

Barriers and Facilitators to Child Participation Within the Child Protection Context
in sub-Saharan Africa

by

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B.A (Hons.), Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology
(KNUST), 2017

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
in the School of Child and Youth Care

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We acknowledge and respect the Lək̓ʷəŋən (Songhees and X̱wsep̓səm/ Esquimalt) Peoples
on whose territory the university stands, and the Lək̓ʷəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples whose
historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

Child welfare policies and laws in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), along with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), require involving children in welfare and protection decisions that affect them. Yet, till date, research on the degree to which children and young persons are involved in the region is limited. This study explores the factors that hinder or support children's role in decision-making within child protection.

This study used a scoping review methodology, following PRISMA ScR-2020 guidelines, to map practical, structural, cultural and systemic challenges to children's involvement in welfare or protection decisions. Seventeen (17) included articles were chosen and reviewed from an initial pool of 2,262; literature was screened with Covidence software (Babineau, 2014).

The study findings revealed that entrenched cultural norms, weak recognition of children's participation rights, and inadequate child-friendly practices are the major barriers to child participation in SSA. Inconsistencies in international child participation standards, and unclear clarity on age, maturity, and competencies threshold are also key challenges. The study suggests culturally relevant ways to improve children's involvement in SSA.

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Acknowledgement

Firstly, I would like to express my deeper appreciation to my supervisor, Prof. Doris M. Kakuru, for your feedback, encouragement and guidance throughout my master's thesis process. I am grateful that you have allowed me to stand on your shoulders and see into the next chapter of my life. You have been instrumental in my learning journey. I wish to also extend my sincere appreciation to my committee member, Prof. Shanne McCaffrey. Thank you for coming through for me in times of need.

This two-year Child and Youth Care programme would not have been possible without my spouse, Queen Jennifer, and my beautiful daughter Bithiah Gariba. The friends and colleagues I encountered, especially Fattaneh, Kyla, Lawrence, your company and insightful discussions made me feel at home most of the time. To the leadership of Church of Pentecost Canada, especially the Victoria Assembly, thy prayers and encouragements made this possible.

I also deem it a great honour to use this medium to express my heartfelt appreciation to the Commissioner of Police, Emmanuel Twumasi Ankrah (The Eastern Region Police Commander-Ghana), Rev. (Prof.) Frances Emily Owusu-Ansah, Prof. Peter Dwumah and my mother, Mrs. Kagao Kwuyiwuu Gariba, for supporting my aspirations to pursue further education outside Ghana. I would like to acknowledge the spirit of my ancestors, especially my father, who laid the foundations, and my guiding angel.

As the adage goes, to begin demonstrates desire, but to finish demonstrates perseverance. This is not only a master's thesis, but also a masterpiece birthed out of commitment, passion and a sense of care for children and young people experiencing different forms of barriers in the sub-Saharan Africa context. I finally thank God for the strength, goodwill and health which carried me throughout this challenging expedition.

Chapter 1: Introduction

“No one is born a good citizen; no nation is born a democracy. Rather, both are processes that continue to evolve over a lifetime. Children and Young people must be included from birth.

A society that cuts itself off from its children and youth severs its lifeline; it is condemned to bleed to death”

Kofi Annan (1998, p. 21)

Secretary-General, United Nations

Children’s and young persons' rights to participate, and having their voices heard and acted upon, are stipulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN General Assembly, 1989). The aim is to ensure their active involvement in decision-making processes and the development of mainstream society (Collins et al., 2021). According to UNICEF, (2018), children’s right to participate in decision-making is a crucial aspect of inclusion in a democratic society. As stated by Vis et al. (2011), involving children in decision-making boosts their self-esteem and is also associated with an increased feeling of prowess and control. However, literature has shown that there is a dearth of children and young persons involved in decision-making in Africa (Abdullah et al., 2018; Imoh, 2024). Reflecting on the above assertions, child participation is one of the most complex and sensitive aspects of practice (Abdullah 2021; Healy, 2009). The above argument ties in with Viviers and Lombard’s (2013) observation about the growing sentiment among children globally regarding the non-participation culture in matters about their welfare. Literature suggests that the continual marginalisation and frustration of children’s and young persons’ (CYP) rights to participation were one of the leading factors of the recent END-SARs protests, where children decided to

rebel against authority figures (Iwuoha & Aniche, 2021). The Acronym END-SARs in this context refers to the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a unit of the Nigerian Police Department known for its long record of abuse against Nigerian citizens.

According to Amnesty International (2020), the BBC (2020), CNN (2020) and the Guardian (2021), at least 56 young persons were killed, and hundreds of thousands were severely injured at Alausa and Lekki Toll Gate Lagos during the ENDSARs protest. This resonates with Kofi Annan, UN general secretary (1998, p.21) statement - 'A society that cuts itself off from its children and young persons severs its lifeline; it is condemned to bleed to death'. Children's peaceful assembly and exercise to register their displeasure and for their voices to be heard and acted upon were clamped down on and disrupted by government officials (police). These protesters per the reportage, sought to express their grievances against systemic repression of children's voices in the sub-Saharan context. The above incident highlights a broader culture of political non-participation, where children are often compelled to remain silent as their voices and rights are forcibly suppressed (Iorfa et al., 2022; Sebti et al., 2019). The above raises the curiosity of the researcher to questioned what the barriers to child participation are in the sub-Saharan African context (SSA).

Conceptualizations of Childhood in SSA

Childhood in sub-Saharan Africa is socially construed and context-dependent, not strictly defined by age (Gatsinzi & Hilson, 2022; Kajubi et al., 2016). Accordingly, Meinert (2009, p. 15) observed that among the "Iteso people in Eastern Uganda, age in years is seldom used as a marker of maturity; the definition of a child depends on their life situation as well as the specific context". Research also reported that African scholarship does not universally define childhood by biological factors such as age, but rather as socially constructed (Imoh, 2016). For instance, among the Iteso in Eastern Uganda, Igbos in Nigeria, Akan's in Ghana and other tribes in the

sub-Saharan context, age is not the primary marker of childhood; rather, society defines roles and life events that determine whether an individual is considered a child or not. Literature shows that “a 17-year-old female who is married and has given birth is not regarded as a child in her marital home, but is considered a child when visiting her parental home” (Kajubi et al., 2016, p.7). Similarly, a 25-year-old unmarried man living at home with his parents may still be seen as a child (2016, p. 7). Reflecting on the above instances illustrates that childhood in SSA is shaped by environmental and cultural factors, rather than by universal biological or psychological stages. The above perspective contradicts Western notions of childhood as a biologically driven, homogeneous period and instead stresses its diversity and fluidity within SSA contexts (Imoh, 2016).

The scholarship, therefore, widely highlights how cultural norms of obedience, respect, and interconnectedness shape children’s geographies and their social positions (Gatsinzi & Hilson, 2022). Kajubi et al. (2016) argue that African childhood is rooted in communalism, where children assume the position of social apprentices whose primary responsibility is to integrate into family and community life through observation, duties, and respect for elders. This social orientation often prioritises children’s rights to protection, care and social belongings over their rights to self-expression or participation in decision-making processes (Abebe & Ofose-Kusi, 2016). In line with the above assertions, Agbényiga (2011) notes that generational and adultist hierarchies and cultural perspectives placed on respect for elders restrict children’s opportunities to voice out their opinions, as speaking out may be interpreted as challenging the cultural norm and elderly authority. Such cultural expectations corroborate with interpretations of children as dependents whose parents and elderly figures act in their best interest, thereby

limiting the implementation of children's participatory rights, such as those stipulated in Article 12 of the UNCRC (Imoh, 2016).

Rights-based initiatives, such as those informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), advocate for viewing children as active, knowledgeable social actors with valuable insights into their own lives (UNICEF, 2018). However, the actual participation of children in decision-making in SSA remains constrained by entrenched discourses of power and participation (André, & Hilgers, 2015). The tension between international child-rights frameworks and African worldviews is further highlighted by scholars such as Maconachie and Hilson (2016), who emphasises that the UNCRC stances on children's autonomy conflict with SSA relational understandings of childhood. The ratification of the UNCRC marks a significant shift in the conceptualization of childhood by recognizing children as social agents with the right to participate in decisions affecting their lives. Article 12 of the UNCRC specifically states that children capable of forming their own views have the right to express those opinions freely in all matters affecting them, with their views given due weight according to age and maturity (Kurtoglu & Arda, 2025). This principle is further echoed in the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), which also emphasizes participation rights (Cody et al., 2025; Kurtoglu & Arda, 2025).

Justification of Terminologies Used in the Study

Both the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, United Nations 1989, Article 1) and the SSA various constitutions of the countries, to mention a few, like the Republic of Uganda (1995), Ghana (1992), South Africa (1996) etc clearly define a child as a person below the age of 18 years (Kajubi et al., 2016; Meinert, 2009, Manful & Manful, 2014). Conversely, anthropological studies show that there are varying perspectives concerning the concept and extent of childhood in SSA (Punch, 2003). Empirical findings of cross-cultural variations in

childhood are acknowledged extensively in the literature, and differences have been observed in constructions of childhood between the global north and global south (Bühler-Niederberger & Van Krieken, 2008, p. 148). Literature consistently demonstrates that in many SSA contexts, biological age is not the primary marker of childhood; instead, childhood is shaped by social roles, community expectations and relational status (Kajubi et al., 2016). As such, deploying entrenched age-based categories risks muddying the complex lived realities of children and young persons (CYP) whose transitions into adulthood do not align neatly with chronological age markers.

Therefore, to address this conceptual gap, this study employs the terms ‘child’, ‘children’, and ‘children and young persons’ (CYP) interchangeably when discussing child participation and agency. This approach aligns with current scholarship, which argues that child vulnerabilities, dependencies and risks affecting their geographies in SSA do not abruptly end when they reach 18years of age (Abebe & Ofofu-Kusi, 2016). Studies further indicate that many young African persons remain economically, socially, or emotionally dependent on families or state structures well into their twenties due to factors such as limited employment opportunities, socio-cultural expectations and prolonged transitions to independent adulthood (Mugadza et al., 2019). Reflecting critically on the above research findings, underscore the need for a more flexible and inclusive approach that recognize the continuity of childhood-related welfare and protections needs beyond strict biological age thresholds.

Although, existing age policy frameworks like United Nations definition of ‘youth’ (15-24years) and the categorization of ‘young persons’ (10-24years) are widely used in developmental and population studies (Pence, & Nsamenang, 2008), they do not completely exhaust the culturally embedded transitions that shape childhood realities in SSA. However,

these worldviews are crucial for synthesising the literature on child participation in SSA (Imoh, 2016). In light of these considerations, integrating the broader terms ‘child’, children and young persons’ (CYP) within the current study is both conceptually appropriate and methodologically sound.

Conceptualizing Child Participation in SSA

Scholars highlighted that there are existing entrenched adult-centric norms, a lack of child friendliness and systemic barriers that persistently repress the voices of children and young adults in Africa (Haffejee, & Levine, 2020; Viviers & Lombard, 2013). This contradicts Vandeborne’s (2019) views on children and youth-friendly institutions' arguments in the sub-Saharan context. Vandeborne noted that such child friendliness does not only prioritize children and young people’s wellbeing but also actively engages them in decision-making processes. However, Abdullah et al. (2018), and Imoh and Okyere, (2020) refuted such claims that, the context of such child-friendliness in Africa reflects only policy index that support children and young people from neglect, abuse and exploitations. Similar to the above observation, Iorfa et al. (2022) critique that, most of the governments and professional institutions do not involve children in decision-making, especially in matters such as adoption, and institution placement arrangements.

This congruence with Manful et al. (2020) and Cudjoe et al. (2020) that the cultural construction of children as passive recipients of adult socialization further inhibits child participation in Africa. This aligns with perspectives that view children as incomplete or biologically immature, characterized by powerlessness and dependence (Wall, 2022). The perceptions of childhood as a “cessation and preparatory phase” further challenges children's ability to express their opinion in matters that affect them (Cudjoe et al., 2020; Qvortrup, 2017, p. 2). Cultural practices and other barriers typically prevent children from having a say in adult-

oriented decisions (Abdullah et al., 2018). Consequently, children are not expected to challenge or correct adults, even when mistakes are made (Gariba & Rømer, 2024). Children who express opinions or show assertiveness are often considered rude or poorly raised (Adonteng-Kissi, 2023).

The above correlates with current literature which highlights that children's and young people's participation in the broad range of child protection in Africa remains underdeveloped and poorly construed (Adonteng-Kissi, 2023; Cudjoe, 2019, Manongi, 2022; Truter, & Fouché, 2021). According to Gibbs, (2019) children's voices globally continue to be marginalized in critical matters such as child placement and decision-making processes, and Africa is not an exception. Although there have been notable strides towards recognizing children's geographies (Kakuru, 2023; Nonyana-Mokabane, 2012; Truter, & Fouché, 2021), there remains a glaring gap between theory, reality and practice in the sub-Saharan context, particularly concerning the gaps in how child participation is understood and operationalized in Africa. Moreover, the discourse on Children's and young people's rights remains fraught with challenges pertaining to participation and protection, necessitating urgent attention from researchers and welfare practitioners to map the barriers and facilitators that either inhibit or include children's and young adults' (Haffejee, & Levine, 2020).

Following the above scientific findings on the barriers to children's and young people's inclusion, necessitated the need to map the theoretical underpinning that guides the exploration into the current study, especially the possible facilitators or enablers to child participation in the sub-Saharan Context.

Theoretical Framework

This section conceptualized the foundational theories, concepts, and ideas that serve as a starting inference to guide the study processes. The study, therefore, approached theory from the abductive critical thinking lenses (best available or plausible assumption). The essence of this section is to critically engage the theoretical underpinnings of Lundy's model of child participation, which had its groundings in critical childhood studies (Correia et al., 2022; Lundy & O'Donnell, 2021; Lundy, 2018; Ward & Lundy, 2024).

The model also encompasses a diverse and evolving discourse that explores the intricate dynamics of childhood in relation to power, social structures and child's geographies or agencies (Griffin, 2024; Long & Grant, 2024). Advancing the critical discourse surrounding child participation, Lundy's model surfaces as a pivotal framework for understanding the barriers and facilitators to children involvement in welfare decision-making process (Moore, 2019). Literature argues that the theory (model) not only captures the essence of child participatory practice but also elucidates the instrument through which children's and young people's voices can be effectively heard and acted upon in child welfare and social protection decision-making settings (Henze-Pedersen & Bengtsson, 2024).

The Foundation of Lundy's Model

This conceptual model was coined by Laura Lundy, a professor of international children's rights at the School of Education at the Queen's University of Belfast (Lundy, 2007). Her model as detailed in the 2007 publication in the British Educational Journal, which provides a critical theoretical lens to conceptualized child right to participation. Lundy's (2007) child participation model is therefore, deeply fastened under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

(UNCRC) article 12. The article states that children have the right to express their opinions freely in social protection matters affecting them (Bradwell, 2019; Lundy, 2007). Contemporary writers emphasized that, the above legal framework is not just merely aspirations or ambitious desire but rather a binding policy that mandates structural improvements and implementation of child-friendly spaces across governance and practice (Kennan et al., 2018). The above theoretical depth enforces Lundy's child participation relevance, allowing researchers, practitioners and policymakers to conceptualized children and young people involvement within welfare institutional frameworks, thereby establishing methods for practice accountability and responsiveness (Skauge et al., 2012).

