal for a Council

[Recommendation Establishing a European Child Guarantee](#) (European Commission, 2021b). These aim to promote equal opportunities for children at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Still, research evidence indicates variation in the extent to which young people are consulted on important issues and decisions in schools.

Over the years, schools across Europe have also encouraged families' involvement in their children's education. 'Involvement' can take many forms in practice (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). These include representative membership on school boards and other minor types of involvement. Parents of children with additional needs and disabilities are accepted as being more involved in their children's education, particularly in the primary years. However, the involvement is generally around everyday decisions and rarely extends to school policies.

Exactly what parents' educational role should, or might, be is much debated. Significant research over more than 40 years has indicated that parental involvement is beneficial in terms of their children's academic engagement and progress (Goodall, 2013). Still, there are significant barriers to parents supporting their children's learning (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; Hornby and Blackwell, 2018).

Recent movements to engage families in education have involved 'partnership' models (Epstein and Sheldon, 2006), but there is variation in how these are conceptualised and practised (Boonk, Gijselaers, Ritzen and Brand-Gruwel, 2018). The role of families has been traditionally viewed as supporting learners' voices and speaking in their interest. However, it cannot be taken for granted that families can achieve this without support from schools and other organisations.

It becomes clear that 'having a voice' is merely the beginning. There is no guarantee that voices will be listened to attentively and with respect – that is, be heard. Nor is it a given that all views will be considered and acknowledged as a valuable part of a discussion. The concept that each individual is an expert in their own life, with unique knowledge, experience and perspectives that can enrich others' understanding in unexpected and valuable ways, regains attention in research on inclusive education.

In terms of inclusive education, the literature suggests that no education system or school can be considered inclusive if marginalisation exists and the voices of those closely involved are not heard (Messiou, 2006; 2012). When young people and adults do not 'feel heard', they are silenced and disempowered (Murdoch, English, Hintz and Tyson, 2020).

While policy-makers draw extensively on academic research literature to inform policy decisions, a gap remains between the academic research community and practitioners in schools and other educational contexts (European Agency, 2022; Mangiaracina et al., 2021).

The VIA activity aimed to address this gap, by identifying key messages to ensure the voices of learners and their families are included effectively in educational decision-making. VIA attempted to achieve this by:

- providing a focused analysis of policy and research evidence on effective ways to include the voices of learners and their families in policy development and implementation;

- examining examples of how previous Agency work and Agency member countries have considered the voices of learners and their families (at local, regional and national levels);

- exploring relevant approaches, guidelines, tools and/or appropriate methodologies and suggesting effective examples of policy and practice.

2.2 Terminology

Learners and families

In the context of this activity, 'learner(s)' refers to all individuals at the age of typical compulsory education levels, i.e. International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) levels 1–2. It includes those with complex needs, those from vulnerable or hard-to-reach groups, those who are out of formal education, those in pre- or post-school education, and those missing from education.

In referring to 'families', VIA's intention is to include the voices of those closest to learners, whether these be parents (biological, adoptive, step- or foster parents), siblings, grandparents, extended family members/relatives, carers, guardians or other close members of their community who interact with the child around their learning. This is in contrast to some literature that refers to 'parents' in the narrower sense of immediate family. When this distinction is made in the policy and literature documents, this report uses both terms (i.e. parents and families). It should also be noted that some young people do not have a specific person who can act in the role of 'family' for them.

Voice and voices

While the literature often uses the terms 'voice' and 'voices' interchangeably, it is important to distinguish between a group or collective voice and individual voices (Murray, 2019). The word 'voice' suggests a homogenous group, such as 'people with disabilities', 'migrants' or 'learners'. This overlooks the importance of the individual and assumes that a diverse group speaks with one voice. The use of 'voices' in this activity, however, suggests that there are many individual voices within a group, and that these may not always agree. On occasion, groups are conflated, such as 'learner and family voices'. However, evidence suggests that these two groups may sometimes be in conflict based on the competing rights and autonomy of the different parties involved (Harris and Riddell, 2011; Riddell, Harris and Davidge, 2021).

Based on the above, this activity uses the term as follows:

'Voices' means the values, opinions, beliefs, views and perspectives of learners and their families. It also refers to the degree to which these are considered, included, listened to and acted upon when important decisions that affect their lives are being made at local (school), regional (district) or national level.

The term 'voices' is used to convey the notion of multiple, diverse voices. It implies that learners and families are not considered as homogenous groups, but as unique individuals who are treated as equal and valuable members in discussions (European Agency, 2022, p. 17).

Meaningful participation

… for the voices of learners and their families to be meaningfully and effectively included, individuals and groups must be fully informed. Their respective opinions must be sought, listened to, valued, promoted and shared in planning, in decision-making and in practice, to include shared opportunities for feedback and further input. Those who were previously unheard or overlooked must be engaged in interactive dialogue with others in more powerful positions than themselves. Such participatory approaches are fundamental to the development, implementation and sustainability of inclusive organisations and education systems (European Agency, 2022, p. 13).

Meaningful participation occurs when children and young people have the opportunity to express their views, influence decision-making and achieve change in areas that affect their lives. Participation is informed, relevant and voluntary (Save the Children, 2007).

Based on the above premises, this activity uses the term 'meaningful participation' as follows:

'Meaningful participation' means that learner and family views are not only listened to attentively and with respect but are also considered and acknowledged as an equal and integral part in discussions. At its highest level, meaningful participation is where learners and families are able to initiate ideas/plans that are taken forward for joint discussion and those ideas/plans are acted upon and truly embedded in policy decisions at local, regional and/or national level.

Agency

The term 'agency' means having influence to make transformational change within the educational environment. Learners and families have agency when their voices are given weight in educational discussions. Furthermore, 'active agency' is when learners or families are able to initiate discussions, take action and have shared power to influence decisions and bring about transformative change.

Ethical approaches

Ethics is concerned with individuals and groups of people, and how attitudes, actions and decisions may influence and have intended and unintended consequences on their own lives and the lives of others. In practice, ethical approaches are clear in their purposes and processes and intend to benefit all those involved. At every stage, steps are taken to reduce power imbalances and bias and to enable all to participate safely and voluntarily.

In the VIA activity, ethical approaches address issues of human rights, values and perspectives, as well as recognising and respecting the voices of all learners and their families. All approaches must be transparent, voluntary, respectful, relevant, inclusive, supported by training, safe and sensitive to risk, accountable and child-/adolescent-friendly (UNICEF, 2020).

3. PERSPECTIVES FROM POLICY, RESEARCH AND PREVIOUS AGENCY WORK

The different VIA activities provided complementary perspectives on the conceptual and practical aspects of engaging with the voices of learners and families through meaningful participation.

Figure 2 illustrates how these five activities (i.e. the literature review, the policy review, the Agency review, the country examples and the country cluster activities) were brought together to inform the creation of the VIA Framework for Meaningful Participation in Inclusive Education.

Figure 2. The different VIA activities that informed the VIA Framework

The following sections summarise the main findings of the policy review, the literature review and the Agency review. Section 5 presents the country cluster activities. The 19 country examples will be made available on the VIA web area, as part of the VIA online toolkit.

3.1 Policy review

The review of international policy, over a 30-year period, reveals a clear thread in the development of the recognition of the importance of the voices and views of children and families. From 1989, policy began to reflect a conceptual change in the way children were positioned, moving from decisions being made about them, to children themselves being seen as **active agents** and **competent individuals** in their ability to form and to express views, which are to be considered in policy decisions. This is now seen as **a right for children**, rather than a recommendation (United Nations, 1989; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013; European Union, 2000; Council of Europe, 2011).

In 2021, President von der Leyen proposed making 2022 the European Year of Youth, a year dedicated to empowering young people

> **… if we are to shape our Union in their mould, young people must be able to shape Europe's future. Our Union needs a soul and a vision they can connect to.**
>
> (von der Leyen, 2021)

However, progress towards the rights of families and parents in relation to their children's views has been slower. Policy development now emphasises the complementarity of parents' and families' roles in the defence and enjoyment of children's rights. Families are fundamental actors in developing and affirming learners' voices in educational matters. Their role in listening to, respecting, supporting and, in some cases, conveying learners' voices should be naturally integrated in a broader framework of learners' interests to avoid creating a new divide (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009; 2013; Council of Europe, 2012). Therefore, the voices of families must be respected and heard, provided that they express their children's rights and their best interests (United Nations, 1989).

> **It is not only children who want education to be prioritised in times of emergency and crisis. Parents, caregivers and communities also consider education as an essential need that should be provided alongside food, shelter and water.**
>
> (Save the Children, 2015, p. 11)

While parents and families are recognised as pivotal actors in developing and affirming learners' voices in educational matters, the role of institutions and communities in guiding, supporting and enabling them to do so is indicated and, in some cases, considered a parental right. Some key policy documents suggest that, in addition to children receiving parental guidance, institutions and communities should also support parents (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009; 2013; Council of Europe, 2011; Council of the European Union, 2017). Parents have the right to information, guidance and support from services in place for this specific aim (Council of Europe, 2011).

Progress is made when policy documents invite countries to unlock the potential of children's and parents' rights and duties, thus creating the conditions for these rights and duties to be enjoyed and fulfilled (Council of Europe, 2012; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2016). The role of national and local legislators and administrators is pivotal to policy developments around learners' rights and voices (Mangiaracina et al., 2021). Implementation of international engagements can only take place through national, and consequently regional/local, enforcement.

> **It is not easy for us to live in a period where the values that founded the European Union are difficult to find within political choices … There is a need to talk and confront each other.**
>
> (Andrea, Italian learner, in European Agency, 2018a, p. 23)

It should be noted that the rights of children and families to participate in decisions affecting them is not yet granted or systematised, despite the fact that European countries have ratified and signed legally binding treaties/charters that state and protect children's rights. All policy developments and recommendations receive strong support, both at national and European level, inspiring a number of national-level projects with positive impact (Council of Europe, 2020; Rand Europe, 2021; European Commission, 2021c). However, they are still little-known or not properly used within European countries at the national, regional and local levels, where concrete policy mechanisms have to be developed and implemented (for more details, see European Agency, 2022, p. 29).

