



Voices into Action: Including the Voices of Learners and their Families in Educational Decision-Making

Final Summary Report



EUROPEAN AGENCY
for Special Needs and Inclusive Education



VOICES INTO ACTION

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in Educational Decision-Making

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Editors: Anthoula Kefallinou and Diana Murdoch

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Secretariat

Østre Stationsvej 33
DK-5000 Odense C Denmark
Tel: +45 64 41 00 20
secretariat@european-agency.org

Brussels Office

Rue Montoyer, 21
BE-1000 Brussels Belgium
Tel: +32 2 213 62 80
brussels.office@european-agency.org



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Introduction

Promoting learner and family participation in decision-making and policy development is a priority for European and international organisations. However, the extent to which learners and their families are truly considered in important decisions that affect them still varies.

The **Voices into Action** (VIA) activity, carried out by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency), examined how to meaningfully involve the voices of learners and their families in educational decision-making processes. This was in response to requests from Representative Board members from Agency countries, and in line with international calls and initiatives for greater intergenerational stakeholder participation in educational decision-making.

VIA had two main aims:

- to establish the background and rationale for the widely recognised need to involve learner and family voices in decision-making;
- to identify how policy-makers and other stakeholders might meet this need in practice, in different countries and different contexts.

These aims were achieved in two consecutive phases. Phase 1 consisted of a literature review, an analysis of how past Agency work involved learners' and families' voices, and a collection of relevant country examples. Phase 2 included in-depth work in three countries (Iceland, Malta and Norway) to identify and practise effective ways of involving learners and families.

Phases 1 and 2 resulted in the following outputs:

- A **literature review**, providing VIA's conceptual and empirical background (European Agency, 2022a)
- A **synthesis report**, detailing all VIA activities and main findings (European Agency, 2022b)
- The **Voices into Action Toolkit**, an online practical resource, providing direction to action
- An **infographic**, illustrating the VIA Framework for Meaningful Participation in Inclusive Education and the activity's key messages
- A **video**, showcasing the voices of learners, families and policy-makers at a VIA event
- This final report, summarising the activity's methodology and main outcomes.





Phase 1: Developing the VIA Framework for Meaningful Participation in Inclusive Education

In phase 1 (2021), the Agency team reviewed policy and academic research literature to establish a sound conceptual and empirical basis for VIA. The team also collected and analysed examples of actively involving learners and families in decision-making from previous Agency work and from 19 **Agency member countries**.

The outcome of this work is the **VIA literature review** (European Agency, 2022a), which provides a focused rationale and key evidence on meaningful ways to involve learner and family voices in educational decision-making.

The policy and literature review findings clearly indicate a growing recognition of the importance of including learner and family voices in educational decision-making. However, there is a lack of knowledge and skills about how to achieve this in practice, across different contexts and with diverse stakeholders.

 **We are the ones who are actually in school; we should be the most important voices.** 

(Learner representative, VIA event)

Key findings 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 move from recognising 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 towards 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.

Key findings from the literature review



- Although there is a significant body of literature around voice and the need for awareness of learners' voices in the educational rhetoric, a research-practice gap persists.
- 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.
- Research generally focuses on involvement at school or class level, and less on involvement in decision-making at policy level.
- The research literature does not greatly explore intergenerational participation or community involvement in education.
- Research with adults and learners vulnerable to exclusion continues in 'silos', based on various classifications and labels.
- Active engagement in participatory research of multiple groups vulnerable to exclusion is limited.
- Greater use of resources offered by assistive and digital technology and by non-governmental and civil society organisations could significantly change research methods around voices.



Further work in phase 1 led to the development of the VIA Framework for Meaningful Participation in Inclusive Education. The framework, illustrated in the **VIA infographic**, has four essential elements: **Space, Voice, Audience** and **Influence**. These elements were drawn from a **model of child participation** developed by Professor Laura Lundy of Queen's University Belfast (**Lundy, 2007**).

The VIA Framework applied Lundy's model to education contexts and extended it to include families, in addition to children and young people. It also built on other theoretical models for learners' and families' involvement to include wider ethical considerations (e.g. the work by **UNICEF, 2020**).

The four elements work together interactively and iteratively.



Space is broadly conceived as the opportunity to express views in a safe, inclusive environment.