In line with the above assertions, Meloni et al. (2015) argues for a critical rethinking of children's voice and geographies (agencies) in broader contexts that acknowledge their dependence on social relations and institutions. The following sub-section shall contextualize Lundy's child participation model to the current study context in relations to the model four lens of viewing participation.

Conceptual Structure of the Model: Space, Voice, Audience and Influence



Figure 1. (Lundy, 2007, p. 932)

As indicated in the above fig.1, Lundy's model encapsulates four interwoven components such as, - Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence. Lundy (2007) argues that the above four

domains synergistically function to promote genuine child participation. Literature argues that participation in general begins with providing children and young people the avenue, time and opportunity to engage (Correia et al., 2022). Therefore, Lundy stated that, creating a safe and supportive environment (space) that enable children to participate is first and foremost an encourager or facilitator to child participation globally (2007)

Another key feature of Lundy's child participation model is voice. Voice in this context underscores the importance of facilitating children's expression and ensuring that their views are heard (p. 935). Lundy asserts that, simply creating a space for expression is inadequate (Lundy, 2007, p. 936). In responding to Lundy's assertions, Long and Grant (2024) posit explicitly that, childcare workers and other professionals must actively support children and young people to articulate their views.

Moreover, audience is one of the modules of Lundy's child participation theory. Lundy highlighted that simply giving children a space, voice or opportunity to speak is not enough (Lundy, 2018; Ward & Lundy, 2024). In relation to the above, Olsen (2023) emphasized that a guaranteed audience for children where their perspectives are seriously listened to signifies participation. This implies a crucial phase to child participation process because it alters children's views from mere expression into meaningful communication that can influence outcomes (Lundy, 2007). Therefore, without a proper audience, children and young people's views risk being ignored, dismissed, or not appropriately integrated into decisions (Moore, 2019). This made Lundy state that, child protection workers ensuring an audience that is both accommodating and capable of understanding and acting on their views is necessary for meeting the legal rights as stipulated in Article 12 of the UNCRC (Lundy, 2018).

The last domain of Lundy's model is influence. Influence in this context stresses the necessity of translating children's voice or views into tangible actions. Literature argues that children and young people's participation should not be constrained to merely expressing their opinions or being listened to; rather, their perspectives must also be given due weight (Correia et al., 2022; Lundy & O'Donnell, 2021). Lundy emphasized the need for a mechanism to ensure children are informed about how their views are considered and whether they affect the final decision (Lundy, 2007).

Reflecting on the above, underscores the importance of not just listening to children and young people but also acting upon their views as necessary. Also, Lundy's child participation model components are interdependent, reflecting a non-linear correlation. That is the depth of and significance of Lundy's model to the current study lie in the above interconnectedness. I shall, therefore, reflect on the above theoretical relevancy of this model in the context of barriers and facilitators to child participation within the child protection or welfare systems in the sub-Saharan Africa.

Theoretical Efficacy in Assessing Child Protection Systems

Conceptualizing and applying Lundy's child participation model to child protection in Africa implies ensuring children have safe space to express their opinions, facilitate or creating a friendly environment and tailored it to their geographies, respecting and listening to these opinions and more importantly guaranteeing that children and young people perspectives influence protective decisions. The current study draws on Lundy's model as an analytical tool for mapping the barriers and facilitators to child participation within the child protection systems.

In the child protection context, applying Lundy's theoretical lens involves evaluating whether and how children and young people in the sub-Saharan African context are involved in

decision-making processes that affect their safety and wellbeing (Moore, 2019). Mining for seed papers for this current study revealed that, elements of Lundy's child participation model illuminate the study goals and specific areas to explore. Vis and Lauritzen (2020), study observe that child welfare and protection services practitioners must constantly assess service structures. This is because, service agencies that opt to ensure that children and young people have a voice could rather be repressing such voices, thereby undermining their involvement in decision-making (Long & Grant, 2024). Therefore, professionals must evaluate the accessibility and effectiveness of such child welfare and protection services. By doing the above, literature shows that practitioners can identify how service models either enable or hinder children's participation (Vis & Lauritzen, 2020). Considering the above, Schiller et al., (2023) also argues that, examining barriers or gaps in policy is essential for fostering child participation in practice.

Drawing on Lundy's model to guide this current study, Henze-Pedersen and Bengtsson (2024) stated that, the model provides researchers and practitioners a normative lens for evaluating and implementing child-friendly practice. This will enable child protection workers to identify systemic weakness (barriers) and areas for change (Correia et al., 2022).

Having reflected on the theoretical underpinning guiding this study, the next section of the thesis would, therefore, contextualize my positionality. According to Milner (2007) critical self-location is crucial in research as it informs the researcher's positionality and biases, shaping the depth and quality of the research process.

Researcher self-location

I identify as a cisgender male, neurotypical, and adult man from the Indigenous Kasem tribe in Chiana-Kanania, the Upper East region of Ghana. I grew up without social protection and child support. I loss my father when I was only seven years old, and this has been a self-

propelling journey which shaped my perspective, life choices, trust and professional academic path. I am currently a graduate student studying Child, Youth, Family and Community Studies (CYFCS) at the University of Victoria. I have experience in social work and social activism and have served as a leader of an NGO. I have committed my time to joining peer and child support programmes as well as volunteering in many service-oriented fields to contribute my quota in advocating for a fair society that enables children and young people to strive for a better future and for their voices to be heard. As a BIPOC student in Canada, my identity and memories are shaped by the legacy of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and the ongoing impacts of slavery and genocide on Black and Indigenous communities. Today, these histories persist through a weaponized neo-colonialism and immigration policies that continue to control people from the Global South in Canada and other parts of the world.

As I continue to reckon with my identity as a person of colour with African Indigenous roots, my positionality has influenced my research lens, approaches to social justice engagements, advocacy tone and sense of empathy in this MA thesis. Being nurtured in a society with strong family and cultural values but limited resources and facilitators to child involvement in decision-making, I understand the deep impact of voicelessness and its psychosocial effects on children and young people in Africa as well as BIPOC communities' children and young people struggles in Canada and other parts of the world. I, therefore, commit myself to continually hone my care approach, cultural competence, advocacy as well as sharpen my social justice lens that would enable me to support and stand in solidarity with BIPOC communities' children and young people seeking freedom and equitable access to social services in Canada, Africa and other parts of the world.

In terms of epistemology, I see knowledge production as developing through dialogues, critical self-reflection, and engagement with various cultural contexts. I value reciprocal learning, where children and young people's agencies and ways of knowing connect with Western dominant philosophies and cultural orientations in Africa. Knowledge viewed through cultural and other philosophical lenses is a connection shaped by our lived experiences and contacts that influence the world we live in. As a researcher, I recognize my ethical obligation to the people and communities I do research with, and I value mutual relations that are polite, responsive, and culturally sensitive.

In terms of axiology, I hereby admit the possible effect my critical self-location may have on this study, and I commit to be ethically responsible in screening and synthesizing of the study data. My goal is to advocate for children and young people's inclusion and their values to co-create solutions that aligned with their wellbeing or needs. I value the significance of strengthening the voices of these children and advocating for welfare policies that address social barriers that inhibit their involvement in child protection meetings. As such, as practice-researcher, I approach this study as a helper rather than an expert, ensuring that my research deploys an inclusive and empowering language that rejects systemic barriers. Moreover, I avoid generalizations and worldviews of the needs and experiences of children in the sub-Saharan context; and instead, recognize the nuances and diversity that shape their lived realities.

Research Objectives and Questions

This thesis investigates the factors that either inhibit or enable children's and young people's inclusion in decision-making processes in Africa. The study utilizes scoping review approach to map the literature on barriers and facilitators to child participation within the child

welfare or protection system in the sub-Saharan Africa. The specific research questions guiding this study are as follows.

1. What are the barriers to child participation in child protection settings in Sub-Saharan Africa?
2. What are the gaps in how child participation is understood and operationalized in the Sub-Saharan Context?
3. What are the possible facilitators or enablers to child participation in the Sub-Saharan Context?

Thesis Outline

This study adopts the scoping review methodology to investigate the lived realities of factors that either enable or inhibit children and young people's inclusivity in child welfare or protection decision-making processes that affect their daily lives. Chapter 2 presents a thorough review of the existing body of literature, focusing on child participation, social protection (welfare), barriers, and facilitators to children's and young people's inclusivity. Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology and data screening, analysis process. Chapter 4 details and presents the findings, thematically coded and conceptualized into themes for discussion. Chapter 5 discusses the study findings in relation to existing literature and theory. Chapter 6 presents implications and policy recommendations, summary and conclusions, and highlights the contribution of the study to research and future studies.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter presents an empirical literature review to reflect what has been mapped on the barriers and facilitators to children's and young people's involvement in decision-making processes in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). The essence of this literature review is to explore existing scholarly works on children's voice in Africa. It starts by gathering the literature through a multi-database search, including the University of Victoria APA PsycINFO, EBSCOhost, Medline, Google Scholar, Web of Science, and Africa Index Medicus. Non-governmental organizations, and governments of SSA countries website searches for gray literature were also conducted. Key search strings or Boolean operators such as participat* OR engag* OR involv* OR input OR voice OR inclusion; child* OR youth* OR adolescen* OR teen* OR young*; "child welfare" OR child services" in conjunction with either "Sub-Saharan Africa", OR "Sahael" OR individualized countries were inserted into the above search engines. Afterwards, I synthesize the evidence on child participation, social protection or welfare. Then, I present literature and trends on barriers and facilitators to child participation.

Context of Child Participation in Sub-Saharan Africa

Current literature has predicted that the Sub-Saharan Africa region is likely to experience a significant demographic shift (Blum, 2007; Canning et al., 2015). That the region is poised to have the world's largest growing population of children and young people aged 10-24 years (Aboderin et al., 2020). As of 2015, UNICEF highlighted that by 2050, the number of children and young people in Africa would swell to approximately 605 million, a significant increase from the expected 436 million in 2025 (Ackah-Baidoo, 2016). Current literature has also indicated the significance of children's and young people's involvement in developmental

matters, decision-making and welfare or protection arrangements (Kennan et al., 2018; Skelton, 2013). However, research has reported a dearth of studies on the degree to which children and young people's voices are heard and taken into account in child welfare and protection settings in Africa (Abdullah et al., 2018; Imoh & Okyere, 2020, Iorfa et al., 2022; Tisdall, 2013; Wilson et al., 2020). As Frimpong-Manso, (2014) argues, children and young people are the custodians of the future. However, Twum-Danso and Okyere (2020) note that African children and young adults are sidelined in decision-making and welfare or protection initiatives.

Omitting young people from decision-making is incongruent with the (UNCRC), which specified that children and young people have the right to participate and for their voice be heard in decisions affecting their lives (Andersen, & Dolva, 2015; Lundy, 2007). The UNCRC has therefore been labelled the most powerful legal instrument of the twentieth century for protecting the rights of children and young people (Manful & Manful, 2014; Tobin & Cashmore, 2020). Its large endorsement by 194 of the 196 United Nations member states underscores the global importance of child protection and participation (Gariba & Rømer, 2024). One of its critical assumptions is that, at policy and practice level, children's rights to participation and protection will enlighten and guide practitioners and other child-friendly institutions with a sense of responsibility regarding children's geographies (Manful & Manful, 2014).). This necessitate exploring the existing barriers and facilitators that practitioners encounter in promoting child protection and participation in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Conceptualizing Child Protection in SSA

Historically, child protection in the African context was customarily kinship-oriented care practice (Frimpong-Manso, 2014; Iorfa et al., 2022; Imoh & Okyere, 2020). The extended families and community networks offer care and protection for children whose parents were dead

or incapable of providing care (Abdullah et al., 2018). Such cultural practices and ceremonies enhance the child's well-being and children's geographies, especially in the case of foster children from dysfunctional or poor families (Gariba & Rømer, 2024).

Despite the benefits this system possesses, it harms children because it denies their rights to participation (Cudjoe, 2020; Sarfo et al., 2019). Scholars argued that care favors from kinship care and other community projects ties force children to do their biddings and children and young people are not well represented in decision-making processes (Abdullah et al., 2018; Sarfo et al., 2020). The complexities surrounding child protection practices reflect the intricate interplay of institutional policies and implementation dynamics in Africa (Cudjoe, 2020; Frimpong-Manso, 2014; Sarfo et al., 2019). Therefore, it is imperative for the researcher to critically explore the barriers the child protection system presents in Africa.

Reports indicated that the presence of western ideologies in Africa has weakened and eroded the beautiful traditional kinship care system and communalism discussed above (Gariba & Rømer, 2024; Manful et al., 2021). Literature had it that most African countries such as South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya recently have a relatively robust child protection framework, (Akinwotu, 2022; Boehmer, 2020). The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), adopted in 1990, is a robust regional framework guiding child protection across African countries (Africa Union, 1990; Murray, 2004). Maimbolwa (2019) critiques the ACRWC robust foundation, arguing that its practical implementation varies significantly across member states due to differences in political will and resources. Scholars also assert that most countries child protection frameworks like the South Africa Children's Acts 38 of 2005, Nigeria's Child Rights Act (CRA) of 2003, Ghana's Children Act 560, aligns with many provisions from the UNCRC (Imoh & Okyere, 2020).

However, in 2010 Ghana was ranked 29th out of 52 African countries for child-friendliness (Ruiz-Casares, 2010). This is not encouraging for a country that was the first to gain independence in Sub-Sahara Africa as well as sign both the UNCRC and the ACRWC (Manful & Manful, 2014).

The literature suggests that children's rights, particularly in rural communities are violated by negative cultural practices (Abdullah et al., 2021; Sarfo et al., 2020). According to Vandeborne (2019), implementation of UNCRC and ACRWC in Africa remains a challenge, especially in rural areas where resources are scarce. This corroborates with Akinwotu (2022) observations on resource limitations and lack of policies enforcement in Africa. African countries' failure to protect children and young adults against adultism, exploitation and maltreatment could be linked to cultural and systemic barriers that need practitioners' and researchers' attention (Abdullah et al., 2018). The failure of the above-mentioned legislations and frameworks to ensure children's safety raises what we call a child protection irony in Africa (Gariba & Rømer, 2024). Therefore, exploring the gaps in how children and young people's involvement in protection meetings is understood and operationalized in the Sub-Saharan Context would go a long way to enhance children's geographies in Africa.

Barriers to Child participation

Scholars stipulated that, such barriers often stem from diverse interwoven factors that either influence or inhibit children's involvement in decision-making processes (Coyne et al., 2014). Literature therefore broadly categorized these challenges into systemic, socio-economic, attitudinal and cultural factors that frequently intersect with each other to aggravate children vulnerability around their rights to participation (Gottschalk & Borhan, 2023). The above correlates with reports from Theis (2007) that inadequate public services and life-threatening

extenuation factors directly affect the wellbeing of children in southern Asia. Research also argues, while social protection programs in Africa have emerged as vital instruments to fight issues such as malnutrition, inadequate funding and administrative capacity often hamstring child protection and welfare programs implementation (Boland et al., 2019; Ehlers & Frank, 2016). Moreover, disparities exist between child protection frameworks and their actual implementation, (Chikuruwo & Rautenbach, 2024). For instance, Adu-Gyamfi (2015) argues that despite the ACRWC clearly enunciating systemic challenges, and children rights to participation often undermine compliance. I shall therefore elucidate the above barriers in relation to the study topic- child participation.