Key messages from the policy review

- The right of children to be heard and considered in matters affecting them extends to ALL children. It has taken 30 years of reiterated policy work and school practices to recognise children as agents, to their effective enjoyment of this right.

- Families must be consulted, provided that the principle of the 'child's best interests' is always the primary consideration in final decisions.

- Children have the right to guidance and support from organisations, institutions and communities. Families also have this right, in fulfilling their duties toward children.

- Policy alignment and collaboration among stakeholders are pivotal to ensure the rights of children, parents and families.

- Countries must commit to systematising and developing effective processes for learners' and families' participation and interaction in synergy with all institutions and stakeholders in all matters affecting children.

3.2 Literature review

The review of academic literature in educational research over a 20-year period revealed similar progress to that in the policy review, as the gradual recognition of children as active agents becomes increasingly evident across research. At the same time, however, there are barriers to progress.

A main finding is in connection with the conceptualisation of 'voice' and 'voices', for which there is no single definition in the research literature. As a result, the terms 'voice' and 'voices' are frequently used as synonyms for other concepts, such as autonomy, engagement, participation, involvement or agency.

Evidence emerged of some resistance to the increased rights and positioning of children as active, participatory and valued agents in research, alongside a significant gap between recognition in research and participation in practice. Significantly, evidence continues to emerge from research with children that, while their voices are sought, they feel their views are not considered or included in decision-making, leading to the impression that their views are not valued or seen as important. This leads to an on-going lack of trust between children and adults or organisations, who continue to hold the power. This power imbalance is evident in the choice of research topics – often to suit specific adult ends, in the manner in which research is carried out, and in the presentation of findings, where the authenticity of children's voices may be lost in the process.

❝ **We're Talking; Are You Listening?** ❞

(Joining Forces, 2021)

Some difficulty with the term 'in the best interests of the child' emerged in research. Evidence suggests that children and their families, or principal caregivers, do not always agree on what this might be and this can be a source of conflict. Competing demands and

notions about the purposes and uses of research evidence in education can create further complexity around the interpretations of 'best interests' by learners, families and teachers.

> **Keeping learners at the centre to achieve the goal of inclusion in education also requires genuinely involving parents and families as well as the wider community.**
>
> (UNESCO, 2021, p. 130)

While there is a strong body of evidence around the importance of parental and family support and engagement with their children's education, family participation in decision-making in education has tended to be around issues at the school level, rather than at policy levels. There is significantly less research around the voices of families, compared to those of children, and particularly in relation to adults with physical or cognitive impairments. However, more recent participatory research methods have shown the importance of the interactive relationship between schools, families and communities. Moreover, they have provided evidence of how this might be achieved across a range of different types of environments, including with urban, rural or marginalised communities.

An important finding in this context has been the recognition of the importance of intergenerational participation in decision-making. However, there is little evidence of this in practice, across learners, families and the broader communities in which they are located.

> **Children's voices, even in the plural, are certainly never enough. They must be conjoined with others as part of a complex generational, intergenerational and intragenerational struggle.**
>
> (David Oswell in Baraldi and Cockburn, 2018, p. viii)

Much research in education continues to be in relation to specific groups of learners, or according to assigned 'labels', indicating the continuation of thinking in 'silos'. The participation of those with additional or special needs in research activity has increased over the 20-year period of this review, with a gradual move towards a broader concept and understanding of additional needs, as suggested in the term 'vulnerable to exclusion', and towards issues of intersectionality.

Previously, the voices of those with 'disabilities' were seldom heard in research, either as learners, adult researchers or family members. Where the voices of those with different needs were included, this was most frequently through advocacy or representation by their parents or families.

More recent research findings indicate that with a wide range of methods, almost all can participate meaningfully in research, communicate their opinions and be included in decision-making on topics of importance and interest to them. Important in this context is the finding that NGOs and civil society organisations have done significant work to enable the active participation of children, young people and adults, through the development of rich resources, which are readily adaptable to a wide range of contexts.

> **Those of us who experience disability are frequently conspicuously left out of dialogue about our own lives.**
>
> (Cologon, 2020, p. 396)

The role of ICT has emerged in two ways in the review's findings. In the first instance, educational research has not widely recognised or used the huge potential of assistive and digital technology in enabling diverse voices to be heard and included. This is despite continued work on accessibility and technology in this area, at all levels of education and society. A second finding is in relation to ethical aspects around technology, which include the lack of equitable access, the dangers of the exploitation of vulnerable people, the negative impact of social media and the misuse of powerful technology.

> **Nobody sees me.**
>
> (Six-year-old child, cited in Bradwell, 2019)

The importance of ethics in all aspects of meaningful participation has emerged as a finding from the activity. There is evidence that the ethical implications of both the means and the purposes of gaining people's views are not always fully considered, with a power imbalance at all levels. Thus, while research into meaningful participation should benefit those whose voices are sought, findings show that this is not always the case, and that power imbalances occur in the choice of topic and the means in which 'voices' are accessed, listened to, reported and used.

It is also clear that there is a lack of clarity and transparency around whose voices are sought and how their views will be used, resulting in silenced and absent voices from some marginalised groups. While these voices are generally acknowledged as absent in the research, there has been little evidence of progress in enabling their participation.

Key messages from the literature review

- There are a number of different **conceptualisations** of 'voice/voices' in the literature, and an overall definition is lacking. The concept of voice is frequently used as a synonym for other concepts, such as autonomy, engagement, involvement, participation or agency.

- There is a body of literature that **criticises** the 'voice' movement as tokenistic, inauthentic or a 'bandwagon'. It also raises **ethical issues** around how the voices of learners and families may be accessed and used.

- There is a significant amount of research literature on the **inclusion of 'voices'**, but less about participation in decision-making. There is still a **research-practice gap**, despite the existence of a significant body of literature around voice and the need for raised awareness of learners' voices in the educational rhetoric.

- Active consideration of **ethics** in all aspects of meaningful participation is important. A lack of ethical approaches is evidenced by power imbalances, a lack of clarity in purposes, methods and outcomes, and the marginalisation and silencing of some voices.

- The **voices of families** are much less present in the research literature. Research generally focuses on involvement at school or class level, and less so on involvement in decision-making at policy level. Families and parents who are themselves vulnerable to exclusion, particularly those with physical or cognitive difficulties, are under-researched.

- There is more research on children than on **intergenerational participation** and voices. **Community involvement** in education is not greatly developed in the research literature.

- There continue to be '**silos**' in research, with learners or adults who are vulnerable to exclusion generally included in research based on a range of classification and labels.

- The active participation of multiple groups vulnerable to exclusion in participatory research is limited, despite the literature acknowledging that there are **absent and marginalised voices**.

- The opportunities that **assistive and digital technology, devices and resources** offer to enable meaningful participation do not appear to have made a significant change to research methods around voices.

- **NGOs and civil society organisations** have done significant work to enable the active participation of children, young people and adults, through the development of rich resources, which are readily adaptable to a wide range of contexts.

3.3 Review of Agency work

Organisational commitment to participatory policy-making is essential to prioritise strategic focus, resources and planning for learners' and families' collaboration with education decision-makers. Since 2003, the Agency has been committed to including learners and their families as active stakeholders in exchanges with decision-makers responsible for developing and implementing policy and practice for inclusive education, in line with developments in international policy.

The internal Agency review provides targeted information on how previous Agency work has included the voices of learners and their families. The review aims to improve how the Agency involves learners and families in future processes and activities. The review's findings will also complement the Agency's self-review activities that aim to improve its overall working procedures. Some key messages identified were included as another source of evidence for how learners' and families' voices can be heard in wider policy debates.

This internal review indicates four particular aspects of Agency work that have directly involved young people with and without disabilities/special educational needs in **exchanges with policy-makers and decision-makers** responsible for developing and implementing policy for inclusive education:

- Four European Hearings involving over 300 young people, held in 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2015

- Consultation workshops with learners in several countries as part of the European Commission's Technical Support Instrument – TSI (the former Structural Reform Support Programme – SRSP) actions

- Focus groups and surveys with learners and families in the external audits the Agency conducted on Malta's and Iceland's education systems

- Focused, interactive learner workshops in thematic projects.

European Hearings

The Agency has organised four **European Hearings** that aimed to listen to the voices of learners and empower them by promoting their involvement in inclusive education policy debates. In total, over 300 young delegates from across Europe, with a range of learning needs, participated in the four Hearings, alongside national and European policy-makers and professionals.

All the Hearings included working groups of young people, where they expressed their views on how inclusive education is implemented in their educational settings. During the workshops and the plenary sessions, learners shared their views on their right to education (access), their rights in education (learning and participation) and their rights in wider society (achievement).

Key messages from learners included the importance of barrier-free schools, raising awareness, changing attitudes, and combatting stereotypes to support their longer-term social inclusion and ensure they are able to become full citizens in their local communities.

Figure 3. Participants in the European Hearings

> ❝ **I believe that society needs to accept everyone, the way they are. Not only with their disability. But also with their gender, with their race, with their hobbies … there is still some work to do. We need to raise awareness about the differences between us.** ❞
>
> (Adrià, moderator, Spain, in European Agency, 2016b, p. 15)

> ❝ **Teachers have to focus on my strengths and not on my weaknesses.** ❞
>
> (Michaela, Czech Republic, in European Agency, 2016b, p. 17)

Technical Support Instrument/Structural Reform Support Programme actions

An example from the TSI/SRSP work is the [Agency's technical support to the Czech Ministry](#) of Education, Youth and Sports to promote more inclusive and equitable learning opportunities for all learners in the Karlovarský and Ústecký regions of the Czech Republic.

Stakeholder data collection provided additional and specific information on stakeholders' perceptions of the extent to which seven agreed standards for the Czech education system are being met in practice. Each of the activities – **interviews**, **focus groups** and an **online survey** – aimed to collect information from representatives of all relevant stakeholders in the Karlovarský and Ústecký regions.

The discussions with learners and families focused on the sixth standard: 'There is effective communication and collaboration across and between all system stakeholders'. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the stakeholder data collection was carried out online. The findings from the data collection were used to prepare a report presenting the strengths of and challenges for implementing measures to promote more inclusive and equitable learning opportunities in the Czech Republic.

