Check for updates

RESEARCH ARTICLE

REVISED Between EU objectives and national guidance: a documentary analysis of ESF+ funding for child and family services in Finland

[version 2; peer review: 6 approved with reservations]

Laura Ortju[1-3], Kati Honkanen[1,4], Elina Weckström[1,4,5]

[1]Project ID: R-02504, Coordinating the Participation and Inclusion of Children, Young People and Families, Helsinki, Finland
[2]Finnish National Agency for Education, Helsinki, 00531, Finland
[3]Department of Nursing Science, University of Eastern Finland, Kuopio, 70211, Finland
[4]SOS Children's Villages Finland, Helsinki, 00520, Finland
[5]School of Applied Educational Science and Teacher Education, University of Eastern Finland, Joensuu, 80100, Finland

v2 **First published:** 12 Dec 2025, **5**:388
https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.21937.1
Latest published: 06 Aug 2026, **5**:388
https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.21937.2

Abstract

Background

The European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) is the European Union's (EU) primary instrument for investing in people and supporting the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. This study explores, through selected documents, how the ESF+ funding in Finland contributes to the European Commission's strategies for operationalising children's rights, including the European Child Guarantee. The analysis focuses on funding calls under the national theme "Developing services for children, youth and families and promoting well-being towards equality". The analysis is informed by a normative children's rights perspective.

Methods

The study draws on the following documents: 1) the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, 2) the Council recommendation establishing the European Child Guarantee, 3) the Finnish National Child Strategy Committee report, 4) the Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027 programme, and 5) three funding calls.

Results

This study examined how ESF+ funding calls in Finland reflect strategic

Open Peer Review

Approval Status ? ? ? ? ? ?

	1	2	3	4	5	6
version 2 (revision) 06 Aug 2026						? view
version 1 12 Dec 2025	? view	? view	? view	? view	? view	

1. **Sipho Sibanda**, The University of Western Australia, Perth, Australia
2. **Michael Rigby**, Keele University, Keele, UK
3. **Therese Boje Mortensen**, BML Munjal University (Ringgold ID: 435516), Gurugram, India
4. **Dasha Shamrova**, School of Social Work, Texas State University, San Marcos, USA
5. **Tara M. Collins**, Toronto Metropolitan University, Toronto, Canada
6. **Mónica López López**, University of

guidance from both EU-level and national frameworks, with a particular focus on children's rights. The findings indicate that national documents introduce additional obligations—such as promoting family-friendliness in education and working life and enhancing equity and children's perspectives in leisure activities—that go beyond EU-level strategies. However, certain EU commitments, notably those related to child-friendly justice and digital competence in family services, are not consistently reflected in the analysed national programming or funding calls.

Conclusions

The analysis suggests that national-level priorities may lead to differential emphasis on certain EU objectives in the operationalisation of ESF+ funding. Allocation decisions are influenced not only by shared strategic goals but also by domestic political agendas and demographic considerations. This raises concerns about strategic coherence and the visibility of children's rights in funding processes. Documentary analysis of EU strategies can support better alignment between national programming and shared European goals, contributing to more equitable development of child and family services across Member States. The findings highlight the need for greater transparency in how children's rights priorities are operationalised in funding calls.

Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

Plain language summary

The European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) is a program that helps EU countries invest in people and improve social rights. This study looks at how ESF+ funding in Finland supports children's rights and the European Child Guarantee, which aims to make sure every child has access to basic services like education, healthcare, and housing. We examined official EU and Finnish documents and three funding calls under the theme "Developing services for children, youth and families and promoting well-being towards equality."

Our findings show that Finland's funding plans follow EU goals but also add extra priorities, such as making schools and workplaces more family-friendly and improving children's opportunities in leisure activities. However, some EU goals—like child-friendly justice and digital skills in family services—are missing from Finnish plans. This means that national priorities sometimes overshadow EU objectives. Better alignment between EU and national strategies could help ensure that all children in Finland benefit equally from these programs.

Keywords

children's rights, European Child Guarantee, European Social Fund Plus, policies, project funding, social inclusion, strategies, well-being

This article is included in the Horizon Europe gateway.

Corresponding author: Laura Ortju (laura.ortju@oph.fi)

Author roles: Ortju L: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project Administration, Validation, Visualization, Writing – Original Draft Preparation; **Honkanen K**: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project Administration, Validation, Visualization, Writing – Original Draft Preparation; **Weckström E**: Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – Review & Editing

Competing interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Grant information: This research was conducted as part of the coordination project Coordinating the Participation and Inclusion of Children, Young People and Families (Project ID: R-02504), funded by the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+).
The funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript.

Copyright: © 2026 Ortju L *et al*. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

How to cite this article: Ortju L, Honkanen K and Weckström E. **Between EU objectives and national guidance: a documentary analysis of ESF+ funding for child and family services in Finland [version 2; peer review: 6 approved with reservations]** Open Research Europe 2026, **5**:388 https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.21937.2

First published: 12 Dec 2025, **5**:388 https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.21937.1

REVISED **Amendments from Version 1**

This revised version has been substantially strengthened in response to the reviewers' comments. The Introduction and Background sections have been revised to clarify the role of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as an overarching normative and ethical reference point, rather than as a directly analysed source document. We have also strengthened the child-centred and children's rights-based framing of the article, including clearer attention to social justice, social sustainability, and the Finnish context of child and family services.

The Materials and methods section has been revised to improve transparency regarding document selection, the scope of the analysis, and the analytical procedure. We have clarified that the study is a qualitative documentary analysis focusing on how children's rights commitments are articulated in policy documents and ESF+ funding calls, rather than an assessment of service implementation or outcomes. The analytical framework and tables have been revised to distinguish more clearly between the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee, including explicit attention to the six core service guarantees of the latter.

The Findings and Discussion sections have been reorganised and expanded. The revised version gives greater emphasis to areas that are omitted or only weakly reflected in the analysed documents, including child-friendly justice, healthcare, nutrition, housing, and digital safety. At the same time, we clarify that differences between EU-level and national priorities may reflect legitimate national adaptation and localisation rather than simple misalignment. The Discussion now more explicitly addresses national political priorities, demographic considerations, strategic fragmentation, accountability, and the implications of funding decisions for the visibility of children's rights. The limitations and future research directions have also been refined accordingly.

Any further responses from the reviewers can be found at the end of the article

Introduction

As a political initiative, the European Commission introduced the European Union (EU) Strategy on the Rights of the Child (European Commission, 2021a) and the European Child Guarantee (ECG) (European Commission, 2021b) to advance children's rights and strengthen protection. Adopted in 2021, the ECG forms part of the EU's broader social rights agenda, which aims to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 15 million by 2030 – of whom at least 5 million should be children. Achieving this goal requires targeted measures for children in vulnerable situations and calls on Member States to ensure access to essential services.

This study was produced as part of the work of coordination project *Coordinating the participation and inclusion of children, young people and families*, which supports national and regional projects under specific objective 4.3 (equitable inclusion) of the *Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027 programme.* The programme falls under priority area 4 of the EU cohesion policy (*A competent and inclusive Finland that provides work*). The coordination project, funded by the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), is implemented in cooperation by two organisations (SOS Children's Village and Youth Academy) and one government agency (the Finnish National Agency for Education) under the guidance of the Ministry of Education and Culture. While this study focuses on specific objective 4.3, we acknowledge that efforts to promote children's rights extend across the broader programme and beyond.

Previous research has examined the operationalisation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in Finland (Hakalehto, 2020; Tolonen, 2020; Tolonen *et al.*, 2020) and more broadly in Europe (ia. Heimer & Palme, 2016; Lyons, 2018; Powell & Muddiman, 2024). Some studies have also addressed the UNCRC's integration into EU policy (Lundy, 2012; Skivenes & Søvig, 2019). However, the visibility of UNCRC-based strategies in EU-funded projects appears not to have been systematically studied. This study explores whether national authorities have allocated funding in ways that reflect international human rights obligations and strategic priorities at both EU and national levels. A critical review of these practices can inform the future use of financial instruments and improve project coordination in upcoming programming periods.

In Finland, services for children and families are organised as part of a universal, publicly funded welfare system. Municipalities are responsible for providing core services such as early childhood education and care, primary and secondary education, and basic social and health services, while wellbeing services counties organise more specialised social and health care, including child protection and family support services. The Finnish system is grounded in the principles of universality, equity and early intervention via preventive services. National strategies and legislation guide the overall framework, while local authorities retain considerable autonomy in service operationalisation (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2026; Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities, 2026).

