



Stakeholders' Perception on Youths' e-Participation in Finland: Case Virtual Council

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Abstract

Widening youth participation is recognised as essential in national decision-making processes. One inclusive approach to achieving this is by providing e-participation possibilities targeted towards youth. In this qualitative study, we explore a digital prototype of a virtual council of youth in Finland and ask what factors either promote or hamper the ability of educational institutions, non-governmental youth organisations and public authorities to implement e-participation tools in their daily activities. Our data comprise six expert interviews reflecting the institutional approach to considering youth e-participation from the perspective of online deliberation. Thus, this research provides an empirical understanding of the role of youth e-participation by stating that a virtual youth council can provide inclusive participation opportunity for youth in a different geographical location in an era when different digital participation channels are likely to increase. Our study also shows that a virtual council of youth requires institutional collaboration with different stakeholder groups. However, the quality of implementation of the virtual council would be enhanced by taking into account youth interest, ensuring inclusiveness and clarifying the normative and political goals of youth (e-) participation.

Keywords Virtual council · Youth participation · e-Participation · Online deliberation · Finnish youth policy

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Introduction

Improving youth participation in societal decision-making is a crucial goal and a critical issue for reinforcing a democratic society and guaranteeing a democratic, high-quality administration (Martin 2012). However, several normative and social obstacles hamper young people's societal participation, including restricted opportunities to partake in legislative processes, despite the existence of laws guaranteeing youth participation in societal decision-making (Meriläinen et al. 2022). Furthermore, young people, like all citizens, encompass diverse life situations, societal backgrounds and geographical locations, which affect their willingness to engage in societal participation (Bessant 2020; Pietilä et al. 2021). Consequently, the objective of this study is to investigate how a virtual council for youth, designed to offer an easily accessible, dialogical, and anonymous online platform for societal participation (Pietilä 2022), can overcome these barriers in the institutional environment. This includes educational institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), thereby encompassing young people from various backgrounds across different geographical locations in Finland.

Based on previous studies, youth participation is an increasingly multisided phenomenon encompassing various forms of formal and informal activities and processes that are both carried out voluntarily by young people and guided by official bodies regionally, nationally and internationally (Gretschel et al. 2014; Weiss 2020). For example, young people have taken advantage of alternative forms of participation, such as demonstrations and exchanges of opinions online (Bessant 2020; Weiss 2020). Also, national governments in different countries in Europe (Crowley and Moxon 2018; Pitti et al. 2021) and elsewhere (Bessant 2020) have established various policy goals and practical interventions to provide easily accessible opportunities to be engaged in societal decision-making on a regional and national level by establishing an online consultation platform (such as in Austria), engaging youth chat forums to be part of decision-making (such as in Denmark) and introducing an extension to lower the voting age (such as in Australia) (Bessant 2020; European Commission 2022).

In this research, we approach youth participation by focusing on a Finnish example of a youth virtual council representing one form of digital societal participation (Pietilä et al. 2021) that occurs in various institutional contexts. During recent years, youth digital societal participation, such as sharing and liking posts concerning social inequity on social media platforms (Dishon and Ben-Porath 2018; Pietilä et al. 2021) or online participatory budgeting targeted for youth (Falanga 2023), has become one of the key venues to engage youth in decision-making processes (Dishon and Ben-Porath 2018). Previous studies have stressed that youth digital societal participation can enhance national deliberative youth participation (Gretschel et al. 2014) and can be one way to support young people's self-efficiency, especially if they have no previous experience in influencing political and societal issues (Pietilä et al. 2021; Pietilä 2022). On the other hand, online platforms can contain problematic elements, such as shaming and trolling, compared with other traditional outlets, such as newspapers, as online discussions

are not necessarily well-regulated (Dishon and Ben-Porath 2018). Nevertheless, there is a limited amount of research on how public authorities have implemented different forms of youth digital societal participation tools in educational institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), especially in Finland, where virtual councils or traditional mini-publics have not yet been widely applied (Koskimaa and Rapeli 2020).

In this research, we explore how youth digital societal participation is implemented in Finnish institutional environments, such as educational institutions and non-governmental youth organisations (e.g., a Youth NGO), that comprise an integral part of young people's daily lives. An empirical example in our study is the consultation of youth (aged 14–17) in a digital virtual council (prototype) that has been developed in the multidisciplinary research project through which the Ministry responsible for legal orders and reinforcing the structure of democracy (later referred to as the Ministry) consulted them in a national antiracism work programme in the spring of 2021. In this article, we focus on the data obtained from interviews with six expert representatives from educational institutions, a Youth NGO and the Ministry. The interviewees' input was an integral part of the virtual council implementation relating to antiracism strategy work. In our research, such an institutional network provides a context for improving youth participation by adopting deliberative principles (e.g., Curato and Böker 2016; Esau et al. 2017; Zgiep 2019) and thereby strengthening young people's participation as a critical enabler of democracy.

