Children and Young People's Participation in decision-making in Foster Care

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Abstract

Children's participation in decisions about their lives is a crucial point of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is the basis of child welfare and protection worldwide. Despite these clear guidelines, there is evidence that children's voices may be heard but often with little impact on the decisions made by professionals in the childcare system. This study seeks to ascertain whether the voice of children living in foster care is considered and respected when making decisions that concern them, whether the children effectively exercise it, and what factors impact their participation. A systematic scoping review was performed to clarify concepts and unveil research gaps, using eleven scientific databases and publishers that allowed us to identify twelve recent studies in critical journals. In the light of the Bouma et al., (2018) model, the findings showed that there is, in general, a lack of effective children's participation, namely in terms of information, listening, and involvement. Children's voices still have a minimum impact on the decisions made in the childcare system. It will be necessary to avoid the bureaucratic assumption that there is an age cut-off point to promote participation. More, it is stressed the importance of a trusting, sincere and confidential relationship between the child and the social worker and the need to ensure training for professionals who intervene in review/statutory meetings or judicial proceedings, namely in the court of law.

Keywords Participation · children · young people · decision-making · foster care

1 Introduction

Promoting children's rights is refusing the discredited idea that adults can determine what happens in children's lives without considering their views, experiences, and aspirations (Bijleveld et al., 2015). In the perspective of Lansdown (2001), it means

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accepting that all children have the right to be heard and taken seriously, even when younger, and that their life responsibilities must increase as they grow.

The child is a subject of rights, neither a minor nor a small adult (Brown, 1998; Rogers 2001). According to their maturity, it is intended to be an active actor (Bijleveld et al., 2015). Adults should not previously determine a child's life trajectories, i.e., mediation for effective citizenship implies the ability to create and recognise plural narratives built from the active role of children (Marí, 2007).

Children's participation is included in the leading international legislative documents: Article 12 of the Convention on the Child's Rights (United Nations, 1989) and Article 24 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Official Journal of the European Union, 2007). Both articles consecrate the involvement of children and young people in the processes that concerns them, according to their age and maturity.

The child is a subject of rights, neither a minor nor a small adult (Brown, 1998; Rogers 2001). According to their maturity, it is intended to be an active actor (Bijleveld et al., 2015). Adults should not previously determine a child's life trajectories, i.e., mediation for effective citizenship implies the ability to create and recognise plural narratives built from the active role of children (Marí, 2007).

Once the general principle of participation has been formally recognised, it is essential to define what participation degree, conditions, and objectives the children should have in each decision. This process requires dialogue and power-sharing in decision-making. It also assumes that parents, carers or social workers fulfil their duty to guarantee the necessary conditions to empower children in participatory processes (Bijleveld et al., 2014; Juul & Husby, 2020). As Thomas (2001) noticed, there is no age at which children acquire the competence to make decisions about their lives: everything depends on the decision and the child. The restriction of the child's fundamental rights, such as participation, can only be justified by the need to safeguard other rights, always in their best interests. Thus, any discretionary action is rejected because it is characterised as paternalistic intervention, which is now outdated (Donnelly, 2010; Vis et al., 2010; Flekkoy & Kaufman, 1997) defined children's participation as the process of choosing, planning, and developing a project based on the development of autonomy, personal confidence, and belief in the possibility of change.

Children have significant abilities to make decisions and express themselves, alone or with others, particularly those made in their best interest. However, the mechanisms that guarantee the effective sharing of decisions remain to be built, namely in family care (Husby et al., 2018). Acknowledging the importance and willingness to facilitate participation does not necessarily mean that participation is implemented in practice. There remains a large gap between professionals' perspectives on participation and its prevalence in practice and the experiences and perspectives of young people under the care of child protection systems (Bijleveld et al., 2014; Cudjoe et al., 2020). In foster care, the proximity of attention, the individualised relationship, the permanent coexistence, and the possibility of developing a secure attachment creates a fertile context that might promote the child's participation (Delgado et al., 2019).

In this study, we seek to ascertain through a systematic scoping review of the literature whether the voice of children living in foster care is considered when making

decisions that concern them; how the power-sharing takes place in this context of foster care; whether carers and social workers attend the right of child's participation; and whether the children effectively exercise it in care.

2 Participation in Foster Care Context

When children are often removed from their biological families because they have been subject to violence or mistreatment, they may be placed in a foster family. Colton & Williams (1997) analysed a range of definitions of foster care and concluded that it varied among different countries, as the exact terms often mean other things. In an attempt to encompass the various possibilities, the authors globally defined foster care as the "care provided in carers' home, on a temporary or permanent basis, through the mediation of a recognised authority, by specific carers, who may or may not be relatives of the foster child (defined differently in different countries), who may or may not officially reside with them" (p.292).

In foster care, problematic behaviours, emotional disturbances, and integration difficulties are often addressed at home, school, and in the surrounding community. Foster care could offer children the possibility of living safely, at a distance from their parents, but keeping them present if possible or allowed. It allows children to benefit from a context where their needs might be considered. It also allows children to live and participate in the family's daily life and its decisions (Rees et al., 2012). Finally, it offers them emotional support within a network of stable family relationships, which favour their growth and the developing process of their personality (David, 2000; Doyle, 1997). Foster care should provide children with individualised attention, living in a safe and respectful environment, with privacy but knowing the limits. This environment will enhance their social inclusion, providing a school career with more probability of educational success (Berridge, 2012; Jackson & Cameron, 2014; Rees & Pithouse, 2008) and a family experience within the community (Bell & Romano, 2017).