Despite the overall strong welfare system, inequalities between children and families have grown (Kauppinen et al., 2022; Kiviruusu et al., 2024; Read et al., 2024), particularly in mental health (Blomgren et al., 2025) and learning outcomes

(Pulkkinen et al., 2024). National monitoring reports indicate increasing levels of anxiety, loneliness, and psychological distress among children and adolescents (Blomgren et al., 2025). Regional disparities have also been identified: children's access to early support and specialised services varies between municipalities and wellbeing services counties, raising concerns about equity in the realisation of children's rights (Kesanto-Jokipolvi et al., 2023). In addition, socioeconomic differences are reflected in children's wellbeing, as families experiencing poverty or unstable employment face higher risk of marginalisation, reduced participation, and limited access to leisure time activities (Bucelli & McKnight, 2024). These patterns highlight persistent gaps between the principles of universalism and the everyday operationalisation of children's rights in Finland (UNICEF Innocenti, 2025). Comparable national-level studies focusing specifically on EU-funded programme documents and funding calls related to children and families remain limited, particularly in terms of comparative analyses of how children's rights strategies are translated into concrete funding instruments.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of The Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989) provides the overarching normative framework for this study. The UNCRC is founded on four general principles: non-discrimination, the primacy of the best interests of the child, the right to life and development, and respect for the child's view. These rights apply to all individuals under the age of 18. The Convention is formulated in general terms, and its effective implementation requires each state to enact national legislation and engage in strategic planning (Powell & Muddiman, 2024). Following ratification, the rights of the child have been incorporated into Finnish national legislation, and the National Child Strategy has been developed to promote these rights within society (Finnish Government, 2021). To meaningfully assess the implementation of the UNCRC principles at the national level, it is essential to include relevant European and national policy documents in the review. As an international human rights treaty, the UNCRC is implemented through national legislation and policy frameworks, and states retain discretion in how its principles are interpreted and operationalised within their specific legal, institutional, and social contexts. Consequently, variation in national strategies reflects not only differences in prioritisation but also legitimate processes of localisation.

Rather than being analysed as a source document alongside EU and national strategies, the UNCRC functions as a legal and ethical reference point that informs the interpretation of children's rights commitments within European and national policy frameworks. EU strategies, such as the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (European Commission, 2021a) and the European Child Guarantee (European Commission, 2021b), represent contextualised and operational policy instruments through which UNCRC principles are prioritised and translated into concrete guidance within the EU governance context.

The rights of the child in the strategies guiding the services of children, young people and families

The **EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child** (European Commission, 2021a) opens with a quote from children at the 13th European Forum on the rights of the child: *"We need a strategy that is inclusive of all children and that supports children in vulnerable situations, and we need a strategy that promotes and supports our right to participate in decisions that affect us. Because nothing that is decided for children should be decided without children. It's time to normalise child participation."* The strategy's overarching goal is to build the best possible life for children in the EU and globally by fostering healthier, more resilient, fair and equal societies – together with children.

The Council Recommendation of establishing a **European Child Guarantee** (ECG) (European Commission, 2021b) ensures access to essential services for all children, especially those in vulnerable situations. The ECG's aim is to combat social exclusion and promote equal opportunities. It builds on the European Pillar of Social Rights and the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child. In Finland, the ECG and UNCRC are implemented alongside national legislation through the **National Child Strategy** published in 2021. Designed to extend beyond individual government terms, the strategy provides a long-term framework for promoting children's rights (Finnish Government, 2021). It was prepared by parliamentary committee and was based on the project *Child's Time – Towards a National Strategy for Children 2040*, launched in 2018 (Finnish Government, 2021).

European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) funding in Finland

The ESF+, funded by the EU, allocates approximately €602 million to Finland. In Finland, ESF+ supports development projects promoting employment, competence and inclusion under five objectives: pathways to employment, new competence to working life, equitable inclusion, safety nets for the future of young people, and resources for life (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland, 2022a). These objectives are defined in the ***Innovation and skills in Finland 2021–2027*** EU Regional and Structural Policy Programme (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland, 2023), which complements and supports EU strategies. The programme's policy objective 4 focuses on a more social and inclusive Europe. Part of the funding is allocated to national themes of strategic importance

coordinated by various ministries. One theme is the *Development of services for children, young people and families and promotion of well-being towards equality*, with a total allocation of €23 million. The theme's actions support the implementation of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, particularly by promoting equal opportunities for children and young people in vulnerable situations and advancing the ECG. A cross-cutting aim is to strengthen everyday cooperation across different actors and administrative sectors (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland, 2022b).

Development projects under this national theme focus on the three areas: 1) Identifying and supporting vulnerable children, young people, and families in everyday life, particularly those facing inter-generational exclusion, learning disparities, low-income, or labor market exclusion. 2) Strengthening the competence of professionals working with children, young people, and parents by developing inclusive practices and guidance across all levels of education and educational transitions. 3) Promoting equal access to cultural, sports, and guided leisure activities for children, young people, and their parents (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland, 2022b).

The first national funding call under this theme was launched in 2023, followed by calls in 2024 and 2025. Applicants are instructed to align their project plans with the objectives of the *Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027* programme and its underlying strategies. Applicants may be either national or regional actors, third-sector organisations, or companies. Typically, the applications are multidisciplinary consortia consisting of several types of project implementers.

Social sustainability in the contexts of child and family policy

United Nations (2015) define sustainable development in their Agenda for Sustainable Development as comprising social, environmental, and economic dimensions. Social sustainability, understood as a dynamic and evolving concept, refers to forms of participation that are deeply embedded in everyday practices and operating cultures, promoting communality rather than individualism. Social sustainability entails a commitment to human dignity, expressed through values such as equality, justice, and compassion (Salonen, 2010). In a socially sustainable society, citizens are able to strengthen their social capital—that is, their networks of relationships—and participate in decision-making processes that affect them (Padovan, 2008).

Practices that foster socially sustainable participation can promote equality and justice and help prevent social exclusion (Weckström et al., 2022). Numerous sustainability programmes and initiatives are currently implemented across different sectors at global, national, regional, and local levels (Saikkonen, Rotko & Vaalavuo 2025). Strengthening social sustainability also contributes to the realisation of children's rights: on the one hand, children have the right to participate in discussions concerning social sustainability, and on the other hand, the objectives of social sustainability directly concern children through the implementation of children's rights (Weckström et al., 2022).

Children's rights perspective as an analytical lens

While this study does not apply a formal theory-driven framework, it is grounded in a normative children's rights perspective informed by the UNCRC and related research on social justice and social sustainability. From this perspective, policy documents are not understood merely as descriptive texts but as instruments that shape social realities by defining priorities, responsibilities, and the allocation of resources. Consequently, omissions in strategic guidance are analytically relevant, as they may affect the visibility of children's needs and the realisation of their rights, particularly through development funding and project-based instruments.

Aim and research questions

The aim of this study is to examine three national ESF+ 4.3 funding calls that focus on developing services for children, young people, and families These calls are analysed in relation to the following strategic frameworks: the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, the Council Recommendation of establishing the ECG, Finland's National Child Strategy, the *Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027* programme, and the official thematic description of special objective 4.3.

The research questions are as follows:

1. How are the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Council Recommendation on establishing the European Child Guarantee reflected in Finland's National Child Strategy and *the Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027* programme, particularly within the theme *Development of services for children, young people and families and promotion of well-being towards equality*?

2. To what extent and in what ways are these guiding strategies reflected in the ESF+ funding calls under specific objective 4.3?

This study explores how EU-level strategic policies are translated into national guidance documents and project funding calls. The aim is to generate insights into key considerations for policy operationalisation and to inform the future formulation of funding calls. It is both important and ethically necessary to critically examine how funding is allocated, especially when it concerns children's rights and well-being.

Materials and methods

Data and sample selection

This study is based on policy and strategy documents produced by the European Commission, the Finnish Government, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland, the Ministry of Education and Culture, and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. The data were collected from official websites and examined in a structured manner using qualitative documentary analysis. All documents used are publicly available.

The documents were selected based their relevance to the ESF+ funding framework examined in this study. First, as this national theme represented a new and explicit ESF+ funding framework in Finland focusing on children, young people, and families, the three funding calls under the theme Development of services for children, young people and families and promotion of well-being towards equality were selected as the primary object of analysis. The Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027 programme was included because it defines the ESF+ programme structure in Finland and introduces the national themes of strategic importance, including the theme examined in this study.

Second, because the programme and this national theme explicitly aim to support the operationalisation of Finland's National Child Strategy, the strategy was included in the analysis. Third, as the programme and the national theme also contribute to advancing the ECG in Finland, the ECG was included as a key EU-level policy document. The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child was included because it provides the broader EU-level children's rights framework on which the ECG builds and against which the national operationalisation of child rights objectives can be meaningfully examined.

Finally, since these EU-level documents are grounded in the rights of the child, the UNCRC was included as the overarching normative reference informing the interpretation of the analysed documents. The analysis therefore focuses on how children's rights commitments are articulated at the level of policy documents and ESF+ funding calls, rather than on the implementation or outcomes of services in practice. The document corpus was therefore purposefully defined rather than generated through a systematic search procedure.

Document hierarchy and scope of analysis

The analysis includes **EU-level policy documents** (EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (European Commission, 2021a) and the council recommendation of establishing a European Child Guarantee (European Commission, 2021b)) and **national-level policy documents** (Finland's National Child Strategy (Finnish Government, 2021) and the *Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027* programme (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland, 2023)). Unless otherwise specified, references to EU-level or national-level policy strategies in the analysis refer to these document groups. The programme's national theme *Equality of the children, young people and families* (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland, 2022b), as well as the three national funding calls launched under this objective (Häme ELY Centre, 2023, 2024, 2025) are collectively referred to as funding calls. The strategic hierarchy of the analysed documents is illustrated on Figure 1.

The analysis focuses on special objective 4.3, which explicitly aims to operationalise the National Child Strategy through development funding. As such, it provided a relevant case for examining how EU-level children's rights strategies are translated into national funding instruments. The *Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027* programme guides ESF+ project funding and complements EU strategies. Together, these guiding documents form a coherent framework that is meaningful to examine as an integrated entity.

