Nordic Welfare Centre

Student councils and democratic participation in the Nordic region

Nordic co-operation on children's and young people's opportunities for participation and development after the Covid-19 pandemic

Contents

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Foreword

This report is an important contribution to the Nordic co-operation project Nordic co-operation on children's and young people's opportunities for participation and development after the COVID-19 pandemic, led by the Nordic Welfare Centre on behalf of the Nordic Council of Ministers. The project supports the Council's broader ambition to make the Nordic region the world's most sustainable and integrated region, with a strong emphasis on equal opportunities, democratic participation, and the rights of children and young people.

The project aims to strengthen the right of children and young people to be heard and to participate in decisions that affect their lives — both in everyday situations and during times of crisis — in line with Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This report specifically examines the current state of student councils and democratic participation in primary and lower secondary schools across the Nordic region. It offers valuable insights into how young people's voices are incorporated into school life and how these structures can be improved to ensure more inclusive and equitable participation.

Based on extensive data collection and collaboration among researchers from across the Nordic countries, the report provides a solid knowledge base for developing sustainable, inclusive participation structures in education. It also draws on lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many youth participation mechanisms — including student councils — were overlooked or underutilised. The findings underscore the importance of integrating children and young people into decision-making processes, especially during societal disruptions.

Student councils are among the most important collective bodies for co-determination and influence in schools. The report explores how these councils can be strengthened as arenas for meaningful participation and how they can contribute to a positive and inclusive school environment for all students. The authors challenge the outdated notion that student councils merely serve as training grounds for representative democracy. Instead, they emphasise offering a diverse group of students, participation in both minor and major matters — giving them real opportunities to shape schoolwork and develop a sense of responsibility, belonging, and citizenship — beginning in the school community and extending into wider society.

Importantly, the report highlights the need for adults to recognise and support the contributions of all children and young people, particularly those whose voices are often overlooked. Rather than assigning symbolic roles — such as 'leader of the school dance' — which may unintentionally undermine the purpose of student democracy, schools should empower students to take real ownership of their participation. This is essential for building democratic skills, promoting equality, and

fostering inclusion, especially among young people in vulnerable situations.

The report reflects the Nordic Council of Ministers' commitment to integrating a children's rights and youth perspective into all areas of policy, including education. This aligns with the goals of the Council's Action Plan for 2021–2024 and contributes to the broader vision of achieving the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. By highlighting promising practices and identifying knowledge and implementation gaps, the report provides a roadmap for strengthening student participation across the Nordic region.

We extend our sincere thanks to the authors of the report , Dr Ragný Þóra Guðjohnsen and Dr Eva Harðardóttir of the University of Iceland, for their dedication and meticulous work. We also thank all the researchers, experts, and young people who contributed their experiences and perspectives to this report. Their contributions have been invaluable in shaping the findings and recommendations presented here.

We hope the report will inspire decision-makers, school leaders, teachers, and other stakeholders to empower children and young people to participate — and help make the Nordic region the best place in the world to grow up.

Eva Franzén
Merethe Løberg

Greetings from the authors

First, we want to thank the Nordic Welfare Centre for the valuable opportunity to work on this report. It has been highly instructive to collaborate with experienced experts such as Merethe Løberg and Clara Sommarin. We also extend our gratitude to Eva Franzén, Director of the Nordic Welfare Centre, who, along with Merethe and Clara, served on the editorial board of the project.

This report is a product of fruitful collaboration of researchers who joined forces to collect data on student councils and democratic participation of young people in the Nordic countries. A list of the researchers' names appears at the beginning of the report, and we extend our deepest gratitude to all researchers for the excellent co-operation during the data collection process. We look forward to continuing our Nordic co-operation, with the aim of publishing our findings in academic journals.

The main aim of the project has been to map the status of young people's democratic participation, with a focus on student councils and how effectively these councils are used to ensure real opportunities for young people to express their voices and influence on issues that affect their lives, in accordance with Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Recent global challenges – such as infectious diseases, natural disasters, and migration – highlight the urgent need to seek new solutions that are beneficial and meaningful for young people. We must build on the experiences gained during the Covid-19 pandemic while also learning from areas that could have been handled better. In future crises, it is crucial to ensure that well-defined platforms, opportunities, and resources are in place to prevent young people from being sidelined when important decisions are made. The wealth of young people's ideas and creative solutions must not be overlooked.

Summary

This report, conducted by researchers from the University of Iceland and funded by the Nordic Welfare Centre, examines the state of student councils and democratic participation in primary and lower-secondary schools across seven Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Faroe Islands, Greenland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. Rooted in the Nordic tradition of democratic education and the UN convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989), student councils are seen as key mechanisms for promoting students' voices and democratic citizenship within the context of schools. However, recent global trends towards democratic backsliding, coupled with effects from market-driven education reforms and the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, underscore the importance of critically examining how student participation is enacted in everyday school settings.

Using a mixed-method approach, the study draws on multiple data sources to offer a holistic analysis on the status of student councils. A policy mapping exercise was conducted, analysing 14 national policy documents concerning student councils and democratic participation. Empirical data was collected through an online survey administered to students in grade 5 and in grade 9 or 10, depending on which grade was the highest of lower-secondary school in each country. The focus of the survey was on students' awareness, participation, and experiences related to student councils in their schools. Further insights were gathered through workshops and informal discussions at the Nordic Baltic Youth Summit and the Nordic Youth Disability Summit alongside group interviews with students and educators across 19 schools in the Nordic region. The analysis was framed by Laura Lundy's model of child participation, emphasising the dimensions of space, voice, audience, and influence, in relation to broader theoretical background and previous studies on student councils, citizenship education, and young people's democratic participation in the Nordic countries.

The findings shed light on a complex and often uneven landscape of student participation across the Nordic region. While most countries mandate the establishment of student councils by law, the actual implementation often falls short of policy ideals. Although many students report high awareness of the existence of a student council in their school, many fewer – between a quarter and a third of the surveyed students – have participated in councils themselves. Considering the Nordic education tradition, democratic elections are the dominant method of selecting council members. Typically, students either volunteer or are nominated for class-based voting, sometimes with attention to gender balance. Other processes include open discussion about who to nominate, application processes, and attending student councils as part of an elective course. However, concerns were raised by students across all the Nordic countries about fairness, transparency, and inclusivity of these processes. Students described how popularity contests, perceived power status, lack of clear processes, and teacher influences can undermine trust in council legitimacy, particularly for marginalised groups such as students with disabilities or minority backgrounds.

The thematic analysis of open survey questions and interview data revealed that student councils tend to focus heavily on organising social events and minor school improvements rather than addressing broader current education, social, or systemic issues. Overall, students valued student councils as platforms where they could raise issues with teachers and school leaders. Yet, many also expressed frustration over limited follow-through and impact of their suggestions. Even when students felt that they were being encouraged to raise their voices and share their opinions on matters concerning them, they still experienced little visible feedback or change, indicating a perception of tokenism or superficial democracy. The young people consulted through the Youth Summits highlighted that for engagement to be meaningful, councils must be accessible to all students, address diverse issues that are relevant not only to one group of students, and provide clear pathways for influence on school governance.

Even though the report clearly highlights challenges in offering children and youth meaningful opportunities for participation within the context of student councils, findings from the focus group interviews with students and teachers give insight into promising practices that have been successful in mobilising a larger and more diverse group of students through participation in student councils. They demonstrated how rethinking participation through such measures as inclusive selection models, stronger teacher facilitation, and integration with broader municipal structures can foster more meaningful and diverse student engagement. These approaches can serve as an inspiration for school administrators, teachers, and students on how to better utilise student councils as an advocacy platform able to reduce social hierarchies and broaden the purpose and diversity of topics and activities of student councils beyond event planning for an exclusive group of students.

In conclusion, the report highlights significant gaps between normative ideals of democratic education and youth participation as embedded in Nordic policy and lived experiences of students in schools. It calls for deliberative strategies to ensure open and inclusive access to student councils, strengthen supportive administrative frameworks, foster democratic communication and feedback between and within student councils, broaden the scope of councils' activities to address substantive and diverse issues of education which are meaningful to students' well-being and global citizenship. Without such structural and cultural shifts, there is a risk that student councils remain symbolic and superficial rather than transformative spaces for young people's democratic engagement. Moreover, the lessons learned during the Covid-19 pandemic further stress the urgency of considering how student councils can truly become a platform for resilient and meaningful participation where children's rights are safeguarded, not only during ordinary times, but also at a time of future crises.

Sammanfattning

Denna rapport, genomförd av forskare från Islands universitet och finansierad av Nordens välfärdscenter, undersöker statusen för elevråd och demokratisk delaktighet i grundskolor och lägre sekundärskolor i sju nordiska länder: Danmark, Finland, Färöarna, Grönland, Island, Norge och Sverige. Förankrat i den nordiska traditionen av demokratisk utbildning och FN:s konvention om barnets rättigheter (CRC, 1989), ses elevråd som nyckelmekanismer för att främja elevers röster och demokratiskt medborgarskap inom skolans ramverk. De senaste globala trenderna med demokratisk tillbakagång, i kombination med effekterna av marknadsdrivna utbildningsreformer och störningarna orsakade av Covid 19-pandemin, understryker vikten av att kritiskt granska hur elevdeltagande genomförs i skolans vardag.

Med en blandad metodansats baseras studien på flera datakällor för att erbjuda en helhetsanalys av elevrådens status. En policykartläggning genomfördes där 14 nationella policydokument som berör elevråd och demokratisk delaktighet analyserades. Empiriska data samlades in genom en onlineundersökning bland elever i årskurs 5, 9 och 10, med fokus på deras medvetenhet, deltagande och erfarenheter kopplade till elevråd på deras skolor. Ytterligare insikter samlades in genom workshops och informella diskussioner vid Nordic Baltic Youth Summit och Nordic Youth Disability Summit samt gruppintervjuer med elever och lärare vid 19 skolor i Norden. Analysen ramades in av Laura Lundys modell för barns delaktighet, med fokus på dimensionerna utrymme, röst, mottagare och inflytande, i relation till bredare teoretiska ramverk och tidigare studier om elevråd, medborgarskapsutbildning och ungas demokratiska deltagande i Norden.