Upon arrival at the foster carers' home, the child usually carries a set of painful and sometimes contradictory feelings: fear of the unknown, feeling guilty for the mistreatment suffered, which is mixed with loyalty towards their birth parents who have been abandoned (Schofield et al., 2000), the pain and trauma associated with the removal, and the uncertainty regarding the future (Cairns, 2002). These feelings show the importance of preparation and monitoring during the initial phase of foster care. In many cases, children manifest resistance to accepting the placement and distrust given the learning situations that the new context proposes to them. They often cannot process information about a different reality, for example, looking at the adults who offer them good foster care with the representations developed about the previous adults (Beek & Schofield, 2004). When the placement is extended over time and has positive results, these feelings are gradually attenuated until they disappear, replaced by secure and affective bonds that slowly build up between the child and the caregivers, which can lead to a secure attachment. When foster care is not accepted, and resistance is not overcome, conflicts can arise and lead to a placement breakdown (Sinclair et al., 2005).

In foster care, as in any other family context, the child must participate in the choices related to care. Children must be informed and be able to express their opinion and preferences, and learn how to do it in time, space, and appropriately, in an ongoing process of decision sharing that makes them responsible and promotes them as individuals (Bouma et al., 2018; Daniel et al., 1999) recommended that children should know: (1) the reasons they have been placed in foster care; (2) their rights in foster care; and (3) the plans for their future and how they can influence them. McDowall (2016) defined a set of principles to guide participation in practice, considering the necessity to listen, share and respond to children's views in care (Mullan et al., 2007; Munro, 2001).

As children grow up, they must increase their level of participation in family life, expressing their point of view regarding the people they want to be fostered with, the school they wish to attend, and the nature of contact with their parents, family, or friends (Montserrat & Casas, 2018). Participation in leaving care decision-making is also recognised as a potential protective factor during their transition from care to independent adulthood (Park et al., 2020).

Several frameworks have been used to define and operationalise participation. Despite its longevity, Hart's ladder of children's participation (1992) is among the most commonly preferred (Cudjoe et al., 2020; Donnelly, 2010; Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2020). According to our definition of participation, participation starts in Hart's ladder at the 5th level (consulted and informed) and ends at the 8th level (child-initiated, shared decisions with adults). Thoburn et al., (1995) proposed a variation, where nine increasing levels defined the concept of 'participation' in youth care. Starting from the lowest (manipulation), which cannot be considered a degree of effective participation because it makes any contribution or influence impossible, to the highest level (delegated power). Shier (2001), on the other hand, defined participation as empowerment, considering that it is up to professionals to carry out actions in which they share power with children. Shier also uses the ladder metaphor with the following steps: listening to the child, supporting the child in expressing their views, considering the child's point of view, involving the child in decision-making processes and, finally, sharing the power and responsibility for decision-making with the child. Franklin & Sloper (2005) associated children's participation in decision-making processes with information, knowing what is at stake and what the options are, the opportunity to express their wishes and views, and the possibility of their opinions being considered and having an impact on decision-making. Wright et al., (2006) took a holistic approach to participation and identified four related elements which can be adapted to the context of foster care: (1) culture, which reveals an organisational commitment to participation; (2) structure, which is characterised by planning, developing and obtaining resources for participation, namely in out-of-home care; (3) practice, which translates into the methods and ways of working, the skills and knowledge that allow children and young people to get involved; and (4) review, with the presence of monitoring and evaluation systems that allow an organisation, inside the child care system, to highlight the change generated by the participation of children and young people. Healy & Darlington (2009) identified three participation principles to promote children's involvement in decision-making in practice: respect, adequacy, and transparency. Lundy (2007) highlighted four elements for effective participation

of children in decision-making that include: (1) a safe, friendly, accessible, and inclusive space to support children's views; (2) giving them opportunities to express their voices; (3) access to an audience that has the power to make decisions, and ensuring they are listened to; and (4) making sure that their voices make influence decisions.

Following Bouma et al., (2018), we conceptualise 'participation' as a meaningful one in the ongoing process over time and space and not be limited to identifying the degree of involvement children must have in making certain decisions. As the authors assumed, "at every step, children should be informed, heard and involved" (2019, p.281). This model seems to embrace participation as an instrument or mechanism for accessing fundamental values, such as democracy, inclusion, or more effective management. It also must be understood as a value, defensible from the view of justice and ethics. Thus, they defined 'participation' as hearing children's opinions beforehand and involving them in decision-making (Bouma et al., 2018, p. 281).

Very few studies have investigated the issues of if and when foster care children are involved in the decision-making process about their placements. Recently, Fylkesnes et al., (2021) attributed participation's potential to build trust in relationships, cultivate a sense of belonging, and allow proper monitoring of placements. McPherson et al., (2021) developed a systematic scoping review about young people's participation in decision-making in residential care. We have adopted the same approach, examining the last twelve years of research focused on children's and young people's participation in decision-making in foster care. By 'participation' means the possibility of voluntarily and competently informed involvement in decision-making that we might influence through our contribution (Delgado, 2006). In foster care, the voice of children should be considered when making decisions about their placement, expressing the right to be heard and involved in everyday life decisions. Based on this scoping review, we consider potential recommendations for foster care services to improve children's participation in decision-making processes.

3 Method

There have been several systematic literature reviews about child participation in child protection and child welfare services (e.g., Bijleveld et al., 2015; Gallagher et al., 2012; Skauge et al., 2021; Vis et al., 2010). The specific target for our literature review led us to choose a systematic scoping review as the most appropriate method to interpret and synthesise international research about child participation in foster care. We wanted to extensively cover the literature (various types of publications) on this topic to clarify concepts and unveil research gaps (Munn et al., 2018).

We followed the path of McPherson et al., (2021), based on Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) methodological framework for scoping reviews, with a five-phase approach: (1) developing a research question; (2) systematically identifying relevant studies; (3) charting the data; and (4) and (5) collating and analysing the results.

3.1 Phase One: Developing the Research Questions

Our scoping review was guided by two research questions: (1) what does research tell us about children and young people's participation in decision-making in foster care and its consideration and respect by the other actors? (2) what factors are identified in the existing literature as impacting children's and young people's participation in decision-making in foster care?.

This study seeks to ascertain whether the voice of children living in foster care is considered and respected when making decisions that concern them, whether the children effectively exercise it, and what factors impact their participation.