Analysis process

The qualitative documentary analysis was conducted deductively (Krippendorf, 2013), using the EU-level strategies as an analytical framework for examining the other documents included in the study. Document analysis is a structured, low-cost method for reviewing and evaluating data to generate empirical knowledge and deepen understanding. It is unobtrusive and nonreactive, requiring the researcher to maintain both objectivity and sensitivity throughout the process. (Bowen, 2009). The analytical framework consists of two complementary components:

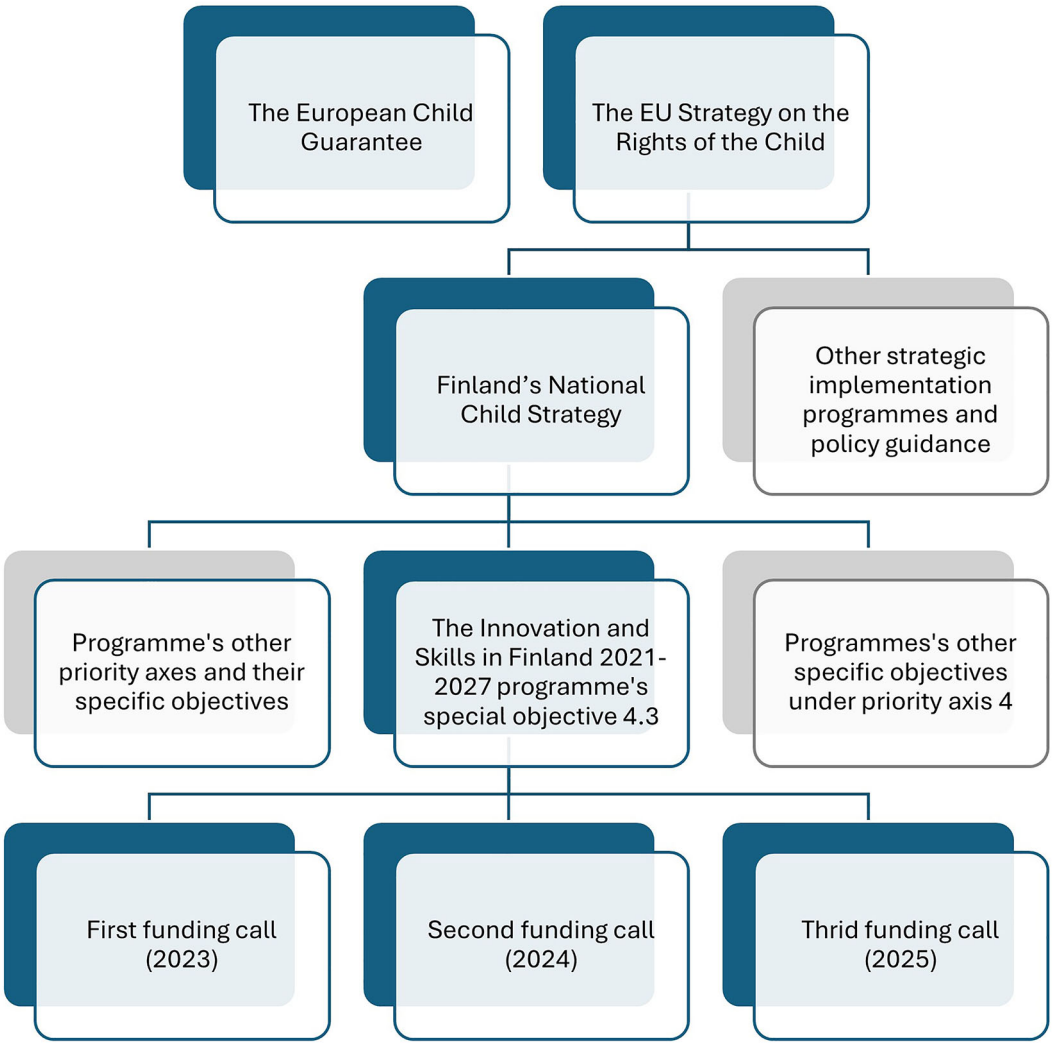

Figure 1. Strategic hierarchy of child rights policies in the EU and Finland. Analysed documents are highlighted.

1. Thematic priorities derived from the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, based on 25 requests made by the European Commission to Member States. These requests were grouped into themes related to participation in democratic life, socioeconomic inclusion and equal opportunities, healthcare, education, protection from violence, child-friendly justice, and the digital environment. Actions assigned exclusively to EU institutions or private information and communication technology (ICT) actors were excluded.

2. Service-oriented commitments set out in the ECG, specifically the six core service guarantees: (a) combating child poverty and social exclusion; (b) early childhood education, general education, and healthcare; one to access to nutrition and housing; one to the governance and reporting; and one to monitoring and evaluation.

In this study, the term *operationalised* refers to the explicit reflection of strategic priorities in policy documents or funding calls, not to their implementation or effectiveness in practice.

Finland's National Child Strategy and the *Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027* programme were first examined against this analytical framework. Subsequently, three ESF+ funding calls under specific objective 4.3 were analysed using the same criteria.

To enhance analytical transparency, Table 1 provides an illustrative example of how EU-level children's rights commitments were translated into analytical categories and examined across national policy documents and funding calls. The table is intended to demonstrate the analytical procedure rather than to present the full set of findings.

Table 1. Illustrative example of the analytical procedure.

Analytical step	EU source	Analytical category	Example from national document	Interpretation
Identification of EU request	EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child	Child participation	"Children's participation will be addressed systematically …"	EU-level participation priority reflected in national strategy
Identification of EU commitment	European Child Guarantee	Access to healthcare	No explicit reference in funding calls	Commitment not visibly operationalised at funding level

Findings

The findings highlight both areas where EU-level children's rights priorities are reflected in national strategies and funding calls, and areas where they remain unaddressed or only implicitly present. The results are presented in relation to (1) the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, (2) the ECG, and (3) the ESF+ funding calls under specific objective 4.3.

Reflections of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child in national policy documents

Several thematic priorities of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child are reflected in Finland's National Child Strategy and in the *Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027 programme.* These include participation in political and democratic life, access to healthcare, inclusive and quality education, protection from violence, and a safe digital environment. However, the theme of child-friendly justice – which includes recommendations such as supporting judicial training, promoting restorative justice, and implementing the Council of Europe guidelines on children with imprisoned parents – is not addressed in national documents. Other themes, such as the digital environment, are addressed at a general level but are not consistently connected to child-specific recommendations articulated in the EU Strategy.

Table 2 illustrates through examples how selected themes of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child are reflected in Finland's National Child Strategy and the *Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027 programme*, highlighting both areas of convergence and omission.

Table 2. Correspondence between the themes of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and their reflections in Finland's National Child Strategy and the *Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027 programme*: illustrative examples from the analysis.

Theme of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child	Expression in the National Child Strategy	Expression in the *Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027 programme*
Participation in political and democratic life	Children's rights and status will be mainstreamed, ensuring that children are consistently taken into consideration in all policies and activities alongside with other members of society and that they are informed of their rights.	Development of citizen-oriented activities and community-based services, along with the promotion of participation by minority and special groups in service planning. (Priority 4. Specific objective 4.3 equitable inclusion.)
Socio-economic inclusion, health and education: Building inclusive, quality education	The preconditions for children's learning and development as well as support for school attendance, the work of educational and teaching staff, and pupil and student welfare services will be secured. The realization of multidisciplinary cooperation must be ensured to provide adequate holistic support for children and families. Existing means will be used, and new ones will be sought with a multidisciplinary approach, to prevent dropping out and social exclusion. Particular attention will be paid to the transition stages of education. The possibility of completing at least a secondary level qualification following basic education will be secured for each child.	Models are developed to increase the diversity competence of education providers and employers. The needs of the disabled are considered, e.g. in the preparation of training materials and in the accessibility of communication and services. Equality and equality planning is being developed so that challenges can be better met in education and working life, e.g. segregation and the effects of stereotypes. (Priority 2.4.2 Specific objective 4.g New skills for working life.)

Table 2. *Continued*

Theme of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child	Expression in the National Child Strategy	Expression in the *Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027 programme*
Digital and information society	The importance of the digital environment for children's close and peer relationships will be recognized, and children's media and interaction skills will be built up, also in relation to electronic communication.	Digital services are developed to be customer-oriented, secure and make extensive use of digital opportunities. Digitalization of the public sector and bold experiments bring a significant boost to the functioning of ecosystems. (Priority 2.1.2 Specific objective 1.ii Exploiting the benefits of digitization for citizens, companies and public administration.)

Visibility of the European Child Guarantee in national strategies and ESF+ funding

The ECG establishes six core service guarantees aimed at reducing child poverty and ensuring access to essential services. The analysis shows that several of these guarantees (particularly those related to child poverty and exclusion, early childhood education, and inclusive education) are explicitly addressed in Finland's National Child Strategy and, to a lesser extent, in the *Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027* programme.

However, the visibility of ECG commitments weakens substantially at the level of ESF+ funding calls under specific objective 4.3. Guarantees related to healthy nutrition, adequate housing, and child-specific healthcare are largely absent from the analysed funding calls, despite their central role within the ECG framework. While Finland may address these needs through other policy instruments and universal service systems, their absence from ESF+ funding calls limits the visibility of these rights within this funding framework and constrains opportunities for targeted development through project funding.

Table 3 summarises how the six core service guarantees of the European Child Guarantee are reflected across the National Child Strategy and programme-level guidance.

