Immigrated students’ voices at school environment: an analysis of policy documents through school websites

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Abstract

Background

The development of immigrant friendly schools is an important target across educational settings. However, relatively few studies have specifically examined mechanism how student voices are heard in European school context. This study examined the extent to which student voices have been addressed in European schools as evidenced from websites of schools located in high migrant areas in six European countries: Austria, England, Finland, Germany, Romania, and Switzerland.

Methods

Between 2 March and 8 April 2021, we reviewed the publicly available policy documents on school websites to ascertain how student voice practices are carried out in schools as described in the documents. The selected schools were in areas of high immigration. Pre-designed categories were applied to the documents extracted from the websites using a four-step analytic approach (finding, selecting, appraising, and synthesizing the data). A combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches with descriptive statistics (n, %, Mean, SD, range) was used for the data analysis.

Results

A total of 412 documents from 305 schools were extracted (49–110 documents per country). The most common documents were anti-bullying or violence prevention strategies (75/412) and mission statements (72/412). There were disparities between countries and schools about how hearing students' voices and including students in decision-making in schools were described in the documents. Limited evidence was apparent as to how students are listened to in their schools based on policy documents.

Conclusions

Our document analysis based on publicly accessible school websites suggest that student voices are less frequently described in school written policy documents in our sample of European schools. Our findings provide a baseline to further monitor activities, not only at school level but also to any governmental and local authorities whose intention is to serve the public and openly share their values and practices with community members.

BACKGROUND

Migrated children's mental well-being is a global problem. About half of the world's refugees are children and nearly 50 million children have migrated or been displaced across borders [1]. Studies have documented increased mental health and psychosocial wellbeing risks in displaced children and adolescents [2]. Especially refugee children and adolescents suffer symptoms of depression, PTSD, and aggression [3, 4]. If integration of children remain unsolved, it may impact on adolescents’ further life by developing problems in coping, social relationships, and identity [5].

Schools play central role in supporting the resettling of new students [6]. Encouraged in the Health Promoting Schools framework of the WHO, student voice can be supported by implementing policies and practices that respect students’ wellbeing and dignity, provide multiple opportunities for success, and acknowledge intentions as well as personal achievements [6, 7]. ‘Student voice’ refers to listening to the opinions of students so they can have a say and influence decision-making within the school context [7, 8]. Despite development of different approaches and intervention in building sense of identity, belonging, listening youth voice and participation to foster their wellbeing holistically [9], school-based interventions have been criticized for their limited ability to target the full range of multi-faceted problems in youth refugees [10]. In addition, the absence of the pupil voice in public health approaches to school mental health is still marked [11].