Bouma et al., (2018) identified three elements to achieve meaningful participation in decision-making: **inform**, **listen**, and **involve** everyone. We consider that these elements should characterise the child protection process. Participation is never a definite, irreversible achievement; it is a process in permanent construction that cannot be reserved for certain moments. Participation is a way of life, not a ritual, that favourably resolves the tension between the child and the adults, whether they are social workers, biological family members or caregivers. It also resolves or eases the stress that might characterise the relationship between children as individuals, and social workers, as representatives of the childcare system (Bouma et al., 2018).

The **informing** element is seen as a prerequisite for participation and covers the children's rights to participate in the origin and process steps, possible consequences, and decision-making. Participation only constitutes a natural space of autonomy, where effective power-sharing occurs, if free and global access to information is guaranteed. It means being informed about their process and pathways through the protection system, namely about reasons to be in foster care, their rights, alternatives, if they exist, and available resources. Secondly, **hearing** involves empowering and encouraging children to express their views and stories, recognising their importance. Children should also be listened to because they can provide valuable information and possible successful solutions (Bouma et al., 2018). Participation requires time for reflection and dialogue, appropriate places, structures, or spaces. It is also essential that, in the places of participation, the processes are suitable for the children involved and that respect for different opinions is ensured. Participation presupposes negotiation between adults and children, based on mutual respect, reciprocity and equality, avoiding temptations to control or dominate. In foster care, that should mean the possibility for children to express their views about experiences and circumstances during decision-making processes, like review meetings. The third element – **involving** – regards the consideration of the children's opinions in the preparatory phase of the process, the way the decision is made, and the implementation of the decision. Their inclusion and involvement in the foster care decision-making process can change decisions already made by others.

Participation requires the possibility to influence the decision. It is inseparable from the outcomes evaluation, the reflexive attitude that enables learning, namely when mistakes are made and the results are not desired (Delgado, 2006).

Finally, we define 'decision-making' as including all decisions that affect the lives of children and young people in foster care, consistent with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

3.2 Phase Two: Systematically Identifying Relevant Studies

In this phase, we systematically identified relevant studies by developing a search protocol that has included eleven databases and publishers: Academic Search Complete, Cinahl, Elsevier, Journal Citation Reports, Medline, Psychology & Behavioural Science, Sage, Springer, Taylor & Francis, Web of Science, and Wiley.

The search terms adopted as keywords were: 'youth' OR 'adolescents' OR 'young people' OR 'teen' OR 'young adults' OR 'children' OR 'child' AND 'decisions' OR 'decision making' AND 'foster care' OR 'foster children' OR 'foster care system' OR 'child welfare system' OR 'family care' AND 'participation' OR 'collaborative decision making' OR 'engagement' OR ' empowerment' OR 'voice' OR 'involvement'.

Only 27 articles complied with this scoping review. Then, to check if there would be more articles of interest for our work, we opened the search to every keyword of the Boolean sentence. This approach led us to obtain 91 more papers for analysis, which increased the number of articles to 118. After analysing these articles, 106 were set aside due to the exclusion criteria presented below, leaving 12 as the base for our study.

3.2.1 Inclusion Criteria

In scholarly journals, we searched for full-text articles published in English between January 2009 and December 2020. A twelve-year time frame was chosen to limit our results to contemporary findings in this domain. Peer-reviewed, scholarly manuscripts were included when they published research concerning children and young people (0 to 18 years) in foster care and their participation in decisions that may affect their lives. This approach includes studies about other actors' points of view and all decision-making related to the child protection processes (e.g., removal, placement, revision, reunification, transition to an independent life, children's rights, participation standards, the court of law hearings), and any other contexts of the cases. The search was conducted between December 2020 and January 2021.

3.2.2 Exclusion Criteria

We excluded manuscripts that were not peer-reviewed research publications, including guidelines for practice and academic journals. Some studies report on multiple forms of care, for example, foster care and residential care. The distinction between forms of care could not be made, so we excluded the publication. We also banned publications identifying other types of out-of-home care, like kinship or residential care, and non-out-of-home care children's settings, such as in-patient psychiatric units, medical settings, schools, legal settings, and court arrangements. Finally, articles only related to parents' and professionals' participation were removed from the study. Despite their expression in many jurisdictions, the exclusion of relative/ kinship care is due to their peculiarities and specificities, like different regulations, support, evaluation, and training, that distinguish it from foster care. In specific contexts (e.g., Portugal and Brazil), kinship care is not even considered out-of-home care placement.

3.3 Phase Three: Charting the Data

We used charting to reach a consensus on relevant information to extract from all included studies considering the conceptual framework and research questions. This activity involved coding for descriptive characteristics of studies using a qualitative approach. We analysed the conceptualisations of participation (existence, consideration, and respect), the factors related to barriers, and the facilitators of children's participation. Categories related to the conceptualisations of participation were informed by Bouma et al., (2018) model of participation: informing, hearing, and involving. Factors influencing participation derived from the content analysis were organised around two levels: individual and professionals/institutions.

An intercoder agreement was established by independently charting the first four studies by the three authors and comparing the results. We discussed discrepancies to reach a consensus. One of the authors coded the remaining studies, and the findings were discussed, being the questions resolved at regular research team meetings.

3.4 Phases Four and Five: Collating and Analysing the Results

The literature review results are presented in three parts: first, we give information on the descriptive characteristics of the articles represented in the study. Second, we provide information across the three levels of Bouma et al., (2018) framework: (a) informing, (b) hearing, and (c) involving. Third, we present information on factors hindering or facilitating children's and young people's participation in foster care at the individual and professional/institutions level.

4 Results

4.1 Descriptive Characteristics

The 12 relevant articles in the scoping review are summarised in Table 1. This table identifies the author and location of the twelve studies, including methodology and findings. Ten articles employed qualitative research methods, and two were quantitative. Six of the studies were conducted in the United States, and the remaining studies were in the Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom, South Africa, the Republic of Ireland and Canada.