Table 3. Correspondence between the themes of the ECG and their reflections in Finland's National Child Strategy and the *Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027 programme*: illustrative examples from the analysis.

ECG service guarantee	Expression in the National Child Strategy	Expression in the *Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027 programme*
Combating child poverty and social exclusion	Poverty among families with children will be reduced through determined measures taken across society. Ensuring an adequate income for families with children and reducing poverty among them will be highlighted as a priority in the development of social security.	Intergenerational marginalization and poverty are prevented by supporting families and promoting parents' participation in education and working life. Support for low-income families is strengthened through multiprofessional collaboration, and children's participation is promoted by guiding them into leisure activities. Existing structures, such as local and regional family and adult social work, are utilized in these measures. Young people are supported holistically on their pathways to education and working life, and their functional capacity and capabilities are strengthened, for example through psychosocial means. (Priority 4. Specific objective 4.3 equitable inclusion.)

Table 3. *Continued*

ECG service guarantee	Expression in the National Child Strategy	Expression in the *Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027 programme*
Early childhood education, inclusive education and school-based activities (including healthy meals)	In the Finland of the vision, high-quality, equal and diverse early childhood education and care and education will help realise the child's right to growth, development and learning.	Gender equality is promoted by dismantling and addressing structures that maintain gender-based segregation in educational and career pathways. (Priority 2.1.2 Specific objective 1.ii Exploiting the benefits of digitization for citizens, companies and public administration.) Gender equality and the reduction of segregation in education and working life are supported. (Priority 2.4.1 Specific Objective 4.1: Pathways to work.) Educational structures and learning environments that enable continuous learning, as well as pedagogy that supports learning, are developed. (Priority 2.4.2 Specific objective 4.g New skills for working life.)
Access to healthcare	To improve the effectiveness of social welfare and healthcare services, cooperation with education, leisure services and various organisations will be strengthened.	Services and support measures based on the needs of children and young people are developed to be easily and quickly accessible. These services are produced locally in multi-actor networks, while listening to the needs of children and young people. Such services may include, for example, mental health and substance abuse services; smooth healthcare processes; support for participation and leisure activities through cultural and sports activities; support in studies and applying for education; support for coping with everyday life, housing, and household management; and support for employment and transitions into working life. (Priority 2.5.1 Specific objective 5.1 Safety nets for the future of young people.)
Access to healthy nutrition	Securing an adequate standard of living and social security for families with children and reconciling work and family life.	In its 2019 country-specific recommendations, the Commission recommends that Finland mitigate material deprivation by distributing food to the most deprived and by providing accompanying measures. These measures also contribute to supporting the principle of equal opportunities under the European Pillar of Social Rights. (Priority 6. Specific Objective 6.1: Material assistance.)

Table 3. *Continued*

ECG service guarantee	Expression in the National Child Strategy	Expression in the *Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027 programme*
Access to adequate housing	Securing an adequate standard of living and social security for families with children and reconciling work and family life.	Services and support measures based on the needs of children and young people are developed to be easily and quickly accessible. These services are produced locally in multi-actor networks, while listening to the needs of children and young people. Such services may include, for example, mental health and substance abuse services; smooth healthcare processes; support for participation and leisure activities through cultural and sports activities; support in studies and applying for education; support for coping with everyday life, housing, and household management; and support for employment and transitions into working life. (Priority 5. Specific objective 5.1 Safety nets for the future of young people.)
Governance, monitoring, and evaluation	Children's equality will be promoted through systematic measures. Data on wellbeing gaps and their causes will be collected and utilised, and measures that are as effective as possible and respect the rights of the child will be taken to narrow these gaps.	no expression

Nationally specific priorities extending EU-level frameworks

In addition to themes originating from EU-level strategies, the analysis identified two nationally specific priorities that extend beyond the explicit thematic framing of both the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the ECG. First, the promotion of family-friendliness and reconciliation of work, studies, and family life, emerges as a distinct national priority. This theme is embedded throughout Finland's National Child Strategy and is strongly reflected in ESF+ funding calls, particularly those focusing on parenting support, low-threshold family services, and support for diverse family forms. Although EU-level strategies address equality, inclusion, and social participation, they do not frame family-friendliness as a standalone policy priority. In the Finnish context, however, this theme is elevated to a strategic objective and actively operationalised through development funding.

Second, children's right to meaningful leisure time and hobbies constitutes a further national priority. This theme is particularly visible in the third ESF+ funding call under specific objective 4.3, which emphasises equal access to cultural, artistic, and sports activities and the promotion of leisure-time participation during the school day. While elements related to well-being and participation are present in EU-level strategies, the explicit focus on leisure activities as a children's rights issue reflects national policy choices and contextual considerations rather than direct EU-level prioritisation.

These nationally specific priorities should not be interpreted as deviations from EU objectives. Rather, they represent legitimate national extensions and contextualisation of shared children's rights commitments, reflecting domestic policy agendas, demographic considerations, and existing welfare structures.

ESF+ funding calls under specific objective 4.3

The three ESF+ funding calls issured under theme *Developing services for children, youth and families and promoting well-being towards equality* place strong emphasis on participation, inclusion, and competence development. Across the calls, priorities include strengthening parental support, promoting children's and young people's participation in leisure activities, and enhancing professionals' capabilities through cross-sectoral collaboration.

At the same time, several EU-level themes remain unaddressed at the level of funding calls. Child-friendly justice is entirely absent, and commitments related to child-specific healthcare, digital safety, healthy nutrition, and adequate

housing are only weakly or indirectly referenced. This pattern suggests that while ESF+ funding under objective 4.3 effectively operationalises selected national and EU priorities, it also contributes to a selective interpretation of children's rights commitments within development funding.

Table 4 provides illustrative examples of how themes from the EU Strategy of the Rights of the Child are reflected across the three ESF+ funding calls.

Table 4. Key contents of ESF+ funding calls in relation to guiding strategies.

Strategic document	First call (2023)	Second call (2024)	Third call (2025)
EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child	Promoting the well-being and inclusion for vulnerable children, youth and families in everyday life. Strengthening professionals' skills across sectors and developing early childhood education and care (ECEC) and education.	Development of primary services and flexible models to support family functioning and participation.	Strengthening mental health and community belonging. Equal access to arts and cultural heritage. Activities organized in cooperation with schools and educational institutions.
European Child Guarantee (ECG)	Cross-sectoral cooperation to promote family well-being, parent's education and working, and prevent child poverty. Development of inclusive guidance, support practices, and language awareness in ECEC and all levels of education. Strengthening professionals' competence and cross-sectoral collaboration to support children, youth and families from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.	Addressing intergenerational exclusion and supporting protective factors in children's development. Integration of child and youth perspectives into adult services. Strengthening professionals' skills in empowering guidance.	Focus on groups at risk of social exclusion. Children and young people's participation in cultural activities and workshops. Activities are organized in collaboration with schools and educational institutions.
Finland's National Child Strategy	Supporting children, young people and their families for equal participation in cultural and leisure activities. Development of primary services and models for holistic family support, especially supporting parents' and families' active participation and agency in education and labour. Strengthening youth guidance and developing methods to enhance parents' ability to support children and youth in engaging with cultural, sports and leisure activities.	Strengthening parenting support across diverse family structures and life stages. Multisectoral cooperation in family services. Development of primary services, support and flexible models to strengthen: - systematic parenting support within wellbeing services - co-creation of family-centred and multidisciplinary support - recognition of family diversity, gender equality and inclusion in parenting - support for parents in life transitions and crises - prevention of regional segregation and family isolation through community-based and peer support in everyday environments	Promoting youth well-being, mental health and community belonging through free hobbies during school days. Activities must base on youth preferences. Using the best practices from the Finnish Model for Leisure Activities.

Discussion

Discussion of findings

Strategic recommendations and national priorities addressed by ESF+ funding

From a children's rights perspective, the absence of explicit policy attention has tangible implications for how children's needs are recognised and prioritised. The operationalisation of ESF+ funding in Finland is influenced not only by EU-level strategies but also by national political priorities, particularly those outlined in the Government Programme *a Strong and Committed Finland* (Finnish Government, 2023). National strategies are prepared through multi-actor processes involving ministries, expert bodies, and, in some cases, participatory mechanisms for children and young people, which also influence prioritisation. As demonstrated in this study, ESF+ funding calls under specific objective 4.3 do not aim to comprehensively reflect all priorities articulated in EU strategies and national policy documents, but rather emphasise selected recommendations considered particularly relevant in the Finnish policy context.

The emphases are closely connected to Finland's demographic development, where population growth is projected to slow and decline (see Alho & Valkonen, 2024), while labour supply challenges are expected to intensify. In this context, ESF+ funding has been strategically directed towards initiatives that promote inclusion, participation, and competence development among children, young people, and families in vulnerable situations.

The Government Programme highlights the importance strengthening democracy, participation, and social cohesion, with a specific focus on children and young people. Previous research underscores the need to address inequality and structural barriers within Finnish education and early childhood education and care. For example, Helakorpi *et al.* (2023) demonstrate that students with immigrant backgrounds in Nordic countries face increased risk of discrimination, bullying, and educational discontinuation. Similarly, Loukola (2023) identifies manifestations of racism and white normativity in Finnish early childhood education, while also noting professionals' willingness to develop more inclusive practices. These findings provide important contextual grounding for understanding why inclusion-oriented priorities have been foregrounded in ESF+ funding.