Systemic, and Attitudinal Barriers

Literature suggests that policies and structures are the intrinsic factors that are intertwined with practitioners' discretion (street-level bureaucracies) (Brodkin, 2012; Lipsky, 2010). This is supported by Bijleveld et al. (2013), who observed that practitioners' professional attitudes and knowledge about children's capacity to participate significantly influence their involvement in decision-making processes. Research suggests that many childcare workers have the view that children lack the ability to partake in multifaceted decision-making, which severely limits their participation rights (Skivenes & Strandbu, 2006). As sighted by Race and Frost (2022), limiting children rights to have a voice perpetuates a cycle where children feel disempowered and marginalized with service agencies designed for safeguarding their wellbeing. The above therefore shed lights on fundamental issues where existing structures might not prioritize child participation, resulting in inadequate conceptualization of children's needs. Considering this, Miller et al. (2013) and Toros (2021), emphasize systems which fail to include child voice may

not respond effectively to children experiences, thereby undermining the efficacy of child protection strategies.

As argued by Kennan et al. (2018) and Thurston et al. (2025), once children and young people's voices are overlooked during family welfare case conferences, it reflects a larger systemic issue in Africa, where child welfare systems fail to recognize child's geographies and their right to participation. Subsequently, a failure to create space for children to participate can lead to welfare decisions that do not reflect children's best interest (Lundy, 2007). Current studies have shown that even when child participation frameworks exist, the system and practitioners may still fail to engage all children equitably (Adu-Gyamfi, 2015). The above corroborates with Buckley et al. (2010) arguments that, societal attitudes towards children and young people across the globe presents a critical role in shaping their experiences within child welfare systems. They further report that, there exists a normative perspective that prioritizes adults' perspectives over children, often sidelining their voices in the decision-making processes (Buckley et al., 2010). According to Anghel et al. (2013) cultural norms may influence beliefs of childhood and the rights of children and young people in specific geographical contexts. For instance, Anghel et al. argues that, despite the comprehensive child protection legislation in Eastern Europe, the gap between policy and practice remains substantial due to societal norms that devalue children's and young people's voice (Anghel et al., 2013). Therefore, the above entrenched cultural norms and worldviews are echoed in the Sub-Saharan Africa contexts.

Scholars argue that, the socio-economic challenges in various communities in Sub-Saharan Africa often hinder the implementation of child protection legislation (Fokala, 2017). Research findings by Mhizha and Nhedzi (2013) show that child protection services lack the necessary resources, infrastructure and skilled practitioners to function effectively in terms of

rendering services to children in welfare context. The above systemic inadequacy highlighted by Mhizha and Nhedzi (2013) can lead to lack of engagement with children during welfare related decision-making processes.

Following the above, such norms are not in congruence with the UNCRC, the Africa rights charter and other legislative frameworks safeguarding children and young people rights. Having discussed the study context trends, child protection and participation conceptualization, and existing barriers, it is imperative to explore possible legislative instruments and frameworks that facilitate or encourage child participation in Africa.

Facilitators - Legislative Instruments on Child Participation

Literature argues that customary and religious laws play a significant role in child participation in many African countries (Abdullah et al, 2018; Manful et al., 2020). Therefore, child protection in Africa is governed by an amalgamation of interventional conventions, regional frameworks, and national laws (Lansdown, 2014; Lansdown et al. 2014). These instruments work together to create a legal and policy environment aimed at safeguarding the rights and well-being of children across the continent.

International Legislative Framework

The UNCRC is a comprehensive international legislative instrument that has been ratified by all African countries, making it a cornerstone of child protection across the continent (Nwachukwu, 2023). Child participation is a fundamental principle under the UNCRC, specifically Articles 12 and 13, which emphasize children's right to participate in decision-making processes affecting their lives (Quennerstedt et al., 2020; UN General Assembly, 1989). Therefore, child participation simply implies that all children have the right to be heard, express

their own opinion, and influence decisions affecting them directly (Lansdown et al., 2014). In 1989, in response to a growing international consensus on the need for a new instrument that explicitly laid out the specific and special rights of children, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the UNCRC (UN General Assembly, 1989).

The Convention rapidly became the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history, with almost every government around the world now legally bound to uphold a universally agreed standard for children's rights (Lansdown, 2014). The Convention is unique in that it delineates the first comprehensive set of rights including social, economic, cultural, and civil rights relevant to children and recognizes children as social actors and active holders of their own rights (Milne, 2005). It contains new provisions relating to children; for example, the right to participation and the principle that in all decisions concerning the child, the child's best interests must come first (Kjørholt, 2008). It also establishes the first international body responsible for overseeing respect for the rights of the child: the UNCRC (Archard & Skivenes, 2009; Kjørholt, 2008).

Regional Frameworks

One of the regional legislative instruments in Africa is the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) (African Union, 1990). Literature has indicated that the ACRWC is a region-specific instrument that complements the UNCRC, addressing the unique cultural, economic, social and political context of the African child (Anyogu & Umeobika, 2020; Keetharuth, 2009; Olowu, Dejo. 2002). It has been contended by scholars that the ACRWC was born out of the criticism of UNCRC about its missed of context specifics - important socio-cultural and economic realities of the African child experience (Keetharuth, 2009). It must however be recognised that the ACRWC is not opposed to the UNCRC; rather, the two pieces of

legislative frameworks are complementary in Africa (Olowu,'Dejo. 2002, p. 3). Whereas the Convention generally makes it clear that children are independent subjects and have rights, the Charter stresses the need to include African cultural values and experiences in considering issues pertaining to the rights of the child in Africa (Keetharuth, 2009).

Olowu,'Dejo (2002) argued that the ACRWC is potentially powerful tool in enhancing the lives of millions of African children. However, the most daunting challenge that confronts Africa children's and young people rights activists and practitioners is the modalities for bridging practice gap and law (Chirwa, 2002). Although the pace of ratification and implementation of the ACRWC by African countries bizarrely slow, the charter remains nonetheless a veritable tool for the advancement of children's rights in Africa (Boadu & Alaji, 2022; Chirwa, 2002). Also, the African Union (AU) Agenda 2063 is the regional strategic framework for the socio-economic transformation of Africa over the next 50years (African Union Commission, 2015; Aniche, 2023). Scholars state that, the initiative's goals focus on child protection and participation, including eradicating child labor and child marriage, improving access to quality education, and promoting participation rights in matters affecting children and young people (Nwebo, 2018). Many African countries have enshrined children's and young people's rights in their constitutions, providing a legal basis for child protection and participation within their national legal systems. Scholars argue that systemic and cultural barriers often coexist and intersect with formal legal frameworks, sometimes leading to intervention conflicts, especially in areas such as children's rights to participation, child marriage, and family and inheritance rights (Abdullah et al., 2018; Sarfo et al., 2021).

Contemporary research has reported that in some African countries, the legal frameworks and policies that safeguard children's and young people's rights, either underdeveloped or

inadequately enforced (Anyogu & Umeobika, 2020; Boadu & Alaji, 2022; Keetharuth, 2009). Social and cultural perspectives or norms often prioritize adult authority and view children as needing guidance rather than as individuals capable of contributing to decision-making (Boadu & Alaji, 2022). Therefore, the African context is marked by both systemic barriers and facilitators to child participation. Having discussed and reflected on the presence of the above robust international and regional legislative frameworks as key facilitators that support children's rights to participate, Hart (2008) argues that mere existence of legislative frameworks is insufficient. They require a political will, commitment and systemic alignment for them to be effective on the ground (Niekerk & Ismail, 2013). The current scholarship emphasized that, even when policies and procedures are in place, their translation into practice can be compromised in the Sub-Saharan Africa (Hart, 2013). This according to Bijleveld et al. (2014) institutional barriers such as inadequate staffing, and high caseloads often results in environments that fail to encourage child participation and thereby reducing opportunities for children and young people to voice out their views. The above inconsistencies demonstrate the gap between policy and practice, questioning the effectiveness of existing systems in genuinely empowering children and young people.

Other Facilitators to Child Participation

Scholars indicated that social support networks or friendly space acts as a catalyst for enhancing child participation practices (Nathe et al., 2023; Warming, 2013). Research highlights that caregivers and child welfare practitioners' positive relationships can significantly promote children's willingness to participate in decision-making concerning their care and support (Kang'ethe & Nyasha, 2014). On the contrary, an absence of support spaces can suppress a child's ability to engage, especially in families and protection care facilities (Lundy, 2007). The

findings from Kang'ethe and Nyasha (2014) and (Lundy, 2007), reveals a critical enablers' gap; where a supportive environment can empower children, and the absence of such spaces can entrench existing systemic inequalities. Therefore, the perception held by adults regarding childhood and participation can either encourage or inhibit children's involvement. Studies show that a supportive adult perspective can foster a culture of participation, enhancing children's geographies in decision-making (Adebiyi et al., 2022).

Literature also indicates that innovative participatory methodologies, such as photovoice and community mapping, can encourage children to express their views and participate actively in decisions affecting their lives (Walters, 2016). Such evidential children's voice inclusion strategies experimented in early childhood education (Shaw, 2021) can facilitate engagement and provide children and young people with platforms to share their experiences. The effectiveness of such methodologies though varies from context to context; it is replicable in the social protection and child participation Africa settings (Liew et al., 2022). Though the above strategy for inclusivity in child participation can be replicated, it is important to acknowledge that, not all children may have equal access to the above methods. This necessitates a careful consideration and applicability to ensure that all children's voices are included and valued. Contextualizing the above facilitators to Africa, community driven child participation practices resonate well within African societies, where collective decision-making and family-oriented support networks are paramount (Dawson-Squibb et al., 2022; Tsotetsi et al., 2023). Therefore, the above strategies must be modified to reflect local realities and the lived experience of the African child. The study employed PRISMA scoping review method, thereby critically synthesizing literature knowledge on the barriers and facilitators to child participation.

Knowledge Gaps and rationale

Literature argues that child-friendly professional agencies and governments globally are now engaging with children and young people differently than before (Chawla & Heft 2002; Derr, & Tarantini, 2016). Recent reports have shown that several African countries have established child friendly forums where children and young people can voice their opinions on matters affecting them (Brown et al., 2019; Livingstone & Third, 2017). For example, Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, Kenya, and Rwanda have platforms where children and young people can discuss issues like education, health, violence and make recommendations to government authorities (Keeley, & Little, 2017; Union, 2020). However, the current study emphasizes children's and young people's involvement in their own lives and is linked to the cultural and political modernization of democratic states (Skivenes, 2002; cf. Habermas 1996; Eriksen 2001). The right to participate in decision-making is a crucial aspect of children's inclusion in a democratic society (UNICEF, 2018). Vandeborne (2019) argued that child-friendly institutions do not only prioritize children's wellbeing but also actively engage children in decision-making processes that affect them. Reflecting on the above, most African governments are becoming increasingly children and young people friendly. However, Abdullah et al. (2018), and Imoh and Okyere, (2020) have reported that the context of such child-friendliness reflects policy index of supporting children from neglect, abuse and exploitation. Similar to the above observation, Iorfa et al., (2022) critiques that most of the governments and professional institutions do not involve children in decision-making, especially in matters such as adoption, and institution placement arrangements.

Therefore, the child participation and protection services situation in many African countries presents a stark contrast. There is a significant lack of literature on child participation, and the prevailing culture often regards children as silent participants in decision-making

processes, treating them as second-class citizens (Abdullah et al.,2018). Although international instruments like the UNCRC are ratified by nearly all nations, including most African Countries, implementation remains limited. This ratification implies that every country in the Sub-Saharan Africa has committed to upholding children's and young people's rights and wellbeing as outlined in Articles 12 and 13 of the UNCRC, that is the right to participation, protection, education and health. Scholars have argued extensively that practical implementation of the UNCRC in Africa remains a challenge and under researched (Akinwotu, 2022; Boehmer, 2020; Imoh & Okyere, 2020). Perhaps, one would be wondering if CRC is understood and operationalized differently in the Sub-Saharan context than the rest of the world. Although the CRC asserts that children and young people have the rights to freedom of speech and to participate in decision-making processes affecting their lives. Yet, children and young people are marginalized, and their voices are being unheard in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The CRC specified that children's voice must be heard, and that their views must be considered in child protection decision-making processes (Vis & Thomas 2009; Donnelly 2010). Countries like Canada, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and other Western contexts, there is a vast of literature that focused on whether children and young people had a say in decisions about their lives (Caldwell et al., 2019; Kennan et al., 2018; Johanasson, 2003; Sommer 2003). This resulted in an increasing awareness about the benefits of children's participation in child protection decision-making processes, an awareness that has been progressively acknowledged in policy, practice and legislation (Leeson 2007; Woolfsen et al. 2010). Extensive literature has also highlighted the significance of child participation for children and young people, especially children in care (Kennan et al., 2018; Skelton, 2013). This aligns with scholars' views that children's and young people's participation in decisions about their lives helps them feel

connected and committed to those decisions (Woolfsen et al. 2010). Additionally, by taking children's views, wishes and expectations into account, interventions might be more responsive and therefore more effective (McLeod 2007; Barnes 2012). However, in the African context, contemporary scholars report a dearth of research to ascertain the extent to which children and young people voices are heard and taken into account in child welfare and protection settings in Africa (Abdullah et al., 2018; Imoh & Okyere, 2020, Iorfa et al., 2022; Tisdall, 2013; Wilson et al., 2020).