> **Bullying, poverty, parents' divorces: these are issues in schools. Even before interventions, professionals need to focus on early prevention … it is necessary to find the roots of the problems.**
>
> (Representatives of the Cyprus Children's Parliament, quoted in Mangiaracina et al., 2021, p. 9)

External audits

Another example of including the voices of learners dates back to 2017, when the Agency completed an external audit of the system for special needs and inclusive education in Iceland: *Education for All in Iceland – External Audit of the Icelandic System for Inclusive Education* (European Agency, 2017). The audit explored the implementation of the Icelandic policy for inclusive education.

As well as background information, the data collection involved **focus groups with learners with and without special educational needs and/or disabilities**. In addition, an **online survey for parents** was made fully accessible to accommodate additional print-related needs. All audit respondents were asked the same questions, but tailored to their situation. Language and concepts were adapted to the audience. The surveys were in Icelandic and English. Interpretation was available in Icelandic as required for focus groups. An Agency team implemented the focus groups. Colleagues from the Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture were on hand, but did not sit in on or join the sessions.

In the focus groups, the discussions for learners focused on the question '**What do teachers and other school/specialist staff do that supports you in your learning?**' The parents' discussions focused on the question '**How well do you feel that policy for inclusive education is being implemented in practice?**' At the end of each focus group,

participants were asked if they wanted to share an 'eco-map'. The eco-maps were designed to provide additional information about everyday life in school for teachers and learners, as well as details of parent/carer networks.

Thematic projects

Finally, the Agency's thematic activities provided several examples of increased learner participation. In particular, Raising the Achievement of All Learners in Inclusive Education attempted to promote further learner agency by holding a **focused learner workshop** during the project's final conference. The conference took place in Malta on 5–7 April 2017 as an official event of Malta's Presidency of the Council of the EU and engaged approximately 100 project participants. The Agency's ministerial representatives from 30 member countries joined the plenary sessions.

During this conference, 10 learners – from Italy, Malta, Poland and United Kingdom (Scotland) – were involved in an interactive workshop and shared their perspectives on achievement. During the workshop, the learners presented examples of recent success and discussed what achievement and success mean for them, as well as 'what really works' in supporting their learning in inclusive settings. The young people presented their frank, engaging views on achievement, **using text, video, art, dialogue and interaction with the other delegates**.

For more details, see the video of learners' views on achievement (European Agency, 2018b).

Figure 4. Young learners presenting their key messages at the Raising Achievement final conference

Key messages for the Agency team

These examples from Agency work highlight the potential of including learner voice in high-level decision-making processes. In all cases, learners' and families' perspectives, along with those of all other stakeholder groups, were incorporated into the feedback to the ministry – that is, they were on an **equal footing** with the other stakeholders. The respective ministries of education recognised, valued and reflected upon the learners' contributions, which facilitated the ministries' work in developing their inclusive education systems.

Overall, the main findings of the review of previous Agency work highlighted key areas for consideration, related to well-documented issues evidenced in the literature review. These include the need to be attentive to power relations and selection bias, to ensure accessible information and material, to be more flexible when using different methods for eliciting voice and to be clear and transparent in the way the voices are reported and incorporated in decisions/outcomes. In this way, the review indicated both the importance and relevance of these issues and validated the findings of other aspects of the VIA activity.

These findings have led to the identification of the following **key messages for the Agency team**, which are also relevant to those who work in other organisations and design participatory approaches:

1. Explore different ways to recruit learners and families, to minimise any possible selection bias.

2. Produce and share accessible preparatory information about the planned activities and ways of working.

3. Explore different means for participation (e.g. using multimedia to improve the permission/assent process; organising meetings at a time, place and in a language/medium that enables ALL to participate; providing different options to express views).

4. Allow learners to communicate about any aspect of school/experiences they wish, and not only follow the agenda predetermined by adults.

5. Ensure more clarity and transparency on how learner and family views are incorporated into the activity outcomes.

6. Explore ways to collect feedback from families and learners on their participation in and influence on the activities.

These key messages can be seen as guidelines and points of reflection for ways forward when organising participatory activities with learners/families. In combination with the findings from the other aspects of the VIA activity, they bring to the fore important considerations for any organisation that is committed to involving learners and families more systematically in its work. The key messages and findings can contribute to the

creation of a more participatory and child-friendly culture in relevant processes and activities.

4. DEVELOPING A FRAMEWORK FOR REFLECTION

The findings from the different aspects of the VIA activity clearly indicate that while the importance of the role of voices in educational decision-making is increasingly recognised, there is a barrier caused by a **lack of knowledge and skills** about how this might be achieved in practice, across different contexts and with diverse stakeholders. More critical and reflective frameworks to work with learners and families can help to address such barriers and avoid tokenistic approaches, or the danger of 'glamorising' voices, while maintaining the necessary authenticity of voice in any discussion on educational experiences (Kefallinou and Howes, 2022).

Drawing on these findings, it was decided that a model, or framework, for meaningful participation was needed. This would bring together the elements considered essential to bridge the gap between policy and practice. This framework would:

- combine the essential elements;

- extend the use beyond learners to families and communities;

- be clearly in line with international rights policy and ethical best practice;

- be interactive and dialogic;

- address the gaps, challenges and barriers that emerged through the different aspects of the VIA activity.

The literature review (European Agency, 2022) identified a number of models or frameworks of participation that have been developed to indicate how different conceptualisations might be applied in educational settings.

For example, Hart's Ladder of Participation illustrates eight rungs on a ladder. The first three rungs indicate a lack of voice and thus no participation (Hart, 1992). Meanwhile, Shier's five-level model indicates that the starting point for participation must be the recognition of presence (Shier, 2001).

Pearce and Wood (2019) suggest an evaluative framework approach for schools, moving away from earlier 'building block' approaches. Cook-Sather (2020) provides a review of

transformative approaches to learner voice and agency in schools across numerous varied contexts. Likewise, a number of studies offer practical models for schools and school leaders to encourage parental involvement in different contexts and with diverse groups (Harwood and Murray, 2019; Jeynes, 2018; McCaleb, 1995).

Sinclair (2004) suggests four main aspects to consider: the level of participation; the focus of the decision-making; the nature of the activity; and the children involved. She emphasises the importance of recognising that 'children' do not form a homogenous group, but are very diverse in terms of their individual and collective circumstances.

In addition, UNICEF identifies four modes of participation: 'no participation or unethical participation', 'consultative participation', 'collaborative participation' and 'adolescent-led participation' (2020, p. 11). These are linked particularly with education in formal and non-formal environments (UNICEF, 2020).

Such models offer practical steps to analyse current practices. They also suggest progressive models for developing meaningful participation at school.

4.1 The VIA Framework for Meaningful Participation in Inclusive Education

To develop the VIA Framework, the VIA team further analysed models considered to be influential in practice in educational settings (Hart, 1992; Shier, 2001; Sinclair, 2004; Pearce and Wood, 2019). The analysis indicated that, while the models differ in style and presentation, they each contain similar elements, considered to be the essential 'building blocks and conditions' (Pearce and Wood, 2019, p. 114).

The VIA Framework draws together these essential elements, developing Lundy's work on 'Space, Voice, Audience, Influence' (Lundy, 2007; Lundy, McEvoy and Byrne, 2011). It applies Lundy's model to inclusive education contexts and extends it to include families in addition to learners. It also expands the range and meaning of each element to include wider ethical considerations, identified in the work by UNICEF (2020). These indicate that all approaches must be **transparent, voluntary, respectful, relevant, inclusive, supported by training, safe and sensitive to risk, accountable and child-/adolescent-friendly**.
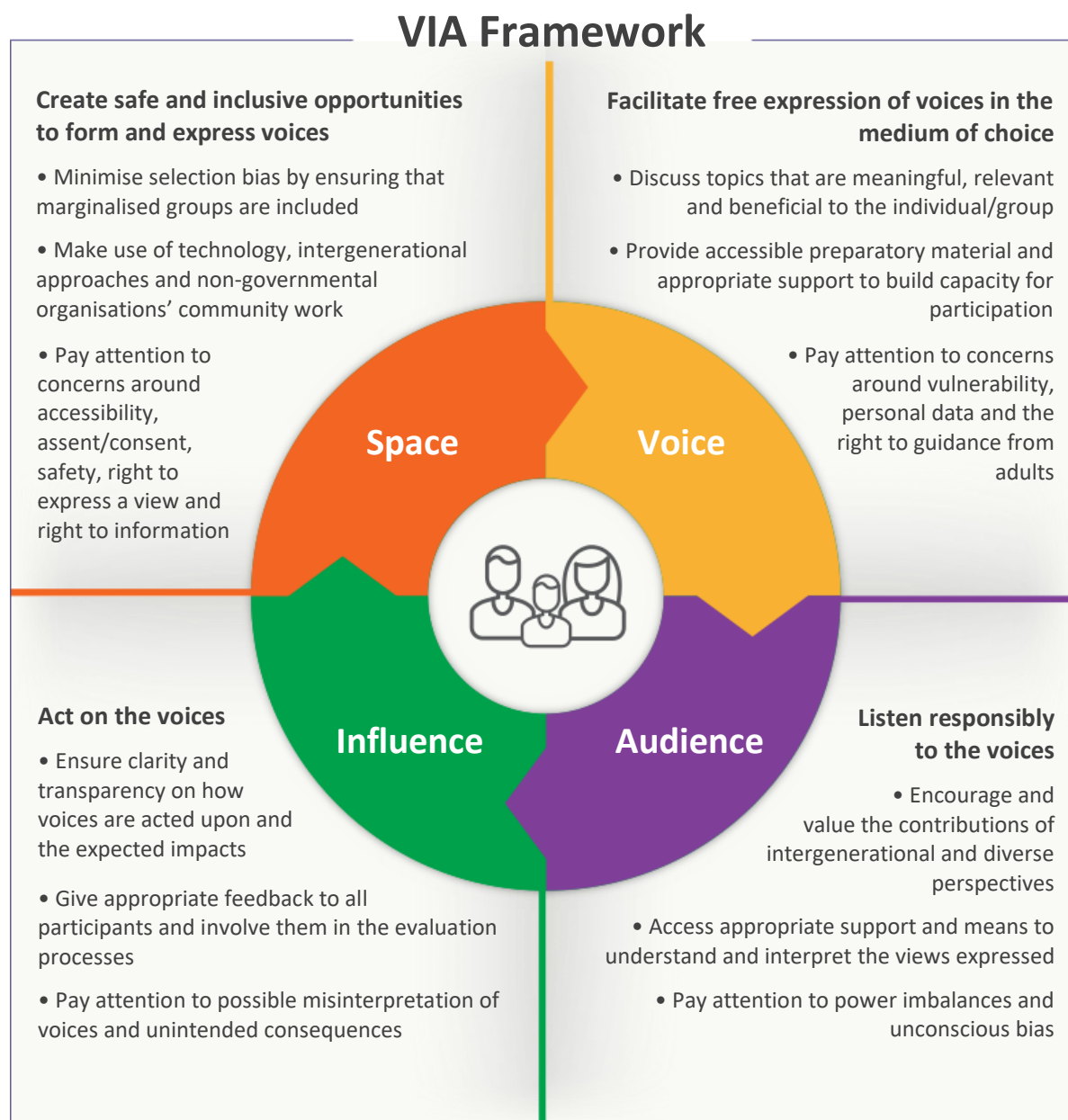
Lundy's model is aligned with the rights-based approach. The four elements can be linked with specific United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) Articles (i.e. Articles 2 – Non-discrimination; 3 – Bests interests; 5 – Right to guidance from adults; 13 – Right to information; 19 – Right to be safe) (Lundy, 2007). The four aspects are also linked with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) general principles, as well as specific Articles of the Convention (e.g. Articles 5 – Equality and non-discrimination; 7 – Children with disabilities; 9 – Accessibility; 21 – Freedom of expression and opinion, and access to information; 29 – Participation in political and public life).