Resultaten belyser en komplex och ofta ojämn situation när det gäller elevdeltagande i Norden. Även om de flesta länder lagstadgar om att elevråd ska finnas, brister ofta den praktiska implementeringen jämfört med policyns

intentioner. Även om många elever rapporterar hög medvetenhet om att det finns ett elevråd på deras skola, är det betydligt färre – endast omkring en fjärdedel till en tredjedel av de tillfrågade eleverna – som själva deltagit i rådet. I linje med den nordiska utbildningstraditionen är demokratiska val den dominerande metoden för att välja elevrådsmedlemmar. Vanligtvis anmäler sig elever frivilligt eller nomineras för klassvisa omröstningar, ibland med hänsyn till könsbalans. Andra processer inkluderade öppna diskussioner om nomineringar, ansökningsförfaranden och deltagande i elevråd som en del av ett valbart ämne. Dock lyfte elever från alla nordiska länder farhågor kring rättvisa, transparens och inkludering i dessa processer. Elever beskrev hur popularitetstävlingar, upplevd status, avsaknad av tydliga processer och lärarpåverkan kan undergräva förtroendet för rådets legitimitet, särskilt för marginaliserade grupper såsom elever med funktionsnedsättning eller minoritetsbakgrund.

Den tematiska analysen av öppna enkätfrågor och intervjudata visade att elevråd tenderar att fokusera starkt på att organisera sociala aktiviteter och mindre skolförbättringar snarare än att ta itu med bredare aktuella utbildnings-, sociala eller systemiska frågor. Överlag värderade elever elevråden som plattformar där de kunde lyfta frågor till lärare och skolledare. Samtidigt uttryckte många frustration över bristande uppföljning och svagt genomslag för deras förslag. Även när elever upplevde att de uppmuntrades att uttrycka sina åsikter, rapporterade de ofta lite synlig återkoppling eller förändring, vilket indikerar en upplevelse av tokenism eller ytlig demokrati. De ungdomar som konsulterades genom ungdomstoppmötena betonade att för att engagemang ska vara meningsfullt måste råden vara tillgängliga för alla elever, behandla varierade frågor relevanta för fler grupper och erbjuda tydliga vägar för inflytande i skolans styrning.

Trots att rapporten tydligt belyser utmaningar i att erbjuda barn och unga meningsfulla möjligheter till delaktighet inom ramen för elevråd, visar resultaten från fokusgruppsintervjuer med elever och lärare på lovande exempel. Dessa exempel visar hur man genom att ompröva delaktighetsmodeller, exempelvis genom inkluderande urvalsprocesser, starkare lärarstöd och integrering i bredare kommunala strukturer, kan mobilisera en större och mer diversifierad grupp av elever. Dessa arbetssätt kan inspirera skolledare, lärare och elever till att bättre använda elevråd som plattform för påverkansarbete, minska sociala hierarkier och bredda syftet och mångfalden av ämnen och aktiviteter bortom enbart eventplanering för en exklusiv grupp.

Sammanfattningsvis visar rapporten på betydande gap mellan normativa ideal om demokratisk utbildning och ungas delaktighet i nordisk policy och elevernas faktiska erfarenheter i skolorna. Den understryker behovet av genomtänkta strategier för att säkerställa öppen och inkluderande tillgång till elevråd, stärka stödfunktioner, främja demokratisk kommunikation och återkoppling inom och mellan elevråd, samt bredda rådens verksamhet till att hantera väsentliga och varierade utbildningsfrågor som är meningsfulla för elevernas välbefinnande och globala

medborgarskap. Utan sådana strukturella och kulturella förändringar riskerar elevråd att förbli symboliska snarare än att bli transformativa arenor för ungas demokratiska engagemang. Dessutom understryker erfarenheterna från COVID-19-pandemin vikten av att säkerställa att elevråd kan bli verkliga plattformar för motståndskraftigt och meningsfullt deltagande, där barns rättigheter skyddas – inte bara i vardagen utan också vid framtida kriser.

Introduction

To achieve the aims outlined in Vision 2030 by the Nordic Council of Ministers (2020) – that the Nordic region becomes the best place in the world for children and young people – schools must play a central role. This is particularly true in creating and sustaining democratic spaces where children and youth can learn about, exercise, and develop their rights to be heard and to participate meaningfully in matters that affect them. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989) has influenced many nations, and particularly the Nordic countries, which are notable for their efforts to institutionalise and implement student participation in everyday school life. This includes the right of students to express their views within the space of schools and take part in decisions that affect them (Gunnulfsen et al., 2023).

Across the Nordic region, student councils have long been regarded as a major platform for realising these rights and responsibilities. In this report we examine the current state of student councils in seven Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Faroe Islands, Greenland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. These countries have education systems rooted in the Nordic model of education (Blossing et al., 2014), characterised – especially from a policy perspective – by a strong emphasis on democracy, sustainability, and student welfare (Gunnulfsen et al., 2023).

We use the term student councils, reflecting what are also called in the literature as pupils' councils. Both terms refer to a student-led group where students assemble to democratically associate around issues concerning the student body, their education, and work within the school (Kempner & Janmaat, 2023). The democratic notion pertains not only to the right for students to speak and engage in matters concerning them but also to the process of accessing and experiencing meaningful participation within the councils.

However, in an era marked by global democratic backsliding (Haggard & Kaufman,

2021; Jafarova, 2021), it has become increasingly challenging (Kahn-Nisser, 2025) to maintain or expand democratic practices, including children's rights to participate in their own education. At the same time, Nordic education systems face mounting pressure from market-oriented and managerial policies that prioritise individual achievement and standardised outcomes. As a result, school leaders and educators often have limited time and resources to fulfil their democratic, rights-based, and participatory educational roles and responsibilities (Gunnulfsen et al., 2023).

Recent studies indicate that while ideals such as sustainability and global citizenship are highly visible in Nordic education discourse, they are more often acknowledged in principle rather than actively pursued in practice in Nordic schools (Jónsson et al., 2021). Moreover, although the legal frameworks of Nordic schools emphasise democratic participation and equal opportunities, research also shows that schools may inadvertently reproduce social inequalities, particularly those based on class and culture, through uneven access to participatory structures such as student councils (Kempner & Janmaat, 2023). This raises important questions about the extent to which student councils, considered a hallmark of Nordic education, truly function as inclusive and democratic spaces where all students can have their voices heard so that they may influence matters concerning them.

This report is part of a four-year project led by the Nordic Welfare Centre, focused on children's right to be heard in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic (Løberg, 2023). As such, it contributes a critical piece to the broader puzzle of understanding the challenges and opportunities involved in ensuring that children and young people across the Nordic region have equal access to meaningful participation in a democratic and sustainable society. The report maps students' democratic participation opportunities in the Nordic countries by focusing on student councils.

A policy mapping exercise sheds light on the legal and formal framework for student councils in the seven participating countries whilst a student survey administered to students in grades 5, 9, or 10 of primary and lower-secondary schools across the Nordic region offers an insight into students' awareness and experiences of student councils. Drawing on informant and focus group interviews, selected examples will be given from practices that promote engagement of all pupils and contribute positively to an equal and inclusive learning environment. The voices of children and young people in vulnerable situations will further offer vital understanding of where improvements are needed to ensure the participation of marginalised groups.

The report will also summarise findings and lessons learned from examining the situation of youth during the pandemic and the current research findings concerning the topic (Gretschel et al., 2023; Kjellander & Sjöblom, 2023; Løberg, 2023). These findings show evidence that there was too little interaction and information exchange between youth and decision-makers at that time. Children and young people were scarcely heard or involved in matters that concerned them and rarely involved in decision-making. The knowledge gathered in this report

should be able to better prepare youth involvement in decisions in future crises in the Nordic region.

Conceptual background and literature review

The conceptual background for this report investigates the idea of democratic education, citizenship, and participation within the context of Nordic education and takes stock of previous research related to student councils and student participation in Nordic schools.

Democratic education, citizenship and participation

The concepts of democracy, active citizenship, and children's rights are generally portrayed as fundamental to the Nordic model of education (Blossing et al., 2014; Nordic Council of Ministers, 2024). The ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989) in Nordic countries has further enhanced a climate for participation and empowerment of children and young people. However, application of these values in practice is far from straightforward and there are growing concerns over the way education for democracy, citizenship, and human rights are often either taken for granted or oversimplified within education policies and practices (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006; Edelstein, 2011; Gollifer, 2022; Magnúsdóttir & Jónasson, 2022; Osler & Goldschmidt-Gjerlow, 2024).

Much of the critique points towards increased power of marketised policies and practices as part of the problem (Dovemark et al., 2018), more specifically how they underpin and ignite an emphasis on standardised outcomes based on individualism and instrumentalisation as opposed to collective responsibility and communication (Guðjohnsen, in press; Harðardóttir & Magnúsdóttir, 2018; Jónsson, 2016). This shift towards 'future citizen making' in the name of democratic participation or citizenship education has been criticised by several scholars within the field of

inclusive education (e.g., Biesta, 2006; Magnússon, 2019; Slee, 2011) for not attending to structural and contextual factors such as class and culture and thus excluding a large group of students from participation within the context of education. This is particularly so in larger and more diverse schools (Gillett-Swan et al., 2025).

These concerns have prompted calls for more critical and inclusive approaches to citizenship education paying explicit attention to the complex interaction of democracy and citizenship (Aðalbjarnardóttir, 2007; Harðardóttir, 2023) and how it plays out differently for diverse groups of young people within the context of education (Harðardóttir & Jónsson, 2021). This includes looking critically at ethical and global issues, understanding different historical and cultural contexts, and work deliberately towards students engaging in meaningful participation within educational settings. (Hämäläinen & Nivala, 2023; Jónsson & Garces Rodriguez, 2019; Sund & Pashby, 2020).

Researchers in the field of citizenship education have also emphasised the meaning of democratic knowledge, both at individual and societal levels. At the same time Storstad et al. (2023) findings, showed signs of declining civic knowledge among young people in the Nordic region which further indicates the importance of placing emphasis on this aspect in schoolwork, as such knowledge has predictive value for active and responsible civic behaviour. In Damiani et al. (2025) report, on the ICCS 2022 civic and citizenship study, findings showed that civic knowledge varied both across and within countries. However, between 2016 and 2022 students' civic knowledge had decreased. Consistent with previous ICCS findings, female students reported higher civic knowledge than male students, and student socioeconomic status was positively associated with student civic knowledge. Further analysis of the data showed the meaning of civic knowledge for fostering fundamental democratic values such as trust and equality and preparing students in being active voters and spotting threats to democracy. Findings also showed strong associations between students' civic knowledge and several attitudes, such as students' views on sustainable behaviours.