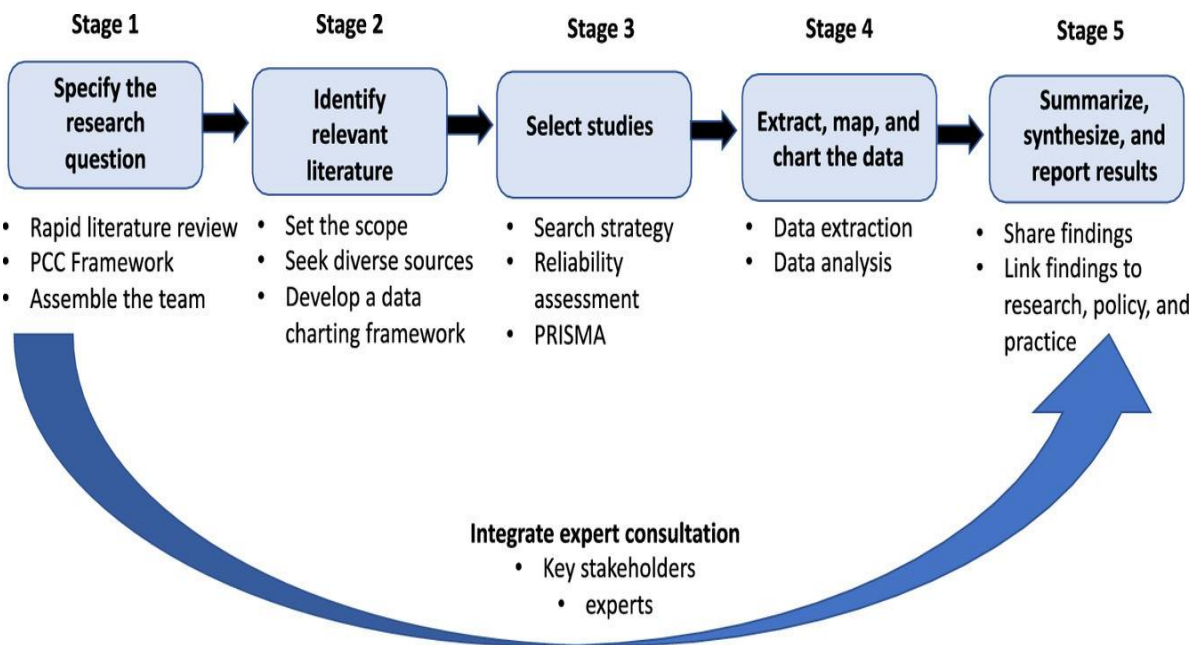
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

The study sought to map the existing literature on barriers and facilitators to children's and young people's involvement in welfare arrangements or social protection decision making processes. The scoping review study instrument guided the researcher to identify gaps in the current body of literature. I critically appraised the factors inhibiting and or influencing children and young people's participation and highlight areas for further empirical studies on child protection in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Study Instrument

Designing a scoping review instrument for qualitative text-based research according to McGowan et al., (2020) required a transparent inclusion and exclusion criteria of the literature search and screening process. I, therefore, drew inspirations from the scoping review frameworks and methodologies of Arksey and O'Malley (2005), Levac et al. (2010) and Peters et al. (2015), scoping review frameworks and research methodologies to undertake the current study. Proponents on scoping reviews, like Arksey and O'Malley (2005) emphasized the essence of structured framework to guide the study in identifying and critically synthesizing the body of knowledge on children and young people's voice and their involvement in decision making. Building on Arksey and O'Malley's framework, Levac et al. (2010) notified the need to integrate an iterative perspective and the essence of stakeholders' involvement in the study process. Their framework stresses methodological rigor and the need to address emerging ethical dilemmas and gaps as the study review progresses. Peters et al. (2015) therefore, refined Levac et al. (2010) and Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) approach by providing detailed guidelines on exploring the body of literature and reporting the reviewed findings. Peters et al., (2015) framework highlights the

importance of precise and concise research questions, systematic literature search, and transparent reporting of findings to support evidence-based practice. This structured approach or frameworks does not only help in identifying existing gaps but also lays the groundwork for further research involving primary data, since this is purely text-based study. This scoping review study therefore followed Arksey and O’Malley’s (2005) five-stage framework while integrating other perspectives to minimize any biases and other ethical concerns. Below is therefore, a pictorial diagram of the Arksey and O’Malley (2005) scoping review five-stage framework.



The Review Question

The question that guided the scoping review was, ‘*what are the barriers and facilitators to child participation within the child protection context in Sub-Saharan Africa?*’ Scholars stress the importance of crafting a review question that is broad enough to encompass the key study areas of interest while being specific enough to deliver meaningful and actionable exploratory

results (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). In scoping review methodology, the research question plays a crucial role in guiding the study entire review process (Peters et al. 2015; Levac, 2010). The proponents emphasize that, the question defines the scope and focus of the study and helps in determining the breadth of the review by setting a clear boundary for what will be included or excluded. The above therefore helps ensure that the research explore the study review and follows the PRISMA-ScR 2020 protocol (Tricco et al., 2018).

Literature search strategy and recording

Identifying relevant literature was crucial for ensuring a thorough and true representation of the current literature on the barriers and facilitators to child participation within the child protection context in the study region. Following this, I conducted a comprehensive literature search by inserting Boolean search strings, terms or operators into various database engines, including, - EBSCOhost, APA PsycINFO, Medline, Google Scholar, Web of Science, Africa Index Medicus, Social Sciences and Social Work Abstract etc.

(participat OR engag* OR involv* OR input OR voice OR inclusion); (child* OR youth* OR adolescen* OR teen* OR young people OR young adult OR young*); (child welfare OR child services OR foster care OR care home OR youth in care OR children in care); (sub-Saharan Africa OR Sahel* OR Ghana OR Angola OR Benin OR Botswana OR Burkina Faso OR Burundi OR Cameroon OR Cape Verde OR Central African Republic OR Chad OR Comoros OR Congo OR Congo (Democratic Republic) OR Côte d'Ivoire OR Djibouti OR Equatorial Guinea OR Eritrea OR Ethiopia OR Gabon OR The Gambia OR Guinea OR Guinea-Bissau OR Kenya OR Lesotho OR Liberia OR Madagascar OR Malawi OR Mali OR Mauritania OR Mauritius OR Mozambique OR Namibia OR Niger OR Nigeria OR Réunion OR Rwanda OR Sao Tome and Principe OR Senegal OR Seychelles OR Sierra Leone OR Somalia OR South Africa OR Sudan*

OR Swaziland OR Tanzania OR Togo OR Uganda OR Western Sahara OR Zambia OR Zimbabwe).

The above search strategy aligns with Aveyard's (2023) and Aromataris and Lockwood's (2020) JBI Manual for Evidence Synthesis. They argued that literature exploration involves a well-defined searching strategy, inclusion, and exclusion criteria, and recording the search, with the intention of creating empirical knowledge, that is comprehensively and critically appraising the literature findings from earlier scholars (Aveyard, 2023; Aromataris & Lockwood, 2020; Grad-Coach, 2019; Wilson, 2008). We screened the literature from the search databases through the Covidence software platform in accordance with the established PRISMA-ScR 2020 criteria for determining the articles relevance to the current study. The literature was screened by three independent researchers (myself and two volunteers, - Clinton and Ben)¹. We independently screened the titles, abstracts and full texts of the identified literature and resolved any disagreements through discussions. I then conducted the data extraction and coding for themes. I consulted with the team periodically and sought their candid opinions whenever it was necessary. Consistent with the Arksey and O'Malley (2005) framework, this systematic and transparent approach ensured the capture of all relevant data, providing a comprehensive synopsis of the barriers and facilitators to child participation within Africa's child protection system.

Inclusion Criteria

Designing an inclusion and exclusion criteria for the literature screening helped me maintain a clear focus and comprehensiveness (Tricco et al., 2018) in the review. The current

¹ To ensure compliance with PRISMA guidelines during the review process, two independent volunteers assisted the primary researcher in screening the title, abstract, and full text using Covidence software. Both volunteers are PhD students in fields related to CYFS. They conducted the screening process independently, and any disagreements were resolved through discussion in accordance with PRISMA recommendations.

study included literature that are context relevant to Africa. To capture the current happenings in child protection settings in Africa, the review included literature published in English within the last 10years (2014 to 2024). Children and young people aged 10 to 24 were the population of interest, who are either within the child protection system or have encountered participation issues in welfare or protection arrangements, as well as stakeholders such as social workers, child and youth welfare professionals, caregivers, and kinship care involved in child protection. In line with the study topic, the literature extracted for this study focussed on barriers and facilitators to child participation in welfare or protection matters encompassing research policies, practices, cultural factors, and systemic issues affecting children's and young people involvement. Additionally, the review included sources based on, qualitative study design such as peer-reviewed journal articles, gray literature and reports from child-focused international organizations such as Save the Child, UNICEF, CARE international to capture diverse perspectives when critically appraising and discussing the findings.

Exclusion Criteria

The current study, therefore, intentionally filtered out literature that did not align with the study focus (Levac et al. 2010). This comprises non-empirical studies, such as opinion letters and editorials, blogging, to maintain a focus on evidence-based findings. All outdated studies published outside the selected time frame were excluded unless they provided foundational understandings or were frequently cited in more recent studies. As stated in the above, the inclusion and exclusion criteria ensured that the study captured the most relevant and credible literature, providing a thorough understanding of the barriers and facilitators to child participation within the child protection context (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005).

Data extraction and Synthesis

In scoping reviews, data extraction also known as data charting, is the process of gathering key information from the included literature to create a descriptive summary of the findings. This summary often aims to address the scoping review's objectives and answer the research questions by synthesizing the key findings from the included literature. I, therefore, charted data in line with PRISMA-ScR 2020 guideline for exploring scoping review studies. At this stage, according to Arksey and O'Malley, 2005, the researcher must systematically extract relevant information from the selected studies, focusing on key interested variables such as study characteristics (e.g., author, year, location), methodologies, populations studied, and findings related to the barriers and facilitators to child participation within the child protection system in Sub-Saharan Africa. A standardized data extraction form was built on Covidence in congruence with PRISMA-ScR to ensure consistency across the literature. The form included categories capturing detailed information, such as study design, sample size, intervention type, findings related to children and young people opinion, voice or involvement and identified barriers and facilitators. Peters et al. (2015) emphasized that extracting scoping review data systematically helps the researcher maintain accuracy and ensures that no important pieces of information to inform the current study is overlooked. I critically appraised the factors influencing children and young people participation, the role of cultural and systemic influences and the impact of these elements on decision-making processes within child welfare or protection context.

Scholars argue that, once the literature is screened and data extracted, the researcher must synthesize to identify patterns, themes, and gaps in the literature (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Peters et al. 2015). Synthesizing the data according to Peters et al. (2015) often involves a descriptive analysis rather than a formal meta-analysis. This includes summarizing the frequent occurrence of certain barriers or facilitators, comparing findings across different regions or

contexts within Africa, and identifying common themes that emerge from the literature. The above process also involves mapping the evidence, which can help visualize the relationships between different elements affecting children and young people participation and highlight areas where further research is needed. At this stage, I drew upon the iterative perspective to critically appraised the study. This aligns with Arksey and O'Malley (2005) who emphasize that synthesizing the study data, the researcher must be iterative, with the possibility of revisiting the data extraction form as new themes or important variables emerge during the review. This helps the reviewer to remain flexible while ensuring that the process remain comprehensive and responsive to the interwoven complexity of the current study topic. Levac et al. (2010) argues that the main goal of the data extraction and synthesis stage is to provide a clear and organized overview of the existing evidence, offering insights into the barriers and facilitators of child participation within the child protection context and identifying areas for empirical future research.

Trustworthiness and authenticity

Literature has argued that trustworthiness and authenticity are key measures for assessing the validity and reliability of text-based qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ensuring trustworthiness and authenticity was crucial, especially given the complex and sensitive nature of the study. Reviewing previous scholarships from reputable articles, peer-reviewed journals databases and websites for this research, ensured that the data was both reliable and credible. The selected databases and websites were thoroughly assessed to confirm its authenticity and relevance, adhering to strict PRISMA- SRc-2020 inclusion and exclusion guidelines for scoping review. This aligns with Creswell's (2014) and Bryman's (2012) criterion for assessing study reliability and credibility. They argued that to regulate the accuracy of any qualitative studies, the

researcher must co-create the research report, major findings, or themes with a team of colleagues to minimize error and ensure findings accuracy. For this Scoping review study, scoping review, my team of three independent screeners included two volunteers (Ben and Clinton) and Sam (The leading researcher).

The study also deployed thematic analytical tool to conceptualize and code themes, patterns and concepts that resonate with the reviewed literature included in the study. The thematic analysis was conducted meticulously, with repeated coding and readings to ensure that themes accurately reflect the screened data. Maintaining transparency and rigorous analytical processes, I resorted to the thick descriptions of themes that is the insider's and outsider's detailed analysis of the context and providing the many perspectives that define the themes (Younas et al., 2023). The present study offered a nuanced viewpoint of each theme by reporting existing contradictory and confirmatory literature on the study topic (Creswell, 2014). This rigorous methodological approach, combined with the utilization of credible and reputable literature sources, underpin the trustworthiness and authenticity of the study and provides a robust and insightful exploration of the lived experience of the Sub-Saharan African child whose seeks for their voices to be heard and acted upon.

Study Limitations

To make this review study more feasible, I included only qualitative text-based literature retrieved from different databases, websites, and other pre-existing studies (seed papers). The study's focus on reviewing previous studies on barriers and facilitators to child participation in Africa might restrict the applicability of findings beyond this specific geographical context. Furthermore, this review's reliance on text-based qualitative studies constrained the inclusion of primary data and quantitative data. Consequently, the quality of the findings is indirectly

contingent upon the quality of the included studies, inheriting their potential ethical and methodological weaknesses.

Ethical considerations

The study phenomenon is a sensitive topic, requiring high ethical standards. However, the study explored only existing literature through a scoping review methodological lens. My critical self-location and personal experiences as a Ghanaian may inadvertently raise a conflict of interest and bias which may potentially influence the knowledge production and study findings. However, the involvement two independent volunteers (Ben & Clinton) and my supervisor offering an oversight role minimized such conflict of interest or bias.

Chapter Four: Findings

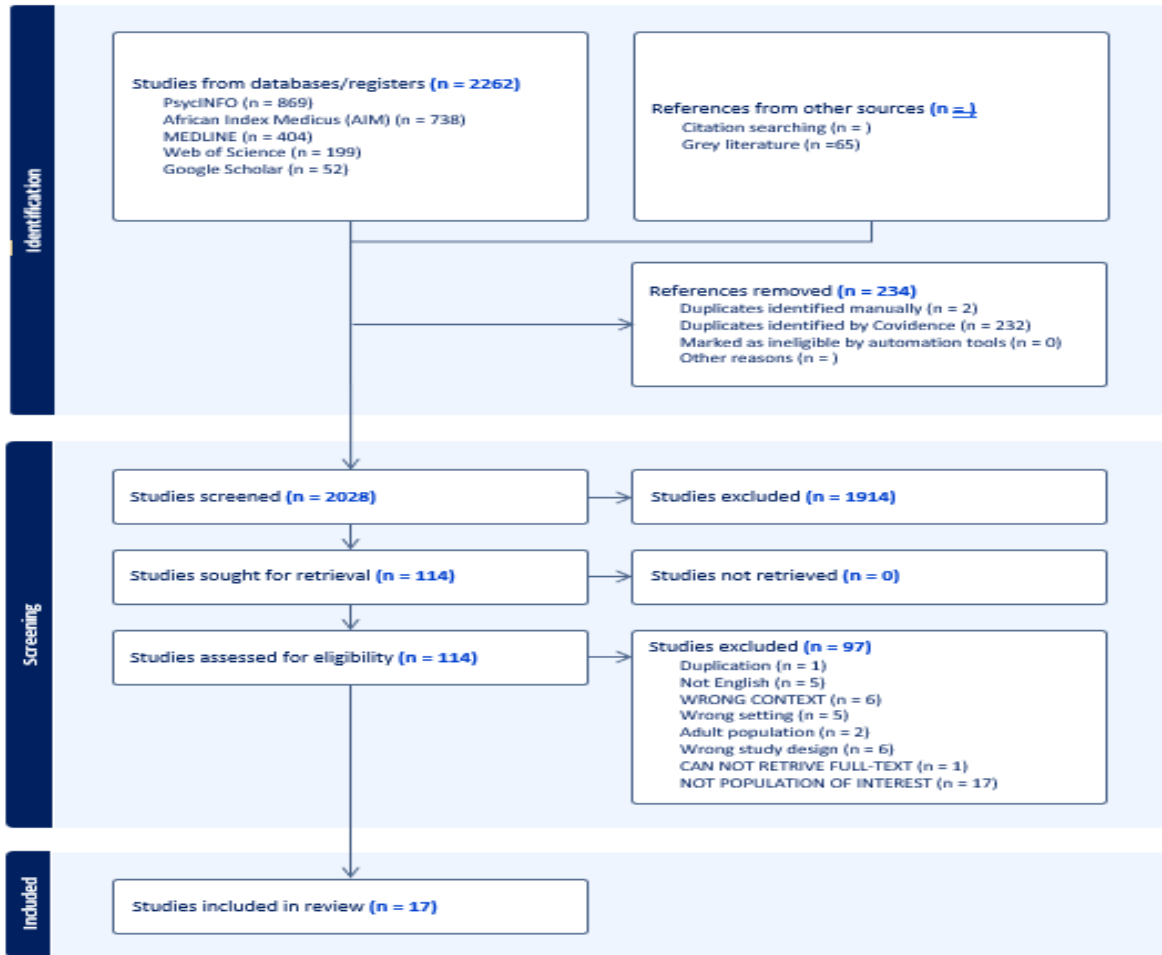
This chapter presents the study findings and appraises the findings through a critical lens. The study was motivated by three specific research questions: to map the existing barriers to child participation, to determine how child participation is construed and operationalized, and to explore about the possible existing facilitators or enablers of child participation in the Sub-Saharan Africa context. The study themes were therefore conceptualized and coded by drawing insights from Lundy's Child Participation model (Lundy, 2007). The literature review identified nine (9) major interconnected themes through an inductive iterative approach that speaks to all three research questions. The extracted data compared 17 journal articles included in the study to establish patterns and trends. The study also included the researcher's observations and thoughts at the full-text PRISMA data extraction stage through an abductive critical reasoning.