Cook-Sather [12] specify the value of having a voice, meaning a presence, power and agency that are realized in opportunities to express one's views, to be heard and have an influence on outcomes in a democratic context [13]. The approach has paved the way towards a vision of equality and partnership in schools where teachers, students and parents communicate between each other [14]. Different approaches have been used to implement student voice practices and understanding how they are recognised and practiced within the school environment [15–18]. R Sharp [19] conducted a systematic review to understand what enables secondary school students to perceive themselves as active agents in their lives and found that students’ sense of belonging, being heard and valued, being involved in joint decisions, and seeing the impact from their actions all contributed. T Shallcross, J Robinson, P Pace and D Tamoutselli [20] synthesized findings of case studies regarding the role of student voices in creating sustainable environments in three schools in England, Malta and Greece and concluded that paramount to student voices being heard is the ability that students have to express their views. A variety of participatory approaches have also been used to promote student voices in school settings [21]. Findings in the UK [22], Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Denmark [23] highlighted unequal access to participation at school due to students’ socioeconomic status, and therefore questions around the representation of student voices, in terms of diversity need to be considered. In Australia, R Black [24] analysed student participation in policy and research from the viewpoint of marginalized young people and found mismatch between policy and practice. Student participation was rare, particularly in decisions related to wider school systems. A minority of students had real opportunities to make changes in their school because the number of student school council representatives was small [24]. U Mager and P Nowak [25] synthesized 32 empirical studies, mostly from English-speaking countries, to explore the effects of student participation in decision-making at school. They found that students participated in councils, in
Policy document analysis has been used to describe policy indicators and real practices of implementing these school policies. In the Netherlands, Boonkamp et al. [26] analysed policy documents from six schools. The results indicated that although specific school activities were offered in the general policies, these activities were not realised in students’ daily practices. Another review concluded that school-level policies were promising in principle but they often lacked sufficient financing, program quality, and effective coordination [27]. It has also been reported that only moderate effects of school-level policies were found using WHO’s Health Promoting Schools framework [28]. Despite interdisciplinary knowledge describing the benefits of listening to youth voices and supporting their participation, young people have few opportunities to meaningfully engage in decisions related to policies, programs, and services [29]. Practices in the transparency of policy documents may also vary in different countries. For example, in Sweden, Norway and Denmark, governments have launched web portals to publish statistical information related to each school. On the contrary in Finland, school reports are published on a superficial level only. This difference in transparency between schools may indicate country-specific institutionalized ideas, rationales, and discursive practices, not only on school evaluation, but also on school accountability or public information within the Nordic region [30].

Identifying the presence of students’ voices on school’s policy documents is important for many reasons. The practice of student voice is an indicator of a democratic school environment, which in turn relates to lower bullying incidents [31]. There is also a need to understand ‘how and why certain policies come to be developed in particular contexts by who, for whom, based on what assumptions and with what effect’ [32]. Previous studies have shown that student experiences of active participation in decision-making processes at school can diminish the negative effect of ethnic victimization on immigrant youth’s self-esteem, and thus increase their satisfaction with school and academic expectations [33]. Further, democratization of school culture and policies, within a context of racism and trauma experienced by immigrant students through student voice initiatives can add to a positive learning environment for all [34]. In addition, by offering voice to students, schools can contribute to overall positive health and well-being as well as developing strategies towards a more tolerant society and respect for others [35].

In this study, we were particularly concerned with how immigrant student voices are captured within school policy documents, a practice that has been suggested as poorly developed in the school context [36]. Marginalized students without access to existing community and school-based supports, are less likely to engage with school-based activities including student voice initiatives [37]. Students, particularly those traumatized by past experiences, often meet the criteria for marginalization. When schools become ‘trauma-informed’, where they recognise the prevalence of trauma and the impact past experiences can have on a student, they use practices and policies that are mindful of these experiences with the intention to not re-traumatize a student [38]. Schools can become places where immigrant students are assisted and supported, which has a direct impact on their overall experience of school and their participation in school-based initiatives. Therefore, analyzing school policy documents in these areas, including mission statements, anti-bullying guidelines and policies, would enable us to determine the presence of immigrant student voices within these documents. For further purposes, to determine the effectiveness of policies regardless of their contents, it is important to evaluate the actors and processes involved in policy development and implementation, as investigating the evidence of these variables could be a worthwhile endeavor for future research [26]. If variations exist between the volume and content of the retrieved information across schools, countries, and geographical areas, the differences could infer that there are country-specific institutionalized ideas, rationales and discursive practices, not only on the school evaluation, but also on the school accountability or public information within this wider European region [30]. This could further lead to greater diversity in how the provision of listening to students is conducted. With this in mind, we propose that engaging students in school initiatives such as student voice work, should be clearly stated in school policy documents.

We systematically searched but did not find any systematic review focusing on how students are involved in school policy development or implementation as evidenced from school public facing websites. In this study, we therefore aimed to describe how student voices have been addressed in European schools as evidenced from websites of schools located in high migrant areas in six European countries: Austria, England, Finland, Germany, Romania, and Switzerland. To our knowledge, it thus fills a gap in the current research and provides an added value compared to the existing knowledgebase. More specifically, our research aim was three-fold. First, we described, to what extent hearing ‘student voices’ at school can be identified within publicly available policy documents on school websites. Second, we identified the specific characteristics of the schools in locations of high immigration where student voices are well identified based on the policy documents. And third, we described how student voices are represented in school policy and other documents on publicly available school websites.