While the four elements in the VIA Framework are individual, they are to be considered interactively and iteratively. Also, the elements work in two sets: space and voice; audience

and influence. An ethical approach runs through all aspects of the Framework, to raise awareness of and address issues such as consent, assent, accessibility, vulnerability, safety, power imbalances, bias and transparency.

VIA Framework

Create safe and inclusive opportunities to form and express voices

• Minimise selection bias by ensuring that marginalised groups are included

• Make use of technology, intergenerational approaches and non-governmental organisations' community work

• Pay attention to concerns around accessibility, assent/consent, safety, right to express a view and right to information

Facilitate free expression of voices in the medium of choice

• Discuss topics that are meaningful, relevant and beneficial to the individual/group

• Provide accessible preparatory material and appropriate support to build capacity for participation

• Pay attention to concerns around vulnerability, personal data and the right to guidance from adults

Space

Voice

Influence

Audience

Act on the voices

• Ensure clarity and transparency on how voices are acted upon and the expected impacts

• Give appropriate feedback to all participants and involve them in the evaluation processes

• Pay attention to possible misinterpretation of voices and unintended consequences

Listen responsibly to the voices

• Encourage and value the contributions of intergenerational and diverse perspectives

• Access appropriate support and means to understand and interpret the views expressed

• Pay attention to power imbalances and unconscious bias

Figure 5. VIA Framework for Meaningful Participation in Inclusive Education: Key elements and ethical considerations

Space and Voice

'Space' is broadly conceived as the opportunity to express views in a safe and inclusive environment. 'Opportunity' includes considerations of time, environment and access to information in appropriate formats. It also encompasses clarity and transparency around the topics, purposes and outcomes, ensuring these are meaningful, of interest, relevant and beneficial to the individuals or groups of participants.

While 'space' enables participants to express their views, 'voice' facilitates how this is to be done and builds capacity in all stakeholders: those who wish to express views and those who organise and listen. Voice is intended to ensure that support is available to all, to enable them to express views. This is achieved by providing appropriate information in a variety of formats, to build capacity, knowledge and understanding of the topic, the processes involved, the possible outcomes and the implications of participation. Participants should be able to choose how to express their views in a way that is accessible, relevant, appropriate and meaningful to each individual or group.

A further important aspect is the provision of support and training to facilitators interacting with learners or families, to develop the appropriate knowledge, understanding and skills to enable effective participation by diverse groups.

Ethical considerations

Particular ethical considerations must always be foremost while planning and undertaking events to enable diverse voices to be informed and their views expressed. These include issues of consent, assent, choice about withdrawal, coercion to participate or not participate, awareness of risks around vulnerability and exploitation of individuals or their views, marginalisation, and unheard voices. Further issues are raised in relation to the use of ICT and online resources, including equitable access, confidentiality, security around personal data, and vulnerability and safety in online spaces.

Audience and Influence

Accessing and hearing the views of learners and their families are the first steps towards meaningful participation in decision-making. 'Audience' and 'Influence' encapsulate the essential outcomes of hearing those views.

There are several aspects to this. 'Audience' encompasses the role of the listener in reporting the views. 'Influence' refers to how views are incorporated into decisions, and the changes that result, thus enabling meaningful participation. Therefore, those who listen must be in a position to communicate the views of others responsibly. This responsibility requires the listener themselves to be knowledgeable in the topic area, while recognising that others (i.e. learners, families or community members) may be the experts in the topic under discussion. Furthermore, the listener must recognise, encourage and value the important contributions of intergenerational and diverse perspectives, and access the necessary support to listen to and understand the views expressed (for example, through translation, interpretation or explanation), with the holder of the views present, if possible, to ensure authenticity.

To enable meaningful participation, it is essential that views are recorded authentically and accurately, without distorting their meaning or removing them from the process. All views should be taken seriously, given due weight and consideration, and acted upon.

Further steps include giving appropriate feedback to all participants and other stakeholders, as well as gaining feedback from participants about the process of giving their views and the effects of any changes to practice as a result of their input to decisions. There should then be further consultation with participants about amendments to be

made. Thus, processes and outcomes become fully participative, open and transparent, with monitoring and evaluation at every stage.

Ethical considerations

Notable ethical issues in relation to these stages concern the importance of giving all participants the choice to share their views and be heard. This requires attention to identifying voices that may be 'silent' or marginalised within the context, to ensure that these are also communicated, heard and included. It is necessary to be equally open to, and acknowledge, a range of diverse views, including those that may be negative, contradictory, challenging or go against the majority. At all times, those listening and acting on views should make every effort to minimise the effect of vulnerabilities and risks, such as those arising from the imbalance of power, status and control and/or unconscious bias.

Table 1 illustrates the VIA Framework's key elements, practical aspects and ethical considerations in more detail.

Table 1. The VIA Framework for Meaningful Participation in Inclusive Education

Space	Voice	Audience	Influence
Opportunity to be listened to: a safe and inclusive environment to express views	**Support in expressing views: provision of appropriate information in a variety of formats; choice, knowledge and guidance**	**Views are communicated to someone with the responsibility to listen**	**Views are acted upon: active agency, shared power and responsibility for decision-making and/or initiating debates**
Setting up the environment	**Building capacity for participation**	**Becoming a responsible listener**	**Enabling meaningful participation in decision-making**
• Gain participants' informed consent. Provide full, accessible, diversity-sensitive and age-appropriate information about the participation process. • Be clear and transparent around the topics, purposes and outcomes: topics should be meaningful, of interest, relevant and beneficial to the individual/group. • Ensure mutual agreement about timing and location that is accessible and convenient for all participants (i.e. school, park or café, private or online spaces).	• Build capacity, knowledge and understanding of the topic, the processes and the possible outcomes and implications. • Provide support and training to those interacting with learners/families to develop the appropriate knowledge, understanding and skills for effective participation. • Enable participants to express their views in a way that is accessible, relevant, appropriate and meaningful to the individual/group.	• Be knowledgeable in the topic area, recognising that others (i.e. learners, families or community members) may be the experts in the topic under discussion. • Recognise, encourage and value the important contributions of intergenerational and diverse perspectives. • Access support to listen to and understand the views expressed (e.g. translation, interpretation, explanation, with the holder of the views present, if possible, to ensure authenticity).	• Record the views authentically and accurately, without distortion of their meaning or their removal from the process • Take seriously and act upon the views expressed. Give all views 'due weight' and proper consideration. • Give appropriate feedback to all participants and/or other stakeholders. • Involve participants in the evaluation of the whole process (i.e. planning, implementation, follow-up).

Space	Voice	Audience	Influence

Ethical considerations

- Give participants the choice/opportunity to refuse or withdraw participation or to remain silent at any point.
- Give participants the opportunity to choose someone to speak, interpret or represent their views.
- Be aware of vulnerabilities, risks and the implicit imbalance of power/control in intergenerational or personal-professional interactions.
- Consider the additional ethical implications related to the use of online spaces, i.e. lack of equal access to ICT, security, confidentiality, privacy issues, etc.

Ethical considerations

- Give all participants the choice to share their views and be heard.
- Be attentive to the 'silent' or marginalised voices and ensure they are heard.
- Be equally open to and acknowledge a range of diverse views, including those that may be negative, contradictory, challenging or go against the majority.
- Minimise the effect of vulnerabilities and risks, such as those arising from the imbalance of power, status and control and/or unconscious bias.

4.2 Use of the Framework

The VIA Framework is designed to work as a reflective tool, in different contexts, with a diverse range of stakeholders. It is intended to be adaptable across different contexts and systems. Its flexibility arises from the way in which the development of the different elements has drawn on sources from international policy, academic research literature, the work of NGOs and civil society, examples from 19 Agency member countries, as well as from the practical application in the work of the three cluster countries (Iceland, Malta and Norway). The Framework is also aligned with, and set in the context of, internationally recognised articles on human rights.

The Framework offers a coherent and full approach, but each section is also standalone. It can be adapted to contexts and stakeholders who are themselves at different stages in the process. To become sustainable, the approaches that this Framework proposes must be embedded in educational policies at every level: national, regional and school. It is only with such a broad reach that marginalised voices may be identified and their meaningful and authentic participation will occur. As with inclusive education systems, it is essential that all stakeholders are fully engaged with and support this approach.

5. PUTTING THE FRAMEWORK INTO ACTION

This section presents the work of the three cluster countries that participated in phase 2: Iceland, Malta and Norway. The aim of their involvement was to elaborate and validate different practical aspects of the VIA Framework.