Student councils are often held up as emblematic of democratic participation in schools, yet their actual function warrants closer examination. Sousa & Ferreira (2024) note how schools generally associate the existence of a student council with children's democratic participation in the school. In contrast to this perceived linear relation, their analysis suggests that in most cases student councils are not experienced as a platform of democratic power-sharing but rather understood as advisory bodies under the supervision of teachers who might, or might not, be interested in meaningful democratic engagement of students. In addition, it has been argued that student councils often amplify the voices of already active students (Männistö, 2020; Tujula, 2023; Tiusanen, 2025).

FACT BOX: About student councils

STUDENT COUNCILS are formal structures within schools, designed to enable students to assemble, discuss and participate in decision-making regarding matters concerning them. They are typically composed of elected student representatives from older grades. Total number of participating students varies depending on different structures.

STUDENT COUNCILS core purpose is similar across the Nordic countries; to promote students' voices and participation. Yet, their roles, mandates and levels of influence vary considerably depending on national legislation, school culture and administrative support.

STUDENT COUNCILS activities vary considerably but usually include organising events, initiating school improvement or leading discussions. While such activities reflect the potentials for democratic participation, they tend to have a narrow and normative agenda.

Similarly, a systemic review by Griebler and Nowak (2012) on student councils within the context of health-promoting schools indicated that whilst students were likely to benefit on a personal level from participating in student councils, most councils are symbolic rather than impactful. In other words, students are given a platform but lack real decision-making power, risking maintaining or recreating normative power positions of both students and teachers. Practical challenges, including lack of time and space within the school, were also noted to impede the work of effective student councils. Such challenges are further exacerbated in the case of students with special educational needs as noted by Griffin (2022), who describes how students with disabilities are in many cases excluded from decision-making processes within the context of education. Griebler and Nowak (2012) finally note that effective student councils are those that have clear procedures and transparent selection processes, regular meetings, and strong communication links between diverse members, staff, and the greater student body.

To better understand and support meaningful participation within the context of schools, scholars have increasingly turned to conceptual models such as Lundy's participation framework (Lundy, 2007, 2013). The model relies on children's universal rights to participate based on Article 12 in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989). It has four elements crucial for examining the scope and depth of children's participation: space, voice, audience, and influence. It has been endorsed and adopted by national, regional, and international authorities and underpins a global shift towards increasingly participatory and child-friendly policy frameworks concerning children's education and leisure activities (EU, n.d.; Long & Grant, 2024; Molloy, 2024; NICCY, 2022). While the Lundy model provides a robust framework, recent data from the Nordic countries suggest that implementation

remains uneven. Findings from the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (Schulz et al., 2023) report an evident backlash to democratic experiences of children and young people in Nordic schools (Schulz et al., 2023; Guðjohnsen, Jordan et al., 2024). In the ICCS study from 2022, where 22 countries took part, including three Nordic countries (Denmark, Norway and Sweden), most students – close to 80% – are reported to have access to student councils according to principals' reports. Danish and Swedish principals estimated their students' access to student councils as well below this average, or at 58% and 45% respectively, while Norwegian reports indicated that nearly 90% of all students in Norway are understood by principals to have access to student councils (Schulz et al., 2023).

Perhaps more importantly, it is the perspectives offered by students themselves that provide the most valuable insight. The findings from the ICCS 2022 study revealed that Danish and Swedish students are among the most sceptical about their own influence in school governance (Schulz et al., 2023). Only half of the student population in these two countries reported believing that voting in student council elections makes a difference in their school (Bruun & Lieberkind, 2024; Skolverket, 2024). Similar findings have been reported in Iceland where many students in both lower- and upper-secondary schools expressed experiencing that their ideas were not given sufficient weight in their schools (Guðjohnsen, Haraldsson et al., 2024). In Finland, while students in upper-secondary schools view student councils positively, they are hesitant to participate due to perceived limited impact. In other words, students trust in student councils' role as a democratic body in schools but are unwilling to participate in the activities and decision-making of the student councils (Hiljanen, 2022).

The tension between the normative ideals of democratic education and the realities of school governance is particularly visible in the case of student councils. While international recognised frameworks such as the CRC and the Lundy model offer a strong foundation for children's participatory rights, evidence from the Nordic region reveals persistent structural, relational, and cultural barriers that hinder meaningful engagement. Student councils, often positioned as symbols of school democracy, risk becoming tokenistic unless supported by inclusive practices, equitable representation, and genuine power-sharing mechanisms. Doing so requires sustained commitment to structural change, critical reflection, and a willingness to listen to the diverse voices of young people on their own terms.

Supporting educators to foster meaningful participation

For student councils to function as meaningful platforms for democratic engagement, educators must be equipped and empowered to actively support and guide them. This involves not only an understanding of democratic values but also the use of teaching methods that foster participation and inclusion. Whole-school democratic approaches and deliberate opportunities for student voice are essential

in cultivating a participatory school culture (Donbavand & Hoskins, 2021).

Westheimer (2014) emphasises the importance of civic discussions in the classroom and the value of exposing students to multiple perspectives. Similarly, Tujula et al. (2021) have found that the open classroom discussions are linked to students' orientation towards societal influence. In addition, research by Aðalbjarnardóttir and Harðardóttir (2018) demonstrates that students who experience meaningful participation in democratic classroom discussions are more likely to express inclusive attitudes, including respect for the rights of immigrants and women. For such participation to be effective, however, Westheimer (2014) argues that the issues explored must be personally relevant to students. This includes providing opportunities for practical problem-solving where students work collaboratively to identify and evaluate solutions to real-life challenges.

Yet, a cautionary note is warranted. There is a risk that participation may be reduced to superficial or commercial activities, such as planning entertainment events or organising fundraising projects. These may be easier to facilitate but can detract from the development of critical democratic experiences. Biesta and Lawy (2006) warn against such instrumental approaches to education, which may undermine the deeper goals of creating a truly democratic form of life where one is able to learn *about*, *through*, and *for* democracy (Edelstein, 2011, p. 130) based on shared values and collective responsibility (Guðjohnsen, Haraldsson et al., 2024).

Empirical research from Iceland points to further challenges in realising meaningful student participation. A small-scale study using focus group interviews with 15-year-old students in Icelandic upper-secondary schools revealed concerns about the integrity of the student council election process. While all students were formally allowed to run, teachers often influenced the process by suggesting certain candidates or excluding others based on academic or social criteria. This practice led to a general sense of mistrust among students, who perceived the student council as disconnected from their educational experiences and well-being (Guðmundsson, 2016). Additional research highlights a broader uncertainty among Icelandic educators regarding the facilitation of citizenship learning. Students across primary and upper-secondary schools reported that their teachers often appeared unsure of how to approach democratic education in practice (Guðjohnsen, in press). This perception aligns with teachers' own accounts of feeling insufficiently prepared to promote inclusion and democratic participation, particularly in culturally diverse classrooms (Harðardóttir et al., 2019; Harðardóttir & Magnúsdóttir, 2018).

The impact of Covid-19

The Nordic countries have made every effort to fulfil the obligation of Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and emphasise the responsibility of authorities to promote young people's social involvement and opportunities to

influence matters concerning themselves with their well-being in mind. In addition, there is an ongoing need to safeguard democratic participation of groups that are at risk of not being heard because of disabilities, foreign background, etc. but also during crisis such as was the Covid-19 pandemic. A considerable amount of research has been conducted in the Nordic countries on the significance of the Covid-19 era for children's and young people's learning and social interactions. Among those are reports led by the Nordic Welfare Centre on behalf of the Nordic Council of Ministers.

In the first report, Nordic youth voices: The pandemic and the right to be heard (Løberg, 2023), findings described young people's experiences of lacking support during the pandemic related to difficulties when moving between school levels. In the second report, Child and youth participation during crisis: Recommendations for decision makers in the Nordic region (Kjellander & Sjöblom, 2023), the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic for children and youth were investigated, as was their right to be heard. The main findings emphasised the meaning of building sustainable participatory processes that become critical infrastructure during crisis.

The third report, Children's and young people's participation during the corona pandemic: Nordic initiatives (Helfer, Aapola-Kari et al., 2023), gave an overview of Nordic authorities' measures during the pandemic to ensure participation and influence of children and young people. Findings indicated that in most of the Nordic countries, including Faroe Islands and Greenland, children's voices were found to be ignored to some degree and when they were consulted, it was after decisions had already been made. In addition, representatives of institutions working for and with children and youth expressed having been unprepared for the crisis and its many challenges. The fourth report, Restricted childhood, interrupted youth: Research observations on education, leisure, and participation, summarised new Nordic research on the consequences of the pandemic (Helfer, Ibsen et al., 2023).

The main findings of studies presented in these reports carried out under the umbrella of the Nordic Welfare Centre indicated that children and young people had very limited opportunities to take part in decision-making concerning their well-being and participation during the pandemic. Their rights to be consulted and heard were largely neglected. Lessons from this time when children and youth had little influence on their education situations showed that gathering additional Nordic knowledge and competence about how student councils work must be further developed.

Research questions

The research question that we seek to answer with our data is as follows:

- What is the status, role, and perceived impact of student councils in Nordic schools?
- What characterises the regulations on student councils in the Nordic countries?
- How are students selected to participate in student councils across the Nordic countries?
- To what extent are students familiar with the purpose and function of student councils?
- What proportion of students, report having experience of serving in student councils
- What types of issues are typically addressed by student councils?
- How do students describe their experiences of having students' suggestions heard by school staff?

Method

In this mixed-method study, data was collected in Denmark, Finland, Faroe Islands, Greenland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden through multiple sources. Firstly, we conducted a mapping exercise of existing education policies dealing specifically with student councils, by collecting public policy information from all seven participating countries. Secondly, new empirical data were gathered from an online survey, asking students in grade 5, and in grade 9 or 10 depending on which grade was the highest of lower-secondary school in each country – about their knowledge of and participation in student councils. Thirdly, informal discussions and workshops were conducted with youth experts in two different youth summits. Finally, key informant and focus group interviews with teachers and students actively participating in student councils took place in selected primary and lower secondary schools across the Nordic region.