**METHODS**

**Design**

Policy document analysis [39] was used to review how student voices are heard and implemented in Europeanschools in high immigration areas, as evidenced from their websites. This study used a constructionist approach, informed by mainstream policy studies where the analytical focus on policy documents is informed by the value of those documents and the interactive research questions guiding the inquiry [40]. This approach fits with our study because according to mainstream policy studies, policies are understood as an interaction of values, interests and resources guided through institutions and mediated through politics [41], which are further featured prominently in policy texts [42].

**Settings**

Data collection was conducted across six European countries: Austria, England, Finland, Germany, Romania, Switzerland. These countries represent different European geographical areas with diverse economic and cultural contexts and educational systems. Populations ranged from 5.5 to 84 million
people with a diverse range of languages spoken, between one and four in each country. Compulsory education started at age 4 to 6 years and ended at ages 15 to 18 years depending on the country. Schools were funded by municipalities or local government or from several funding sources, and the management of education was either centralized or decentralized. Half of the countries had legislation relating to student voice initiatives (Table 1). A description of school system in countries included in the study is described in Additional file 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>Austria</th>
<th>England</th>
<th>Finland</th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>Romania</th>
<th>Switzerland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em><em>Population (MM</em>)</em>*</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>56.3</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>84.0</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Official languages</strong></td>
<td>German</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Finnish, Swedish</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>Romanian</td>
<td>German, French, Italian, Romansh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Population born abroad</strong></td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student age</strong></td>
<td>6–15</td>
<td>4–18</td>
<td>6–16</td>
<td>6–16</td>
<td>6–18</td>
<td>4–15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Funding</strong></td>
<td>State, federal states, municipalities</td>
<td>Local authorities, not-for-profit academy trusts, foundation bodies</td>
<td>Municipalities</td>
<td>Federal states (staff) &amp; Municipalities (buildings)</td>
<td>State, local authorities, other sources (sponsorships or donations)</td>
<td>Municipalities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Management of education</strong></td>
<td>Centralized</td>
<td>National curriculum, local authority or independent</td>
<td>Centralized</td>
<td>Decentralized (federal states level)</td>
<td>Partially decentralized</td>
<td>Decentralized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Legislation of student voice initiatives</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*MM = Million, **Compulsory education

**Eligibility criteria**

Internal policy documents from school websites were selected as data for this study as they represent ‘social facts’ [43]. In this study, policy documents were referred as ‘formal or informal legislative or regulatory action, statements of intent, or guides to action issued by governments or organizations’ [44]. We reviewed school policy documents where we expected to see referrals made to student voices and their inclusion. The documents were defined as written organization-wide strategies addressing key issues, principles, and values of the school. These included mission statements, policies, guidelines, rules, or other written documents publicly available on the school websites.

We aimed to review documents from 50 schools in each country. The inclusion criteria were: schools providing education to students up to and including those aged 18 years; public websites easily accessible by the public (no access codes required) and the website content in written format in the country’s main national language. The schools were located in areas of high immigration defined in national documentation. Further, if the information led to other websites or sources, only the primary source was extracted. We excluded any social media sources or unofficial websites on the school website or external links leading to other national level websites outside the specific school website.

**Data extraction tool**

The characteristics of the schools including geographical location, school type (public, private, other), number of students, possible specialties in student composition, and age range of students in each school were extracted. In addition, the document type, name, aim and target group of the document were identified.