The first and third ESF+ funding calls under specific objective 4.3 emphasised guidance for children and young people in cultural, sports, and structured leisure activities. These calls supported the development and piloting of supervised leisure activities in arts, culture, and sports for young people aged 15–19, as well as cultural activities for children aged 7–19. This focus reflects the Government Programme's identification of physical inactivity as a significant societal challenge. Only one in three children and young people in Finland engage in sufficient physical activity to maintain health, with far-reaching consequences for learning, work capacity, national defence, and the economy. The estimated annual societal cost of physical inactivity is approximately €3.2 billion.

To address these challenges, the Government calls for a comprehensive, cross-sectoral approach starting in early childhood services. It aims to ensure that every child and young person has access to at least one meaningful leisure activity of their choice, with special attention to those without a hobby or who have dropped out. Initiatives such as the national *Schools on the Move* programme (LIKES, 2025) support these objectives, including mapping opportunities for leisure activities during school holidays.

In parallel, ESF+ funding has contributed to sustaining cultural and sports services at time when the Ministry of Education and Culture faces approximately €125 million in funding cuts to subsidies affecting the independent arts and culture sector (Sokka & Nokela, 2025). This raises the question of whether, in this context, ESF+ funding may also partly function not only as a social inclusion instrument but also as a means of supporting cultural infrastructure relevant to children and young people.

National Child Strategy priorities and ESF+ funding

Although the implementation plan of Finland's National Child Strategy (Finnish Government, 2022) extends beyond individual government terms, the ESF+ funding calls under objective 4.3 reflect several of its core priorities. These include strengthening family-friendly policies, supporting the reconciliation of work, studies, and family life, and recognising the diversity of families. The second funding call focused on parenting support and low-threshold services for families, reflecting priorities from both the National Child Strategy and the Government Programme. The Government aims to provide low-threshold services for families, with attention to couple and parenting support, the best interests of the child, and the individual circumstances of families, with particular attention to the challenges faced by families with small children, single parents, student families, and families with multiple children.

Despite Finland's comparatively strong position in terms of gender equality and women's labour market participation, socioeconomic and cultural differences between families continue to affect children's well-being. European research (e.g. Dewilde, 2025) highlights the individual and societal impacts of child poverty and socioeconomic disadvantage. Preventing the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage (see Dewilde, 2025) can been influenced, for instance, through strategic allocation of funding.

Strategic gaps and unaddressed themes

While many EU and national priorities are reflected in the ESF+ funding calls, the analysis also reveals significant gaps. One overarching theme, child-friendly justice, is entirely absent from the analysed national strategies, thematic descriptions, and funding calls. However, the government's shared learning platform eOppiva (HAUS, n.d.), includes several modules on child-friendly justice, and is widely used across sectors, including municipalities and educational institutions.

In addition, several core elements of the ECG, including explicit references to access to adequate nutrition, adequate housing, and comprehensive child-specific healthcare, receive limited or no attention in the analysed documents. These omissions do not imply that such needs are not addressed elsewhere within Finnish policy or service systems. Finland provides free school meals to all children in comprehensive education, thereby responding to the ECG's recommendation of ensuring access to at least one healthy meal each school day. Moreover, issues related to child poverty and nutrition are addressed within other ESF+ priority axes, such as priority axis 6 (*Combating material deprivation*), which were outside the scope of this analysis.

It is important to notice, that the present analysis does not assess the availability ir quality of child health services in Finland. Rather, it examines how child-related health commitments are articulated or remain implicit within selected EU- and national-level strategy documents and ESF+ funding calls. At the EU-level, previous research has raised concerns regarding the practical realisation of the health-related aims of the ECG, particularly for children in vulnerable situations (Rigby, 2021). These discussions highlight broader challenges in translating child health commitments into concrete measures across governance levels. In this study, references to health-related gaps should therefore be understood as observations about the visibility of such commitments within selected funding frameworks, rather than as assessments of national service provision.

Digitalisation, despite its prominence in national strategies, is not clearly visible in the examined funding calls. This may be since EU-level recommendations have already been extensively operationalised in Finland. Digital competence is embedded in national education steering documents, and the Ministry of Education and Culture, together with the Finnish National Agency for Education, actively promotes digitalisation. Strategic goals include ensuring digital skills for all, fostering innovation, and positioning Finland as a global leader in technology education. These goals are supported by initiatives such as alignment papers on digitalisation in education (see Berisha *et al.*, 2023). Thus, Finland has invested in digitalisation in other forums than funding of ESF+. Despite Finland's progressive approach to digitalisation, certain risks remain concerning digital safety, as well as the accessibility and equity of increasing digitalised services (cf. Alexopoulou, 2025). In Finland, the entertainment-oriented media use of digitally native children and youth during leisure time may not be in balance with the pedagogical use of digital platforms in education (Mertala, 2020). Investing in the digital skills and safety of vulnerable groups – especially children – would be of considerable importance.

However, from a children's rights perspective, the absence of these themes within the analysed funding framework remains significant. Funding calls influence what types of development work are prioritised and how children's needs are conceptualised within institutional boundaries. When certain rights-related themes are consistently omitted from funding instruments framed as promoting inclusion and equality, there is a risk that these issues remain less visible in cross-sectoral development efforts.

Fragmentation, strategic coherence, and accountability

EU child rights strategies function primarily as normative and coordinative instruments: while they articulate shared objectives and principles, responsibility for prioritisation, service organisation, and funding allocation remains largely at the national and sub-national levels, in line with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality.

The ESF+ is the EU's main instrument for investing in people and supporting the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. With a budget of €142.7 billion for the period 2021–2027, the ESF+ provides a substantial contribution to the EU's employment, social, education and skills policies, including structural reforms in these areas.

(European Commission, n.d.) Given its scale and policy significance, it is justified to examine how ESF+ funding allocation contributes to the operationalisation of key strategic objectives related to children's rights.

As Rapley (2021) notes, documents do not merely describe realities but actively produces them, and the realities they construct have tangible effect. In this study, these effects are traced through documentary analysis, as they are presumed to have great importance for the realisation and visibility of children's rights within funding processes.

The analysis revealed that while EU-level strategies provide a broad normative framework, their operationalisation at the national level is shaped by country-specific needs, priorities, and governance structures. Finland's approach reflects this dynamic: although numerous strategies exist across different administrative levels – European, Nordic, and national – not all are fully integrated into the National Child Strategy, nor is such integration necessarily required. National programming must remain responsive to domestic contexts and policy needs.

However, the fragmented nature of strategic guidance raises questions about coherence, coordination, and accountability in the operationalisation of children's rights. When multiple strategies intersect without a clear overarching framework, it becomes difficult to assess whether the entirety of the strategic landscape is truly governed or understood by any single actor. From a children's rights perspective, this fragmentation may pose ethical and practical concerns. If the totality of funding allocated to children is not examined holistically, there is a risk that certain priorities, such as child-friendly justice, remain consistently outside the scope of development funding, not due to deliberate policy choices but because they fall between institutional mandates. Such omissions are particularly relevant in the context of EU-level commitments that emphasise equality among children across Member States.

At the same time, the findings no not suggest that national prioritisation is inherently problematic, nor that EU-level strategies should override domestic decision-making. On the contrary, the localisation of international and European commitments is both necessary and legitimate. However, from a children's rights perspective, consistent omissions of certain rights-related themes raise concerns about whether all children's needs are equally visible within funding instruments that explicitly aim to promote inclusion and well-being. The funding priorities observed reflect a view of children primarily as future learners and participants, rather than as rights-holders with immediate and diverse needs.

Finally, these observations raise broader questions about how the best interests of the child and the rights enshrined in the UNCRC are balanced against broader economic, demographic, and political considerations in funding decisions. If allocation decisions are driven primarily by economic imperatives, there is a risk that normative commitments to children's rights receive less systematic attention. Addressing these tensions requires not uniformity across governance levels, but greater transparency regarding prioritisation and clearer accountability for how children's rights are operationalised in multi-level funding frameworks.

Differences between EU-level strategies and national or local policy priorities should therefore not be interpreted as failures of implementation. Rather, they may reflect necessary processes of localisation, translation, and adaptation pf children's rights commitments to distinct social, cultural, and institutional contexts. In this context, concerns about strategic coherence do not imply that domestic demographic or political considerations should be subordinated to EU-level priorities; rather, they highlight the need for transparency regarding how children's rights considerations are weighed alongside other legitimate national objectives.

Limitations and further research

As document analysis typically involves data not originally produced for research purposes, the data are independent of the researcher and may present limitations in terms of scientific rigor (Voutilainen *et al.*, 2018). As a subjective interpreter of such data, the researcher must ensure analytical transparency and methodological rigor throughout the process (Bowen, 2009). One challenge in this study was the structural heterogeneity of the documents. Reliability was strengthened through researcher triangulation, careful documentation, and ensuring transparency in each phase of the analysis process.

The scope of this study was deliberately limited to the theme Development of services for children, young people and families and promotion of well-being towards equality under the specific objective 4.3 in the *Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027* programme. While other priority axes and objectives were excluded from detailed analysis, a light comparison was conducted, acknowledging that goals of the EU strategies may also be addressed through measures beyond objective 4.3.