The studies presented several aims, such as children's participation in the point of view of advisory boards (2 papers); on decision-making about child protection processes of removal, placement, revision, reunification, transition to an independent life, children's rights, participation in court hearings, participation standards (9); and on the cases' contexts and power relationships (1).

Five studies involved data collection exclusively from young people in foster care (e.g., Kriz & Roudtree-Swain, 2017; Schiller & de Wet 2019), and three studies included only practitioners (advisory board facilitators, foster carers) (e.g., Havlicek et al., 2018; Zaijlmans et al., 2019). Three studies used triangulation between young people in foster care and practitioners in data collection (e.g., Park et al., 2020; Pertz

et al., 2017). One of these studies also included biological parents (Balsells et al., 2017). Finally, one study used another secondary data source to study young people's participation – inspection reports on foster care services (Brady et al., 2019).

In the included studies with foster youths, the sample size varied from a small sample of 5 participants (Nybell, 2013) to a sample of 727 foster youths (Park et al., 2020). Five studies had samples between 20 and 30 children and young people in foster care (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2010; Pert et al., 2017). The participants in these studies ranged from 8 to over 18 years old. In the studies with practitioners, the sample size varied between 13 (Havlicek et al., 2016) and 63 (Balsells et al., 2017) professionals in the child protection system.

In terms of study focus, eight studies focused on children's and young people's participation in decision-making in foster care through the analysis of their voices, feelings, influence, and level of engagement in decisions (Havlicek et al., 2018; Kriz & Roundtree-Swain, 2017; Park et al., 2020). Three studies focused on the impact of specific contexts on children's participation (Nybell, 2013; Schiller & de Wet, 2019; Weisz et al., 2011). Additionally, one study focused on advice to improve the children's experiences of participation in foster care (Mitchell et al., 2010).

5 Results

5.1 What does Research Tell us about Children's and Young People's Participation in Decision-making in Foster Care and its Consideration and Respect by the other Actors

This set of results begins with the description of how Bouma et al., (2018) dimensions of participation – informing, hearing, and involving – have been addressed in the literature, and what results have been found regarding the participation of young people in these dimensions. Table 2 displays these dimensions in the analysed studies and the children's experiences concerning each dimension

5.1.1 Informing

All the analysed studies mentioned, in some way, this dimension of children and young people in foster care being informed about their cases and relevant aspects for decision-making, namely about reasons of separation/placement, possibilities/alternatives of choice, if they exist, and rights and available resources

Seven studies reported that children were not informed about alternatives to decide on (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2010; Nybell, 2013). Four studies reported mixed findings, with reports of information being provided to children and a lack of information (e.g., Weisz et al., 2011). These latter studies include two quantitative studies (Park et al., 2020; Weisz et al., 2011); a study using a secondary analysis approach (Brady et al., 2019); and a qualitative study with young adults (18–21 years old), who reported that the provision of information increased over the years in foster care (Kriz & Roundtree-Swain, 2017). In turn, Havlicek and colleagues (2016) analysed the facilitators' perspectives on how to activate young people's voices

Table 1 Descriptive characteristics of the twelve selected studies

Reference	Aims	Methodology	Sample	Instrument/ Data analysis	Results
1. Havlicek et al., 2018 USA	To explore youth participation from the perspectives of 42 primary Youth Advisory Boards (YAB).	Qualitative study	42 advisory board facilitators from 34 States.	Semi-structured interview (telephone). Thematic analysis	Data revealed four approaches to youth participation, ranging from predominantly adult-driven to predominantly youth-led. The most common approach to youth participation among these facilitators, a '50–50 Y-AP'
2. Zaijl-mans, López, Grietens, & Knorth, 2019 The Netherlands	To examine the influence of children, birth parents and foster carers on the matching decision from a practitioner's perspective.	Qualitative study	22 practitioners from 17 of the 28 foster care organisations in the Netherlands, responsible for matching children with foster families.	Semi-structured interview.	The participation of children in the matching process is not evident. Practitioners' assumptions about the ability of stakeholders could diminish their capacity to influence the matching decision; practitioners could also determine when and how stakeholders are involved; and, even in a compromised context, they could choose which stakeholders' wishes to fulfil and which to ignore
3. Balsells, Fuentes-Peláez, & Pasto, 2017 Spain	To examine the voices of children and adolescents at the time of removal and reunification in the child protection process.	Qualitative study (triangulation of participants and data collection techniques)	30 children and adolescents (6 to over 18 years old), 42 biological parents, and 63 professionals in the child protection system.	Semi-structured interviews (18). Focus groups (22).	The information provided to children and adolescents is inaccurate and incomplete at all stages of the decision-making process. The degree of understanding of the reasons that underlie the decision-making is minimal. The main reason for removal defines how the child is involved in participation. The participation of children and adolescents in the reunification process contributes to its success and stability

Table 1 (continued)

Reference	Aims	Methodology	Sample	Instrument/ Data analysis	Results
4. Park, Powers, Okpsych, & Courtney, 2020 USA	To examine the level of youth engagement in their transitional independent living plan; the levels of satisfaction with their transition decision-making processes; and the predictors of youth involvement and satisfaction with transition planning.	Quantitative study (triangulation of participants and data collection techniques)	727 foster youths (16 to 17 years old), and 235 caseworkers.	Three data sources: a longitudinal study of a state-wide representative sample of foster youths in California – in-person interview; a child welfare caseworker survey; and a state child welfare administrative data.	Youth participating in the TILP development were positively associated with their age, conscientiousness and agreeableness personality traits, their rating of helpfulness of their caseworker, and physical disabilities documented by caseworkers. Youths satisfied with the team meetings were positively associated with their rating of helpfulness of their caseworker and being a parent.
5. Schiller & de Wet 2019 South Africa	To explore the role of indigenous cultural and institutional practices as experienced by foster care adolescents and how they impact their rights in situations of participatory decision-making.	Qualitative study Phenomenological research design	29 adolescents (12 to 18 years old) in foster care who belonged to a specific indigenous African cultural group.	Interviews/Focus groups.	Adolescents often do not partake in decision-making. Adolescents often observed that foster care was mainly about the monetary benefit.
6. Pert, Diaz, & Thomas, 2017 United Kingdom	To explore how well children understand and take part in Looked After Children reviews, and what factors impede this.	Qualitative study	25 children (8 to 17 years old), and 16 foster carers.	Interviews.	Levels of participation, as experienced by children and foster carers, were very low and the methods used were relatively ineffective. Children experienced significant barriers in engaging with the review process.