To describe the presence of student voices as evidenced on each school website, we used a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. First, we used a qualitative approach to identify specific topics for consideration in the written policy document such as clear statements about student voice initiatives or activities. This approach focused on text (words, sentences) used in the targeted documents. Second, a quantitative approach was used to ensure that documents were examined and interpreted similarly in different contexts and cultural areas. Consequently, a structured data extraction format was developed based on the literature [45]. The data extraction coding was formed as an analytical tool to reduce, classify and synthesize raw data [46]. The data extraction tool was piloted with 10 school websites in each country (totaling 60). To ensure congruent data extraction and to align the analysis from different reviewers, this pilot exercise was discussed and the tool modified by the research team [39].

The final data extraction tool included 8 items and the representative author/s from each country rated the following items:

1. The general question: Student voice had been sought in the process of developing the document (1 = strongly disagree – 7 = strongly agree)
Specific questions relating to evidence were asked about student voice in the retrieved documents. If the evidence was clear the reviewer assigned the value ‘1’, if it was not clear the reviewer assigned the value ‘0’. This evidence related to:

2. Specific methods were used to seek student views in developing the document. (1 = yes, 2 = no)
3. Students participated in a document development group (1 = yes, 2 = no)
4. Students feedback was sought in reviewing the document (1 = yes, 2 = no)
5. The documents cited or referred to existing literature (1 = yes, 2 = no)
6. The document evidenced how student voice(s) informed the development of the document (1 = yes, 2 = no)
7. Student diversity was reflected in the document (1 = yes, 2 = no)
8. The document described how student voices were considered or ensured in school practices and processes (1 = yes, 2 = no)
9. Any methods used by the school to seek student input, including consultation, interviews or surveys in the document development (1 = yes, no = 0).

Data extraction and analysis

Data extraction (Fig. 1) was undertaken between 2 March and 8 April 2021. A four-step analytic procedure including finding, selecting, appraising, and synthesizing the data contained in the school documents based on the pre-designed categories was used. Quotations from the original document(s) were used to describe the representative content of the data [47].

First, in each country, a list of 50 schools located in areas of high immigration were identified using Google web engine, government level websites, or relevant documents. The assumption was made that publicly available information should be easily available on the school website, so no longer than 20 minutes should be spent on each school website. However, the time limit was only indicative aiming to show that information available to a public audience should be easy-to-access, without specific insight knowledge of the structure or content of the website. Second, the websites were screened for eligibility (document selection). If more than one document per school was found, all documents were extracted separately by the local reviewer. Third, the content of each document was reviewed (data appraisal). Fourth, the content of the documents was extracted and coded to address the questions included in the data extraction tool (data synthesis). Questions raised during the data extraction and analysis process were discussed with the first two authors. Data from each country were further combined and checked by the same authors to ensure consistency of the analysis. In the case of any missing data or unclear coding, the questions were addressed with the country representatives.

For quantitative analysis, characteristics of the documents and schools, and numerical data extracted from the written policy documents were analysed and were described using descriptive statistics (n, %, Mean, SD, range). Possible differences between schools and the documents in each country were described by crosstabulation. The data were analysed using SPSS version 27 (IBM Corp). To illustrate the results, examples of methods addressing student voice were provided from specific schools’ documents with the school’s identification number (ID).