The rest of this article includes the following sections. First, youth participation in Finland is explored by describing the typical characteristics of legislation, the institutional context and youth engagement in societal decision-making, representing the youth participation regime in this research. Second, the application of the analytical approach of online deliberation, the collected data and the research method are described. Third, the findings are presented by categorising the main results by the identified (context-related) factors and analytically interpreting them from the perspective of deliberative democracy, indicating both the institutional capacity of educational institutions and Youth NGOs to enhance youth societal participation as well as reflecting the systemic ability to reinforce deliberative democracy within the youth participation regime in Finland.

The Youth Participation Regime in Finland

In Finland, young people's rights to be heard and to participate in the decisions that affect them are ensured by legislation and stressed in the national youth policy. For example, the Finnish Youth Act 2016 states that youth¹ should be consulted in matters that affect them; local and central government agencies shall offer them opportunities to be involved in issues related to youth work and policies (s. 24). Also,

¹ According to the Finnish Youth Act 2016, youth is defined as all persons who are under 29 years old. However, often in youth policy and strategies are focused on youth aged 12/15–25, considered to represent the core group (MINEDU 2020).

the national programme on youth work and youth policy (2020–2023) outlines the diversification of instruments for youth participation and direct democracy for young people (MINEDU 2020). Likewise, improving democracy and human rights education, as well as youth participation, are important goals of the National Democracy Programme 2025 (Ministry of Justice 2019), representing one of the main goals in the governmental programme by Prime Minister Sanna Marin (Finnish Government 2019). In a survey of youth participation conducted under the National Democracy Programme 2025 by the Ministry of Justice (2021a), young people themselves stated that they needed more information on current local and regional issues and on how to take part in societal decision-making. Additionally, youth stressed that information should be provided at an early stage of decision-making and preparation processes (Ministry of Justice 2021a).

In general, youth participation in societal decision-making in Finland comprises various forms of political participation, such as demonstrations, making value-based consumer choices and signing petitions (Pekkarinen and Myllyniemi 2019). Some young people are also interested in traditional forms of political participation, such as voting in elections (Harrinvirta 2019). However, participation seems to be accumulating; the same young people are engaged in societal decision-making in many ways. Forms of participation may also vary, depending on the young person's educational background or home region. For example, young people living in the city may have more opportunities to participate in NGO activities than those residing in rural areas (Pekkarinen and Myllyniemi 2019). Thus, different e-participation forms, such as online voting in participatory budgeting targeted for youth (City of Helsinki 2023), that are integrated into the activities of educational institutions and youth organisations can at least potentially represent an inclusive approach to enhance societal participation of the youth among diverse groups in different regions (Dishon and Ben-Porath 2018).

In this research, our main focus is on those institutions that are near the youth's daily lives: educational institutions (comprehensive school vocational institution and general upper secondary school), as well as a Youth NGO that aims to support the youth in managing their daily lives. Based on previous studies (Dishon and Ben-Porath 2018; Edelstein 2011; Leek 2019), educational institutions' role in enhancing youth participation is stressed. As stated by Edelstein (2011: 128), "The only institution that can provide opportunities to cultivate a democratic experience—not for elite groups, but all children and youth—is the school. No other system involves the entire young generation".

In Finland, educational institutions have a legal and educational responsibility to support civic engagement (see e.g., Act on General Upper Secondary Education 2018); thus, they represent key environments for transmitting civic norms and encouraging the youth to be acquainted with democratic principles (Leek 2019). Equally, in Finnish society, NGOs provide services in the public interest, and through these, improving youth participation is generally strong (see e.g., Ruuskanen et al. 2020). Despite the solid democratic ethos, Finnish society has its shortcomings in light of previous research. For example, a recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) country report (2021) stresses the "Finnish paradox", stating that while Finns trust political institutions and are

satisfied with democracy, citizens do not consider their possibilities to participate in political processes. This is at least partly recognised in a recent national youth policy in terms of addressing young people's diverse backgrounds (including language, gender, ethnic origin and functional capacity) when implementing the national youth policy programme (MINEDU 2020, p. 14).

Virtual Councils of Youth as an Example of Online Deliberation in the Institutional Settings

Our empirical case represents a youth consultation via a virtual council prototype implemented in four educational institutions and one Youth NGO. The consultation aimed to engage 14–17-year-old youth in national antiracism strategy work coordinated by the Ministry. Thus, the empirical context of our research is a youth participation regime that includes various stakeholders, such as representatives from the Ministry and teachers from educational institutions. Moreover, the empirical context is affected by the different objectives of the institutions involved as well as their mutual aim to support youth participation at both national and local levels (MINEDU 2020; Youth Act 2016).

