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'I think they should be involved in some capacity.'

An interview study about perceptions of children's possibilities and abilities for democratic participation and influence.

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Abstract

This dissertation uses Wall's (2010) concept of childism and Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis to analyse the perceptions of students previously registered on a university course about children's rights. The focus for the study is the students' perceptions of children's possibilities and abilities for democratic participation and influence in the private and public sphere.

Data were gathered through semi structured in-depth interviews with 13 participants, held and recorded through Zoom. All of the participants expressed the view that children should be 'involved in some capacity' democratically, but their suggestions for influence and participation ranged from emphasising activism and minor decisions related to the family and the school (the private sphere) to advocacy for a low voting age (the public sphere). Some, such as Mika, suggested that education needs to improve so children can make informed democratic decisions, or that more experience and maturity are needed for children to become involved in formal major democratic decisions. Issues of protection and the adultification of children were stressed by some participants as arguments against children's involvement. Other perceptions underscored that children should not be deemed incompetent, that the experiences of all people are of relevance in a democracy, and that children should not be excluded from various arenas based on their age. Instead, it was argued that children should be able to represent themselves just like other groups in society. Many participants saw adults and their view of children as an obstacle to children's genuine democratic participation and influence. Here national and cultural aspects were thought to be of relevance, with some countries being described as more supportive than others. The taken for granted view of children as *adults in becoming* was questioned by some participants but supported by others.

Wall's (2010) concept of childism shines a light on normative adult views on democratic participation and calls for a reconstruction that empowers children and their perspectives. In an era where the rights and voices of children are of relevance, but democracy is declining (especially among youth), this dissertation argues that more attention should be given to the issue of children's democratic participation.

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Authors declaration

"I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution."

Printed Name: _____Jessica Eng_____

Signature: _____

Definitions/abbreviations

CRC - Convention on the rights of the child

UDHR - The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Key terms

These terms are explained in the text, but it may be helpful for the reader to gain an explanation at the beginning of the text.

Childism:
According to Wall's (2010) definition, childism is a concept that aims to empower children and is analogous to feminism. It also constitutes a theoretical framework where childism adopts a critical reconstructive view of adultist norms.

Adultism:
Wall (2021) describes adultism as a form of discrimination towards children by adults, analogous to racism and sexism It entails the marginalisation of children based on their age where they are perceived as incompetent and not valued as citizens the way adults are.

The private sphere and the public sphere:
Wall (2021, p. 22) writes 'The private sphere of family and school was associated with women and children; the public sphere of work and politics, with men. The chief democratic division involved a combination of age and gender.' The private sphere in this dissertation entails, as seen in the quote, the school and the family which are more 'closed' gatherings associated with children while the public sphere is more 'open' and adult oriented.

Proxy claim vote:
Wall (2021) argues for a proxy claim vote system so everyone, from birth, can vote. The vote should be exercised by a person in a close relationship with the child (for example a guardian) until the child can claim the vote.

1. Introduction

This research aims to shed light on how students previously registered on an international course on children's rights perceive children's possibilities for democratic participation. This topic is of relevance to me because I teach on the course, and my interest in the subject grew the more familiar I became with it. The study is also of wider relevance because it concerns the issue of children and democracy at a time when, as UNICEF's (2021) report suggests, there is a slowdown and weakening of democratic development. According to UNICEF data, this has worsened since the pandemic: 87% of the world's population now resides in nations where civic space is considered closed, repressed, or obstructed (UNICEF, 2021). At the same time, youth activism is growing, and a lowered voting age has been endorsed by the European Union (Wall, 2021). For further context, the dissertation is written in a challenging post-COVID era. Activism that includes children is being debated (particularly in light of the climate emergency), the conflict between Israel and Gaza has escalated, and Russia is at war with Ukraine. All of these contexts have led to protests involving young people. Against this background, it is therefore of relevance to explore the topic of children's democratic participation.

I focus primarily on perceptions of children and democracy in my dissertation[1]. I use an interpretivist research approach to explore the topic, with data collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with former children's rights students. To some extent, perceptions of children's participation has been explored through surveys with university students or interviews with children and parents (Campbell & Covell 2001; Cherney 2010; Karaman-Kepenekci, 2006; Peterson-Badali et al., 2003). However, the focus tends to be on a rights perspective or on the school environment rather than on children's democratic participation in public society. I have not found a similar study using the approach I have taken for my research.

The theoretical framework I use to explore the issue of children's democratic participation, and my research data is Wall's (2010) concept of childism. This concept responds to the issue of *adultism* which is described by Wall (2023, p. 329) as 'an expression of normative systems of social marginalization. Adultism, in this view, is not only cultural and institutional but also normative, that is, built into the often-invisible assumptions organizing language, thought, and social relations.' Children are, from this perspective,

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[1] Some of the literature I use also contains references to, or focusses on, youth. I have included this literature where it is relevant to looking at democratic tendencies in society for young people.

understood as lesser human beings than adults with limited competencies. Childism adopts a critical reconstructive view of the concept of adultism: that is, the historically normative marginalization of children by age. However, there is limited literature using Wall's theory, so my dissertation adds to the field in terms of understanding his theory and using it in research. I also build on Wall's work to include Archard (2015) and his work *Children: rights and childhood* which summarises philosophical and sociological notions of the subject. In addition, I explore other concepts of children and childhood as a context for the discussion of childism. I will elaborate on these later in the dissertation.

In the next section, I explain the professional relevance of my study where I related to a course which I teach in and where the participants are recruited from. section (1.2) then discusses why the subject of children and democracy is important by including research and other documents. I then briefly outline Wall's theory (in section 1.3). This is done here to provide a background and platform for the rest of the dissertation, but the theory will be expanded upon in chapter 2. After this, I outline some of the key issues relating to children and democracy and the key concepts that I use in my dissertation (section 1.4). These include children's rights, democratic participation and citizenship. I further discuss the family and the public sphere and private sphere (section 1.5) as well as a Swedish perspective on children and democracy (section 1.6). Finally, the aim and research questions are presented as well as the structure of the dissertation.

1.1 Professional relevance

I teach at a Swedish university at the Department of Childhood, Education and Society. I am the course coordinator of a children's rights course (although I also supervise students who write their Bachelor Thesis on various topics and lecture on other courses). The course is held every semester at a Swedish university, on campus (online during the pandemic), in English, at the bachelor level, and has been running for several years but with various literature and content. Some students take the course as part of a programme, exchange semester or stand-alone course. The participants range from about 19 to 60 years of age, but most are around the age of 20-30 years and come from all over the world, though the Nordic countries are often overrepresented. In some semesters there have been about 30 participants and in others, there have been fewer than 10 (for example due to covid).

The course currently consists of weekly themes such as children and climate change, feminism, education, voting rights, philosophical perspectives, sociological perspectives and post/decolonialism but, as stressed, the content has changed over the years. The course encourages understanding that the CRC and children's rights is not a neutral field but entails different understandings and interpretations. After completing the course, students should be able to: give a critical account for the content and message of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; analyse different understandings and implementations of the Convention and children's rights in general, within local and global perspectives; and critically analyse the Convention in relation to children's participation and citizenship. The work of Wall was brought into the course in 2022 by my colleague Hanna Sjögren and I have kept this in the course content. Wall's ideas take the issue of children's participation to a controversial and, to some, a radical point. This is why I found his theory appealing. It gives a necessary critical perspective on how children and the concept of childhood are perceived, thought of, and talked about.

On a personal note, the more I read and write on the subject of children's democratic participation, the more I become convinced that children's influence in society should be greater than it generally is at the moment, and that their involvement should not be as restricted by adults as it often is. This is a belief that has grown from a point of not reflecting on the exclusion of children in public political society. At first, I was going to focus my research on perceptions of children's possibilities for self-determination within the family or school settings, but I did not want to focus only on the private sphere. I found the private sphere to be well explored in literature and came to think that children needed to be considered democratically in the public sphere. Wall's (2010) concept of childism is of relevance here and my encounter with the concept was thought-provoking.

Wall (2021) explains that some people recognise the principle that humans under 18 (in this dissertation defined as children) should have some degree of formal political rights. Wall considers children to be deserving of a voice in public arenas since political decisions affect their lives. As Wall explains, democratic rights are not tied to formal voting but depend on many informal rights such as free speech, access to information, non-discrimination, and more. Wall suggests that democracy is an ideal and relates to the idea that those in power can be held accountable to the many but at the same time it is also a struggle. Children have long been perceived as needing to mature before they are able to engage in the public democratic space. This is akin to the view of children as *adults in becoming* rather than beings in their own current right (Wall, 2021). Wall (2014) states that

many objections to formal participation for children are variations on the idea that they lack the necessary political capacities to make informed decisions. Children are not considered to possess political competence (involving abilities such as critical thinking or understanding the outcomes of decisions). Further, Wall explains that a frequent counterargument against children's formal political involvement is that children are strongly influenced by parents and the media, for example, and so may lack the ability to vote independently.

Wall's reasoning tends to divide opinions among students when used in the children's rights course. Some are provoked by his thinking while others find it appealing since, generally, those above 18 are not required to meet certain capabilities to participate in formal democracy the way children are (according to various argumentation). The students in the children's rights course had an interest in children's rights, but I encountered opposing views and tensions during teaching and the examination of students' work about the extent to which children should have democratic influence. I wanted to understand and explore these views further. I want to know more about the former students' perceptions and the arguments they used when discussing children's possibilities and abilities for democratic influence and participation.

I was interested in studying the views of former students because they have insight into, and interest in, the subject of children's rights and democracy. I thought carefully about the participants for this study. I could have interviewed children about their perceptions of whether or not they feel heard, and what they thought about democracy. However, the focus for my study was my professional practice and the course I taught, therefore the most relevant voices were the voices of former students. In focussing on adult students as participants, it could be critiqued that children's perceptions are not heard in the data for my dissertation. However, I agree with Sundhall's (2017) point that when examining adulthood norms it is not sufficient to focus only on those at the bottom of the hierarchy (children). To understand adultist norms and their reproduction, it is of relevance to examine those at the top of the hierarchy - the adults - since their perceptions constitute the norm.

Although I am using Wall's concept of childism in this study, I am not focusing on the former students' understandings or perceptions of his work. The focus is on their views of children and democracy (which is also the key focus of the course). Wall provides the theoretical lens through which I explore their perceptions, so it was not necessary for the

participants to have encountered Wall on the course for their perceptions to be valid for my research. In addition, gaining more knowledge regarding the students' perceptions of children's abilities and possibilities for democratic participation will support my future work with the course, and other courses that involve the subject. My research should also contribute to further understanding of the topic and could be of interest to others working or having an interest in the field.

1.2 Why consider children and democracy?

For me, it is important to study children and democracy because it is a subject that I believe should receive more attention, for reasons that I explain in this section. Jamieson et al. (2022, p. 56) state that children and young people's participation in society 'is increasingly recognised as a global concern with geopolitical dimensions'. The CRC also enshrines children and young people's rights and expects governments to work not only to protect children and young people but to afford them specific rights. However, Bessant and Watts (2024, p. 1277) argue that much of the discourse and practice in relation to children and young people's participation, particularly their political participation, has been influenced by adultist perspectives, which 'preserve adult power, privilege, and interests'. I think it is important to question adultist views of children's participation in (democratic) society.

In terms of the importance of the study, it is also worth observing Cammaerts et al.'s (2014) point that political participation has declined on a global scale over the past four decades. Policymakers are therefore looking to the younger population for engagement, believing that young people's distrust in political systems and institutions plays a central role in the crisis of representative democracy (Cammaerts et al., 2014). According to Cammaerts et al. (2014), participation in democratic life is emphasised as an essential right in the European Union. Participation is stressed in Article 10.3 of the Treaty of Lisbon and in Article 165 which underscores the significance of supporting young people's participation in democratic life across Europe (Cammaerts et al., 2014).

Below, I will present an overview and brief background on some key aspects relating to children and democracy in order to give a summary for the reader before exploring the subject further. I begin by discussing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, before exploring issues relating to children, democracy and participation rights. I do this because Wall's (2010) concept of childism relates to the broader concept of children's rights more

generally. Important here is the role of the United Nations which has established conventions that aim to support and protect the rights of children and adults. Of relevance for this dissertation is the focus on democratic possibilities for children which is why particular aspects from the conventions are stressed in this section.

The UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989, np) defines a child as every human being under 18 years, and this is the definition I will use in my dissertation. Article 12 of the *Convention* (1989, p. 5) states the following: ´States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.´ However, as Lansdown (2001, p. 2) comments:

> It is important to understand clearly what Article 12 does and does not say. It does not give children the right to autonomy. It does not give children the right to control over all decisions irrespective of their implications either for themselves or others. It does not give children the right to ride roughshod over the rights of their parents. However, it does introduce a radical and profound challenge to traditional attitudes, which assume that children should be seen and not heard.

Lansdown (2001, p. 2) further remarks that the wording of article 12 means that the 'weight' given to young children's views 'needs to reflect their level of understanding of the issues involved'. Reference to age and maturity should not be interpreted as meaning that a younger child's view is less significant. As Lansdown comments, 'there is no lower age limit imposed on the exercise of the right to participate' by Article 12 (p. 12).

The CRC in its statement of rights draws from the original Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This does not have a specific age exclusion in terms of suffrage and voting rights, as Wall (2021) notes. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (1949) announces in Article 21 that 'the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage.' Several of the UDHR signatory countries had a voting age of twenty-one at that time and a child is, as established, a person under the age of 18.

Wall (2011) remarks that despite the UDHR calling for 'universal and equal suffrage' in Article 21, over half a century later, children are rarely included in the definition of 'everyone' who has the right to participate in their country's government.

Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra (2022) remark that the CRC (especially Article 12) has been described as radical. However, it still emphasises only a 'modest right' to participation (Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2022, p. 795). They write that views of children 'are not necessarily determinative' in decision-making: 'decision-makers (typically adults) do the weighing and it will be adults who judge the implications of a child's age and maturity' (Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2022, p. 795). According to Wall (2011), the concept of children's agency as citizens finds expression in the right to participation outlined in the CRC. These rights are a significant advancement over previous children's rights agreements, encompassing free expression, the right to be heard, freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, as well as the 'freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds' (p. 5). Wall (2011) remarks that participation rights have played a crucial role in advancing children's political movements. He further argues that to promote children's political agency in a systematic and institutionalised manner, it is essential to frame their active citizenship in terms of participation rights. However, as Archard (2015) explains, the CRC grants participation rights to children but does not provide any right to participate in political activities or explicitly mention children's formal democratic participation. Kulynych (2001) also suggests that the CRC grants children a wide array of rights, including legal, social, and civil rights, but fails to endorse their political participation rights. The CRC reflects diverse interpretations of citizenship but mirrors the global uncertainty surrounding the definition of childhood and the political status of children (Kulynych, 2001).

It can therefore be questioned to what extent the right to express views and be heard involves any real democratic substance, especially for the younger children, if it is simply up to adults to listen and make decisions. Zlotnik Raz and Almog (2023) describe a case where a child of the age of 16 presented arguments asserting that their exclusion from participating in local elections based on age was a violation of their rights under the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. The child contended that election results directly impacted their life and urged the CRC Committee to prompt the State Party to take immediate legislative action to lower the voting age. The CRC Committee's decision acknowledged the child's efforts to vote but stated that they lacked information about the

child's motivations for pursuing this goal. According to Zlotnik Raz and Almog (2023), this case furthered discussions about children's political participation and children's suffrage but the CRC remains ambiguous regarding the extent of children's political participation since it does not prohibit discrimination based on age. This situation can contribute to children's exclusion from formal democratic participation but also participation in political associations and demonstrations. Further, arguments based on the best interest of the child can be used against children's democratic participation under the banner of protecting them (Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2022; Zlotnik Raz & Almog, 2023). Zlotnik Raz and Almog (2023) conclude that the CRC Committee has a history of addressing contentious matters and adopting an evolving interpretation of the Convention, so it should be both plausible and justifiable for them to offer guidance on recommending that States Parties refrain from excluding children from democratic participation based on age.

Hart suggested in 1992 that the degree to which children are perceived to have a voice is a subject of strongly divergent opinions: there are those who emphasise children's voice and involvement and those who discard it (Hart, 1992). Hart's perspective is that some child advocates tend to speak of children as if they were the rescuers of society – something that is still relevant today with, for example, the Fridays for Futures movement. This is not the aim of this dissertation nor the childism perspective. Childism seeks to empower children including the possibility of gaining democratic influence, but it does not present children as the saviours of democracy or the planet. Hart further states that many have argued that increased democratic participation among children is a naive notion because children do not possess the decision-making power of adults. Other arguments contend that children should be protected from undue involvement and responsibility in the problems of society in order for them to have a carefree childhood (Hart, 1992). The latter perspective rather sees democratic participation as a burden that is not the children's to carry. Hart concludes that children are the least listened to members of society but in cultures where adults themselves have little opportunity to influence community decisions, children can become the initiating force for change. In my view, these conflicting perspectives, from the saviour to the non-competent and/or innocent child, are still relevant. However, although the rights of children may have improved, as I discuss next, there are still issues to tackle and the development of children's rights is not continuously moving in a positive direction.

Foa et al.'s (2020) study raises significant concerns about young people's satisfaction with democractic processes. Their research used a comprehensive global dataset, which included data from 3,500 surveys from 160 countries, and responses from 4.8 million individuals spanning the period from 1973 to 2020 (Foa et al., 2020, p. 3). Foa et al. found that, on a global scale, satisfaction with democracy among young people is decreasing when viewed in absolute terms and declining compared to the satisfaction levels of older generations at similar points in their lives. Reasons for this discontent among youth, especially in developed democracies, include economic exclusion, high levels of youth unemployment, and political candidates often not representing young people's contemporary values or identities (both in terms of ideology and cultural identity) (Foa et al., 2020). Young people feel less represented and adopt a more negative view. However, the authors clarify that low voter turnout among youth above 18 does not necessarily indicate low civic engagement, as young people may be actively involved in other forms of civic activism such as protests or volunteering (Foa et al., 2020).

Further, UNICEF (2021) suggests that in recent years there has been a growth in youth activism and social protests led by young people. The organisation reports that this phenomenon is expected to persist as young individuals increasingly disengage from conventional forms of political involvement, harbour distrust towards electoral processes, and express discontent with the current state of democracy. The motivation behind this trend is further fuelled by the perception among many young people that their values and aspirations are under threat. This includes issues such as the climate crisis, gender equality, race relations, gun violence, and economic opportunities. However, UNICEF warns that in numerous countries, opportunities for young people to participate in and engage in activism are severely constrained, especially where systematic exclusion occurs based on ethnicity, social class, and/or gender. For example, girls tend to encounter limitations in their possibilities and opportunities for civic engagement and democratic participation since they face a disproportionate level of discrimination (UNICEF, 2021).

One aspect of participation in democracy is the right to vote in elections. Zlotnik Raz and Almog (2023) remark that in recent years, developments have occurred in both academic discourse and practical initiatives concerning children and democratic participation. For example, the New Zealand Supreme Court declared that maintaining the voting age at 18 amounted to discrimination against children. Wall (2021) remarks that the European Union has endorsed but not acted upon a lowered voting age (16) for its members. In relation to this, Mańko, (2023) writes that the European Parliament tabled a proposal in 2022 for a

regulation on the election of the Members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage. The aim of the proposal was to synchronise rules applicable to European elections, including the voting age. According to recital 17 of the proposal, a 'single harmonised age for voting should be introduced across the Union in order to ensure equality and to avoid discrimination'. Article 4(1) of the proposal sets the age at 16 but allows for exceptions for 'existing constitutional orders establishing a minimum voting age of 18 or 17 years of age'.' (Mańko, 2023, np). In order for this proposal to pass, a unanimous agreement of the Council is required as well as the approval of all Member States in accordance with their constitutional requirements (Mańko, 2023). This proposal emphasises the shifting demographics in Europe. It also reflects a concern that an aging population may result in the marginalisation of young individuals from the political arena and focus on issues that resonate with older demographics (Parliamentary Assembly, 2011)[2]. This trend potentially poses a challenge to the stability of democracy, especially during a time when social cohesion holds heightened significance according to the Parliamentary Assembly.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe further considers democracy in Resolution 1826 which discusses a lowered voting age to 16. This resolution refers to studies which indicate that prolonged exclusion from political participation during youth correlates with decreased civic involvement in adulthood (Parliamentary Assembly, 2011). Moreover, broader participation in elections enhances the representativeness of elected representatives within society. Enhanced voter engagement stands to foster a greater sense of responsibility among young people in shaping their societal roles and positions. Lowering the voting age to 16 could facilitate a higher turnout among first-time voters, thereby increasing overall electoral participation. It is remarked in the resolution that education systems must prioritise democratic citizenship education to empower future generations with the skills needed to exercise their civic rights effectively (Parliamentary Assembly, 2011). Some countries such as Germany and Belgium have recently lowered their voting age while other countries, such as Sweden, do not have a visible debate about either formal or informal democracy for those under 18. As of 2022, the Council of Europe is still presenting information on, and arguments about lowering the voting age (Council of Europe, 2022).

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[2] The resolution does not involve, or refer to, a specific country but the focus is on European nations. The document is from the Political Affairs Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

Given the issues with democratic participation, the topic of my dissertation is particularly relevant from its childist standpoint on empowering children and raising awareness about attitudes to the relationship between children and democracy. The adultist norms related to children's abilities can be questioned to extend and challenge our thinking on democracy and participation for children

1.3 Theoretical position

I use Walls' (2010) theory of childism in my dissertation to provide a theoretical lens to analyse perceptions of children's possibilities and abilities for democratic participation. Wall (2019) argues that his theory is relevant for critical studies that analyse and deconstruct adultism to consider age-inclusive approaches. Childism is described by Wall (2022) as a theoretical framework that aims to empower children's experiences in order to change societies. Wall (2011) argues that the inclusion of children in core democratic processes calls for an expanded concept which he concludes is childism. The author describes childism as analogous to concepts such as feminism but in this case focused on empowering children. Wall (2010) suggests that childism is an attempt to respond to children's experiences through changed understandings and practices.

Wall's (2010, p. 3) perspective on childism calls for a 'profound ethical restructuring' and an expanded concept of the political subject. He considers children to be a distinctive, but not homogeneous, social group that shares similar experiences and challenges. Wall (2010) claims that a simplistic view of childhood tends to influence attitudes about children's inclusion and marginalisation in societies today, which is why he advocates for a critical perspective. From the perspective of childism, children should be seen as beings in their own right and not adults in becoming. This idea will be significant to the dissertation. As Wall (2010) remarks, a child is not a gift nor a piece of clay that simply can be formed as an adult in the making. This perspective, along with a critical view of adultism and its normative assumptions of children and childhood, is the lens from which the data will be analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis.

Overall, the dissertation is written in relation to Wall's work on children and democracy. This aligns with the purpose of my research where adultist norms on the relation between competence and participation in a democracy will be visualised and viewed from a critical stance. Literature that counters some of Wall's argumentation is also presented. Although

critique is rarely explicit and is difficult to find, it is of course possible to be critical of Wall's conclusions, or aspects of it. It is also possible to see the exclusion of children in democratic practices and children's empowerment as non-issues. I will return to these points later in the dissertation, particularly in chapter 2 where I discuss the theoretical framework.

1.4 Democratic participation of children: key concepts

In this section, I briefly outline the key concepts that feature in this dissertation, including children's rights, democratic participation, citizenship and childhood. (When referring to particular texts, I will use the terms that the authors use.) Under the subheadings of *Children's rights* and *The right to participation* I will focus on the Convention on the Rights of the Child and participation rights. Further, I will present the concept of *citizenship* along with *agency* and *power* order in relation to age. These concepts will all be discussed in greater depth across the dissertation. I then move in section 1.5 to explain the concepts of *The public, private and family,* before giving an outline of Swedish perspectives on these spheres (section 1.6). I then explore the concept of childhood in section 1.7 before explaining the *Aim, research questions and structure of the dissertation* in section 1.8.

1.4.1 Children's rights

According to UNICEF (n.d.) the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* relies on the notion that children are not objects owned by their parents and for whom decisions are *made*, nor are children adults in becoming. Instead, children should be seen as full persons with and in their own right. This is in line with the views adopted in this dissertation. UNICEF (n.d.) further explains that childhood, which lasts until the age of 18, should be understood as a protected time, separate from adulthood. The Declaration of the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1959, np) defines children's rights as 'the right to health, education and protection' for every child.

What a right is, and how the concept of children's rights can be understood, are complex matters. Like many subjects in this dissertation, these are extensive areas on their own: many philosophical and theoretical assumptions can be underscored by discussing moral rights and juridical aspects that deliberate legal rights. One way of focusing this extensive area is to follow Archard (2015, p. 110), who stresses the important concepts of provision, protection and participation in relation to rights. He relates this to the CRC, noting that some rights relate to freedom *to* certain things (such as provisions and participations), and freedom *from* other things (for instance, protection from abuse or exploitation).

However, as Vandenhole et al. (2015) explain, there is no unitary definition of children's rights. They remark that children's rights can be understood as a claim for social justice and human dignity for children relating to the overall field of human rights. Further, Vandenhole et al. state that there is a tension between human rights and children's rights due to the potential conflict of interest when interpreting the best interests of the child. It could be that what the adult considers the best is not always in the child's best interest or what the child would have chosen. Vandenhole et al. suggest that some interpret children's rights as more about protection while others emphasise the right to self-determination and agency. The latter interpretation is of most relevance in this dissertation. Both interpretations are important to a discussion of children's rights particularly given the potential conflict between the concepts of children's protection and participation. Under the banner of protecting the vulnerable child, children can be kept from having a voice in important decisions. Vanderhole et al. conclude that the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC) sets minimum standards for children's rights and offers a legally binding document that can hold states accountable. Whether it is a right for children to be involved in democratic decisions and, if so, to what extent, will be discussed further as the dissertation progresses.

1.4.2 The right to participation

The United Nations (n.d. a). states that child participation, on a general level, is crucial, and, one of the essential principles of the CRC (United Nations, 1989). According to the Council of Europe (n.d.) the right to participation entails the right for children to be heard in all decisions that concern them in several arenas including the home, the school but also at the national and international level. The Council, aligned with the United Nations, suggests that the right to participation is a fundamental part of children's rights and they base their recommendations to member states on Article 12 in the CRC.

1.4.3 Democratic participation

It is difficult to find an overall definition of the term democratic participation (especially in relation to young people). Children and youth participation is sometimes referred to as democratic participation but also just participation or political participation. However, both tend to be used without a clear definition according to my review of the literature, and authors can use different terms to discuss democratic participation in the same text.

Cammaerts et al. (2014) state that people have different understandings of democratic participation that can either be narrow, with a focus on national/local elections, or broad, including participation in social movements, schools, or even the family. They remark that in political theory democratic participation is often defined as sharing of power. Democratic participation in this dissertation takes into account both formal (such as voting) and informal (for example engagement in civil society, activism, and social movements) democratic acts but with a focus on public society rather than family or school settings. This means that however important, for example, self-determination in families, school councils, or similar will not be the main focus of this dissertation but it will be touched upon.

Verba (1967, p. 53) describes democratic participation as 'acts that are intended to influence the behavior of those empowered to make decisions.' Cammaerts et al. (2014) explain that various notions of democratic participation can center around elections and voting in the public sphere or include social movements and the private sphere. Democratic participation tends to be defined within the field of political theory as sharing of power (Cammaerts et al., 2014). Checkoway's (2011, pp. 340-341) review article on youth participation concludes that this 'is a process of involving young people in the

institutions and decisions that affect their lives' (something that is protected by the UN CRC). Checkoway also states that youth participation 'refers to the active engagement and real influence of young people, not to their passive presence or token roles in adult agencies' and that the term 'assumes that young people are competent citizens, rather than passive recipients of services' (Checkoway, 2011, p. 341).

Hart (1992) created a 'ladder' outlining levels of children's participation (I will detail his ladder of children's participation later in the dissertation). The lowest steps indicate democratic projects where children are used as decorations while the highest indicate genuine participation and represent child-initiated projects, with shared decision-making involving adults (Hart, 1992). This suggests that children's democratic participation can be more or less genuine in the sense that it is sometimes too adult controlled.

As described in the introduction, democratic participation in this dissertation concerns formal and informal democratic acts but with a focus on public society. I also agree with Cammaerts et al. (2014) that democratic participation should entail the sharing of power.

1.4.4 Citizenship

According to the United Nations (n.d.b.), global citizenship can be seen as an umbrella term for 'social, political, environmental, and economic actions of globally minded individuals and communities on a worldwide scale'. The term can stress that people are members of networks such as, but not exclusive to, nations. Kulynych (2001) suggests that the concept of citizenship, at its simplest, can be seen from two perspectives: citizenship as rights and citizenship as identity. Citizenship is not just tied to a region, according to the author, but is based on active participation in a political system. Cohen (2005) states that children can be considered citizens from the perspective that they usually possess a nationality but however tend to lack full citizenship due to their perceived incapability to make informed political decisions. (I will expand more on this in the literature review.)

1.4.5 Agency and power

Sundhall (2017), from Wall's (2010) childism perspective, argues that the focus on children's agency in the field of childhood studies has steered debates on children's citizenship since the concept has traditionally ignored children. This is the case because human rights and the competence trait has generally addressed adulthood and so children could be perceived as not possessing the privilege to have rights. From a historical perspective, children only become rational persons through maturity and education since they are under development of becoming an adult. Children could therefore be considered second-class citizens since agency has been linked with an autonomous adulthood.

Agency is discussed in various ways in the literature. For example, based on the work of Kuczynski and De Mol (2015), Bergnehr (2019) suggests a wider definition of agency where every individual, explicitly or implicitly, impacts and is impacted by others. Bergnehr (2019, p. 51) argues that it is common to define agency with respect to actions and so investigate the influence the child can gain from this in certain contexts. Bergnehr argues that to be an actor and an agent is to impact our surroundings through social interactions, but this does not mean that there is influence in a deeper sense (for example, in the sense of influencing a decision) (Bergnehr, 2019).

Duhn (2015, p. 922) notes that agency and 'the capacity for action' are key concepts 'in educational discourse and are deeply embedded in national policy documents, including early years' policy, in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Sweden, Canada and Great Britain.' Stressing the general use of the concept, Duhn (2014, p. 921) explains that agency, in this sense, is not generally connected to younger children since it entails the ability to be socially competent and execute choices. This understanding can also be seen in Jerome and Starkey's (2022) research, where they state: 'We understand agency as a capacity to do things, to act on the world, and to make a difference' (p.439). Their article offers 10 propositions that offer teachers tools for reflecting on and developing children's agency. However, Jerome and Starkey (2022, p. 449) also remark that agency 'is not binary' and so 'is not something that is achieved or not.'

This dissertation understands agency in line with Bergnehr. I agree that influence requires more than just agency but that everyone is, to some extent, an actor in relation to our surroundings. Even a young child has agency (although they may not be able to exercise genuine influence).It is nevertheless useful to know that agency is often used more like

Jerome and Starkey's (2022) definition within the literature. It is also useful to understand agency in relation to competence. For example, Sundhall (2017) follows Wall in arguing that the concept of agency and competence in relation to children's rights reproduces an adulthood norm where 'rights are not absolute but must be earned' (p. 164). From a historical perspective, agency has been seen from an adult-centric perspective: children only become rational persons through maturity and education since they are under development towards becoming an adult (Sundhall, 2017). This norm therefore limits children's agency rather than seeing them as full human beings who are competent and capable of agency. Per the author, it also places a competence bar on children's participation, which adults do not need to meet no matter how dependent or vulnerable they are.

Sundhall (2017) also emphasises age as a power order. By this she means that age is not only 'a widespread and accepted reason to treat people differently' but that age 'and different ways of regulating age' are 'common ways to create social order' (Sundhall, 2017, p.162). Further, age can be seen as the divider between children and adults, where adults are viewed as the naturalised norm and the child is seen as being under development and so in need of protection. Based on this, Sundhall remarks that age can be seen as a power order built on the definition that power is a social order with 'hierarchies and discrimination, inclusions and exclusions' (p. 162). The norms about age can be used to discipline people. Here, adulthood is viewed as high status and on top of the power order compared to the childhood which is seen as a stage not actively contributing to society. I agree with Sundhall's concern that children could be seen as second-class in relation to agency, but also in relation to citizenship since they are not granted full citizenship (other than nationality).

In the next section I will explore the subject of children and the role of the family to consider the concepts of public, private and family as these are important to Wall's thinking.

1.5 Public sphere, private sphere, and family

This section discusses the family and the child since the family generally constitutes a major part of the child's life. (Later, in section 1.6, I will connect this discussion to an overview of Swedish research on the subject).

For Wall (2021), the family is part of the *private sphere*, while the *public sphere* is more open and adult-oriented. According to my literature review (see chapter 3) and Wall's (2021) argumentation (see chapter 2), a great deal of children's democratic participation is associated with the private sphere (especially in relation to school and preschool). It is also important to note how rights relating to the family are mentioned in the CRC (1989) which highlights that parents' rights should be respected and that both State Parties and parents have accountability for the upbringing of the child. It is therefore not only the rights and well-being of the child that are emphasised in this document but also the rights of parents and, implicitly, the family's primary role in the child's life. If the family is not adequate in meeting the needs and ensuring the welfare of the child, the state can interfere.

This dissertation follows Wall's characterisation of the family as belonging in the private sphere[3]. However, like the concept of childhood, what a family is can be understood in various ways. Archard (2015, p. 181) states that it is important to stress 'that there is no such thing as the family, as a single, historically unchanging kind of social unit. There always has been a diversity of familial forms.' Archard (2015) clarifies that it is not only the concept of the nuclear family that holds relevance, but diverse constellations of various family members. The private nuclear family can, according to Archard (2015), be seen as a historically and culturally specific phenomenon, especially prominent in twentieth-century Western societies. However, a definition of family is difficult to establish since, as Archard notes, families do not require members to be living together or to have shared genetics. Archard (2015, p. 192) remarks that families are closely linked by intimacy and independence and are, to some extent, not chosen. He also argues that the parent-child relationship is generally characterised by a power imbalance, with parents as independent superiors and children as dependents (Archard, 2015).

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[3] According to Archard (2015), earlier and non-Western societies often featured families with less privacy, but all cultures separate the public sphere from the family to some extent.