RESULTS

Characteristics of the documents and schools

A total of 412 documents from 305 schools met the inclusion criteria (Table 2). The number of documents analysed per country varied from 49 (Switzerland) to 110 (Finland). The most common documents were anti-bullying or violence prevention strategies (75/412) and mission statements (72/412). The target group of the document was stated in 217 documents as follows: the wider public (n = 106), students (n = 53), parents/carers (n = 5) and school staff (n = 3). From all the documents, fifty were intended for more than one target group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>Austria</th>
<th>England</th>
<th>Finland</th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>Romania</th>
<th>Switzerland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of document</strong></td>
<td><strong>N (%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>N (%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>N (%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>N (%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>N (%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>N (%)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-bullying or violence prevention strategy</td>
<td>75 (18%)</td>
<td>3 (6%)</td>
<td>50 (82%)</td>
<td>3 (3%)</td>
<td>10 (11%)</td>
<td>3 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission statement</td>
<td>72 (17%)</td>
<td>25 (48%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>5 (4%)</td>
<td>11 (13%)</td>
<td>10 (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School rules</td>
<td>50 (12%)</td>
<td>15 (29%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>21 (19%)</td>
<td>9 (10%)</td>
<td>5 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion or diversity strategy</td>
<td>45 (11%)</td>
<td>2 (4%)</td>
<td>4 (7%)</td>
<td>5 (4%)</td>
<td>33 (37%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School curricula</td>
<td>38 (9%)</td>
<td>3 (6%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>28 (26%)</td>
<td>7 (8%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination</td>
<td>23 (6%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>17 (19%)</td>
<td>6 (12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>109 (27%)</td>
<td>4 (7%)</td>
<td>7 (11%)</td>
<td>48 (44%)</td>
<td>2 (2%)</td>
<td>27 (53%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>412</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
School characteristics were based on data from 305 schools in the six countries, representing 89 cities/municipalities in 154 geographical areas. Typically, the schools were public (N = 295) although a small number of 'other' schools were represented including private or religious schools. Student numbers varied from 10 (England) to 1,700 (Switzerland). Variation in student age was evident, ranging from 2 years (England) to 22 years (Romania) as some schools provided education to younger children and those with special education needs. More detailed information of the schools in each country is described in Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>Austria</th>
<th>England</th>
<th>Finland</th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>Romania</th>
<th>Switzerland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of schools</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cities/municipalities</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic location</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School type</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School including diversity groups*, n (%)</td>
<td>55 (18%)</td>
<td>16 (31%)</td>
<td>8 (16%)</td>
<td>28 (56%)</td>
<td>2 (4%)</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age range (years)</td>
<td>2–22</td>
<td>10–14</td>
<td>2–19</td>
<td>5–19</td>
<td>6–18</td>
<td>3–22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* As far as explicitly mentioned on the website

Student voices as represented on school websites

Using the 7-point scale, reviewers were asked to respond to what extent student voices were heard in the documents on the school websites. Of the 412 documents, seven documents were rated as 'strongly agreed' by the reviewers. This meant that seeking students' views and preferences were evident in these seven documents. Sixteen (n = 16) documents were rated 'high' regarding how student voices were heard (i.e. a response scored either as 6 or 7). On the contrary, in 247 cases, reviewers indicated that it was not possible to determine, based on the document, whether students' views and preferences were sought when the specific document was developed (strongly disagreed) (Fig. 2.)

[Figure 2 here]

Specific methods used to address student voice was reported in 105 documents representing 29% of schools. Student voices were mostly heard using consultation, interviews or surveys (n = 70) or by student participation in document development groups (n = 55). Existing student voices literature was referred to in 30 documents. Student feedback on the document draft was sought in 12 cases. Twenty-three documents included information about how student voices were used to inform the document development. Further, the processes of considering and ensuring student voices in the school were described in 124 documents while student diversity was reflected in 120 documents. Across the dataset, 16 documents were rated 'high' regarding hearing student voices (scores 7 or 6). These documents came from schools in England (n = 6), Romania (n = 5), Finland (n = 2), Switzerland (n = 2) and Germany (n = 1) (Table 3). Of the 16 schools, 15 were government funded. The size of these schools varied from 81 to 1,159 students (M = 378), and they did not describe any specialties in student composition. Almost half (n = 7) of these schools reported strategies relating to anti-bullying or violence prevention (Table 4).
## Table 4
Characteristics of the highly rated schools (N = 16) and methods how student voices are heard