Analytically, we consider the virtual council as an example of online deliberation (Esau et al. 2021; Esau et al. 2017). In our study, deliberation is approached broadly by acknowledging that communication in online deliberation can include various forms of reason-giving processes among individuals from different groups (Esau et al. 2021; Esau et al. 2017). Also, online deliberative practices and communicative means can vary depending on the topic or deliberative online forum (Esau et al. 2021). Despite these variables, online deliberation aims to be inclusive, reciprocal and respectful (Strandberg and Grönlund 2018). This kind of approach to online deliberation indicates in our study that the virtual council has deliberative potential to promote the inclusiveness of youth societal participation in different institutional settings by fostering dialogue between young people and decision-makers (Pietilä et al. 2021). Equally, the virtual council may only selectively represent young people's perspectives when they do not reflect mainstream views, and statements formulated by the virtual council can therefore suffer from a lack of legitimacy, especially if the public authorities selectively take advantage of the statements generated by the virtual council. Concerns regarding legitimate government authority are emphasised in studies related to deliberative mini-publics (see e.g., Smith and Setälä 2018). In addition, youth contribution is not always considered in a transparent way in the formal consultation, even in cases where youth use official platforms (Meriläinen et al. 2022). Thus, similar considerations can also arise in virtual council implementations, particularly if the objective of the virtual council is to contribute to national policy processes.

In this research, we also recognise different institutional settings in which online deliberation is taking place. As showed in previous studies, institutions' characteristics, such as structures or values, have an impact on the ways in which deliberative processes can be conducted (Zgiep 2019). This is specifically relevant to our study, which aims to explore how institutions near to youths' social life, such as

comprehensive schools or Youth NGOs, enable online deliberation for the youth. However, the functionality of the system can also emerge as a significant concern within a youth participation regime, particularly when online deliberation is employed as a collaborative effort involving various parties, including the local Youth NGO and the Ministry. According to Zgiep (2019, 1-2), a deliberate system can be understood from a network perspective as a “relational-pluralist structure” that encompasses both horizontal and vertical ties among institutions, individual actors and entire networks. This analytical approach, focused on institutions, enables the utilization of digitality to foster discussions at various local and national levels (Lyons 2017), including the actor-centred level (intra-institutional), institution-centred level (inter-institutional) and network-centred level (trans-institutional) (Zgiep 2019). At the same time, different institutional settings may also include various normative and practical questions to be solved when designing deliberative initiatives, such as who will be recruited and how it will be done, what is the ultimate goal of the deliberation and can the outcome of the deliberation include alternative viewpoints (Wolfe 2018).

Previous studies show that it is crucial for youth to perceive that their participation in virtual councils has an impact, and participants themselves receive acknowledgment of that (Pietilä et al. 2021; Pietilä 2022). In this study, we analytically assume that the deliberative relevance of virtual councils in different institutional settings can be approached via three dimensions: legitimacy seeking, deliberation making and capacity building (Curato and Böker 2016). This frame is conducted by Curato and Böker (2016) in their studies on the mini-public scope to enhance deliberative capacity in a broader sense. Hypothetically, we assume that virtual councils possess comparable potential to mini-publics in fostering deliberative capacity within the realm of youth participation. According to Curato and Böker (2016), democratic legitimacy indicates the normative ideal in which deliberative practices have a recognised role in societal decision-making (see also Dryzek and Tucker 2008). This potential can be supported by deliberation making, which refers to the capacity of deliberative practices to synthesise different perspectives and transmit these notions to a wider audience (Curato and Böker 2016). This kind of approach stresses the deliberative practices potential for more comprehensive system-level deliberation, which can be further supported by emphasising the deliberative practice ability to enhance broader capacity building in society (Curato and Böker 2016).

As Esau et al. (2021) state, online deliberation is tied to both the type of online practices (arenas) and the broader context in where online deliberative practices take place. In our study, virtual councils facilitate anonymous discussions among participants. The discussions take place in written form, using pseudonyms, on the virtual council’s own closed platform, requiring personal registration. Also, virtual councils are embedded with institutional aims, such as fostering youths’ active membership in society (see e.g., Act on General Upper Secondary Education 2018) and national goals to ensure that youths’ voices are heard in the issues that concern their lives (see e.g., Youth Act 2016). Thus, in this study, the consultations via a virtual council represent a potential means of fostering a deliberative turn in youth digital societal participation (see e.g., Pietilä 2022). At its best, this can diversify opportunities for young people to participate in societal decision-making, for example, in rural regions, and contribute to

the mitigation of intergenerational adverse impacts of significant wicked problems of our times (e.g., climate change). However, this may require a broader (political) strategic approach (see e.g., Lafont 2015), the institutionalisation of virtual councils and young people's perception of the virtual council as a meaningful way to participate in societal discussions (Pietilä et al. 2021; Pietilä 2022).

Empirical Case, Data, Method and Analysis

In this qualitative study, we explore how educational institutions, Youth NGOs and governmental agencies can maintain, improve or hamper youth's opportunities to engage in societal decision-making processes through virtual council. As previous studies of virtual councils show, for youth, virtual council provides one suitable option to be engaged in societal decision-making processes, especially if the discussion topic of the virtual council is considered important, concrete outcomes of the participation can be provided and virtual council provides a safe environment to express opinions (Pietilä et al. 2021; Pietilä 2022). In this study, we aim to complement the previous studies on virtual council by considering the institutional perspective of virtual council. Therefore, we seek to answer the following research questions (RQs): (1) What factors affect youth's participation in virtual councils in local and national institutions? And (2) How do these factors vary or remain consistent across different institutional contexts? Based on the empirical findings, we will also analytically consider the potential deliberative impact of virtual councils.