As noted by Wall (2021, p. 22), men have historically represented the public sphere, while women and children have been associated with the private sphere. Children are often linked to the family and the private sphere, where they are seen as developing until they are ready to enter the democratic space (Wall, 2021). However, Cockburn (2007) remarks that the notion of, and divide between, the private and the public sphere is, to some extent, arbitrary. He also notes that there are some intermediate spaces like for example clubs. Cockburn (2007) also problematises the idealised view of the private sphere for children and their participation, noting the myth of happy families. He underscores the structural relationship between children and their parents, where democracy within the family is often shaped around protection. Communication and relations can be complicated, with power relations and clashing interests (Cockburn, 2007).

In addition, Archard (2015) comments that parenting approaches can vary widely: this range is tolerated provided parents safeguard a child's (potential and specific) needs and as long as the parenting meets a society's minimum standards. The public sphere is not generally expected to intrude into the private sphere of the family. However, as Archard explains, state intervention in the family domain can be a response to child mistreatment and is considered necessary when such issues are brought to public attention. The protection of the child then triumphs over the family's privacy.

Archard (2015) also discusses the role of the family in relation to principles relating to democracy. He notes that:

> A citizen must be educated both to and in democracy. Education must have a certain content, comprising not just an introduction to the principles and practices of democratic government but also an inculcation of the civic virtues – tolerance, respect for others' rights, and non-violence, children must learn democratic participation through practice. That practice should not simply commence at the age of majority and thereafter be only quinquennial. There is no reason why both the family and the school should not be the sites for exercises, even if limited, in self-government. Active democratic citizens are not born overnight when a certain age is reached. (Archard, 2015, p.238)

Here, both the school and family are mentioned in relation to self-government and democratic participation through practice. The aim of raising democratic citizens may be complex, but the child should be able to form their own views and develop various functions, values, and resources within their families.

1.6 Swedish perspectives on children and democracy

Since this research is based on the perceptions of those who were registered on a course at a Swedish University, I will include a short overview of Swedish perspectives on children and democracy and how this relates to the private sphere of the family. Overall, when searching for keywords like children (*barn* in Swedish), democracy and influence (*demokrati, inflytande*), private arenas such as preschools and schools were emphasised in the peer-reviewed research I found. This was also the main subject of research returned when searching for democracy and various forms of family, caretaker, parents and so on (*familj, vårdnadshavare, föräldrar*).

To give a brief background, Dodillet and Christensen (2020) describe how, over the course of the twentieth century, the Swedish state gradually expanded its role in the education and upbringing of children. Educational reforms culminated in the establishment of a nine-year mandatory comprehensive school system. This development was informed by a belief that families were not adequately equipped to cultivate the democratic and socially responsible citizens necessary for maintaining peace and societal welfare. As a result, the researchers stress, the Swedish compulsory school system was designed to deliver democratic education to all children (Dodillet & Christensen, 2020). This democratic aim can be interpreted as, on the one hand, an initiative to nurture informed individuals capable of taking responsibility for, and influencing, their own futures. On the other hand, according to Dodillet and Christensen (2020), it may be seen as a social project aimed at forming citizens who align with a predetermined vision of democratic society. On this point, Thornberg and Elvstrand (2012, p. 44) remark that Swedish schools should, according to official policy documents, 'conduct citizenship education in democracy as well as being a democratic arena where the pupils can practise democracy in their day-to-day school life'. This further underscores the connection between children's education and democratic aims.

However, Thornberg and Elvstrand (2012) emphasise that children's voices can still be marginalised in the context of democratic participation and decision-making within schools. For example, pupils can be met with a predetermined set of explicit rules, which they are expected to follow. These rules are typically established by adults, with minimal input from pupils. Practise and policy may differ. (I discuss Thornberg and Elvstrand's [2012] research more fully in chapter 3.)

Josefsson and Sandin (2022) summarise Swedish research on children and democracy by concluding that it often focuses on welfare, implementation of the CRC, protest movements, and social media. They note that children have received more recognition and rights during the past century but argue that children have been overlooked in relation to considerations of basic democratic foundations (such as age limits, who constitutes the 'demos', and who gains access to full political rights and citizenship) (Josefsson & Sandin, 2022). Josefsson and Sandin (2022) argue that representation of children's democratic participation has been outsourced to the family, civil society, and authorities such as the Swedish Agency for Youth, civil society, the Children's Ombudsman, and others.

According to Nylén (2024) Sweden has a range of organisations that focus on the rights of children tying in to the aspect of civil society. Nylén suggest that these have increased in number and the discourse they promote has shifted from child protection to children's rights. Altogether Nylén (2024, p. 6) has found 22 different organisations, (see Table 1 below). Some are multinational ones, for example, UNICEF Sweden, while others are domestic focusing on one issue such as Porrfri barndom (Porn-free childhood).

Category	Organisation	Est.
Multinational SCROs	UNICEF Sverige	1954
	Erikshjälpen	1967
	SOS Barnbyar Sverige	1972
	Ecpat	1990
	Barnfonden	1991
	PLAN International Sverige	1997
	World Childhood Foundation	1999
	Child Rights Eurasia	2019
Domestic, single-issue SCROs	Majblomman	1907
	Adoptionscentrum	1969
	Friends	1997
	Bufff	2001
	Treskablinoll	2017
	Porrfri barndom	2017
Domestic SCROs with a broad focus	Rädda Barnen Sverige	1919
	Räddningsmissionen	1952
	Bris	1971
	Maskrosbarn	2005
	Trygga Barnen	2010
	Barnrättsbyrån	2011
	Knas Hemma	2013
	Brinn för Barnen	2020

Table 1: Categories of Swedish Children's Right's Organisations (Nylén, 2024, p.6)

The various organisations' work to promote children's rights can be seen as a complement to the family, advancing the issue on a public democratic level (Josefsson & Sandin, 2022). Moreover, Dodillet and Christensen (2020) explain that the establishment of the Children's Ombudsman in 1993, tasked with representing the rights and interests of children and youth in relation to policymakers and public institutions, further illustrates this shift. By doing so, the state positioned itself as a possible challenger to the family in defining and protecting the child's interests. The authors state that it is 'the child, rather than the parent, who is subject to responsibilisation in the Swedish education system' (Dodillet & Christensen, 2020, p. 387). They argue that legislative proposals which incorporate the UN CRC into Swedish law 'indicate that the child's perspective will remain central to Swedish education policy in the future' (Dodillet & Christensen, 2020, p. 387).

However, Josefsson and Sandin (2022) remark that the institutionalisation of children's rights and participation can be a way of controlling children. The authors conclude that the lack of debate about developing children's representation and lowering the voting age in Sweden can be seen as an expression of children's rights being enhanced in other ways. For example, there is a focus on formalising the representation of children and implementing the CRC rather than an emphasis on children's possibilities to represent themselves by vote or as political candidates (Josefsson & Sandin, 2022). The authorities

instead focus on research and legislation that stress listening to children, which the authors see as a paternalistic view (where children are not considered competent enough to represent themselves). According to Josefsson and Sandin (2022), childhood, determined by age, becomes a barrier between those who can represent themselves and those who cannot even if children's involvement has become an issue due to the increased visibility of protest movements. However, the concept of childhood and its relation to adulthood is complex, as I elaborate in the next section.

1.7 The concept of childhood

The concept of childhood is important in considering Wall's work and in relation to the subject of this dissertation. My research takes into account the juridical definition, according to the CRC, of a child being a person under the age of 18. However, the concept of childhood is complicated, as Archard (2015) notes, concerning the stage from birth to adulthood. Childhood, as stressed by Archard (2015) and Wall (2021), is a concept to some extent paired with the idea of someone lacking the powers and competence of adulthood. This aspect of childhood is something my dissertation, to some extent, problematises.

It is of relevance to note here that sociological and philosophical perspectives of children and childhood are a huge field on its own, and so a detailed discussion of these is beyond the scope of this dissertation. While this dissertation is written in relation to Wall's work, I emphasise that these ideas do not begin with Wall. For example, James and Prout (1990, p.7) summarise six features of the sociological paradigm (as quoted below):

1. Childhood is understood as a social construction. As such it provides an inter-pretive frame for contextualizing the early years of human life. Childhood, as distinct from biological immaturity, is neither a natural nor universal feature of human groups but appears as a specific structural and cultural component of many societies.

2. Childhood is a variable of social analysis. It can never be entirely divorced from other variables such as class, gender, or ethnicity. Comparative and cross-cultural analysis reveals a variety of childhoods rather than a single and universal phenomenon.

3. Children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the perspective and concerns of adults.

4. Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. Children are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes.

5. Ethnography is a particularly useful methodology for the study of childhood. It allows children a more direct voice and participation in the production of sociological data than is usually possible through experimental or survey styles of research.

6. Childhood is a phenomenon in relation to which the double hermeneutic of the social sciences is acutely present... That is to say, to proclaim a new paradigm of childhood sociology is also to engage in and respond to the process of reconstructing childhood in society. (James & Prout, 1990, p.7)

Some of these ideas and notions are touched upon to various extents in my dissertation through the work of Wall and others. Of particular importance are the idea of childhood as a socially constructed concept, children as active participants, and the process of reconstructing childhood as a concept.

Mayall's views on childhood as a socially constructed concept are also helpful in understanding the role of sociology in shifting perceptions. She states (2000, p. 248):

> The sociology of childhood has begun to shift adult understandings of what it is to be a child, and how this varies across time and across societies. On the one hand, the work is leading to greater respect for children and childhood; on the other hand, it is leading to fuller understanding of the wrongs suffered by children.

The author further remarks that it is hard to rethink concepts of children and childhood, partly due to the considerable knowledge about the development and socialisation of children that exists. Mayall (2000) remarks that children are seen as people in a family and their possibilities depend on the abilities of the family. There is a strong belief that children should be supervised which, according to Mayall (2000), has led to close surveillance in the home and school.

In Western societies, children are not considered independent actors in public spaces (Mayall, 2000). Then, between childhood and adulthood, is adolescence which Mayall (2000, p. 244) sees as an adult construction which 'extends beyond childhood the idea that young people are becomings, rather than people'. Mayall (2000) argues that such views of childhood are political, and that theories concerning children and their development - and what role adults should play in their upbringing - are not objective facts but constructed narratives shaped from adult perspectives. These theories are structured within specific social and economic contexts that serve adult interests but are viewed as non-political. In asserting that adults know what is in a child's best interest, the risk is that children are denied their rights, particularly when it comes to participation. Mayall (2000) argues that efforts to protect and provide for children are seen as common sense but it can be a challenge to acknowledging children as active contributors. Further, Mayall (2000) stresses that childhood can be seen as having a social status, positioned within a generational hierarchy and subordinate compared to adulthood. The way that childhood can be understood is also dictated by adult expectations. Mayall (2000, p. 248) gives the example of schooling, where children's daily lives are controlled by adult agendas. This control is often justified through a naturalised view of childhood and framed as being in the best interest of the child.

However, Archard (2015) argues that the sociological assumption that childhood can be seen as merely a social construct is debatable, even if a universal definition of childhood is not conceivable. When childhood begins and ends can be debated: when a child is assumed to have reached a state of maturity has been interpreted differently in various cultures and times (Archard, 2015). Archard (2015, p. 31) stresses that immaturity is not constant and is subject to cultural understandings. In addition, physical maturity happens at different times and childhood can be seen as a hybrid between biological and social factors (Archard, 2015, p. 31). In relation to concepts of maturity, Bessant and Watts (2024, p. 1277) argue that 'proponents of developmentalism' stress that adolescence and youth can be seen as transitional phases in life where immaturity is emphasised and used to argue that children and young people should be kept away from the adult world of politics. This view has been characterised by a 'male European centric developmentalist view' which 'naturalized the idea that all young people, regardless of cultural context, class, gender, or ethnicity, are troubled and troublesome' (Bessant & Watts, 2024, p. 1280). This perspective is an adultist one which positions children and youth as less morally competent, and lacking knowledge and experienced.

Bessant and Watts (2024) call for a review of the age-based, and often Western, perspectives on the distinction between youth and adults. Further, they argue that Western governments and organisations express an outspoken interest in youth participation. Even so, this engagement is often marginalised since the same organisations do not set agendas after or prioritise children and youth in important decisions but instead tend to be aimed at managing their presence in the world.

To further problematise what a child is, Faulkner and Nyamutata (2020, p. 70) suggest that the CRC imposes 'a universal notion of what it is to be a child'. They seek to challenge this notion but also the rights framework that cannot sufficiently represent all children in the whole world no matter the context between, for example, the Global North and South. They argue that this is important since Eurocentric knowledge and Western views dominate the field along with a liberal individualist approach rather than the collectivist approach which is often a feature of non-Western societies. The criticism from both Bessant and Watts (2024) and Faulkner and Nyamutata (2020) implies that children and their rights tend to be viewed from a Eurocentric Western view which then tends to become taken for granted.

My own stance on childhood is that it is a complex and, to some extent, arbitrary concept (even if the aspect I adopt is, per the CRC, the juridical one that anyone below the age of 18 is a child). I agree that childhood and adolescence can be debated as concepts. However, the most important aspect for me is that, even if some may see childhood as a protected time, it should not be a time when someone is treated in an infantilising way or as though their opinions do not matter.

1.8 Aim, research questions and dissertation structure

The aim of this study is to gain more understanding of the perceptions of former students on an international course on children's rights. The main research question is:

What are former children's rights students' perceptions of children's possibilities and abilities for democratic participation and influence?

The sub-question is:

What arguments are used by the former children's rights students when discussing children's possibilities and abilities to participate in democratic processes?

The structure of the dissertation begins with this introduction, which outlines the area of focus for the study, before moving to the second chapter which discusses Wall's ideas and the theory of childism. In chapter 3, the literature review is presented which includes various perspectives on children's democratic participation, including citizenship, activism, and voting rights. The methods used for my study are detailed in chapter 4, where I explain the interview approach, the choice of participants, the approach to analysis, and ethics. The findings will be presented in chapter 5, followed by a discussion in chapter 6. Finally, I discuss my conclusions in chapter 7, including an outlook for further studies, limitations and a reflection on professional relevance.

2. Theoretical framework: Wall's Theory of Childism

In this chapter, Wall's thoughts on children and democracy and his theory of childism will be described in more detail (see sections 2.1 and 2.2). How other scholars have responded to his work will be presented at specific points in the discussion as will critique of Wall's ideas. I will then expand on the subjects explored below in chapter 3 when I consider the work of other scholars, including some potential counterarguments to Wall's thinking.

2.1 Wall on democracy

Wall believes that democratic processes would be improved with greater participation of children and young people (including their enfranchisement). This view arises from his perspectives on childism[4]. As noted in chapter 1, Wall (2011) describes democracy as government that represents 'the demos' - the people. He states that, at its core, democracy is an ideal for society where those in power should be held accountable to all people instead of just a few (Wall, 2011). According to Wall (2011), increased democratic inclusiveness in the last century has seen many more adults being able to participate in democracies, but children are still excluded from many democratic processes: 'the people' are, rather, just 'the adults'. He comments that children do not generally possess democratic influence to shape laws or elect representatives: children are considered to be 'too incompetent, irrational, or dependent to exercise the levers of power for themselves' (Wall, 2011, p. 86). Wall (2011) suggests that it is possible to challenge the orthodox view that formal democracy (with few exceptions) only includes those above the age 18. For Wall (2011, p. 87) challenging this orthodoxy is not about extending adult privileges to children, but rather involves ' a restructuring of fundamental social norms in response to children's experiences'.

2.1.1 Democracy and children

Wall (2021, p. 11) states that democracy 'has transformed radically over the centuries, not just in who can participate in it but also, and more fundamentally, in how it is understood'. He explains the changes over time in relation to the increased participation of adults, particularly women:

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[4] He is a founder of the Childism Institute (n.d) which develops academic collaboration, workshops, conferences and more.

Instead of being defined around gender, the democratic space now came to be defined as one that expresses the collective reason of individual adult competence. Women are just as competent as men to vote. Whether one labors outside the home or not is irrelevant. Whether one belongs to some metaphorical public sphere is beside the point. In effect, property ownership became internalized. Individuals came to be understood as their own property, not that of others, insofar as they own internal rational capacities. Women gained the vote primarily on the grounds that all adults have the competence to exercise ownership over themselves and hence also over the political decisions that affect them. (Wall, 2021, p. 24)

Wall (2021) argues that historical notions of public democratic space and competence are deeply ingrained in our current democratic consciousness. He suggests that there are three major reasons why children have not been included in democracy the way other groups have. First, children are associated with the family: they are perceived as requiring a period of development within the confines of their homes before entering the shared public democratic space. Second, they are still considered the property of their parents (whereas even marginalised adults are considered to be the property only of themselves). Third children are assumed to lack competence (Wall, 2021): they are primarily seen as future citizens in the making rather than present participants in political life. When it comes to children's citizenship, Wall (2011) stresses that this can include civic engagement and free speech, but that children also should be heard and be able to participate in democratic politics and processes. Wall reasons that from a childist perspective, the idea of political citizenship does not account for children's experiences of imbalances of power in relation to adults. (This power imbalance is also discussed by Cockburn - see chapter 3). All of these points are of relevance to this dissertation.

Wall (2011) notes that political citizenship and democratic participation are not the same as political power. He argues for a sharing of power that includes the whole population and also requires changed procedures of representation. Wall (2021) reasons that, for example, children's councils are sometimes held as a positive example of including children in the democratic arena, but they are generally controlled by adults and can be tokenistic rather than actually listening to the voices of children. Wall (2011) notes that children's parliaments provide a more 'direct form of representation' than councils, and are 'a worldwide movement' (p.88). However, they are still segregated from adult parliaments, which suggests a form of marinalisation (Wall, 2021).

However, Wall (2021) suggests that children's parliaments differ in their political effectiveness: some are more tokenistic while others have generated policy shifts in areas such as labour law, environment, education, and non-discrimination.

Wall (2011) raises the question of whether children's parliaments can represent children the same way as a normal parliament with adults could. Children's parliaments tend to operate from the neighbourhood level up to the national level and there are examples of parliaments leading to decision-making for children at local levels making a difference to local communities. Separate structures could also recognise children's differences instead of their views being overwhelmed by adults. At the same time, no other historically marginalised group (such as women or the poor) have gained equal political influence through a system of separate parliaments. Wall (2011) argues that this is because separate representation leans toward tokenism, resulting in a gap between mere representation and real political power. Instead, Wall suggests that some representatives in adult parliaments should be children (if the mission does not hinder children's education). When it comes to democracy, Wall (2021), emphasises that the activism of children can make various issues of children's rights, and engagement in issues such as climate change, visible on the political radar.

2.1.2 Democracy and children's suffrage

Wall considers children's suffrage to be a vital part of expanding democracy for children. From Wall's (2011) standpoint, arguments against children's suffrage are rooted in adult-centric notions of political representation. Wall argues that voting is seen as an expression of political maturity and only to be granted to those who are viewed as politically mature. However, from a childist perspective, voting ought to be reimagined as a potent tool for making political representatives more responsive to the diverse needs of all citizens, including children (Wall, 2011). By granting children the right to vote, Wall (2021, p. 10) claims that representatives would be compelled to pay more attention to the diverse experiences and perspectives of children. He argues that the right to vote should be as inclusive as possible because those who are politically elected are entrusted with power over the lives of all citizens.

According to Wall (2021), the primary argument used to defend the current age bar for voting is that 18-year-olds possess equivalent voting competencies to older adults, and most societies now associate eighteen as the age of full adulthood competence. This

measure of competence hinges solely on the passage of time in one's life rather than any concrete indicators of political capacity or level of engagement. Wall (2021, p.25) believes that the struggle of marginalised groups has fundamentally transformed the concept of voting, shaping it into what is recognised today as an expression of adulthood and competence. Childhood is instead paired, directly or indirectly, with incompetence. He suggests that this framing marginalises children, limiting them from participating in democratic process, and assumes that certain competencies are exclusive to adults (Wall, 2021).

Wall (2021) states that, in the realm of politics, all individuals bring with them their unique social backgrounds and experiences. Within democratic systems at present, he claims there is a systematic suppression of the diverse viewpoints and life experiences held by children (Wall 2021). Wall argues that by denying children the right to vote, democracies inadvertently discard a valuable wellspring of knowledge that children can offer. He suggests that the act of barring an entire demographic, a third of humanity, from the democratic arena serves to weaken the collective pool of democratic perspectives. Crucial views on matters such as education, healthcare, and climate change are excluded if certain groups do not have a clear voice in democratic matters (Wall, 2021, p. 71).

It could be counterargued that Wall makes excessive claims relating to suffrage and the voting system. However, Wall (2011) argues that a responsive and representative democracy is one that embraces the diversity of its members' experiences. It ought to acknowledge individuals as complete social beings, possessing both active agency for engagement, alongside passive vulnerabilities and dependencies. Children may not generally possess the same level of autonomy as adults but are equally diverse in their experiences (Wall, 2011). If the aim of democratic representation is to respond to the widest array of social experiences, it must encompass children and their diversity. Wall further argues that children can be seen as a critical test of a democratic society's responsiveness (Wall, 2011).

However, Wall (2021, p. 171) makes a controversial argument for lowering the voting age not just to age 16 (as many scholars do), but from birth. Wall promotes a proxy claim vote to all, to be exercised by someone who is in a close relation to the child until the child can claim their vote. People with diseases, or who are very old, and are dependent on others may be prevented from voting by themselves and so should also be included in the proxy vote. Wall states that an issue with this is that having someone vote on a child's behalf

opens voting to potential misuse, as it does for adults in existing proxies. He also points out that an argument used against giving children voting rights is that young children would tend to vote alike with their parents and the proxy would likely be the same as the vote of the parent. However, Wall (2021) concludes that there is no better alternative than the proxy system since the other option is to have no vote at all for young children or dependent people. In a review of Wall's book, Johannsson (2023) expresses positive thought-provoking notions about Wall's ideas, but underscores a critique against the proxy vote partly because it removes the democratic foundation of one person, one vote.

When reviewing Wall's (2021) book *Give children the vote: On democratizing democracy,* Brando (2022, p. 883) supports the idea that granting children the right to vote is beneficial but also necessary and just. However, Brando suggests that Wall's book fails to fully address foundational questions in democratic theory and that this is crucial for providing a solid justification for who - in this case children - should be included or excluded from voting. Brando states that, in order to support the arguments for children's right to vote, it is essential to address which democratic theory is endorsed and how citizenship is defined. Further, the argument against a double standard for assessing voting rights is described by Brando (2022) as compelling since it calls for an equal standard for everyone. In Brando's view, this leaves two options. Firstly, eliminate the standard of competence as a condition for suffrage, thereby implementing true universal suffrage, (which is the path Wall advocates). Or, secondly, apply the standard of competence, thereby legitimising the exclusion of anyone who does not meet it, regardless of age. Brando (2022, p. 885) believes Wall is correct in choosing the first option due to the strength of his argumentation. For example, Wall (2021) claims that the prohibition of suffrage based on a perceived lack of knowledge ultimately weakens democracy. It is often presumed that adults can appropriately represent the viewpoints of children in the political arena, but Wall suggests that no group can fully immerse itself in the experiences of another, even if adults have been children before.

2.1.3 Wall on competence

To Wall (2021), competence is a dominant factor in why children are excluded from democracy and democratic processes. Wall (2021) argues that even if children have proven their interest in political engagement and/or activism, there is still a general opinion that children are not competent enough to exercise or take part in formal democratic procedures.

According to Wall, this argumentation, stemming from Enlightenment thought, is the main reason why children are denied access to full participation in democratic society (Wall, 2021). Wall (2010, p. 89) states:

> The great Enlightenment ethicists— John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, and others— realized that they were excluding children in fundamental ways from their theories of moral obligation. The freedom, rationality, and autonomy by which they define moral humanity is explicitly understood as something children do not yet fully possess.

According to this argument, children have not yet acquired the ability to become moral citizens and thereby can justifiably be excluded from democratic participation. However, Wall (2021) stresses that adulthood does not equal democratic competence and this is a critical point against the age requirement in voting. Instead, Wall suggests that the wish to vote includes the capacity needed to take part in formal democracy. He states that 'voters should have the competence to cast ballots, examine their own and others' views, and make political choices. And absolutely nothing more. These requirements do not arise at any specific age' (Wall, 2021, p. 82).

Wall rejects the idea of a certain competence bar for voting because voting, according to Wall, equals the right to have an influence in political life. Democracy is not about making rational choices but giving a voice to the people which should involve diversity in perspectives. This stance discards many of the arguments put forward by critics against children's involvement in democratic processes that often stem from ideas and research on competence. However, Wall (2011) notes that adults have more experience, education, and resources than children in determining norms that control political action and thinking. They have the position to determine which competencies and rights are significant. Wall (2021) suggests that democratic competence and adulthood tend to be intertwined and almost all adults in democratic societies are able to exercise it no matter gender, minority status or occupation. This occurs because they are perceived as mature and competent enough to do so.

Wall (2021) argues that the recognition of the importance of children's political knowledge is not merely about the development of policymaking but about preserving the essence of democracy itself. Children are, from Wall's perspective, equally affected by the decisions

made in a democratic society and their voices must be included in the democratic discourse to maintain democracy. Wall (2021) suggests that a common opinion regarding voting is that it relies on certain biological abilities and that the outcome has consequences for both the voter and society. A result of this is that some, according to Wall, advocate for maintaining age-based restrictions on voting, or even raise the bar, since children may not yet have the biological brain development necessary for making complex political decisions. This is because the brain is developing until the age of 25, something that is suggested to influence short-term impulses and peer influence (Wall, 2021). Both exposition to peer pressure and impulsiveness can be used to argue against children's possibilities for democratic participation, especially when it comes to voting. This calls back to the above discussion on ideal citizens.

From Wall's (2021) perspective, the assumption that voting competence should be tied to a specific age is arbitrary. A fairer approach would be for a competence bar to be applied to all citizens and not just children (Wall, 2021). However, this approach would limit the diversity of perspectives in other areas which goes against one of the purposes of democratic voting which is to ensure that politicians are exposed to a wide range of pressures and perspectives, to promote beneficial decisions for all citizens (Wall 2021). Wall (2021) suggests that it is difficult to evaluate children's formal democratic competence since they have never had the opportunity to vote in real life. Therefore, empirical studies attempting to measure children's voting abilities can, according to Wall, only reflect the competence of children who have not been encouraged to develop these skills and instead, on a general level, told that they lack them. Based on the societal perception of children's incompetence in voting, Wall (2021) argues that this can create a self-fulfilling prophecy where children might feel that they lack abilities. Further, as established earlier, he rejects the idea of competence as a measure for being able to participate in the democratic sphere.

Wall (2021) concludes that the debate on the competence of children in democratic matters is a complex issue that raises questions about fairness and voting competence criteria. While there are some valid concerns about the readiness of young individuals for the responsibilities of formal democratic participation such as voting, Wall (2021) believes it is essential to critically examine the existing age-based restrictions and consider alternative approaches that ensure a more inclusive and representative democratic process.

2.2 Wall's theory of childism

Since the first use of childism in 1975, the concept has developed three distinct meanings. Wall (2022) emphasises that each meaning reflects the different fields of study from which childism developed. Wall (2010) claims that the discourse on childism and the ethical considerations surrounding childhood have evolved significantly over time. In psychoanalysis, it has been used as a similar term to, for example, sexism implying a prejudice against, in this case, children (Wall, 2022). Further, from a literary point of view, childism has been used to explain the practice of literary criticism from children's perspectives. Finally, in childhood studies, which is relevant for both Wall and this dissertation, it refers to children's empowerment. Empowerment holds a positive meaning according to Wall (2022) and childism entails a systemic normative critique of children's positioning in society. Young-Bruehl's (2012) theory of childism focuses more on discrimination against children (ageism) and, in contrast to Wall, does not advocate for children's suffrage. Biswas et al. (2023) argue that Wall's pro-child concept of childism should not be confused with Young-Bruehl's (2012) anti-child usage of the term (referring to prejudice against children).

2.2.1 Understanding Wall's perspective on childism

According to Biswas et al. (2023, p. 741), Wall's childism centers on critiquing norms and structures in response to the marginalisation of children's experiences. This perspective challenges philosophy to explore new possibilities in ethics, politics, epistemology, ontologies, and hermeneutics. Distinct from more established areas such as the philosophy of childhood, childism places children's voices at the forefront of inquiry. According to Biswas et al. (2023), childism represents a critical theoretical lens that empowers children's experiences by reshaping structural norms. A childist perspective recognises the interdependence of human relations and moral responsibility. This includes the fundamental political obligation, both towards and by children and adults, to actively respond to marginalised experiences (Biswas et al., 2023).

A key to understanding Wall's (2019) perspective on childism is his criticism of adult controlled social understandings and practices. All areas from culture to laws and norms rely on what Wall refers to as adultism and suggests that childism is a response to this issue. Similar to feminism, Wall claims that the problems childism raises are also relevant for adults. This is the case because marginalised groups cannot break the marginalisation

all by themselves. Here childism can function as a broad lens comparable to, for example, norm critical feminism, but only in so far as it develops distinctive theoretical foundations. Wall argues that these can be formed by pushing theoretical advances in childhood studies past structuralism and poststructuralism toward a friendly criticism of the previous isms, a 'post-poststructuralist' approach that Wall refers to as reconstructionism. The author further claims that the ethicists of postmodernism have only to a limited extent considered children. According to Wall (2010), children's marginalisation is part of a consequence of adults' failure to consider them as moral thinkers. Rethinking ethics in light of childhood and not just using an adult perspective can be challenging since it calls for a reconstruction of how, in this case, competence and democracy, are perceived. Wall (2019) therefore calls for a reconstruction of hegemonic discourses that marginalise children. In Wall's view, childism demonstrates that social theory must embrace the differentiation of lived experiences in order to expand and not simply deconstruct social norms. To empower children further, it is not enough to just construct imaginations of their lives or to deconstruct the hegemonic discourses that marginalise them. From a childist perspective, social theory ought to acknowledge the lived experiences of difference and otherness to expand social norms (Wall, 2019).

Wall (2010) notes, using the language of the feminist movement, that the childhood studies movement is in its second wave of childism. Childism focuses on emphasising children's agency and participation in society. A risk is that, aligned with third wave feminism, this strategy is asking the oppressed group to conform to the structures forced on them by their oppressors. The reconstruction aims to break these structures by rethinking the adult terms of agency and autonomy. Otherwise, Wall (2010, p. 38) remarks: 'No matter how much agency children have, they are likely still to remain disproportionately socially marginalized'. Wall attempts to look beyond the dichotomy of agency and vulnerability, where the latter is often paired with children and represents the absence of self-control, reason, and power. Wall (2010, p. 40) argues: 'Being human, especially in light of childhood, involves neither pure agency nor pure vulnerability but the experience of creative tension between the two.' To be vulnerable is human but it does not exclude the ability to have agency.

Wall (2010, p. 31) presents three major models of child-responsive ethics that have emerged throughout history: top-down, bottom-up, and developmental. The top-down perspective posits that children start with moral inexperience and need guidance. This perspective, according to Wall, acknowledges children's active participation in the moral

struggle while recognising the need for moral education. Conversely, the bottom-up model emphasises children's innate goodness, often associated with religious perspectives. It attributes moral purity and wisdom to children, emphasising their agency. However, it should be balanced, as overemphasising children's innate goodness may absolve society of its responsibilities toward them. The developmental model takes a different approach, emphasising gradual ethical growth throughout one's life, influenced by social conditions. This model recognises the complexity of human nature, allowing for both noble and distorted moral expressions. It does not impose a strict binary view of nature as either the problem or the solution (Wall, 2010).

Wall (2010, p. 31) uses an analogy from Francis Bacon, the Enlightenment philosopher, to explain the models:

> A top-down childism tends to interpret human beings as rather like ants: finding a sense of purpose through their roles in a larger social order. A bottom-up view sees people as more like spiders: spinning from within themselves strong silken threads against the winds of the world. Developmentalists view humanity along the lines of flies: passing through stages of metamorphosis to eventually swarm into flight.

He also makes links to other thinkers and authors such as James and Prout (mentioned in chapter 1) in relation to sociological perspectives on childhood. According to Wall (2010), childhood is generally understood as a step toward adulthood with adulthood being viewed as more complete. Wall's (2010, p. 31) alternative perspective uses elements of all three models but 'crafts their linearity into a new kind of ethical circle that is not finally reducible to any of them'. (Wall, 2010) suggests that a shift towards a more childist and child-inclusive ethics can derive from these questions:

> 1. 'What does consideration of childhood suggest about what it means most basically to be human?' (p. 7)

> 2. 'What does childhood teach about what human relations and societies should try to aim toward?' (p. 8)

> 3. 'What, in light of childhood, do human beings owe each other?' (p. 9)

Wall (2010) does not answer the questions explicitly but lets them guide his argumentation in the chapters of his book.

A cornerstone in how childism is understood and applied in this dissertation, building on Wall's (2010) theory, is that children have capabilities for speaking their minds and social agency. They have, according to Wall's concept, the capacity to participate on their own behalf in society but tend to be perceived as passive recipients of adult socialisation and considered adults to be. Generally, it is presumed that children need to be prepared for adulthood and can only then formally participate in democratic events. Arguments against children's participation stem, according to Wall (2011), from adult-centric norms on maturity, competence, and political representation. Childism is an act of thinking outside of these views (Wall, 2010). Wall (2010) argues that since children are human beings the neglect of them reduces the humanity of everyone. He further asks the essential question for the childist perspective 'Why do children everywhere enjoy narrower human rights than adults?' (Wall, 2010, p. 2).

According to Sundhall, childism offers a fresh perspective that expands the understanding of democracy by centering children's experiences and redefining the political landscape. The concept of childism also allows critical examination and discussion of the naturalised invisible structures and norms of adulthood. Sundhall (2017, p. 164) uses Wall's theory of childism when discussing how adulthood norms restrict 'possibilities of including children in democratic processes and understanding them as political subjects'. Sundhall's (2017) article examines speech acts related to the Youth Council of Gothenburg, Sweden. The analysis explores how norms of adultism are both entrenched and challenged drawing on the poststructuralist assumption of regarding language as performative. Sundhall states, building on Wall (2010), that childism seeks to reshape understanding and practices, not only for non-adults but for all individuals, by addressing children's experiences. This approach challenges existing structures and possibilities in the realm of democracy, as the power to determine what is politically significant traditionally resides with adults. During the research, Sundhall (2017) reflected on the risk of adults choosing issues they find suitable for the Youth Council and the potential concerns of this, making the issues more adult controlled. Children can also experience resistance from adults when they participate in democratic processes and their participation is examined through adult norms.