In 2022, the Agency representatives of the three countries (i.e. Representative Board members and National Co-ordinators) worked with learners and families in country-based interactive activities. The main focus of these activities was to explore **previous experiences of participation** and **effective ways to include more voices at different system levels**.

Each country was free to choose its own topics and the most relevant way to work with stakeholders at national level, with the support of the VIA team. The VIA team provided a set of reflective questions to the countries, drawn from the VIA Framework, to guide them through each stage. Depending on the chosen topic and the selected participants, the VIA team provided targeted practical material/resources (i.e. tools, guidelines and appropriate methodologies) and suggested a more detailed structure for each country-based activity. The reflective questions and the practical material will be available in the forthcoming VIA toolkit.

Following the discussions and the VIA team's suggestions, the countries developed and undertook their planned activities in their national contexts. All three included 'voice-elicitation' activities – in the form of learning walks, focus groups, individual/group interviews, or observations – with the aim of exploring learners' and families' experiences of participation.

Table 2. Overview of cluster country work

Cluster country/organiser	Date	Activity
Iceland (National Co-ordinator)	May 2022	Learning walks, group interviews with learners (age 13)
Malta (Representative Board Member and National Co-ordinator)	May 2022	Group and individual 'voice-elicitation' activities with learners (ages 12–14) Online focus groups with parents
Norway (Representative Board Member and National Co-ordinator)	September 2022	Observations of 'learner panel' meetings Interviews with policy-makers and with the School Student Union of Norway (Elevorganisasjonen), and survey with 'learner panel'

The three country-based activities are presented in more detail below.

5.1 Iceland: Evaluating the 'Social Innovation Action Lab' workshop

Context: According to Iceland's education policy, each municipality creates its own school policy based on the Icelandic Curriculum Guide, and each school makes its own school curriculum.

Fellaskóli is a comprehensive primary school with 350 learners in Breiðholt, one of Reykjavík's largest districts. Breiðholt has the city's highest proportion of residents with a foreign background (85%). Fellaskóli school is aiming to change its work in accordance with the City of Reykjavík's school policy. The school's project is called 'The dream school'. It aims to strengthen learners' Icelandic language skills and results, and to increase their self-esteem and independence so that they can make their dreams come true.

Implementation: A workshop entitled 'Social Innovation Action Lab' was held in Fellaskóli school on 9 March 2022. This is a way of working with ideas and solutions to complex challenges and a way to co-create opportunities for learners to meaningfully participate in their schools. The workshop was carried out with 13-year-old learners in 7th class and included teachers as well as a representative of Innovation Lab at the City of Reykjavík. The role of the learners was to find ways to make Fellaskóli a better school. This is in line with the City of Reykjavík's new school policy. The learners used Lego blocks to build places within the school that they like (Figure 6).

Figure 6. The Social Innovation Lab workshop

They exercised creative thinking by finding and creating spaces and coming up with ideas on how to improve the school.
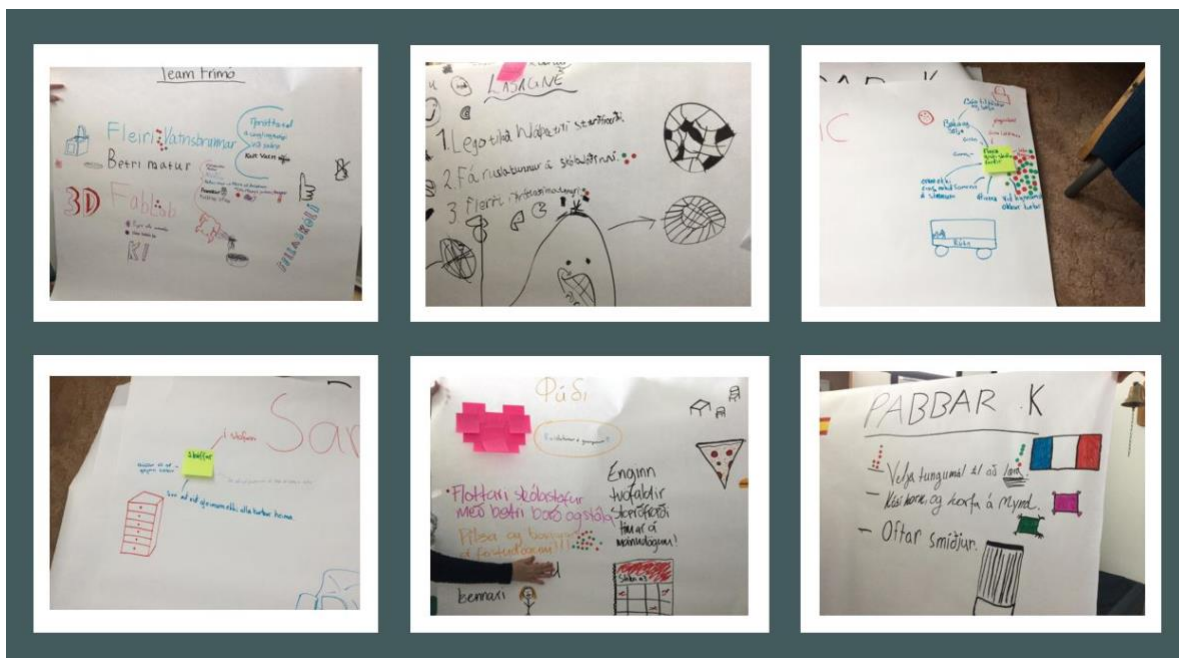
Figure 7. The learners' ideas in the workshop

Not long after the workshop, in May 2022, a researcher (the Agency's country representative) visited the school to explore how learners and teachers perceived the workshop. The main question was: 'Is this a way to effectively include learners in decision-making?'

The researcher interviewed two teachers to discuss the workshop and what impact they think it will have in the school. The researcher had a 'learning walk' with six learners from 7th class in the school, as well as a focus group interview with them after the walk. Pictures were taken during the walk and discussed in the focus group. The learners were asked about their workshop experience and their daily life at school.

Impact: The teachers found the workshop interesting and had a strong will to follow up on the learners' ideas. They also raised some concerns about the diverse group of learners that exists in the school:

> ❝ Some of the learners come from refugee camps and have not studied for a long time … with such a diverse group of learners, learning Icelandic is a priority – otherwise we fail them. ❞

The activities with the learners enabled them to express their views about many aspects of their school life. For example, when asked about the best place in the school, the learners answered:

> ❝ The most fun in school are sports and the most boring classes are Icelandic, natural sciences and Danish. Nobody wants to learn Danish. ❞

> ❝ We sit here in the corridors and in the lunch hall at recess. When we were younger, we had to go outside [1st–6th class] and that was not good in bad weather. ❞

Figure 8. The best places in the school

Learners talked about their relationships with other learners and teachers, and shared their proposals for changes in the school:

> 66 **We would like more overnight trips with the school; we talk so much together then.** 99

The learners also shared various views on their experiences of the Action Lab workshop:

> 66 **The lab was just fine. It was good to talk together and know what everyone wants.** 99

> 66 **There were not many people who wanted workshops again. It was not so much fun.** 99

The learners were also critical about the lack of action in relation to their proposals:

> 66 **We have said this a million times. It is important that something is done about what we want. Why else are we talking about this?** 99

> 66 **We get a paper like this every year where we have to write what we want [to be] better – nothing is done.** 99

The researcher, reflecting on the overall experience of the Action Lab, noted:

> 66 **It is important to give learners a forum, such as an Action Lab workshop, to make their voices heard. It is as important to listen and understand what they are saying and to let their voices guide the changes they call for to 'make their dreams come true and build the dream school'.** 99
>
> (Iceland National Co-ordinator)

5.2 Malta: Evaluating a pilot policy initiative

Context: Malta's government has embarked on an intensive programme to promote inclusive education. According to Malta's National Inclusion Policy (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2019), all learners should have access to quality instruction, intervention and support to experience success in learning within a high-quality inclusive education system. There is a clear policy direction to include learners with disabilities in the mainstream education system, rather than in 'resource centres' (i.e. centres catering for learners' more demanding needs). The inclusion process has involved providing various support services in mainstream schools and has led to more and more learners joining secondary schools.

Despite the policy developments, secondary mainstream classes might not always meet all learners' needs effectively, particularly for learners on the autism spectrum. To address this, it was decided to pilot units for learners on the autism spectrum in Years 7 and 8 (12–14-year-olds) in two mainstream secondary schools. Each unit enabled a group of learners to receive part of their educational provision in a specialised class, within the mainstream setting. The aim was to ensure greater support, targeted to their individual needs, and for them to access a meaningful curriculum in a calm environment. The unit also enabled learners to access mainstream educational and social learning opportunities as members of the school community.

Implementation: Each unit operated during the 2021/2022 school year. The VIA national activity was used to evaluate this pilot initiative, through the voices of parents and learners. Five learners and their parents were invited to share their views on and experiences of the units. Four parents provided written consent for their own participation, their children's participation, and the use of spoken and visual data.

A focus group with parents was held online and was moderated by the policy team (the VIA Malta team). Parents were asked to discuss their children's experiences of the unit

throughout the school year. They were given space and time to openly express their thoughts and feelings on the questions. The focus group session was video recorded.

The policy team also worked closely with teaching staff in the unit to elicit the voices of learners who were non-verbal. The activities designed for the learners were part of their routine tasks, to avoid causing them stress. During the activity, the learners were monitored for signs of any potential discomfort, in which case the activity would have been stopped. The project and tasks had been previously explained to parents, through appropriate consent forms and information sheets.