Policy mapping

A policy mapping was conducted by gathering existing policy documents – including acts, regulations, and curriculum – that deal with democratic education, student participation, and student councils. Initially, 17 policy documents were pointed out by the contributors of this report, with text references covering 20 pages. To ensure precision and comparability of the policy texts used for the mapping, we decided to narrow the selection of documents to primary and lower-secondary education alone, excluding policies for upper-secondary schools, higher education, and adult education. This resulted in a final choice of 14 documents from seven countries. These include national education acts, regulations, and the curriculum. The documents were read with a special focus on summarising text relating to student councils rather than general participation.

We analysed the policies descriptively (Braun & Clarke, 2022) with reference to the Lundy (2007) model. The findings are presented in the chapter of findings under three categories, namely 1) access and eligibility, 2) roles and responsibility, and 3) structure and content.

Online student survey

An online survey was designed with the aim of collecting data on students' knowledge of and participation in student councils. Students asked to participate were in grade 5, 9, or 10 depending on which grade is the last grade in lower-secondary schools in the Nordic countries. The design of the questionnaire was part of a joint research project by the University of Iceland and the Ombudsman of Children in Iceland (2023). The survey consisted of ten open- and closed-ended questions. The Icelandic Educational Research Institute administered the survey using Qualtrics, an online survey platform. Researchers in each of the Nordic countries selected a mix of schools to capture a broad spectrum of grade levels and socio-economic backgrounds. The schools which accepted to submit the survey were asked to send parents an information letter about the study. Parents who did not wish that their children answer the survey were asked to notify the school.

The survey was submitted in Iceland in September 2023 and during November 2024 to April 2025 in the other Nordic countries. The total number of students who answered the survey was 2205 with a similar percentage of girls and boys (52% girls; 48% boys) as well as a similar percentage of students in 5^{th} grade and 9^{th}/10^{th} grade except for in Sweden, where most of the students who answered were in 10^{th} grade and in Finland, where most of the students who answered were in 9^{th} grade.

Before the analysis of the data, it was cleaned with the criteria that participants had to answer questions about grade and gender and at least two other questions to be included in the dataset. The number of students after the data cleaning was 278 from Denmark, 303 from Finland, 638 from Faroe Islands, 23 from Greenland, 917 from Iceland, 8 from Norway, and 69 from Sweden. Descriptive methods were used to analyse the close-ended questions. Due to the small number of participants from Greenland and Norway it was not possible to analyse the responses to the closed-ended questions from these countries. However, during the thematic analysis of the open-ended questions, answers from Greenland and Norway were included to provide some insight into the attitudes of students from these countries.

Online questions and workshop with young experts

Views from young experts were gathered during two different youth summits in 2024 supported by the Nordic Welfare Centre.

In the Nordic Baltic Youth Summit, approximately 300 young people aged between 15 and 25, from all over the Nordic and Baltic region attended a three-day celebration of young minds and projects. The young participants were asked two general questions online via the Mentimeter app, which made it possible for anyone in the summit to answer by using a QR code. The first questions asked participants to describe an ideal student council in one word. The second question asked participants to describe the biggest challenge in operating student councils. In total, 40 responses were gathered for the first question and 35 for the second questions. In the Findings chapter a word-cloud picture summarises the answers from the young people.

During the Nordic Youth Disability Summit, a workshop was conducted with a group of eight youth experts representing youth disability organisations from all the Nordic countries. The workshop focused on gathering the experts' perspectives on student councils through in-depth discussions. Questions raised during the discussions were designed to highlight their experiences of student councils as relating to the four dimensions of the Lundy (2007) model, including issues of access and representation. In the Findings chapter a word-cloud picture summarises the answers from the young people.

Key informant and focus group interviews

Key informant and focus group interviews were conducted in selected schools across the Nordic region. By using a joint interview guide, interviews were taken with students and a few teachers and other professionals who are actively involved in student councils (see Appendix B). The schools were purposefully selected to represent unique or promising practices of student councils whilst balancing diversity criteria relating to both students' and schools' demographics. The final selection of schools included a total of 19 public schools, with a range of smaller and larger schools; schools from rural, semi-urban, and urban areas; and schools representing a specific language diaspora such as Swedish-speaking schools in Finland.

Key informant and focus group interviews were conducted with teachers and students who are active members of student councils in schools across the Nordic region. The schools were all public primary and lower-secondary schools with operating student councils. They were selected to gain a deeper understanding of how student councils operate in different contexts, and in particular to identify

unique or innovative practices in place. In total, focus group interviews were conducted in 19 schools across the Nordic region using a joint interview guide (see Appendix B).

Table 1. Informant and focus group interviews

COUNTRY	NUMBER OF SCHOOLS	OTHER INFORMATION
Iceland	6	• 3 schools in rural or semi-urban area and 3 in the capital. • School size ranged from 300 – 600 students.
Finland	10	• 2 university training schools and 8 municipality schools • A mix of schools based in North, South and Central Finland. • 1 of the school is a Swedish speaking school. • School size ranged from 100 – 700 students.
Denmark	2	• 2 schools in northern Denmark, placed within a Child Friendly municipality • One Rights Respecting School. • School size ranged between 350 – 500 students.
The Faroe Islands	1	1 school with approximately 300 students.

Data analysis

To fulfil the aim of getting a holistic view of the status of student councils in primary and lower-secondary schools in the Nordic region, data was analysed through the lens of Laura Lundy's (2007, 2013) participation model as well as in accordance with the theoretical approach of the study. As described in the theoretical background, the model outlines four elements crucial for examining the scope and depth of children's participation. These are, in a chronological order, space, voice, audience and influence.

Figure 1 Lundy Model of Child Participation

Space refers to the right of children to find themselves in safe and welcoming places and spaces where their opinions can be shared and valued. Within the context of education such spaces can include the classroom as well as other school premises but are also highly related to platforms of decision-making, including student and school councils. Accessibility to such spaces should be ensured across children's gender, abilities, religious and cultural background, and socio-economic status.

Voice refers to the right of children to share their thoughts and feelings and subsequently the obligation of adults to ensure that they can do so safely. This includes giving them information, encouragement, and freedom to decide if and how they choose to express themselves. With reference to student councils, questions arise such as what kind of means students have to truly express their own unique voices and whose voices are being reflected.

Audience indicates that children have not only the right to speak up but also to be listened to. This means that adults must genuinely listen and respond to what children and youth have to say. Within the context of education this often comes down to the quality of communication and collaboration between students and teachers or school leaders who in turn are most commonly responsible for the operation of student councils in schools.

Influence is about ensuring that children's voices and perspectives are truly given due weight so that they may benefit the students in their daily lives. In other words, children's views should have a meaningful impact on decision-making processes. For schools this means that teachers or school leaders must be willing and able to seriously consider children's views, give them honest feedback, and explain how their perspectives have been considered when making decisions that concern them.

Findings

In this chapter, findings from each of the data sources will be presented separately. First, we shall outline findings from the policy mapping, followed by findings from the online student survey. As a third step, we will summarise insights from young experts, and fourth, present selected promising practices.

Policy mapping

The analysis of the education policy documents was classified into three categories relating to the four elements of the Lundy model: Access and eligibility (space and voice), Role and responsibility (audience), and Structure and activities (influence). In Table 1 below a hyperlink is connected to each of the selected policy document for a full version.

Table 2 Policy document analysis

POLICY DOCUMENTS	CATEGORIES		
DENMARK	**Access and eligibility**	**Role and responsibility**	**Structure and activities**
Executive Order on Student Councils in Primary Schools BEK no. 695 of 23 June 2014 Executive Order on the Primary School Act Consolidation Act no. 989 of 27 August 2024 (In Force)	According to the Executive order from 2014 schools shall establish a student council and that all students in primary schools are eligible to take part in student councils The curricula from 2024 states however that students from grade 5th have the right to form a student council and all students should have voting rights.	The role of the student council is to reflect collective interest of all students. Head teacher or school leaders are responsible for forming and operationalizing student councils and sub-councils in cooperation with students.	Elections to student councils are mandated before October every school year. Student councils shall create bylaws concerning election processes, size of the council, finances and other procedures.
ICELAND	**Access and eligibility**	**Role and responsibility**	**Structure and activities**
Act on compulsory schools 2008/91 Iceland National Curriculum for compulsory schools	All compulsory schools must establish a student council according to the national act and the curriculum.	The role of the student council is to include and promote social, general interest and welfare issues of concern to pupils. Head teachers are responsible for ensuring that the student council receives necessary support.	Student councils are to set their own rules regarding elections and other procedures.

SWEDEN	Access and eligibility	Role and responsibility	Structure and activities
The Swedish Education Act 2010/800 The Swedish National Curriculum for Compulsory Schools	Schools are required to support student associations, facilitating students' ability to organize and express their opinions collectively However, neither the Act nor the curriculum specifically reference an obligatory establishment or operation of student councils.	NA	Student councils are mentioned indirectly in the social studies section for grades 4–6 as an example of democratic decision-making platforms schools can choose to create.

FINLAND	Access and eligibility	Role and responsibility	Structure and activities
Basic Education Act (628/1998) National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014	Schools must have a student council established by pupils according to the Basic Education Act.	The curriculum states the task of student councils is to promote joint action, involvement, and participation of the pupils. The education provider is responsible for supporting the establishment of a student council or other means for students to express their opinions in matters concerning them.	The curriculum offers pupils' participation and involvement as a guiding principle for developing the school's operating culture, as well as an obligation to consult students, for example when drawing up a disciplinary plan and a student welfare plan.

NORWAY	Access and eligibility	Role and responsibility	Structure and activities
Norwegian Education Act	All schools with students in grades 5^{th} – 10^{th} must have a student council according to the Education Act.	Student councils aim to promote the common interests of students and work towards creating a positive learning and school environment. The National Curriculum states that student councils are to offer children and young people the opportunity to express opinions and make suggestions on matters concerning the students' local community.	Class-based democratic elections are commonly used to select students into student councils.
Norwegian National Curriculum			

GREENLAND	Access and eligibility	Role and responsibility	Structure and activities
The Government of Greenland's Act on the Inatsisartut Act on Primary and Lower Secondary Education	The Education Act states that each school shall establish a student council. In smaller schools the student council may include the entire student assembly.	The council shall serve as a forum for discussions on student interests. Pedagogical council shall consult with the student council on all relevant matters.	