Findings

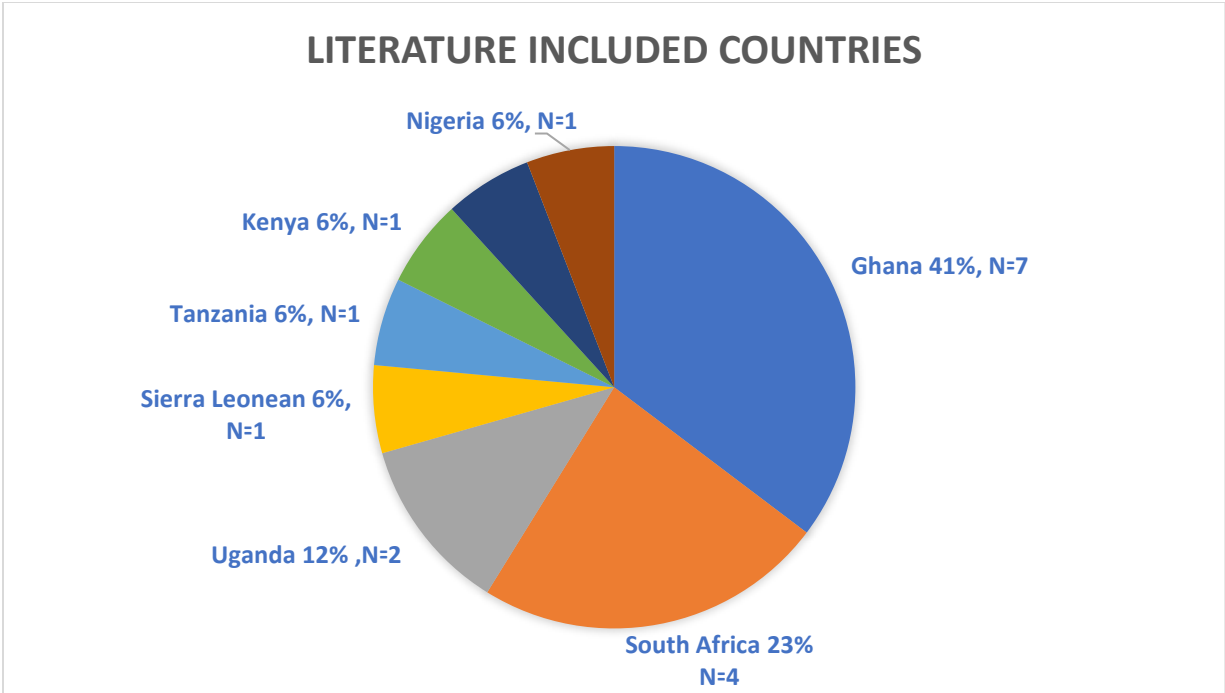
The initial database and website search yielded 2262 journal articles. After removing duplicates, 2028 unique papers remained for further screening. Based on title, abstract, and key words (Child participation, child welfare, and social protection), 1914 articles were excluded due to lack of focus on child participation in the child protection or welfare context, not being written in English or non-empirical study design or not specific to the Sub-Saharan Africa context. A total of three independent team members (including 2 volunteers) screened the articles that were unclear with respect to meeting the study inclusion criteria whiles my supervisor plays an oversight role. After reviewing the full text of each study in the remaining 114, we excluded 97 and had 17 remaining articles for inclusion in the study. A Preferred Reporting Items for

Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) flowchart of the literature search and screening process is included below in Figure 1.

PRISMA Flowchart Scoping Review of Barriers and Facilitators to Child Participation, - Fig 1



The distribution of sub-Saharan African countries represented in the study is illustrated in the pie chart Figure 2 below. Countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Tanzania and Nigeria each contribute one article to the study. Additionally, Uganda had two articles, South Africa 4, and Ghana, 6 respectively.



Coding the above 17 articles into themes, I also explored patterns and trends against the reviewed study key words such as participation, welfare, protection, Africa among others. In the figure 3 below concepts or terms in red colour depicts the interconnected trends and patterns among the 17 included articles.

Key Words Trends and Patterns, fig. 3



The above fig. 3 heightened my curiosity to explore the barriers and facilitators to child participation within the child protection and or welfare context in Sub-Saharan Africa. The themes identified were analyzed in response to research questions.

Results of Scoping Review- Barriers to Child Participation in Africa

One of the major research questions of the study was to identify the barriers that inhibit children and young people from participating in or have a say on, welfare and protection issues that affects them. Out of the 17 articles included in the study, three major themes were identified as barriers to child participation in the Sub-Saharan context. The study revealed that systemic factors, intertwined with societal cultural norms and adult-centric hierarchies, suppress the voices of children and young people voices in Sub-Saharan Africa. It is important to point out here that, findings of this study have been holistically presented to reflect the ‘true and full accounts’ of the literature on child participation. The themes that emerged from study’s findings include cultural norms and expectations, poor implementation or inadequate child-friendly practices and insufficient understanding of children’s rights to participation.

Cultural Norms and Expectations

One of the key barriers to children and young people’s participation in the African context is largely rooted in cultural constructs and influences. Out of the 17 studies included in the overall scoping review, 16 (Abdullah et al., 2020; Andre et al., 2018; Adonteng-Kissi, 2021, 2023; Cudjoe et al., 2020, 2021; Desta, 2017; Haffejee & Levine, 2020; Lake, 2014; Mbise, 2016; Manful & Manful, 2014, 2020; Munongi et al., 2024; Ng'ondi, 2015; Twum-Danso & Okyere 2020; Wessells 2015) examined the role of cultural norms and expectations in inhibiting children and young people from having a voice in matters that affects their lives.

The findings revealed that traditional norms, religious practices, and intersecting factors like gender disparities and poverty are deeply entrenched in the Sub-Saharan African context significantly influencing child participation practices in the region. In this context, the cultural pervasiveness affecting child participation refers to systemic controls in Africa, that is kinship-based and institutional that are shaped and maintained by traditional norms and expectations. According to Cudjoe et al., (2020) and Manful and Manful (2020), there is a pervasive fear among children and young people in the region when it comes to voicing their concerns or expressing their dissatisfaction especially when they are excluded from decision-making processes or when they believe a decision is not in their best interest.

Cudjoe et al. (2021) noted the following:

There is a prevalent fear among young and children's participants regarding the potential consequences of voicing their opinions. They worry that their honesty could lead to familial discord or maltreatment and thus may censor their contributions in case meetings. (Cudjoe et al., 2021. p. 36)

The above findings suggest that children's participation in decision-making processes, particularly within family and institutional settings, is hindered by fear. This fear includes concerns about possible repercussions, relational breakdown and punitive responses from adults. These findings raise an important question about the practical implementation of the UNCRC, specifically article 12 which emphasizes the right of the child to be heard. The findings suggest that child-friendly spaces for children and young people inclusivity in decision-making are largely absent, especially when reflected through the lens of Lundy's model of child participation. According to Lundy (2007), involvement of children and young people requires four key factors: space, voice, audience and influence. However, in the context of the current

study, the lack of safe and enabling space, both physical and relational undermines the importance of spatial component. Moreover, children's fear of repercussions and the dominance of adultist norms suppress their voice and limit access to an audience that genuinely listens, let alone allows their perspectives to influence decisions. The findings revealed a gap between the child rights to participation enshrined in the UNCRC and their practical realization in the Sub-Saharan African context due to entrenched systemic barriers.

These findings are consistent with the research conducted by Twum-Danso & Okyere (2020), which highlights how cultural norms and expectation thwart the involvement of children and young people in social protection setting.

Their key findings are as follows:

Interviewed children and young participants perceive child protection meetings as primarily adults' business. This perception diminishes the importance of children and young persons' views and makes them feel that their input is not valued, reinforcing a culture where children feel sidelined. (p. 46)

Similarly, findings of Adu-Gyamfi, (2014) support the above view. His research argues that:

Even when young people are allowed to express their views, their input often does not significantly impact decision-making. They tend to serve merely as informants rather than active participants in shaping outcomes, which may foster a sense of tokenism rather than genuine involvement. (p. 25).

These insights are further corroborated by studies conducted by Abdullah et al. (2018) and Cudjoe & Abdullah, (2019) who argued that children in Africa are generally excluded from decision-making processes, such as family case meetings. They observed that "even when children and young people are included in the case meetings, their voice or views are rarely

sought nor are their opinions taken into account when decisions are made concerning their welfare” (p. 23).

Twum- Danso and Okyere (2020) also support the above observation, noting that cultural practices in Sub-Saharan Africa often do not allow children and young people to have a say or participate meaningfully in social protection meetings with adults. Their findings echo those of Adu-Gyamfi (2014), emphasizing that, entrenched adult-centric cultural norms and systemic barriers continue to suppress the voices of children and young people in the region. Due to oppressive cultural norms and expectations in the Sub-Saharan Africa, it can be extremely difficult to involve children and young people in social protection or welfare case meetings. Child and youth care scholars advocate for inclusion of children and young people in such meetings (Adonteng-Kissi, 2023; Cudjoe et al., 2020, 2021; Manful & Manful, 2014).

Child-Friendly Practice

The findings charted above regarding cultural norms and expectations highlight the pressing need for child-friendly practice. However, across the 17 reviewed studies, the absence of such practices was consistently identified as a major barrier to child participation. While Vandeborne, (2019) argued extensively that the Sub-Saharan context has well documented child-friendly initiatives, the evidence presented in these studies refuted such a claim especially in line with children and young people’s involvement in child protection decision-making processes. The assertions of Abdullah et al. (2018), Twum-Danso and Okyere, (2020), and Vandeborne (2019) primarily reflect policy frameworks aimed at protecting children from neglect, abuse and exploitations rather than ensuring their active participation. This interpretation is further supported by Cudjoe et al (2020), who noted that there is inadequate governmental and institutional commitment to implementing child-friendly practice in many African countries,

especially in regions affected by poverty or conflict. In all, the above findings underscore a critical gap between policy rhetoric and practical implementation in promoting child participation within child protection systems in Africa.

Mbise (2016) further highlighted that:

Policies in the region often fail to adopt child-centric approaches that values children's perspective, needs, and rights. Instead, policy decisions are frequently shaped by adult viewpoints, which define what children needs, without involving them in discussions that directly impact their lives. (p. 18)

Mbise's (2016) findings highlighted a significant gap in child participation across Africa, pointing to a systemic issue in the Sub-Saharan context attributing it to adult-dominated conceptualization of children's needs and interests. This exclusion of children from participating in decision-making processes perpetuates a structural imbalance of power, reinforcing a view of children as passive recipients of care rather than active rights holders and social agents.

Similarly, Abdullah et al. (2020) revealed, "existing practices within the department of social welfare (child welfare institutions) often do not incorporate child-friendly communication strategies or environments, making it difficult for children to engage meaningfully" (p. 50). The above findings collectively suggest the need for practitioners and allies to shift attention towards inclusive, child-centred approaches in both policy and practice.

The research conducted by Abdullah et al. (2020), also suggest a procedural barrier inhibiting children and young people's involvement in institutional settings. That is inadequate institutional practices to accommodate children's communicative needs and developmental capacities impede children's ability to express their views. Many parents and practitioners harbor beliefs that involving children in decision-making could lead to arrogance or undermine parental

authority. These perceptions act as barriers because they restrict opportunities for authentic participation in practice, viewing children's voices as potentially disruptive or inappropriate. The above reinforces the existing adult-centric power between adults and children in institutional settings. Without accessible, respectful and age-appropriate mode of involvement, children are unlikely to feel safe or confident enough to participate in discussions about their own wellbeing and protection.