Empirically, our study focuses on implementing (a digital prototype of) a virtual council for youth consultation relating to national antiracism strategy work in the spring of 2021 in three educational institutions (a comprehensive school, vocational institution and general upper secondary school) and one Youth NGO located in different regions of Finland. The Ministry responsible for the antiracism strategy initiated the arrangement of consultation via a virtual council as it provided a new kind of e-participation tool to involve young people in decision-making processes in new and meaningful ways. The ability to participate online was also important due to the restrictions of COVID-19. The Ministry considered young people as a key group to be consulted in anti-racism strategy works as young people have increasingly experienced racism on personal and structural levels, especially in school contexts (Ministry of Justice 2021b).

In this empirical case, the Ministry was responsible for recruiting the institutional partners, determining the schedule for the consultation and providing relevant background information about the strategy work to young people. Teachers from the educational institutions and the coordinator of the Youth NGO were responsible for recruiting the participants to the virtual council, coordinating the timeframe for the virtual council and providing monitoring support during the online discussions. The role of the multidisciplinary research group was to provide the virtual council service with technical support.

Participants received an invitation to virtual council via email, and after that, they registered in the service to join in online discussion using aliases. Altogether, five virtual councils took place during the spring of 2021, and each of the discussion

lasted 1–2 weeks asynchronously, depending on the institution's schedule. During this time, the virtual council allowed individual participants to contribute to the discussion freely. However, the nature of the institution also influenced the level of participation. At the educational institutions, the virtual council was implemented either as a part of the school day or as a part of the student board's activity. In the Youth NGO, the virtual council was a voluntary-based activity for those youth that were engaged in the Youth NGOs' activity. Prior to the online discussions on the virtual council's platform (owned by the university), the Ministry conducted an online session using various platforms, such as Zoom or Teams, based on the institution's preference. During these sessions, a representative from the Ministry introduced the objectives of the anti-racism plan, outlined the schedule for its further development and highlighted the main goals for the virtual council.

At the end of the discussion phase, the final statement was written, either with the support of the teachers/volunteers or by the youth independently. Participants had the possibility to comment on the final statement, which was then delivered to the Ministry and used as a part of the anti-racism strategy work development. In the case of educational institutions, the virtual council was implemented either as part of a compulsory course or based on the voluntary participation of representatives of the local student union. In the local Youth NGO, participation in the virtual council was voluntary.

In the previous studies conducted in the All Youth Want To Rule Their World (ALL-YOUTH) research group, youths' experiences using the virtual council prototype have been explored rather extensively to gain a comprehensive understanding of how to design a virtual council that best supports youths' perception of suitable e-participation (see Pietilä et al. 2021; Pietilä 2022). However, throughout the implementation phase of virtual councils, the institutional level has been empirically emphasised because virtual councils have consistently been implemented in cooperation with local or national institutions. To gain more information on how different stakeholders can support youths' e-participation, in this study, we conducted semi-structured interviews with six expert participants involved in the virtual council implementations. Three participants represented teachers in educational institutions (a vocational institution, general upper secondary school and comprehensive school in different locations in Finland). One participant represented a local Youth NGO, and two participants were public officers at the ministry responsible for legal protection and democracy. The selection of interviewees was based on their vital roles in the virtual council implementation in their own institutions. In practice, the participants were responsible for organising the virtual council, coordinating the time frame for the virtual council and providing background information for youth participating in virtual councils. Therefore, participants in this research represented institutional perspectives that hold a crucial role in providing youth opportunities to be engaged in societal decision-making processes either as part of the comprehensive or secondary education or during the youths' spare time. All six interviews focused on institutional principles (e.g., regulations relating to youth participation) and actions (how youth participation is done in the institutional level), indicating an "inter-institutional" or "trans-institutional" approach that enabled us to consider larger deliberative context-dependent conditions and the roles of different institutions (Zgiep