THE FAROE ISLANDS	Access and eligibility	Role and responsibility	Structure and activities
The Public-School Act	At every school with 5th grade or higher, a student council should be established. The school leader involves the students in matters concerning their safety and health.	According to the Executive Order the purpose of student council is to provide students with a place where they can discuss matters of common interest. To develop cooperation and shared responsibility, where students actively participate and address issues through a democratic process. Also, to ensure that students are heard in all matters where decisions are implemented that affect learning, well-being, and educational conditions.	At schools with a student council the method of involvement shall be discussed through the student council.
Draft (2025) on Executive Order on Student Councils in Primary Schools. Expected to come into force in autumn 2025.			
The Faroe Islands National Curriculum NÁM			

The findings summarised in Table 1 show that as regards the elements of *space* and *voice,* represented here within the category of access and eligibility, the Nordic countries require schools to establish and support student councils in all primary and lower-secondary schools. According to the policy documents, eligibility typically starts from grade 5 (e.g., Denmark, Faroe Islands and Norway). In most cases, all students are able to either vote or participate indirectly in student councils, ensuring broader representation (e.g., Denmark, Finland, Faroe Islands and Iceland). An interesting legal example is offered by Greenland, which allows for the option of an entire student assembly to form a student council in smaller schools, reflecting a flexible and contextualised approach. Sweden is currently the only Nordic country which does not mandate student councils, rather it encourages student organisation generally. In this sense, student councils are mentioned in the national curriculum as one of good ways of working towards students' democratic participation.

In terms of the element of *audience,* represented here within the category of role and responsibility, student councils in the Nordic region are primarily tasked with

promoting the interests, welfare, and voices of students (e.g., Faroe Islands, Iceland and Norway). Student councils often operate in relation to school or municipal councils, ensuring students a wider audience beyond their class or school (e.g. Denmark, Finland, Iceland). They are often understood as a platform to consult on school policies (e.g., Finland) and a space for democratic participation (e.g., Finland, Faroe Islands and Iceland). In most cases student councils are governed by head teachers or school leaders, who are expected to play a supportive and facilitative role, ensuring councils are formed and operated effectively (e.g., Denmark, Iceland, Norway).

Finally, with regard to the element of *influence,* represented here under the category of structure and activities, Denmark and Norway require formal elections and structural democratic procedures in operating a student council. Commonly, class-based elections are used to select 1–2 representatives to student councils, who are then able to set their own bylaws (Denmark). This includes forming their own mandate and list of activities (Iceland). In Finland, student councils are embedded into the schools' operational culture and have recently been connected to the idea of transversal competencies such as sustainability, human rights, and democratic participation. Structures such as pedagogical councils in Greenland and student council discussions in Faroe Islands emphasise the role of student councils as part of broader school governance.

Student survey findings

The ten-question student survey was submitted to students in the Nordic countries, asking them about participation in student councils, knowledge on their aims and tasks dealt with, as well as experiences of trying to have influence on school issues. As mentioned in the chapter on methods, it was not possible to collect the same number of responses among the participating countries. The total number of responses after data cleaning amounted to 278 from Denmark (46% girls; 54% boys), 303 from Finland (47% girls; 53% boys), 638 from Faroe Islands (50% girls; 50% boys), 23 from Greenland (48% girls; 52% boys), 917 from Iceland (48% girls; 52% boys), 8 from Norway (0% girls; 100 % boys), and 69 from Sweden (64% girls; 36% boys). In Greenland and especially Norway, the numbers of responses were very few and for that reason the results from those countries will not be interpreted. The numbers of 5th-grade students and 10th-grade students were similar in all countries except for Finland, where most respondents were 10th graders, and Norway, where all respondents came from grade 5.

Existence of student councils and students' participation

When students were asked if there was a student council in their school, most students reported that this was the case (91–99%). The exception was Iceland, where the percentage was 73% (see Table 3).

Table 3 Existence of a student council

Is there a student council at your school?	
Denmark	
Yes	96%
No	4%
I don't know	0%
Faroe Island	
Yes	96%
No	2%
I don't know	2%
	100%
Finland	
Yes	91%
No	3%
I don't know	6%
	100%
Greenland	
Yes	91%
No	0%
I don't know	9%
	100%
Iceland	
Yes	73%
No	6%
I don't know	21%
	100%
Norway	
Yes	100%
No	0%
I don't know	0%
	100%

Sweden	
Yes	99%
No	1%
I don't know	0%
	100%

Students were also asked if they had been on a student council (See Table 4).

Table 4 Been on a student council

Have you been on a student council?	
Denmark	
Yes	32%
No	68%
Faroe Islands	
Yes	26%
No	74%
Finland	
Yes	28%
No	72%
Greenland	
Yes	57%
No	43%
Iceland	
Yes	24%
No	76%
Norway	
Yes	25%
No	75%
Sweden	
Yes	29%
No	71%

As seen in table 3, roughly one third of the surveyed students had been part of a

student council. The lowest participation rate, 24%, came from Iceland.

Students' responses on the length of time they had been on the council showed that regardless of the country of residence most students reported having participated between six months and up to three years. Some students mentioned not recalling how long they had participated. A similar trend was identified across all the Nordic countries: most students participated in student councils during their teenage years, but there were also several students younger than this.

Choosing members of student councils

Students were asked if they were able to describe how students were elected for the student councils. There was a great deal of variation in their knowledge (Table 5).

Table 5 Knowledge on how students are elected for student councils

Can you describe how students are elected for the student councils?	
Denmark	
Yes	86%
No	14%
Faroe Islands	
Yes	75%
No	25%
Finland	
Yes	49%
No	51%
Greenland	
Yes	26%
No	74%
Iceland	
Yes	41%
No	59%
Norway	
Yes	100%
No	0%
Sweden	

Yes	59%
No	41%

Table 5 shows that the majority of students in Denmark (86%) were well informed about the choosing process for student councils. This was also the case in the Faroe Islands, where the percentage was 75%. In Sweden, around 60% knew how students get selected to participate in student councils. The percentage was 50% in Finland and around 40% in Iceland (Table 5).

When students were asked open questions to further describe how student council participants were chosen, most of them explained that some kinds of democratic processes were used. Students in Denmark described that a classmate willing to participate generally volunteered, campaigned, or gave a speech. Voting took place in anonymous ballots or by open voting. However, some described how their school used random selection, with teachers generally guiding or monitoring the selection.

Students from Faroe Islands described elections of student council members typically involving self-nomination, candidate presentations, and typically anonymous classroom voting. However, among many students there were also concerns about popularity bias and lack of structure or fairness related to electing participants. This suggests there is room for improvement in transparency and accountability.

Finnish students also said that voting was the most common method of selecting students for the student councils, but there was significant variation between schools. Some schools used applications, others favoured interviews, and some used random draws. Although many viewed the process as democratic and fair, others expressed concerns about lack of clarity or consistency and the teachers' key role in the selection. As was already mentioned, few responses were collected from Greenland. However, their open answers were in line with those of the other countries in that democratic classroom-based elections were the most common way of getting into student councils. These included a process of students voting or deciding together who should represent them. Written ballots were mentioned as an example of the process, but there were also examples where students were not fully aware of or involved in how the selection for student councils worked in their school.

In Iceland, most students reported that joining the student council involved some form of democratic selection, such as elections or application-based processes. The process varied slightly across schools but generally included representative elections within each class. Students were either nominated or voted for, typically selecting one boy and one girl. Some schools used applications where staff members choose candidates based on their interests and qualifications. Others described random drawings if too many were interested in being on the council. In some cases, students could also choose the student council as a subject where they can get

credits for participating, especially in the higher grades. Some students raised fairness concerns, mentioning the need for greater consistency, transparency, and fairness in the selection process. These concerns were raised in relation to teacher influence in the process. One student mentioned having been on the student council when Covid-19 hit the world and described having missed out on the experience of being on the council as there were no meetings during the pandemic. Thereafter the student had not been chosen by administration to be on the council:

Quote from student
" I was [in the student council] ..., but because of Covid-19, I didn't get to be there for long, and I'm really mad at the school for not giving me another chance.... I was also sick a lot, but that's my problem, but their [problem] is that they postponed [student council meetings] a lot.

In Greenland and Norway, answers were few but students typically described democratic voting or random drawing as methods of selecting students for the student councils. There were also some less democratic exceptions, which pointed to the need for more structure in the selection process.

In Sweden, students commonly reported using voting when choosing between class representatives, usually at the start of the school year. Typically, the classmates nominated themselves or others, and everyone voted – sometimes with attention to gender balance. Another option was open discussion about who to nominate, often led by teachers. Some responses point to possible bias or dissatisfaction, especially related to teacher favouritism. It was suggested that the process needed to be made more transparent.

Issues typically addressed by student councils

Students were asked in the survey if they could describe what issues the student council work on (see Table 6).

Table 6 Issues dealt with in student councils

Can you describe issues dealt with by the student councils?	
Denmark	
Yes	68%
No	32%
Faroe Islands	
Yes	53%
No	47%
Finland	
Yes	41%

No	59%
Greenland	
Yes	35%
No	65%
Iceland	
Yes	34%
No	66%
Norway	
Yes	75%
No	25%
Sweden	
Yes	61%
No	39%

Denmark and Sweden had the highest percentage of students saying they could describe what the student councils do, followed by students from Faroe Islands. A notable number of students from Finland, Greenland and Iceland were not sure about the role of student councils.

Students who said that they were able to describe what the councils do were asked to give examples of the council's projects. Students mentioned that the meetings between students and staff related to the student councils created a positive venue for them to share ideas and push for positive change. In general, the most common tasks mentioned in all countries were organising social events and making the school a better place by amplifying student voices. Practical ideas were most often mentioned such as ideas on running school cafés, fundraising, furniture needed, and improvements for the playgrounds. However, some also mentioned helping to improve the overall school atmosphere and improving well-being in the school.

In Sweden, the student councils were generally viewed as a platform for student representation where class issues and ideas are discussed and, at times, acted on. Students appreciated having a voice, especially regarding school policies, trips, and classroom conditions. They said they understood that not all requests can be met, as some requests are unrealistic and the schools have limited resources. There were also responses that highlighted the importance of strengthening the councils' framework and ensuring inclusivity, democratic, and respectful communication within the councils, and support from school employees.

Norwegian students described the role of the student councils as working on issues

to improve the school environment especially with peer support and inclusion in mind. They reported that student councils can play a supportive role for the school community. However, numerous students said they had limited knowledge or awareness of the student council. They were consequently not fully aware of their role.