The generalisability of the findings should be approached with caution, as the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child varies across national strategies (Powell & Muddiman, 2024). However, the inclusion of both European strategies and national programming documents enhances the reliability and broader relevance of the results.

As the *Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027* programme period progresses, further analysis will be conducted on the project plans of funded projects under the theme of *Development of services for children, young people and families and promotion of well-being towards equality.* These reviews will reflect the strategic documents discussed in this article. In time, it will also be possible to assess the practical operationalisation of children's rights in line with EU strategies and evaluate the outcomes of the funded projects. Future research should explore how strategic coherence and rights-based prioritisation can be strengthened in multi-level governance contexts, ensuring that no essential aspect of children's well-being is left behind.

Conclusion

The findings reflect both significant progress in advancing children's rights and persistent fragmentation across strategies and funding frameworks. This study highlights the complex interplay between EU-level strategic guidance and national priorities in the operationalisation of ESF+ funding. While Finland has actively aligned its funding calls with domestic policy goals – particularly in the areas of physical activity, cultural participation, and family support – certain EU-level themes, such as child-friendly justice and digital safety, remain underrepresented.

The findings underscore the need for improved strategic coordination and transparency in funding allocation. Ensuring that children's rights are systematically and comprehensively addressed requires a more coherent approach across governance levels. Future efforts should focus on strengthening the visibility of underrepresented themes and enhancing the role of children's rights in funding decision.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

Data and software availability

Data are available under the terms of the Creative Commons Zero "No rights reserved" data waiver (CC0 1.0 Public domain dedication).

Source data

The European Child Guarantee: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32021H1004

Citation: European Commission (2021b). Council recommendation of establishing a European Child Guarantee (ST/9106/2021/INIT).

The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52021DC0142

Citation: European Commission (2021a). Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions EU strategy on the Rights of the Child (COM/2021/142).

Finland's National Child Strategy: https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/items/eb477644-6c32-48f9-bd3c-b60d80d782f8

Citation: Finnish Government (2022). Implementation plan for the National Child Strategy. Publications of the Finnish Government 2022:38.

The Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027 progamme: https://rakennerahastot.fi/documents/91635434/120111163/Uudistuva+ja+osaava+Suomi+2021-2027+ohjelma.pdf/deb0126a-d68f-bc5d-5f2e-dac95d97a451/Uudistuva+ja+osaava+Suomi+2021-2027+ohjelma.pdf?t=1684927591791

Citation: Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland (2023). Innovation and skills in Finland 2021–2027 EU:n alue- ja rakennepolitiikan ohjelma.

First ESF+ funding call under the theme of development of services for children, young people and families and promotion of well-being towards equality: https://eura2021.fi/hakuilmoitukset/hakuilmoitus/dca16f9e-54ba-4afc-a90d-c30ec94fb400/

Citation: Häme ELY Centre (2023). Valtakunnallinen hankehaku: Lasten, nuorten ja perheiden palveluiden kehittäminen ja hyvinvoinnin edistäminen kohti yhdenvertaisuutta. [National funding call: Developing services for children, young people and families and promoting well-being towards equality].

Second ESF+ funding call under the theme of development of services for children, young people and families and promotion of well-being towards equality: https://eura2021.fi/hakuilmoitukset/hakuilmoitus/ed80cd96-355b-4ac5-9c05-554c98b73219/

Citation: Häme ELY Centre (2024). Valtakunnallinen hankehaku: Lasten, nuorten ja perheiden palveluiden kehittäminen ja hyvinvoinnin edistäminen kohti yhdenvertaisuutta. [National funding call: Developing services for children, young people and families and promoting well-being towards equality].

Third ESF+ funding call under the theme of development of services for children, young people and families and promotion of well-being towards equality: https://eura2021.fi/hakuilmoitukset/hakuilmoitus/01c1aeda-eb64-4032-a328-c542f3155f0a/

Citation: Häme ELY Centre (2025). Valtakunnallinen hankehaku: Lasten, nuorten ja perheiden palveluiden kehittäminen ja hyvinvoinnin edistäminen kohti yhdenvertaisuutta. [National funding call: Developing services for children, young people and families and promoting well-being towards equality].

References

Alexopoulou S: **Paradigm shift: exploring the impact of digital technologies on the welfare state through a systematic literature review.** *Social Policy Administration.* 2025; **59**(1): 135–157.
Publisher Full Text

Alho J, Valkonen T: **Suomen väestökehitys 2025-2070. [Population development in Finland 2025–2070].** *ETLA Brief nro 148.* ETLA Economic Research, 2024; Retrieved September 11, 2025.
Reference Source

Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities: **Functions of municipalities and joint municipal authorities.** 2026; Retrieved May 19, 2026.
Reference Source

Berisha AK, Francke L, Hakalisto L, *et al.*: **Target state of digitalisation in early childhood education and care, pre-primary, primary and lower secondary education.** *Publications of the Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland.* 2023; **54**.
Reference Source

Blomgren J, Kiviruusu O, Parikka S, *et al.*: **Mielenterveys.** In Kestilä L, Karvonen S, editors. *Ratkaisuja kestävän yhteiskunnan rakentamiseen. [Solutions for building a sustainable society. Population Health and Wellbeing Report 2025.] THL Reports 1:2025.* Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare; 2025; pp. 42–46.

Bowen GA: **Document analysis as a qualitative research method.** *Qual Res J.* 2009; **9**: 27–40.
Publisher Full Text

Bucelli I, McKnight A: **Review of the mechanisms underlying the intergenerational transmission of poverty.** *Itla Reports 2024:3.* Itla Children's Foundation; 2024.
Reference Source

Dewilde C: **The intergenerational transmission of financial disadvantage across Europe.** *Social Policy Administration.* 2025; **59**(3): 487–510.
Publisher Full Text

European Commission: **Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European economic and social Committee and the Committee of the regions EU strategy on the Rights of the Child (COM/2021/142).** 2021a.
Reference Source

European Commission: **Council recommendation of establishing a European Child Guarantee (ST/9106/2021/INIT).** 2021b.

European Commission: **What is the ESF+?** (n.d.) Retrieved September 11, 2025.
Reference Source

Finnish Government: **National Child strategy committee report.** Publications of the Finnish Government 2021:8.2021.
Reference Source

Finnish Government: **Implementation plan for the National Child Strategy.** Publications of the Finnish Government 2022:38.2022.
Reference Source

Finnish Government: **A strong and committed Finland: programme of Prime Minister Petteri Orpo's Government.** Publications of the Finnish Government 2023:60.2023.
Reference Source

Hakalehto S: **Constitutional protection of children's rights in Finland.** In: Haugli T, Nylund A, Sigurdsen R, *et al.*, editors. *Children's constitutional rights in the Nordic countries.* Brill; 2020; pp. 58–82.
Publisher Full Text

Häme ELY Centre: **Valtakunnallinen hankehaku: Lasten, nuorten ja perheiden palveluiden kehittäminen ja hyvinvoinnin edistäminen kohti yhdenvertaisuutta. [National funding call: Developing services for children, young people and families and promoting well-being towards equality].** 2023; Retrieved September 11, 2025.
Reference Source

Häme ELY Centre: **Valtakunnallinen hankehaku: Lasten, nuorten ja perheiden palveluiden kehittäminen ja hyvinvoinnin edistäminen kohti yhdenvertaisuutta. [National funding call: Developing services for children, young people and families and promoting well-being towards equality].** 2024; Retrieved September 11, 2025.
Reference Source

Häme ELY Centre: **Valtakunnallinen hankehaku: Lasten, nuorten ja perheiden palveluiden kehittäminen ja hyvinvoinnin edistäminen kohti yhdenvertaisuutta. [National funding call: Developing services for children, young people and families and promoting well-being towards equality].** 2025; Retrieved September 11, 2025.
Reference Source

HAUS: **Learning is for everyone.** (n.d.) Retrieved September 11, 2025.
Reference Source

Heimer M, Palme J: **Rethinking child policy post-UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: vulnerable children's welfare in Sweden.** *Journal of Social Policy.* 2016; **45**(3): 435–452.
Publisher Full Text

Helakorpi J, Dovemark M, Rasmussen A, *et al.*: **Positions of newly arrived students in Nordic education policies and practices.** *Nordic Studies. Education.* 2023; **43**(2): 111–127.
Publisher Full Text

Kauppinen TM, van Ham M, Bernelius V: **Understanding the effects of school catchment areas and households with children in ethnic residential segregation.** *Housing Studies.* 2022; **37**(9): 1625–1649.
Publisher Full Text

Kesanto-Jokipolvi H, Vuorenmaa M, Klemetti R: **Vauvaperheiden vanhempien kokemukset lapsiperheiden palvelujen riittävyydestä vaihtelevat hyvinvointialueen ja vanhempien taustatekijöiden mukaan.** *Finnish Institute of Health and Welfare (THL).* 2023.
Reference Source

Kiviruusu O, Ranta K, Lindgren M, *et al.*: **Mental health after the COVID-19 pandemic among Finnish youth: a repeated, cross-sectional, population-based study.** *Lancet Psychiatry.* 2024; **11**(6): 451–460.
PubMed Abstract | **Publisher Full Text**

Krippendorf K: *Content analysis. An introduction to its methodology.* Sage: London; 2013.
Publisher Full Text

LIKES Concept: Concept: **Schools on the move.** *LIKES Research Centre for Physical Activity and Health.* 2025; Retrieved September 11, 2025.
Reference Source