Sundhall concludes that adult norms are both replicated and challenged in the speech acts she analysed. The adult norms were not solely supported by adults, but also by children, emphasising the naturalised invisibility of these (Sundhall, 2017, p.164).

Biswas and Mattheis (2022) concur with Wall (2019) and Sundhall (2017) that childism can be used to challenge adult norms. However, in their example of school strikes for climate, they suggest that Greta Thunberg and other strikers inform the development of childism by changing the discourse around the concept because they refuse to be seen from a subordinate position. They suggest that childism stresses children's experiences through the transformation of structures for everyone. In contrast, Adami and Dineen (2021, p. 370) distance themselves from Wall's definition of childism since they consider it 'problematic in how it presupposes adults to include children and advance children's human rights in prejudice-free and unbiased ways, seemingly without the necessary first step of addressing adults' compliance in child-subordination'. They instead draw on Young-Bruehl (2012), since her use of childism suggests critical self-reflection by researchers on how 'ontological and epistemological assumptions are stained by possible prejudice and by negative or ambivalent attitudes towards children' (Adami & Dineen, 2021, p. 370).

As briefly explained earlier, Young-Bruehl (2012) uses a more discriminatory ageist approach which I do not wish to apply to my participants' perceptions. Young-Bruehl (2009, p. 251) explains that she 'advances a proposal that there is a prejudice against children, which could be called "childism," that is comparable to prejudices like anti-Semitism, sexism and racism. It argues that prejudices serve three fundamental purposes—elimination, sexual exploitation, and erasure of identity—each of which reflects defenses of a specific sort obsessional, hysterical and narcissistic, respectively.' Aligning with Sundhall (2017), I will use a critical view of taken for granted structures and norms of adulthood that can be both challenged and upheld. This is not to say that prejudice against children is not of relevance, but it is not the focus of my approach to the research material. As noted, Wall (2021) relates his concept of childism to feminism, bearing a more empowering meaning than Young-Bruehl's (2009) analogy of sexism.

2.2.2 Critique of Wall's theory

According to my reading, the critique of Wall's theory on childism is brief though existent. For me, the key elements in Wall's theory are the rethinking of the view of children and the challenging of adultist normative perspectives about childhood and children's democratic participation. I agree that both prejudice and maturity are factors, as outlined above, that are of relevance when it comes to childism. However, there is also a dilemma when it comes to maturity and vulnerability in relation to whether the many are to be considered or the few. This also generates discussion around vulnerable groups in society and democratic exclusion including age limits. Here Wall's views on the participation of the many can be seen as highly inclusive or as extreme.

There is also an issue of how Wall links theory and practice according to Csinos (2013). Csinos mostly expresses a positive notion of Wall's (2010) book *Ethics in light of childhood* but states:

> Following the "Theory" section comes the "Practice" section, where the author applies theory to three areas of moral life. I find such an approach problematic because, by beginning in the realm of theory and then moving to the realm of practice, Wall seems to imply that practice has little (or nothing) to say about theory. (Csinos, 2013, p. 6)

Csinos further raises the issue of Wall not involving the actual voices of children in the book, so the focus is more on adults' perspectives on children's lives. The same critique can be voiced about this dissertation but since I teach adult students, it is their perspectives on the subject that are of interest to me.

Cloutier (2012, p. 196) takes issue with Wall's concept of childism arguing that it involves an artificial avoidance of 'any telos of maturation'. Like other 'isms', Cloutier remarks that Wall's argumentation builds on the fact that children are full human beings and full participants. The emphasis on full participation, in Cloutier's view, conflicts with the reality of maturation in human life. Both children and adults possess agency and vulnerability, but children, generally speaking, are considered more vulnerable and less capable agents, and thus have particular needs and also, Cloutier remarks, offer particular gifts to adults. Childism tends, from Cloutier's perspective, to obscure the unique characteristics of childhood and the ways we are naturally and culturally oriented toward

maturity. To counter this, it can be argued that children are not to be viewed as a gift and that maturity is not, from Wall's perspective, assumed to be reached when the child has turned 18. However, when discussing younger children there is a dilemma here since they are dependent which Wall (2021) argues that some adults are too.

Wall's ideas are also too focused on a Western view of democracy, but my literature review suggests that his focus on Eurocentric theoretical ideas has not been stressed clearly enough by other authors. As Archard (2015) notes, there are different cultural assumptions of when maturity is reached and when childhood ends. He comments that there are societies that are less individualistic and focused on concepts like the nuclear family which tend to dominate modern Western discourses (Archard, 2015). Further, Faulkner and Nyamutata (2020) question the CRC's universal perception of a child which is not sensitive to the cultures and collectivist communities of the Global South where children may need to work or support the family.

However, it should be noted that Wall founded the Childism Institute (n.d). which currently focuses on projects like 'Childism and Decoloniality in European Education Research' with the aim to 'advance research at the intersection of adultism and coloniality to contribute to ethical advancements in European and Euro-centric educational practices.' The institute is also looking at age as 'a category that calls for critical attention in research at the intersection of coloniality, racism and education' (Childism Institute, n.d). This suggests that childism is of relevance from beyond strictly Western discourses. Even so, the decolonial perspective is not dominant in the theoretical approach presented in this dissertation. It should therefore be acknowledged that the Eurocentric perspective could also be a relevant criticism of this dissertation since the literature and focus are from a Western angle. It is easy to see activist middle class children from the Global North as the ones whose participation rights are of most concern.

While these critiques have validity, they are not in my view significant enough to negate the use of Wall's concept and turn to another. Wall's theory fits well with the subject of the dissertation which centres on children and democracy. It provides a powerful perspective to explore the issues that relate to this area since it questions taken for granted norms of children and democracy and fosters a rethinking of these.

2.3 Conclusion

Wall (2011, 2021) defines democracy as a form of government that represents the people and asserts that democracy requires those in power to be accountable to all people, not just a few. Despite increased democratic inclusiveness over the last century, Wall (2011) notes that children remain largely excluded from democratic processes. He argues that the exclusion of children from voting stems from adult-centric views of political maturity. From the perspective of childism, Wall (2011) suggests that children's voting could make political representatives more responsive to diverse needs and that voting should be for all.

In the dissertation, Wall's (2010) concept of childism is used as a critical lens through which adult assumptions on democracy and competence that influence children's abilities and possibilities for democratic possibilities are reconstructed. Childism is a concept that can be used to challenge the status quo of adultism when looking at children's possibilities for democratic participation which is why I find it useful. The use of the concept by other scholars is limited, but the literature does use the concept in relation to discussions of children and democratic participation. This avoids the need to make 'translations' from one context to another, as I would have had to do with theorists who might have a relevant framework but without a clear focus on children or a relation to democratic participation.

3. Literature Review

The literature review begins by considering children, citizenship, and democratic participation. In particular, the work of de Castro (2012), Kulynych (2001), and Archard (2015) are important here and a critical view of children's role in democracy discussed. Hart's (1992) ladder will then be discussed along with more contemporary understandings of participation for children. Here, the genuine aspect of children's participation is emphasised. This is followed by discussion of children and activism with a focus on activism among children and youth which is an arena that is receiving emerging attention in the field of children's participation. After this, the subject of voting rights for children is presented in a section on children's suffrage with a focus on voting rights. This section considers, among others, the work of Wall (2021) and Pearse (2023), but a great deal of literature that concerns children's democratic participation outside of the private sphere also touches upon suffrage, so this will also be discussed. In addition, children and democratic competence will be explored since this is a relevant part of the reason given for the exclusion of children from democratic participation according to Wall (2021). Finally, perceptions of children's rights to democratic participation will be summarised using studies from school environments, and reports and surveys with students who have studied children's rights (or similar) courses. The chapter ends with a conclusion that aims to summarise some of the findings.

All of the sections have been written with the aim and research questions in mind. Some of the subjects and concepts have briefly been outlined in the first chapter, but - as I note on several occasions in the dissertation - many are substantial topics on their own so a selection has been made with a clear focus on relevance to the aim and research questions.

3.1 Children, citizenship, and democratic participation

In this section, I outline some of the crucial aspects involved in understanding children's possibilities for democratic participation. The topics of citizenship and democracy are huge matters in their own right, so I have narrowed the focus to literature relating to children and democratic participation rather than other areas such as political theory aimed at adults. Some of these aspects have been touched upon in chapter 2 (on Wall's theory) but thoughts from other researchers will now presented.

3.1.1 Children and democracy

De Castro (2012) explores the potential connections between the realms of political theory and childhood studies and argues that there has been an absence of discourse and public debate regarding why children are typically excluded from the political sphere (de Castro, 2012, p. 166). This exclusion, rather than being questioned, is generally taken for granted. Further, it is mostly assumed that only adults possess the moral and psychological prerequisites necessary to function as legitimate political subjects, with children relegated to the status of the other in the context of the ideal political subject and consequently marginalised from participation in political activities (de Castro, 2012, p. 166). Further (and similar to Wall's perspective) de Castro (2012, p. 166) argues that childhood has come to represent a phase that needs to be transcended for children to be recognised as capable political participants. This mindset, which the childist view critiques, continues to exclude children from political engagement.

Further, De Castro (2012) remarks that the emergence of children's rights has challenged the unquestioned subordinate status of children. Even so, the question persists regarding how this rights discourse impacts contemporary political practices involving children since protective rights have occasionally been invoked to underscore children's incapacity and curtail their participation rights. According to de Castro (2012, p. 169) the moral dignity of children has been intrinsically linked to the legal imperative to protect and educate them under the supervision of adults. The elevation of children to the status of rights bearers has increased their visibility as subjects of public policy but despite this it remains uncertain to what extent the discourse of rights has provided children with a counter-ideology to developmentalism, enabling them to articulate their own perspectives (de Castro, 2012, p. 169). De Castro also highlights that children have the Convention of the Rights of the Child to support their voices to be heard. However, these rights do not stipulate democratic representation.

Archard (2015) concludes that in most democratic societies there is typically a designated voting age. In most countries this is set at 18 when the child reaches adulthood (although some countries, such as Austria and Brazil, have extended the vote to those over the age of 16). A voting age of 18 results in children being excluded from the voting process. At the same time, suffrage is considered a fundamental aspect of citizenship in a democracy. Citizenship, in this context, as explained by Archard (2015), involves a cluster of rights and duties that can be acquired gradually, suggesting that children can possess some roles

of citizenship even before they reach the voting age. Kulynych (2001), on the other hand, states that viewing citizenship through two dimensions simplifies the concept: citizenship as rights and citizenship as identity (which entails both national and political identity). Citizenship as a concept is not tied to a specific region but is based on active participation and belonging in a political system and involves identification with ideals, values, traditions, and institutions. Kulynych (2001) concludes that discussions to address children's citizenship often reflect the inadequacy of democratic models for children and instead tend to justify their exclusion. She remarks that in terms of national identity, children have long been considered citizens but in political identity, children should be recognised as political beings.

Kulynych (2001, p. 253) argues that increased exposure to children's perspectives is crucial for democracy, but children are still often kept within the private sphere even having specialised justice systems, entertainment, and news media. This privatisation denies children a public identity and the opportunity to participate as citizens which is why Kulynych, in line with a childism perspective, calls for an end of negative stereotypes of childhood that diminish them from being viewed as political actors. According to Cohen (2005) children are considered citizens since they generally have a nationality. However - as Wall also emphasises – children are often deemed incapable of full citizenship because they are perceived as lacking the capacity to make reasonable and informed decisions (Cohen, 2005, p. 221). From Cohen's perspective, this results in children having a form of semi-citizenship (2005, p. 222). Cohen (2005, p. 222) also remarks that children's exclusion from active participation in democratic politics is emphasised by the absence of a widely accepted normative framework that recognises the unique type of citizenship that children hold (or do not hold).

Wall (2011) reasons that, from a childist perspective, the idea of political citizenship does not account for children's experiences of imbalances of power in relation to adults. This power imbalance is also discussed by Cockburn (2007). Cockburn notes that Habermas posited that the essence of democracy lies in the assembly of citizens who converge to articulate their mutual interests (Cockburn, 2007, p. 447). The author suggests that this belief hinges on the principle that truth emerges through communication and debate among equal participants, but that equality is hard to achieve between adults and almost very hard to achieve between children and adults.

Building on Young's citizenship model that critiques the homogenisaton of the heard public (mostly consisting of comfortable taxpayers), Cockburn (2007, p. 450) suggests that children can aim to remove themselves from the private sphere and be heard by forming alliances with other groups who share common interests.

However, Lansdown (2001) argues that democratic participation should not be seen as the end in itself. Lansdown (2001, pp. 6-7) emphasises that democracy should be understood in broader terms such as participation in 'civil society'. She reasons that even with no access to formal democratic processes, children can still have a right to political participation (Lansdown, 2001). Still, children are excluded from several formal democratic arenas based on their age even if they possess, or are perceived to have, participation rights. Hart (1992) explains that the term participation is often applied to the process of partaking in decisions that affect a person's life and community. From a democratic view, it can be seen as a standard against which democracies can be measured and the fundamental approach to citizenship. He proposes that a nation is democratic only to the extent that all its citizens are involved (Hart, 1992. p. 4). However, as Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra (2022) state, children's contributions tend to be undermined by weak accountability in participation projects. The lack of transparency results in children not being given appropriate information, receiving minimal feedback on their contributions, and not being informed about how their opinions have potentially influenced decisions (Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2022).

3.1.2 Children's participation: Hart's ladder

Concepts of participation are contested and contextual. Kellett (2009) gives an overview of the way in which responses to children's participation have shifted over time. Responses have moved away from paternalistic stances where children are seen as in need of protection and to be excluded from decision-making processes based on the view that they are morally immature and inexperienced. A more liberationist perspective has emerged where children are seen as capable of making rational decisions. This shift is what has underpinned the rights movement following the CRC. Kellett (2009) stresses that Hart (1992), among others, has worked to create a framework for understanding how rights and participation can be actualised in practice. Kellett (2009) also remarks that not all children wish to participate, and their right to opt out is as significant as their right to engage. Central to this is the child's right to make an informed choice about whether and how they wish to engage in participatory activities.

Hart (1992) states that while children's participation does occur in different degrees around the world, it is often exploitative. Hart presents a ladder of children's participation with eight steps (see Figure 1). This is sometimes used in child-oriented projects to evaluate the participation of children.

Figure 1: Hart's ladder of participation

As can be seen above, at the lowest rung of the 'ladder' lies *Manipulation* (Hart, 1992). Adults may believe that achieving their goals justifies certain means, even if it involves children carrying political placards without understanding the issues. Such actions, done under the guise of participation, are not an appropriate introduction to democratic political processes for children since they often stem from adults' unawareness of children's capabilities and understanding. *Decoration* represents the second rung, where children are given superficial roles related to a cause, such as wearing T-shirts or performing at events. Children's participation here may be driven more by incentives like entertainment, rather than a commitment to the cause. *Tokenism* involves giving children a voice but at the same time restricting opportunities to form their own opinions. Tokenism can manifest in events

like conferences where children are placed on panels without genuine representation or preparation. *Assigned but Informed* is the fourth step. To be truly participatory, children should understand the project's intentions, know who made decisions regarding their involvement, and have a meaningful role. Number five is *Consulted and Informed*. Children can be consultants for adults, providing their opinions in a meaningful manner. This approach maintains integrity as adults design and run the project, but children's opinions are taken seriously. *Adult Initiated, Shared Decisions with Children* means that projects are initiated by adults, but the decision-making is shared, and the project aims to benefit all age groups. *Child Initiated and Directed* suggests that children initiate and lead complex projects, demonstrating their ability to work cooperatively in large groups. Supportive conditions and minimal adult interference are necessary for such initiatives to flourish. Examples of child-initiated community projects tend to be rare since adults often struggle to respond to young people's own ideas. The last step is *Child Initiated, Shared Decisions with Adults* and it represents projects initiated by children, with shared decision-making involving adults. In these instances, children take the lead, and adults provide guidance and support. These projects are also considered uncommon but can be highly valuable, fostering creativity and learning. They depend on caring adults who recognise and nurture the interests and capabilities of the youth (Hart, 1992).

Hart (2020) explains that the ladder primarily represents the extent to which adults and institutions facilitate or permit children's participation. He underscores the importance of noting that the ladder addresses only a limited aspect of how children engage in their communities worldwide. It emphasises structured programs or projects rather than the informal everyday participation of children in their local environments. It also largely focuses on the different roles adults assume in relation to children's participation. Hart (2020) stresses that the ladder was introduced as a framework to encourage a critical perspective on a topic that, at the time, lacked such analysis and the ladder was never intended to function as a comprehensive evaluative tool. Instead, its purpose is to illustrate the varying degrees to which children are allowed, supported, and empowered to initiate their own projects and participate in decision-making alongside others.

However, according to Kellett (2009), the ladder has been criticised because it portrays rights as something granted by powerful adults to passive children, and because the model is too static. Kellett (2009, p. 45) mentions Treseder's model of participation where he takes the top five levels from Hart's ladder but arranges them in a circle to demonstrate 'that they are different, but equal, forms of good participation'.

Further, Kellett explains Shier's model where the lowest level involves children being listened to and the top level is where 'children share power and responsibility for decision making' (Kellett, 2009, p. 45).

Additionally, Hart (2020) suggests that a Western view overwhelmingly dominates the global discourse on childhood and that the ladder does not challenge this. Hart explains that he expected more criticism of the ladder in relation to this aspect but remarks that this may be because 'many of those who write about the issue of children's participation are themselves educated in the West and rely on Western theories of children's development' (Hart, 2020, p. 26). However, his intention was not that the ladder should work as a single evaluation tool, but that its most beneficial quality is the utility it provides to rethink how young people can engage with in relation to participation. This is also the purpose of its inclusion in this dissertation: despite the valid criticism of it, the ladder illustrates and encourages critical thinking about children's participation.

3.1.3 Children's participation: political participation and engagement

Archard (2015) suggests that the establishment of children's parliaments, implemented in numerous countries, can serve as a tangible embodiment of the CRC mandate that every child's voice should be heard. He notes that these parliaments are not legislative bodies but rather platforms for children to express their opinions. Archard claims that these are less tokenistic and instead provide a platform for children to voice their perspectives, concerns, and interests that can be heard by adults of influence. The scholars both agree that these councils can contribute to strengthening the bonds of mutual understanding and potential collaboration between children and adults. They can also, from Archard's point of view, offer education in citizenship and enhance children's abilities to engage in civic life. Nishiyama (2017) suggests that to recognise children as citizens they need to be included in democratic projects such as children's councils. However, the scholar remarks that to solely focus on participation projects and only acknowledge children as citizens when they are recruited and ruled by adults limits their role and possibilities to truly be involved.

Taft and Gordon (2013) discuss the necessity of nurturing formal political participation among youth to ensure the vitality of a democratic society. In light of this, the authors observe that youth councils, rather than voting in political elections, are frequently advocated and regarded as the primary arena wherein the youth can exert influence and participate in democratic processes. According to Taft and Gordon, these councils are

often extolled for fostering democratic agency among children who are unable to vote. However, Taft and Gordon (2013) suggest that youth activists perceive democracy in fundamentally different ways compared to what youth councils can offer. Youth councils or similar are sometimes perceived as rather elitist, representing the interests of the established powerful, marginalising the less powerful, and interpreting them as tokenistic. Social movement scholars and other theorists of participatory democracy argue, according to the authors, that liberal models of democracy, which the notion of youth councils rely on, exaggerate the democratic potential of such institutionalised political channels. The authors remark that social movements thus become a response to these power imbalances, representing one of the few possibilities through which marginalised groups, such as youth, can assert political influence. Democratic participation for youth still often occurs beyond the formal channels (Taft & Gordon, 2013).

Chawla (2001) has reviewed areas of consensus relating to children's participation based on observations from the Oslo symposium about this issue. To define the concept of participation the author states:

> Participation is a process in which children and youth engage with other people around issues that concern their individual and collective life conditions. Participants interact in ways that respect each other's dignity, with the intention of achieving a shared goal. In the process, the child experiences itself as playing a useful role in the community. Formal processes of participation deliberately create structures for children's engagement in constructing meaning and sharing decision making.
> (Chawla, 2001, p. 1)

Regarding consensus, Chawla (2001) concludes that many areas concerning decisions and children are subject to strong adult control where children's voices may not be heard. The author does note that participation for children may already occur in some settings, but argues that the more important the decision, the less children may have a say.

Two more recent examples of child and youth participation guidelines can be found in documents by Save the Children (2021) and The Youth Participation Framework (n.d.). Both organisations explain that their guidelines are rooted in article 12 of the CRC, which stresses the freedom of expressing the child's views. The Youth Participation Framework was created by and for young people to foster youth participation and support

organisations through the agenda *Hear by Right*. The Youth Participation Framework aims to promote young people's engagement with policies that have an impact on them. Similarly, Save the Children's (2021) *Nine Basic Requirements for Meaningful and Ethical Children's Participation* aims to ensure ethical and meaningful engagement, voluntariness, respect, relevance, inclusivity, child-friendliness, and accountability. It stresses that facilitators of participation must ensure informed consent, address power imbalances, and respect children's diversity. Further, the document argues that participation outcomes should be monitored, with timely feedback mechanisms to empower children and influence decisions (Save the Children, 2021). The approach aims to foster transparency and continuous quality improvement, aiming to amplify children's voices while respecting their rights. Save the Children further explains that it integrates child participation into its organisational principles, framing this as both a right and a tool to fulfill other rights. Their approach to participation was used, for example, in the UN Study on violence against children.

3.2 Children and activism

Activism and children has been touched upon above, mentioning Taft and Gordon (2013) and UNICEF's report (2021). UNICEF (2021) stressed that, in recent years, a growth in youth and children's activism has emerged along with a decline in democratic development. Since a great deal of the literature does not concern children's activism alone, youth activism has also been included in the review. The points made below also problematise activism in relation to more formal channels such as youth councils where, for example, Taft and Gordon (2013) remark that these may be more controlled by adults than by youth.

3.2.1 Activism as critique and dissent

Discussing climate change, O'Brien et al. (2018) see youth activism as a response to exclusion from decision-making processes. Youth and children can be invited to meaningful decision-making processes but often without the possibility of having a real impact but rather contribute as tokenistic decoration (O'Brien et al., 2018, p. 3).

Being at the lower rung of Hart's (1992) participation ladder, youth are not recognised as autonomous political actors (O'Brien et al., 2018). This is why they take their commitment elsewhere, for example engaging in activism which allows them to express their critique and dissent (O'Brien et al., 2018). From this perspective, activism can be viewed as an answer to children's exclusion from other forms of democratic participation (O'Brien et al., 2018, p. 3).

Taft and Gordon (2013) suggest that activists who join youth councils report experiences with adultism where their own perceptions and contributions are being tokenised. Besides finding youth councils 'ineffective and elitist', young activists often perceive them as 'repressive sites of social control rather than youth-led spaces for critique and influence' (Taft & Gordon, 2013, p. 95). While youth councils are celebrated as highly engaging forms of civic participation seeking to involve young people in politics, Taft and Gordon (2013, p. 96) emphasise that the youth council approach to political participation and inclusion differs significantly from that of youth activists. The critical perspectives of young activists on youth councils and similar initiatives draw attention to the fact that these forms of youth inclusion provide a narrow interpretation of democratic citizenship. Young activists' notions of participation align more with those advocated by social movements according to Taft and Gordon (2013, p. 97). Being included but not gaining influence or being listened to is not sufficient for young activists who might then turn their engagement elsewhere towards less formal channels.

Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra (2022) suggest that children's activism is challenging to the status quo of adult power, decision-making, and concerns about protecting children. Further, activism can expand the field of participation since it provides ways for children to express their views. According to Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra, to recognise child activism is to view children as political actors (2022, p. 792). The authors argue that activism can be understood as an informal form of participation, and can be seen as a response to the problem of not being included in the first place (Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2022). Activism therefore draws attention to a cause that children are not able to influence through formal democratic channels (Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2022).

3.2.2. Activism and social media

Research by Cortés-Ramos et al. (2021, p. 3) on youth activism and social media indicates that among young individuals, social media is perceived as a medium for both expression and communication. Given the widespread availability of digital resources to the young demographic, social media platforms offer an easily accessible avenue for sharing opinions and engaging in causes without formal organisational affiliation (Cortés-Ramos et al., 2021, p. 10). The authors note that previous studies demonstrate that young individuals who engage in digital activism tend to also participate more actively in traditional offline political activities (Cortés-Ramos et al., 2021, p. 11). From this perspective, social media not only fosters novel modes of youth participation but also contributes to the cultivation of engagement in conventional spheres. In summary, their findings affirm the capacity of social media to facilitate the social participation of young people, transforming informal channels of communication into effective agents for social change.

Yılmaz (2017) writes about the role of social media activism and suggests that the discourse surrounding the association between internet usage and civic and political engagement revolves around two predominant perspectives. On one side, the optimistic stance argues that the internet has significantly altered political involvement by enabling cost-effective mass mobilisation, thereby potentially elevating overall levels of political engagement (Yilmaz, 2017, p.156). Conversely, Yilmz remarks, the skeptical viewpoint assesses virtual actions such as signing petitions, joining social media groups, and participating in short-term boycotts as ineffective and trivial endeavors (often associated with 'slacktivism') (2017, p.157). However, critics of 'effortless forms of internet activism' contend that these fall short in achieving political objectives compared to traditional forms of activism (Yilmaz, 2017, p.157). In contrast, the study from Cortés-Ramos et al. (2021) argues that social media can be a potential facilitator for further engagement.

Taft and O'Kane (2023, p. 755) note that children's activism has become more visible through increased media coverage in relation to children's rights and participation. The authors explain that children's activism traditionally has been viewed in terms of participation, but they question if it is a new form of participation or an old one that just receives more attention. Before 2018, the authors conclude that few academics used the term activism to label children's political actions (Taft & O'Kane, 2023, p. 746). Instead, they used terms such as advocacy or active citizenship: this is why the term activism can be seen as 'new' term even if 'the practices it describes are not empirically new' given that

protests among youth are not just a contemporary occurrence (Taft & O'Kane, 2023, p. 747). Taft and O'Kane (2023) suggest that activism should be understood as a collective engagement involving a shared political vision that is acted upon. Further, the action needs to be willing to disrupt and challenge the previously mentioned status quo which makes the approach different from advocacy (Taft & O'Kane, 2023, p. 752).

Nishiyama (2017) suggests that children can evoke a wider sense of empathy and the possibilities to influence society through protagonists such as Greta Thunberg or Malala Yousafzai. This can create further attention to the cause than if mainly adults protest. Further, Checkoway (2011) states that studies reveal that youth leaders are crucial for encouraging democratic participation among young people. This is the case because it is challenging to involve youth who may not see themselves as a unit with influence and the potential to make a difference. Checkoway aligns with Taft and Gordon (2013), when he argues that this is often because children are met with adultism, the assumption that adults are better which may cause youth to question their abilities and internalise adultist norms on competence.

Further, Nishiyama (2017) remarks that children can question adults' taken for granted viewpoints and why they could be seen as everyday activists in a sense. Zlotnik Raz and Almog (2023) conclude that children have progressively engaged in, for example, human rights, social issues, and climate-related causes, why their recognition as active political contributors has increased in recent years. Paradoxically, the rights of children in the political context are still a divisive subject of debate. If they engage for a certain cause, potentially due to exclusion from democratic arenas of decision-making, they can, as in the case of Greta Thunberg, be viewed as either adult controlled or as heroes/saviours (Mkono et al., 2020).

Overall, then, even if activism has been on the rise, it can be problematised as being used when other formal and informal arenas are not sufficient democratic spaces for children. However, forms of activism can also provide a freer space for expression and so can be seen as a vital part of democracy. Having discussed various forms of activism in this section, I will now explore the subject of children's suffrage. The subject of giving children the vote will reoccur in this dissertation since this is a formal form of democratic participation.

3.3 Children's suffrage

In this section, debate and research on children's suffrage will be presented. Some researchers such as Priest (2016) and Wall (2021) argue for children's enfranchisement, while others like Chan and Clayton (2006) take a stance against. Zlotnik Raz and Almog (2023) remark that, in most cases, children are excluded from important political decision-making and that giving children the vote (or shifting to a lowered voting age) is a divisive topic. Voting is therefore a contentious aspect of children's democratic participation. However, it is an important aspect to consider given that some nations have recently lowered the voting age (at least in local elections). The question of whether children younger than 16 should vote is potentially even more controversial but relevant to consider, particularly given Wall's position on this (as discussed in chapter 2).

3.3.1 Debates on children and voting

Pearse (2023, p. 2) claims that, in the realm of political theory, the issue of allowing children to vote is often marginalised and met with skepticism. The predominant focus remains on questions surrounding universal adult suffrage, while children's exclusion from the political process is typically regarded as unproblematic (Pearse, 2023, p. 2). Pearse (2023) remarks that in contemporary democracies, various exclusionary principles are at play, but they all incorporate some form of age-related competency screening (p. 1). This prevailing model of universal suffrage excludes children and prioritises voter competence (whatever the definition may be) over political equality (Pearse, 2023, p. 1). Within systems of representation, Pearse (2023) argues that principles of equality of worth and relational equality have two implications. Firstly, each individual's interests and perspectives are considered equally valuable (Pearse, 2023, p. 4). Secondly, decision-makers are obligated to give equal consideration to each person and their viewpoints (Pearse, 2023, p. 4). As an extension of these principles, he concludes that every individual should have the right to vote, ensuring that their perspectives are not systematically disregarded by those in power and that decision-makers are held accountable (Pearse, 2023, p. 4). Along similar lines, Cohen (2005) states that children's interests, when different from those of adults close to them, tend to not be formally represented in a democratic society.

Priest (2016) argues that it is an injustice to not allow children to vote. The author uses Rawls's principle of justice as fairness and concludes that all citizens should be entitled to

equal basic rights including voting. Priest however remarks that Rawls himself argued that children lack rationality and sees no problem with them being discarded from the vote (Priest, 2016, p. 216). Even if modern representative democracies maintain several exclusions of people from voting such as immigrants, expats and/or prisoners, as Pearse (2023) remarks, age is the constant factor. However, according to Kulynych (2001) theorists like Arendt and Purdy argue that granting democratic rights to children would politicise what should remain private and that it could be dangerous for both children and society to break this barrier. Kulynych also argues that the debate over children's rights bears similarities to historical struggles for the rights of marginalised groups. However, Kulynych suggests that efforts for political inclusion centered on formal democracy such as the right to vote or hold office, are less effective in today's complex, bureaucratic world. Instead, the author emphasises informal democratic participation and fruitful possibilities for children to be heard.

3.3.2 The voting age

As emphasised before, this dissertation does not interpret democratic participation as only relating to formal democractic principles such as voting. However, the arguments on voting age are still relevant because they relate to ideas of children's abilities and competence and to the idea of a lowered voting age as a slippery slope. Merry and Schinkel (2016) promote a voting age from about 14 and do not concur with the slippery slope argument that is sometimes put forward which suggests an adultification of children and that restrictions based on age such as driving, alcohol use, or the age of consent could also disappear. They argue that a lower voting age will not impose adult-like responsibilities on children since this exaggerates the burden of voting (Merry & Schinkel, 2016, p. 206).

Chan and Clayton (2006) also consider the idea of a lowered voting age to 16 from a UK perspective. They reviewed survey data relevant to the question of the age of the electoral majority. Based on these they defend a voting age of 18 and argue that it should not be lowered to sixteen. Chan and Clayton (2006) suggest that a large majority of the public are against the idea of 16-year-olds having the vote. They argue that arguments in favour of votes for women and minorities are irrelevant since these are more stable features than childhood and adulthood (Chan & Clayton, 2006, p. 540). They also note that the brain is still developing 'during the teenage years and perhaps for some time in young adulthood as well' and so 'it seems unlikely that simply enfranchising sixteen and seventeen-year-olds would make them politically mature voters' (Chan & Clayton, 2006, p. 533). However

Kulynych (2001) remarks, in relation to biological arguments, that children, especially younger ones, may be more biologically dependent on their guardians and others but dependency is still not exclusive to children as a group. For example, elderly people are also more reliant on support.

Chan and Clayton (2006, p. 542) state that survey data has consistently shown that younger people are, on a general level, less interested in politics. The individuals participating in the surveys are often eighteen years or older. This data is now dated, but the more general points Chan and Clayton (2006) make are still relevant. Chan and Clayton's study revealed that a majority of 16 and 17-year-olds are less knowledgeable about political facts and less consistent in their attitude and interest in politics than older people (2006, p. 549). The researchers suggest that the teenage years are a period of political awakening (Chan, 2006, p. 553). However, they remark that their data only tests for present competence and interest and do not take into consideration if the findings would be the same if children had the vote or a greater say in politics. In line with Wall's (2021) arguments, they state that increased influence would likely positively influence the ability and willingness of youth to engage in democracy and politics (Chan & Clayton, 2006, p. 553).

Hart and Atkins (2011) argue against Chan and Clayton's (2006) stance of rejecting a lowered voting age. Hart and Atkins (2011) suggest that the argument about the public being against a lowered voting age is not supported by survey data in the US. They conclude that 16-year-olds should be able to vote and that this is supported by research and analysis which indicate that their capacities are not different from those who have turned 18. For example, Hart and Atkins (2011) remark that, when their study was conducted, no neurological evidence supported the claim that 16-year-olds are not mature, responsible, or experienced enough to vote. Their analysis of research showed that 16-year-olds had developed the competencies of citizenship believed to be necessary for voting in a democracy. Hart and Atkins also suggest that evidence indicates substantial benefits to a lowered voting age of 16, such as increased participation leading to a greater commitment to civic life. A final argument, of relevance for many countries, is that their populations are becoming older and less interested in supporting the interests of young people: a lowered voting age would balance this demographic development (Hart & Atkins, 2011).

3.4 Children and democratic competence

Several of the studies below argue for and against democratic competence based on various research and ideology. This emphasises the norm of requesting a certain level of abilities for children to be able to participate, at least formally, in a democratic society. When discussing children's democratic competence voting tends to reappear in the material since this is an example that puts the issue on edge. It is therefore difficult to discuss this issue without some repetition of points made above.