Learners communicated their views about different aspects of their school experiences through a choice of an interactive whiteboard or a table activity, using symbols adapted to their needs – with the support of the class teacher. Specifically, the learners were shown different activities carried out in the unit and were asked to indicate whether or not they like them. Photographs were taken during the learners' activity, after obtaining parents' consent (see Figures 9–10 below).
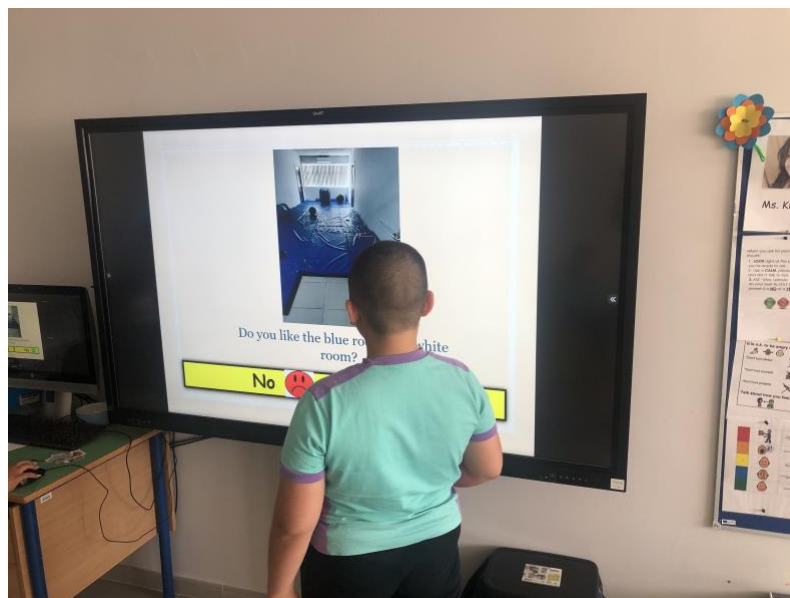
Figure 9. A learner during the activity held at the unit
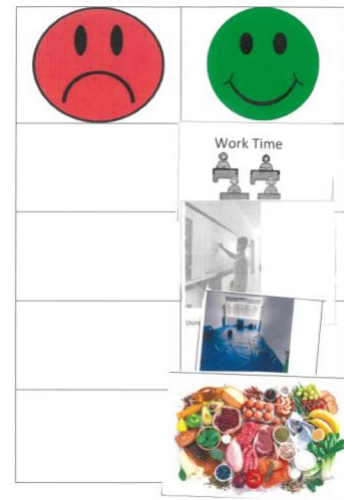
Figure 10. A learner activity at the unit

Impact: The operation of the autism units was a pilot project carried out at school level, with implications at national level. The VIA activities allowed for the evaluation of this pilot project through the voices of learners and their parents. The lessons learnt from the first year of the unit's implementation will ensure an effective roll-out across other schools in Malta.

The policy team made the following important reflections on the overall act of listening:

> 66 **We need to listen to parents and their concerns. Sometimes, parents' priorities are different from those of professionals; however, this does not mean that they are less important.** 99
>
> (Malta National Co-ordinator)

> 66 **Learner voices are not always easy to hear, especially for vulnerable and non-verbal individuals. However, their voices should be central to decision-making. There are a lot of lessons to be learnt.** 99
>
> (Malta Representative Board Member)

5.3 Norway: 'Shadowing' learner panel meetings in national policy development processes

Context: The Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research is working on a White Paper [3] regarding young people and school. The Ministry organised learner panel meetings with representatives from all of Norway's different regions, inviting them to give input to the White Paper. The learner panel first met in person in Oslo, with a kick-off seminar. More meetings will follow (online and in-person). In addition to the learner panel, the School Student Union of Norway [4] plans to organise 50 school visits, to collect input to the Ministry's work on the White Paper. The School Student Union's local bodies will carry out the meetings and report back to the central organisation. The central organisation provides guiding resources to the local bodies, to ensure good involvement processes.

The VIA Norway team (the two Agency country representatives) viewed this policy initiative as an opportunity to explore ways to ensure learner participation at system level. The aim was to gain insights into how learner involvement in policy development can be carried out, what challenges and dilemmas can occur, and how the White Paper project group and the learners themselves experience the process.

Implementation: The VIA Norway team followed the process established by the Ministry and had two meetings with the White Paper project group before summer 2022, where it gave input and advice on the planned process. VIA Norway also attended and observed the learner panel's kick-off seminar in September 2022, where the Minister of Education and two state secretaries were present.

Figure 11. The learner panel, together with the Minister of Education and two state secretaries, at the kick-off seminar

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[3] A government policy document for parliament, with an overview of current and planned policies and measures.

[4] The School Student Union of Norway represents 75% of upper-secondary schools and 10% of lower-secondary schools across the country. In total, it represents 180,000 learners.

During the seminar, the VIA Norway team met the learner panel and presented the planned VIA activity to the learners. The VIA Norway team then sent a survey to all 29 members of the learner panel, with targeted questions about their experiences of participation. This survey included explanations on how the input received will be used. It was sent to the learners' parents for approval, due to privacy rules.

VIA Norway also interviewed members of the White Paper project group about the execution of, and the output from, the process. In addition, VIA Norway discussed the learner panel, the regional meetings and learner involvement in general with representatives from the School Student Union.

Impact: This high-level initiative established an arena for learners' input to a policy-making process. The learner panel's inputs will be used in the policy-making and decision process and their contributions will be embedded in the final White Paper on Youth and School, though it has not yet been decided how. This consultation process has been made known to the public, through media presence at the kick-off seminar.

Figure 12. Learner presenting group work in the plenary discussion

The VIA survey shows that the **learners** felt that they were given a safe arena to express their views on topics they thought were important. Most felt that they were listened to, but they were more uncertain about how much influence they actually have and how their input will be used in the policy-making process. It is important to follow up on this in the next stages.

In the interview with representatives from the School Student Union, it became clear that they saw the learner panel as a valuable contribution to the regular structures for learner participation, particularly with younger learners in primary schools. They also pointed out that the School Student Union has an advantage when planning to listen to the voices of children and young people, as it connects well with them. The School Student Union also asserted that learner participation should start early, so that children learn to practise democracy and get used to giving their opinion and raising their voices from a young age.

> 🎙 **Student participation and involving student voices is actually all about democracy – involving students in democratic processes. And it is really just about talking to the students and taking their inputs seriously; it is not that complicated.** 🎙
>
> (Aslak Berntsen Husby, President of the School Student Union of Norway)

While the panel representatives were diverse in terms of age, gender and type of school, the criteria did not include those representing 'silent voices'. To ensure greater diversity, the local bodies of the School Student Union plan to collect input from learners who are not on the panel, and report back to the central organisation. The survey sent to the learners showed that many of the panel representatives also planned such contact with fellow learners, to encourage wider learner involvement in the process.

The **White Paper project group** indicated that planning, establishing and implementing an involvement process through a learner panel requires a lot of resources. There were dilemmas in the criteria for selecting panel members to represent different types of learners. The project group intends to seek input from different groups through involvement from different user organisations.

There were also some practical and ethical issues around organisational aspects in the choice and suitability of the accommodation, and the role, responsibilities and extent of participation of the children's companions/parents at meetings. Companions were not included in the meetings, to ensure that the learners did not feel less free to express their opinions. The project group discussed the challenge of asking the right questions and giving appropriate support to learners to enable them to answer, without influencing their responses.

Based on the data gathered, the VIA Norway team reflected further on a number of issues. The practical and ethical dilemmas arising from the participation of a broader range of learners should be addressed during the planning stages. As the team pointed out:

> 🎙 **The challenge is to include learners who are afraid of giving their opinions, and to create an arena where everyone feels safe to express views.** 🎙
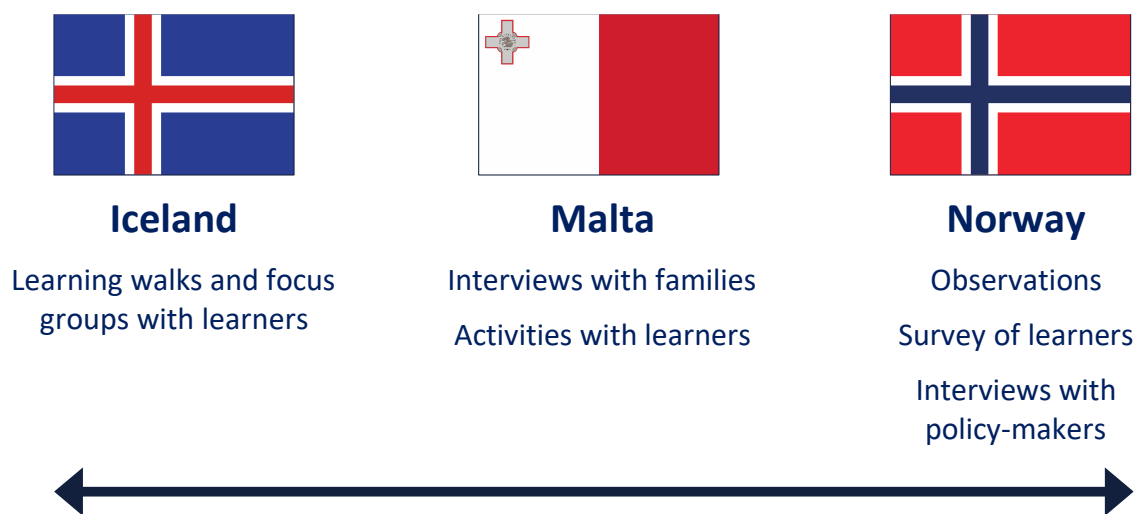>
> (Norway Representative Board Member)

The team also highlighted the various challenges and opportunities of in-person or online meetings and activities, in addition to the appropriate phrasing of questions, which should not be leading or give undue influence. There are ethical issues around care, safety and responsibility, to be balanced against privacy and respect for participating learners (i.e. in terms of receiving advance information about the project's processes, purposes and outcomes).

5.4 Reflecting upon countries' experiences

The examples above show not only how differently cluster countries have worked with and validated elements of the VIA Framework, but also how they used it for different purposes **in the context of their own education systems**. A key outcome of this work was the way in which the voices of families and learners influenced policy-makers by enabling them to gain new perspectives and to see and understand differently, leading to different decisions.

Iceland

Learning walks and focus groups with learners

Malta

Interviews with families

Activities with learners

Norway

Observations

Survey of learners

Interviews with policy-makers

Figure 13. Different activities in the three VIA cluster countries

In Iceland, the activities were carried out in a small school with a high proportion of migrant learners, with the aim of evaluating a promising initiative previously carried out in the school. Malta's team evaluated the implementation of a policy of 'autism units', by receiving input from learners educated in these units and interviewing their parents. Finally, in Norway, activities were carried out at national level with learner representatives and policy-makers, with the aim of evaluating the consultation processes and structures that were taking place. Despite clear variations in the aims, scope and context of these country-based activities, several common themes emerged during the country cluster discussions and reflections, all related to achieving meaningful participation.