Loukola S: **"Not in our daycare"? Commitments and obstacles to antiracism in finnish ECEC.** *Early Child Educ J.* 2023; **53**: 11–19.
Publisher Full Text

Lundy L: **Children's rights and educational policy in Europe: the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.** *Oxf Rev Educ.* 2012; **38**(4): 393–411.
Publisher Full Text

Lyons D: **Domestic implementation of the donor-conceived child's right to identity in light of the requirements of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.** *Int J Law Policy Family.* 2018; **32**(1): 1–26.
Publisher Full Text

Mertala P: **Paradoxes of participation in the digitalization of education: a narrative account.** *Learn Media Technol.* 2020; **45**(2): 179–192.
Publisher Full Text

Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland: **European Social Fund plus (ESF+).** 2022a; Retrieved September 11, 2025.
Reference Source

Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland: **Development of services for children, young people and families and promotion of well-being towards equality.** 2022b; Retrieved September 11, 2025.
Reference Source

Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland: **Innovation and skills in Finland 2021–2027 EU:n alue- ja rakennepolitiikan ohjelma.** 2023; Retrieved September 11, 2025.
Reference Source

Ministry of Social Affairs and Health: **Health and social services.** Retrived May 19, 2026.
Reference Source

Padovan D: **Social capital, lifestyles and consumption patterns.** In Tukker A, Charter M, Vezzoli C, *et al.*, editors. *System Innovation for Sustainability 1: Perspectives on Radical Changes to Sustainable Consumption and Production.* Greenleaf Publishing; 2008; pp. 271–287.
Publisher Full Text

Powell R, Muddiman E: **State-civil society relations. The importance of civil society for the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.** *The International Journal of Children's Rights.* 2024; **32**: 1–26.
Publisher Full Text

Pulkkinen J, Hildén R, Ketonen L, *et al.*: *Arviointiuudistuksen alkutaipaleella: Perusopetuksen päättöarviointitutkimuksen loppuraportti [First stages of the restructuring of final assessments in comprehensive school education: Final report of the research project].* Publications of the Ministry of Education and Culture: Ministry of Education and Culture; 2024: 6.
Reference Source

Rapley T: *Doing conversation, discourse and document analysis.* London: SAGE; 2021.
Publisher Full Text

Read S, Salmela-Aro K, Kiuru N, *et al.*: **The cohort trends of social connectedness in secondary school students in Finland between 2017 and 2021.** *PLoS One* 2024; **19**(10): e0312579.
Publisher Full Text

Rigby MJ: **European Union Child Guarantee – challenges raised by the welcome promise of free healthcare for marginalized children.** *European Journal of Public Health.* 2021; **31**(5): 943–950.
PubMed Abstract | **Publisher Full Text** | **Free Full Text**

Saikkonen P, Rotko T, Vaalavuo M: **Kestävä yhteiskunta – tekemistä vaille valmis.** *[Sustainable society – ready to do.] Yhteiskuntapolitiikka.* 2025; **90**(3): 299–305.

Salonen AO: *Sustainable development and its promotion in a welfare society in a global age.* University of Helsinki, Faculty of Behavioral Sciences; 2010. Research Report 318.

Skivenes M, Søvig KH: *Child rights and international discrimination law. Implementing article 2 of the Unites Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.* Routledge Research in International Law; 2019.
Reference Source

Sokka S, Nokela S: *Katsaus taiteen ja kulttuurin vapaan kentän rahoitusleikkauksiin ja niiden alueelliseen kohdentumiseen. [Review of funding cuts in the independent arts and culture sector and their regional allocation]* Center for Cultural Policy Research; 2025; Retrieved September 11, 2025.
Reference Source

Tolonen H: **Children's right to participate and their developing role in finnish proceedings.** In: Haugli T, Nylund A, Sigurdsen R, *et al.*, editors. *Children's constitutional rights in the Nordic countries.* Brill; 2020; pp. 225–248.
Publisher Full Text

Tolonen H, Koulu S, Hakalehto S: **Best interests of the child in finnish legislation and doctrine: what has changed and what remains the same?** In: Haugli T, Nylund A, Sigurdsen R, *et al.*, editors. *Children's constitutional rights in the Nordic countries.* Brill; 2020; pp. 159–184.
Publisher Full Text

UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight. Innocenti Report Card 19: *Child well-being in an unpredictable world.* Florence: UNICEF Innocenti; 2025.
Reference Source

United Nations: **Convention on the Rights of the Child.** *Treaty Series.* 1989; 1577.
Reference Source

United Nations: **Transforming our world: the 2030 agenda for sustainable development.** A/RES/70/1. 2015.

Voutilainen A, Kapanen S, Kangasniemi M: **Division of work in documents of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health – document analysis.** *Journal of Social Medicine.* 2018; **55**: 212–224.
Publisher Full Text

Weckström E, Lastikka A-L, Havu-Nuutinen S: **Constructing a Socially Sustainable Culture of Participation for Caring and Inclusive ECEC.** *Sustainability.* 2022; **14**(7): 3945.
Publisher Full Text

Open Peer Review

Current Peer Review Status: ? ? ? ? ? ?

Version 2

Reviewer Report 21 October 2026

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.26374.r81444

© **2026 López López M.** This is an open access peer review report distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

?

Mónica López López
University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

This article interrogates, through a deductive documentary analysis, how the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee is reflected in Finland's National Child Strategy, the Innovation and Skills in Finland programme, and three specific ESF+ calls. To me, this question is very original and highly policy-relevant. As far as I know, the link between children's-rights strategies and the content of structural-fund calls has not been examined systematically, and therefore this article has a great value.

The context is well updated, with Finnish sources on inequalities, mental health and learning outcomes. While word limits may not allow a full theoretical extension, the paper could benefit from engaging, even briefly, with literature that theorises policy silences, and with the social investment critique.

Documentary analysis seems an appropriate method for these research questions, although some aspects of its reporting could be strengthened. First, the article mentions researcher triangulation but does not specify how many researchers were involved in coding or how disagreements were resolved. Second, a brief reflection on the authors' positionality would be welcome. Third, a deeper description of the analytical process, ideally with the codebook as supplementary material, would improve transparency.

The findings show that nutrition, housing and child-specific healthcare are largely absent from the funding calls, yet the conclusion names mainly child-friendly justice and digital safety as underrepresented. Housing almost disappears from the conclusion. Its absence is explained by appeals to Finnish universalism, free school meals and "other policy instruments", none of which were analysed in this study. Moreover, the calls analysed seem to have been issued during a period of documented housing-related retrenchment in Finland. Engaging with this context would allow a sharper conclusion on what is perhaps one of the paper's most important findings.

Relatedly, the discussion tends to neutralise the rights-based lens through phrases such as "should not be interpreted as failures", or "do not imply that such needs are not addressed

elsewhere". From a children's rights perspective, the authors could state more clearly that the ECG services are not optional, and that where needs are said to be met through other instruments, this should be demonstrated rather than assumed.

In short, my main suggestions would be to: 1) revise the conclusion so it reflects all findings, including housing, nutrition and health; 2) complete the method and add a brief positionality statement; 3) highlight the relevance of this study (especially the methodological contribution) for other European countries that could be inspired in different ways; and 4) check whether children and young people were involved in designing the calls themselves (given the EU Strategy's insistence on participation, this would be also a notable gap!).

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Yes

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Structural inequalities and systemic injustice in child welfare | Racialized, gendered, and class-based violence in child protection systems | Intersectional and critical feminist approaches to child welfare systems | Queer, trans, and intersex liberation in and beyond care systems | Power, accountability, and resistance in child welfare decision-making | Community-rooted alternatives to foster and residential care | Youth-led and emancipatory research on transitions from public care | Epistemic justice and the lived experiences of children and families | Participatory, co-produced, and decolonial knowledge practices.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Version 1

Reviewer Report 17 March 2026

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.23731.r71258

© **2026 Collins T.** This is an open access peer review report distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

?

Tara M. Collins
Toronto Metropolitan University, Toronto, Canada

This paper is a valuable contribution to understand an example of how European strategies are translated (or not) in a specific country of focus, in this case Finland. For those interested in governance questions related to children and youth, it provides an interesting case of how regional priorities are interpreted and reflected within national strategies and measures, relying on publicly-available documentation as data. It is important to understand how regional strategies are translated or not at the national level to support children's rights. While there are some useful connections, the authors also found some limited integration of the strategies, which is a valuable result.
The paper is quite clear and accurately presents its findings. However, it would be helpful to develop the analysis further in relation to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child ([CRC]; 1989) and related current literature. The paper's title highlights the emphasis of ESF+ funding for child and family services in Finland but the introduction and one of the research questions highlight children's rights as per the EU Strategy and Council Recommendation. The CRC is presented on p. 4 as the conceptual framework but it does not seem to inform the paper much, rather seems cursory or superficial. This is a missed opportunity as greater attention to the CRC would be beneficial to develop the analysis further. For instance, the authors have identified the importance of coordination within governance but they have not identified how it is a key CRC general measure of implementation. This paper highlights the efforts, successes and ongoing fragmentation challenges according to publicly-available documentation, which could be acknowledged on p. 13 of the article but it is not. It also points to the potential of future research emphasizing these general measures further and how they can advance not only strategies but their implementation with attention to such general measures as budgets, etc.
For useful guidance from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, the following resources should be helpful:
UN Committee, General Comment No. 5, General Measures of Implementation, UN Doc. CRC/GC/2003/5, 27 November 2003.