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document ID</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
<th>Type of document</th>
<th>Consultation, interview or survey</th>
<th>Participation in development group</th>
<th>Feedback for the draft</th>
<th>Citation of existing literature</th>
<th>Use of gathered information</th>
<th>Student voice processes</th>
<th>Student diversity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>69</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>Anti-bullying</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>School vision</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>Anti-bullying</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>88</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>Anti-bullying</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>Anti-bullying</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>112</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>Anti-bullying</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>118</td>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>1159</td>
<td>School curricula</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>151</td>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>630</td>
<td>Annual report</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>309</td>
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<td>352</td>
<td>Romania</td>
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<td>School rules</td>
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<td>359</td>
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<td>394</td>
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<td>360</td>
<td>Student parliament protocol</td>
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The most frequently reported methods to hear student voices were consultation, interviews or surveys. Examples in the data (ID represented verification of the specific school in the data) included topics of planning upcoming school events (ID 394), involvement of the student council to develop school rules (ID 352), informal meetings to ask students their views on bullying (ID 90), or focus groups to seek student views on the school vision (ID 74). Students were enabled to produce content for anti-bullying documents (ID 85, ID 411) and diversity strategies (ID 309), to share experiences through writing school leaflets about their school year (ID 151) and online schooling during the pandemic (ID 346). Surveys were also developed to understand school bullying (ID 69, ID 88, ID 359) or involve students in developing school curricula (ID 118). Documents also reported on student opportunities to send messages by post box and email to anti-bullying ambassadors (ID 112).

Ten out of 16 highly ranked documents demonstrated that students had participated in the document development group. Students were involved in decision-making and writing anti-bullying policies (ID 85, ID 90, ID 112) or drafting a list of school visions and values (ID 74). In one document, student union boards had participated in developing school rules and decision-making on how student behavior and working skills were evaluated (ID 118), as well as contributing to the final production of the document (ID 151, ID 411). However, in other cases, detailed description of student roles in development groups was lacking.

Feedback on the draft of any school document was reported in 5 documents. For example, in one school, students working as anti-bullying ambassadors annually reviewed the anti-bullying policy (ID 90). Student voice had also been sought regarding the draft of the school vision (ID 74). One document was written by students themselves (ID 411) and in two cases detailed examples of this method was lacking. The rarest method to address student voice in the development of high-rated documents was citation of existing literature (3/16). References used included instructions for preventing and tackling bullying (ID 69, ID 85, ID 88).
Use of gathered information was illustrated in half of the documents (8). It was reported that student views had supported the development of school values and helped the document development group to see how the school vision would look in practice (ID 74). It was also noted that student feedback was useful in informing future provision of anti-bullying policies (ID 88) and how to regularly seek student views in the future (ID 69, ID 85, ID 90, ID 112). Written examples of using information gathered was missing from two cases.

Nine documents included a description of student voice processes implemented in the school. These included specific responsibility roles, such as elected student representatives (ID 69) and anti-bullying ambassadors (ID 112). Student voice was discussed in relation to safe climate (ID 327) and opportunity to communicate (ID 74) and express opinions (ID 346). Two documents instructed students on how they can communicate their thoughts and concerns (ID 90) or devised creative methods for students to work together in groups to find solutions to bullying (ID 330) while one document illustrated that student participation in developing, planning and evaluating the working culture was promoted by "own teacher's moments", development discussions, peer supporter action and a student union board (ID 118). Documents described that student voice was addressed as outlined in national policies (ID 88).

In addition, five documents reflected student diversity. For example, they detailed bullying of different groups (ID 90) in relation to race, sexual orientation or being different in any other way (ID 411). Also, documents stated commitment to promoting community cohesion and implementing necessary actions in relation to ethnicity, religion or culture (ID 69) or described methods to promote students lingual and cultural identity (ID 118). Diversity was also found intrinsic to the content of diversity strategy documents (ID 309).