Depending on the policy context, countries might choose to listen to the voices of different stakeholders for different purposes, e.g. to assess the implementation of inclusive/segregating policies, to explore the possibility of implementing inclusive policy in a particular area, etc. Whatever the purpose, it is important that the voices should come from **diverse learners/families, with multiple identities and complex experiences in different settings**, rather than from a homogenous group. Particular attention should be

paid to opposing and conflicting views that exist between different groups of learners/families. As Malta's representative put it:

> **We need to reflect on the other side of the coin … and be sensitive to the needs and beliefs of all, not just those who are overrepresented and 'make the most noise'.**
>
> (Malta National Co-ordinator)

Careful organisational planning is also essential. **Practical issues might emerge around gaining consent/assent**, especially when recruiting learners with different types of needs/accessibility issues. For instance, in Malta's case, the learners were non-verbal and had to be constantly monitored to check for any signs of discomfort that would necessitate the termination of the activity. Anonymity was also an area of attention for Norway:

> **Collecting data from young people is challenging from an ethical perspective. We were aware of the importance of designing the interview guide to ensure that the questions could be answered anonymously.**
>
> (Norway Representative Board member)

Likewise, in a small community and school like in Iceland's case, it is hard to ensure anonymity with a vulnerable group of learners. Also, in real-life contexts, many **instant decisions** might need to be made. Iceland's representative commented on the issue:

> **I had gained consent from six learners and their parents – but then a seventh learner came who blended in and wanted to participate in the walk and discussion. I did not deny him that.**
>
> (Iceland National Co-ordinator)

Time constraints and possible **unexpected changes** should also be considered when planning relevant activities. In Norway's case, gathering learners from all over the country in in-person meetings, was time- and resource-consuming and needed careful planning.

Malta's representative highlighted the importance of collaboration with schools and teaching professionals:

> **In order to plan it, we had the teaching team on board so that we could actually work together.**
>
> (Malta Representative Board member)

Identifying and including 'silenced' and diverse voices was another recurring theme in the work of all countries. In Malta, the learners with autism were non-verbal, so it was a challenge to choose the appropriate methods to elicit their voices. In Iceland's case, it was difficult to recruit 'hard-to-reach' families, and this has been identified as a priority. In Norway, the representation of learners from vulnerable groups (such as learners with disabilities or migrant learners) within the learner panel was also an issue of concern. As Norway's representative noted:

> **We are now involving learners. That's good. But we don't listen to all learner voices when doing this, so perhaps we have a role in pinpointing that. To do this is a much more complex and delicate issue.**
>
> (Norway Representative Board member)

In the effort to ensure **representation of all voices**, working with existing organisations or parents'/learners' associations might be a useful approach. Countries also raised the important role of gatekeepers, who should protect access and prevent the 'exploitation' of vulnerable individuals. At the same time, it was clear that even with careful ethical consideration of those whose voices may not be heard, there may still be others:

> **There are marginalised and silent voices within groups of marginalised voices.**
>
> (Iceland National Co-ordinator)

Another issue that emerged during the country cluster discussions was the need to find **appropriate ways of eliciting the voices** of those learners or families who communicate differently. Efforts should also be made to facilitate **authenticity of voice**. According to Norway's representatives, it is important to find out how to make learners feel at ease to talk honestly and openly, so that they refrain from providing 'expected' or 'right' answers

that reflect adults' words or views. This illustrates the need to remain reflective and continuously consider and address the on-going ethical issues around space, voice and audience, which may emerge at any point. Countries emphasised the importance of remaining flexible to enable all voices to be heard, using a range of accessible materials and methods (written, spoken, visual, etc.).

> **You need to be open to being surprised … and work with all voices, to find out what is important to them. I think sometimes as policy-makers we are on different wavelengths. What is priority for us is not priority for them.**
>
> (Malta National Co-ordinator)

Finally, countries agreed that a key issue is **acting upon the voices and extending and sustaining participatory structures and initiatives**. In all country-based activities, a common element was that the voices of learners and families were listened to, with the aim of informing policy decisions. However, the issue of real impact and sustainability of participation was identified as a significant challenge. To quote Iceland's representative:

> **We find innovative ways to reflect on these voices but then we stop. We have to emphasise the two last phases of 'audience' and 'influence'. Why consult with learners and not make that lead to changes in the school?**
>
> (Iceland National Co-ordinator)

Overall, setting up participatory activities in their own contexts, with the support of the VIA team, made countries think about the process in a more **systematic and reflective** way, with a clear focus on and engagement with ethical issues at all stages. Attempting to apply different aspects of the Framework enabled countries to think that it is indeed possible to elicit voices differently. As Malta's representative noted:

> **You would have some reservations and perhaps think that this might be a real challenge – but in planning out and even having some 'fall-back' positions, you realise that you CAN actually hear those voices.**
>
> (Malta Representative Board member)

6. KEY MESSAGES FOR POLICY-MAKERS

The VIA activity was undertaken with the aim of establishing a clear theoretical and practical basis to inform future Agency work and enabling educational policy-makers to develop and implement policies in which learners and families are able to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect them.

The evidence from the activity shows there is a clear gap between policy and practice in including the voices of learners and families. While this topic is a pressing issue on the agenda of educational policy-makers, policies have not been translated into practice. To effect sustainable change, policy-makers must open a dialogue, to enable the voices of learners and families to become part of the process of change.

The analysis of the different aspects of the VIA activity has resulted in eight key messages for increased participation of learners and families in Agency member countries. These messages can be seen as a set of guidelines for policy-makers working to fill this policy-practice gap and for those who support this work, including the Agency team. The VIA activity's eight key messages are discussed below, indicating considerations and relevant actions for policy-makers, as well as the Agency's role in their achievement.

Key message 1: Systematise processes for the meaningful participation of learners and families at national, local and community levels

To be effective, all relevant legislative and policy documents must systematically promote the rights of learners and families. Policies should indicate clear processes for their implementation, developed through cross-sectoral collaboration. Policy-makers must also recognise the role of families as essential in supporting and enabling the voices of learners to be heard and included in decision-making.

The Agency team should support policy-makers as they plan and implement these changes, by suggesting appropriate policy tools and strategies. The Agency can act as a multiplier for mobilising and collecting stakeholder voices on the process of implementing inclusive education.

Key message 2: Focus on increasing participation in shaping legislation and policy

While there has been some learner and family participation at school or class levels, the evidence shows their participation at policy level is limited. Participation at this level must be **genuine** and not tokenistic. It should actively include the many individuals who have not yet been able to influence policy-level decisions that affect them, their peers, their schools and their communities.

The Agency's role is to support policy-makers to identify the gaps in their policies and practices in relation to the participation of marginalised groups and unheard voices at policy level.

Key message 3: Use ethical approaches at all stages of participation

Ethical approaches are not always considered integral to all aspects of participation in decision-making. This is not only in relation to issues of consent, safety and GDPR, but also to the ways in which views are obtained and used, the clarity of their use for the direct benefit of learners and/or families, the openness of the transfer of information, and accurate and authentic reporting. These issues indicate the need for more democratic and socially just approaches that address power imbalances in participation and provide access to knowledge and to appropriate means of communication and participation.

The Agency team can raise policy-makers' awareness of, and provide detailed guidance on, all ethical aspects of enabling meaningful participation for different stakeholders, in a range of contexts.

Key message 4: Identify and include marginalised, unheard and silenced voices

As some voices continue to be absent, it is particularly important to address this topic. These voices might come from within diverse groups of learners or families, known to be vulnerable to exclusion in particular contexts.

Policy-makers are encouraged to work collaboratively with professionals in schools and from communities to identify and enable the voices of those in diverse marginalised groups to be heard and included. They should also recognise the interdependence between young people and adults and acknowledge the important role families play in developing and affirming learners' voices in educational matters.

Organisations, such as the Agency, can provide policy-makers with guidance and practical suggestions on how to design more participatory and

intergenerational programmes, by bringing together diverse groups and helping to reduce barriers created by stereotypes.

Key message 5: Be aware of the complexities of diverse groups, assigned labels and intersecting identities

It is essential not to make assumptions about people who seem to belong to one 'group', but to consider the multiple identities and contexts of learners and families and how these intersect and have an impact on views and opinions. Although focusing on the voices of one marginalised group may be necessary, it is also important to consider that a group of learners or families who share a characteristic or 'label' may still have different experiences and views they wish to convey. Thus, it is essential to attend to the **individual** voices within all groups of learners and families. This ethical approach can inform policies for all learners and all families, rather than policies for particular groups.

The Agency team can promote this approach by providing more opportunities for interactions with learners and families who have complex experiences within inclusive education systems.

Key message 6: Use a wide range of models, approaches and resources to enable all to participate meaningfully

Learners and families are diverse, living in a wide range of circumstances and environments. Therefore, a range of approaches and resources should be available to ensure that meaningful participation is equitable and possible at every stage. Modern ICT offers great potential for significant change in the ways diverse voices may be heard in education. Policy-makers can use different models as a basis for designing participation at all stages of policy and practice, with points for reflection and discussion, as well as practical considerations and guidance.

The Agency has a key role in this area, providing guidance and support to policy-makers to practise different aspects of the VIA Framework and inspiring them with examples and resources, such as those in the VIA toolkit.

Key message 7: Build capacity for meaningful participation and active listening

Policy-makers have a responsibility, not only to facilitate opportunities for more active participation at all levels, but also to build learners' and families' capacity to be able to participate. Policy-makers must provide learners and families with the appropriate support to develop knowledge, skills and understanding on how to participate actively.

Policy-makers also need opportunities to build capacity in order to learn how to set up a safe environment, listen responsibly, and understand and interpret the views expressed. Community associations, national institutions and international organisations, such as the Agency, should collaborate closely with

policy-makers to provide tailored guidance and support on building their capacity.