Voice means how participants may express their views. It is intended to ensure that everyone can express views in a way that is accessible, relevant, appropriate and meaningful to each individual or group.



Influence refers to how views are incorporated into decisions and the changes that result, thus enabling meaningful participation.



Audience encompasses the listener's role in reporting the views. Listeners must be in a position to communicate others' views responsibly.

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

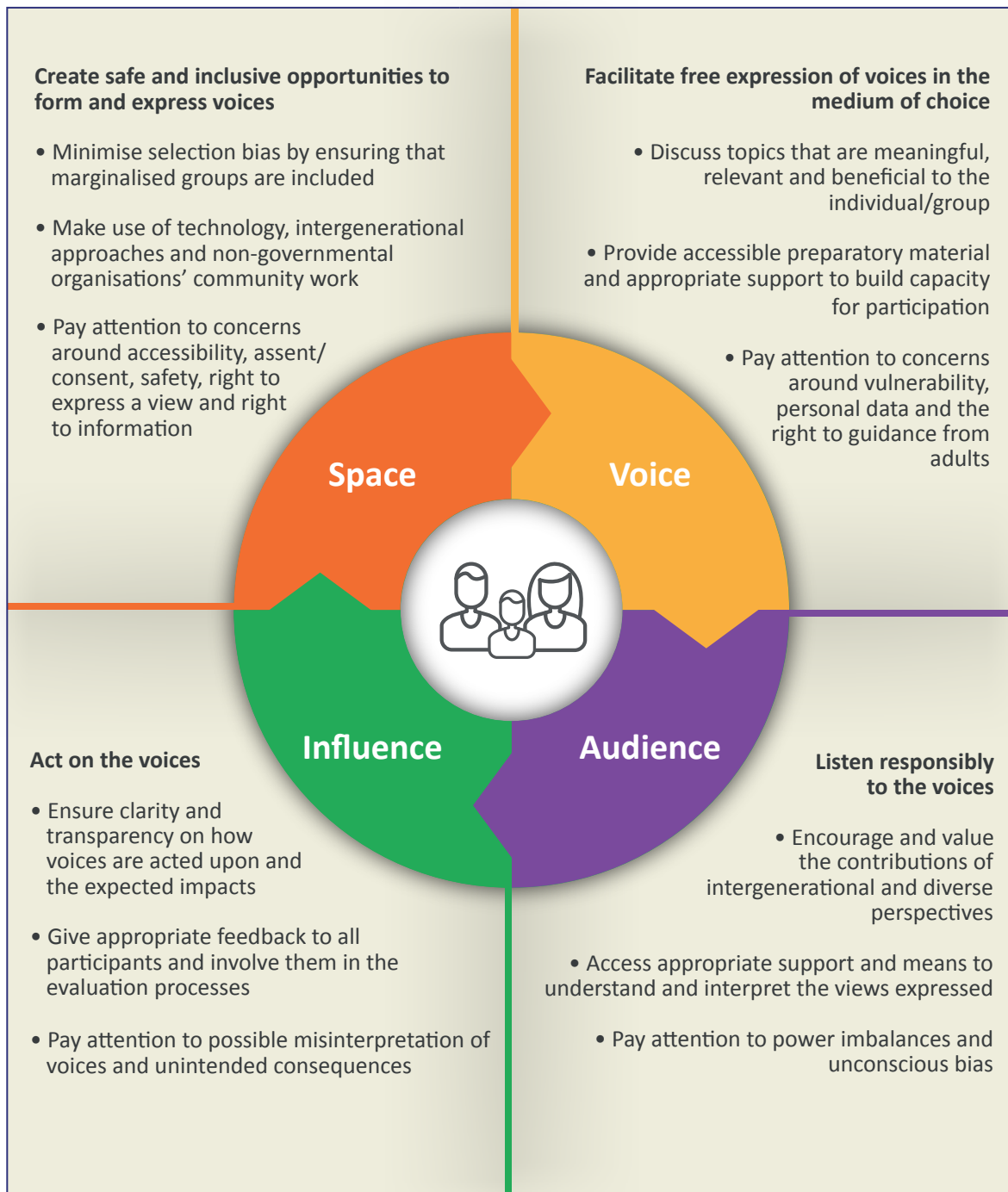


Figure 1. VIA Framework for Meaningful Participation in Inclusive Education: key elements and ethical considerations



Phase 2: Putting the VIA Framework into action

In phase 2 (2022), representatives from Iceland, Malta and Norway worked in a small group, engaging in interactive country-based activities with learners and families. The VIA Framework shaped the methodology and served as a practical guide to these activities.