3.4.1 Are exclusions reasonable?

Within the realm of contemporary democratic theory, according to Schrag (2004), Christiano stands out as the sole proponent who acknowledges the necessity of explaining why children are legitimately excluded while at the same time arguing for the participation of all citizens in democracy. Christiano's (2001) argument relates to competence: he claims that children lack the capacity to have rational views on moral principles and just adopt opinions from their guardians. He also remarks that children have not yet developed own interest or understandings. Nishiyama (2017) critiques Christiano's perspective to explore dominant approaches on the topic of children and democracy. Nishiyama (2017, p. 2) states that this reflects the opinion that children lack the capabilities and judgment required to engage in a democracy and exaggerate the abilities of adults. Schrag (2004) also argues against Christiano's (2001) that to participate in democratic decisions indicates the right to exercise power over others so moral competence is and ought to be a significant factor. Schrag (2004, pp. 371-373) remarks that Christiano's claims that the individual should be capable of reflecting about ideas on justice and establishing a sense of their own interests are vague and could limit the possibilities of suffrage for adults.

Purdy (1994) argues that children should not have equal rights to adults and that a common-sense view suggests that limits and exclusions for children are reasonable. The author builds this argument on the assumption that children and adults are different morally and possess differing capacities for logical thinking, and that adults have more knowledge of the world. Purdy suggests that these competencies can only be acquired over time through protected learning. Further, with reference to counterarguments about overlapping abilities among children and adults Purdy (1994, p. 228) asks:

What about individuals who never develop the capacities we expect in adults? In part society's response should depend on the nature of their deficiencies. If the deficiencies are serious, then those persons need continued protection. If an individual's problem is more limited, doing nothing may be the best response.

Differences on an individual level, either an incompetent adult or a competent child, can from this perspective be understood as a non-issue that does not impose any sort of action. This common-sense view can be read as a counter-perspective to Wall's (2021) argument. Wall and Purdy take profoundly different approaches to children and their participation rights.

However, Pearse (2023) remarks that there is no cohesive definition of what is required to become, for example, a voter but adults are generally believed to have it and children are not. Kulynych (2001) explains that some argue that limiting children's political exposure is in their best interest since they need to develop moral virtues and self-control. Kulynych further argues that children's capacities are consequently underestimated while adults' abilities are overrated which affects children's ability to act as autonomous agents. The exclusion of children's voices from the public sphere is exacerbated by categorising children as disorderly seeing children as both vulnerable and as disruptive (Kulynych, 2001, p. 259).

For Archard (2015), there is an arbitrariness in relation to age as a principle for holding certain rights. Cohen (2005) also thinks that the age of 18 rather serves as a convenient arbitrary marker for adulthood but that the actual capacity of both children and adults varies significantly. He claims that there is a 'lack of uniformity in the capabilities of minors' where numerous instances of children are displaying abilities that are commonly associated with adults (Cohen, 2005, p. 225). Cohen concludes that many adults occasionally act irrationally due to a number of factors, again stressing the arbitrariness of age limits and democratic participation.

Archard (2015) further suggests that those defending the current exclusion of children from voting often, as stressed before, argue that it hinges on the competence required for voting, which is typically defined as the ability to make rational decisions about political choices based on available information. According to Archard, the necessary voter competence is minimal rationality, the ability to differentiate between political parties, candidates, and policies based on identifiable interests and goals that are worth promoting.

He notes that this does not demand that voters make wise rational choices but rather that they choose among alternatives based on relevant criteria. Pearse (2023) also claims that placing a competence demand on citizens is problematic, not only for the role of children in a democracy since this may dismiss more people. The author suggests that children are excluded from full democratic citizenship based on the principle that they are deemed incompetent (Pearse, 2023, p. 3). Pearse (2023, p. 5) remarks that many studies in developmental psychology suggest that some skills are acquired gradually through age. With reference to this, children's expected limitations in reason and competence make them seem ill-fitting, by some, to take part in voting or policymaking. According to Hart (1992) confidence and competence among children can gradually be acquired through practice why there should be increasing opportunities for children to participate in any aspiring democracy particularly in those nations already convinced that they are democratic. It may be hard to be competent at something that one has been excluded from.

3.4.2 Democratic competence

Munn (2014) responds to the democratic competence issue with the proposal of a capacity test. He remarks that political participation can be formal and informal where formal participation is primarily defined by the right to vote (Munn, 2014, p. 1135). Since, for example, children are excluded from the formal process based on age he suggests capacity testing to enhance the enfranchisement of capable citizens in democracies. Munn (2014) contends that any capable citizen should have the right to participate in formal political activities and that the aim should be only to include and not exclude people based on the test. In line with the Doe capacity standard, Munn's (2014, p. 1136) proposal defines a politically capable individual as someone who comprehends the significance of voting and possesses the ability to make a choice. The Doe test, as advocated by Munn, offers an objective, and easily administered standard for capacity, aligning with medical and criminal capacity criteria. The author's proposal is that, if an excluded person can demonstrate their understanding of voting and their ability to cast a vote, their continued exclusion is unjust. Munn recognises four main objections against capacity testing. These revolve around the belief that capacity testing is costly, carries the risk of corruption, lacks objective agreement on competence, and introduces uncertainty regarding one's involvement in democracy that can, unlike age-based exclusions, lead to permanent exclusion (Munn, 2014).

Archard (2015, p. 68) is critical of the perception that children are, by right, disqualified from possessing certain rights due to their potential inabilities (the so-called incompetence thesis). Archard (2015) suggests that it may seem unjust to exclude humans from certain rights solely based on age, and that society distinguishes between young and old based on a perceived correlation between age and the capacity to exercise rights. The issue is not, according to Archard, that young people are inherently devoid of rights due to their age, but rather that their youth is associated with assumed inadequacies in relevant competencies. Archard puts forward the argument that if a child cannot, for example, vote due to their inability to make rational choices, a similarly incapable adult should also be disqualified from voting. To be excluded or included over presumed capabilities rather suggests a democracy that seeks an ideal voter. According to Archard (2015, p. 237) the value of democracy should be the guiding principle in adults' approach to children. He contends that for a society to function as a self-governing entity, its members must possess the capacity to engage in collective self-management. From Archard's perspective this goes beyond developing rational autonomy but also entails recognising and respecting diverse viewpoints and being willing to collaborate despite these differences.

Building on the argumentation of a competence bar, Archard (2015) separates the view of a common voter and an ideal voter. Ideal voters, described by the author, would not only possess competence but also have the ability to identify key issues and connect them to their goals, exhibiting intelligence and knowledge rather than just minimal rationality. Using these qualities as criteria for voting competence might imply educational qualifications or, as suggested by John Stuart Mill, presented by Archard (2015, p. 140), an entitlement to additional votes which further stresses the question of the view on democracy. Archard (2015, p. 141) further describes that through centuries, political philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle have measured governance with the aim to, in the end, achieve the most good and just for all. Against this background, Archard states that the best approach from this historical perspective might be to provide more power to the ideal qualified citizens instead of the many. This suggests a modified democracy that provides more votes to the most capable adults and removes power from those perceived as less qualified (Archard, 2015).

Archard (2015) continues the discussion on age and responsibility stating that children below a certain age are affected by laws but sometimes not held accountable for them, while those above that age are both affected by and subject to the law. The argument made is that it is inconsistent for a jurisdiction to hold a specific age group responsible for their

actions under the law while simultaneously denying them the right to participate in shaping and validating those laws. This inconsistency becomes apparent, from Archard's view, when certain age groups are allowed to engage in activities that presuppose civic competence, such as military service, while being denied the right to vote. For example, 16-year-olds can engage in full-time work and sexual relationships but are still considered incapable of casting a vote in many countries. On the other hand, Archard puts forward that some political theorists have argued that the significance of the vote in democratic contexts is limited. Still, formal democratic participation seems to be important enough to defend and gatekeep from certain groups throughout history. According to Wall (2021) historically, the concept of voting competence has evolved from ancient times when it was believed that the ideal citizens should have the exclusive right to vote. This moved to property ownership as a criterion for competence, followed by adult maleness, and finally, voting competence became based on adulthood, aligning with democratic ideals.

Stoker (2006) suggests that a functioning democracy should value different perspectives and experiences rather than ideal citizens. Based on this he claims that children's democratic participation should not be postponed due to assumed lack of competence. Merry and Schinkel (2016), building their argument from a review on the subject, argue that children from the age of 14 ought to have the right to vote and that they, like several other scholars' points of view, are excluded mainly based on their presumed incompetence. The authors suggest that few would meet a standard competence bar that would favour an ideal citizen (Merry & Schinkel, 2016). Wall (2021), however, makes a distinction between voting knowledge and competence where the first is more about education, understanding, and experience while the latter is more about ability. Wall concludes that children, on a general level, have received less formal political education than adults and might not have learned about, for example, political history but still reasons that children can be considered politically competent and knowledgeable. However, Nishiyama (2017) remarks that in the context of democracy, children's immaturity and sense of curiosity are what enables them to question and challenge norms or taken for granted perspectives in the adult world.

Steinberg et al. (2009) have not been looking at democratic competence in specific but aimed to challenge the sweeping statements regarding the maturity of children based on cognitive testing. After testing about one thousand adolescents, they remark that at the age of 16 typical cognitive abilities are almost identical to adults' since 'scores increased between ages 11 and 16 and then levelled off, with no improvement after this age' (Steinberg et al. 2009, p. 592).

Based on this they concluded that 16-year-olds can make essential health decisions for themselves. Hart and Atkins (2011) also used this study to support their stance on a lowered voting age.

A well-referred study by Stevens (1982) underscores that young children, aged 7 to 11, have the capability to critically acquire and use information. The researcher talked to many children over a period of three years and concluded that they have knowledge of concepts such as democracy, freedom, laws, and political actors as well as can form their own opinions. For example, Archard (2015) builds on this research suggesting it reveals that children can become adept at participating in democracy and making informed political choices if they are presumed capable from an early age.

A study by Fjeldstad and Mikkelsen (2003) indicates that Norwegian students around 14-years of age possessed adequate democratic competence such as knowledge of democracy and democratic institutions but lacked an interest and willingness to participate politically. Internationally the Norweigan students' democratic knowledge indicated a high level compared to many other countries. As both Wall (2021) Chan and Clayton (2006) remarked above, the fact that young persons lack opportunities to participate democratically and to make their voices heard the same way that adults can, may possibly contribute to the lack of political interest expressed in the surveys.

Pearse (2023) concludes that there is a focus on the weaknesses of children with a claim that empowering children in the democratic sphere would lead to a chaotic democracy. Based on this argument, according to Pearse, children are assumed to not be capable enough to participate in democratic life. Their lack of competence, per the author, expressed through arbitrary parameters, would undermine the results of why democracy must be protected from the disorganised opinions of children.

3.5 Perceptions of children's rights to democratic participation

This section will briefly outline a selection of research that presents findings on perceptions concerning children's rights to democratic participation. It also discusses studies that underline the issue of children's democratic participation in various forms such as education. (A reflection on the subject of children's rights is found in the first chapter of this dissertation.) Few of the studies I found contain an explicit definition of children's rights but are rather focused on particular aspects of their rights. For example, Campbell and Covell (2001, p. 123) discuss the obstacles to realising children's rights as 'the

persisting belief of children as property and the lack of knowledge and understanding of children's rights as articulated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child'. They repeatedly refer to the CRC while emphasising the rights of children (Campbell & Covell, 2001). Another example is Peterson-Badali et al. (2003, p. 731) who define nurturance rights for children as 'children's rights to basic care and to protection from harm and exploitation' but who do not define the overall concept of children's rights in itself.

However, Karaman-Kepenekci (2006, p. 307) more clearly explains: 'A right is an enforceable claim to the possession of property or authority, or to the enjoyment of privileges or immunities.' She goes on to state that the study of rights 'is the study of power, control and decision-making. The connection between rights and power, or powers, would seem particularly relevant to a discussion of children's rights' (Karaman-Kepenekci, 2006, p. 307). Cherney et al. (2008, p. 433) state, in relation to children's rights: 'One can anticipate basic cultural differences in how the term children's rights is understood. In some cultures, it may be difficult for individuals to imagine children as having rights apart from their parents.' They also explain that the CRC rather underscores the rights of an individual child than focussing on rights within the family or a group.

3.5.1 Understanding children's perceptions

When looking at perceptions about children and democracy it is not unusual for studies to focus solely on educational matters. For example, Botha et al. (2016), as part of a longitudinal study on children's perceptions of democratic values, studied 9-year-olds attending a school in South Africa. The focus was the children's understanding of their democratic values, and their ability to critically examine these. The researchers concluded that the children in the study developed their thinking when provided with the opportunity to exercise it and concluded that they should be able to participate in democratic processes in their school and class (Botha et al. 2016). Lobman (2011) suggests that schools have served as the institution accountable for preparing children for democratic participation. However, the author remarks that out-of-school experiences have become increasingly more important for children's democratic development (Lobman, 2011).

Another study which focuses on pupil perceptions of participation in school was carried out by De Róiste et al. (2012). They collected survey data through self-completion questionnaires from over 10,000 pupils between 10-17 years old in Irish schools and established that a large majority of the young people reported that they were encouraged to

express their views in class but less so in being part of creating rules in the school environment. The authors conclude that their findings stress the importance of genuine school participation for pupils (De Róiste et al., 2012, p. 100). They argue that genuine democratic school participation, can lead to enhanced relations and learning which is rewarding for both staff and pupils (De Róiste et al., 2012, p. 99).

Thornberg and Elvstrand (2012) present another example of democracy in the school environment. The primary objective of their research was to study the perceptions and experiences of Swedish elementary school children concerning democracy and pupil engagement within the context of routine school activities. The research had a particular emphasis on amplifying pupils' voices on these matters (Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012, p. 44). The researchers' analysis underscores a dynamic wherein children's position is marginalised and their expressions frequently suppressed or minimised. The outcomes, according to the researchers, highlight the incoherence between political aspirations and educational implementations. Thornberg and Elvstrand (2012) suggest that the findings illuminate a series of challenges and constraints within the routine milieu of school life that need to be redressed in order to foster a more inclusive school, thereby engaging pupils in democratic processes and readying them for active citizenship beyond the educational domain (p. 52). They state that some research, for example by Saha and Print (2010, in Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012, p. 52), supports the view that, for example, school elections can indicate a preparedness for adult suffrage. The conclusions by Thornberg and Elvstrand (2012, p. 52) suggest that educators must heighten their awareness of entrenched power dynamics and interactional norms within the everyday culture of schooling and student councils, as these elements can foster a democratic attitude within educational settings. Discontinuity among staff emerges as an obstacle to the cultivation of trust and democratic relations between pupils and educators (Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012, p. 47). According to Thornberg and Elvstrand, this discontinuity entails situations where decisions made democratically by pupils with one educator may be overturned by another without explanation (2012, p. 47). The pupils perceived an inconsistency among educators regarding their perspectives and actions concerning pupil involvement and educational democracy. While some educators regard pupil influence and participation in the classroom as an aspirational objective, others do not perceive it as a requisite condition (Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012, p. 47).

Wider perspectives on participation were gathered in a report by the Swedish Federation of Student Unions (2023) for youth aged 16 to 19 years of age indicated that the students largely expressed that they could participate in and affect school decisions but not political decisions at the local or national level. In addition, 6 out of 10 respondents expressed a low or fairly low level of trust for politicians. This is a small survey report but still complements the data presented earlier on declining views of democracy, especially for the younger population. Cockburn (2007) notes the critique that schools have been focused on preparing children for future citizenship instead of giving them encouragement to genuine experiences of democracy. The author remarks that schools are not miniature democracies and cannot fully teach the practices of democracy. The view on children's democratic participation in this dissertation is trying to move from a mere focus on educational settings for those under 18 even if these are highly important institutions. Those settings are not the public democratic sphere, and a school election cannot compare to a local or national one.

Again, relating to wider participation, the scholarly discourse on education for citizenship and democracy, with a specific focus on schooling in England, has been comprehensively synthesised by Osler and Starkey (2006) in their review article. This synthesis encompasses research published since 1995, shedding light on the evolving landscape of civic and political engagement, particularly among young people, which constitutes a concern shared by several democratic nation-states. The researchers observe that lack of democratic engagement is often labeled as 'apathy' in established democracies (Osler & Starkey, 2006, p. 437). The imperative to enhance citizenship education is intertwined with a tendency to attribute societal issues to the younger generation. The younger population tends to be blamed for not engaging enough democratically and therefore being perceived as apathetic. Consequently, citizenship education is envisaged as a strategic tool to address the perceived insufficiencies among children and youth, thereby reinforcing democratic values and countering anti-democratic sentiments (Osler & Starkey, 2006, p. 437).

To give a view of the public sphere, Cammaerts et al. (2014) assessed youth attitudes in six European countries using a comparative survey, interviews, and focus groups. The authors' data revealed that young people's willingness to engage politically is being hindered by the political discourse and practice that makes them feel ignored. Voting is seen as both valuable and desirable but the low voter turnout among those who just turned 18 reflects a frustration. The study underscores the disconnect between the aspirations of young people for democracy and how these objectives are addressed by politicians. Cammaerts et al.

(2014) conclude that those who attribute the low turnout of young voters to apathy or selfishness misunderstand their political interest, engagement, and critique of the political process. This study is not aimed specifically at children but relates to the myth argument about 'youth apathy' that tends to be directed at young people as an argument against their extended political involvement.

3.5.2 Adult perceptions of children's rights

In contrast to the studies which focus on children and young people's perceptions, Peterson-Badali et al. stated in 2003 that there had been limited research on adults' attitudes toward children's rights. Although this research is dated, it still contributes to the field of research because it highlights perceptions of children's rights. Their study involved two anonymous individual questionnaires where the participants, college students in Canada and the US, were asked to think of a child of a specific age when responding to the questions. The study revealed that Canadians showed more support for children's self-determination than Americans (Peterson-Badali et al., 2003, p. 730). Further advocacy for children's rights depended on the age of the child and the type of right. The latter may indicate that there are some national and/or cultural differences in the view of children's rights (Peterson-Badali et al., 2003).

Cherney et al. (2008) stress the importance of adult perceptions when it comes to children's rights since these are fundamental to facilitating the accomplishment of these rights. Their research investigated the perceptions of adults from the United States, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom regarding children's rights (Cherney et al., 2008). Overall, the findings indicated that Swiss and British adults were more likely than their U.S. counterparts to endorse autonomy and self-determination rights for children. Additionally, the data revealed that parents were generally less likely to support autonomy rights for children than were non-parents. Cherney et al. (2008) propose that the degree of paternalism (or parentalism as they also call it) within a culture may serve as a greater predictor of adults' perceptions of children's rights than traditional cultural dimensions such as individualism or collectivism. Cherney et al. (2008) argue that paternalism is characterised by a hierarchical structure in which authority figures may restrict the freedoms of those with less power for the perceived benefit of society. U.S. participants appeared to hold more conservative views concerning children's rights relative to their Swiss and British counterparts, who may be situated within more politically and socially liberal contexts, according to Cherney et al. (20080). British participants tended to view children as competent to make decisions regarding religious affiliation and educational choices at a younger age, while Swiss adults were more likely to perceive children as

capable of engaging in, for example, consuming alcohol, and managing earned income at earlier ages. In contrast, U.S. adults were more likely to view children as competent to participate in military service at a younger age (Cherney et al., 2008).

Another study that included adult perspectives was conducted by Cherney (2010) who interviewed 47 US Midwestern children between 10 and 16 years old. Their parents also received a questionnaire about their perceptions of children's rights. Some guardians thought that their child would support children's rights more, and mothers were more likely than fathers to perceive that their child would support self-determination rights (Cherney, 2010, p. 79). Parents' perception of competence was also highly based on age. The children themselves did not advocate for the right to vote and thought that adults would make better choices (Cherney, 2010, p. 94). Building on Wall's (2021) remarks as emphasised earlier in the text, it might be difficult to assume that you have certain democratic abilities when you have been told, on a group level, that you lack these.

Building on perceptions of children's rights, Campbell and Covell (2001) conducted surveys with fill-in options with university students before and after learning about children's rights. They then compared their data with a student group that did not take part in learning about children's rights. Their study showed that the group who received education in children's rights increased their awareness of, but also support for, children's rights. Campbell and Covell (2001) concluded that the results of the study revealed the advantages of educating adults about children's rights. In line with Campbell and Covell (2001), Karaman-Kepenekci (2006) also used a survey where 350 university students in Turkey regarding their attitudes towards children's rights. The result concluded that female students and students within the fields of Education or Human Rights had a more positive attitude towards children's rights than others.

Some of the studies above touch on the presumed apathy of young people when it comes to political engagement, but overall age seems to be a dominant factor when thinking of children's rights and issues surrounding this. Of course, age constitutes the being or not being of a child but the view of young people, through various ages deserves, in my view, more attention. The emphasis on education and the school environment do not per se constitute an arena where children's rights are fully exercised and where their voices can be heard even if democratic engagement in these places is praised. Attitudes toward children and their participation rights, based on my reading matter since these can contribute to either enhancing or strengthening the involvement of children.

3.6 Conclusion

In the literature review, the following subjects were outlined: children, citizenship and democratic participation; activism among children and youth; suffrage for children; democratic competence and children; and perceptions of children's rights and the right to democratic participation. Below some central aspects from these areas will be summarised.

Following the discussion around children's democratic engagement, the issue of competence emerged as important, especially in relation to formal participation such as voting. While some took a stance against the image of the ideal voter and/or competence as important in a democracy others argued against the competence and abilities of children. The concept of children's citizenship was outlined were some presented a critique, seeing children as second class citizens, depending on the definition which can be broad, including democratic rights or narrow focusing on nationality. Hart's (1992) ladder is an important approach to thinking about the various ways in which participation can be thought of. It helps us to see and question which forms of participation are inclusive and authentic and which are tokenistic or exploitative. This should be borne in mind when thinking about, for example, youth councils or similar. Though there are positive examples some authors argued that youth activists can find youth councils to be elitist and tokenistic rather than meaningful why informal channels may be preferred. It was suggested that activism can be seen as a solution to the lack of formal channels to express their political engagement.

The chapter also presented perspectives on political engagement among children and youth. Some authors challenge apprehensions about, for example, youth apathy and competence, while others maintained it. This also ties into the research on democratic engagement in the school environment, and research into the perceptions of children and adults on democractic involvement. In summary, the literature highlighted the debate about children's exclusion from democratic processes, the view on competence and children, and the role of education/school and activism in promoting children's participation as well as, although limited, the understanding of democracy, citizenship, and the relation to children.

4. Research Approach and Methodology

I briefly explained some of the motivations for the choice of interviews and study participants in the introduction chapter, but will provide more detail here to explain how the methodology allowed me to explore my research focus and questions. The chapter presents the research approach, including reflections on the research paradigm and the validity of the study. I also describe the interview approach and provide information about the participants. The process of transcription is also outlined following discussion of thematic analysis where I provide an overview of how Braun and Clarke's (2022) approach was used in my study.

This chapter also includes a section on ethical considerations where I reflect on ethical aspects of relevance for the dissertation. (Ethics is an aspect that should be seen as present throughout the whole text and not just accounted for here.) Later, in chapter 7, I will focus on some of the limitations and implications of the research approach and the choices I made.

4.1 Research approach

According to Uzun (2016), ontology deals with questions of reality and what is knowable while epistemology concerns what knowledge is and how it can be created and understood. Ontological and epistemological understandings are linked to research paradigms, which Uzun explains as perceptions of the nature of research. The author remarks that research paradigms differ in their understanding of reality as abstract, concrete, objective, or subjective. The interpretivist paradigm, which is of relevance to this dissertation, uses, as described by Uzun, a relativistic approach since the ontological basis suggests that reality is understood as subjective and depending on individual and/or context. Through this lens, reality is also socially constructed and, in a simplistic way, varying without absolute truths. Uzun (2016) states that data in the interpretive research paradigm is often collected, through, as in this case, interviews which contribute to understand the perceptions, values, and beliefs that people express.

The epistemological framework of this study embraces an interpretivist perspective, recognising knowledge as socially constructed and context-dependent. By adopting an interpretivist approach, the study aims to unravel the participants' perceptions of children's possibilities and abilities in democratic participation and influence. The notions of the participants are understood as statements that I as a researcher interpret from a certain analytical lens rather than an objective truth.

Coleman (2021) suggests that validity and reliability tend to be associated with quantitative research but can still be applied to qualitative studies. Validity and reliability are, in a broad sense, concerned with the issue of credibility. Coleman (2021, p. 2041) builds on several scholars when concluding that reliability can be referred to as dependability, confirmability, or consistency. The researcher needs to be able to show how the research has been conducted so that the reader can examine the decisions that have been made. The author further describes validity as referring to the correctness and/or credibility of the study's conclusion, explanation, and interpretation. For research to live up to the criteria of reliability and validity the researcher needs to demonstrate that the approaches he or she has chosen are suitable for the study. According to Coleman (2021, p. 2042) the use of recordings and complete interview transcripts, as I have used, can ensure that the data is richer compared to more selective interviewer notes. The recording and transcription generate raw data that can be reviewed. Coleman thus remarks that no method can guarantee complete validity but to be transparent contributes to the credibility of the research. I will explain the procedure and choices below in order to be transparent about the process.

4.2 Methodology

This study uses semi-structured interviews to gather data on the perceptions of children's possibilities and abilities for democratic participation from students who have been registered on a course on children's rights. Allmark et al. (2009) remark that the use of one-to-one in-depth interviews is a usual occurrence in qualitative research. According to Brinkmann (2008) interviews are part of a conversational tradition that occurs between an interviewer and an interviewee. Through this interaction knowledge can be produced. As elaborated on under the headline of 'professional relevance' the work with the dissertation will support my professional knowledge and future work to reencounter the notions from former students.

The perceptions of the participants are the basis of the research data, and these views will be analysed through the lens of childism (Wall, 2010) and using Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis to produce knowledge.

4.2.1 Interview approach

Magnusson and Marecek (2015, p. 1) prefer the term interpretative research to qualitative research 'because it is both more precise and more descriptive'. They state that the goal of such research is to interpret 'the meanings that people ascribe to events and actions, how they make these meanings their own, and how they negotiate these meanings in interactions with other people.' (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015, p. 1) They suggest that questionnaires provide limited alternatives constructed by the researcher as to why interpretative research benefits from using semi-structured interviews that generate knowledge regarding the participants' worldviews and beliefs. The aim is to take part in the perceptions that the participants express and not find a positivist truth on the topic or generalisable overall conclusion. If I had used a questionnaire, I might have received more answers, but the data would be less rich since I could not ask follow-up questions, clarify, or elaborate. As with my dissertation, in-depth interviews are commonly semi-structured where, according to Allmark et al. (2009), the interviewer uses open-ended questions rather than strictly follow a number of closed questions. Magnusson and Marecek (2015) suggest that the questions should be feasible to understand, open-ended, and request, for example, opinions and reflections. Other aspects I considered when constructing my interview guide was to ask one question at a time, not assume the answer beforehand. Magnusson and Marecek also remark that unpacking the research questions should be the aim of the interview.

When using semi-structured interviews, Magnusson and Marecek (2015, p. 47) explain that the questions are written in an interview guide, but the interviewer is not required to follow a strict order. If the conversation follows a different structure of topics the interviewer can adapt to this. Semi structured interviews tend to have a more conversational tone in the sense that the participant should feel at ease (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015, p. 46). Open-ended interview questions, as I used, should also encourage the participants to talk about their personal perceptions and reflections. I constructed ten main questions followed by encouragement to motivate or clarify such as how and why[5].

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[5] The interview guide I used is included in Appendix 1.

The questions focused on perceptions regarding children's involvement in democratic processes, decisions, influence and voting, as well as exploring the benefits and challenges around this. The interview also included more specific questions about perceptions of voting age, competence and ethical considerations. During the interviews, all questions were covered but I adapted to the conversation and sometimes changed the intended order to avoid repetition if participants already had discussed something. I also clarified some questions, asked a follow up question or changed the wording a bit in order to follow the conversation and the participant's reflections. The follow-up questions also differed depending on the answers. This approach enabled me to gather data that related to my research question but also allowed scope to follow individual participant voices and perceptions. I will elaborate more on the methods in the sections below and reflect more fully on the research process in chapter 7 (Conclusion).

4.2.2 Participants

I interviewed 13 participants, using one in-depth zoom interview each, lasting between 15 and 40 minutes 'effective time' (not including before and after chat). As explained at the beginning of the dissertation the participants had been registered to a course on children's rights at a Swedish University between 2018 and 2023. The participants either took the course as a standalone or as part of a programme. Overall, they were a heterogeneous group: some took the course during an exchange semester while others were interested locals. The participants lived in different countries around the world at the time of the interview. (Interviews were held over zoom so the study did not take place with participants from a specific country.)

This study is small-scale, and no attempt is made to create a representative sample or to generalise the results. Qualitative interpretative research does not necessarily work with representative samples but rather with purposeful samples where those who are selected are most appropriate for understanding a particular phenomenon (Palinkas et al, 2015). Palinkas et al. (2015, p. 2) remark that purposeful sampling enables 'the identification and selection of information-rich cases.' They further stress that this involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups that can be knowledgeable about something or have an experience of interest. In addition to this, the researchers also state that 'the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner' is also an important consideration (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 2).

I chose the participants for my study because they had experience of studying the content of the course on children's rights. The choice of participants builds on the notion, as stressed by Magnusson and Marecek (2015), that the topic ought to be something that the participants can talk about. The former children's rights students had encountered the subject of children's democratic participation and influence. Since they registered for a course on the subject some kind of interest and knowledge were likely to exist among the potential participants. At first, I focused on the most recent students that were registered between 2021-2023 but after receiving few answers, I expanded the pool of participants to those registered from 2018. Reasons for the small response rate might be that many participants may have had contacts that were no longer valid such as old student email addresses while others may not have been interested. However, the most recent students were more difficult to recruit, potentially due to being part of other university courses and therefore busy with their studies. According to a review article by Allmark et al. (2009) participants, on a general level, decide rapidly if they wish to participate in a study and their sentiment about the research topic is influenced by their perception of its relevance. It is more probable for people with some interest in the topic to be willing to engage in a study about the subject.

The participants came from a range of backgrounds: not all had experiences where they worked in, or intended to work in, fields related to the learning on the course. The names used in reporting the data are pseudonyms chosen by me. The plain language statements emphasised that participants could choose a pseudonym but no one requested to do so. I called the students Anton, Ahmed, Erik, Mika, Kimmie, Emelie, Ioanna, Greta, Viktoria, Jasmine, Nancy, Ida and Jin. I did not analyse the data specifically by gender but I am calling them he and she in the material. I could have given gender-neutral names but instead wanted to relate to the genders they presented.

Knowledge of Wall was not a prerequisite for inclusion in my study, and it is worth noting that only Ida, Jin and Mika had met Wall's ideas on the course. The participants' current relation to children's rights also differed. Some stated that they had left the field, while others worked actively with it in various ways, or still studied at university, while others did not specify. This was not something I asked about since I felt that the interest in the subject, sufficient to be accepted onto a course on children's rights, and wanting to discuss

this issue further, was enough to generate relevant data for this dissertation. This decision can be debated but, in retrospect, all participants gave responses that contributed meaningfully to the aim of the dissertation.

I did not ask about nationality or aspects of culture, but two participants (Ahmed and Jin) emphasised their non-Western backgrounds in their interviews. I acknowledge that various aspects of a student's background may influence their perspectives, including prevailing cultures in home nations, but this was not a focus of the study. I have therefore avoided making generalisations about different cultures and countries but I do report the participant's experiences and perceptions about these. A cross-cultural comparison of student perceptions would have been beyond the scope of the study and would have required a different design with questions framed to explore perceptual influences. The views the participants emphasise are their own.

4.2.3 Transcription

The interviews were recorded through zoom and I transcribed the data as close as possible to the completion of each interview with support from the recorded captions. Mero-Jaffe (2011) explains that the process of turning spoken language into written is essential for the organisation and management of the material so the data can be quoted and examined. Davidson (2009) emphasise that the transcriber's awareness and choices during both the interview and transcription influence the quality of the transcript.

The transcription was 'cleaned', removing for example, 'uhm' and repetition of words ('like, like'). According to Davidson (2009) a more naturalised transcription involves providing a detailed and unfiltered account with nuances such as pauses, mumbling, involuntary sounds, and body language. My approach has been a denaturalised transcription that presents a more streamlined version of data. The naturalised approach can offer an authentic portrayal of the interview while the denaturalised transcription provides cleaner data (Davidson, 2009; Mero-Jaffe, 2011). The latter was preferred in this instance since I focus on the spoken perceptions of the participants rather than sociocultural authenticity. Hesitations and repetitions were not a focus of the analysis. When presenting quotes in the final text I have also, in some instances, removed smaller words such as 'like' and corrected minor grammatical errors.

4.3 Thematic analysis approach

Braun and Clarke (2022) state that thematic analysis is a hybrid between a method and methodology that offers a rigorous approach to qualitative research. It is used to systematically develop, analyse, and interpret patterns within qualitative data through the process of data coding, leading to the identification of key themes. There exist various approaches for conducting thematic analysis but this dissertation will use Braun and Clarkes (2022, p. 35) 'six phases of reflexive thematic analysis'. Reflexivity here involves critically reflecting on the researcher's own role and position. This entails examining personal and theoretical assumptions with a thoughtful and questioning attitude.

Some core assumptions about reflexive thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 8) are:

- Researcher subjectivity is central to reflexive thematic analysis, recognising that knowledge is subjective and dependent on the context. The analysis and interpretation of data cannot be entirely accurate or objective, especially in an interpretive study as in this dissertation.

- Themes in thematic analysis are patterns rooted in shared ideas, meanings, or concepts, rather than summaries of all aspects of a topic. The themes are also analytical outcomes that evolve from codes, and they cannot be entirely predetermined before the analysis. Further, themes are not passive outcomes that naturally derive from the data but are actively constructed by the researcher through systematic engagement with the dataset.

- The analysis of the data is underpinned by theoretical assumptions, and reflecting on these assumptions is a crucial step in the process especially when using a deductive approach (although my approach is a hybrid between inductive and deductive).

- Finally, Braun and Clarke emphasise that thematic analysis provides guidelines and a process rather than rigid rules that must be strictly adhered to why it can be more

creative. The strength of thematic analysis is that it can uncover patterns of meaning through the coding process.