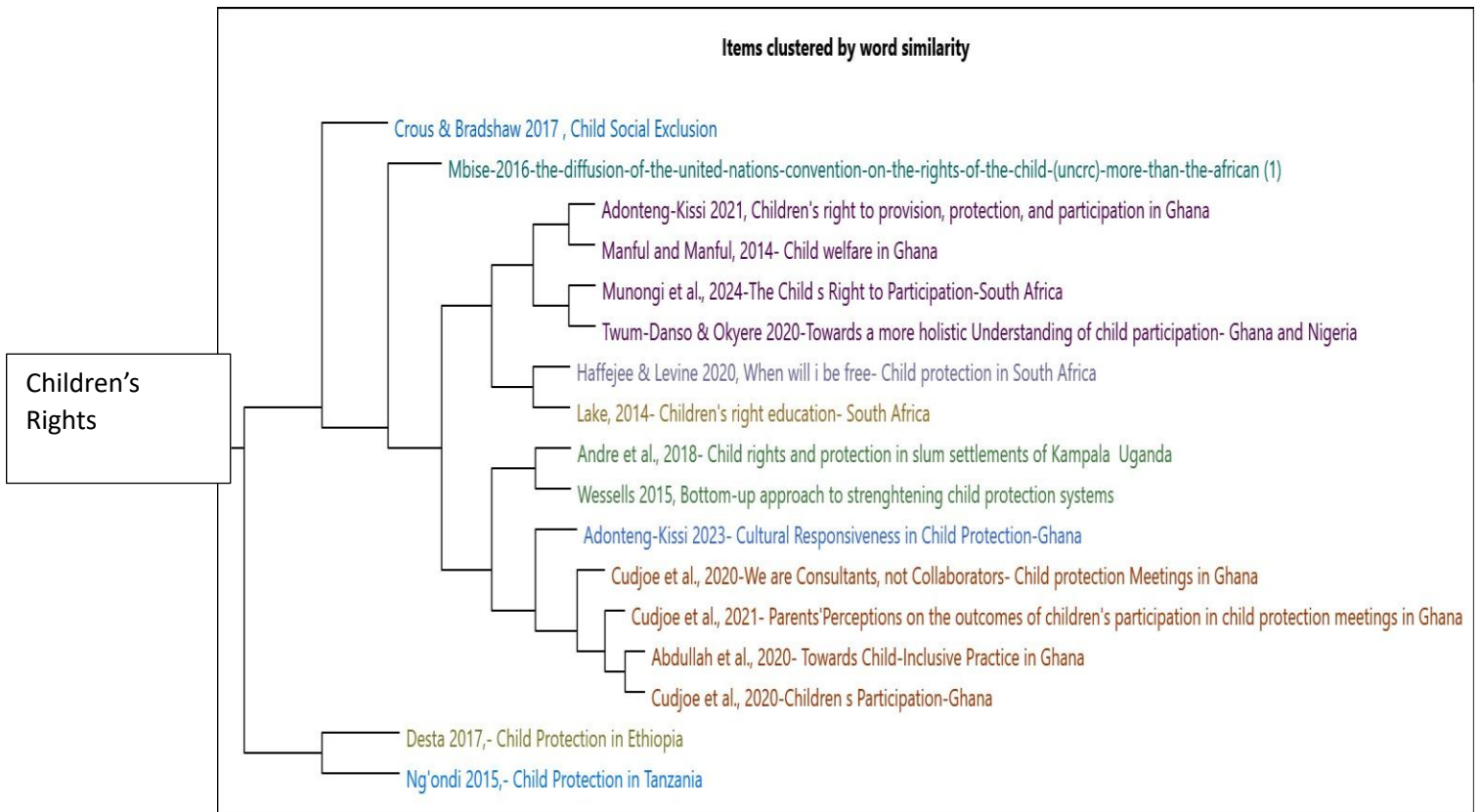
This aligns with the findings reported by Munongi et al., (2024) which revealed that: Practitioners often grapple with balancing the need to protect children from potential harm during discussions and the importance of involving them in decision-making. This tension may result in limited participation due to concerns about exposing children to distressing topics or harm. (p. 57)

The research findings conducted by Munongi et al., (2024), suggest that many child protection officers and caregivers in the Sub-Saharan Africa err on the side of caution. That is, they choose to limit children's involvement in certain discussions out of fear that some topics like, divorce, and child placement arrangements, incarcerated parents might retraumatize or upset children. This protective instinct, while well-intentioned, can inadvertently silence children and young people's voices. Similarly, Ng'ondi, (2015), discusses the above in relation to how this fear can lead to superficial participation, where children are theoretically included but not meaningfully engaged, especially in sensitive matters like, custody, abusive investigations and or program planning.

Limited Recognition of Children’s rights to participation

One of the central themes that emerged from the 17 reviewed articles is the insufficient understanding of children’s rights to participation. This is illustrated below by the graphical representation of item clustered by-word similarity thread.

Word Similarity Thread



The pictorial diagram above illustrates the 17 thematic clusters of included articles for the current study. Deploying word similarity analysis, the journal was grouped based on the frequency and contextual use of key terminology, revealing how scholars frame and prioritise issues around child participation. A remarkable observation is that children’s rights emerge as a central, unifying thread across all the reviewed literature, despite dissimilarities in country contexts, research methods, and thematic emphases.

The clusters revealed shared areas of importance: some of the articles focus strongly on rights-based models, and policy implementation (eg, Diffusion of UNCRC, children's rights education), while others address practical steps and cultural context influencing participation (eg, child protection meetings in Ghana, community-based approaches in Uganda, cultural responsiveness). There are also groupings that centre on welfare and protection systems in specific countries (eg, South Africa, Ethiopia, Tanzania, etc).

The above pictorial mapping supports the findings that, there are a clear factor around the interplay between systemic enablers (such as legislation, institutional commitment, and participatory practices) and the persistent barriers (including cultural attitudes, systemic inequalities and resources constraints) that shape children's and young people's opportunities to participate in decision-making processes. As illustrated in fig. 4, the term '*child rights*' appears as a recurring cluster across all the articles included in the review, highlighting its relevance, while also pointing to a lack of depth in its practical implementation and interpretation.

The findings from studies conducted by Manful and Manful (2014), Mbise (2016) and Wessells (2015) highlight the relevance of international frameworks such as the UNCRC, the key umbrella that promotes children's rights to participation. However, Adonteng-Kissi (2021) and Mbise (2016) both argue that there exists a disconnection between policy and practice in the Sub-Saharan context. That is the principles advocating for children's rights to participation are often a borrowed ideology from the western contexts and may not align with local cultural realities, leading to tokenistic participation rather than active engagement. The concept of meaningful participation as stated in the above, is a heated debate across the 17 included articles.

According to Adonteng-Kissi (2023) there is an "ongoing debate regarding the appropriate age and maturity level for children to effectively participate in decision-making

processes” (p. 26). In line with this, Cudjoe et al (2020) also observed that, “the legislative instrument regarding children's participation lacks age and context specifics, which suggests that practitioners must use their own discretion to determine when and how to involve children in decision-making” (p.39). The above discourse directly connects to the children evolving capacities principle outlined in Article 5 of the UNCRC, which stipulates that as children grow, they acquire increased competencies, enabling them to take greater responsibility in decisions affecting them. Therefore, the absence of practical, context-specific guidelines in SSA, as highlighted by Twum-Danso and Okyere (2020), stands to suggest that practitioners in the SSA context must navigate the delicate balance between protecting children and empowering them according to their developmental stage. The current study suggests that, embedding the evolving capacities paradigm into policy and practice could therefore bridge the gap between abstract children’s rights and culturally grounded, age-appropriate participation.

The findings above point to a significant abstruseness surrounding the operationalization and conceptualization of children’s rights to participate in decision-making processes, especially within the Sub-Saharan African settings. The ongoing discussion about the age appropriateness and maturity required for children to participate in decision-making sheds more light to the barriers inhibiting children’s involvement. This reflects a broader concern around adult determined thresholds of capacities and competence, which can result in the exclusion of children based not on their ability, but on subjective perceptions of maturity. Literature reinforces the above discourse by pointing out that existing legislative instruments lack age and context specific guidelines (Cudjoe et al., 2020). As a result, practitioners are often left to rely on their own discretion, which introduces inconsistencies and potential bias. Personal discretion in this context resonates with Lipsky’s street level bureaucracy theory (Lipsky, 1980). The theory is

based on the notion that public services represent ‘the coal mines of social protection where the “hard, dirty and dangerous work” of the state’ is done’ (Bovens & Zouridis 2002, p. 51).

Therefore, due to resources and structural constraints, frontline child protection workers are usually under duress (Lipsky, 1980). This could potentially force them to make an unfavourable decision that can disempower children, particularly by excluding them from decision-making processes (Brodkin, 2012). The findings therefore suggest that, without clear standards, there is a risk that child participation becomes selective and adult-controlled, rather than child-led or rights-based. Twum-Danso and Okyere add further weight to the barrier to child participation. They noted that the absence of practical, context-specific guidelines in national policies could severely hamper efforts to institutionalize meaningful child participation (Twum-Danso & Okyere, 2020).

Analyzing the findings through the lens of Lundy’s model of child participation which emphasizes four major elements: space, voice, audience and influence (2007). These findings highlight various systemic deficiencies. Perhaps, some children may have access to space to participate, the absence of international clarity around age appropriateness and practitioner discretion may undermine their voice. The findings also suggest that, without structured, supportive mechanisms, children’s and young people’s views may not reach a friendly audience, nor are they likely to have influence on decisions affecting their lives. The above incoherence between rights rhetoric and practice not only revealed a gap in policy implementation but also risks reinforcing a non-participation culture, where children and young people’s involvement is symbolic rather than substantive.

Gaps in How Child Participation is Understood and Operationalized

One of the central aims of this study was to explore the gaps in how child participation is understood and operationalized within the Sub-Saharan African context. While the 17 reviewed articles presented a range of findings, a thematic synthesis conducted in collaboration with my co-reviewers led to the identification of two overarching themes: inconsistent international standards, ambiguity around age, maturity and competency thresholds. These themes reflect the complex interplay between global UNCRC framework, local cultural norms and institutional capacities in shaping children's ability to meaningfully participate in decisions that affect their lives.

Inconsistent International Standards

Findings from the reviewed articles reveal that, although international legislation and conventions such as the UNCRC recognize children's rights to participate, the integration of these standards and principles into local practices remains inconsistent across the Sub-Saharan African context. According to Manful et al., (2021) varying interpretations of children rights, shaped by local cultural values and societal norms, pose a significant challenge to establishing a standard approach to child-inclusive practices on an international scale. This divergence underscores a key tension between universal rights frameworks and context specific realities, where global mandates may infringe on entrenched socio-cultural understandings of childhood, authority and autonomy. The synthesis above suggests that implementation tends to be fragmented, symbolic, or selectively applied, undermining the spirit of meaningful participation envisioned by the UNCRC globally.

In line with the above assertion, Lake (2014) observes that:

There is a considerable lack of understanding among child welfare professionals regarding the relationship between children's rights and their participation. While some professionals recognize that children's rights should inherently involve participation, they often struggle to translate this understanding into real and practical action. (p. 13)

The above findings highlight a persistent disconnect between theory and practice within the Africa child protection landscape. Even though, practitioners express support for the UNCRC and ACRWC principles of participation, this verbal commitment does not interpret implementation. Lake's findings reveal that a conceptual understanding of participation does not automatically lead to practice that centers children's voices. Lake observed that, most child welfare workers acknowledge the importance of children's rights particularly their right to participate in decisions affecting them. Supporting the above findings, Crou and Bradshaw (2017) and Wessells (2015) argue that child protection workers often hold a reductionist perspective of participation, likening it solely with the physical presence of children in case meetings. This narrow interpretation overlooks the broader spectrum of participatory strategies such as consultation, representation, child-led forums which allow children and young people to express their views in matters affecting them.

Adu-Gyamfi (2015) similarly notes that "child protection professionals often misconstrue child participation as requiring children's physical presence in discussions" (p. 19).

The above narrow view fails to acknowledge that participation can occur via a range of modalities, such as being consulted or having their views represented, rather than necessitating children to be directly present in every decision-making processes. The findings suggest that limited view restricts the broader intent of child participation as stipulated by the UNCRC.

Further complicating the issue, research conducted by Andre et al., (2018) highlight a global discrepancy in defining when a child is considered mature or competent enough to participate in social protection or welfare proceedings. Their research reveals the absence of standardize age thresholds, for instance:

In Sweden, there is no clearly well-defined age at which a child can partake in court proceedings, leaving much to child protection workers professional discretion and leading to uneven implementation. On the other hand, in the Netherlands, while children over the age of 12 are typically given the opportunity to influence decisions regarding their care, those under 12 are often excluded. (p. 32)

The above highlighted a lack of uniformity in how children's participation rights are interpreted and applied across different jurisdictions.

The findings above reveal both conceptual understanding and age-related thresholds inconsistencies. This highlights the limitations of a one-size fits all approach to children's rights underscoring the need for practices that are sensitive to local context while maintaining coherence and consistency. Drawing on Lundy's child participation model, it becomes clearer that ensuring children's inclusivity is not solely about physical presence, but about creating the needed space, coordinating children and young people voice, ensuring they have an audience and enabling their influence in decisions that affect them. Without the above pragmatic and inclusive practices, child participation in the Sub-Saharan Africa context shall remain symbolic or exclusionary. The above findings also correlate with the observations made by Crous and Bradshaw, (2017) reports. They revealed that there is no consistent understanding of what child participation or inclusivity entails among different stakeholders, including government officials, NGOs, and community members.

Age, Maturity and Competency Threshold

Ten out of the 17 reviewed articles addressed issues related to children's age, maturity and competency thresholds in the context of participation. The findings revealed a significant gap: there are no existing assessments tools, frameworks or standardized guidelines to assist child welfare or protection professionals in the Sub-Saharan Africa in assessing children's competency, maturity or capacity to participate in welfare-related decisions. According to Twum-Danso and Okyere (2020), the absence of empirical research on children's capacities and competencies in the Africa context makes its more problematic. They argue that the limited available research does not sufficiently prioritize advocacy aimed at influencing the policymakers or developing practical tools and protocols. This lack of evidence-based support leaves practitioners to rely on their personal discretion, which often leads to inconsistent, and sometimes exclusionary child participatory practices.

The above findings are consistent with the research conducted by Mbise (2016). They argued that there is no existing standard on what constitute "child participation" in the Sub-Saharan context (p.9). Cultural norms and adult-centric beliefs interpret what constitutes child participation. This leads to unreliable implementation of practices and expectations in child protection decision-making meetings. According to Adonteng-Kissi (2021), Munongi et al. (2024) and Ng'ondi (2015), meaningful participation of children and young people in the African context is rooted in culturally relevant and contextualized practices that honor the unique traditional, and community dynamics of the African society. The findings therefore suggest that meaningful participation in the Sub-Saharan context constitutes respect for cultural values. This stands to confirm why some of the reviewed articles point to the fact that children's rights to participation are a foreign or western cultural assumptions. The above findings align with ACRWC (1990), which underlies the importance of integrating African cultural heritage into the

promotion of child rights. The findings also support Manful and Manful's (2014) assertion that the techniques for involving children in decision-making processes are not well established or effective in Africa. Although there are some community-level structures for participation, they are often not utilized to their full potential and vary widely from country to country. Similar to Manful and Manful (2014) observations, Cudjoe et al., (2021) noted that many social protection officers and child rights activists in most countries have a limited understanding of children's rights and the importance of their participation in welfare matters. This lack of awareness hinders their ability to advocate for and implement inclusive practices in the Sub-Saharan context.

Scoping Review Findings: Facilitators to Child Participation

One of the guiding questions of this study was to explore the factors that enable or encourage child participation in the Sub-Saharan African context. The concept of facilitators to child participation emerged strongly across almost all the 17 reviewed articles. The findings identified three major themes that encourage child participation in the region. These include awareness and education, building stronger networks, resources allocation, child-centric environments among others.

Increased Awareness and Education

The study revealed that awareness and education regarding children's rights particularly their rights to participate in decisions affecting their lives serves as a key enabler of participation in Africa. According to Abdullah et al. (2018), "empowering children with the knowledge about their rights and equipping them with the confidence to express their views constitutes a critical step towards realizing child participatory practices" (p.30). Findings from 16 of the 17 reviewed articles consistently indicated a pervasive lack of awareness among children, families, and even

child protection workers significantly hinder the implementation of child participation rights. The thematic gap is especially concerning considering that these rights are enshrined not only in the UNCRC but also in regional charters like the ACRWC. As Crous and Bradshaw (2017) observed “Without modest understanding, children are less able to know their rights or exercise them actively, thereby, limiting their participation in decision-making processes that affect their lives” (p. 47). Their findings reveal a critical knowledge gap that contributes to the continued marginalization of children’s voices within the Sub-Saharan African child welfare systems.