Table 1 (continued)

Reference	Aims	Methodology	Sample	Instrument/ Data analysis	Results
7. Brady et al., 2019 Republic of Ireland	Outlines findings of a secondary analysis of data in relation to participation standards in Health and Information Quality Authority foster care, residential care and special care inspection reports over a two-year period from 2013 to 2015.	Qualitative study Secondary analysis (thematic analysis of HIQA inspection reports)	40 HIQA inspection reports including inspections on 11 foster care services, 25 children residential centres, and 4 children special care units. 254 children consulted in the reports.	Thematic analysis of HIQA inspection reports.	There were evidence of children and young people being supported in a variety of ways to express their views in a safe and inclusive space, and of staff being responsive to the diverse needs of children and young people.
8. Kriz & Roudtree-Swain, 2017 USA	To show young people's feelings about their experiences with participation in decision-making in public care.	Qualitative study	8 young adults in the public child protection system (18–21 years old).	Semi-structured, in-depth interviews.	All participants had both positive and negative experiences with participation. Most reported negative experiences at the point of their first entry into care, and most reported positive experiences when signing themselves back into the care of the child protection system when they turned 18.
9. Nybell 2013 USA	To explore the ways that very specific contexts and relationships of power shaped the utterances of young people in the foster care system and distorted, muted, or amplified their abilities to express their need and interests.	Qualitative study (narrative)	Five former foster youths who are current University students.	Narrative analyses (two interviews by participants).	It can be summarised by the stories published in VOICE, a periodic publication, that defends that the "foster youth should be part of the decision-making process every time there is a change in placement".

Table 1 (continued)

Reference	Aims	Methodology	Sample	Instrument/ Data analysis	Results
10. Weisz et al., 2011 USA	To address the following questions regarding children's participation in dependency court hearings: (1) Is attending court harmful to children? (2) Is attending court beneficial to children? (3) Is judicial behaviour with the child in the courtroom related to potential harms or benefits? and (4) Are there age differences in children's reactions?	Quantitative study (Survey)	93 children (8 to 18 years old) involved in the abuse/ neglect court system (43 attended their review hearings, and 50 did not).	Survey before the hearing. Questionnaire after the hearing. Survey at the follow-up interviews. For children not attending their hearing: survey at the follow-up interviews.	Children who attended their hearings reported more positive feelings about the dependency process (e.g., trust in the judge, perceived fairness, and more comfort with their guardians ad litem and caseworkers).
11. Havlicek et al., 2016 USA	To understand how the youths' voice is defined and activated in a foster youth advisory board.	Qualitative study	13 facilitators (program staff and child welfare liaisons and administrators) of a Youth Advisory Board.	In-depth interviews.	The belief system of facilitators, provision of social support, opportunities to try new roles, and state agency leadership contributed to the cultivation of the youths' voice through two parallel processes: personalisation and professionalisation.
12. Mitchell, Kuczynksi, Tubbs, & Ross, 2010 Canada	To seek out children's advice about ways to improve the children's experiences during the transition into care.	Qualitative study	20 children in foster care (8 to 15 years old).	Semi-structured interviews.	The children identified various situations and experiences that require attention during a transition into foster care: the importance of preparation time, provision of information during the home transfer, familiarity with the foster home, interpersonal communication and social support upon entrance into the foster home.

Table 2 Dimensions of Bouma's et al. (2018) model of participation addressed in the 12 analyzed studies

	Informing	Hearing	Involving
1. Havlicek et al., (2018)	X	+/X	+/X
2. Zaijlmans, López, Grietens, & Knorth (2019)	X	X	X
3. Balsells, Fuentes-Peláez, & Pasto (2017)	X	N/A	X
4. Park, Powers, Okpsych, & Courtney (2020)	+/X	N/A	+/X
5. Schiller & de Wet (2019)	X	X	X
6. Pert, Diaz, & Thomas (2017)	X	+/X	X
7. Brady et al., (2019)	+/X	+	+
8. Kriz & Roudtree-Swain (2017)	+/X	+/X	+/X
9. Nybell (2013)	X	+/X	X
10. Weisz et al., (2011)	+/X	+/X	N/A
11. Havlicek et al., (2016)	+	+	+
12. Mitchell, Kuczynksi, Tubbs, & Ross (2010)	X	X	X

+ positive experience; X negative experience; N/A not available information.

Despite the acknowledgement of its importance by the different stakeholders, there is a lack of information provided to children and adolescents (e.g., Balsells et al., 2017). Zaijlmans et al. (2019) studied the influence of children, birth parents and foster carers on the matching decision related to placement from a practitioner's perspective. These authors pointed out that, to some extent, practitioners present stakeholders with multiple choices (providing the example of a mother) but also highlighted that presenting information to children is beneficial but challenging to accomplish. In the Schiller & de Wet (2019) study, a participant stressed that children should be prepared for the placement and get acquainted with the people they are going to live with; however, this is not happening. Mitchell et al., (2010) seek out the children's advice about ways to improve their experiences during the transition into care. Children mentioned how being informed of having to move can be helpful for the transition and to better adjust to foster care. Being provided with information is referred to by participants as necessary for having time to prepare for the transition. Balsells et al., (2017) found that children are told about decisions shortly beforehand, not allowing them time to prepare. This situation relates to the moments of entering into foster care and in the process of family reunification