Braun and Clarke (2022) suggest that thematic analysis is theoretically flexible and can be paired with multiple theoretical frameworks. (As stated earlier, Wall's (2010) theory of childism will inform my analysis.) The authors explain that theoretically driven reflexive thematic analysis is not about choosing data that fits a theory but that the conceptual idea of the study gives the theory more analytic priority in the interpretative processes than in an inductive analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

Braun and Clarke (2022) introduce six phases when conducting reflexive thematic analysis. The phases are described as entangled and not a set of rules but rather practical tools that guide the analysis. The authors stress that some phases can be overlapping or go back and forth which was of relevance when I performed the phases in the reflexive thematic analysis. This is explained further in the next section where the analytic process is described.

4.3.1 Familiarisation with the data

The first phase concerns a deep engagement with the data. According to Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 35) this process involves carefully reading the data and, if needed, watching/listening to the interviews again. Further, the authors remark that it is necessary to make notes of ideas and understandings of both individual and more general parts of the data. After four conducted and transcribed interviews I started working and engaging with the material. I re-read the material and colour coded it. One I knew the material better and was able to find patterns I started working on the second phase. After every interview was conducted and transcribed I re-visited it again and familiarised myself further with the material.

4.3.2 Generating initial codes

Phase two concerns the coding process. Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 35) state that the researcher needs to work in a systematic way with the data in order to categorise sections of data that seem of potential interest for the research question. The focus can, per Braun and Clarke, be detailed and aim to capture specific explicit meanings (semantic) or more implicit (latent) as well as more descriptive or interpretive. They clarify that semantic and

latent codes should not be viewed as a dichotomy and often a semantic and latent approach is applied. The coding process can also be inductive. I chose a more deductive approach which means that the theoretical framework supported the creation of codes because I wanted to let the theory guide my reading of the data initially. However, as Byrne (2021) argues, that it is not possible to conduct an exclusive deductive analysis since the data itself needs to be taken into consideration in the phases of analysis. A risk with the deductive approach, according to Byrne, is that it may offer a lesser description of the data since it tends to focus on certain aspects of it through a particular theoretical lens. Braun and Clarke (2022) explain that with a more deductive approach, the research questions relate to the theoretical idea the researcher aims to understand through an interpretative lens. For this dissertation, Wall's (2010) work on childism was considered when the research (and interview) questions were constructed.

Braun and Clarke (2022) remark that coding is not just about reduction of the content but should aim to support the analytic angle on the data. They consider the codes to be the smallest element of the analysis, and these should be the cornerstones of the analysis since these will later shape the themes. Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 56) note that coding may be inductive, deductive or hybrid. Whichever is used, it is important for the researcher to be aware of how the meaning-making process of the coding shapes what is noticed in the data. In Braun and Clarke's approach, the coding process involves 'reading each data item closely and tagging all segments of the text where you notice any meaning that is potentially relevant to your research questions with an appropriate code label' (2022, p. 53). However, they do not advocate line by line coding, preferring a broader framing of which segments of text are relevant to the research question. The authors further stress that some codes may apply to just a few words while others may apply to paragraphs of text (Braun & Clarke, 2022). According to Braun and Clarke (2022), depth of engagement with the data is not achieved through breaking codes down into subcodes and applying these to smaller elements of text, but 'through a repeated process of close engagement' with 'meaning and patterning' across the dataset (p. 54). Codes are, per the authors, 'heuristic devices' that are used to 'enrich understanding' of the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 59).

Following their approach, I began with broadly framed codes that connected to the aim and research questions. I went through the transcribed data and extracted quotes (sometimes with my own comments and explanations) to a new document where I also placed them under code labels. I used both a semantic and latent focus but leaned more on the explicit

semantic. There is a fine balance between being too descriptive or reading too much into the data. At first, I generated 12 codes[6] but after conducting eight interviews (I was not sure if I would receive more participants) I added a code named *other* to capture any significant data that did not fit with the existing codes. I named the codes as follows, together with the associated meanings that related to the main code:

1. *Voting.* Relates to research question(s) concerning: possibility, ability, influence.
2. *Age.* Relates to research question(s) concerning: possibility, ability, influence, argument.
3. *Competence/knowledge.* Relates to research question(s) concerning: possibility, ability, influence, argument.
4. *Different voices.* Relates to research question(s) concerning: argument.
5. *Protection.* Relates to research question(s) concerning: possibility, argument.
6. *Not being listened to/respected.* Relates to research question(s) concerning: possibility, influence.
7. *Adults.* Relates to research question(s) concerning: possibility, influence.
8. *Matters that concern them(children).* Relates to research question(s) concerning: possibility, influence, argument.
9. *Engagement activities (private/public sphere).* Relates to research question(s) concerning: possibility, influence, argument.
10. *Education.* Relates to research question(s) concerning: possibility, argument.
11. *Being/becoming.* Relates to research question(s) concerning: possibility, influence, argument.
12. *Views on children.* Relates to research question(s) concerning: argument.
13. *Other.*

Although I had predefined codes (which indicates a deductive approach), these were then refined when I took more consideration from the material. There was then an inductive element in the refining of codes based on the data itself. Some versions of the 'original' codes made the final draft including, for example, competence and children as beings or becomings. Even so, the codes were not strictly deductive since the material has been carefully taken into consideration providing an inductive element. Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 56) state that they 'view coding as a subjective process shaped by what we bring to it'. Codes and coding labels can 'shift and change throughout the coding process, to better

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[6] See Appendix 2 for example of some codes and transcript text

evoke and differentiate between the range of meanings in the data – and researcher subjectivity fuels that process' (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 56). The authors explain that coding achieved through this process can be stronger or weaker but it can never be viewed as right or wrong (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 56). They stress that this is because the analytical process is subjective and interpretivist which is part of the nature of reflexive thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2022) underscore that all coders will observe and make sense of data in various ways.

4.3.3 Creating themes

According to Braun and Clarke (2022) the third phase concerns the production of initial themes. A shared meaning and certain patterns in the data can be identified which later create themes. The authors remark that the development of themes should be viewed as an active process where themes do not passively emerge from the data but are created by the researcher. After conducting eight interviews, I applied the codes to the transcribed data and clustered codes that shared a mutual idea together, carefully considered the connection to the research questions, and named the themes. Braun and Clarke suggest that themes are broader than the codes that generally only capture a specific meaning rather than the themes' shared meanings. The researchers recommend that this process is allowed to take time including the process of moving between a profound engagement with the data and returning to it with a fresh view. The process for my initial creation of themes lasted for about a week but as remarked before, the development of the thematic analysis sometimes goes back and forth. I started phase three after eight interviews since I had a setback with recruiting new participants. The interviews had been collected for about three months and I wanted the analytical process to advance not too long after the interviews: I did not want to lose too much of the closeness to the data even if I could re-watch or listen to the interviews multiple times.

4.3.4 Reviewing, defining and naming themes

During phases four and five the themes are refined and finally named. Braun and Clarke explain that there is no correct number of themes. They can be few, many, or something in between. However, too many may result in the data being under-analysed and too few may not provide enough richness in relation to the data. The themes I created during phase three were:

- Children's competence and knowledge in relation to democratic participation and influence.

- Perceptions on age and democratic participation and influence.

- Views on obstacles to children's democratic participation and influence.

- Democratic participation and engagement in matters that concern children/ Democratic participation and influence for children in the private/public sphere.

- Children as beings (here and now) and becomings (they can wait until adulthood).

I considered the possible themes that the data suggested in the light of Wall's (2010) theoretical framework. Wall's framework therefore informed the naming of themes and considerations of how to collate the coded data. Wall's concept of childism, including if adultist norms were challenged or maintained, has led the thematic generation, but it is also partly inductive since the themes are also derived from the data. Five themes represented the data and its relation to the purpose and research questions in a sufficient way even if some themes provided more richness in the data than others.

In phase four I was able to conduct two more interviews. The additional data was also coded and then related to the existing themes. Braun and Clarke (2022) describe this phase as focused on developing and reviewing the existing themes. The authors underpin that the task here is to assess the fit of the created themes concerning the data as well as the possibilities of conducting the analysis. This process includes examining if the themes make sense taking into consideration the codes and the dataset as a whole. Braun and Clarke suggest investigating if the theme is able to tell a substantial story about crucial patterns of shared meaning in relation to the research question. Here, themes can be split, used together, or discarded. The authors also remark that a topic is not a theme since a topic is not the same as a shared meaning or an idea. The themes should entail an essential organising concept since this clarifies the purpose.

As stressed, I used a hybrid approach, beginning with more deductive initial codes that were guided by theory in my focus but also stemming from the material being more content driven with an inductive approach to the material. Braun and Clarke (2024, p. 9) state that 'when doing reflexive TA, it is not possible to code for themes or to use coding to allocate data to themes because themes cannot be pre-identified.'

According to the authors, themes are 'interpretative stories about data, stemming from the researcher's subjectivity, and crafted through their rigorous but positioned reading of the data' (Braun & Clarke, 2024, p. 9). The themes therefore provide an interpretative story (Braun and Clarke, 2023) of the former students' perceptions. To create the themes, I carefully considered what the participants said about children and democratic involvement along with their various reflections and options.

Byrne (2021) stresses that meaningfulness is of relevance in relation to identifying themes which will then be needed to answer the research questions. Byrne (2021) further underscores that the themes ought to relate: where codes and themes do not fit and provide meaning in relation to the research questions they may need to be discarded. Some points made in the data for my study were not sufficient to constitute a full theme, including some practical examples about exercises in school (these also not relate to the research purpose or research questions). My themes connect under the umbrella of the student's perceptions of children's democratic involvement: their views are brought forward and the interpretive story they tell emerges in the themes. The five themes presented below should not be seen as entirely separate from one another since they connect in many ways.

During this phase I revised, re-read, and re-named the themes, however the content, at large, remained the same. The names for the themes were:

1. Children's competence and knowledge in relation to democratic participation and influence
2. Perceptions on age in relation to democratic participation and influence (including voting)
3. Views on obstacles to children's democratic participation and influence
4. Democratic participation, influence, and engagement in matters that concern children in the private/public sphere (excluding voting)
5. Children as the adults of tomorrow

The fifth phase is explained by Braun and Clarke (2022) as the final refining, defining, and naming of themes. The authors stress the necessity of, again, ensuring that the theme is built around a strong essence that is supported by the data and fits with the research questions. This process includes writing a short synopsis of each theme. They also encourage the renaming of the themes into a concise but still informative name.

Some new participants reached out and wanted to contribute at this stage which is why three more interviews were added making a total of 13. I engaged with the new data focussing on the themes that were already established. I then revised and shortened the name of some themes and described each theme as follows:

Children's democratic competence and knowledge

This theme involves arguments that are used by the participants when discussing children's competence and knowledge in relation to democratic participation and influence. It also discusses the abilities and possibilities for children to have democratic influence. I organised the quotes from the participants under the subheadings 'challenging' adultist norms and 'manifesting' adultist norms to tie into Wall's concept of childism. The more 'neutral' quotes were under their own subheading. The challenging and manifesting of adultist norms should not be understood as firm but rather as guidance for the analysis.

Perceptions on age and democratic participation

This theme concerns the participants' views on age in relation to democratic participation and influence, including voting. Children's democratic participation is the main topic but here the former registered students elaborate on age as a factor. Here I have also divided the quotes into the subheadings of 'challenging' adultist norms and 'manifesting' adultist norms as well as other/more neutral quotes. In accordance with the above theme this one links into the possibility, ability, influence, and argument aspects of the research questions.

Views on obstacles to children's democratic participation and influence

The theme focuses on what the participants suggest can be potential struggles for children to express their voices or for adults to truly listen as well as other aspects. Like some of the other themes, there is a division between 'challenging' and 'manifesting' adultist norms which relate to the theoretical framework. This theme has a subheading including country and 'culturally' specific aspects that are stressed by the interviewees. The question of possibilities for children to democratic participation and influence is mainly visible here.

Children's democratic participation in the private and public sphere

Voting has mainly been excluded from this theme even if it is part of the public sphere. Focus here lies on what the participants emphasise about children's democratic participation, influence, and engagement in matters that concern them in the private and/or the public sphere. Like other themes, the data has been divided into 'challenging' and 'manifesting' adultist norms but also with subheadings of either the private or the public

sphere. This theme links into all aspects of the research questions. In a sense, this is the broadest theme, but it makes sense to connect 'matters that concern children' to the private sphere since these often are linked together and contrast this to emphasise the public sphere.

Children as the adults of tomorrow

The participants under this theme discuss that the children of today are the adults of the future. This involves different reasoning about learning for the future or having an impact already in their current state. The research question this theme mostly relates to is the argument aspect of children's influence and democratic participation. This is the narrowest theme with the least data, with no subheadings, but it is still a key aspect when thinking of children as in the development of becoming future citizens. Even here, I used the approach of dividing quotes, to which it applied, as challenging or maintaining adultist norms on.

4.3.5 Writing up the findings

The sixth and final phase Braun and Clarke (2022) call writing up. They describe that writing is a crucial aspect of the analytical process and should be started early on. This step includes writing drafts and notes that are refined throughout the process. The authors further stress that the analytical narrative ought to be woven together with excerpts from the data. During the process of conducting the previous steps with reflexive thematic analysis I used the codes, themes, and theory to create a structure and narrative that connects to the purpose and research questions. Under the themes and subheadings, I gathered quotes from the data that supported the narrative. Due to the number and richness of the quotes only some of them have been used to exemplify participant viewpoints. However, I have in general favoured actual quotes over paraphrasing to be closer to the original material.

Overall, the analysis reflects some general viewpoints but also specific ones. The writing has been an extensive process since it is a challenge to arrange the data in a structured way that makes sense for the reader and does the material justice. Overall, as noted above, the themes provide an interpretative story (Braun and Clarke, 2023) of the former students' perceptions about childrens' possibilities and abilities for democratic participation and influence and the various reflections around these issues. The key story, as found in the title, is the uncertainty that emerges from the participants' perspectives. There is a sense from the participants that children should be democratically involved in some capacity but

in what capacity seems challenging for participants to explain. It was also difficult to find common ground around the abilities that children would need to develop to be involved. Normative views around children were both contested and maintained in various ways but most participants did, to some extent, confront adultist perceptions.

After the results chapter is presented, a discussion chapter will connects the literature in depth to the findings. However, there are signposts within the findings chapter that briefly connect some points of the literature to the data.

4.4 Ethical considerations

The study gained ethical approval from the ethics committee in the College of Social Sciences, University of Glasgow. The Swedish university where the students previously studied stated by email that they did not see any obstacles with the study nor that it needed further approval at the national Swedish level from The Swedish Ethical Review Authority. This decision was reached since the participants are adults, the research does not involve sensitive information and the method involved 'normal' interviews held through zoom.

Allmark et al. (2009) stress that the usual recommendations when conducting an interview study focus on the significance of offering information to participants about the study and emphasising the need to gain written consent. The participants were located through the learning platform of the university they had been registered at and messaged with information about the study including a detailed Plain Language Statement. The interested participants then responded to me, and a zoom interview was scheduled. They submitted a consent form and were provided with additional information such as data management before the interview. Verbal consent was also recorded.

Allmark et al. (2009) stress the topic of ethical issues regarding in-depth interviews. They conclude that a recurring issue is that privacy may be compromised since participants may share a great deal of information. Further, the authors stress that there might be a temptation for the researcher to focus on the most extraordinary elements of the participants' expressions. This mainly concerns sensitive topics but is also of relevance for interpretive studies like mine where I must remain focused on the research questions.

Even if I use a pseudonym, which is recommended, Allmark et al. (2009, p. 49) remark that though the participants are not identifiable on a large scale they might still be so by

their peers or in this case former peers. I therefore noted this in the material provided to the participants. However, to enhance de-identification, I have not included major identifiers in the responses and, as advised by Allmark et al. (2009) considered carefully at various points whether these might need changed or removed (taking care not to do so in a way that altered the focus of the material).

Magnusson and Marecek (2015) explain that even if semi-structured interviews have a more conversational tone, as in the case of this study, the relationship between the researcher and participant is asymmetrical. This is because the purpose of the participant is to share information about the subject and the interviewer to collect data. In this case, I have also been a lecturer to three of the participants so there was an extra power imbalance involved. However, I did not interview at a time when the students were relying on me for assessments, so any dependent relationship was in the past and no longer a factor. The participants were asked to share their own views and perceptions which I acknowledged may be sensitive to some. Magnusson and Marecek (2015) suggest that a unitary reliable ethical procedure is not possible to find but an ongoing reflectivity about sensitivities and issues that may arise is needed from the researcher. The guiding principle is to reflect on issues in advance, during, and after the research (Magnusson and Marecek, 2015). I tried to maintain a conversational tone during the interviews where I only clarified the content when asked to do so (before the interview itself started I explained the research and answered questions) and asked some follow-up questions when I felt that it was needed. Partly I leaned more to a low profile since I refrained from interfering too much since I did not want to push the participants in a certain direction and affect their perceptions nor take over the interview. This may however have resulted in some follow-up questions not being asked which is a weakness. I asked clarifying questions and summarised how I interpreted their views when I thought it was needed in order not to misunderstand the participants' perceptions.

With reference to thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2022) explain that it is crucial to carefully reflect upon ethical factors such as othering especially when it comes to particularly marginalised groups. To me, this includes meeting all participants with respect and not drawing generalisable conclusions about a certain group they may or may not 'represent'. After I have completed the dissertation, it will be sent to the participants who expressed a wish to read it, along with a thank you email.

4.5 Conclusion

To collect the data, semi-structured interviews were held and recorded through zoom with participants who had previously been registered for a course about children's rights. The former students were no longer dependent on me for their assignments, and I had only taught three of the participants. The participants were given a pseudonym and the interviews were transcribed as soon as possible after the end of each interview. The quotes used in the following chapter have in some instances been 'cleaned' from repetition and grammatical errors. The material was analysed using Wall's (2010) concept of childism and Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis. How the themes were created has been outlined step by step relating to Braun and Clarke's guidelines, although I used a hybrid approach where both the theory and the material were taken into consideration when organising the data. The process is complex to outline since authors argue that it is not likely to conduct a strictly inductive or deductive analysis. The phases sometimes go back and forth, and it is challenging to reflect upon if the material or the theory is more present in the process even if I have a strategy when working with the thematic analysis.

In the next chapter (5), I will present the findings from the data analysis before moving on to the discussion in chapter 6.

5. Findings

As stated in chapter 4, Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis together with Wall's (2010) theoretical work on childism formed the basis of the data analysis. The concept of childism will be used to critique norms of adultism and structures in response to the marginalisation of children. Childism encourages the willingness 'to deconstruct democracy's current adultist foundations and reconstruct them in new ways that fully and equally include people of all ages' (Wall. 2021, p. 7). The themes are presented as follows: *5.1 Children's democratic competence and knowledge, 5.2 Perceptions of age and democratic participation, 5.3 Views on obstacles to children's democratic participation and influence, 5.4 Children's democratic participation in the private and public sphere and 5.5 Children as the adults of tomorrow.* Subheadings are used to facilitate the reading and provide a clear structure. In section 5.6 I reflect on the findings and offer some thoughts on what the participants stated on the subject of children's democractic participation. The chapter end with a conclusion which summarises the findings.

5.1 Children's democratic competence and knowledge

As explained at the beginning of the dissertation, a foundation for how childism is used in this study is building on Wall's (2010) theory that children have the capacity to speak for themselves and the ability to participate in society. Wall (2021) remarks that there is a debate about children's abilities regarding their participation in democratic procedures. He takes a critical stance of the view that democratic expression is tied to adulthood. Adulthood is further automatically paired with competence which establishes the norm that democracy is for presumed competent adults. Wall further stresses that one of the main reasons why children have not been included in democracy (in the way that other groups have) is due to them being considered to lack competence.

Participants in my study mostly expressed the view that children should be seen as competent enough to participate in a democracy. Mika and Jasmine thought that children should not be perceived as less knowledgeable. Greta took a stance against the normative adultist view of children by explaining that children should be seen more as thinkers than just as passive people that have nothing to say. Ioanna and Victoria discussed children's understanding:

I think they [children] are considered to not know as much as they actually do. In my experience, children from quite a young age have a very good understanding of maybe not very specific things, but they have opinions and a lot of knowledge about how society should be in a more idealistic way, maybe. Or like they know what is good for society. They might not know exactly like details about doing taxes to get there. (Ioanna)

I think it is very important to have them have a seat at the table from the very start and have them be involved and have them be listened to at an early stage because children understand and know so much more than we think they do. And they have an insight to what is happening, and they understand it from their perspective. (Victoria)

These perceptions serve to illustrate the view expressed by some participants which rejects the idea that children as a group should be deemed less competent just because they are children. The understanding articulated about children in these statements is one that empowers children and sees their democratic influence as an asset. However, Wall (2021) stresses that it is hard to determine children's formal democratic competence since they have not had the opportunity, for example, to vote. Children have also, according to Wall, not had encouragement to develop democratic abilities and have been told that they lack them. The participants' views, to some extent, challenged the adultist notion of children and their abilities and competence for democratic participation.

Some participants argued that if children need to be competent in order to participate in a democracy that criterion should also be applied to adults. Ioanna, Kimmie and Nancy all thought that it was unfair that children and adults were talked about differently in relation to competence and democratic participation. Nancy highlighted: 'It's not like adults are sort of screened for competence when they vote. (…) Why should children have to have criteria to vote, whereas adults might not have that?' Mika stressed a perception that children's competence is questioned when children engage in democratic matters in a way that adult competence would not be questioned:

Why are children going to be at this climate conference? They don't know anything because they are children. And I think that's a viewpoint that a lot of people have. Like you don't know anything just because you're a child, which is wrong. (Mika)

Likewise, Jin thought that 'children are usually considered as really weak' because they are young.' Both perspectives indicate that children may be subjected to a critical adult gaze where they are perceived to lack knowledge on various subjects and are perceived as lesser compared to adults in terms of both power and abilities. This view of children tends to align with an adultist normative view of children and their presumed incompetence when it comes to democratic engagement. As indicated in the literature review, lack of competence can be seen as an argument against children's possibilities for democratic influence but not against adults' influence, participation and voting rights. From the theoretical perspective of childism, Wall (2021) remarks that the assumption that voting competence is connected to a specific age is arbitrary. He argues that adulthood is connected to competence and knowledge while those in their childhood are met with suspicion when it comes to their abilities. The arguments and ideas from the participants noted above do seem to challenge the view of children needing to prove themselves as competent in order to participate by turning the gaze toward adult counterparts and problematising the fact that adult knowledge is often taken for granted.

Some participants did stress that children differed to some extent from adults, though that did not mean they were less competent or knowledgeable. Anton suggested that children may actually have more competence and knowledge than adults in some matters: 'I have analogical education experience and competence. They (children) have digital. Totally different worlds. (…) The future is digital technology. (..) I'm trying to keep up with the trends but, you know, they live with that.' However, he remarked that children 'are more natural than adults' reasoning that they are less manipulative than adults and more 'open'. Other notions also challenged the adultist norm that the presumed competencies of adults may be the preferred ones in a democracy. For example, Ida stated: 'When you're a child, you have no personal reasons to vote. It's more like wholesome, maybe, in a way.' Ioanna also commented that children may have a view of society that may be healthy for democratic processes. The positive notion of what children can contribute with is also stressed by Nancy even if she started by remarking that it depends on the age of the children. She said:

I mean, it depends on the age of the children, but I think sometimes children might also have perhaps a longer perspective than adults in some ways. (…) I think that, sometimes adults might have quite a narrow perception of what is a good decision. So, I think that anything that would kind of widen the perspective. And you know, take a different point of view. (Nancy)

According to this notion, children have the ability to contribute to democracy and its decision-making, challenging adultist views on democracy. Wall's (2019) argues that it is of relevance to acknowledge children's lived experiences of difference and otherness in order to expand and reconstruct social norms. In the participant quotes, the otherness of children was described as an asset. The argument is that children may have abilities that are desirable for a democratic society - in this case, with descriptions such as natural, open, and wholesome, children can be perceived as having less of a hidden agenda than adults.

Participants also discussed a range of views relating to the concept of the role of knowledge and participation in democracy. Ioanna highlighted that 'there are no requirements on adults to have knowledge to participate in democratic processes, for example, voting'. She further stated that it is unjust to children that more knowledge is asked of them, especially in relation to voting, than for those who have turned 18. Mika felt that it was not necessary to 'know things' in order to participate in democracy - the 'relevant factor' is 'wanting to participate in democracy'. Jasmine thought that expert opinions were 'worthy' and 'important', but that 'everyone should have a right to a say… Everyone's opinion should be valued.' These views suggest a critical stance that aligns to some extent with Wall's (2019) argument for the reconstruction of hegemonic discourses that marginalise children. Wall (2021) adopts a critical stance on competence in relation to participating in a democracy, even the formal aspects of it such as voting. Participating in political life and democracy, according to Wall, entails the right of everyone (including children) to have an influence in democratic life. He further explains that it is not about making good rational choices but having a voice that ought to involve a diversity of perspectives (Wall, 2021).

Other participants maintained the hegemonic norm when it came to age and voting. Eric and Emilie reflected on a potential competence bar in more positive terms when it comes to voting. Eric reasoned that he was 'very excited about that point' when discussing a competence bar for voting but concludes that having 18 as an age limit 'is just the flaw of a democracy and we kind of just have to accept it'. Emilie similarly thought that 'the

democratic system has its faults' because 'a lot of people can vote when they don't have any knowledge of the issue'. She also thought that it would be 'immoral not to let everyone vote' (Emelie). However, it can be clarified here that *everyone* in Emelie's reasoning implies all who have turned 18: this was clear from the interview but not in this single quote. No participants concluded that an overall competence bar was preferred concerning democratic participation. To accept 18 as a limit was more defensible to some, upholding the norm that the voter should be an adult. This can be interpreted as age being the dominant factor when participating in formal democratic processes such as voting. Being an adult is seen by these participants as more important than being competent. In contrast, Anton said: 'I would consider individuals who feel themselves competent to vote should vote.' He remarked that this could entail even six-year-olds. This view supports a more inclusive perspective where persons can decide for themselves if they feel that they have the ability to vote. When someone would consider themselves competent enough may however be measured against adultist norms on democratic competencies. The competence norm can be viewed as naturalised and could be invisibly internalised, as Sundhall's (2017) research showed, by both children and adults. Still it is challenging to general adultist views of democracy that children who feel competent should be allowed to vote.

Other participants discussed children's democratic knowledge, age, and whether children should always have influence. Here adultist norms were more apparent. Greta stated that she did not think children should have a say on every topic, since, due to their age children 'don't have the competence for every topic like an adult.' The presumed lack of competence here can be viewed as an argument against their democratic involvement, aligning with a more traditional normative adult view. On competence, Kimmie wondered: 'Up until what age are you, like, capable of having an understanding of what you're actually deciding upon?' and further suggested that it is desirable to have reached a stage where someone understands what they are involved in or deciding upon. This may indicate that a person must reach a certain *age* before they know certain things (tying knowledge to age).

On the issue of competence, some participants reflected on the role of learning in acquiring democratic competence. Victoria said: 'we don't have to use big words for everybody to understand… Children are so receptive to information that they can learn these competencies.' Mika stressed: 'You won't be able to vote and make an informed decision' if 'you aren't given the circumstances to be able to' do so. He therefore felt that 'education needs to improve' to support informed decision making. Ioanna and Emilie also felt that

children needed to learn more to be able to participate democratically. While these participants felt that children needed more knowledge in order to develop democratic knowledge, they did not explain exactly what children need to learn more about and gain experience of, though there is an implicit suggestion that children need to learn more about democracy and politics in order to develop competence. In relation to this, Wall (2021) determines that children, in general, may have received less education than adults overall and in respect to political procedures but argues that children can still be considered politically competent and knowledgeable. Wall (2021) stresses that learning and experience are gained through life and not tied to certain phases in life. However he also argues that adults determine the norms that control political actions, thinking, and which competencies are valued. This can make the understanding of desired democratic competencies a matter that is determined by adults and favours their experiences above the ones of children.

5.2 Perceptions of age and democratic participation

This theme takes into account formal democratic participation such as voting but also more informal accounts where age is particularly being discussed in relation to the subject by the participants. When discussing the voting age the former students present a variety of perceptions. Anton, Ida, and Jin argued for a view that challenged the norms around voting competence and age. Anton thought that the voting age could go down to 12 but remarked: 'I may sound radical in my answers in your interview, but I'm not really radical.' Others, like Ida, saw potential practical issues with this. Ida was familiar with the idea of the proxy vote promoted by Wall and referred to this when she said:

> Theoretically, I really agree with, you know, having no limit, on the age (of voting), but I'm not sure how much I agree with the ideas that they have now about how to do that. So with the, you know, a proxy vote all of those ideas. So I guess my age would be when you can do it on your own. So 11, 12, 13 maybe something like that. So at least a lot lower. But yeah, I'm not sure if I would lower it more than that, just out of practical reasons, even though some kids would probably be able to do it younger, some maybe wouldn't. (..) Many kids, as they turn 18, have changed the opinions from their parents, even though, like their whole family vote, this one certain, party. So, I would want you to just always have your own vote. (Ida)

Jin was also familiar with the proxy claim and rejected the idea of a guardian voting for the child: 'I believe that vote always has to be kept in secret, and the vote is a very personal thing. It's related to one's interests.' She believed that 'all the people have the right to vote' but, like Anton, acknowledged that this opinion sounds 'radical'. Jin said that her argument 'sounds very weird for someone because the voting age is something that people believe is reasonable.' Ida and Jin were the only ones who explicitly referred to an idea from Wall in their interviews. These two are among the few participants who actually encountered the idea and work of Wall during the course.

These views can be interpreted as relating to a highly child-inclusive notion when comparing these perceptions against the adult hegemonic discourse on democracy. However, Anton, Ida and Jin were more of an exception in holding these perspectives. When explaining why she held these views, Ida explained that including younger children in the vote can be interpreted as forcing politicians to represent issues that children find important, such as climate change, more than they do now to attract the votes of the younger generations. This would, from this expressed perspective, make children gain more influence in society.

Other participants discussed a lower age, but were more cautious, suggesting a voting age of 16 or slightly lower as appropriate. Jasmine reflected:

> I mean, I don't see a difference between being 16 and 18. 16 could be 15. (…) Because I know that some people have theories of, well, at 18 they're more mature, but it doesn't make sense. There's not a lot, it is not like we are talking about 10 years and 18 years. I think 16 would be also a good age for them to politically be involved and talk about to understand much more politics. (Jasmine)

Kimmie stated: 'I wanted to say an age, but I'm not certain. But I would definitely say a person who is 15 and who's dedicated to a topic has just as much to say about the topic as someone who is 18.' Ioanna saw 16 as a starting point to the lowering of the voting age not because I think something happens at 16 but it would be a good idea to try first and then you could go even lower.'

According to Wall (2021) it is not sufficient to grant the vote with an age limit of 16. As established, his argument builds on the idea that, by denying children the right to vote, democracies reject the knowledge that children offer. Eliminating a third of humanity weakens the different democratic perspectives (Wall, 2021).

Some participants did not want to say a specific age when they thought voting in national elections would be suitable but agreed on 18. Ahmed and Emelie both stated support for 18 as a voting age, while Nancy suggested that lowering the voting age to below 18 would require a more child-friendly approach, adapting democratic processes to 16-year-olds so the procedure can become more understandable. This would allow a more inclusive approach towards the younger population which might potentially strengthen the possibilities for young people's participation. However, if nothing changed, Nancy suggests that 18 is suitable. Contrary to the perceptions that support a lowered voting age to around 16, Eric argued: 'But I've also met 16-year-olds - I've been a 16-year-old… Some of them are super aware and super smart, and some of them are not and we have the age of 18 for a reason.' On having the voting age at the bar of 18 he stated that his arguments where more based on feelings than logic and 'I would rather keep it as it is, but I can't really specifically explain why other than there's a level of maturity that happens within those years.'

From a childist lens it is possible to argue that a change is needed to include the voices of children in formal voting and reconstruct the current status quo. However, Mika made an important point by distinguishing between involvement and voting:

> I think it's very important to involve children in democratic processes. I don't know if I think it's right to have children be given votes, but I think they should be involved in some capacity. (…) I think the children should be able to speak for themselves, but I don't know if I think the way to do that is by giving kids a vote. (Mika)

Arguments supporting a voting age of 18 may, from the perspective of childism, tend to overlook the diverse experiences and perspectives of children and the various ways they could be involved, reinforcing an adult-centric bias in decision-making processes. The experience and thinking of adults are considered important in order to vote which favours them and their notions over children's. However, the discussion around a suitable voting age reflects societal attitudes and power dynamics concerning the rights and status of children. Through the lens of childism, it is possible to interpret the perceptions of some

participants who support a higher voting age as shaped by entrenched adult biases. As noted above, both Eric and Emelie stressed that they feel a certain way about experience, maturity, voting, and adulthood. Eric was outspoken about this expressing an awareness about maintaining a norm, keeping the voting age as it is. Eric further described the tension between him 'wanting more young people involved, being frustrated with older generation taking up a lot of space in politics, but at the same time not really wanting young people to vote'. He also presented a viewpoint that might be controversial to some when arguing: 'I do think that it's also kind of ridiculous that people that are like 90 that might pass away soon can vote on the future, like a future they are not going to be part of.'

In their reasoning about the voting age and other forms of democratic participation, Greta and Victoria touched upon arbitrariness of the voting age and how age limits for certain activities varied in different countries. Greta remarked:

> So some things should start, for example, at 16 or 17. Like in the US, they can get the driver's license when they are 16. And here in Europe it's 18. What is the difference in between them? Why would you acknowledge better in the US as 16 year old rather than an 18 year old. So it's something we should question as a society. (Greta)

On the same note, Victoria stated:

> Some countries have a lower age limit for driving or drinking alcohol or being part of the military, or any type of decision that's going to impact somebody under 18 or somebody over 18. And in those cases, I think it's kind of ridiculous that you don't have a say in a vote on what impacts you or affects you. (…) I mean, in the US you have drinking at 21, but you can vote or be part of the military at 18. That to me doesn't make any sense at all. You know, like you can make decisions for other people, but you can't make decisions about yourself. So that's where I'm kind of like, I feel like the voting should be the kind of guideline for what the other ages are supposed to be. (Victoria)

Similarly, Greta reflected upon becoming 18 and then being perceived as an adult and the arbitrariness of that. She asked for something 'in between' that could account for those who are not yet an adult but are around 16 years of age. What this 'in between' could entail

is not explained but she expressed that there is not a large difference between being 16 or 18 years of age. This reasoning, along with the other reflections on age limits, serve as examples of the difficulty of determining age limits and when someone should be allowed to decide certain things for themselves or exercise certain rights.

