



## **Narrative review of research evidence on youth engagement strategies**

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## **Purpose**

A growing body of scholarly literature has documented and analyzed the realities of child and youth engagement (CYE) in a range of sectors, including health care, education, child protection and welfare, and community organizations<sup>1</sup>. Our review of this literature sought to identify what is known – and what is unknown – about how effective and respectful CYE can be promoted in policy, practice, and research settings.

## **Methods**

We undertook a narrative review of the large and diverse field of CYE scholarship. Narrative reviews allow for the synthesis of a wide range of data to develop a broad perspective on a given topic<sup>2</sup>. They are considered particularly effective when undertaken by experts in the field under review<sup>3</sup>. Given the size and scope of the CYE literature and our VOICE team's previous research experience in this field, we considered a narrative review to be a suitable approach to meet our objectives.

To achieve a wide-ranging overview that prioritizes the highest level of evidence, we focused our review on knowledge syntheses. Additionally, due to our interest in CYE in Canada, we also examined key Canadian scholarship. Our inclusion criteria required peer-reviewed articles, published in English or French, that study CYE with children and youth aged 18 and under in research, practice, or policymaking settings. With the guidance of a university librarian, we performed database searches of CINAHL, Scopus, ERIC, and Google Scholar using variations of terms related to children or youth, combined with variations of terms related to participation, engagement, or advising, with filters limiting the results to knowledge syntheses or

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<sup>1</sup> Haddad et al., 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Green et al., 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Green et al., 2006.

Canadian research. The search results were assessed for relevancy to our research question and non-relevant articles were excluded. Searches of the reference lists of relevant articles complemented our database searches.

## **Results**

Our search found 20 knowledge syntheses and an additional five Canadian studies that fit our inclusion criteria and were relevant to our research question. Of the 25 articles reviewed: 12<sup>4</sup> focused on CYE in research; eight<sup>5</sup> focused on CYE in practice; one<sup>6</sup> focused on CYE in policymaking; and four<sup>7</sup> focused on CYE in multiple settings (research, practice, and/or policymaking). We identified three main themes within these articles: (1) assessing practices of CYE; (2) barriers to CYE; and (3) facilitators of CYE.

### ***Theme 1: Assessing practices***

Articles that assessed CYE practices did so by analyzing the reported goals and outcomes of CYE initiatives, as well as the methodologies of CYE research. Two reviews analyzed goals<sup>8</sup>. Notably, Haddad et al. (2022) found that the goals of youth advisory groups and the organizations that engage them are largely unreported in the literature – an important limitation since such goals are a benchmark for measuring the efficacy of a CYE initiative’s outcomes. Data on youths’ goals are particularly underrepresented in the literature<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Ali, 2022; Anderson, 2020; Anyon et al., 2018; Bakhtiar et al., 2023; Bradbury-Jones et al., 2018; Grace et al., 2019; McCabe et al., 2023; Montreuil et al., 2021; Sellars et al., 2021; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017; Valdez et al., 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Bijleveld et al., 2015; Gray & Woods, 2022; Kennan et al., 2018; McPherson et al., 2021; Sullivan et al., 2021; Watson et al., 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Macauley et al., 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Haddad et al., 2022; Ozer et al., 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Bakhtiar et al., 2023; Haddad et al., 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Haddad et al., 2022.

Several articles<sup>10</sup> analyzed the reported outcomes of CYE initiatives for youth and other stakeholders. Findings differed concerning the representation of children and youths' voices in reported outcomes. One study<sup>11</sup> on CYE in policymaking found research did assess young people's views to report on outcomes, while another<sup>12</sup> on CYE in research found research rarely reported on children's own perceptions of their engagement. Notably, the former focused on youth aged 12 to 25 and the latter on children aged 12 and under, indicating the possibility of a relationship between participants' ages and the degree to which their voices are represented. Indeed, several reviews<sup>13</sup> noted an overall underrepresentation of young children in the CYE literature they reviewed (see Table 1).

Issues related to the reporting of goals and outcomes are part of a larger trend of methodological challenges in CYE studies, noted in several articles<sup>14</sup>. Reporting issues and a lack of standard terminology in CYE research obscured the nature and degree of child and youth participation in CYE initiatives and prevented rigorous analysis of outcomes<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Ali et al., 2022; Anderson, 2020; Anyon et al., 2018; Bakhtiar et al., 2023; Haddad et al., 2022; Macauley et al., 2022; McCabe et al., 2023; Montreuil et al., 2021; Ozer et al., 2020; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017; Valdez et al., 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Macauley et al., 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Montreuil et al., 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Anyon et al., 2018; Bakhtiar et al., 2023; Bradbury-Jones et al., 2018; Ozer et al., 2020; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Ali et al., 2022; Anyon et al., 2018; Haddad et al., 2022; Montreuil et al., 2021; Ozer et al., 2020; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017; Valdez et al., 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Ali et al., 2022; Allahwala & Bhatia, 2021; Anyon et al., 2018; Haddad et al., 2022; Montreuil et al., 2021; Ozer et al., 2020; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017; Valdez et al., 2020.