2019). The data was collected in the spring of 2021. Due to the restrictions imposed to control the spread of COVID-19, the Microsoft Teams application was used when conducting the interviews, which lasted 45 min each on average.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed by applying qualitative content analysis (Bengtsson 2016). The analysis process was based on abductive logic, indicating the combination of the researchers' prior knowledge of a virtual council and emerging notions related to a theoretical approach of deliberative democracy. During the analysis process, the transcribed interviews were read several times, and a preliminary coding list was established based on the first observation during the interviews, earlier experiences related to a virtual council and the notions stressed in the previous research (e.g., Pietilä et al. 2021). After that, the coding list was reformulated, and the codes were grouped according to the types of institutions (local or national) and whether the factors related to implementation were based on the institutions' internal issues, such as teachers' interest in trying something new, or external issues, such as aims stated in the legislation. This grouping was based on the different positions of the institutions to enhance the deliberation and support youth participation, which became clear at this stage of the analysis. For example, ministries operate nationally in different administrative areas and have political responsibility in their respective fields. Educational institutions and NGOs do not have the same political responsibility; instead, they operate in the local domain in close interaction with the youth (in their everyday life). Thus, we wanted to compare (among others) whether awareness of or views on social interaction at these various levels differed, and if so, how they differed, as this could explain the institutional environment of deliberation enhanced by virtual councils. Finally, the categorisation was further synthesised and interpreted from the deliberative democracy perspective (e.g., Curato and Böker 2016; Zgiep 2019), which provided an analytical lens to understand virtual council as part of the wider youth participation regime. At this stage, we also utilised our previous understanding of the institutional context and the virtual council of youth; in previous studies, one of the authors (Juusola) has focused specifically on understanding educational institutions from different administrative angles. As a result, the interpretation of the empirical data shares similarities with the theoretical field of social institutions (e.g., Scott 2014). Additionally, one of the authors (Varsaluoma) has been responsible for developing a (pilot) virtual council for youth in the multidisciplinary project and thus has a comprehensive understanding of the development of the virtual council together with youth. Both authors have also been involved in studies aiming to explore youth participation and wellbeing in different contexts. These experiences have created a pre-understanding of the way in which institutions operate and the basis of youths' needs in virtual council operations.

This research design did have some limitations. While our study provides valuable insights into the experiences of various stakeholders involved in virtual councils' implementation, by excluding youth participants from our research, we may have missed nuances and perspectives that could have enhanced the validity and applicability of our findings. Therefore, it is crucial for future studies to consider youth participation already in research design phases and when agreeing, for example, with educational institutions' possibilities to engage youth in research processes voluntarily during the school day.

Findings

In general, the implementation of the virtual council in collaboration with local institutions (vocational institution, general upper secondary school, comprehensive school and Youth NGO) and national institution (the Ministry) brought a variety of institutional characteristics to the forefront, which had further implications for how youth consultation, as one type of online deliberation, could be provided for youth. To approach the dynamics of the different institutional factors, we analyse empirical findings and interpret them for both the institutional-centric approach (e.g., Zgiep 2019) and the analytical approach of online deliberation (e.g., Esau et al. 2021; Esau et al. 2017). To ensure the anonymity of the used quotes, the participants are referred to as Participant 1, Participant 2, and so on. The authors translated the original Finnish quotes into English. The quotes have been chosen to demonstrate the key findings.

Contextual Factors for Implementing the Virtual Council of Youth in the Institutional Settings

The main factors affecting the implementation of the virtual council relate to regulatory and normative factors (external factors), internal abilities to implement experimental technological platforms and willingness to enhance youth participation (internal factors), as well as spatiotemporal situations in each institution that participated in this research (spatiotemporal factors) (Fig. 1). These factors reflect the meso-macro-dynamics (see e.g., Zgiep 2019) through which virtual council as an example of online deliberative interventions (see e.g., Esau et al. 2021; Esau et al. 2017) can stimulate youth participation in societal decision-making in institutions and at the national level, thus diversifying youth participation in a way that can strengthen democracy. At the same time, the virtual council is interlinked with the institution's core duties and the partly separated network of institutional actors, combining national actors (representatives of the Ministry), local actors (representatives of educational institutions and the Youth NGO) and platform providers (the multidisciplinary research project). This kind of trans-institutional collaboration (Zgiep 2019) indicates the relationship between different institutions and their connection via the virtual council.

As presented in Fig. 1, *external factors* stress regulatory and normative aspects of local organisations (educational institutions and the Youth NGO) and public administration (the Ministry), indicating characteristics that obligate (instrumentally or societally, see e.g., Scott 2014) local organisations and public administration to act in a certain way and focus on specific issues. Regulatory aspects clearly formed an important basis, especially for the participants representing educational institutions, who stated that the role of the national principles for the curriculum is an important starting point to enhance youth participation. Indeed, active membership in society is one of the fundamental aims of education (see e.g., Act on General Upper Secondary Education 2018). This is further emphasised in the national core curriculum set by the Finnish National Agency for Education in terms of basic and