The countries' involvement aimed to:

- elaborate and validate the practical aspects of the VIA Framework, in relation to the key elements of Space, Voice, Audience and Influence;
- contribute to the development of the VIA Toolkit.

Each country chose its own topic and the most relevant way to work with stakeholders at national or local level. The VIA team supported the countries by providing reflective questions drawn from the VIA Framework to guide them through each stage. Depending on the selected topic and participants, the VIA team also provided targeted practical resources (i.e. tools, guidelines and appropriate methodologies).

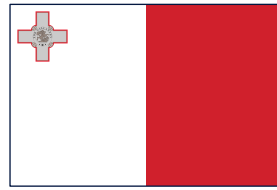
Following initial group discussions, each country developed and undertook its planned activity in its national context. All three aimed to explore learners' and families' experiences of participation through various 'voice-elicitation' activities, e.g. learning walks, focus groups, interviews or observations.





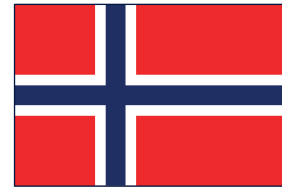
Iceland

Learning walks and focus groups with learners



Malta

Interviews with families
Activities with learners





Norway

Observations
Survey of learners
Interviews with policy-makers

Figure 2. Activities in the three countries

Specifically, Iceland's activities aimed to evaluate a promising initiative previously carried out in a small school with a high proportion of migrant learners. Malta evaluated the implementation of a policy to establish units for learners with autism in mainstream schools, by seeking input from learners educated in the units and interviewing their parents. Norway evaluated consultation processes and structures that were in place at national level with learner representatives and policy-makers.

 **Those of us who experience disability are frequently conspicuously left out of dialogue about our own lives.** 

(Cologon, 2020, p. 2)

Despite variations in the aims, scopes and contexts of these country-based activities, **common themes** emerged during the group discussions and reflections, all related to achieving meaningful participation:

- Whatever the purpose of listening, the voices should come from diverse learners/families, with **multiple identities and complex experiences** in different settings, rather than from a homogeneous group.
- Particular attention should be paid to **opposing and conflicting views** that exist between different groups of learners/families.
- Practical and ethical issues arise around **anonymity** and gaining **informed consent or assent**, especially when recruiting learners with different types of needs/accessibility issues.
- Decisions and changes may have to be made 'on the spot', due to time constraints or **unexpected events**. Organising in-person meetings of learners from all over the country can be time- and resource-consuming and needs careful planning.
- **Schools and teaching professionals** can facilitate the expression of learner and family voices.





- Particular attention must be paid to ensure the meaningful participation of those who are **vulnerable, marginalised** or whose voices are rarely heard.

These common themes validated key VIA Framework aspects and the overall activity's **key messages**.

Setting up participatory activities in their own contexts, with the Agency's support, made countries think about the process in a **more systematic and reflective way**, with clear attention to and engagement with ethical issues at all stages of the activities.

Applying different aspects of the framework enabled countries to think differently about participation. 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)

The **synthesis report** (European Agency, 2022b) contains more details about the countries' work. It may be of particular interest to countries aiming to promote meaningful participation.

The Voices into Action Toolkit

Upon completion of the country work, all findings, key messages, practical materials and resources from both VIA phases were drawn together into an open-access online toolkit. The **Voices into Action Toolkit** provides practical approaches to collaborating with learners and families. It indicates how to act upon and truly embed their voices in decision-making. It contains Agency member country examples and links to relevant Agency activities and outputs, as well as to key research, policy and initiatives from various international organisations.

The toolkit is a dynamic resource intended to support diverse stakeholders across all education system levels to become agents of change in their schools, communities, regions and countries. These stakeholders may include:

- Learners, families, practitioners and researchers
- Local school and community leaders
- Regional and municipal bodies
- Non-profit organisations
- National policy-makers.



Agency countries are free to continue to upload examples of meaningful participation from their own contexts.