Pert et al. (2017) explored children's understanding and participation in the "Looked After Children" reviews and found that children and young people know about these regular reviews. However, their knowledge of the purpose of such meetings varied. None of them recognised that the "Looked After Children" reviews informed them what was happening, what to expect, or what decisions needed to be made. Furthermore, children and young people reported that these meetings were not for themselves, but rather for the adults, too formal and dull. Weisz et al., (2011) evaluated children's participation in dependency court hearings. They found that older children reported knowing about their hearing, and children who attended these meetings better understood their case. Brady et al., (2019) analysed foster care inspection reports and found that the provision of information was inconsistent, without evidence of an organisational-level approach related to this practice. Kriz and Roundtree-Swain (2017) studied young people's feelings about participation in deci-

sion-making in public care. Participants reported that they were not informed at the moment of their entry into the welfare system and did not experience participation

Nevertheless, participants focused on being informed as a cornerstone for becoming independent adults who will have to make informed decisions for the rest of their lives and for developing a positive sense of self through external valorisation and respect for the young people in care. Most of the studies addressed the need for children to be informed, particularly before their entry and during their stay in foster care, although few examples of this practice could be found. These studies do not address plans after foster care

5.1.2 Hearing

Ten studies referred to opportunities for children to express their views about experiences and circumstances. Three studies reported that children's and young people's opinions and views were not heard during decision-making. Four studies highlighted that hearing children and young people in foster care depend on several factors, explicitly focused on below. One qualitative study based on youths' narratives found different experiences about being heard in decisions about their lives (Nybell, 2013). Two studies found positive experiences (e.g., Brady et al., 2019). Opportunities of being heard were evaluated in the context of review/statutory/court meetings in two studies (Pert et al., 2017; Weisz et al., 2011) and without specifying the nature of those opportunities (e.g., informal level) in the remaining studies

In a specific cultural context study, Schiller & de Wet (2019) found that decisions are taken about children without hearing what they have to say. Only two of the twenty-five children who participated in the Pert et al. (2017) study reported hearing about what they would like to discuss in the "Looked After Children" review meetings. Foster carers were pointed out by participants to be the key to their voices being heard, promoting their engagement and participation in reviews. The secondary data analysis approach by Brady et al., (2019) found that inspection reports of foster care services mention that children are supported to express their views at the review/ statutory meetings of their care placement. However, they also found inconsistencies in how young people's views and complaints on issues of concern in service provision are valued and taken seriously. Weisz et al., (2011) found that the children who attended hearings at court and had a positive experience in the relationship – being heard for more extended periods and encouraged by the judge – considered that the judge made a fair decision. They also reported feeling more comfortable sharing opinions and more available to participate in future hearings

Havlicek et al., (2018) identified four approaches to youth participation from adult-driven practices – with little or no participation – to youth-led practices. These approaches varied from youths having the opportunity to voice their preferences to facilitators and establishing close relationships where their perspectives are listened to and valued. In the Mitchell et al., (2010) study, children's advice about ways to improve their experiences during the transition into care include asking children about their opinions regarding their experience in the foster placement context

In Havlicek et al., (2016) study, facilitators reported their actions to train foster youths to make their voices heard by others, recognising the power of children's

and young people's voices to allow their experiences in the care system to be understood. The role of facilitators/social workers/foster carers is also stressed by Kriz and Roudtree-Swain (2017). Furthermore, in this last study, the authors highlighted that children and young people's hearing in foster care depend on several factors, which will be discussed below

5.1.3 Involving

Being involved in the decision-making process was addressed in eleven studies. Overall, most of these studies (n=6) found that children and young people have minimal participation in the decision-making process (e.g., Havlicek et al., 2018; Nybell, 2013; Zeijlmans et al., 2019). Participation in decision-making was described by Havlicek et al., 2018 as sharing power with children and sharing planning and decision-making responsibilities to meet goals. Schiller & de Wet (2019) found that adolescents were excluded from the participatory decision-making process, creating a "sense of powerlessness" and constituting a barrier to self-development. Similarly, Pert et al. (2017) reported that the lack of choice and control was the most emotional topic for children and young people. Zeijlmans et al. (2019) and Balsells et al., (2017) reported that children are mainly involved last when they do not have any potential to change decisions already made by others. Park et al., (2020) found a variety of variables influencing youths' involvement in decision-making – participating in transition planning. In the Brady et al., (2019) study, inspection reports of foster care services described that children are encouraged to exercise choice in issues related to daily life activities. Kriz and Roundtree-Swain (2017) reported a dichotomy of experiences, with participants sharing that they could participate in some fundamental decisions but not all of them. Participants also say that their involvement in the decision-making process increases as they get older. In the Mitchell et al., (2010) study, children's advice included the request for children to have the opportunity to be active participants in making decisions about issues related to their placement

5.2 What Factors are Identified in the Existing Literature as Having an Impact on Children's and Young People's Participation in Decision-making in Foster Care?

The 12 articles included in the scoping review highlighted several factors that influence the participation of children and young people in the decision-making process in foster care. We organised the findings according to two levels:

5.2.1 Individual level

We present findings related to personal characteristics and the biographies of children and youths in foster care services.

The children's age was a critical characteristic for guiding professionals in involving children in decision-making about foster care (e.g., Park et al., 2020). Professionals referred to different thresholds as a minimum age to provide relevant information, consider the opinion, and promote the active participation of children and youths, based on arguments such as the vulnerability and maturity of younger children to

identify what is in their best interest. Zeijlmans et al. (2019) generally found 10–12 years old as cut-off points for children's participation. Children participating in the Kriz and Roundtree-Swain (2017) study referred to different ages from when they felt their voice began to be heard and exercised power in decisions related to foster care services (i.e., 14, 15, 18 years old). Despite constituting an objective criterion, it seems that the definition of an objective age to start participation runs the risk of omitting the characteristics of children, namely their maturity, pushing their involvement to later ages, and limiting participation that could effectively begin earlier.