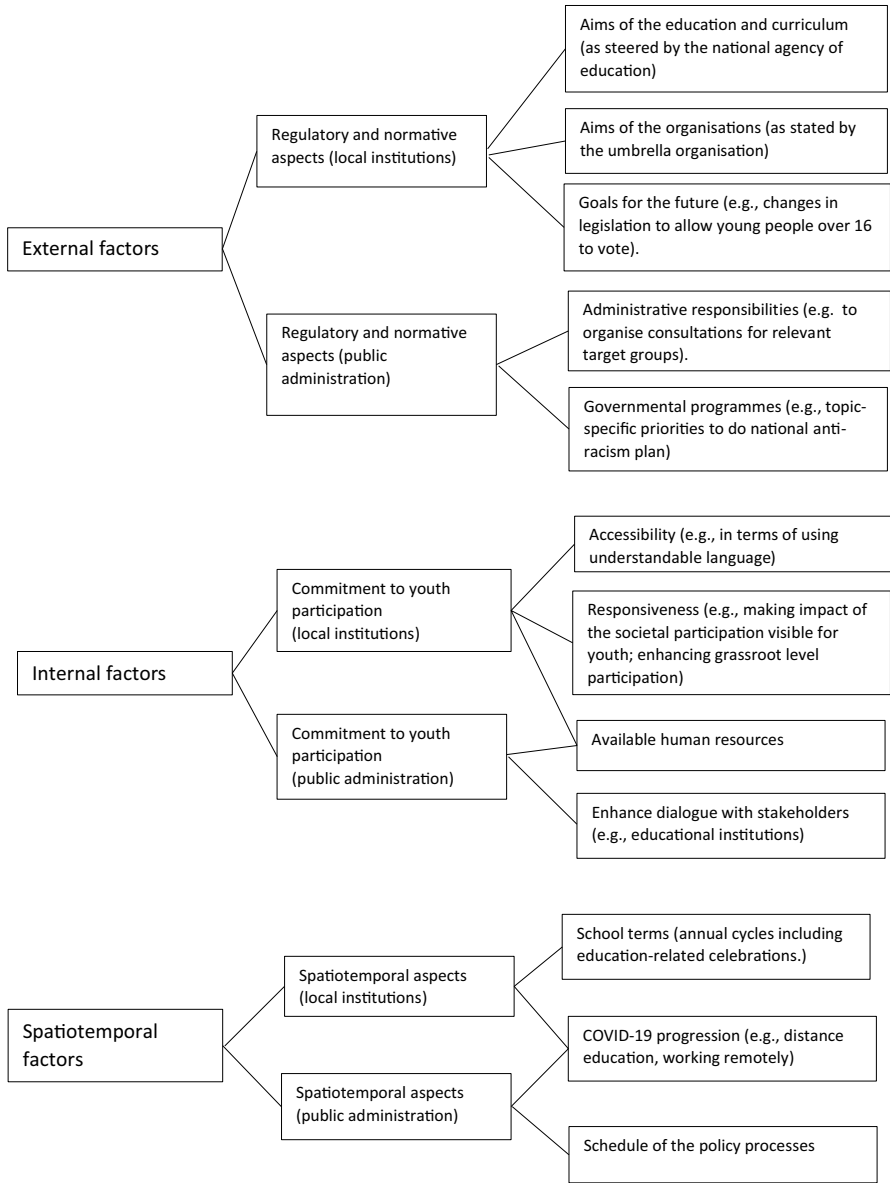


Fig. 1 Summary of the main contextual factors

general upper secondary education. In the case of vocational education, active membership in the society is part of the general competencies defined by the statute (*asetus*) of vocational education approved by the Finnish government. In the interviews, the participants also stressed the broader (legal) position of young people in formal participation. For example, one of the participants highlighted the need to change

legislation to allow young people over 16 to vote. Currently, the general voting right in Finland applies to everyone over the age of 18.

For the Youth NGO included in this study, the virtual council activities conformed with the organisation's own regulations. Similarly, the Ministry has the political and administrative responsibilities to improve its executive branches and hold consultations with relevant target groups. Regulatory and normative factors, particularly for educational institutions and the Ministry, set out a value-based approach to maintaining democracy and enhancing the active citizenship of youth. However, external factors (regulatory and normative aspects) set the basis that can be concretised by various methods decided by the institutions.

Internal factors indicate the institutions' available (human) resources and commitment to enhancing youth participation. For example, in the Youth NGO, the virtual council was implemented with the help of enthusiastic young volunteers, who took care of the recruitment of participants and the practical implementation of the virtual council for the organisation. Human resources and related virtual council practices were also highlighted in interviews with Ministry representatives. As Participant 6 stated:

If a virtual council is going to be a permanent service, then it would be useful to provide clear guidelines for different users, such as guidelines that consider the different roles involved in the virtual council, for example, from the officials who, from the point of view of the end user of the information provided via the virtual council, what is expected, who are the other key people involved in virtual council implementation, such as teachers and the chair of the virtual council, and what kinds of steps are included in the implementation process and what needs to be taken into account

Participants' commitment to enhancing youth participation was observed in this study, especially in relation to cultural and linguistic accessibility, including respectful interaction and responsiveness. This notion is also stated in previous studies. For example, Manosevitch et al. (2014) assert that a (practical) design of online (deliberative) initiatives can value participation but disregard the substantive ideas of deliberative democracy that enhance certain political and moral cultures. Likewise, Sass and Dryzek (2014: 21) indicate that a culture-sensitive approach to deliberation considers "publicly accessible meanings, symbols and norms", shaping the ways in which different actors engage themselves in democratic discourse. Indeed, these notions stress the importance of context and its connection to the approach to youth participation. As stated by the participants, organisational ability and contributions to providing linguistically accessible information to young people enhance communication in the virtual council. As Participant 3 described:

If we want young people to participate in societal decision making, the language we use must be comprehensible to young people. It's a big deal, if we want, for example, young people to consider and comment on 'good relations among different population groups' [laughs], it may be that 'good population relations' may not be an easy term to understand, especially for a young person who doesn't speak Finnish as one's mother tongue.