Audience to student councils' proposals

Half of the students or more said that their audience were teachers and the administration, who generally listened to their ideas. In Denmark, 80% of students said that school leaders and teachers took student council proposals into consideration.

Table 7 Audience to student councils' ideas

Do you think school leaders and teachers consider proposals from student councils?	
Denmark	
Yes	80%
No	20%
Faroe Islands	
Yes	50%
No	50%
Finland	
Yes	63%
No	37%
Greenland	
Yes	22%
No	78%
Iceland	
Yes	53%
No	47%
Norway	
Yes	86%
No	14%
Sweden	
Yes	58%

No	42%

A much deeper and a more nuanced picture emerged of students' attitudes, when their open-ended responses were examined. While the administration in the Nordic countries generally listened to students on the student council and while the students felt it was useful to meet staff members to discuss school matters and reforms, many students expressed a desire for clearer outcomes of their ideas.

Danish students emphasised that this would boost students' trust in the effectiveness of their inputs. They explained that the most common suggestions acted upon were related to practical matters such as getting a new microwave, planning a school event or trip, improving the playgrounds, seating in the classroom, and increasing food options. When it comes to other and more complicated proposals many students express frustration over ignored ideas, unrealistic promises, and lack of transparency. Many students also cited incidences of poor communication within the councils themselves, inconsistent processes, and a lack of follow-through with ideas.

Similarly, students in Norway and Sweden expressed mixed views on how seriously their suggestions were taken. While some felt heard and respected, there was lack of consistency and follow-through. Students also felt that some ideas are acknowledged or implemented while others are not, often depending on feasibility. Sometimes the processes are so long that by the time action is taken, the students who proposed the action have moved on. The Finnish students added to this and outlined that more persistence, clarity, and active communication is needed between students and the school staff. However, students underlined their understanding that not all ideas can be accepted. Some are unrealistic and the schools' resources are limited.

Student council influences

Students were asked if they could describe issues student councils have had real impact on in their schools (see Table 8).

Table 8 Knowledge of issues student councils have had influence on

Can you describe issues that student councils have had influence on at your school?	
Denmark	
Yes	44%
No	56%
Faroe Islands	
Yes	50%

No	50%
Finland	
Yes	36%
No	63%
Greenland	
Yes	9%
No	91%
Iceland	
Yes	22%
No	78%
Norway	
Yes	17%
No	83%
Sweden	
Yes	31%
No	69%

Table 8 shows that 22–50% of students could describe issues where student councils had made a difference. Students from all countries gave several examples of the influence exerted by these councils on preparing events such as talent shows and renewing sports equipment. Danish students also mentioned various issues such as upgrading cafeteria areas and making changes related to meals. Students from the Faroe Islands said the school councils had had a positive impact, particularly on playgrounds, restrooms, and getting rest areas and sofas in the school.

Similar findings emerged from Finland: student councils were identified as critical in giving opportunities to enhance school life, particularly through organising events and improving various student matters. Other examples related to improving play areas, well-being, and occasionally influencing school rules.

However, it is important to note that only a small proportion of students believed they could have a real impact on their school. In their answers they often also expressed doubts about student councils' visibility and felt that its impact was limited. Swedish students reported mixed experiences with their student councils and their perceived influence. The experiences varied greatly, depending on communication within the councils themselves and with administration, and follow-through. A desire for a more meaningful impact and clearer outcomes was evident

as students expressed frustration or uncertainty about the process.

According to the open answers, Greenlandic students felt the councils functioned as a key link between students and school staff, especially in forwarding concerns or needs. They said that meetings played a central role in the planning and decision-making involved in organising meaningful activities such as study trips. However, not all students were fully clear on the council's role, suggesting room for improved communication or visibility. Similar emphases were evident in the responses of the Norwegian students who saw the student councils as contributing to school life through planning fun events and adding enjoyment and a variety of experiences to enrich their schooling.

Summary of student survey findings in the Nordic countries

Space: selection process
Across the participating countries, student council selection is widely framed by democratic principles, with voting being the most common method. Students value having a voice in choosing their representatives and participating in school decision-making. However, there were concerns about the lack of structure, transparency, consistency in working methods, and bias when selecting representatives to the councils. In addition, findings mention communication issues and lack of criteria within the councils to ensure the inclusion and well-being of all participants.

Voice: issues dealt with
Student councils are valued across the countries for representing student voice and improving the school environment. The most frequently mentioned issues are related to events and practical questions. Students nevertheless wish to strengthen the student council's role as an effective body for student voice. Anyone within the student councils can express themselves and make suggestions on issues that they consider are meaningful and significant to improving student well-being.

Audience: communication and resources
Most students generally feel their voices are heard by school staff, especially through the student council. Listening is valued by students even when not all ideas are accepted. Teachers are often seen as more responsive than school leaders. Students also stated that communication and consultation between students and school staff needs to be increased as well as the follow-through of student proposals so that the student councils have a stronger and a more trusted role in shaping the school life. Across all contexts, students frequently express frustration that their suggestions are not consistently implemented. While some practical ideas lead to change, students report that many others are stalled due to slow processes. Also, students desire clearer communication on what happens after ideas are submitted. A lack of transparency in how student council ideas are handled – especially in the Faroe Islands, Finland, and Iceland – leads to doubt, disengagement, or scepticism about the council's impact. In addition, many

students (especially in Finland, Faroe Islands, Iceland and a few in Greenland) don't fully understand the student council's role, suggesting a need for improved visibility and information-sharing within schools. In the Faroe Islands and Sweden, some students mention that council representatives don't always consult classmates or that they fail to act on shared concerns, highlighting a gap between representation and inclusion.

Influence: meaningful activities

Student councils were recognised as a good way to improve school life, but across all countries, students express lack of follow-through on students' ideas. Students also reported that they receive little information about what happens to their proposals, and those that are put forward often take a long time to process, so that students may even have completed their studies when the changes are implemented. While many students recognise and appreciate tangible changes such as new equipment or social activities, others express frustration with limited follow-through. Students often doubted the actual influence of student councils; according to their answers, the perceived influence of the councils depends largely on how well they communicate, how visibly they implement changes, and how consistently they follow up on student suggestions.

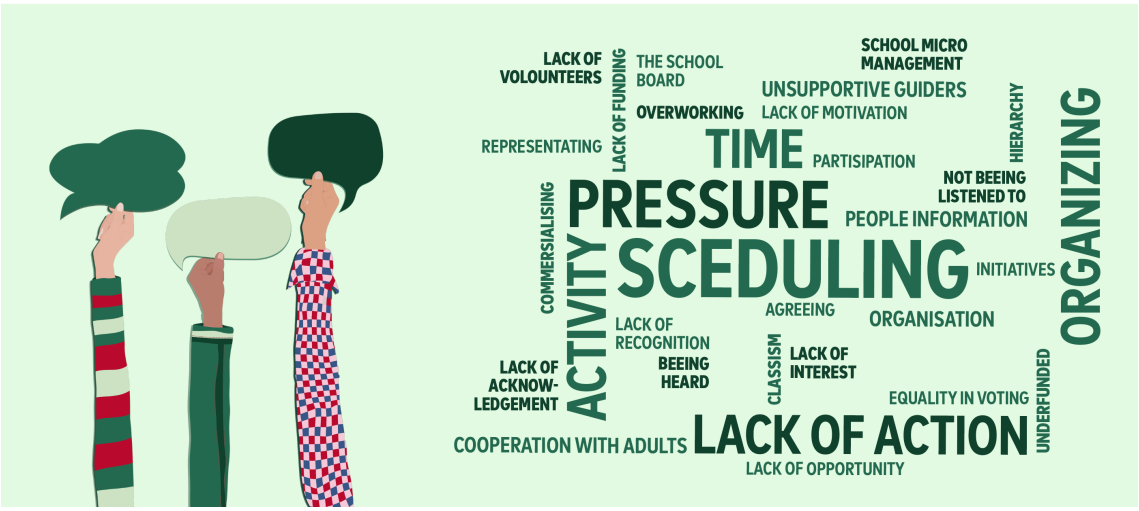
Insights from young young experts

Nordic Baltic Youth Summit

In September 2024, the Nordic Baltic Youth Summit took place in Vilnius, Lithuania. During the summit, information about student councils was gathered from the participants through questions posted online and in informal discussions. Most of the young people engaged in the summit spoke positively about their experiences of participating in a student council in their lower- or upper-secondary schools. When asked to describe the 'ideal' student council, the respondents emphasised inclusivity and representation along with aspects of engagement and meaningful activities. When asked to offer one concept or term to describe the biggest challenge student councils face, the students raised several issues from lack of recognition to the opportunity to be heard. These questions were featured prominently along with ideas of elitism or non-democratic processes despite the formal election system in place in most Nordic schools. Figures 2 and 3 below display the words most often used in relation to the two questions posed during the summit.

Figure 2 Word-cloud presenting young experts' ideal student councils

Figure 3 Word-cloud presenting the biggest challenges of student councils according to young experts



Promising practices in student participation and inclusion

For this study, we sought examples of unique and promising practices from across the Nordic region to illustrate how student councils can become meaningful platforms for participation when grounded in inclusive practices supported by principles from the Lundy model.

The following case studies are not meant to be compared, copied, or borrowed without due consideration of how temporal and relational factors impact all policy and practical implementation within the context of education (Steiner-Khamsi, 2024). We do however hope that they are a source of inspiration to students, teachers, and policymakers alike, as they came across as having a great potential to us.

Activating the school yard: Enhancing students' physical and social well-being (Finland)

In one Finnish school, the student council's typical role in organising social events evolved into a broader initiative to improve students' health and well-being. During a regional gathering of student council representatives known as 'winter days', students discussed common concerns and shared ideas for promoting student engagement. An idea that emerged was to transform their own schoolyard, which was largely paved with asphalt and was widely regarded by students as dull and demotivating.

In response, the student council organised equipment and materials such as board games and sports gear to revitalise recess activities and energise both body and mind during short breaks. This initiative reflects multiple elements of the Lundy model: *space* (a transformed, engaging environment for students), *voice* (students identified the problem and solution), *audience* (school leaders supported the initiative), and *influence* (the idea was implemented with visible impact).

Importantly, this practice highlights the value of peer exchange beyond individual schools, where young people inspire and learn from one another across contexts. It also demonstrates how democratic participation can impact students' everyday experiences in meaningful ways.