For instance, Mbise’s (2016, p. 8) findings indicated that, “there is the need for social workers, child protection practitioners and civil society to promote the awareness of the ACRWC through media campaigns, advocacy, and education initiatives that informs the public and children about their rights”. Mbise’s findings suggests the need for fostering a broader societal or regional awareness. This would enable and create the need space for children and young people to engaged effectively in community and policy forums because children may understand their entitlements and responsibilities. In line with the above, Twum-Danso and Okyere (2020) argue that for awareness and educational campaigns to be truly effective and contextually relevant within the Sub-Saharan settings, they must include indigenous knowledge systems and local practices. Integrating culturally grounded strategies ensures that such child participation initiative resonate more deeply with local children, who are shaped by communal traditions, social hierarchies and oral-based knowledge mobilization. This approach does not only make child participation more relatable but also affirms children’s cultural identity in the participatory process. Findings show that embedding child participation awareness campaigns within familiar cultural frameworks can create child-friendly environments where children and young people feel respected, valued and confident to share their views. Such culturally embedded approaches

help overcome barriers from adultist who may otherwise view child participation as a foreign or Western imposition. The literature indicated that the above perspective reinforces the need to localize rights-based strategies in a way that respect community values while upholding the child participatory ideals of the UNCRC and the ACRWC.

Child-Centric Environment

Creating a child-friendly spaces in the Sub-Saharan context emerged as one of the major themes and key facilitators of children's involvement in decision-making processes. A central recommendation across the 17 reviewed articles emphasized the importance of establishing child-centric environments as a foundational step toward enabling child participation. Within the context of this study, the concept of child-centric environments refers not only to physical spaces but also to social and cultural settings that prioritize the needs, rights and holistic wellbeing of children and young people including emotional, intellectual and social competencies. These spaces challenge traditional adult-centric structures by reframing the role of adults from authoritative instructors to supportive facilitators who guide, listen to and empower children.

According to Cudjoe et al (2021), Desta (2017) and Haffejee, and Levine, (2020) such environments encourage child active participation, exploration, and geographies, creating space where children and young people feel safe and respected. Findings from the above scholars argue that fostering inclusive, and culturally responsive environments can help dismantle systemic barriers such as culturally embedded silence, and fear of authority. Similar to the above findings, Wessels (2017) suggested that, involving children through play can ease children's anxieties and foster better communication. The above findings suggest that child protection workers incorporating humor in their work and engaging children in a less formal ways can help diminish

intimidation and encourage children to share their views and needs in child protection issues affecting them. Some of the reviewed studies highlighted the importance of creating structure and age-appropriate mechanisms to support child participation.

For instance, Andre et al. (2018,) emphasize that:

Establishing clear processes and mechanisms for children and young people to participate effectively, such as age-appropriate platforms for expression, can facilitate their involvement. Therefore, social workers and other care providers ensuring that children understand the purposes and processes of participation helps them feel more empowered and inclined to share their opinions. (p. 62)

The above findings revealed that when children understand the potential outcomes and purpose of their involvement, they are more likely to feel empowered and confident in articulating their opinions. This resonates with Lundy's child participation model, particularly the elements of voice and space, which emphasize the importance of creating a safe environment for expression and ensuring that children are adequately supported to share their views on welfare matters affecting them. The findings also suggest that child participation in the Sub-Saharan context would not just happen in a vacuum or by chance. It therefore requires well intentioned planning by factoring in age-appropriate platforms such as child-friendly meetings, visual tools or digital forums, where children can express themselves in ways that match their communication abilities and developmental stages.

The above analysis resonates with reports by Adonteng-Kissi (2023) and Lake (2014). They stated that, a child-friendly space should be accessible, safe and inclusive. Therefore, child involvement must be structured, clear from the onset and age sensitive. Reflecting on the above, when children and young people understand the purpose and feel safe and respected in child

protection meetings, they are more likely to actively participate and contribute meaningfully. This goes a long way to strengthen both their sense of geographies and the quality of decision made about their care.

Child Protection Workers Capacity Building

One of major themes emerging from 15 out of the 17 reviewed articles is the inadequacy of training and professional development for social workers and childcare providers regarding children's participation rights. The findings consistently highlight that limited capacity among frontline practitioners hinders the implementation of child participation frameworks especially in complex cultural and institutional settings such as those found in Sub-Saharan Africa. The reviewed studies acknowledge the barriers professionals faced such as lack of practical tools, knowledge and confidence to translate child participation into action. As a result, child participation tends to be poorly facilitated in the Sub-Saharan context. In response to this barrier, the 15 reviewed articles strongly recommend the integration of capacity-building initiatives, such as continuous professional education, practice-based seminars or training workshops. These strategies would focus not only on the ethical or legal aspects of child participation but also on the practical strategies for creating child-friendly spaces, facilitating good communication techniques and managing power dynamics.

Supporting the above views, Manful et al. (2020, p.6) reported that, "effective child participation requires well-trained professionals". This addresses the need for ongoing education and training for social workers and practitioners to develop skills in child-centered communication, cultural sensitivity, and ethical practices, thereby equipping them to better engage with children (Manful et al., 2020).

The findings encapsulate the concern raised across the 15 reviewed studies: without ongoing, context-specific professional training, the right of children to participate as outlined in the UNCRC (article 12) and reinforced by Lundy's (2007) child participation model, risks remaining theoretical rather than operational. Similar to the above findings, cultural sensitivity and trust-building emerged as key enablers of child participation in the Sub-Saharan African context. According to Cudjoe et al (2021, p.32) fostering "child participation begins with establishing a trusting relationship between social workers and children". Their research reveal that children are more likely to express their views when they feel safe, respected, and emotionally supported. Consequently, child protection workers demonstrating empathy, warmth, and authentic presence is not merely a relational ideal but a practical requirement for effective child inclusive participation.

The above findings also correlate with research conducted by Twum-Danso and Okyere (2020). They stated that "integrating indigenous ways of knowing or cultural practices into child-inclusive frameworks can aid effective participation" (Twum-Danso and Okyere, 2020, p. 17). Recognizing specific cultural dynamics and how they influence family decision-making, as well as addressing potential parental concerns about child involvement, is vital for fostering a supportive environment for children. The findings suggest that, instead of imposing a one-size-fits-all or western-centric models into the Sub-Saharan context, child protection workers should advocate for the integration of indigenous ways of knowing and practices into child participation strategies. The above will helps make child-inclusive approaches more relevant, acceptance and effective within the region. According to Mbise (2016), the Sub-Saharan government institutions should focus more on enforcing supportive legal frameworks that mandate child participation in decision-making. The above should include national laws and policies that align with the rights

outlined in the ACRWC and emphasize children's and young people voices in various sectors. The research conducted by Munongi et al. (2024) also suggests that practitioners and allies should advocate for funding and resources allocation to child welfare initiatives that prioritize participation. Therefore, ensuring that there are sufficient resources available for programs that promote children's rights is an essential enabler to child participation in the Sub-Saharan context. This would help address Ng'ondi, (2015) research that reveals a insufficient funding and resource allocation to child welfare institution is partly the reason why involving children and young people in decision-making is challenging.

Chapter Five: Discussion

This chapter discusses the barriers and facilitators to child participation, drawing on the findings presented in Chapter 4. I use Lundy's child participation model, and abductive critical reasoning lens to discuss the findings and make some educational conclusions. The discussion situates barriers and facilitators to child participation in Africa. Three core themes (1) Cultural norms and expectation, (2), Child friendly practice, (3) Inconsistent International Standards and (4) Education and Awareness, are discussed in the context of the 17 included reviewed articles. Thereby, mapping the barriers and facilitators, discrepancies, and implication for policy and practice in the sub-Saharan Africa context. The discussion addresses the below research questions:

1. What are the barriers to child participation in child protection settings in Sub-Saharan Africa?
2. What are the gaps in how child participation is understood and operationalized in the Sub-Saharan Context?
3. What are the possible facilitators or enablers to child participation in the Sub-Saharan Context?

These questions are studied through an thematic analytical lens, shedding light on the factors that either inhibit or promote children rights to participation in decision-oriented matters in the Africa context.

Barriers to Child Participation

The first of the findings of the study highlight how systemic cultural norms and expectations are pervasively intersecting with other elements like, - adultism to creates otherness

in child participation in sub-Saharan context. Adultism according to Wall, (2019) refers to the normative dominance of adults over children and young people which reinforces systemic norms that prioritize adult perspectives and devalue children's experiences and geographies. Although, adultist beliefs dominate many social protection and child welfare decision-making processes in SSA, which often relegating children and young people to the status of otherness (second-class citizens) as suggested by Abdullah et al. (2018), Manful and Manful (2014) and Wall (2019). This corroborates with the study by Nukunya, (2016) which suggests that children are to be passive recipients and those who express their views or are assertive are normally considered not well trained. Nukunya's (2016) observations align with Gariba and Romer (2021, 2024) studies on child marriages in Ghana. It was reported that such children and young people who challenge the adult-centric norms and expectations are usually excluded from the mainstream of society or the family.

The findings above risk essentializing the sub-Saharan African culture as inherently oppressive. This resonance a broader trend in the international child participation literature that universalized western participation models without adequate commitment to African theory of knowledge (Andersen & Dolva, 2015; Barnes et al., 2016; Blum, 2007). Recent scholarly literature argues that such framing fails to account for the heterogeneity and fluidity of African societies, many of which contain Indigenous modes of child participation that fall outside the praxis of child participation paradigms advanced by the UNCRC (Boadu et al., 2022; Duramy & Gal, 2020; Frimpong-Manso, 2014).

The literature highlights the need to approach criticism of cultural norms and expectations as a barrier to child participation in the SSA with a critical lens. It is important to contextualize our understanding by recognizing and challenging dominant narratives that have

historically portrayed African traditional knowledge as stagnant and incompatible with modern child rights discourses (Boadu et al., 2022). As Keetharuth (2009) and Olowu (2002) indicated, the child participation rights-based framework, as stated by Lundy's model, which has its groundings in the UNCRC, is not culturally neutral but historically embedded in liberal western values of individualism and autonomy. Therefore, the imposition of such dominant structures without critical adaptation risks epistemological injustice especially the nature of the study area. This according to Santos (2014, p. 35) refers to as "epistemicide", that is the SSA ways of knowing are devalued in favour of Lundy's child participation. In view of the above, the Africa charter on the rights and welfare of the child (ACRWC) thus serves as a vital corrective (complementary), offering a culturally grounded perspective that centres the sub-Saharan African child within their socio-political context (Anyogu & Umeobika, 2020; Mbise, 2016).

Reflecting critically on the above, child participation in SSA must be conceptualized not as a simulation of Western liberalism but as a dialogical process rooted in African philosophies, histories, and social realities. The findings from the included 17 articles stand to suggest that pervasive cultural norms and expectations are barriers to children and young people's involvement which is true per their findings. On the contrary, the above argument from the reviewed literature indicates that the findings are inconclusive. This is because, Correia et al., (2022) stated that indigenous practices such as storytelling, dance, games and communal rites can be adapted to create culturally relevant spaces where children and young people's voices are heard and respected. Findings from Markowska-Manista, (2025), Nalugya et al. (2023) and Twum-Danso and Okyere (2020) observed that, spaces in the context of communal and relational, positioned within informal gathering, village squares (circles), play-based environments where children and young people normally engage through culturally entrenched

practices like, songs, dance, storytelling and games are arts of participation. Therefore, the challenge is not cultural norms and expectations per se, but the conformity of those traditional philosophies under modern patriarchal and neoliberal pressures that portray them unresponsive to evolving social dynamics of child participation.

Twum-Danso and Okyere (2020) further emphasize that, if the above could be implemented and framed contextually, the principles of participation, including those summarized in Lundy's child participation model of space, voice, audience and influence can coexist with African communal values and philosophies. Nevertheless, child participation in SSA must be a negotiated space that respects both children's geographies and the cultural integrity of the current study context.

Absence of Child-friendly Practice

Another major theme that inhibits child participation was inadequate child-friendly practices. The above findings revealed a critical gap between policy and the lived realities of children's geographies across sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Though Vanderborne (2019), suggest that the African context have existing policy frameworks that promote child-friendly practices, the current findings reveal a sharp contradiction. The review points to the absence of conducive environments that encourage children and young people's involvement in decision-making. Literature shows that Africa Countries national policies often advocate commitments to children's protection and rights, which exhibits an ironic situation (Blum, 2007).

In line with the above, Twum-Danso and Okyere (2020) argue that the above policy frameworks primarily centre on safeguarding children from neglect, exploitation and abuse, rather than enhancing children's active involvement in welfare or protection decisions that affect them. This difference is important because child protection is necessary but inadequate when it

fails to give children and young people a voice. Abdullah et al. (2018) support the above critique by observing that government institutional efforts towards child-friendly practices remain underdeveloped. According to Cudjoe et al. (2020), it is very alarming within poverty-stricken, and conflict affected African regions. The above policy gaps reflect what Wall (2019) identifies as a broader adultist lens, where adults, rather than children and young people define the terms of participation in protection meetings.

The study findings therefore suggest a dire tension between protecting children from harm and facilitating them to participate in decisions about their own lives. Research and practitioners are caught up between the web (state of dilemmas) about whether certain child protection topics are ‘too difficult’ for children to discuss or not (Healy & Darlington, 2009; Iorfa et al., 2022). For instance, topics such as domestic violence, child removal, parental separation or incarceration are repeatedly handled with minimal children and young people’s input, under the hypothesis that exclusion is safer (Kjørholt et al, 2008; Tisdall et al., 2006). Nevertheless, Kennan, et al. (2021) and Lundy (2007) argue that prohibiting children and young people from the above conversations can cause just as much harm. This aligns with Nwachukwu’s (2023) claims that, keeping children in the dark about life-altering welfare decisions that directly impact their lives can breed confusion, anxiety, fear and even resentment. Moreover, Percy-Smith, & Thomas, (2010) and Pecora et al. (2018), asserted that such exclusion from child protection decisions can deprive children and young people of their chance to develop emotional resilience, competence, and self-awareness.

Reflecting critically on the above, policy and practitioners disregarding child participation in such moment, not only disrespects children’s autonomies but reinforces adultist perspectives. The current study advises that absence of child-friendly environments in many

African countries child welfare or protection systems is not simply a policy or resources gap. Per Ruiz-Casares (2010), and Robinson et al. (2020) the above stated gaps reflect a deeper seated structural, cultural and institutional barriers that must be addressed. This corroborates with the literature which often views children as objects of protection rather than people with voices, in need of spaces and the rights to be included in decisions that affect their lives (Sebti, et al., 2019; Wall, 2022). Literature, therefore, suggests that, changing the above reality requires a fundamental shift in how institutions and practitioners engage with children (Sarkadi et al., 2023; Tobin & Cashmore, 2020). That is, one that respects their geographies, values their contributions and creates spaces (environments) where children and young people voices are not just heard, but truly matter and influence decisions.