Children's participation in decision-making is impacted by their characteristics, such as their temperament and personality, disabilities, and the ability to express wishes and opinions. Youths perceived as being friendly and organised were reported as being more involved in transition planning (Park et al., 2000). In turn, children with disabilities were less likely than their peers to be informed and involved by professionals (Park et al., 2020). The capacity for self-advocacy has also been related to how professionals and services hear children and young people. Thus, they are more heard when they articulate their arguments and opinions clearly and persistently (Havlicek et al., 2016; Kriz & Roundtree-Swain, 2017).

The children's background also influences the likelihood of being involved in planning life goals, and being a foreigner reduces the likelihood of being involved in decisions (Park et al., 2020). Cultural ideas about the children's role are another factor that can also determine their participation. Schiller & de Wet (2019) found that the cultural context of adolescents limits the implementation of policies, hindering participatory decision-making on being removed or deciding their placement. The same happens to children with histories of substantiated abuse, who were reported as less likely to be involved and lead the decision-making process (Park et al., 2020). In prior years, the type of foster care also influenced the professionals' consideration for the youths' participation. Youths who spent their lives in more protective care (e.g., congregate care) were less encouraged to participate than their peers who spent most of their time in other settings (e.g., guardian home, the court specified home or medical facility).

5.2.2 Professionals and institutions level

A total of three articles indicated that establishing a positive and trustful relationship between the child and social workers/practitioners is critical for children's engagement in decision-making. For instance, Kriz and Roundtree-Swain (2017) indicated that the children's positive rapport with their social workers facilitates their participation. Trusting in professionals, perceiving professionals as helpful elements, and feeling that they hear what is said minimises children's and young people's stress and supports them in comprehending foster care's positive aspects (Mitchell et al., 2010).

The relevance of this climate of trust and satisfaction with the professionals extends to the review/statutory meetings. Children and young people described these meetings as moments of embarrassment and fear, where the conditions conducive to their participation are not met. Children consider review meetings excessively formal, threatening, dull, or generalist, and these views motivate their disengagement and little participation (Pert et al., 2017). In turn, when children are provided with

encouragement by the judge during, for example, their hearing in court, they report feeling more comfortable and more willing to engage in debate and decision-making about their lives (Weisz et al., 2011).

The philosophy of shared decision-making at the professionals' and institutional levels emerged as another critical factor hindering/facilitating children's and young people's participation in the decision-making process, which conflicts with the core values of democracy. As described before, institutions following an adult-centred approach adopt practices that neglect the involvement of children and young people, suggesting disbelief in their capacity to decide about their own lives and to evaluate what is in their best interest (Havlicek et al., 2016; Schiller & de Wet, 2019). Values and culture characterising the system of beliefs at institutions can create power imbalances visible among policies, institutional structures, bureaucratic mechanisms, and daily practices (Havlicek et al., 2016).

This powerless approach occurs in situations in which children are informed about being removed or their new placement right at the moment when the transition occurs. They are barely heard about their views and opinions about, for example, how to prepare for review meetings, plan life goals, or monitor their satisfaction with their current situation. They have little involvement in decisions and do not choose or control who attends review meetings (Kriz & Roundtree-Swain, 2017; Pert et al., 2017).

On the side of professionals, Havlicek et al., (2016) analysed how youth's voices are activated in foster youth advisory boards and found that facilitators acknowledge their role in promoting engagement and increasing awareness of rights and resources. Furthermore, they recognise that an adult-dependent approach is not the only possible way to inform children and young people in foster care. In the Havlicek and colleagues (2016) study, participants referred that foster youths constitute an excellent resource to educate other foster youths about their rights and resources due to the knowledge they gained from their own experiences in foster care.

6 Discussion

This study aimed to discover what recent literature tells us about whether the voice of children living in foster care is considered when making decisions that concern them; how the power-sharing takes place in this context of foster care; whether carers and social workers attend the right of child's participation; and whether the children effectively exercise it in care. Empirical studies indicate a gap between the participatory climate advocated by national and international steering documents and legislation and current foster care services practices (e.g., Bijleveld et al., 2014; Cudjoe et al., 2020). Similarly to a previous scoping review conducted in the residential care context (McPherson et al., 2021), this scoping review demonstrates that children's voices still have minimum participation in the decisions made about their pathway in the childcare system. According to our data, the three elements to achieve meaningful participation in decision-making – inform, listen, and involve (Bouma et al., 2018) – are often neglected in foster care services or combine, simultaneously but contradictorily, positive and negative aspects. Examples of good practices in this area are scarce. Nevertheless, these elements should characterise the child protection

process. According to Bouma et al., (2018) and Thomas (2001), children's participation is about what the child says and the extent to which the child is informed and understands the reasons behind decisions and the options available. More, it includes knowing how well the child could participate and is supported to express opinions and desires regarding their own life. This study suggests that Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which sets out children's right to be heard in decisions that affect them in everyday living decisions/choices, still has a long way to go to be fulfilled. However, by definition, participation is to act in human relationships, framing and enabling them, and will only be helpful if its implementation is possible.

The analysis of the studies found that most participants were not informed about entry into foster care, with the agency making decisions without informing, clarifying, or preparing them (Balsells et al., 2017; Kriz & Roundtree-Swain, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2010; Nybell, 2013; Pert et al., 2017; Zeijlmans et al., 2019). Furthermore, the participants mentioned the lack of information about what will happen as a special issue with a significant emotional impact on foster care, diminishing satisfaction with social services and reducing the possibility of successful integration into foster care (e.g., Kriz & Roundtree-Swain, 2017). Children's access to information is a critical step toward participation.

In most studies and reports, being heard was referred to, but many report that children and young people do not have opportunities to express their views and desires for their own lives (Schiller & de Wet, 2019). Here, the characteristics of review/statutory/court meetings were negatively highlighted for discouraging the children's participation. On the other hand, the crucial role of the social worker as a trusting person in the process and responsible for making their voices heard by others (Havlicek et al., 2016).