Linking school councils with local governance: A child-friendly municipality (Denmark)

In one Danish municipality recognised as child-friendly under the UNICEF framework of child-friendly cities, strong ties have been established between student councils at the school level and the municipalities' youth councils. This structure creates a continuum of participation that enables children and young people to influence decisions both within and beyond their schools.

A key feature of this model is its intentional focus on inclusion. The municipality actively works to ensure participation by students who are traditionally underrepresented, such as children of different ages and those with disabilities, by creating *safe spaces* for diverse voices. The councils collaborate on initiatives at some schools, like planning activities for World Children's Day, driven by students themselves and grounded in shared democratic values and Article 12 of the UNCRC.

Students report feeling listened to by school leaders, who regularly coordinate with other schools and municipal officials to promote children's voices and influence. Training sessions equip young people with the knowledge and confidence to contribute meaningfully to discussions about their learning environments, fulfilling all four elements of the Lundy model and promoting long-term capacity building for democratic participation.

Open access to amplify diversity and representation (Iceland)

Two Icelandic schools have made deliberate changes to student council selection processes to challenge the often-exclusive nature of peer voting systems. Teachers and students in both schools identified how traditional election models tended to favour socially prominent or outgoing individuals, marginalising those who didn't fit the normative frame, including migrant students and students with disabilities.

In one school, student council membership was made entirely open to any student in grades 8 to 10, without formal elections. Although the council operates without a fixed time or space, and meetings are arranged on an ad-hoc basis, this model ensures low barriers to entry and gives students significant autonomy over their participation.

In the second school, a more structured system invites all students to apply for student council membership and to submit a brief statement outlining their interests and ideas for council activities. The student council meets regularly during the school year, and members are assigned specific roles aligned with their preferences and plans. This not only increases participation but also creates a more deliberate structure for meaningful engagement based on students' ideas and reflections.

Both schools now report broader representation and greater inclusivity, indicating that alternative access models can strengthen student voice, challenge normative assumptions about leadership, and contribute to more democratic and responsive school governance.

Discussions

This report set out to examine the status, role, and perceived impact of student councils in primary and lower-secondary schools across seven Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Faroe Islands, Greenland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. Our analysis was guided by principles of democratic and citizenship education (Biesta, 2006; Edelstein, 2011; Guðjohnsen, in press) and youth participation (Lundy, 2007).

Drawing from policy mappings, a student survey, youth summits, and focus group interviews, we found a complex and often uneven landscape of student participation across the Nordic countries. The discussion is organised around the proposed research questions, integrating insights from the literature, Covid-19 experiences, and the data collected for this study.

Characteristics of regulation of student councils in the Nordic region

Policy mapping revealed that, except for Sweden, all Nordic countries legally mandate the establishment of student councils in primary and lower-secondary schools. Access to and participation in student councils is usually considered from 5th grade onwards, though in some cases policies mention eligibility of all students. Moreover, policy documents across the Nordic region clearly emphasise the importance of democratic educational processes, representation, and consultations of students. These are in line with the Nordic Council of Ministers' Vision 2030 to ensure children participation in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989).

However, as discussed by Gunnulfsen et al. (2021), implementation often falls short of the ideals of inclusive and effective participation. Our findings show that despite

the policy mandate, many students across the Nordic region are unfamiliar whether or not there is a student council in their school and to what extent it functions on their behalf. Even fewer report having participated in the work of a student council. Participation ranged between 24% and 32% of the surveyed students, with variations by country. Clearly there is a gap between the universal access to democratic platforms within schools, mandated in the policy documents, and the actual lived realities of young people in Nordic schools. While the figures can be read to indicate a reasonable level of involvement, the data also reflects broader systemic issues of unequal participatory opportunities (Griffin, 2022; Harðardóttir & Jónsson, 2021).

For example, in both policy and practice, an emphasis is placed on prioritising older students' participation in student councils. This was evident especially in the findings where the students who reported having participated were mainly in the older age group of 13–16-year-olds and when they spoke about issues student councils were in charge of (i.e. planning events for older students). Such findings indicate that student councils are often overlooked as platforms where younger children can be involved and have a say on many important educational and social issues related to their well-being at school.

While Nordic education policy documents uniformly advocate for democratic schooling, the uneven realisation of student participation underscores the need for ongoing critical reflection, capacity-building, and commitment to genuine participatory culture. The contrast between the progressive Nordic education model and realities of everyday student participation highlights a structural gap, reinforcing critiques from democratic education scholars (Blossing et al., 2014; Jónsson et al., 2021). This is particularly the case during extraordinary times such as the Covid-19 pandemic, as discussed in earlier reports (Helfer et al., 2021; Løberg, 2023), where lack of robust participatory structures became evident and showed the need for a more resilient system to safeguard children's rights in crises and throughout.

Selection processes often lead to unequal participatory opportunities

The student survey indicated that democratic elections are the dominant selection method across schools in the Nordic countries. In some countries, including Denmark and Norway, formal regulations mandate structured elections and operational rules in relation to the selection process. Similar selection processes were also described as part of the qualitative data gathering, during focus group interviews, and by young Nordic experts.

However, critical concerns were raised by young people across the Nordic region that formal democratic selection processes were lacking in transparency and

fairness. Many raised the issue of student councils being prone to popularity contests: students who are elected are described to have a strong socio-economic background or to be in obvious power positions within the school. Additionally, students reported how those elected tend to hold on to their seats and sit for longer periods, impeding other students' opportunities for participation. The legitimacy of student councils in schools, therefore, cannot rest only on formal democratic processes such as elections but must reach deeper to ensure inclusivity and fairness.

The role of staff-working with the student councils often appeared unclear. In some cases, students reported how teachers or school leaders would influence council membership in ways that undermined students' agency and diminished their trust in the democratic potential of student councils. These barriers reflect broader tensions within the context of education between idealistic visions of citizenship education and democratic participation on the one hand and marketised realities of contemporary education on the other (Dovemark et al., 2018; Jónsson, 2016; Guðjohnsen, in press).

Such findings further align with those of previous research (Griffin, 2022; Kempner & Janmaat, 2023) on how traditional structures can inadvertently marginalise certain groups and how superficial democratic forms often mask deeper inequalities (Biesta, 2006; Edelstein, 2011). Reports from students feeling disconnected to decision-making spaces and processes, particularly among those students with disabilities or from marginalised backgrounds, emphasise the importance of considering questions of access to participatory structures within schools in terms of equity and inclusion.

Such reports were strikingly visible during the Nordic Youth Disability Summit, where students with disabilities and minority backgrounds voiced limited participation opportunities within Nordic lower-secondary schools. They also mentioned lack of relevance in councils' agendas causing a sense of mistrust towards conventional participatory structures within the context of education. Their experiences are in line with broader trends showing disengagement and lack of interest in student councils in the Nordic region (ICCS, 2022) and in a wider perspective decreasing trust in public institutions (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Jafarova, 2021). Moreover, their accounts made visible structural and cultural barriers within a perceived democratic and equal Nordic education model (Blossing et al., 2014). The pandemic further exposed these gaps, as noted by Helfer, Aapola-Kari and colleagues (2023), who highlighted the lack of clear participatory avenues and the need to include a broader group of students — not just a few representatives — in decision-making processes such as student councils. This limited inclusivity led to the exclusion of many young people from meaningful participation.

Issues, activities and perceived impact

Findings on what issues students address in a student council further mirror critiques by scholars who claim that student participation is often limited to 'low stake' issues rather than critical civic engagement (Biesta & Lawy, 2006; Guðjohnsen, Jordan et al., 2024a; Westheimer, 2014). While fun activities are important to students' participatory experiences and school culture, as noted by young experts informing this study, there is a risk of missed opportunities to develop deeper democratic engagement and development opportunities (Aðalbjarnardóttir, 2007; Sund & Pashby, 2020).

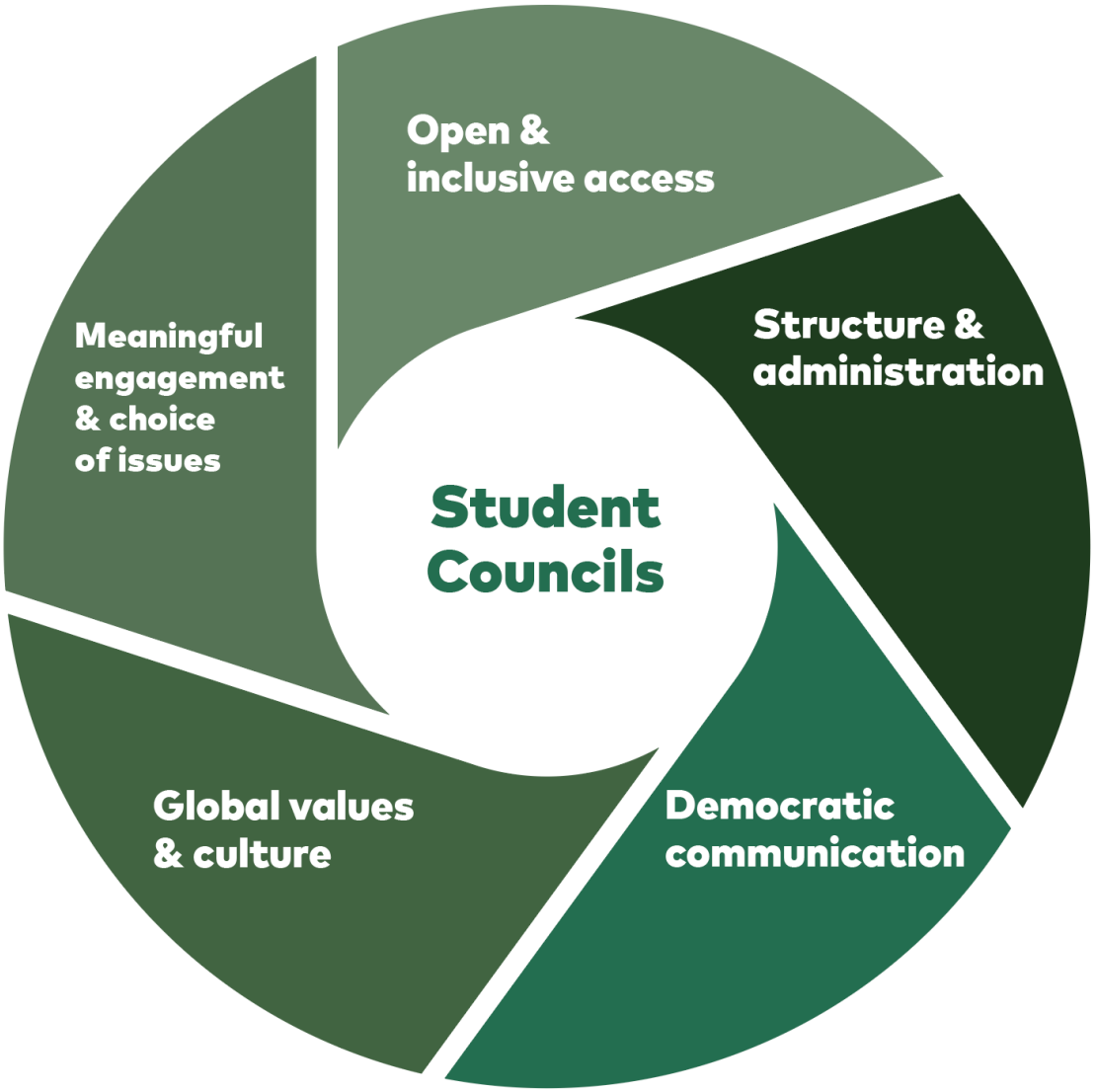
This phenomenon can also be understood within the broader context of marketisation and instrumentalisation of education (Dovemark et al., 2018; Jónsson, 2016), where the emphasis on individual success and short-term outcomes sidelines deeper civic, socio-economic, and cultural issues. As a result, student councils, risk being relegated to organising superficial and predictable activities rather than serving as forums for real democratic engagement, reinforcing concerns raised by Magnússon (2019) and Slee (2011) about the exclusion of critical and diverse voices in education. If student councils are understood in such simplified and tokenistic manner, their impact is equally limited (Griebler & Nowak, 2012).