**DISCUSSION**

Our study aimed to describe the extent to which hearing 'student voices' at school can be identified within publicly available policy documents on school websites. Despite the global emphasis to strengthen student voices in terms of having their say in societies [48, 49], a limited number of documents in our data clearly indicated that student views and preferences were sought at the target schools. The Convention on the Rights of the Child [50] recognizes that the views and opinions of all children and young people are taken seriously and includes 'participation' as an essential right alongside 'protection' and 'provision' [51, 52]. Consequently, children and young people should have an opportunity to participate in how decisions are made about and for them, so they can contribute to social, cultural, and economic changes [53].

We also aimed to identify the specific characteristics of the schools in these areas of high immigration where student voices were well identified based on the policy documents. We found 16 of those schools out of 305: the most schools were government funded and most located in England and Romania. Within the English reviewed documents, it is likely that this is related to the regular government inspection of schools that explores student voice. Similarly, in Romania, the institution that certifies the quality of education at the high school level (ARACIP, https://aracip.eu/) explicitly analyses student voice presence during its inspections. Previous studies have also reported that school size is relevant for the realization of student participation and student voices [54, 55]. In our study, the size of the highly rated schools varied from 81 to 1,159 students (M = 378). Another study has also showed that regardless of variables related to teacher's personality (attitudes towards diversity or personal experiences with migration), percentage of immigrant students, neighborhood of the school and educational and school system in a country, are crucial to ensuring a positive academic and social adaptation outcomes for students [56]. About half (n = 7) of our 16 highly rated schools in the data reported strategies related to anti-bullying or violence prevention and five schools reflected student diversity.

Based on the analysis of 412 documents in six countries, student voices were most often identified in those describing anti-bullying or violence prevention programs (n = 75) or school's mission statements (n = 72). Bullying in immigrant populations has been a subject of much research in recent years [57]. A study by SD Walsh, B De Clercq, M Molcho, Y Harel-Fisch, CM Davison, KR Madsen and GW Stevens [58] involving 10 European countries and the USA, found higher levels of physical fighting and bullying perpetuation for both immigrant and non-immigrant adolescents in schools with a higher percentage involving immigrant students. A positive school environment not only correlates with a reduction in bullying but adds to a positive school experience for students [59]. Consequently, the school climate and how it is perceived by the wider school community, impacts a student's sense of safety and acceptance both in the classroom and within the wider school (reference blinded for review). Our study highlighted the importance of establishing a positive, supportive, and democratic school environment to shape diversity and combat issues of bullying; all these features should be visible in school documents. Our results also support the wider literature promoting a whole education approach to tackling bullying: these programs are successful when they are intensive, long-lasting and implemented with high fidelity [60, 61]. Anti-bullying guidelines should therefore be formulated for the whole school in joined initiatives with students, and visible to teachers, parents, and community.

Even the most common methods used to ascertain student viewpoints, including consultation, interviews or surveys as well as participating in development groups, were evidenced in less than a fifth of the documents reviewed. Of concern, we found that in some cases it was unclear as to how the collected student voice data was used to inform the document development. However, one third of the documents included descriptions about involving students and hearing their views and preferences in school practices. This result raises questions as to whether student voices are linked to reality versus collected student voice data was used to inform the document development. However, one document illustrated that student participation in developing, planning and evaluating the working culture was promoted by "own teacher's moments", development discussions, peer supporter action and a student union board (ID 118). Documents described that student voice was addressed as outlined in national policies (ID 88).

In our data, student diversity was reflected in less than a third of the reviewed documents and only 45 inclusion or diversity strategies were found from websites of then 305 schools. We found this surprising as the schools were selected based on their location in areas with a high migrant population. In
general, the number of immigrant students has increased sharply over the past 20 years in most OECD countries with 13% of students on average having an immigrant background [63]. Noteworthily, it remains unclear as to how immigrant students are involved in school decision-making processes. Research has shown that a minority of students might be, in reality, involved in decision-making at school [24]. This is especially problematic for students with immigrant backgrounds who might have to learn a new language and deal with discrimination as well as other obstacles related to their immigration experience. In addition, European countries differ regarding implementation of curricula for diverse student populations. In some countries, multi- and intercultural education is obligatory (e.g., in the UK) while in others it is mandatory (e.g., in Austria). Thus, it is up to the schools and perhaps their teachers, as to what extent they implement intercultural education in their lessons thus making minority groups visible. Therefore, schools and teachers play an important role as they can foster inclusion and multiculturalism by providing a learning environment that welcomes student diversity and its presence in the curriculum [64]. Further studies are needed to explore the sense of belonging of immigrant students and how their voices are really heard in diverse school environments from student point of views including exploring the teachers’ role in listening to their voices and viewpoints.