Being involved in decision-making, that is, planning and sharing responsibilities with adults, was also absent in most of the studies analysed. The positive reports refer to the participation of children and young people in decisions about everyday events rather than decisions that significantly impact their lives (e.g., Brady et al., 2019). Participatory processes must be promoted to operationalise the rights of the children and guarantee that the values of equality, freedom of expression of the children's voices and self-determination are protected and enhanced (e.g., Bijleveld et al., 2015; Juul & Husby, 2020; Schiller & de Wet, 2019). Overall, improving children's participation contributes to reducing guilt, and the emotional impact children may experience in separation processes. This situation can prepare children for what will happen, empowering them to participate, make their own decisions, and develop a positive sense of self. Furthermore, to mature into independent adults with the capacity to make decisions.

Promoting children's participation has been described as a challenging process influenced by several reasons. The findings of this study indicate that children's participation in foster care decision-making draws on the individual, professional, and institution levels, which led to several practical implications. Recognising, for example, that despite the importance of the child's age, it will be necessary to avoid a bureaucratic assumption that there is a cut-off point to promote participation. Several studies pointed out that the child's age impacts their participation in decision-making. Services tend to consider the child immature to participate in decisions (Kriz

& Roundtree-Swain, 2017), but competence to make decisions depends on the decision itself and the child's characteristics (Thomas, 2001). Protection systems must be organised to guarantee respect for the right to participate, regardless of each child's profile, past, and path in the protection system. The application of guidelines that underline and reinforce this priority, to assure equal consideration and concern for each child, regardless of their characteristics, such as additional support needs or a history of drug use, can contribute to meaningful participation.

Another main finding of this study stresses the importance of the relationship between the child and the social worker. A trusting, sincere and confidential relationship is essential for children, who often experience challenging relationships with significant adults throughout their lives (Bouma et al., 2018; McPherson et al., 2021). It is up to the professionals to provide opportunities for participation, and the relationship will be more cooperative based on effective communication and involvement in decisions. Furthermore, participants' lack of participation is often associated with not being informed about what was happening (e.g., Kriz & Roudntree-Swain, 2017). Information and dialogue also help carry out transitions and better adjustment to foster care, returning home or leaving care (Basels et al., 2017; Kriz & Roundtree-Swain, 2017). These considerations should be equally applied to caregivers (Pert et al., 2017; Kriz & Roudtree-Swain, 2017).

Another implication from this study is the need to ensure training, with multiple formats, for professionals who intervene in review / statutory meetings or judicial proceedings, namely in court. Meetings should not be excessively formal, threatening, or dull. The professionals involved should be able to encourage children to express their ideas and feel comfortable and willing to engage in debate and decisions (Weisz et al., 2011). Data suggest that the children's degree of participation in review meetings depends on the proactive role of the professional that has a closer relationship with the case – social worker/foster carer – or legally represents the child (Kriz & Roundtree-Swain, 2017). These training processes can be enriched with the participation of foster youths and young adults who have been fostered, who have had similar experiences and can thus present their testimonies and help overcome a specific resistance or lack of knowledge of the professionals involved (Havlicek, 2016).

The philosophy of shared decision-making at the institutional level must facilitate participation in children's and young people, simultaneously promoting values such as respect, dignity or democracy, believing in their capacity to decide in their best interest. Meaningful participation is an ongoing process in permanent construction that finds its full justification in child-centred reasons. That should be considered valuable in configuring child protection policies and practices.

This review adds to previous studies as it was conducted in the context of foster care and updates information on the current state of practice (Bijleveld et al., 2015; McPherson et al., 2021). In this sense, it allows monitoring the extent to which children's participation has been attended to in foster care services and what factors have been pointed out.

This study might present some limitations, such as the possibility that other studies were not identified despite the robust methodology. It is also known that scoping reviews do not assess the chosen papers' quality and methodological validity. There

were other essential articles before 2009, but our focus was on the most contemporary contributions to this topic, and therefore we limited the research to 12 years.

Additionally, scoping reviews do not evaluate the chosen papers' quality and methodological validity. Nevertheless, this scoping review might be helpful for other researchers to perform systematic reviews around the topics presented here. For future research, it would be interesting to carry out a similar systematic review in kinship care and to develop a comparison with the data obtained in this study.

7 Conclusions

Sharing power with children should be a priority for decision-makers in all situations where social workers have the authority to offer a natural choice to the child, like alternative placements. It is essential to ensure that children feel heard by professionals and carers, that their wishes and opinions are taken seriously, and that children effectively exercise participation in foster care. It is also an essential sign of respect for the children involved (Kriz & Roundtree-Swain, 2017). Our work highlights the gap between a formal discourse adopted by the system's teams and decision-makers and a practice that, despite being institutionally correct, does not value meaningful participation. Formal compliance with processes and deadlines is recognized to the detriment of each child's individuality, interests, weaknesses, and ambitions. Tasks and decisions are carried out, but there is still no institutional culture/philosophy, time, and resources to offer children an opportunity to understand what is happening, express their opinion, and voice their desires, often disregarded by decision-makers. In turn, this study acknowledges that a long way has to go to make effective the participation of young people in decision-making in foster care, highlighting:

- the need to take care of the relationship between the child and the social worker;
- the conditions to rethink the training of those involved in review/statutory meetings or judicial proceedings;
- the importance of not considering age as an objective and only criterion to promote participation;
- the consideration and respect for children's involvement when it occurs; and.
- the factors that can impact children's participation in decision-making in foster care.

Data Availability The data that support the findings of this study are publicly available.

Declaration of Interest None.

Ethicals Approval Statement The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki; Confidentiality and anonymity of the data were respected throughout the entire process, according to Law 58/2019, 8 August, about Personal Data Protection.

Patient Consent Statement not applicable.

Permission to Reproduce Material from Other Sources not applicable.

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