Our findings show that students feel moderately heard by teachers and school leaders but experience significant frustration over the slow follow-through on suggestions and issues raised within the student council. Again, our findings are consistent with those of previous studies: student councils often serve more symbolic than functional roles. As noted earlier, the Covid-19 experience further underscored the urgent need for more meaningful and responsive communication mechanisms where students' voices are sought in critical matters concerning their education (Donbavand & Hoskins, 2021; Løberg, 2023).

Key areas supporting inclusive and meaningful participation in student councils

The findings of this study highlight key factors that are essential to ensuring that student councils in Nordic schools, function as meaningful platforms for democratic participation and civic engagement. Drawing together the data and literature, we identified five interconnected themes as crucial for strengthening student councils.

Figure 4 Model on student councils' participation



Open and inclusive access

Ensuring that all students, regardless of their age, background, ability, or social standing, can access and participate in student councils is fundamental for promoting genuine democratic participation within schools. Traditional election methods, often relying on majority voting, risk excluding already marginalised voices, while open, hybrid, and flexible participation models could actively encourage representation from a wider spectrum of the student body, including younger students, students with disabilities, minority language speakers, and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Structural supports, such as ensuring physical and communication accessibility, are equally essential. By embedding inclusive practices into the fabric of student council operations, schools move closer to fulfilling the commitments outlined in both the UNCRC and the Nordic Council of Ministers' Vision 2030, ensuring that student representation reflects the diversity

and complexity of contemporary school communities.

Supportive structures and administration

The role of school leadership is pivotal. Administrations must not only establish councils, as stated in regulations, but also genuinely support and empower them. This requires moving beyond tokenistic practices to provide resources, structured time, and adult allies who champion student agency while respecting students' autonomy. Leadership teams and educators must commit to engaging with council proposals in a timely and transparent manner, explaining decisions and highlighting where student input is expected to lead to change. It became clear that many schools are independently 'reinventing the wheel' rather than building on visible and shared structures. This approach often results in isolated efforts rather than systematic support for meaningful participation. Greater collaboration between schools and the establishment of more common guidelines or frameworks for student council work could strengthen consistency, legitimacy, and the overall democratic culture across the education systems. As the Covid-19 experience showed, resilient and supportive administrative practices are essential in safeguarding participatory rights in times of crisis (Løberg, 2023).

Democratic communication

To ensure that councils are meaningful rather than symbolic, communication must be structured, reciprocal, and transparent at three critical levels: within the council, within the school community, and across schools or regional networks. Within councils, it is essential to foster inclusive and participatory dialogue where every member, regardless of background or confidence level, feels empowered to voice their opinions. Clear meeting procedures, rotating chair roles, training in democratic deliberation, and respectful facilitation practices can help ensure that discussions are not dominated by a few voices. Within the wider school community, effective communication involves establishing strong, visible links between the student council and the broader student body. Councils must actively seek input from classmates, either through class representatives, regular feedback sessions, surveys, or open forums. Equally important is the provision of systematic feedback to the student body about how ideas are considered and what outcomes result. At the regional or communal level, fostering communication between councils in different schools offers significant potential for strengthening student participation. Networks of student councils, either formalised through municipal youth councils, cross-school working groups, or regional forums, can facilitate the exchange of ideas and collective advocacy on issues that transcend individual schools.

Meaningful engagement through diverse issues

The data revealed that student councils often focus on organising social events or minor facility improvements. While these activities are valuable, there is a need to broaden councils' mandates to address systemic, educational, and well-being issues that truly matter to students' lives. Addressing more diverse issues such as inclusion, mental health, and sustainability can strengthen students' sense of ownership, relevance, and efficacy in school life, countering trends of marketisation and instrumentalisation in education (Dovemark et al., 2018). By ensuring that councils address a wide range of concerns, reflecting the lived experiences of students from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds and with different experiences, student councils can move towards becoming truly representative forums where all students see their realities and aspirations meaningfully reflected.

Global values and civic culture

Student councils should be embedded within broader goals of education for sustainability and global citizenship. While many councils focus on local issues, a deliberate integration of sustainability, human rights, and social justice topics would foster students' sense of global responsibility and deepen their understanding of interconnected civic realities (Sund & Pashby, 2020; Jónsson & Garces Rodriguez, 2021). Such a shift holds potential to move councils from isolated and often superficial school activities to forums where global democratic values are explored and enacted.

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Appendix A

Student survey

No.	Survey Question	Response Options
1	What class are you in?	1. 5th grade 2. 9th or 10th grade
2	How do you define your gender? *	1. Boy 2. Girl 3. Non-binary 4. Other 5. Don't want to answer *Some countries used a binary gender measure (Boy; Girl)
3	Is there a student council at your school?	1. Yes 2. No 3. I don't know
4	Can you describe what student councils do?	1. Yes. Write a description 2. No, I can't describe it
5	Have you been on a student council?	1. Yes 2. No
6	How long have you been on a student council?	Open-ended response
7	Can you describe how students are elected for the student councils?	1. Yes. Describe how 2. No
8	Are you interested in joining a student council?	1. Yes 2. No
9	Do you think school leaders and teachers consider proposals from student councils?	1. Yes. Describe how 2. No
10	Can you describe issues that student councils have had influence on at your school?	1. Yes. Give examples 2. No

Appendix B

Interview guide

Participation in student council

- How long have you been participating in the pupil's council?
- Have you been involved in pupils' councils before or in another school / social setting?
- For how long do pupils usually sit in the council?

Selection process – access and equity

- How are pupils selected for the pupils' council? (Asked by teachers, principals, elections in class, elections in school, other ways…)
    - How are issues of diversity considered?
    - Would you say that the group of pupils in the council is diverse, if yes how exactly?
    - Is this important, if yes, why?
- What is the best or most suitable way of putting together a pupils' council in your opinion?

Goals and aims of the pupil's council

- Where you introduced to any, rules, goals or aims of the pupil's councils?
    - If yes, what did these goals/aims include?
    - Were you able to discuss, choose or decide upon aims, goals and rules for the pupils' council?
    - In your opinion, what should be the main aim of pupils' councils – in other words why are they important?

Main projects of the pupil's council

- What were some of the main themes or issues the pupils' council has worked on during your time?
    - Who decides what projects or issues to focus on?
    - Can you give an example of a project the council has worked on?

Working methods

- How often do you meet in the council?
- Who oversees or runs the meetings?
- Is everyone able to share their opinion on the matters discussed in the council?
- If yes, how is this guaranteed?
- How do you conclude the issues discussed in the council?
- Do you ever experience disagreement in the council?
- How do you react or resolve it?
- Are members of the council supported by a special person or staff member from the school?
- What type of support is offered to the council?
- Do you consider it helpful, too little, too much?

Audience

- When decisions are made in the council, how are they put in motion? Who do you refer to for actualizing your decisions (principal, teachers, focal person, township).
- Does the council have a platform to reach out to students and teachers (i.e. social media, web page or hang up board).
- Can you give an example of when you decided upon a matter within the council and were able to move or change things based on that decision
- Do you feel like your ideas or decisions are valued and concerned in the school or wider society?
- Can you give an example of this if not provided already.

Influence

- Do you feel like decisions made in the council influence or impact your education, i.e. what or how you learn?
- Are there other areas within or outside the school you feel the council can influence? Can you provide an example of this?

Representative democracy

- How do you in the council make sure you are representing the voice and thoughts of other students in your school?
- Does the council ever meet or engage with other pupils' councils in other schools?
- Have representatives had opportunities to participate in democratic events

beyond their own school?

- Do representatives from the pupils' council have a seat in the school board or other management or administrative bodies in the school?

*If applicable, you can ask about students' experience of running the pupils' council during COVID-19 time (this might however be more applicable to ask teachers or staff members as students might not have been involved in the council during COVID-19).

Questions aimed at focal/informative person, principal or teachers involved with the pupils' council:

- What is your role in relation to or in support of the pupils' council in the school?
- How would you describe the aims or goals of the pupils' council?
- Do you feel that the pupils' council is able to influence matters within the school?
- Can you give an example describing a typical project or matter the council has been involved in.
- Do you think the council in your school is different or similar to other pupils' councils in the area/region/country?
- If different, how or what makes it different?
- Are you involved in the selection process of the council?
- Do you feel that the council represents diversity and inclusion of all students? (think about space, voice, audience and influence)
- Can you give an example of why or why not?
- What is the most ideal way of running a pupil's council in your opinion?
- Consider both internal and external context and resources.
- What are some of the external circumstances that have impacted the way the pupils' council is run today.
- How did Covid-19 impact the work of the pupil's council in your school?
- Was the council operational during the pandemic?
- Were students engaged or considered for decision making at this point?
- ...

About the publication

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