Key message 8: Create synergies and ways of working with NGOs and civil society organisations

Advocacy groups, associations, NGOs, civil society and major international organisations are important actors in raising awareness of the rights and needs of some overlooked groups of children, young people and adults. Several of these organisations have funded or undertaken substantial research on these issues and have produced a wide range of accessible and practical resources in relation to voices and participation. Some of these may be adapted for use in the context of inclusive education policy-making. The possible benefits of developing synergies and ways of working with these sectors is an important further consideration for policy-makers.

The Agency can continue to share with policy-makers practical examples of promising partnerships and encourage collaborations within and between countries.

To further address the gap between policy and practice, these key messages, together with the different practical aspects of the VIA work, will be embedded in an **open-access online toolkit**. Its purpose will be to provide educational policy-makers and practitioners – working with learners, families and wider communities – with the means to enact the Framework's different elements, in diverse contexts and with a wide range of stakeholders.

The toolkit will also address the Agency team and other organisations, with the aim of using and continuing to develop relevant resources for those working closely with policy-makers, practitioners, families and learners in educational projects. The toolkit will enable its users to develop insights into the individual country approaches to participation (including the 19 country examples from VIA phase 1). More information will be available on the VIA web area.

7. FINAL REMARKS

Participatory policy-making is now gaining ground as a general and universal means of overcoming barriers to inclusion and combatting outdated attitudes and stereotypes. However, in reality, efforts to listen to previously unheard voices still consist of non-active involvement and just partial participation (Mangiaracina et al., 2021). Although participatory approaches show positive results, there is little evidence of sustained change.

The VIA activity has provided evidence on the ways in which participatory policy-making can become meaningful and sustainable. It proposes the **VIA Framework for Meaningful Participation in Inclusive Education** as a reflective tool that can help stakeholders to think more carefully about removing barriers to participation in decision-making processes.

VIA has also indicated the importance of **intergenerational approaches** as a means of overcoming barriers, raising awareness of vulnerable and excluded groups and increasing their participation in education at school and local level. This suggests a **top-down policy approach, supported by bottom-up initiatives at local and school level**, as a way forward. This combined approach offers a means of increasing awareness of marginalised and silent voices and facilitating their more active participation. At the same time, it proposes a more democratic and direct way of designing and implementing policy, by engaging policy-makers in interactive voice-oriented activities with learners and families at the local level.

It is hoped that this suggested approach, along with VIA's key messages for involving learners and families more systematically in educational decision-making, can contribute to creating a true culture of listening and acting upon voices.

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ANNEX: VIA METHODOLOGY

This section presents more details on the VIA activity's methodology. It outlines the main activities of phases 1 and 2 and connects them to the VIA outputs.

Phase 1: Desk research activities (2021)

In **phase 1** (2021), the VIA team carried out **desk research activities** following three analytical steps:

Step 1 – Reviewing international policy and research literature

First, the team collected and analysed targeted European and international policy and research literature focusing on effective ways to involve learners and families in inclusive education policy debates.

The policy review focused on policy documents in the English language published in the last 30 years (from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 onwards). It covered documents both by EU institutions (European Commission, European Parliament, Council of the European Union, Fundamental Rights Forum) and international organisations (United Nations, Council of Europe, UNICEF).

The academic literature review examined research on the participation of the voices of learners and families in educational decision-making. Empirical research conducted within the past 20 years was included. Theoretical and conceptual work around 'voices' was not time limited. The analysis considered all learners, including those from vulnerable and 'hard-to-reach' groups (such as those out of formal education, pre- and post-school learners and learners with complex needs).

This analytical step provided a focused rationale for including learner and family voices and resulted in the VIA literature review (European Agency, 2022). This review is addressed to a

wide range of stakeholders, including policy-makers, academic researchers and educational practitioners.

Step 2 – Analysing previous Agency work

The second step involved analysing previous Agency work that involved learners and families in any way. This included final project reports and outputs, methodology reports and other raw material, where available. Initially, the team examined activities that focused on learner and family participation. These include:

- the European Hearings;
- past projects: [Raising the Achievement of All Learners in Inclusive Education](#), [Inclusive Early Childhood Education](#); [Vocational Education and Training](#); [Individual Transition Plans](#);
- the external audits in [Malta](#) and [Iceland](#);
- case studies from the [Inclusive Education in Action website](#);
- examples from the [Technical Support Instrument](#) (the former Structural Reform Support Programme) work.

The VIA team directly requested further raw material and methodological details from Agency Activity Managers and targeted country representatives, where relevant. The team asked each of them to provide more detailed information on the following questions:

> 1. How did you select the participants?
>
> 2. Any details on the learners'/families' profiles? (any additional/accessibility needs?)
>
> 3. What important adaptations/adjustments did you make and why?
>
> 4. What are the exact questions you asked the learners/families?
>
> 5. How were the interviews/sessions moderated?
>
> 6. How were the learner/family views taken into consideration/fed into the project's/action's outcomes?

The information that was finally selected and summarised was checked and approved by the Agency team. Any additional information and feedback were incorporated into the final Agency review, which constituted the second output of phase 1. This was an internal document, addressed to the Agency team.

Step 3 – Collecting country information

As a third step, the VIA team collected targeted information from Agency member countries, using a short country information template. This aimed to identify national examples of effective practice. Nineteen countries submitted examples: Belgium (Flemish community), Czech Republic, Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Malta,

Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom (England), United Kingdom (Northern Ireland) and United Kingdom (Scotland).

The examples were analysed according to the following criteria:

- **Participation**: the extent to which the example provides meaningful opportunities for learners and/or families to share their views and perspectives, as well as the degree to which these views are considered, included, listened to and acted upon in any policy decisions made at local (school), regional (district) or national level.

- **Impact**: the level of change, improvement or outcomes the example had in the particular context where it was enacted.

- **Feasibility**: all the example's practical elements (i.e. time, budget, recruitment of participants, etc.) that made it easy and possible to implement.

- **Adaptability/transferability**: the extent to which the example could be adapted and/or transferred to other contexts and/or situations.

- **Inclusiveness**: the extent to which the example provides equal participation opportunities to learners and/or families who might otherwise be excluded or marginalised from decision-making.

- **Sustainability**: the extent to which the example produced sustainable outcomes that can be continued.

- **Innovation**: the extent to which the example included any approach, methodology, idea, product (tool, guideline), etc., that has the element of novelty.

These criteria were developed on the basis of previous work that has examined effective examples of practice (see Inclusive Education in Action; Raising the Achievement of All Learners in Inclusive Education; PandPAS project).

Following the analysis, **five indicative country examples** were selected for inclusion as evidence of current practice, to support the VIA literature review.

Step 4 – Developing the VIA Framework for Meaningful Participation in Inclusive Education

Phase 1 concluded with the VIA team developing the VIA Framework for Meaningful Participation in Inclusive Education, through an analysis and amalgamation of the key features of models of participation evidenced in the literature. The VIA Framework is based on the four key elements of Lundy's model (2007): **space**, **voice**, **audience** and **influence**. It incorporates points for reflection at every stage of the process of planning, undertaking, evaluating and following up on voice-oriented activities with learners and families. The Framework's main elements underpinned all aspects of phase 2 activities.

Phase 2: Cluster activities (2022)

Phase 2 activities took place in 2022 and included country cluster work with representatives from **Iceland**, **Malta** and **Norway**. The three countries were selected based on the following criteria:

- Stated interest in the topic

- No recent participation in Agency projects/activities

- Geographical distribution/representation

- Type of examples submitted in phase 1 (offering a variety of approaches, at different system levels).

The purpose of their involvement in phase 2 was to elaborate and validate different practical aspects of the VIA Framework. They would also contribute to developing the VIA toolkit in response to their needs. In the interactive work with the three cluster countries, the VIA Framework both shaped the methodology and served as a practical guide. Overall, the country cluster work had five key phases:

1. Participatory needs analysis and priority setting

The first country cluster meeting was devoted to bringing multiple perspectives together to understand the barriers to learners' and families' meaningful participation in decision-making. The cluster countries discussed the draft VIA Framework, set their national priorities and co-organised the future country cluster activities.

2. Planning phase

Following the first country cluster meeting, each country was invited to submit a plan for a national activity where the voices of learners and/or families would be heard. The main focus of the national activities was to explore **previous experiences of participation** and **effective ways to include more voices at different system levels**.

Each country chose their own topics and the most relevant way to work with learners/families in their own context. Countries were free to begin a new project or to gain insights on a current or previous project. The VIA team provided the countries with a set of reflective questions, drawn from the VIA Framework, to guide them through each stage.

Once countries had submitted their plans, the VIA team had individual meetings with the country representatives to support the organisation of the national activity. Depending on the chosen topic and the selected participants, the VIA team provided targeted practical material/resources (i.e. tools, guidelines and appropriate methodologies) and suggested a more detailed structure for each national activity.

3. Implementation phase

Following the discussions and the Agency's suggestions, the countries developed and undertook their planned activities in their national contexts. All three national projects included 'voice-elicitation' activities – in the form of learning walks, focus groups, individual/group interviews, or observations – with the aim of exploring learners' and families' experiences of participation.

4. Reflection and analysis stage

The next country cluster meeting took place in June 2022, where each cluster country presented its national initiatives to the VIA team and the other countries. The countries were asked **in advance** to consider aspects of the VIA Framework and comment on these in relation to their own activities. This was to enable the review of the draft VIA Framework.

During the meeting, each country shared their findings and experiences and discussed opportunities or challenges they had met during the process. Specific points were discussed in relation to the four key elements of the VIA Framework. These gave a sound basis for widening perspectives around what might be possible, both conceptually and in practice, in future voice-oriented workshops.

Another country cluster meeting took place in September 2022, where countries discussed further the common challenges and promising approaches for participation. This process has led to joint identification and consolidation of conditions and essential elements of meaningful participation. With the support of the VIA team, countries have developed their national work as individual case studies. Section 5 presents these and they will also be available on the Inclusive Education in Action website and in the VIA toolkit.

5. Development of the VIA toolkit

During this stage, the VIA team will embed all practical material and available resources (key elements of existing policy frameworks, tools, methodologies and innovative practices) in an open-access **online toolkit**. This toolkit will provide practical ways of involving learners and families and indicate how to act upon and truly embed their voices in decision-making. It will also include the 19 country examples received during phase 1. It will be disseminated at the VIA event (May 2023). More information about the toolkit will be available on the VIA web area.

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