Our study had limitations which need to be considered carefully. First, reviewers in six countries extracted and categorized data from school websites. Currently, a systematic appraisal for policy document review quality is lacking [65]. Since most policies are difficult to evaluate using controlled designs [26], the data in this study were analysed using a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods. Although we carefully tested the categorization rules and possible discrepancies in categorization processes were discussed between reviewers, subjective interpretations may still be evident in document analysis. Therefore, the results must be interpreted with caution. Second, the concept of ‘students voice(s)’ was identified on a limited number of websites. This may lead to questioning if the school policy documents represented “the real” voices of students or the rhetoric of involvement of students in decision-making. Through the methods utilised in this study, we can only conclude based on the extracted data, to what extent the topics are written into policy documents. Other data collection methods such as surveys or focus group interviews with students might provide a better representation of the phenomena in real time. Therefore, the next step is to collect empirical data using perceptions from students themselves on their school environment and the opportunities presented to them to show how student voices are realised in schools. Third, there might be a fundamental difference between the actions of an individual organization and those of a public government with respect to several important factors such as reach, degree of compulsion, democratic legitimacy and use of public resources in each school [26]. Therefore, the results may not be widely generalisable outside European context. Finally, as the written documents from schools have been developed for different purposes and for different target groups, it might be too much to assume that requirements about hearing student voices is recorded in all documents. We still believe that if the core values of the European educational systems, i.e. ethics, transparency, integrity, and mental well-being, are seen as important for schools, the evidence of student voice and their implementation would be found in relevant policy documentation publicly available to all. At the same time, if extracurricular activities to support realisation of student voices are proposed, school-based policies need to ensure that they are available to everyone to avoid social inequalities by targeting well-off neighborhoods only or by failing to take into account the needs of marginalised student populations [26].

CONCLUSION

Our document analysis based on publicly accessible school websites suggests that student voices are less frequently described in school written policy documents in our sample of European schools. Policy makers and health authorities in public health may have less emphasis on the potential of sharing school values and practices on school websites, highlighting the importance of knowledge translation between school representatives and communities. Our findings provide a baseline to further monitor activities, not only at schools but also to any public health authorities whose intention is to serve and openly share their values and practices in supporting students’ well-being with community members on their websites. Transparent, open, and visible policy documents could encourage students and their parents to join in decision-making to foster a feeling of responsibility, belonging and mental well-being. Of importance, diversity of students in schools needs to be reflected and acknowledged in planning supportive actions. Therefore, further research is needed to explore whether student voices are realised in daily practice, and not just written into policy documents.

Abbreviations

UNICEF: United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

PTSD: Posttraumatic stress disorder

WHO: World Health Organisation

ID: Identification number

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The study do not include human subjects, and it's not applicable to this study.

Consent for publication

No content authorization is needed for this study.

Availability of data and materials
The authors have managed and stored the research data openly available online. The datasets used in this study available from the corresponding author (Maritta Välimäki; mava@utu.) on reasonable request.

**Competing interests**

The authors declare no competing interests.

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**Authors’ contributions**

MV and KH conceived the protocol and analysis plan for the study, which was confirmed by all authors. All authors extracted the data in local websites in each country. KH and MV analyzed data, and all authors validated the data extraction and analyses. MV and KH wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors contributed to revisions of this manuscript and approved the final draft.

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**Figures**
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