Others like Kimmie and Ida touched upon the 'slippery slope' argument. According to Merry and Schinkel (2016), the slippery slope argument suggests an overall adultification of children entailing that if the voting age would change other age restrictions on, for example, driving and alcohol use would have to be modified too. This argument occurs, according to Wall (2021), from drawing parallels between voting competence and moral development. The following quote by Kimmie discussed this tension:

> When it comes to voting, I would say that I think 15 would be better, but if you would allow someone who's 15 to vote, then society would maybe start to think that, okay, you become an adult after you are 15. Which then would also have implications on some other questions involving if it is a child or is it an adult. For instance, adult marriage or child marriage. (Kimmie)

Ida also reflected upon how someone can be a child from one perspective but when it comes to voting and democratic processes it can be seen in a different way:

> When you're 15, you can (…) have sex (…) there's a congressman in Denmark who's dating a 15-year-old, for example. And then I was thinking about, okay, or she is just like a child. But then I was like, okay, no, she isn't, because I disagree with that when I think about the voting and the democratic processes. (Ida)

They both highlight issues that could occur if adulthood may be placed earlier than 18 and the relation to voting. However, Ida's quote underscores the difficulty in determining when someone should be perceived as an adult. Age limits can make something legal but also potentially morally wrong or questionable. It is possible to argue, based on Ida's reflection, that childism may empower children to the extent that children may be deprived of certain protections. However, to call on Wall's (2021) perspective, the right to drive, consume alcohol, marry or have sex should not be perceived as human rights but as special rights. In contrast, the right to political participation is considered a human right. Wall (2021) argues that alcohol consumption and a lowered age of consent may be harmful to a child while voting is not. An age restriction on certain issues can from this perspective be defendable

while excluding children from democratic participation may not be since this, from the lens of childism, violates their human rights. From this view, childism seeks to empower children but not turn them into adults: Wall (2021) reasons that rather than lead to an adultification of children, giving them the vote would childify politics.

Overall, the most commonly expressed view among the participants was that children should, as Mika stated (above) 'be involved in some capacity' when it comes to democratic participation. Their age should not constitute an obstacle to this even if, as is visible in the discussions around a suitable voting age, to what extent, and in which activities children should be involved is debated. Only Greta discussed the difference in knowledge and experience between younger and older children explicitly in depth. She said:

> Can you consider a 3-year-old child, equal to a 10-year-old child? Or would you say that the 3-year-old has less rights and has less to say about something than a 10-year-old child? I think this this is a little bit the problem to give children more space in the public and in the private sphere. So I think it would be important to just recognise that children can to some degree for their age have a say in specific topics that are obviously proportionate for their age. (..) It is the biggest challenge for adults. To listen to children of various ages. (Greta)

Greta expressed that children should have a say in some topics that are proportionate for their age. However, some painted with a broader brush when they reflected on age and children's democratic participation as we saw in the quotes above. In addition, Ioanna explained that 'children have a good understanding of what kind of society they want' and concludes that they should have more influence over it. Wall's (2010, 2011) childism discards the view that being a person happens over time and that arguments against children's participation tend to stem from adult-centric norms. This shift can be seen in Kimmie's remark that it would be 'good to involve everyone in decision making' because 'I don't think a person who's 50 years should take all decisions concerning children without involving them'. The approach Kimmie expresses acknowledges the diverse perspectives and experiences of all, challenging adult-centric narratives and fostering a more equitable distribution of political power.

Similarly, Mika stated that 'everyone as a person has a relevancy in questions of democracy' and Jin said: 'If people don't consider children due to the only reason that they

are young and they don't have enough experience… if only age is the reason to exclude children from the process, I don't think that can make society better.' This view ties into Wall's (2011, 2021) reasoning that the people (demos) should be everyone, as an ideal for society, not just adults. Wall (2011) remarks that all individuals bring special experiences that can broaden and strengthen democracy if it embraces the diversity of all people. Wall (2019) calls for a reconstruction of hegemonic discourses that marginalise children, different lived experiences are crucial in reconstructing social norms. Mika's views are also relevant here. He articulated support for stronger democratic participation for children than is generally present today, remarking that there is more to participation in democracy than voting: 'You do not want to reduce democracy to voting and putting like a piece of paper in a box every four years.' Mika generally promoted strikes and activism as tools for democratic participation. As explained earlier, some scholars, such as Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra (2022) suggest that children's activism can challenge the status quo of adult power and can be seen as an informal form of democratic participation. However, they also suggest that this can be a response to the problem of not being included in the first place (Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra, 2022). From a childist perspective, the issue is the exclusion of children from formal participation based on the fact that they are not adults determined by age.

5.3 Views on obstacles to children's democratic participation and influence

Many of the participants distinguished various reasons to explain why children are not included in democratic processes and why they are not able to exercise influence. Four aspects of this theme are relevant: adult attitudes to children, adults representing children, parents and cultural aspects, and other obstacles (such as structures).

5.3.1 Adult attitudes

Several of these explanations included views on adult attitudes as a hindrance to children's possibilities for democratic participation. Mika stated: 'I think it is that people don't respect children. I don't think the problem is the children. I think the problem is adults. They don't respect them.' From Mika's perspective, adults see children with a gaze that constitutes a problem to their democratic participation. Anton suggested that adults ought to take children more seriously while Victoria stressed that adults do not care about children's opinions since it does not matter because adults are seen to have ownership of decision-

making which put a stop to children's possibilities. From the perspective of childism, these perceptions highlight adultist normative views about children where their opinions,are not taken seriously and adult concerns are favoured instead. Wall (2011) explains that adult-centric norms on maturity, competence, and political representation, which childism challenges, are the basis of arguments against children's participation. The lack of respect for children as potential political actors that adults may have can be seen as an obstacle to children's possibilities for democratic participation.

Eric reflected on his own perspective when discussing children's democratic participation:

> Maybe we undermine them (the children). (..) Maybe I did earlier when I said 16-year-olds were immature. It might be that the perception of children not being mature, and you don't take them as seriously as you would. But again, some adults might also be very immature. (Eric)

Here he questions his own normative view as expressed earlier in the interview. As with Anton, he reflected on the obstacle of children not being taken seriously by adults, in this case, due to adultist normative perceptions of maturity. In the quote, the gaze is turned toward adults who could potentially also be immature.

Nancy wondered if adults may feel threatened by children's possession of their own decision-making processes:

> I think very often the adults don't really want to change the form that they have, like the sort of the processes or the forms that they have to make decisions. And also, I think that it's quite often perceived as a threat by many adults. I mean, if one thing is to kind of invite children into the adult processes, but if children want to sort of form their own processes and kind of lead processes, it's quite often perceived, at least that's my experience, that it's often perceived as a threat that children like, you know, if adults actually hand over power to children, that would be quite a big step. And my experience is that adults often start talking a lot about responsibilities when you talk about children's rights, then it's like, yes, yes, yes, but they also have responsibilities. (Nancy)

Nancy also mentioned that adults, from her experience, would rather discuss the responsibilities of children as a response to the subject of children's rights. Wall (2010) calls for a reconstruction to break adultist normative structures by rethinking the terms of agency and autonomy. This can also entail a rethinking of the threat or chaos that some adults may fear if children are given too much power and influence. As stressed by Pearse (2023), there is a common opinion that democracy ought to be protected from the disorganised opinions of children which are perceived to potentially cause chaos.

5.3.2 Adults representing children

Adults were also mainly presented as an obstacle when it came to the political representation of children. The participants reflected on whether adults can represent children in a democracy or if that constitutes an obstacle to children's influence and participation. Conflicting perceptions were raised, but most adopted a critical stance on children being represented by adults. Victoria stated: 'I don't see why an adult should have the voice to speak for the children.' Anton similarly said that children should be able to represent themselves because adults can be manipulative. Ahmed remarked that children and adults do not think alike concluding: 'I don't think that we as adults can represent children and especially not political leaders.'

On the other hand, two participants did not see this as a clear obstacle. Emelie remarked that everyone has been a child and therefore 'some adults can relate more to that part of themselves.' She further argued that: 'It is needed also for the children to have an adult to back their voice up.' Ioanna also stated that sometimes adults can represent children well enough, but also commented that children 'need someone that actually listens'. Ioanna though that 'if there's just ten kids standing outside talking among each other' this was not helpful: 'it has to at some point reach adults because that's how our society works… I mean, reach the people who actually make decisions' (Ioanna). In contrast, Jasmine stressed that adults can't remember how they thought when they were children and Mika argued: 'All the mid-40s can't relate to a 5-year-old. They don't know what a 5-year-old's life is because they… haven't been one for more than 40 years, and society has changed so much.' It is possible to interpret these points as suggesting that it is not sufficient for adults to think back to their own childhood in order to represent children democratically.

According to Wall (2010), it is generally believed that adults *can* represent children in the political arena. However, he states that no group can fully comprehend the experiences of another. Wall (2010) recognises that this is different to other groups or minorities in that everyone has been a child. Even so, he does not think adults can or should fully represent children. Wall (2021) explains that adults tend to favour adult concerns over those of children. It can be understood from the views of Ioanna and Emelie above that children's own voices are not enough, and adults would rather listen to another adult, pushing an agenda for, or on behalf of, children. The child's voice in itself may need validation by adults in order to count, stressing the power imbalance between children and adults.

However, in line with Wall's (2010) argument on representation, Mika stated: 'I don't think any adults, I don't think more or less any person, can fully represent another person.' Jasmine had a similar view:

> You can't fully represent a child and you should also hear from them. And one child would be different from another child so we can't even fully represent everyone. They should represent themselves by themselves. (..) I mean, we also as adults can't remember when we were children and how we wanted things and how we thought and how our thought process was. (Jasmine)

This argumentation can further be related to Wall's (2010) reasoning on the proxy claim vote where a guardian can vote on the child's behalf until the child can claim the vote itself. Here the argument goes that a guardian's representation is better than the child having no voice at all. Still, from a childist perspective, it is possible to criticise that children who can, are not able to represent themselves with a proxy claim approach.

However, some participants did not just see adults as obstacles in this matter. Greta underscored that the ability to represent children may depend on the view adults have of childhood and children. Further, Mika stressed that it is a question of how adults can show children that they are allowed to express opinions. Perceptions about children not being respected, along with the attitude of adults, were described as affecting children's possibilities to express themselves. Not respecting children can be seen as a major risk resulting in children's interests, according to the perceptions of the former students, are not being sought after by adults who do not really value the opinions of children. For children to be represented by adults, instead of being able to represent themselves, is something that

many of the former children's rights students expressed a critical view of, which challenges traditional adultist norms on democracy. How children can express or represent themselves and in which arenas is discussed more under themes concerning voting, the private and the public sphere.

5.3.3 Parents and cultural aspects

Some participants expressed that specifically, parents can serve as an obstacle to children's possibilities for democratic participation. For example, Anton remarked that parents can manipulate their children and Eric also stressed that sometimes children need to be protected from their parents. Ida's statement (below) also serves as an example of a dilemma that has occurred, not in the least for parents, in recent years:

> But today you see the war happening, Ukraine and Russia or what's happening in Gaza. You see it on your phone all the time, like, and as a kid, perhaps you have access to all of this media. So I would rather say, like, you can't be today maybe as protected from these things because like, you used to just see it on TV and your parents would just turn off the TV, basically. But, so I feel like that's why it strengthens the argument, even, that we can't protect them 100% from these things. So it's better to have a conversation about what's happening and that you learn and that you can influence like the fact that you want to partake more because like, for example, a war does not say, oh no, you weren't 18. So like, you're not a part of it in those countries. So protection from it is a bit like, of course, to the best extent we should, but I just don't think that's completely possible in today's age. (Ida)

In Ida's statement, a conversation with children is promoted so they can learn and potentially influence and partake. Protection from news on sensitive topics can, from this perspective, be viewed as an obstacle to democratic participation even if it may depend on the context. It may not be possible for adults to protect children against this content, according to Ida, due to the new technology. In one way this can be perceived as challenging the norm of adult protection of vulnerable children, keeping them from certain issues. However, it brings into focus the complexity of being an adult in a world where children have free access to technology and may see and encounter a variation of content that might scare or even harm children.

To continue the subject of parents, Greta underscored: 'Teach parents how to behave towards children, to understand children and not to treat them like objects or just properties like is actually happening in some countries.' Greta did talk about parents as potentially supporting children in democratic participation, but also continues her reasoning around parents as obstacles:

> I think it's difficult, especially because we have in many countries where children are not really acknowledged as persons unfortunately, but more as properties. And so they do not have something to say. They are not allowed to say something and especially in public. (Greta)

Children here are emphasised as not being the property of their parents challenging the normative adultist perception. However, especially in public, children can be silenced. Wall (2021) also highights that children are sometimes still perceived as being the property of their parents which is one of his three main reasons why children have been, and still are, excluded in a democracy.

When discussing potential challenges to children's possibilities to participate in a democracy some participants believed there are country-specific aspects. Former students compared nations, both within European Union countries, but also between Syria and Sweden here, and in Korea. The statements should not be understood as representative of the nations or cultural aspects the participants emphasise: the views are limited to the participants themselves.

Most participants used Sweden as a positive example. (All participants possessed some relation to Sweden since they have been registered for the children's rights course there, even if it was taught online during the pandemic). For example, Eric explained that is safe for children and that Sweden has a system that works quite well since most children are safe and protected by laws. Jasmine remarked that in Sweden 'they do work a lot on… involving children and everything, but I think there's always there's always a room for getting better.' Victoria made a more general comment in relation to nations where she perceived gender may play a role:

I think the fact that for a lot of things you need parents' permission to do things would hinder it. Especially when you have countries where maybe a girl's opinion is not as important as a boy's opinion. The parents may not write it off or consent to their girls participating but maybe they're boys. (Victoria)

Greta suggested that, in Italy, children are 'super protected' which can limit possibilities for democratic participation: overprotecting children may reinforce children's dependence rather than their agency. She claimed: 'This is not good for the child. I like more the German approach. So just letting the children experience the world.' Germany is expressed as a good example with a free approach while Italy is used as an example where children are being too protected. The lack of experience can be used as an argument against children's right to participation, which is also stressed by Emelie. Jin underscored her own Korean cultural perspective, explaining that the focus in Korea concerning democracy is on adults (mainly on men) and said that she cannot think of any examples where children participate in democracy. To exemplify this view, she remarked that children are not allowed in certain restaurants since they are presumed to make noise and do bad things. Jin further explained that children do not express their voices or try to change the world through protests in Korea. In Jin's statement, an adultist view of children is expressed where children are seen as a potential menace rather than potential contributors to society. Such normative understandings of children could therefore affect children's possibilities - and potentially even their willingness - to participate in democracy.

Ahmed also stressed that he thinks that location is important when talking about children and democracy:

I don't believe, to be honest, that the children have a voice on the political level. (…) If we talk about Sweden, I think, yes, children's voices that are heard for the government, and for the organisations. (…) I think children in Syria think in a completely different way because adults' effect on children and how other things affect the children. Maybe that is why. Depending on location. (Ahmed)

In Ahmed's statement he expressed that children's voices are heard in Sweden but this may be different in other locations such as Syria where children may not have a voice at the political level. Nancy asked when she reflected upon the safety of children relating to

other contexts and countries: 'Where does the line go with between supporting and actually pushing a child to participate in a democratic process? I mean, in our context, it's safe. There might be other contexts, other countries where it's not safe to be part of those kinds of activities'. Along with Nancy's apprehension that children may not be safe to participate in democratic processes in some contexts Ahmed reasoned about the situation in Gaza and concluded that 'I think the first thing that we have to think about is to keep them (children) safe, and then we can think about their role in democratic processes.'

These statements can be viewed as arguing that protecting children is the most important: when that criterion is fulfilled, engaging in democratic processes can follow or be discussed at a more profound level. In countries that are described as safer, it can be perceived as more feasible to engage children and provide possibilities for democratic participation, even if there is, as Jasmine stressed, room for improvement. Wall (2011) suggests that children are seen as vulnerable and in need of protection from democratic engagement in the public sphere. From the perspective of childism, it could be of interest to discuss whether adults also need protection first and democratic engagement later or if these can coexist. Wall (2010) is critical of the fact that children possess fewer rights than adults. Even if it comes from a good place, from the perspective of childism, there is a risk with protecting and keeping children away from the possibility of democratic participation, and maintaining adultist norms, rather than children gaining agency, empowerment, and influence.

5.3.4 Other obstacles

When challenging the views on norms of adultism, some particpants did not explicitly name adults as an obstacle to children's possibilities for democratic participation but rather things like structures. This can, however, entail invisible implications about the adult world as Kimmie highlights:

> If you know that you're not allowed to be involved in the process, some
> people fight for being in it anyways, but most people, they just kind of
> accept that this is the way society is. When I turn 18, I get to have a say
> before that, no one cares about my opinion. So I would say that it's the
> surroundings that will have to change if children should feel more like, wow,
> okay, I can actually take this initiative. And I think it's really cool the
> children who do it anyway. (Kimmie)

Many of the participants expressed the opinion that children are not taken seriously or seen as equals in society, and that children do not feel included or welcome in democratic arenas. The quotes from the participants can be understood as examples of how naturalised understandings of the adultist normative structures of society can uphold these. Being children makes them targets for being met with skepticism when it comes to their abilities to engage in democratic events. In relation to this, Sundhall (2017) states that the concept of childism can be applied to critically analyse naturalised invisible norms of adulthood. Childism aims to reshape the understanding of all individuals by focusing on children's experiences (Sundhall, 2017).

When discussing children's willingness to express opinions and engage in democratic activities (and the potential challenges to this), peer and social contexts were seen as important by some participants. Emelie remarked that trends can dictate what children engage in, but that peers can be important in feeling safe when discussing issues. When it comes to children's motivation in speaking their minds about issues, Nancy stressed that a 'big factor' was 'what their friends are talking about, or the sort of the social context is'. Jin suggested that parents and peers can be important facilitators but emphasise that education is the most important aspect of a child's willingness to express themselves. Lack of education and questions of safety were also stressed as a potential obstacle for children not being able to engage actively in democracy.

Of interest here is also the problematisation Eric noted when talking about children's possibilities to express themselves and engage in democratic activities:

> I have a hard time separating the child aspect of this question, because I feel like it can be applied to most people that I know of because, like, I studied political science, and I feel like so many of us don't want to be involved in politics (…) because there's something very toxic about political life right now. (..) from my own perspective I have a very hard time because if I am not willing to do it, then I can't expect a child to. (Eric)

From Eric's perspective, adults and children are not separated but coexist in a 'toxic' political life which can be perceived as an obstacle to all. (This angle was not stressed by the other participants.)

The focus on obstacles for children can also be, in some cases, of relevance for the perceived hindrances of adults' democratic participation, particularly young adults. The relationship with friends and peers can be compromising for the beliefs of children but also for young people (including young adults) because, as Wall (2021) stresses, the development of the brain occurs until the age of 25.

Ida reflected on whether it is discriminatory against children to, according to her perception, not be able to vote or have a say. She stated that she did not think so before because everybody has been a child and then all have faced that sort of discrimination which hinders democratic participation such as voting. When it comes to age it may seem like a legitimate reason for exclusion from democratic participation since the person is not an adult. When a large enough group that everyone is or has been a part of (which makes it different from most forms of discrimination) it may, as Ida stressed, not seem like discrimination but rather 'a phase' all must pass. The quote indicates that Ida adopted a more critical stance on the exclusion of children now than before, challenging the adultist norms on democracy and who is able to fully exercise their democratic rights.

However, some participants discussed the lack of voting rights as an obstacle. The right to vote has been analysed during the earlier theme of '*Perceptions on age and democratic participation*' but is also relevant here as an obstacle. Even if an age limit of 18 for voting is supported (for example, by Eric) this limit is still also understood as a potential obstacle to children's influence and democratic participation. Eric said:

> Probably the main challenge might be that they don't vote. Because then you don't tailor specific policies for them. But you might do it. But instead you do it for the parents. So, I think that's more of a structural challenge. (…) I think the main obstacle is probably that they don't have voting power and they don't have influence in that. (Eric)

It can be underscored here that, for some, children's exclusion from formal democratic participation is seen as unproblematic. Mika also talked about limits to participation, for example taking part in school strikes is not always a possibility for children due to Swedish laws on school attendance. However, due to the lack of voting rights, strikes might be an instrument for children to use in order to express their opinions. It may however be complicated since children, in general, cannot choose not to go to school without consequences for themselves or their guardians.

5.4 Children's democratic participation in the private and public sphere

This theme will analyse the participants' perceptions of children's democratic participation in the private and public sphere. The private sphere here mainly involves the family and the school while the public sphere includes more visible arenas such as demonstrations, social movements, youth councils, or similar. It can also entail voting, but this was part of the focus on the theme of 'Perceptions of age and democratic participation' which is why reflections on voting will not be central to this theme.

5.4.1 Family and school

Some participants emphasised the importance of children's democratic engagement related to the private sphere, including the school and the home. Greta said that children's democratic participation 'can be easily done… in the private sphere… I think the family context and the school context are fundamental for this.' Ahmed talked about the school as an important arena for children's possibilities to be involved democratically:

> I think it's complex because children in general, are not involved with society just at home and school. So I think schools are the most important. (…) I think we have to focus basically on the school. (…) I think that the school is a place where children are supposed to be free to say what they think. (Ahmed)

Aligning children and democracy with the home and the school echoes the distinction emphasised by Wall (2011) between the public and private domains. Wall argues that children are commonly viewed as vulnerable individuals who require safeguarding from the influences of the public sphere. Instead, their possibilities for democratic participation and influence tend to be limited to private arenas.

Mika remarked that not all children desire to gain influence in the public sphere but rather to make small choices for themselves I the private sphere:

> I think also in families, children should be like in more minor areas like
> children should be involved in democratic processes in the home. Like, what
> are we eating tonight? Well, here we have four books. Which one do you
> want? (…) Every child doesn't want more influence. Maybe some children
> won't want to speak as a united in the UN conferences, but most children
> will want to tell I want this for my sandwich, or I want to read this book.
> And I think only that is influencing your society. (Mika)

Mika did not suggest that this should be the only arena for children to be active, but the 'private sphere' example here could be seen as a step on the way to gaining influence for children. From the perspective of childism there is not an obstacle in exercising democratic influence for children in both spheres. It is rather about having the possibility to do both even if the interests of individual children, as with adults, may differ. Not all adults would potentially wish to speak at UN conferences, but they are not limited should they wish to do so by normative assumptions about their age or adulthood.

In relation to schools as an aspect the private sphere, Ioanna remarked that student councils in schools can work quite well but 'the questions that are considered relevant for the children to participate in are often quite limited'. She explained:

> I think it's very important that when children are asked to take part in a
> democratic process, and especially in kind of practice situations, as in
> school, that participation actually has a result. And unfortunately, I think that
> a lot of times in schools, and also preschools actually, that the kids are told
> that, now we're going to do a vote or something, and then they do, but they're
> not actually listened to in the sense that the that voting leads to something.
> (Ioanna)

Here Ioanna expressed that even if democracy is practiced in the school setting and the children are participating in a vote, this may not result in influence. Nancy also articulated some criticism toward adult-controlled democracy in schools:

What we have in Swedish schools, like with some kind of representative democracy in the schools where they choose one representative that I mean, and sometimes that works quite well but that's still something that's, you know, is led by adults and it's kind of an adult process. It's sort of a mimic of the democratic processes that are sort of designed for adults, but sometimes they work. (Nancy)

While the participants are here talking about student councils, the same apprehensions can be seen in Sundhall's (2017) writing about youth councils. She expresses the risk of adults selecting issues they find suitable for youth councils which makes them adult controlled. She also notes that children may meet resistance when they participate if participation is measured against adult norms (Sundhall, 2017). To just participate in a seemingly democratic platform without being able to exercise influence can be seen as problematic and potentially rank low on Hart's (1992) ladder. From a childist perspective the adult normative view of democracy, even the private sphere, could be criticised as not actually listening to and incorporating the perspectives of children.

However, Emelie expressed a unique point of view, criticizing schools for being too much on the side of children:

I feel like their (children's) voices should be heard and respected. But also, I feel like we, right now have, like, a very child based society, and I think it's good, but, I feel like the school system, I mean, myself, have been working a lot in the schools. I feel like it's, almost going too much to the child side and not, like, listening to the teachers and stuff. And that's also becoming problematic. (Emelie)

This example reveals the tension between the perspective of children's voices being heard and respected against the notion that children, if given too much influence, may then not respect the voices of adults. To empower children and make more voices heard can from this perspective be seen as a threat toward the control that adults exercise. As remarked in the literature review, Kulynych (2001) and Pearse (2023) note that empowering children is seen as the road to a chaotic democracy by some. Finding a balance where children's voices can take place and both adults and children are respected can be perceived as difficult.

5.4.2 Demonstrations and activism

When it comes to children's possibilities to participate and exercise democratic influence in the public sphere, participants also mentioned demonstrations and activism. When reflecting upon why demonstrations can be a more appealing alternative to children instead of just learning about direct democracy in schools, Ioanna stated:

> It's more of just like, now we're teaching you that voting is raising your hand and we count it and that's it. And I think that might also be why more children have been drawn to demonstrations instead, or kind of types of political, democratic participation where they feel that it actually has an effect, that it has a purpose. (Ioanna)

Similarly, Mika argued that it should be legal for children to demonstrate since school strikes can impact society. Mika went on:

> Strikes are such an important way to show what you think without being in the process of voting in the Parliament, and I think that should be a way for children to do things and I also think schools and most parties and regions, and also the states should have like youth groups where children can vote and can make a change, like small changes. Like food committees at schools are a good way to show children democracy or have a youth party. (Mika)

Mika further provided an example of children's abilities to express their voices in public democratic matters:

> And I think in Sweden last year, there were huge cuts in the school. And so many people who organised to stop it were children. And they have like speeches at the events that were given from children at the age of nine until you graduate, and that just like 9-year-olds and like 12-year-olds were so willing to speak and give these amazing speeches about their school system and their day to day life is showing what children want to and are capable of. (Mika)

Mika emphasised demonstrations as a means for children to express what they think but also the importance of small decisions as could be seen in examples earlier about choices

in the home. According to Wall (2021), democracies ought to become more child-responsive and empower children, in the long run by giving them the vote. However, from the perspective of childism there is no obvious tension between giving children more influence in overall society and in minor decisions. As established, it seeks to empower children.

Ida and Nancy mentioned Greta Thunberg, Fridays for Future, and climate change as examples when they discuss children's possibilities to be involved in democracy. Ida expressed that children have been more involved recently because of movements like 'Fridays for Future'. Nancy explained that children may take part in school strikes and similar but that is not always praised by adults:

> I suppose Greta Thunberg would be the example that everybody would bring up. (…) A strike from school I mean, that's something. That means something and kind of gets people to wake up. But it's also very threatening. I think it also gets a lot of criticism. And I have other examples of, you know, young people that or people in my kid's school that have tried to use the democratic processes, like demonstrating and, and being kind of pushed down by adults because it's the wrong way. So I think adults always have that kind of, even though they use the tools that adults have explained to them, that adults are always like can always form it anyway, or kind of push it in a direction because they *know* the right way to participate in democratic processes. (Nancy)

In this example, Nancy makes the point that children can constitute a threat to adults by participating in democratic processes. Children then tend to be pushed in a direction that adults favour. However, Emelie suggested that children have 'different perspectives' and can provide 'great important points for the discussion'. She said that children are 'sometimes more heard than adults'. Emilie concluded that children can have a voice in activism rather than elections. Wall (2021) sees activism as a means for making children's issues and rights more visible in the political landscape. With the example of Greta Thunberg, it is feasible to see why the voices of children in relation to activism can be seen as both fruitful and as a breaking of norms. Some adults may find the breaking of norms threatening. The empowerment of children's voices can, as with the liberation of the subordinate group, be seen as taking power from the superior group which is a tension both Nancy and Emelie note.

Only one participant mentioned social media as a possibility for children to participate democratically and exercise influence. (Otherwise, as mentioned earlier, it is mostly stressed as a place where children can receive news rather than engage.) Ahmed remarked on its importance:

> I think social media is very, very important in that way, because now, I think that children's voices are heard more by social media. They can express themselves if they are allowed to use Facebook, YouTube. So their voices can be sent to the leaders. So that's a way of making themselves heard. (Ahmed)

Ahmed stressed that if children are allowed to use it, social media can be a crucial part of making themselves heard, even to political leaders. This may not be an option for all children since some may not have the age or tools to use it. Social media can, according to research by Cortés-Ramos et al. (2021), be a possibility for children to start their political engagement which may foster other forms of participation. This is however not something the participants reflected on in the interviews. Age restrictions, accessibility or similar may potentially make social media less applicable when reflecting on the overall issue of children's possibilities for democratic participation and influence.

5.4.3 Formal democratic involvement

Some participants underscored more formal democratic involvement for children through schools, youth parties, youth councils, and similar. Emelie thought school elections would be 'a really good way (…) for children to learn how to participate.' Here children's possibilities for democratic influence are not emphasised but rather the learning aspect may be a goal in itself. Ioanna thought 'the idea of youth councils is really good' but also remarked that this work 'needs to then be connected to politicians' or local levels or higher. She also made the point that 'there's not a lot of municipalities that have active councils and there's quite a lot of cases, I think, where there are kind of forums where children are being asked questions about decisions in society more generally (Ioanna). Ioanna briefly mentioned local NGOs at this point, but none of the participants reflected globally on engagement in NGOs or similar organisations. It could be worth noting that this kind of global engagement is also, according to my reading, less explicit within Wall's framework. Some communities may rely on support from children, for example to support

their parents with various tasks, which challenges the dominant Eurocentric view of children and childhood. This can be related to Faulkner and Nyamutata (2020) who question the lacking a sensitivity to the cultures and collectivist communities of the Global South traced in the CRC.

However, Victoria problematised activism as a form of participation since this, and other forms of children's participation are not equal to adult councils. She said:

> I think activism is important, but I think that activism doesn't necessarily bring you into the discussions and I think that having a seat in the discussions or the meetings or being part of not just a youth council, but actually incorporating the youth council into the adult discussions and not having them be separate. Have it to be a joint discussion with everybody and not distinguish between oh, these are the children and youth councils, and these are the adult councils. (Victoria)

Being involved in a youth council or participating in other forms of public democratic commitments can, according to Wall (2021), be a positive example in including children. The risk is, from a childist perspective, that these are adult controlled and children's presence is conditioned by adult norms and restrictions. As discussed at the beginning of the dissertation, children's parliaments in themselves are excluded from the adult version which can be interpreted as a marginalisation. Victoria's statement challenges the perception that the separate youth version of councils or informal activism are sufficient public arenas for children's democratic participation. Wall (2011) argues from the stance of childism that the separation of adult and children's councils can result in a more tokenistic approach to children's involvement. This could also be the case with other councils, such as in a school: if the influence of children is limited it can be interpreted as more of a charade even if some learning aspects may come out of it. Wall (2021) argues that even if children show political engagement, which could also be shown as activism, the general normative opinion suggests that children do not have the ability to take part in formal democratic procedures.

Only one example of children's possibilities for democratic involvement is seen as difficult to label as related to either the public or private sphere. Eric talked about being part of a (Swedish) football association and both exploring and participating in democracy there. He said:

The football association is a democratically run process. So I mean, I assume your parents are the ones voting. As a child, you're still essentially involved in that process, in that association to make sure that it runs. You're like responsible for certain things. As you get older, you also get to do jobs within it. You become a referee. So it's like you're part of making the whole democratic association run. And I think that's probably it's also like a very indirect involvement. But I think it's like one very clear way that I'm used to and I think those are very good ways because it's being around processes that are democratic without it necessarily being like voting in larger elections. (Eric)

From Eric's perspective the association can be seen as an arena for attempting democratic participation and a possibility to exercise influence for children. However, with parents having the voting right in the football association and not the children, it is possible to interpret this from a childist perspective as an example of an adult-controlled environment. Wall's definition of the private and public sphere is what I use but he does not, according to my literature review, make an overview of which practices that could be seen as private or public. As noted earlier, Cockburn (2007) argues that a club is an arena that could be seen as in-between the private and the public sphere. However, Cockburn (2007) argues that children's activities and entrance into the public sphere (outside the home and school) can be perceived as a cause of concern and tension in society which underscores the strong association of the child with the private sphere. That is not to say that all adult control is alike across sites and contexts or that adult influence should be viewed necessarily in negative terms. Eric still describes democratic engagement among the children in the club as a vital part of making the association function.

5.4.4 Children's voice in matters that concern them

A recurring reflection among the participants was that children should have a say in matters that concern them. Ioanna used the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) to emphasise this from a Swedish perspective:

(…) in the children's rights convention, it says that, everything that affects children needs to take them into consideration and that, for example, the municipalities and schools and actors that decide things, should do this children's consequence analysis. (Ioanna)

This consideration can be from a broad perspective relating to children in general or, for example, a custody battle that concerns a specific child and entails both the public and the private sphere. However, Ioanna expressed criticism on how she perceives that this it is done in practice: 'And also when children are considered before taking the decision, they are not that often actually asked. So yeah, they are not participating.' From this perspective, children are understood as not actually having a say in matters that concern them even if an inclusive perspective is claimed to be used. With reference to a childist perspective, it is possible to be critical of the tokenistic normative approach used where the adult is perceived as competent enough to represent children without having to ask or listen.