The toolkit was launched at a VIA event in Belgrade, Serbia, in May 2023. Over 80 policy-makers, learners and family representatives from Agency member countries attended. An overview of the VIA activity was presented and the participants engaged in interactive activities where they discussed issues and challenges around enabling meaningful participation. A **video** was produced at the event, incorporating the voices of adults and learners giving their views on their participation in the VIA activity.



Figure 3. A joint presentation by a learner and a policy-maker at the VIA event

Key messages for policy-makers

The evidence from VIA shows that while learner and family participation in decision-making is a pressing issue on educational policy-makers' agendas, policies have not been translated into practice. To effect sustainable change, **policy-makers must open a dialogue** to ensure learners' and families' voices are part of the change process.

The VIA activity identified **eight key messages** to enable meaningful participation of learners and families. Though the messages are aimed at policy-makers and other professionals and organisations in positions of power, they can serve as a reference for all education stakeholders.



1. Systematise processes for learners' and families' meaningful participation at national, regional and local/community levels

Policies related to learner and family rights should indicate clear processes for implementation across the education system, developed through cross-sectoral collaboration. Throughout, it is important to recognise families' role in supporting and enabling learners' voices to be heard and included in decision-making.

2. Increase participation in shaping legislation and policy

Learner and family participation at the policy level must be genuine, not tokenistic. It must actively include groups and individuals who have previously been unable to influence policy-level decisions that affect them, their peers, their schools and their communities.

3. Use ethical approaches at all stages of participation

Ethical approaches apply to issues of participant consent, safety and privacy. They consider how voices are obtained, recorded, reported and applied, whether these approaches benefit learners and/or families and how openly information is transferred. Importantly, there is a need to address power imbalances in participation.

4. Identify and include marginalised, unheard and silenced voices

Policy-makers should collaborate with schools and communities to identify and include the voices of those in marginalised groups. They should recognise the interdependence between young people and adults and acknowledge families' role in developing and affirming learners' voices in educational matters.

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

All stakeholders should keep in mind that groups contain unique individuals. It is essential to consider that learners and families may have multiple identities and contexts that intersect and shape their perspectives. Learners or families who share characteristics or 'labels' still have their own experiences and voices. This approach can lead to changes that benefit all learners and all families.



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

To accommodate the diversity of learners and families, it is important to draw from a range of resources and ensure equity at every stage. Programme organisers and policy-makers can refer to different conceptual models to design participatory activities across policy and practice. These models often include points for reflection and discussion and practical considerations and guidance. Technology offers flexibility to support meaningful participation in different ways.

7. Build capacity for meaningful participation and active listening

Stakeholders in leadership positions have a responsibility not only to facilitate opportunities for meaningful participation at all levels, but to build learners' and families' capacity to participate. It is vital to appropriately support learners and families to develop the knowledge, skills and understanding needed to participate.

8. Foster relationships with non-governmental and civil society organisations

Advocacy groups, associations and local and international organisations are important in raising awareness of the rights and needs of overlooked groups. These organisations often conduct research on these issues and produce accessible, practical resources about voices and participation. These resources, some of which are in the **VIA Toolkit**, may be applied to inclusive education decision- and policy-making. The possible benefits of developing synergies and ways of working with these sectors are an important consideration for policy-makers.

Final remarks

The VIA activity provided evidence on some of the ways in which participatory policy-making in education can become meaningful and sustainable. It proposed the VIA Framework for Meaningful Participation in Inclusive Education, included in the VIA Toolkit, as a reflective tool to enable stakeholders to address the challenges and barriers to participation in decision-making processes.

VIA stressed the importance of **intergenerational approaches**, where learners, families and education policy-makers at all levels work together. It suggests a **top-down policy approach, supported by bottom-up initiatives** at local and school levels, 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 the VIA activity and its key messages for more systematically involving learners and families in educational decision-making can contribute to creating a true culture of listening and acting upon voices.



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Secretariat:

Østre Stationsvej 33
DK-5000
Odense C
Denmark
Tel: +45 64 41 00 20
secretariat@european-agency.org

Brussels Office:

Rue Montoyer 21
BE-1000
Brussels
Belgium
Tel: +32 2 213 62 80
brussels.office@european-agency.org



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