**Table 1: CYE initiatives' settings and participant ages**

		Age of child/youth participants**					
First author's name	CYE setting reviewed*	Under 7	7 to 9	10 to 12	13 to 18	Over 18	Not specified
<i>Knowledge syntheses:</i>							
Ali (2022)	R			x	x	x	
Anderson (2020)	R				x		
Anyon (2018)	R	x	x	x	x	x	
Bakhtiar (2023)	R	x	x	x	x		
Bradbury-Jones (2018)	R		x	x	x	x	
Grace (2019)	R	x	x	x	x		
McCabe (2023)	R		x	x	x	x	
Montreuil (2021)	R	x	x	x			
Sellars (2021)	R						
Shamrova (2017)	R	x	x	x	x		
Valdez (2020)	R			x	x		
Haddad (2022)	M			x	x	x	
Ozer (2020)	M	x	x	x	x	x	
Macauley (2022)	Po				x	x	
Bijleveld (2015)	Pr	x	x	x	x	x	
Gray (2022)	Pr	x	x	x	x		
Kennan (2018)	Pr		x	x	x		
McPherson (2021)	Pr	x	x	x	x	x	
Sullivan (2021)	Pr		x	x	x		
Watson (2023)	Pr				x		
<i>Individual Canadian studies:</i>							
Allahwala (2021)	R				x	x	
Chan (2021)	M			x	x	x	
Canas (2019)	M						x
Collins (2021)	Pr			x	x		
Ramey (2019)	Pr				x	x	

\* R = research settings; Pr = practice settings; Po = policymaking settings; M = multiple settings

\*\* x = The knowledge synthesis in question reviewed a study that researched CYE with this age group. (In the case of the Canadian studies, they directly researched CYE with this age group). However, representation of research with this age group is not proportional: e.g., knowledge syntheses that reviewed research with children under 7 often found that research with this age group was underrepresented compared to research with adolescents.

## ***Theme 2: Barriers***

Several articles discussed barriers that prevented effective CYE. These included unaddressed power differentials between adults and children<sup>16</sup> and time and resource constraints<sup>17</sup>. Tokenism was an additional barrier, which played out through the overgeneralizing and/or simplification of children's voices and through an overrepresentation of older, more articulate, and more privileged children, leading to a lack of inclusivity and inauthentic representation<sup>18</sup>. The context and environment of CYE initiatives were also identified a barrier, particularly in hierarchical settings like schools and care residences<sup>19</sup>. In the same vein, organizational cultures that prioritise adult voices, a sociocultural image of children as vulnerable and in need of protection, and adults' limited understandings of what true participation entails were also found to be barriers to effective CYE<sup>20</sup>.

## ***Theme 3: Facilitators***

The literature discussed factors that facilitate child and youth engagement. Several articles<sup>21</sup> recommended specific models of youth engagement. Specific models can offer useful guidance for initiating effective CYE, but their efficacy must be evaluated in the settings and contexts for which they were designed. Several authors assert that there is not one-size-fits-all approach to CYE, and practices must be tailored to the aims of each project<sup>22</sup>. Nevertheless, the

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<sup>16</sup> Anderson et al., 2020; Ali et al., 2022; Anyon et al., 2018; Bakhtiar et al., 2023; Bijleveld et al. 2015; Macauley et al., 2022; McPherson et al., 2021; Montreuil et al., 2021; Sullivan et al., 2021 Valdez et al., 2020; Watson et al., 2023.

<sup>17</sup> Ali et al., 2022; Allahwala & Bhatia, 2021; Bijleveld et al., 2015; Collins et al., 2021; McCabe et al., 2023; Sellars et al., 2021; Shamrova et al., 2017; Valdez et al., 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Allahwala & Bhatia, 2021; Bradbury-Jones et al., 2018; Sullivan et al., 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Anderson, 2020; Anyon et al., 2020; Bijleveld et al., 2015; Gray & Woods, 2022; McPherson et al., 2021; Montreuil et al., 2021; Sellars et al., 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Allahwala & Bhatia, 2021; Bijleveld et al., 2015; McPherson et al., 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Ali et al., 2022; Allahwala & Bhatia, 2021; Anderson, 2020; Gray & Woods, 2022; Ozer et al., 2020; Sullivan et al., 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Bakhtiar et al., 2023; Macauley et al., 2022; Montreuil et al., 2021.

literature offers general and specific suggestions for fostering effective CYE. These include (1) fostering trusting adult-child relationships and safe spaces<sup>23</sup>; (2) developing adults' skills related to reflexivity, power sharing, and communication<sup>24</sup>; (3) meeting child and youth needs – including through trainings for children and youth<sup>25</sup>, adaptability, flexibility, and “child-friendly” approaches<sup>26</sup>, and compensation<sup>27</sup>; and (4) increasing child and youth inclusivity and diversity in the research process<sup>28</sup>.

### **Conclusion: What do we need to know about promoting effective CYE?**

Our review examined a wide range of literature that evaluated diverse practices and approaches to CYE. This literature has generated indispensable knowledge about the promotion of effective and respectful CYE, but it also reveals several areas that require further development and consideration. Firstly, there is a need for improved and standardized methodologies for CYE research. Secondly, there is a need for greater inclusion and representation of younger children, particularly those under 13, in CYE initiatives and research. Finally, the literature highlighted barriers related to power imbalances and problematic cultural conceptualizations of children, but the suggestions for dealing with these challenges tend to be abstract. As such, there is a need for more detailed and concrete strategies for addressing these barriers.

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<sup>23</sup> Bijleveld et al., 2015; Bradbury-Jones et al., 2018; Chan et al., 2021; Kennan et al., 2018; McCabe et al., 2023; McPherson et al., 2021; Ramey et al., 2019; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Grace et al., 2019; Gray et al., 2022; Macauley et al., 2022; McCabe et al., 2023.

<sup>25</sup> Bakhtiar et al., 2023; Canas et al., 2019; McCabe et al., 2023; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Anderson, 2020; Bradbury-Jones et al., 2018; Canas et al., 2019; Collins et al., 2021; McCabe et al., 2023; Ramey et al., 2019; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Allahwala & Bhatia, 2021; Anderson, 2020; Canas et al., 2019; Chan et al., 2021; McCabe et al., 2023; Watson et al., 2023.

<sup>28</sup> Bakhtiar et al., 2023; Grace et al., 2019; Macauley et al., 2022; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017.

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