Children's engagement and voices about concerns such as the environment and climate change recur in participant interviews. Mika said:

> I think you should listen, like in questions about refugees or climate change. I think it's so important to listen to children because children will be the most affected by war, and women are the people most affected by war. And listening to children who live in refugee camps will help the refugee camps to be able to allocate resources to how it's needed. And also in climate change. (Mika)

Current issues that concern children where their rights are compromised such as the situation in Gaza, Ukraine, and climate change have previously been mentioned by the participants. For example, Ahmed said: 'If we look at what is happening now around the world, for example, the population of Gaza, they are 50% children under 18 years old and many of them are suffering now. So where are their voices?' These issues can be seen as wide complex questions that operate on an international level where some participants, including Mika, earlier stressed that children's competence around these matters tend, per their view, to be compromised. Nancy's quote also stands when she said: 'I mean, children should have an influence on all areas that, that that have any have effect on them. And that is more or less all areas.' This notion stresses that basically all questions, directly or indirectly, affect children and this is why they should have an influence. Further, Jin remarked: 'I believe if children could be a politician like child politicians, I think maybe the politics could be really different.' She exemplified that for example, the topics could be different than now and also said that this view may be idealistic. Since children, according

to Wall (2021), are related to the private sphere, the participants' suggestion for children to have a say in complex public matters challenges the adultist norms of children's possibilities for democratic participation and influence. However, Emelie reflected that some topics may be unsuitable for children to participate in discussions about, such as various forms of violence while the environment is an area where she suggests children's voices are of importance. Complicated issues or those that evolve around sensitive issues can be understood, in Emelie's argumentation, as matters that children's participation can be excluded from in order to protect them.

From the perspective of childism, children are equally affected by the decisions made in a democratic society as adults: this is why their voices should be included in the democratic discourse to maintain democratic ideals. In several instances, participants' perspectives on children tend to be associated with questions that relate directly to them, such as the school. Their genuine influence in the school environment has also been questioned by some of the participants. According to the childist view, a rethinking and reconstruction of democratic discourse is needed to create an inclusive democracy that also entails children. This does not mean that children should just be considered in special issues (where their true influence may already be limited) but in all arenas, even the public ones.

5.5 Children as the adults of tomorrow

The final theme is also the one with the least amount of data but still offers a crucial perspective when reflecting about the subject: the questions of whether children should be able to have influence now, or later when they have reached adulthood. The reason why this theme has generated a limited amount of data might be because some of the participants emphasised the need to include children without mentioning a development for the future. This is exemplified by this quote when Ida reflects on the concept of children as adults in the making:

So I feel like that you (as a child) aren't a part of literally anything (..) to decide up until you're 18 makes no sense. You have all of these people, or kids that could do more, basically. And we don't engage, I guess, with them. And they are huge, like, percentage wise, if you think about it, of the countries we live in and we don't listen to them and they don't have any say in anything until they're 18. It is also, when you think about a lot of things, it's all arbitrary. It's like 18, why did you pick 18? It used to be 16 or you used to be able to get married at 13 one time. So, we're like 18, if you think about just voting, it's just a bit to me like, yeah, okay, that sounds good as a number. (Ida)

Ida took a stance against the arbitrariness of waiting to gain, for example, voting rights or being engaged until after someone has turned 18, challenging adult democratic norms. Wall (2010) remarks that childhood is often understood as a step towards adulthood where the latter is viewed as more complete rather than the developing child. Children, in Ida's statement, are not described as under development, and that they should be prepared before reaching the adult stage and first when this is achieved, be ready to make an impact on society. From the lens of childism, this implies a reconstruction of the notion of childhood as a development step before the more complete adulthood. This also ties into the earlier theme of 'Perceptions of age and democratic participation'.

Also related to this theme, Eric expressed frustration with the lack of children's influence in important issues for the future. He said:

I can be quite frustrated when I listen to leaders or people with a lot of influence talk about how their generation has failed. And my generation, and I mean the generation after me that like it's our responsibility to fix it. And they kind of like, but they're so excited for us to fix it because they see all the potential in us. And I'm just thinking like, well, I'm 26, you're 70. But you're the head of the UN. Like, it's going to probably take me 50 years or like someone from my generation, 50 years to get to your point and then to get your level of power and influence. And by that time, it would probably be too late to fix the things you are talking about right now. (….) We can look at topics now that are very defining for how the future will look in 50 years and see that there are no children involved in those processes. (Eric)

He mentioned his own generation of younger adults but also the generation younger than him and how adults, in his view, can be excited for the upcoming generations to provide solutions to current issues. By then they will no longer be children but adults from another generation. Eric stressed that, from his perspective, no children are involved in processes relating to topics that are important for the future. Eric's argumentation can be understood as a critical stance against an adult image of children as potential future saviours. From the perspective of childism, children should be empowered and have possibilities to influence here and now rather than relying on a future impact when they have reached the stage of adulthood.

Some participants emphasised that children will eventually become future adults with influence. When talking about children's influence, Greta stated that 'it's important because the children of today would be the adults of tomorrow' while Victoria stressed that children are 'the decision makers of the future.' She continued: 'I think it's very important to include children or youth in democratic processes from the start, to have their opinion, but also because it's a world that they're going to be living in the future.' On the same note Jasmine said: 'Just because they don't have enough power or things to do that doesn't mean that we shouldn't hear them (children). Of course, we should hear them. They're the ones who will be taking our place and changing the world.' Similarly, Anton said:

> I'm 50 years old. I am not in a position to make decisions about the future.
> The future belongs to my kids. To younger generations actually, and they
> have to be involved definitely in democratic processes. We are actually
> borrowing society today from our kids. (Anton)

In these examples, it is stressed that children will both live and be adults in the future which is an argument used to support children's possibilities for democratic participation and influence. From this view, children should be taken into account even before they become adults. Anton's expressed notion can be interpreted as adults should not make all decisions about the future which per this view, belongs to future generations. From a childist perspective, this challenges the norms around democratic decision-making which is generally described as an adult task. More participants also underlined the importance of children being able to try democracy and make decisions but also to be heard by the adult world not least to make them more prepared for the future so they can be more engaged adults. However, some of the statements above could be interpreted as emphasising children as adults in the making, becoming a part of the future. On this point, Ioanna and

Jasmine explicitly talked about children becoming citizens in the future as a reason why children's views should be heard because this 'will lead to them later on being active citizens' (Ioanna). They expressed the perception that children need to be listened to already in their current state. Relating to earlier themes, Wall (2021) discusses how children tend to be perceived as requiring a time of development (childhood) within the private sphere before they can be presented to the public democratic space. Children, from a normative adultist point of view, are mainly seen as future citizens in the making and not as active political persons in their own right.

Emelie also emphasised a view of children as being under development. She said:

> I feel like, of course, children in their teenage years are often or can often be, very knowledgeable and smart. They still are developing their own opinion and rational thinking and everything. So, I feel like it's good that they have that time to just be a child and develop and then have the capacity to vote to their best interests later on when they are above 18. (Emelie)

However, according to Wall (2010) one argument that supports children's exclusion from democratic participation is the idea that they have not yet developed the ability to become moral citizens which can be seen as something that happens when they become adults. Further, Wall (2010) stresses that children are often believed to need to be prepared for adulthood and only when they have reached this stage are they allowed to formally participate in democratic events. Wall (2021) remarks that knowledge gained is not tied to specific phases in life but based on various experiences. Even if children have been in the world for a shorter time than adults this should not discredit the value of their time. Some participants emphasized perceptions aligning with Wall's (2010) perspective on childism thinking that children should be able to make an impact before they reach adulthood. The participants, in general, express a positive notion of including children in the democratic process to make them better adults but also to be heard in their own right. However, to what extent and in which arenas are discussed more in relation to other themes.

To summarise, the discussion around childhood as a protected phase for development and a step on the way towards adulthood is challenged by some participants who emphasise listening to children's voices and giving them influence here and now rather than in the distant future. However, it could be possible to both empower and educate children as well as give them more influence than they generally can exercise today. According to Wall (2010) the perceived dichotomy of agency and vulnerability that is tied to children makes them be seen as either dependent and vulnerable or as active agents when it is possible to be both.

5.6 Final reflections

It is possible that the content of the course and its thinking has influenced some of the participants' views on children and democracy. Which aspects might influenced their perceptions are, however, speculative. It is also not known how active participants were in engaging with ideas on the course. In addition, knowing that few had met Wall's notions on the course, I did not specifically ask about this, particularly since the main focus of my research was on the broader understandings of children and democratic participation that are the focus of the course. I know that three participants had contact with Wall's theory during their studies (Ida, Jin and Mika), but this did not come through strongly or explicitly in the findings. Both Ida and Jin mentioned the proxy vote but concluded that they did not agree with it. Mika emphasised activism more than voting but held a critical view of competence as necessary for participation in a democracy. Anton did not encounter Wall's ideas on the course, but his thoughts aligned with a childist perspective in relation to a lowered voting age and how children are viewed and treated by adults.

The course does consider concepts of childhood from sociological, philosophical and historical perspectives. What the former students have, potentially, gained from this exploration is difficult to say from the data, because the word childhood is only used by Mika and Greta in ways that relate to their own experiences and not to academic perspectives. Greta referred to her own childhood and Mika stressed that being a child - and childhood - is not the same now as it was for someone who was a child many years ago. I would say that understanding of the nuances of childhood as a concept are more visible in relation to discussions of voting or competence than in relation to understandings of the complex concept of childhood itself. Some of the participants also noted cultural and national aspects in their responses. These were the participants' own views and should not be seen as generalisable to others. The cultural comments relate to their own

experiences, sometimes in comparison with what they have experienced in Sweden. Their perceptions imply specific stances or opinions, but the participants did not elaborate on potential political and ideological reasons for the arguments they made. This was not something I asked about during the interviews and the potential significance of the participants thoughts, and what they emphasised did not became apparent until the analytic phase where patterns would become more noticeable. Further, how these cultural perceptions come into play and why these factors are of relevance can be seen as being of interest even though they were not the main focus of the discussions and featured less in comparison to aspects such as normative practices or the voting age. Generally, when the participants discussed their perceptions of cultural factors they seem to be relating more to their own views and experiences, rather than taking a more critical view. Studies by Peterson-Badali et al. (2003) and Cherney et al. (2008) imply differences in adults' perceptions about children's rights between cultures and nations (although these studies compared countries that were all part of the Global North). Cherney et al. (2008) suggest that the rate of paternalism within a culture can affect adults' perceptions of children's rights. This point can also be related to the discussions by the participants about children as property and being protected.

Overall, adultist norms were questioned to quite a significant degree by most participants, although Ahmed, Eric and Emelie showed a stronger sense of adultist perspectives. However, Eric was the only participant who showed reflexivity in the interview when he questioned his own assumptions relating to views of children and democracy. Palinkas et al. (2015) suggested the participants should be able to communicate experiences or opinions in a reflective way. Even if the participants reflected on various issues, a reflexiveness was otherwise not apparent. In addition, the participants were mixed in their reflections, particularly on the question of the lowered voting age. Few participants aligned with a perspective as radical as Wall's on democratic participation, but many spoke in considered ways to highlight some of the key issues that need to be thought about more fully in society. These aspects are ones that the course aims to highlight and challenge and include: issues of age and adulthood; the question of childhood and competence; and the concept of children as adults and citizens in the making. These aspects relate to the interpretive thematic story presented earlier which ties into a tale of mixed views: some participants seemed more confident in critiquing adultist norms, while others took a more pragmatic view, and a minority seemed to hold more closely to adultist norms.

5.7 Conclusion

The themes discussed here concerned children's democratic competence and knowledge, perceptions of age and democratic participation, obstacles to children's democratic participation and influence, children's democratic participation in the private and public sphere, and children as the adults of tomorrow. The perceptions surrounding children's democratic participation revealed a range of viewpoints, highlighting both obstacles and possibilities for their involvement. The participants mostly agreed that children should have a participatory role in democracy, but the extent and method of their inclusion remain debated. Some participants emphasised children's status as future citizens needing preparation before their full potential is reached, while others stressed their immediate need for influence. The debate around childhood as a protected developmental phase versus the child as an active participant in democracy underscored the ongoing discussion about listening to and empowering children's voices now, rather than in the future.

Participants who advocated for lowering the age of voting from 18 emphasised inclusivity and the importance of young voices on issues like climate change. However, concerns about the preparedness and competence of children, along with the need for educational improvements, were also voiced. There was also a discussion over whether adults can represent children's interests, with some who argued that adults may not remember or understand children's perspectives, while others believed adults can do so since they were once children themselves. Adults were occasionally described as obstructing children's democratic participation, with many participants arguing that children's expressions are not being respected or presumed competent. A tension between protecting or including the child was also voiced with national examples.

Children's engagement in activism reflected differing opinions on formal versus informal democratic arenas which could be considered more impactful or helpful. Some participants stressed that children should be involved in decisions directly affecting them, where some highlighted the private spheres like homes and schools, and others the public sphere and more indirect or long-term consequences of decisions. In short, participant perceptions both challenged and maintained adultist norms on children's possibilities and abilities for democratic participation. (The next chapter will discuss these findings in relation to the literature.)

6. Discussion

In this chapter, I will connect the findings in the results chapter with the literature review. I return to key ideas from the analytic themes noted in chapter 5. These ideas include participants' views on the role of education, schooling adult control and activism (section 6.1), together with perceptions of children's abilities for participation, voting and views of democracy (section 6.2). The sections where these ideas are discussed should not be understood as completely separate from each other since many of the ideas relate to each other. (For example, views of democracy and adult control are recurring ideas that appear at various places in these sections.)

I will also return to Hart's (1992) ladder which 'ranks' actions of child participation (from tokenistic to child responsive and initiated). Authors such as de Castro (2012), Kulynych (2001), Nishiyama (2017), Pearse (2023), and Wall (2010, 2019, 2021) who adopt an inclusive perspective of children's democratic participation will also be referred to. The work of Purdy (1994) as well as Chan and Clayton (2006) will also be considered given their arguments against voting rights for children. Foa et al.'s (2020) study on democracy and documents from the United Nations will be mentioned in order to link back to points made in earlier chapters of the dissertation.

6.1 Education, the school, adult control, and activism

The focus in this dissertation is directed on the public sphere. The private arena, including the school, is discussed here since participants stressed its importance, for instance when it comes to matters associated as directly affecting children. Education and the school were seen by some participants as areas where democratic participation could be facilitated. However, within the school context, some participants emphasised the perception that children are not given genuine influence due to too much adult control. Some participants' views (Emelie and Nancy) relate to a tension between giving children more power and the fear that this can diminish the authority of adults. Kulynych (2001) discusses various arguments for not giving children more democratic involvement drawing on theorists like Arendt and Purdy who argue that granting rights to children could politicise what should remain in the private sphere (Kulynych, 2001, p. 234). Arendt feels that doing this could 'erode the special and essential character' of the private sphere (Kulynych, 2001, p. 234). Purdy believes that children need a period of development before they are able to deal with adult freedoms (Kulynych, 2001, p. 235). These types of argument, Wall (2021) remarks,

are similar to those used to argue against the suffrage of women. From Wall's perspective, they are now used to hinder children's democratic possibilities. These recurring opinions and arguments against children's democratic inclusion, have varied (as they once did with respect to women) from the child being viewed as property or not having a true will of their own to the potential chaos of society that could result from children's emerging influence (Wall, 2021).

In the research data and the literature review, engagement in the public sphere appeared more debatable than democratic participation in the school but children's possibilities for genuine influence in the school environment and youth/children councils were questioned. Wall (2021) warns that these councils can be tokenistic and too controlled by adults instead of providing a way of listening to the voices of children. Although some apprehensions about losing adult control may cause more concern than others, the loss of adult power, either parental, authoritative, or other, may seem like a strong argument against furthering the rights and influence of children. Despite potential fears about loss of adult control, I would argue that children need to be listened to and included in channels of genuine influence which rank higher on Hart's (1992) ladder where adults can provide guidance and support, but the initiation can also come from the children. However, it may be difficult to determine when guidance might become more controlling. In a domain like the school, it is possible to argue as some participants do, that this is the sphere where children ought to be heard. Too much adult control and tokenistic participation can limit rather than strengthen the voices and influence of children and do not foster children who believe they can make a difference, neither in the present nor in the future. Saha and Print (2010) state that school elections can result in readiness for adult suffrage and participation in the public sphere. However, Thornberg and Elvstrand (2012) conclude that children's expressions tend to be suppressed, and their perspectives dismissed in schools. They argued that teachers' perceptions are important in fostering an approach that includes children in democratic processes (Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012).

A personal reflection is that, when teaching about children's rights (be it a single course or as part of a teacher education programme), it is of relevance to stress those aspects which affect children's experiences of being listened to in matters that are supposed to be important to them. It is important to consider how to avoid discontent with democratic engagement which tokenistic non-influence can produce (see Hart, 1992). The perceptions of future teachers matter on this subject. Learning and education in relation to the competence of children and democracy is also of relevance, relating to the assumption that

the school should foster, as Greta explained, 'better adults.' This, in turn, relates to the discussion of children as good adult citizens in the making. Cockburn (2007) argues that schools are not mini-democracies and cannot completely tutor the practices of democracy. Osler and Starkey (2006) remark that perceived lack of political engagement or anti-democratic sentiments among the younger population cannot simply be educated away through citizenship education. Further, Cockburn (2007, p. 452) states that schools tend to be focused on preparing children for future citizenship 'rather than providing them with experiences of the operation of democracy.'

Participants like Emilie, Jin and Nancy remarked that children need to learn and gain education in order to participate fully in democratic events. Emelie underscored the importance for children to have 'more experience and more knowledge.' Jin considered education to be the most important factor for encouraging children's willingness to express themselves. Further, Nancy stressed that education needs to change in order for the voting age to be lowered from 18. This is similar to the conclusion from Resolution 1826 by the European Union (Parliamentary Assembly, 2011). However, schools and education can hopefully make a difference for children even if practice does not translate into being a carbon copy of an impeccable democracy. However, based on the literature and the perceptions of the participants, it seems reasonable to question the quality of democratic engagement in schools and aim to make sure this is valuable for children.

When discussing children's possibilities to participate and exercise democratic influence in the public sphere, various forms of activism were mentioned by the former children's rights students. For example, demonstrations and school strikes were talked about, including Fridays for Future and Greta Thunberg along with the overall issue of climate change. Ida also remarked that children have been more involved recently and Emelie suggested that children can be more listened to than adults in relation to activism. UNICEF's (2021) report concludes that recent years have shown an increase in youth activism. Taft and O'Kane (2023) also remark that the activism of children has become more visible due to increased media coverage concerning children's rights and participation. This is an issue that has received a lot of attention during recent years (particularly relating to Greta Thunberg's activism) so it is understandable why this form of informal democratic participation is described by several participants as a way for children to exercise influence and have their voices heard.

Activism can be seen as a response to the issues of arising from adult controlled processes and children lacking formal voting rights. O'Brien et al. (2018) state that activism among youth can be seen as the answer to being excluded from decision-making processes. Activism thus becomes a way of speaking one's mind. De Castro (2012) argue that there has been a lack of debate and a taken for granted assumption about children's exclusion from the political sphere. The lack of debate and not being listened to or (as emphasised in participants interviews) children not being met with respect, can make them rebel against formal and adult controlled democratic engagement. However, Mkono et al. (2020) suggest that even when children engage in activism, some will view them as being adult controlled. This could mean that the voices of children are mistrusted and not considered genuine since, potentially, a guardian could be scheming in the background. This could indicate a view of children as dependent without a mind of their own.

The participants in my study, such as Victoria, problematised activism, suggesting that formal channels should be used instead. As Victoria stressed: 'I think activism is important, but I think that activism doesn't necessarily bring you into the discussions'. She promoted children having a seat where adults listen and criticised youth councils since these are, in her view, held separately from adults. This relates to Wall's (2011) point about whether other marginalised groups would accept a system of a separate parliament. Taft and Gordon (2013) also argued that youth councils are often praised but can at the same time be perceived as elitist and tokenistic especially among activist youth who stive for a genuine influence. Ioanna expressed that demonstrations or other forms of democratic participation where children feel that they can make their voices heard could be a response to lack of influence in schools. However, she also noted that children may take part in democratic processes such as youth councils but never reach people with power. The importance of more genuine participation where children have the possibility to exercise influence was also highlighted by Ioanna (and others such as Nancy).

Taft and Gordon (2013) write that social movements can become a response to the power imbalances that marginalised groups like children face, leading them to seek engagement outside formal channels. From Wall's (2021) perspective, activism can be a means through which the rights of children become more visible on the political agenda. The exclusion of children and youth without some of their questions being taken seriously may trigger activism since they lack formal channels which society may not facilitate. This suggests that political engagement among children and youth can be high even if they do not necessarily engage through political parties or similar more formal means.

Before gathering data, I thought the interviewees would emphasise social media as a possibility for children to engage and make their voices heard. However, this was talked about to a very limited extent. Social media was, apart from Ahmed, not mentioned in the interviews by the participants, other than on two occasions when participants talked about how children receive news from social media. Only Ahmed suggested social media could be used by children as a way of having their voices heard. Cortés-Ramos et al. (2021) conclude in their research that social media is used as a medium for expression and communication among youth and can contribute to further democratic engagement. However, social media can also be seen with more skeptical eyes as Yılmaz (2017) remarks: compared to other forms of activism it can be linked with so-called 'slacktivism' which implies limited and ineffective online engagement.

6.2 Abilities, voting, and views of democracy

In this section, I will discuss the competence of children and democracy including voting right and views of democracy. The discussion of voting and children is returned to frequently in the dissertation, but democratic participation should not be understood as limited to this issue. I elaborated upon splitting this chapter but to me, it made more sense to discuss these issues together since they are entangled with each other.

In contrast to social media, and partly due to the nature of the interview questions, competence and voting were well-reflected upon by the participants. In the literature, Wall (2021) and Chan and Clayton (2006) claim that a common belief about voting capacity is that biology and brain development are often used in as an argument against children's voting rights since they are viewed as still being under development. However, biological aspects were not stressed among the participants in my study in relation to children. Ida on one occasion remarked that even adults who may have something wrong with their brain can vote. Rather, lack of experience and maturity were used by participants as arguments as to why children may not be suitable to vote. For example, Emelie considered voting to be too important and that more life experience was needed in order for someone to be able to vote. However, the participants did not describe children explicitly as incompetent. Instead, Greta, Anton, and Mika highlighted adults as a major obstacle to children's possibilities for democratic participation. This includes the perception that children are not taken seriously or met with respect by adults due to perceptions that children lack competence when they attempt to participate in democratic matters.

This can be connected to Pearse (2023) who argues that there is too much focus on potential weaknesses and presumed lack of competence when discussing children's suffrage. Pearse questions the claim that an open view of suffrage (giving children the vote) would necessarily lead to chaotic democracy or that it would undermine democracy. He states that democracies already function 'with large swathes of ignorant, irrational adult voters, who nevertheless vote meaningfully under minimal epistemic conditions' and concludes that 'placing children outside the scope of universal suffrage is an impediment to democratic flourishing' (Pearse, 2023, p.15). Purdy's (1994) reasoning around doing nothing with respect to individual differences regarding capacities could be viewed as opposing this criticism. Some scholars, such as Wall, see it as an issue that children are excluded from exercising participation rights while others see it as reasonable due to, for example, the overall assumption about abilities that ought to be obtained. If some adults do not develop these capacities (or lose them) and some children have them it is considered a non-issue. On the other hand, scholars like Wall do not even promote certain capacities to have the right to participate in a democracy.

Kulynych (2001) argues that exposure to children's perspectives is crucial for a democracy but still, children are often kept within the private sphere. This privatisation denies children the opportunity to participate as citizens. Wall's (2023) argues that adultism sees children as lesser human beings with limited competences and possibilities for being considered as full citizens. Merely associating children with the private sphere can facilitate the view that children do not belong in the public sphere, not even in some restaurants as Jin stressed. This notion was challenged when participants like Ioanna expressed that children have a good understanding of society, understand things from early on, and should be able to exercise more influence over society and not just in minor decisions within the home or school.

Kulynych (2001) also calls for an end to negative stereotypes that diminish children from being viewed as political actors. Archard (2015) claims that democratic values ought to be the guiding principles in adults' approaches to children: this entails respecting diverse viewpoints and encouraging tolerance for differences. However, Wall (2021) argues that a neoliberal democracy is based on individual competition and so does not concern itself with dependency and needs – both of which are associated with children and the private sphere. In this view, children are not imaginable as, for example, voters in the public sphere. This notion separates autonomous adults and dependent children, due to the latter's perceived lack of agency. Wall (2021) remarks that all persons are dependent to different

degrees since all rely on each other to make society work: he suggested that the whole of human nature is interdependent. From this childist view, the dichotomy between agency, freedom, and competence and the vulnerable dependent child does not exist. According to Nishiyama (2017), children's immaturity and curiosity in relation to democracy can challenge norms or perspectives that are taken for granted in the adult world. This aligns with the view that some participants stressed when they remarked that children can possess competencies adults do not have (such as broader, more wholesome views of society).

Purdy (1994) on the other hand suggests that children are different morally from adults with different abilities for logical thinking (as well as being less knowledgeable). Moral difference (acting to the disadvantage of children) is not something any of the participants highlighted in the interviews. Rather, children's perceived 'innocence' was presented by participants like Anton and Ida as an advantage, although Eric referred to 16-years-olds as immature (without the constructive undertones that Nishiyama [2017] emphasises). Eric later problematised his own statement by remarking: 'It might be that the perception of children not being mature, and you don't take them as seriously as you would. But again, some adults might also be very immature.' From Wall's (2010) concept of childism it is possible to see how some traits can be used to empower children but also to manifest adultist norms on democracy and childhood which do not favour the child's position.

The participants in my study mostly expressed a positive notion of including children in the democratic process, at least to some extent. This tended to relate to the idea of making children more prepared for adult citizenship but also, as for instance, Ida, Anton, and Mika remarked, to be heard in their own right. Archard (2015), in line with Wall (2021), suggests that defenders of the exclusion of children from voting stress their lack of competence as a valid reason. What kind of minimal competence that would be required is, however, debatable. Participants like Mika and Ioanna implied that if competence is required by children to participate in democratic processes this should also be of relevance for adults. According to Pearse (2023), children are often assumed not be capable enough to participate in democratic life. This is something that several of the participants in my study (for example Mika, Anton, and Ida) are critical of, remarking that children should be seen as competent with abilities that enable democratic participation. They did associate children with incompetence in relation to democratic participation. Some of the participants emphasised that children should gain more credit for their competence and Mika expressed an overall critical view of the necessity of knowledge and competence when participating in a democracy. A differing view of democracy is presented where

some, like Mika, took a stance against the focus on competence and the ideal voter while others, such as Eric, expressed a curiosity towards a competence bar for voting. However, no participants saw a competence bar as a real solution or proposal when it comes to voting. Munn (2014) advocates for a Doe test that can offer an objective standard for capacity including medical and criminal capacity criteria but recognised that this sort of capacity testing can be costly, exposed to corruption, and lead to permanent exclusion (instead of age which is not an everlasting trait).

The notion of an ideal voter might be appealing to a few but was not considered a solution or real proposal. De Castro (2012) states that it is largely just assumed that only adults can possess the moral and mental qualifications to be viewed as political subjects. Children are seen as 'the other' when measured against the ideal political subject and therefore they are marginalised from participation in political activities (de Castro, 2012). According to Wall (2021), excluding children based on perceived lack of knowledge weakens democracy since fewer voices can be heard or hold those in power accountable. Pearse (2023) argues that it is problematic to measure people against a competence bar and promotes a perspective where everyone's interests and perspectives are considered equally valuable. He questioned the taken for granted child-excluding model of universal suffrage and remarks that the exclusion of children without a persuasive reason violates the concepts of political equality and undermines democratic legitimacy.

It is possible that those who promote the exclusion of children may argue that they have compelling reasons for their exclusion. It, to some extent, becomes a debate on democracy: who it should be for, and why. Some of the participants, for example, Mika, Victoria and Jin, expressed a view that acknowledged the varied perspectives and experiences of all members in society. Mika explained that everyone has a relevancy in democracy and Victoria remarked that children's opinions are important to include if democracy is to have a variety of views. Jin argued for the necessity of taking all opinions of the public into account in democracy and thought it only fair to involve children in democratic processes since they are part of humankind. This indicates an approach to democracy being for the many which I find to be a key aspect when discussing views on democratic participation. While the participants stressed the notion of many having a say in democracy others, especially when it comes to voting, such as Emelie and Ahmed, highlighted the importance of experience, maturity, and/or competence.

Should democratic influence be for all, or for those who are assumed to understand more about the world and about certain issues? For the many or for the few? According to Wall's (2010) call for a reconstruction and rethinking of age-inclusive approaches to democracy, it should be for all, including children.

However, the right to democratic influence seems especially delicate when it comes to discussions about whether to involve younger children. For example, Greta remarked that children do not have competence on all topics, the same way adults are assumed to have, and concluded that children should have a say in topics that are proportionate in relation to their age. Kimmie also suggested that it is desirable to have reached a stage where the person can understand what they are deciding upon. Pearse (2023) refers to studies focusing on developmental psychology concluding that some skills are acquired gradually through age. To see childhood as a protected time of development may be reasonable from one perspective but from a childist view, it is possible to see development and experience as something that happens throughout life rather than being specifically tied to childhood. Young children may be in an intense phase of learning to walk, talk, and socialise which almost all adults have already passed. Conversely, Hart (1992) writes that confidence and competence among children can also gradually be acquired through increasing opportunities for children to participate in democracy. Contrary to those who perceive childhood as a time for development Wall (2021) argues that knowledge is gained through life and not tied to specific phases in life; even if children have been in the world for a shorter time than adults this should not diminish their experiences.

Greta also noted the challenge of listening to children of various ages where the youngest can, as emphasised above, be the most difficult to take into account. It might even be controversial to some that young children should be heard or given the possibility to influence at all. The tension between parental rights and children's rights becomes visible when the former are described as an obstacle, especially in relation to 'cultural' or national aspects. Victoria stated that parents in some countries may not value the opinions of girls and Greta highlighted the need to teach parents how to behave towards children 'and not to treat them like objects or just properties like is actually happening in some countries.' Further Jin expressed criticism towards, from her perspective, a Korean view of children as weaker and not welcome in some public spaces such as restaurants.

From a childist view, these perspectives manifest children as a 'second class' compared to their adult counterparts who are expected to be well-behaved, competent, and rational. This translates into children's invisibility and limits their possibilities for democratic participation and influence leaving them without power.

Further, parents are described in literature as a potential obstacle to children's influence and their view on children affects the child's possibilities for democratic participation. The cultural aspect of differences between nations was visible in research by Peterson-Badali et al. (2003) where different perceptions of self-determination among children were revealed in a comparison between Canada and the US. The participants in this study had different experiences of nations, for example, Syria, Italy, Sweden, Korea, and Germany. Participants expressed perceptions about the differences between parents, adults, and nations which affect views on children and their possibilities for democratic participation and influence. Some participants were more negative, and some more positive, although the perceptions should not be understood as positivist truths where the people in the countries always 'are' in a certain way.

Another recurrent obstacle stressed by the participants in my study related to the absence of voting rights. Wall (2021) suggests a proxy vote system so that all should have a vote from birth which the child later can claim. It is then up to the guardian to represent the child's view even if this would likely mean the same political view as the adult. Ida was critical of this because a guardian then votes on behalf of the child until the vote is claimed. She wanted children to be able to do it for themselves and potentially be able to vote on a different party than the parents. A negative consequence could be that some adults, since they are guardians, gain more votes and influence. An argument I expected from participants was that children would adopt similar views as their parents, in line with Wall's (2021) suggestion. This argument did not clearly appear in the interview data. Ida and Jin were also against the proxy claim vote partly because of the potential differences from guardians with emphasise on the private individual vote. Since a majority of the participants also questioned if adults can represent children well enough, there might not be a perfect solution in terms of involving the youngest children. It depends on what people perceive as a good enough solution and potentially, as for example Mika remarked, to make choices within the private sphere such as the home. The power imbalance between children and adults was visualised by Victoria and Ioanna who stressed adults' ownership of decision-making and that children are dependent on having adults who actually listen. It comes down to the adult to interpret the best interests of the young child and ensure that

the child can be capable of forming their own views and expressing freely in all matters affecting the child in accordance with the CRC (1989). In addition, the values of the family can potentially clash with the child's right to express their own views. On the other hand, it could also be a potential arena for smaller decisions for the child (as can be seen in Mika's response on children perhaps not wanting participation in the public sphere but rather in the private sphere).

As discussed earlier, some of the interviewees (for instance, Ahmed, Eric, and Emelie) suggested that 18 is a suitable voting age while others argue for a lower voting age (such as Anton, Ida, and Kimmie). Even if an age limit of 18 for voting is supported it can still be problematised. Eric stressed this when suggesting that children may not be having policies made for them. It is possible to defend an age limit of 18 for voting but still see issues with this since it may result in children not being properly represented or having 'their' questions at the top of the agenda. While a few of the former children's rights students defended the voting age limit of 18 others challenged it, for example stating that they do not see a difference between being 16 or 18 years of age in terms of development.

In the literature review, I wrote about a study by Hart and Atkins (2011) which revealed that 16-year-olds had developed the necessary competencies considered required for full citizenship. Emelie remarked that children who are teenagers can be knowledgeable but are still developing their own opinions and can only vote in their own best interest when they have reached 18, aligning more with Purdy's (1994) 'common sense' view. Further, Chan and Clayton (2006) conclude from survey results that a majority of the public was against the idea of 16-year-olds having the right to vote. This was some time ago, so there might be a shift in public perception since then, but Emelie's perspective can be seen as a contribution to these standpoints. Although not the only one who defended an age limit of 18 for voting, her answers tend to stand out on some occasions when emphasising issues and counterarguments on the subject. A reflection Jin made about the voting age was to explain that people tend to believe that the voting age of 18 is reasonable. It is possible to assume that many take the age of 18 for granted or assume that it is there for a valid reason since it often is the normative standard.

Ida and Kimmie touched upon the potential adultfication of children and suggested that if the voting age is lowered other age restrictions would then also need to change accordingly. Wall (2021) on the other hand argues that lowering the voting age would make politics more child-friendly rather than aim to turn children into adults. He does not

see a problem with lowering the age for voting and at the same time defends age restrictions on the use of, for example, alcohol since it can harm the child. The fear of adultification can relate to a willingness to protect children from, for example, alcohol consumption, child marriage or relations with older people. The adultification may then be perceived as standing in contrast with a more child-inclusive and responsive democracy that takes the issues of children and young people more seriously. Ida stressed this tension when discussing the issue of when someone is perceived as an adult using the example of a large age difference in relationships. The age of consent may vary but children under 18 can still today have relations with far older people. It is of relevance to problematise issues that potentially could arise when changing age limits and the relation to the protection of children. However, even without the lowered voting age children are still not protected from issues that may not be illegal but are perceived to be immoral.