The representatives of the Ministry approached interaction from a slightly different perspective. For them, interaction with different stakeholders strengthened the legitimacy of the decisions made and the approved strategies. They also stressed intergovernmental cooperation with educational institutions. However, they paid less attention to responsiveness, that is, what would happen to the joint statement presented through the virtual council and how the presented perspectives would become part of the national programmes. In contrast, responsiveness was emphasised in the interviews with those representing educational institutions, who stated that it would be crucial, on the one hand, to identify issues of importance to young people and, on the other hand, to give a response to young people for their participation (in societal decision-making). In turn, the participants representing the Youth NGO stated that to enhance youth ability and interest in active participation in society, it would be essential to start from the grassroots level, providing participation opportunities related to issues close to youth's daily lives.

Spatiotemporal factors emphasise both spatial and temporal dimensions. In this study, spatial dimensions indicated changes in activity due to the COVID-19 progression (e.g., distance education). Temporal dimensions included notions related to the school calendar (e.g., holiday breaks) and the schedule for developing (new) policy programmes. Presumably, the changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic were significant. It triggered the need to apply different online tools. For example, in the spring of 2021, lectures in secondary educational institutions were only provided online. Moreover, it was not possible to present a face-to-face introduction to the use of the virtual council or background information on antiracism national strategy work. As a result, in some cases, the virtual council scarcely held a discussion. As stated by a participant representing an educational institution, some of the young people participating in the virtual council could have benefited from live interactions and more specific examples of presenting their views in writing. At the same time, an online, anonymous written discussion made it easier for some young people to talk about sensitive topics without feeling that they were representatives of a particular (ethnic) group, as stated by the participant from the Youth NGO.

Additionally, the participants stated that the schedules of educational institutions and those of policy programmes did not always coincide. One of the participants described the scheduling-related challenges, indicating that educational institutions had collaborated with the local authorities (e.g., city council representatives) on a regular basis, but sometimes, requests from the local authorities came on a tight schedule. This could be difficult to adapt to the school's own annual cycle and might even mean that students would not want to participate at all. As stressed by Participant 3

[Youth participation] should not be organised so that you just say that you'll listen to young people; instead, young people should be heard, so I think that's maybe the biggest thing.

Similarly, the representatives of the Ministry stressed the process of hearings and consultation, indicating the schedule of the policy processes. They stated the importance of including hearings and consultation at the preliminary stages of the policy process, as this would strengthen the impact of the consultation. This mix of different institutional schedules requires careful planning in implementing the virtual

council, which is not necessarily supported by the hectic nature of the political process and the unpredictability of the decision-making process.

Discussion: Virtual Council's Ability to Enhance Deliberative Youth Participation in Finland

The capacity of the virtual council to promote youth participation in inter-institutional and trans-institutional collaboration (Zgiep 2019) is linked to the recognised role of the virtual council as one of the influential channels for enabling interaction and facilitating debate. As Curato and Böker (2016) state, legitimacy in deliberative democracy illustrates the normative ideal. However, based on the empirical findings, in the case of the virtual council, this is still in the development phase. Currently, the administration of the virtual council of youth has been transferred from the multidisciplinary research project to the online *demokratia.fi*-democracy services, administrated by the Ministry of Justice. This new premise can strengthen the institutionalisation and recognised position of the virtual council as part of the youth consultation. Also, it can make the virtual council known to political decision-makers. As pointed out by Koskimaa and Rapeli (2020), in Finland, the potential of deliberative democracy initiatives such as mini-publics is not well recognised by policymakers, although recently, initiatives to support this have been taken, for example, by inviting policymakers to participate in a mini-public discussion (Grönlund et al. 2022). In our empirical case, joint statements composed by the virtual council of youth have not appeared in the wider (public) discussion.

Nevertheless, enhancing youth participation via knowledge-based argumentation may require face-to-face contacts, as highlighted in the interviews. This is especially true when the virtual council's aim is to represent public consultation whose topics (e.g., antiracism and good population relations) indicate multidimensional, complex phenomena. In this case, the legitimacy of the virtual council can be supported by providing its participants at least an opportunity to include face-to-face meetings in the virtual council implementation processes, where the participants can ask more specific questions about the council's theme and platform practices. Equally, virtual councils in our research were conducted during the lockdowns caused by COVID-19 progression. This has potentially impacted the ways in which interviewees emphasised the need for increased onsite interaction. Nevertheless, onsite meetings can contribute to the engagement of virtual council discussions. As noted by Korthagen et al. (2020), face-to-face meetings can provide richer engagement in the discussion.

In the virtual council of youth, the deliberative debate has so far focused more on the research aims stated by the multidisciplinary research project or a specific national policy strategy, such as antiracism strategy programmes (as in our empirical case example). Therefore, the main purpose of the final statement has been to contribute to a certain specific goal, defined beforehand. At the same time, the possibilities of the joint statement produced in the virtual council can be expanded by bringing the final statements of the virtual council to the attention of a broader audience. Indications of this kind of expansion were noticeable in the interviews at the institutional level, where a representative of an educational institution planned to inform

the whole school about the final statement made by the virtual council through the institution's own information channels. The representatives of the educational institutions also thought that the remarks made in the virtual council could stimulate discussion in other courses. These notions can increase deliberation-making (Curato and Böker 2016), indicating the situation where views stated in the virtual council of youth are presented in public, at least at the institutional or regional level.