Gaps in How Child Participation is Understood and Operationalized

The study findings reveal that, despite the global recognition of children's rights to participation, notably through the UNCRC and ACRWC, there exists a significant inconsistency in how child participation standards or principles are interpreted and implemented across sub-Saharan context. The reviewed literature provided evidence that, despite the UNCRC outlines of comprehensive vision for child participation, local application is often uneven and culturally determined in Africa. Manful et al. (2021) underline that opposing cultural values and social norms suggestively shape how children's rights are understood and operationalized, leading to different interpretations that deter the establishment of a universal approach to child-inclusive practice in SSA.

The above irregularities further deepen by a lack of clarity among childcare providers regarding the connection between children's rights and participation. As Mbise (2016) notes, although many child protection practitioners recognize that children have the right to participate,

they often lack the practical knowledge, skill and institutional support needed to translate these rights into tangible, participatory practices. Furthermore, some welfare professionals misinterpret child participation narrowly as requiring children's direct physical presence in decision-making (Wall, 2022; Imoh, 2024). This results in failing to recognize alternative participatory methods like, - representation and consultation (Twum-Danso & Okyere, 2020). The above narrow view revealed by the study findings limits children's involvement to only most formal spaces, excluding them from broader and more flexible avenues of participation. Apart from the above stated constructions of child participation in SSA, another recurring phenomenon identified in the reviewed literature was the absence of a universally accepted age or developmental threshold at which children are deemed competent enough to participate in legal or welfare decisions. This correlates with the studies conducted by Andre et al. (2018) which reported a stark contrast between countries like the Netherlands, Sweden, where child participation standards such as age, vary not only across jurisdictions but also within systems.

The above age and competencies thresholds inconsistencies further reflected the Sub-Saharan Africa, where the lack of agreed-upon tools and frameworks to assess children's maturity or decision-making capacity presents significant challenges to child participation (Twum-Danso & Okyere, 2020). The reviewed literature highlights that there are no reliable or contextually grounded tools to assess the capacities and competence of children in participation. The above makes it more problematic for childcare providers to determine when and how to include children appropriately in decision-making processes. Adu-Gyamfi (2015) and Wall (2019) added that adultist views and cultural norms create further discrepancies around what constitutes participation, leading to inconsistent child participation practices. In the Sub-Saharan African context, the findings suggest that participation is shaped by traditions and community

dynamics, where respect for elders and hierarchical family structures can constrain children's voices (Adonteng-Kissi, 2023). For the above reasons, some child protection scholars reported that children's participation rights, as framed by the UNCRC are understood as Western ideas that conflicts with African indigenous values (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010; Twum-Danso & Okyere, 2020).

The findings also stated the knowledge gap among practitioners further aggravates the non-participation culture in Africa. This is in consistent with Cudjoe et al.'s (2021) study which shows that many child protection officers and social workers lack a deeper understanding of children's rights and the critical role of participation in welfare decisions. The above undermines efforts to develop inclusive and child friendly space or empowering practices. Therefore, based on the above presented evidence, the study suggests that conceptual confusion, cultural relativism, professional knowledge gaps, and absence of assessment tools undermines the potential of UNCRC and ACRWC standards to create a unified global framework for child participation. The reviewed literature further argues that, instead of promoting child participation uniformity in SSA, the above stated inconsistencies in Africa suggest the need for localized, context-sensitive child participatory approaches that factor the principles of the UNCRC and ACRWC while also honoring indigenous cultural realities.

Facilitators or enablers to child participation in SSA

The study findings have shown the significant role educational awareness plays in facilitating child participation in decision-making processes across (SSA). A recurring in the reviewed literature was the widespread lack of knowledge among children, families, and some professionals about children's rights to participate, as enshrined in article 12 of the UNCRC (Twum-Danso & Okyere, 2020). This hampers the realization of child participatory practices in

SSA. Appraising the findings through Lundy's model of participation reinforces structural and cultural prerequisites necessary for children to be genuinely involved in welfare decisions that affect their lives. The theme, - increased awareness and education coded from the 17 reviewed articles, therefore directly speaks to space and voice of Lundy's model (Lundy, 2007). The reviewed literature clearly demonstrates that without baseline understanding, children are not equipped to express their views in decisions (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010). This lack of awareness is a significant deficit for children to express their view. Lundy argues the above in relation to space. They stated that space is not just physical, it is also psychological and social (Lundy, 2007). Therefore, a child who does not know they have a right to participate is unlikely to seek that opportunity. The above assertion is supported by the current reviewed findings. The findings revealed a systemic failure across educational, legal and social protection systems. As such the argument for investing in rights-based education is well supported and justified.

Nevertheless, the counter-view findings suggest that increasing awareness alone may not result in participation unless deeper societal and cultural norms are addressed in SSA. Critics argue that rights discourse, when framed solely through the UNCRC can be alienating or resisted at the African community level (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010; Twum-Danso & Okyere, 2020). The above concern is legitimate in the sub-Saharan Context, where adultism is deeply embedded. However, scholars argue that integrating indigenous knowledge systems and oral traditions into the educational component can help minimize harm (Lansdowne, 2011). Such a culturally responsive approach ensures that children's voice is not only informed but also validated within the local worldview. The above is an essential step in transitioning from voice to audience in Lundy's child participation model. The findings affirm that participation gains authenticity in the SSA when it affirms children's cultural identity, not when it displaces it

(Twum-Danso and Okyere, 2020). In addition to the above assertion, Lundy (2018) emphasize that creating both audience and space at the societal level ensures not just that children are informed, but that adults around them are also sensitized to know children participatory rights. This helps challenge adult-centric power dynamics that often silence children. Therefore, the counterview that rights-based awareness child participation campaigns are westernized is partially valid ultimately rejected when such education is localized, intergenerational and participatory in design.

Chapter Six: Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

This chapter present summary of findings and concludes by contextualizing the study findings in the context of literature, from the sub-Saharan context, my position on where to go from here based on the findings, and some implications that could be drawn to influence policy and practice decisions on child participation.

Summary of Findings

This scoping review study aimed at mapping the barriers and facilitators to child participation across the child welfare or protection in the sub-Saharan African context. The following research questions were investigated in the study; What are the barriers to child participation in child protection settings in Sub-Saharan Africa? What are the gaps in how child participation is understood and operationalized in the Sub-Saharan Context? And What are the possible facilitators or enablers to child participation in the Sub-Saharan Context?

According to the findings, entrenched cultural norms and expectations, limited recognition of children rights to participation, and inadequate child-friendly practice are the existing child participation barriers inhibiting children involvement in decision making processes in SSA. Also, inconsistencies in international child participation standards, lack of clarity on age, maturity and competencies threshold are the gaps in how child participation is construed and operationalized in the SSA. Due to the lack of uniformity in age appropriateness and competencies thresholds, and absence of child participation assessment tools, childcare providers deployed personal discretion to determine how much to either involve or exclude children from welfare or legal issues affecting their lives.

Furthermore, the reviewed literature demonstrated that, increased awareness and education for children and young people to know their rights to participation, presence of child-centric environments (space) and capacity building workshops for childcare providers and practitioners are key enablers (facilitators) of child participation in the Sub-Saharan African context. As recommended by the 17 reviewed articles, the above child facilitators themes are not just supportive, but they are essential for the realization of child participation in Africa. That is, when mapped against the Lundy's child participation model, they collectively strengthen the four pillars: space, voice, audience, and influence.

Contextualizing the findings

Contextualizing the study findings, especially Lundy's child participation model and situated it in the sub-Saharan Africa context involves addressing the dominant narratives highlighted in the 17 reviewed articles. Responding to the above, the current study took into account indigenous knowledge and ways of involving children and young people in child welfare and social protection decision-making processes (Lundy, 2018). The study findings revealed that, child participation is a westernized cultural notion, thereby questioned Lundy's child participation model relevance and adaptation in the sub-Saharan context. However, contemporary studies indicated that, Lundy's model in SSA begins with reimagining spaces as communal and relational, positioned within informal gathering, village squares (circles), play-based environments where children and young people normally engage through culturally entrenched practices like, songs, dance, storytelling and games (Markowska-Manista, 2025). Heinz et al. (2023) also argues in line with the above that such space is not Western, formal 'safe spaces,' but rather naturally embedded in everyday life and communal rhythms. This aligns with postcolonial and African childhood authors like Abdullah et al (2018), Bannink Mbazzi et al.

(2016), Kakuru (2023), Twum-Danso Imoh (2009) among others. They stressed the need for localization of child participatory models. The above observations corroborate with Cudjoe et al. (2020) study which revealed that, children and young people's participation practices in Africa must incorporate communal norms and extended family systems. Reflecting on the above, I observed that most of the 17 reviewed articles did not incorporate traditional ways of involving children in decision-making. Thereby depicting the Sub-Saharan Africa context as pervasive and exclusionary. In this context, epistemological injustice, that is neglecting the study area, - Africa realities and eulogizing Westernized ideologies.

Concurrently, de Castro (2020) cautions against western dominance in knowledge production especially involving children's geographies in decision-making. Scholars supported the above views by emphasizing that indigenous ways of knowing, and scholarship must be respected to avoid epistemological injustices (Long & Grant, 2024; Markowska-Manista, 2025). According to Mayaka and Truell (2021) child participation is embedded in *Obuntu bulamu*, in the sub-Saharan African values of belonging, humaneness (*Ubuntu*) and mutual responsibility. Therefore, the concept of *Ubuntu* had its origins from Zulu and Xhosa languages with the phrases "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" which stands for "a person is a person through other people" (Makhanya & Mzinyane, 2023). This reflects a collective notion of "I am because we are" interdependence tradition that profoundly contrasts sharply with Western ideology of individualism (Coeckelbergh, 2022). According to Mayaka and Truell (2021), *Ubuntu* had its focal point of inclusivity, affirming a community-based frameworks that co-create with children, practitioners, parents, teachers etc.

Reflecting on the above critically, child participation in the SSA comprises weaving in communal life not as tokenistic formality (space, voice, audience but not influence). However,

everyday relational practices that affirm children's agency, capacities, sustain cultural continuity and transform communities. Therefore, contextualizing the study findings through Lundy's child participation model requires adaptation centred around indigenous values, intersectional inclusion and collaborative co-creation to foster a more transformative systems that enable children and young people to have a voice and influence decisions.

Where do we go from here

The study findings have revealed that the sub-Saharan social protection systems non-participation culture is nowhere near an end due to structural, resources, knowledge and cultural challenges. Evidence from the reviewed literature identify adultist interferences and institutional cold attitude in terms of insufficient resources makes child participatory efforts in involving children and young people in decision-making ineffective. There also appears to be the concern that, - international policies and frameworks inconsistencies, age-appropriateness and maturity threshold ambiguities of how much to involve the child hampers child protection workers efforts in child participation practices in Africa. Even though, the studies suggest that children and young people in the Africa context often do not have a say in child welfare decision-making processes (Cudjoe et al., 2019; Abdullah et al., 2018), this scoping review findings is revealing that children have the opportunity to share their opinions and be heard by adults including child protection workers. Unfortunately, the involvement of children in child welfare matters in the SSA context stops at after children are heard or have an audience (Cudjoe et al., 2020). The findings revealed that, children voice or concerns are not included in decision making. This corroborates with Lundy's model of child participation space, voice and audience. However, the influence component of Lundy's frameworks is no where achievable. This confirms the study

findings, as it revealed that, creating space for children to have a voice, and audience alone is not enough.

The study findings have shown that with appropriate child inclusive practices put in place, the non-participation culture in the Africa context can be halted or minimized. The study suggested that awareness creation and educational campaigns on child participation should be prioritize by stakeholders. Africa governmental institutions especially the child welfare and protection departments must be strengthened and staffed with resources to encourage child participation practice in the region. The various governments and other stakeholders should not just document in the policies books or literature to attract international attention that they are involving children in decision-making. However, pragmatic and context-sensitive approach should be adapted to enable children participate without any hindrances. To ensure that inclusionary services meet the needs of children in contact with child protection organisations, practitioners are expected to undergoes child participation trainings or workshops, skilled in using assessment tools, and co-create an enabling environment (spaces) with children by advocating and educating children about their rights to participation. Therefore, providing children and young people with information about their participatory process in social protection or welfare, their roles and benefits would act as a catalyst or facilitator to child participation in SSA.

The study Implication for practice and Policy

The reviewed literature on barriers and facilitators to child participation within the child welfare and protection systems in sub-Saharan Africa bears significant implications for both policy and child participatory practice. One of the major policy implications of the study findings is the need to institutionalize child participation by explicitly integrating it into national child

protection laws, policies and procedural strategies. The findings of the study discovered a substantial gap in the practical translation of children's rights into enforceable frameworks although SSA countries are signatories to the UNCRC and ACRWC. The findings, therefore, suggests that child participation policies and rights must move beyond symbolic acknowledgement to include participatory practices, practitioner's accountability structures and clear assessment tools for ensuring children's voices are genuinely heard and acted upon. Reflecting from practice lens, prevalent lack of awareness and understanding among children, practitioners, and families about child participation rights poses a crucial barrier.

In line with the above observations, the current study recommended that, culturally grounded awareness and educational advocacies should be intensified to make child rights information more accessible and acceptable within the Sub-Saharan contexts. Therefore, engaging traditional leaders, using indigenous oral storytelling and align child participatory guidelines with communal values can help bridge the gap between UNCRC and ACRWC frameworks and local practices, thereby countering the worldviews of child participation as a westernized cultural imposition. Alongside these strategies, practitioners, especially childcare providers and child protection officers must undergo continuous professional capacity building in terms of knowledge and attitudinal readiness required to facilitate participation. Therefore, curricula in childcare and protection programs should inculcate courses like child participatory communication skills, child rights education, and guidance based on models like Lundy's child participation frameworks.

Furthermore, co-creating child friendly and age-appropriate platforms for children to share their views is essential. The findings of the study revealed that, children and young people need safe, accessible, and inclusive environments (spaces), that is social, cultural and physical

friendly where children can participate in decisions without any hindrances. The above spaces must take into account the developmental stages, difference communication techniques and tools like visual aids, interactive feedback mechanisms and digital platforms. To ensure accountability, the study suggests that the Sub-Saharan African governments and NGOs must establish robust monitoring and evaluation strategies that assess child participatory quality. Therefore, child-led participatory audits can further enhance participation transparency and empowerment. The above strategies would ensure that participation is not tokenistic or ad hoc but rather, it must be rooted in the above stated structured processes, where children are given feedback on how their views have influenced welfare and protection decisions.

Recommendation for further studies

Findings from the study suggests that non-participation culture is reinforced by deeply grounded adultist and cultural norms and worldviews that drives the lack of UNCRC article 12 realization in the Sub-Sharan Context. Therefore, further studies could use interviews (primary data) to explore children and young people's views on participation in Sub-Saharan African. Also, studies could investigate how childcare providers, and social workers could support and promote child participation in Africa. In addition, research could be done on how to shape and strengthen African social policies and institutional systems at the national and sub-national levels. Moreover, participatory or action researchers could also do a plot study on the effectiveness of Lundy's child participatory model and Ubuntu philosophies in Africa. Finally, considering study goal to advocate for children's and young people's inclusivity in decision-making processes in the UNCRC and the impact that this will have on Sub-Saharan Africa development planning, researchers could also map strategies to build evidence-based data in child participatory practice in Africa.

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