When the participants explicitly were asked about ethical or legal concerns when including children in democratic processes, they overall expressed only minor apprehensions. Before the data collection started, I thought there would be more arguments that would emphasise the protection of children since these formulations were suggested in research (Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2022; Zlotnik Raz & Almog, 2023). For example, Hart (1992) underlines the apprehension that children should be allowed to have a carefree childhood and not be bothered by the problems of society. Wall (2011) argues that children are still perceived as vulnerable, needing protection from the public sphere. Some participants argued that some questions may be too controversial to discuss with children. Emelie's view was that it was good for children to 'have that time to just be a child and develop and then have the capacity to vote to their best interests later on when they are above 18.' As stressed, research from Campbell and Covell (2001) and Karaman-Kepenekci (2006) indicates that students in fields associated with children's rights tend to have a more positive attitude towards children's rights than others. In the interviews, participants like Greta, Anton, and Mika leaned more towards emphasising the rights of children to be involved rather than the vulnerable protection aspect. Ida also reflected upon whether it is even possible to protect children from certain issues due to the accessibility to news.

As Wall (2021) explains, children have been perceived as needing to learn and mature before they are able to engage in the public democratic space and are often viewed as becoming adults rather than beings here and now. Children tend, from this perspective, to be viewed as future adults who need to be prepared during childhood for upcoming democratic participation rather than granted it in the present. For example, Jasmine

referred to children as becoming future citizens which can indicate that they are not seen as full citizens before they reach adulthood. A relevant aspect when discussing children's possibilities for and influence on democratic participation is whether they are perceived to have a voice here and now that ought to be listened to or if they gain one in the future when they are adults. It can be considered taken for granted knowledge that children are being educated and prepared to have an influence later on rather than being thought of as democratic citizens in their own right. Wall's (2010) concept of childism shines a light on this issue. De Castro (2012) also remarks that childhood tends to be viewed as a phase the individual needs to pass before it is possible to be recognised as a capable political actor. A mindset that, according to the author, dismisses children from political participation. It is still possible to argue, for those who have this perception, that children should not be able to exercise influence before reaching adulthood due to various factors such as, but not exclusive to, the need for competence, experience, or protection. At least the issue then is examined through arguments such as experience, competence, and protection and not just operating through invisible norms on democratic participation.

As previously stressed, de Castro (2012) notes that the protective rights of children tend to limit their participation rights. This is emphasised by, for example, Greta as a negative example of where children can be overprotected and potentially treated like the property of their parents. This can be connected to Cockburn (2007) who noted the complex dynamic with families and the private sphere with an asymmetrical power relation and focus on protection for the child. Mayall (2000) also emphasised the surveillance and protection of children where their lives are controlled by adults and their values, justified through a certain view of childhood which forms the apprehension of what the best interest of the child is.

Ahmed suggested that children first need to be kept safe and then discussion around democratic participation can follow. It can be hard to find a middle ground between wanting to protect children and also granting them freedom of expression. Some of the participants, such as Ahmed, talked about ongoing conflicts and the need for both protection and listening to children during troubled times. The desire to protect children, however well-meaning, could also result in their exclusion. Some rights might be seen as more prompting than others, especially during extraordinary circumstances but (as stressed earlier in the dissertation) Wall (2010, p. 2) asks the question: 'Why do children everywhere enjoy narrower human rights than adults?'

The desire to protect is viewed by Wall (2021) as a major reason why children still are marginalised. Women and minorities have, at large, broken out from this barrier while children, especially the younger ones, as touched upon before, are still kept inside.

Eric further expressed that the current political climate does not invite children, or anyone else, to be involved in political matters. In the introduction, the decline of democracy especially among youth was emphasised by research, and the UNICEF (2021) report implies that this was even more occurring after covid (Cammaerts et al., 2014; Foa et al., 2020). This development can have several implications for the state of democratic participation for children. Eric's reasoning about the toxic political climate can be connected to research by Cammaerts et al. (2014) which shows that the willingness among youth to engage politically is hindered by the political discourse and practice which makes young people feel ignored. Eric described the political discourse as toxic, even for adults, and the UNICEF (2021) report stressed that overall satisfaction with democracy has been declining. Wall (2019) states that all areas from culture to laws have been relying on adultism: adult norms surrounding democracy contribute to making it difficult for children to participate.

Foa et al. (2020) conclude in their research that youth feel that political candidates do not represent their values or identities which leads to discontent with democracy. This is also something the participants reflected on, and some suggested that adults can represent children well enough while others argue they cannot since they are not children of today even if everyone has been a child. Remembering what it was a long time ago may not be sufficient why some remark that children should be able to represent themselves. Jin was the only participant who outspokenly supported children as electable politicians even if more stressed that children should be able to represent themselves. According to Josefsson and Sandin (2022) the narrative of listening to children can be seen as paternalistic where children are not competent enough to represent themselves based on their childhood determined by age. It is possible to argue that democracy in general is built on representation but to be represented by someone who shares traits and experience may enhance the feeling of being represented. For children to gain more influence would potentially also put youth issues on the agenda. With an aging population, youth may, in accordance with findings from Foa et al. and along with the perceptions of participants such as Jin and Anton, need at least younger representatives in various matters to not advance their discontent with democracy.

6.3 Conclusion

When reviewing Wall (2021) together with the other literature, and the data I collected, I can conclude that there are some key aspects central to the discussion around children's possibilities for democratic participation and influence. The first one is the view on children that is held by adults and/or wider society. Children can be viewed from a range of perspectives from seeing them as vulnerable and in need of protection to seeing them as potential saviours of the planet. Anton remarked 'We are actually borrowing society today from our kids.' and expressed support for children's early involvement. This offers a counter perspective from adults who might hail children as the future but also keep them from genuine participation.

The second key aspect relates to whether we see children as beings here and now who should be able to have the possibility to make a difference, or as adults in becoming who ought to be prepared for future democratic participation. This further relates to the areas where children are potentially allowed to operate. It could be in the private sphere which they are already related to, as established by Wall (2021). However, the genuine influence children are able to exercise in arenas such as school or family can vary. A further discussion also relates to whether these are the only places where children's opinions are considered to belong or if they should also be able to be heard in the public sphere.

The third key aspect relates to the voting age. Resolution 1826 (Parliamentary Assembly, 2011) suggests it will expand democracy by lowering the voting age to 16 due to an aging population. This indicates the unfairness of 16-olds having obligations to society without voting rights. The Resolution further underscores research which stresses that if youth need to wait for political participation, they become less engaged politically as adults which results in a decrease in democratic participation. The European Union has not yet stirred a widespread debate around this, but this may come. I would argue that what such a debate comes down to is the view of democracy and children. Should democracy aim to embrace as many voices as possible or not? Should there be imagined criteria relating to age, presumed competence, or not? Should children be kept in the private sphere and not be truly listened to more widely? The answers may vary depending on the view the person holds but I think these questions should be discussed, especially in the current societal and political climate.

To call back to the introduction and the current era where children's rights, to some extent, are on the agenda, the time to question taken for granted adultist norms on democracy and ideas about empowering children, as Wall (2010) underscores, may be now.

7. Conclusion

In this chapter, I will use the findings to answer the research questions (in section 7.1). I will then reflect on the limitations and implications of the study (section 7.2), which included both potential possibilities for the research but also a discussion on what could have been done differently. I then discuss the significance of the study and its professional implications (in section 7.3) where I reflect on the relevance of the research for myself and others. In section 7.4 I suggest some recommendations for further research for further research on the subject, before I provide a conclusion with final reflections on the study (section 7.5).

7.1 Answering the research questions

This dissertation has explored the following research question:

What are former children's rights students' perceptions of children's possibilities and abilities for democratic participation and influence?

The sub-question was:

What arguments are used by the former children's rights students when discussing children's abilities and possibilities to participate in democratic processes?

The perceptions surrounding children's participation in democratic processes reflected a spectrum of viewpoints, highlighting both the perceived obstacles and potential pathways for their involvement. While there was a consensus from participants that children should, as Mika stated, 'be involved in some capacity' and have a role in democratic participation, the extent and method of their inclusion remained subject to debate. Central to the discussion was the issue of the voting age, with opinions ranging from advocating for lowering the age to 16 or going even lower to maintaining it at 18. Advocates for lowering the voting age argued for a more inclusive democracy and the importance of amplifying young voices on critical issues such as climate change. However, concerns were articulated by some regarding the readiness and competence of younger voters, as well as the need for adaptations, including improvement of education, in democratic processes to accommodate them. Overall, the participants emphasised children as competent enough for democratic participation, but some were more hesitant when voting was mentioned. A recurring argument here was that children may need to, for instance, learn and mature hence their abilities are considered inadequate.

Participants expressed varied perspectives on the role of children in a democratic society, with some underscoring their status as future citizens needing preparation for forthcoming impact while others stressed their immediate need for influence. The tension between participation in democratic procedures and genuine influence underscores the complexities in the views of engaging children in democratic events, even in the private sphere. Small decisions in the family and the school can be supported by all but not without warnings/emphasis on adult control. Others called for increased democratic influence for children, including voting, and argued that democracy should be for the many and/or that children have the abilities to participate. Moreover, the notions touched upon broader topics such as the adultification of children, the need for children's voices to be heard across all spheres, and the challenges of representing children adequately in adult controlled processes. Whether adults can represent children in a democracy was debated and while some argued that adults do not remember what it is like being a child and have not been a child of today others suggested adults can do it well enough since all have been a child but that it may depend on the specific adult and its view on children.

The potential for children's engagement in activism as a means of participation was both lauded and scrutinised, reflecting differing opinions on formal versus informal channels of influence. Again, many stressed that children should be considered in matters which concern them which to some relates to issues in the private sphere such as the home or the school. Other participants, though not a majority, emphasised that children's voices ought to be heard in all matters, including those which may concern them more indirectly. I will not draw generalisable conclusion from the limited material but, for me, as a university teacher of children's rights, it emphasises the need for a wider view of children's potential arenas for participation which move outside of the private sphere.

Ultimately, while there was recognition of the value of children's involvement in democracy, some participants called for careful navigation of the nuances of children's participation. Some participants thought that children's involvement requires consideration of their capacities, rights, and the evolving nature of democratic governance. Other participants could be perceived as being more 'radical' (to use Anton's word) in their approach to children's democratic participation. Some of the participants suggested that the quest for a more inclusive and representative democracy must remain adaptive to the diverse perspectives and needs of all members of society, including its youngest citizens.

Recurringly, adults were perceived as an obstacle that hinders children's possibilities and abilities for democratic participation and influence. Many of the participants returned to the argument that adults or society do not listen nor meet the democratic expressions of children with respect. Concerning this, arguments related to nations and cultures as well as protection were stressed by some based on their own experiences and perceptions.

It is difficult to distinguish from the data what impact the course content might have made on participants' thinking, and which perceptions were based on their own other experiences. However, some participants stressed that the course on children's rights had expanded their thinking on the subject. From the responses, I can interpret that some aspects of course content may have had an impact relating to the critical approach some of the participants adopt to adultist perspectives and the elaboration on various obstacles for children's democratic participation. In addition, while analysing the data by gender and age was not the aim of this study, it may be useful to clarify that I could not see any relation between participants' estimated age or specified gender and the perceptions they shared. There also seemed to be little if any difference in views between participants who encountered Wall on the course and those who did not (other than some awareness of the proxy vote).

In the introduction, I wrote that I wanted to gain more knowledge about the students' perceptions of children's abilities and possibilities for democratic participation to potentially support my future work with the course or in similar courses involving the subject of children's rights. I feel that my understanding has deepened greatly both through the insights that the participants have provided, but also by exploring the subject through texts, concepts, and data to generate further knowledge. The dissertation reveals a complexity among the perceptions, shines a light on how norms of adultism can be maintained or challenged through various statements, and presents how adults can be perceived as an obstacle to children's possibilities and abilities for democratic participation by arguments that underscore lack of respect and too much control. This tells me that the role of adults and their view on children is of relevance when advancing the subject of children's rights, and possibilities for democratic participation.

7.2 Limitations and Implications

As already touched upon, this study has some limitations. It interviewed a small number of participants who had been registered on one course about children's rights. I could have expanded the pool further by reaching out to former students from an even longer time ago, but it is hard to say if a few more voices would have increased the quality of the study. It is a delicate balance and would likely have added a very limited number of voices (if any) due to factors such as small class sizes and old contacts in the learning platform. I could have reached out to more universities both in Sweden and across the world, but the aim was not to gain as many perspectives as possible (where a survey would have been a better alternative if this was what I aimed for). In addition, the course has changed in content and the participants attended during different years (although at the same university). This provides room for some diversity, particularly since the former students are from different parts of the world even if all, by attending the course, have some relation to Sweden. The aim was to discuss the issue with participants who had experience of the course I teach on (and have some knowledge of issues relating to the research questions) so a smaller amount of rich data was preferred over a large amount of less rich data. Still, I am closer to my minimum desired number of interviews (10) than my aim (20).

In addition, I could have asked more follow-up questions during some interviews to gain more understanding and depth. However, there was then a risk of directing the interviews too much, which is something I wanted to avoid: I aimed for participants' reflections and experiences to be the focus. I adopted a supportive approach to the interviews but deliberately avoided a more active approach which risked putting words in the participant's mouths. I summarised the points that were made or asked if I had understood correctly if I was unsure and tried to encourage the participants without taking too much space. Overall, I aimed to balance listening to the participant and generating useful data by asking questions that followed the conversation. The interviews did vary in length. This could be because they were conducted in English, and some participants could have been more confident in spoken English than others. It could also be because I became more relaxed in the later ones as I gained more experience and confidence. However, every interview was an experience in its own right, and all the interviews generated useful and meaningful data. The interview questions worked well since the participants could respond and seemingly understood them why these were not altered through the process.

The only criterion for participation was to have been registered on the course (not to have participated to a certain stage or reached a certain grade). The participants were registered on the course over a range of different years during which time the course content has varied. Wall was added recently, and so most of the students had not encountered the ideas of Wall and childism on the course. The participants may also have had different aims for registering for the course, such as taking it as part of another programme for teaching, human rights, law or as a stand-alone course. Some of the participants are still students, but it could have been of interest to ask more about the relation to the current profession or thoughts on forthcoming career prospects. This was not a focus of my dissertation study, but on reflection is something that could have been included.

The conclusions which can be drawn from this study are not generalisable nor do they aim to be, even if I return to insights and contributions below. The perceptions of the participants should not be taken as truths that may represent reality or the views of a certain group. The perceptions were also analysed from my selected framework and connected to published research. My own positionality has likely affected the analytic framework and so the analysis is, to some extent, influenced by my perspectives. As stated early in the dissertation, I believe in a lowered voting age from the common age of 18 and increased democratic participation and influence for children which is a stance that may impact the interpretation and presentation. I also think, which has developed during the research process, that adults ought to listen to children and children should have the possibility to be more involved. The reader is made aware of this and can adopt a critical position. The dissertation also makes Wall's standpoints clear to the reader so, again, it is possible for the reader to disagree.

Since Wall's concept of childism is not very well used this limited the possibilities for me to engage more fully with scholarship relating to his work, or present potential critique that such scholarship might have stressed. As an example, Eurocentrism can be dominant in the theory but this is not clearly visible as a critique from other scholars explicitly relating to Wall. Further, the dissertation is written in relation to Wall's work, so some aspects, research and philosophies may not be represented or discussed in the dissertation even though other scholars think they are of interest. In terms of the wider literature, not all arguments and aspects regarding, for example, voting rights for children are reflected in the literature review. Rather, major ideas are presented. This approach ensured I kept a focus on the research purpose and research questions, avoiding concentration on too many different elements.

Based on these limitations, it can be critiqued that, for example, more voices and information on the topic should have been included. However, in terms of the quality of the study, I do not see more and longer as required given the research focus and depth and the richness of the data. To support quality, the thematic analysis is transparent and can be followed through every step which contributes to the validity of the study. I have also aimed to do the participants justice in the analysis which is why I have used many direct quotes to highlight their voices.

7.3 Significance of the study and professional implications

This study is of relevance since it shines a light on the issue of children's possibilities for democratic participation and influence which is a question that, from my perspective, needs more attention and political action. Given concerns about the decline of democracy, the problem needs action instead of criticising young people's activism when they try to make a difference. What action might be taken is subject to various assumptions but the current situation in many democracies is not fruitful for children or democracy itself.

As some of the participants indicate, universal voting for all (for example by proxy claim vote) may not be likely and could have a hard time gaining general acclaim among the public but it can move the conversation further. The study can contribute towards an awareness of issues relating to children and democracy among a range of people, particularly teachers and parents and others who might have an extra interest in the subject. My belief is that the content of this dissertation can mean something to all educators since it may stir conversation and self-reflection on attitudes toward children and students.

It can also raise awareness of children's abilities and competence to make decisions and to understand issues that are of importance. Research in this area can take the agenda further, challenging adultism and taken for granted views of democracy. In addition, Wall's (2010) concept of childism is not a well-used theory, so this study contributes to explorations using it as a critical lens. The concept calls for a rethinking of children and their participation rights through the challenge of taken for granted adultist normative views on democracy. I find this angle refreshing in a society which, in my view, seldom questions the exclusion and treatment of children. Building on Josefsson and Sandin's (2022) summary of Swedish research in the field (with a focus on welfare, implementation of the CRC, protest movements, and social media) this research also takes a multifaced view on the issue of children and democracy to explore this from a critical childist approach.

Higher education within the field of human and children's rights, in my view, needs to carefully consider the view of children and how children are treated by adults. It is crucial to reflect on whether children are met with respect, and if they are provided with possibilities to have genuine influence in society, be it in the private or public sphere. As a lecturer in higher education who teaches on the subject of children's rights, it has been a journey to examine and self-reflect upon my own views, ways of teaching, and treatment of the course content. For example, I am more aware of where I stand on certain issues and am more comfortable with discussions around the subject since I have encountered, read and engaged with literature and people representing various opinions on the subject. The process has made me more aware of various perceptions and arguments when engaging with students and has given an in-depth knowledge when responding to their questions and reflections.

I think that listening to the reflections from former students is a crucial aspect of improving the course but also of understanding more about how they perceive, and feel about, the field of children's democratic participation. This dissertation takes a genuine interest in their voices. The course encourages the students explore and analyse childhood and children's agency from philosophical and political perspectives on a local and global level, including, as mentioned, to critically analyse the CRC in relation to children's participation and citizenship. Speaking to the former students, I can see that many reflect on aspects relating to this. What I hope the course offers, whether it is for students' future professions (for example, teaching, social work, human rights), or for their own development, is a critical perspective on the way children are viewed, thought about, and talked about. If children are encountered or talked about in professional practices or everyday life, I hope current and former students can recognise how normative adultist views of children may position them as incompetent, less respected and not valued in relation to their opinions. This critical approach to thinking can also be applied to the elderly and people with disabilities, who may also be exposed to infantilisation in society.

My own professional implications are that I have become more prepared to teach the course content and have adjusted my approach to teaching. Although I have kept the major structure of the course, I have introduced a wider range of assessments, such as an oral presentation, along with new essay questions. The oral presentation further facilitates partaking in other students' reflections and understandings. It also offers me the possibility to listen to their reflections and what they emphasise in their storytelling.

Building on the findings, it could be of interest that the course could do more on how different cultures/nations are perceived by participants in relation to the treatment of children and not just the Global North and South perspective with post/decolonial aspects which are currently emphasised. Conservatism, paternalism and historical aspects could also be more reflected on. Further, Cherney et al.'s (2008) study indicated that parents were less likely to support independence rights for children than those who were not parents. This did not come across in the answers from the data in this study but could also be an aspect that could stir discussion.

However, I would argue that my expanded knowledge within the field is the largest contribution to my professional development because it has given me a more profound and secure knowledge of the subject. The whole process of undertaking a doctoral degree, and carrying out research for a dissertation, adds to a sense of legitimacy in my teaching and supervising.

More broadly, this study has made me more critically reflective on the topic. Children's democratic participation was not a subject I thought I would be writing about in my dissertation, but I now find it more interesting than ever. With the focus I now have, children's exclusion becomes more visible: where are the voices and perspectives of children in the public sphere? Some of the people I talk to take their adult point of view for granted and many have not reflected on the issue of children being kept from the public sphere. Rather, many adults emphasise a focus on children's rights and protection which may indicate that we care more about these aspects than we do about children's freedom of expression or possibilities to make an impact on democratic decision-making (especially in the public sphere). To endorse active listening to the voices of children does not indicate that adults ought to surrender responsibility and pass that over to children, nor does it mean expressing a notion of children as saviours. For me, it means to view children as beings with rights, including democratic ones, that need to be sought after.

Previously, I have conducted research focusing on children in a broad sense and am part of the *Global Childhoods* research network. I have published an article with a colleague and served on the editorial board of a special issue focusing on gender, age, and sexuality. With this dissertation, I have become more independent and developed my research skills, knowledge and methods.

To advance the field of teaching about human and children's rights within higher education is of professional relevance to me and I wish to explore the subject more in some capacity potentially including perceptions presented online and the voices of children. Further study would not be limited to the subject of children's rights. I think students' perceptions are of value in many other areas and help educators to potentially understand their perspectives more.

7.4 Recommendations for further research

The findings of my study include the perception that adults serve as an obstacle to children's democratic participation. For future research, it would be of interest to ask children what they perceive as obstacles (if any) to their participation. To some extent, this has already been done but mostly the focus lies on the school environment and similar private sphere engagements. I would like a more profound focus on the public sphere.

As Wall (2021) and Sundhall (2017) remark, adultist norms can appear invisible and internalised which can create a self-fulfilling prophecy where children feel that they are the ones lacking abilities. In Sweden, there has also been debate and criticism of activism arising from new protests by Greta Thunberg and Fridays for Future (SVT, 2024). Greta Thunberg emphasised that it is a fundamental part of democracy to make your voice heard. Politicians suggested that she should engage in a political party instead. She argued that there is no suitable political party and that it is more suitable to gather opinions on climate change instead. This tension, to me, deserves more attention. I would also wish for debate that focuses on involving young people democratically in a broad sense rather than focusing on the existence of activism. Research might help to explore both these issues: young people's perceptions of forms of involvement and activism, and ways in which they think they could be more involved democratically.

I also think that researching more general perceptions would be of relevance. The former children's rights students who took part in my study already have an interest in the issue and may possess more insights than the average person. Since I believe this is an issue that should receive more attention, I would like to study the field further, for example using netnography as a method to explore online expressions of people's perceptions on the subject. The assumptions about voting age are also of interest here. For example, voting age differs even within the European Union and Great Britain. Does this affect peoples' perceptions? Are people within countries with a lower voting age more positive about

young people's democratic involvement than those with a higher? It could also be of interest to focus on professionals within the field of children's rights or who work with children, to understand their perspectives on children's participation in democracy. Further research might also include children's participation and their reflections about the issue. Many aspects are of relevance for exploring the field further but, overall, the importance of this type of research is that it shines a light on children's possibilities for democratic participation in the public sphere.

7.5 Conclusion

This chapter has responded to the research questions outlining answers that entailed a range of perceptions. It has also explained the importance of the study for my professional work and how the research has deepened and developed my thinking on the subject. The limitations are discussed, including the small number of participants and focus on one course. However, this approach was defendable given the specific focus for my professional research, the richness of the interviews data, and the transparent approach to data analysis. I also made my own standpoint clear to the reader and explained how use of Wall's theory makes a contribution to research in this area.

The study is important since it highlights perceptions around children's democratic participation, a topic of relevance in society today with the current decline in democratic development (Foa et al., 2020). The dissertation helps us understand this further by exploring the field. I think that it is significant to listen to children's voices since they are part of humanity, are affected by what happens in the world and have been overlooked as a group. But just listening is not enough without working with problematising the lack of representation. Given that research indicates challenges for democracy and with ongoing critique of children's involvement in activism it is of relevance to challenge adultification and the hidden ways in which children's voices are silenced.

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Appendix 1: Interview guide

- What are your thoughts on involving children in children in democratic processes?

- Do you think that children should be more involved in democratic decisions? Why/why not?

- What do you think are the potential benefits and challenges of incorporating children's perspectives into democratic decisions?

- Do you think children should have more influence in society? Why/why not?

- What do you think are some factors that can influence a child's willingness to engage in democratic activities or express their opinions?

- Do you think that adults can fully represent children in a democracy? Why/why not?

- Do you have examples of other ways children could be involved in democracy rather than by voting? Do you think these are good examples? Why/why not?

- Do you think that the voting age should be lower than 18? Why/why not? What do you think is a suitable voting age? Why?

- Do you think competence and/or knowledge are relevant factors to actively participate in a democracy? Why/why not?

- Are there any specific legal or ethical considerations you think need to be addressed when involving children in democratic activities?

- Anything you want to add on the subject?

Appendix 2: Sample extracts from coding table

Voting	'I would say when it comes to voting, I would say that I think 15 would be better, but if you would allow someone who's 15 to vote, then society would maybe start to think that, okay, you become an adult after you are 15. Which then would also have implications. Some other questions involving is it a child or is it an adult? For instance adult marriage or child marriage. And then so in that way I would say it's good that it's 18 because you kind of need to set, an age for when your child or when you're not a child. But if it was just concerning, voting, I would say it could be good to go a little bit down in the age, like 15, 16 or even 17. But I can also see the issue of changing that. So, I think I would be a little bit careful.' Kimmie (förekommer även nedan) 'It could easily be that if it's allowed to vote then okay. Then you're seen as an adult at an early age. But if you look at other laws, should they be changed as well and so on?' Kimmie
Age	'I wanted to say an age, but I'm not certain. but I would definitely say a person who is 15 and who's dedicated to a topic has just as much to say about the topic as someone who is, 18.' Kimmie 'Age is very important regarding the way of thinking.' Ahmed (pro 18 years voting age) 'All the mid 40s can't relate to a five year old. They don't know what a five year old's life is because they don't know. How it's like being a five year old, because I haven't been in for more than 40 years and society has changed so much.' Mika 'age always differs a lot, but quite early on after starting school, I think a lot of children have a good understanding of what kind of society they want. There's something beyond my family and my family's friends and understanding that families are different. That because they have such a good understanding of our society and what is important for our society. I think they should have more influence over it.' Ioanna
Competence/knowledge	'Up until what age are you, like, capable of having, an understanding of what you're actually deciding upon? (..) I think they should have an involvement but I would say that they need to be in a stage where they're actually understand what they're involved in.' Kimmie I don't think to be able to participate in democracy or make good decisions no matter what a good decision is to you in politics. I don't think you need to know things. (…) I think the relevant factor to participate in democracy is wanting to participate in democracy. And often when you want to do something, you will learn bits and pieces about it.' Mika 'And I feel like, of course, children in their teenage years are often or can often be, very knowledgeable and smart. They still are developing their own opinion and, rational thinking and everything. So I feel like it's good that they have that time to just be a child and develop and then have the capacity to vote to their best interests later on when they are above 18.' Emelie (även nedan)
Views on children	'Kids are emotional, but they can be rational also.' Anton 'Children are more natural than adults.' Anton 'I think they should be able to be seen more as thinkers rather than just passive people - just a passive group that has nothing to say about a specific topic.' Greta
Different voices	'I feel like children and young adults often, according to me, are more, powerful in their opinions. Like it's when you form and you realize a lot of

	things about society that you think is wrong, that you want to change. And so I feel like their perspective is so important.' Emelie 'The fact that I do think children have more of this general view of society, or I don't know if I want to call it idealistic, but they have this view of society with more broader goals. And. I think that can be very healthy for society, or like for democratic processes to see kind of a bigger picture.' Ioanna 'but if we focus on children, I think it's important to have their opinions in this. Just have a variety of views to, to distinguish between a younger and an older generation…' Victoria
Protection	'I think the first thing that we have to think about is to keep them (children) safe, and then we can think about their role in democratic processes.' Ahmed (willingness for children to express opinions) 'Definitely trends. What is cool, What is in. And also their safety, I think, feeling safe to express their thoughts like both with their families and, uh, their peers and everything.' Emelie 'It's not really a big issue, but like taking pictures of public events and using pictures of kids in a marketing way or to look like. To make one's organization or party look good or look a certain way. Which I think should definitely be, like, regulated.' Ioanna
Not being listened to/respected	'if you let them (children) in, their opinion wouldn't really be respected, so it wouldn't be considered anyways, because some people, think that their opinion is not as valid as someone who has more knowledge and so on. So that could definitely be a challenge. But I guess that has more to do with people not seeing the value of involving a children's perspective.' Kimmie (förekommer ovan) 'if you know that you're not allowed to be involved in the process, some people fight for being at it anyways, but most people, they just kind of accept that this is the way society is. When I turn 18, I get to have a say before that, no one cares about my opinion. So I would say that it's the surrounding, that will have to change if children should feel more like, wow, okay, I can actually take this initiative. And I think it's really cool the children who do it anyways.' Kimmie I don't believe, to be honest, that the children have a voice on the political level. (…) If we talk about Sweden, I think, yes, children voices that are heard for the government, and for the organizations.' Ahmed
Adults	'What we (adults) think is not like what children thinks. So, I don't think that we as adults can represent children and especially not political leaders.' Ahmed 'I think it is that People don't respect children. I don't think the problem is the children. I think the problem is adults. They don't respect them.' Mika Matters that concern them: 'So I think it's really good to involve them in any kind of democratic process. (..), I think an involvement is really important, especially, when the question concerns them' Kimmie 'In like major Democratic Congress passes like the Congress like or the state should be asking children because the children are the people are going to be affected. And I think don't think it's good to have only the parents be able to speak for the children. I think the children should be able to speak for

	themselves. But I don't know if I think the way to do that is by giving kids a vote, or if it's by listening to kids.' Mika
Engagement activities (private sphere/public sphere)	'I think the idea of youth councils are really good. I also think alot of kind of NGOs or public actors do a great work. But that work needs to then be connected to politicians on local or higher level. Demonstrations.' Ioanna (on examples of democratic participation) 'I think it's (children's democratic participation) important and should be more developed. I don't think there is much attention to this topic, unfortunately, especially in the public sphere.' Greta
Being/becoming	'I'm asking these questions for the kids to be able to make choices that will matter in life because it will help them in the future, you know?' Mika 'like adults have been children and therefore know what it's like to be children. I don't think that's correct, because being a child and being and like childhood changes so much from generation to generation. I can barely relate to my sister who is Nine about how it was like being a child, because we didn't grow up under the same circumstances and the same like economic era or it was influenced by the same books in school or the same people around us.' Mika
Other	'I may sound radical in my answers in your interview, but I'm not I'm not really radical.' Anton 'I do think it's important to take what they say into consideration and listen to what they say. Because their points are valid, they need to be encouraged to share their opinions, to share their emotions, and to just feel like they are part of something.' Victoria

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University
of Glasgow

College of Social
Sciences

Plain Language Statement

Perceptions of children's abilities and possibilities for democratic participation

Researcher: Jessica Eng

Supervisor: Fiona Patrick

Course: Dissertation project EdD

You are being invited to take part in a research project.

Before you decide if you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the information on this page carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. I hope that this sheet will answer any questions you have about the study.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this study is to gain more understanding about what former students who studied on an international course on children's rights express about children's possibilities and abilities for democratic participation.

I will use semi structured in-depth interviews with recent children's rights students who have awareness about the topic. It will be an interpretive study, and the material will be analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis. The theoretical framework I intend to use is Wall's (2010) concept of childism.

Why have I been chosen?

You are being asked to take part because you were registered on a course about children's rights during your degree studies and so are best suited to articulate your perceptions on the subject of children's abilities and possibilities for democratic participation.

Do I have to take part?

You do not have to take part in this study. If, after you have started to take part, you change your mind, just let me know before July 31st 2024. In case of withdrawal, data will be deleted (I will be finished gathering data by July 31st 2024. If you contact me after that date it will not be possible to remove your data from the analysis.)

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you take part, I will ask you some questions about what you think about children's abilities and possibilities for democratic participation. You do not have to answer any question that you do not want to. The interview will take about 30 minutes. We will schedule a time that is convenient to you. The reason for using zoom is that it is more flexible than a face-to-face interview and not dependent on being in a specific region. You are encouraged to find a quiet place for the zoom conversation and you can use a blurred or virtual background and wear headphones. Zoom links will be password protected. With your permission I will audio and video record the answers through zoom so that afterwards I can listen carefully to what was said and transcribe the conversation ready for analysis.

Will the information that I give you in this study be kept confidential?

I will keep all the data, both the personal and research data, I collect in a storage that is managed by the University of Glasgow. I will use Microsoft Sharepoint storage, with OneDrive and Enlighten after my access has expired. The personal data will be deleted after termination of the project and the research data kept for 10 years. When I write about what I have found, your name will not be mentioned. You may choose a pseudonym which I will use when writing up the final assignment.

However, if during our conversation I hear anything which makes me worried that you might be in danger of harm, I might have to inform relevant agencies of this. Complete confidentiality might also be impossible to guarantee because of the small sample size and the use of one university in the study. All identifiers will be removed.

What will happen to the results of this study

I will analyse the data I collect from participants, and present this in a dissertation. I may also present conference papers and write journal articles using the data. You can request the results of research and this will provided to you at the end of the study.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been reviewed and agreed by the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, University of Glasgow.

Who can I contact for further Information?

If you have any questions about this study, you can ask me, Jessica Eng (xxxxxxxx@glasgow.ac.uk) or my supervisor, Fiona Patrick (Fiona.Patrick@glasgow.ac.uk)

For concerns/complaints, the College Ethics Lead, email: socsci-ethics-lead@glasgow.ac.uk

Thank you for reading this.

Appendix 4 Map of themes and codes **(following Braun and Clarke, 2023).**

The main code-theme relations described but some overalp since the themes also are connected to each other

Age.

Education.

Children's competence and knowledge in relation to democratic participation and influence

Competence/knowledge.

Voting.

Perceptions on age in relation to democratic participation and influence (including voting)

Voting.

Engagement activities (private/public sphere)

Different voices.

Children as the adults of tomorrow

Views on obstacles to children's democratic participation and influence

Views on children.

Being/becoming.

Matters that concern them(children).

Democratic participation, influence, and engagement in matters that concern children in the private/public sphere (excluding voting)

Protection.

Adults.

Not being listened to/respected.