In light of these emphasised considerations, can the virtual council of youth then stimulate capacity building with a broader scope? Previous research has already shown that a virtual council can increase individual interest in social participation (Pietilä et al. 2021). This kind of notion may mean that individual-level capacity building may have a positive impact on the broader culture of youth participation at a general level. However, understanding the long-term impact of virtual councils would require a longitudinal study that considers different institutional arrangements in a rather short-term-focused policy context (Felicetti et al. 2016). According to Martin (2012), youth consultation often aims to legitimise political decisions (Martin 2012) instead of strengthening the youth's own approach to participation in society. From the perspective of regional accessibility, the virtual council can at least potentially provide a single channel for those young people who lack multiple participation opportunities in their home region (Pekkarinen and Myllyniemi 2019).

Conclusion

In this research, our aim is to identify the factors that support or hamper the implementation of the virtual council of youth at the institutional level from the perspective of online deliberation. We have also identified the virtual council's potential ability to improve youth participation in various institutional settings. Our study provides three key insights into the implementation of the virtual council and the enhancement of youth societal participation in the institutions close to the youth. First, the implementation of the virtual council for youth is an inter-institutional and trans-institutional activity that requires the institutional ability to operate in the multidimensional (institutional) environment and willingness to collaborate in a mutually beneficial way that considers external and internal factors, such as regulations and institutions' internal aims that are embedded with spatiotemporal aspects. In practice, this can mean agreeing on realistic timetables, ensuring adequate human resources and identifying young people's own starting points before the virtual council is implemented.

Second, our study indicates that virtual councils of youth can stimulate dialogue between young people and policymakers and have the potential to enhance deliberation (see e.g., Curato and Böker 2016) in educational institutions, Youth NGOs and public administration. At best, discussions and final statements created via a virtual council can support institutions' core duties, such as teaching, which can in turn enhance deliberation-making and stimulate wider public discussions. At the same time, it is important to make the impact of the final statement visible also for the youth—how the youth's ideas have been considered in societal

decision-making. This is particularly crucial if the virtual council is used to contribute to public policies.

Finally, our findings indicate that a virtual council or another online deliberative initiation will have its limitations. For example, while anonymity on online platforms can provide a safe space to consider ethnicity and other sensitive topics, the statements produced via a virtual council may not recognise the diversity of the perspectives stated in the virtual council's debate. Likewise, suppose policymakers do not trust the contributions made via a virtual council (see e.g., Koskimaa and Rapeli 2020). In this case, there is a danger that the functioning of the virtual council will be used as a soft-governance instrument for national and local policymakers to establish a certain kind of practice. Identifying and making these issues visible is essential for developing inclusive virtual councils and clarifying the normative and political goals of youth participation.

In this study, we have considered the experiences of representatives of public administration and local institutions with the implementation of the virtual council. In the future, it would be useful to take into account the substantive ideas underlying virtual councils, hearings and consultations. What is the goal of a virtual council or consultation? Is the focus on the results (i.e., statements made in the virtual council), or should attention also be paid to the entire process and the principles behind deliberative democracy and their relations to democracy? And finally, how to ensure that deliberation initiatives tailored for youth do not only constitute an obligation for educational institutions, government ministries and other public authorities, but that young people themselves are involved in developing participation policies and methods.

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Declarations

Ethics Approval In Finland, researchers in all disciplines are required to adhere to the following general ethical principles:

Researchers must respect the dignity and autonomy of human research participants. The rights laid down in the Finnish Constitution (1999/731, Sections 6–23) are held by everybody. These include the right to life, personal liberty and integrity, freedom of movement, freedom of religion, freedom of expression, protection of property and the right to privacy.

Researchers must respect the material and immaterial cultural heritage and biodiversity. In accordance with Section 17 of the Finnish Constitution, the Sami, as an indigenous people, as well as the Roma and other groups, have the right to maintain and develop their own language and culture.

Research must be conducted in a way that does not cause significant risks, damage or harm to research participants, communities or other subjects.

In Finland, all scientific research must comply with the guidelines on responsible conduct of research (RCR Guidelines) drawn up by TENK.

Section 16 of the Finnish Constitution safeguards the freedom of science and arts. This freedom must be used responsibly.

Further information on the research ethics principles of Tampere University is available here: <https://www.tuni.fi/en/research/responsible-science-and-research/ethical-reviews-in-human-sciences#expander-trigger%2D%2D352765>.

In this research, these principles have been followed by the following:

Participants have received a description of the objectives and methods of the research.

Research permission was requested separately for each person targeted by the research (in interviews).

Participation in the study is voluntary for everyone, and participants have the right to cancel their participation at any point in the research process. This has been informed to the participants (in written) before the interviews.

Anonymity has been ensured in the data analysis, and no personal information is included in the research report.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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