UNICEF, The General Measures of the Convention on the Rights of the Child: The Process in Europe and Central Asia. (Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2006).

Nevena Vučković Šahović, 'The Role of Civil Society in Implementing the General Measures of the Convention', (Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2010).

There is some relevant academic literature as well.
One question that did not seem considered was the assumption that coherence across the studied documents would necessarily mean that these strategies would be implemented and reflected in

practices in Finland. While there is growing literature that recognizes that while law and policy may be established, there are challenges and obstacles that hinder or prevent implementation. For instance, the table on p. 10 uses the term “operational:” to indicate a relationship between the Innovation and Skills in Finland program and EU-level strategies but how do we know about the status of the implementation in the program other than it is identified? How is “operational” defined? In addition, there are relevant questions of capacity and political will beyond simply whether regional priorities are recognized in national strategies. Questioning this relationship would be useful to acknowledge at a minimum, and also suggests additional future research directions that have not yet been recognized.

It is recommended that the authors consider referring to other such national level studies in the introduction to provide more context and potential comparative examples if they exist, and if not, they should be mentioned.
There was some degree of repetition of methodology across the introduction, methods, and findings and it is suggested that these details could be streamlined further in the paper.
Minor points:
-p. 6 note spelling issue in last text box of image; should be “Third” not “Thrid”
-p. 11 awkward language in second line: “Research highlights the need to for equality in education…”

Thanks to the authors for their valuable efforts.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Yes

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Partly

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Children's rights

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 17 Mar 2026

Laura Ortju

Dear Dr. Collins, Thank you very much for your careful reading of our manuscript and for the constructive comments you have provided. We greatly appreciate the time and expertise you have dedicated to the review process. We have already received four other reviews and have begun revising the manuscript based on their feedback. Your comments align well with the amendments we are currently undertaking, and they will be fully considered as we continue preparing the revised version. We believe that your observations will further strengthen the coherence and clarity of the article. Thank you once again for your valuable contribution to improving our work. Kind regards,
Laura, Kati and Elina

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Author Response 01 Oct 2026

Laura Ortju

Dear Reviewers, Please accept our apologies that the structured response we submitted at the beginning of the summer has apparently not been made available to you. Below, we have included a copy of our responses to the valuable comments you provided to help us improve the manuscript. We sincerely hope that you will have an opportunity to review the revisions we have made and assess whether our manuscript can be accepted for publication. Thank you very much for the time and expertise you have already contributed to supporting our research. **On behalf of the authors,**
Laura Section Reviewer Comment Authors' response General 1 The lack of a clear theoretical framework to guide the study made it very difficult for you to nicely package your discussion section. Kindly revisit my earlier comment about the need for a theoretical framework, e.g. if you were using the rights-based framework and then in the discussion section you can reflect on how these findings are compared to the principles of a rights-based approach e.g participation, transparency, accountability, empowerment, partnerships, accessibility, acceptability, sustainability, appropriateness, etc, of which all these principles are clearly visible in the findings section. See whether you would like to take this theoretical framework on board, as it would strengthen the discussion section. We appreciate the reviewer's suggestion regarding a more explicit theoretical framework. Due to the documentary nature of the study, we have chosen not to introduce a new academic theory-driven framework, as this would require reconfiguring the analytical design. Instead, we have strengthened the normative and children's right-based framing of the study by clarifying the role of the UNCRC as an overarching normative reference and by incorporating a stronger child-centred and social justice-oriented perspective throughout

the introduction and discussion sections. General 2 It is primarily a documentary analysis, and in such there is always the challenge of going deeper into necessary semantic analysis and in so doing moving away from positive advocacy for the societal members (in this case marginalised children) on whom the policies are intended to be centred. In general the review manages this, but deeper investigation of the significance of the gaps identified, and more vehemence on behalf of children whose needs are omitted, would have more impact than solely stating gaps in textural content. We thank the reviewer for this important observation. In the revised manuscript, we have placed greater emphasis on the significance of identified gaps from a children's rights perspective. The findings and discussion sections have been strengthened to explicitly address omissions related to healthcare, nutrition, housing, and child-friendly justice, and to reflect on the implications of these gaps for children in vulnerable situations. We also clarify the limitations of documents analysis while adopting a more explicit advocacy-oriented stance in interpreting the findings. General 2 The review seeks to identify where European policies have been supported, rather than majoring on those areas which are largely or totally omitted. This does little to actively promote children's best interests, nor to promote stronger achievement of European Commission principles and policies; it is solely a commentary on a government. Thank you for this important observation. In the revised manuscript, we have strengthened the focus on areas that are partially or entirely omitted from national strategies and ESF+ funding calls, rather than primarily highlighting areas of alignment. In particular, the Discussion section now more explicitly addresses the implications of missing themes—such as child-friendly justice and core elements of the European Child Guarantee—from a children's rights perspective. This shift aims to move beyond descriptive commentary towards a more critical examination of how omissions in policy and funding frameworks may affect the visibility of children's rights. General 2 The paper does have one quotation expressing the voice of a child, but this child-centricity and advocacy could well have been carried on in spirit in the main text, by highlighting more strongly the children and child needs omitted, rather than framing this solely in terms of missing text. We agree that a child-centred perspective should be reflected throughout the manuscript, even when the analysis is based on policy documents. In the revised version, we have strengthened the children's rights perspective across the Discussion by emphasising how omissions in strategies and funding calls may affect the visibility of children's needs, rather than framing the analysis solely in terms of missing textual references. This approach seeks to carry the spirit of child-centric advocacy throughout the interpretation of findings. General 2 In the absence of evidence, though, concerns must remain, as the review does not seem to promote Finnish disadvantaged children's needs actively. Indeed, one Finnish policy document cited in the study is quoted as including the statement: "Children and young people are considered as part of adult services" in the response to education and healthcare inclusion - within health this amazing statement airbrushes out post-natal care, immunisation, developmental health, good access to child-sensitive primary care, and adolescent health. By contrast, a simple literature search shows that issues in achieving the health aims of the Child Guarantee have been raised, such as Rigby. "A commitment to marginalized children in the European Union: The hope and challenges of the EU Child Guarantee." Child: Care, Health and Development 48.1 (2022): 170-174; and Rigby. European Union Child Guarantee—challenges raised by the welcome promise of free healthcare for marginalized children, European Journal of Public Health, Volume 31, Issue 5, October 2021, Pages 943–950, https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckab062 . Thank you for this important and

challenging comment. We acknowledge the concern that the manuscript could be read as insufficiently promoting the needs of disadvantaged children. In revising the manuscript, we have clarified the scope of the analysis as a document-based review focusing on how children's rights commitments are articulated within selected EU- and national-level strategies and ESF+ funding calls, rather than as an assessment of the availability or quality of child health or other basic services in Finland. We have removed potentially misleading formulations that could be interpreted as endorsing a marginalisation of child-specific health needs and clarified that references to health-related gaps concern the visibility of such commitments within funding frameworks, not service provision in practice. In addition, we have situated our findings within the broader EU-level discussion on the challenges of realising the health-related aims of the European Child Guarantee by referring to previous research (Rigby, 2021), while explicitly noting the limitations of drawing conclusions beyond the analysed documents. General 3 Relatedly, a consequence of the paper's primary relevance being on a policy level and never moving away from the documents (neither 'up' to theories or 'down' to children's lives), is that it comes across as detached from realities. Seeing what kind of project the article is a product of, and its collaboration with both NGOs and government, I do not presume that your work is detached from reality at all – I'm just asking if your vast ground knowledge on children's participation could be better reflected in the paper. For example, you do have a few mentions of what role documents play, and why it is ethically important to study documents – if these types of reflections were more present throughout the article, it would make for more engaging reading aware of children's realities. Thank you for this thoughtful reflection. While the study deliberately focuses on policy documents, we have revised the manuscript to more clearly articulate why documents matter from a children's rights perspective and how they shape the realities within which services and participation opportunities are organised. We have also strengthened reflexive elements in the Discussion to better reflect the ethical significance of document analysis and to acknowledge the authors' grounding in practice-based knowledge, while remaining methodologically consistent with the study's documentary focus. General 3 I would also ask the authors to clarify or reconsider the role of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in the paper. It is presented under a 'background' section, but not referred to throughout the analysis, only briefly mentioned again under 'Limitations'. On p. 4, you write that 'To meaningfully assess the implementation of the UNCRC principles at the national level, it is essential to include relevant European and national policy documents in the review' – this phrase implicitly says that you aim to assess the UNCRC principles at a national level (and not only the EU child rights principles). Is this correctly understood? If yes, why is the UNCRC not included as a 'source document' and included in the analysis? If no, why the introduction to the UNCRC at all, and especially, why the mention of 'assess[ing] the implementation of UNCRC principles at the national level'? If the UNCRC is part of the 'conceptual framework', it should also be engaged with in the analysis. We have now clarified the role of the UNCRC in the manuscript. The UNCRC is now explicitly positioned as a normative and legal framework guiding the interpretation of EU- and national-level policy documents, rather than as an object of direct document analysis. This clarification has been integrated into the introduction and conceptual background sections. General 4 The main concern is that the study needs better framing. I recommend that you consider framing this paper as a case study of the localization of the UNCRC in Finland rather than just an analysis of documents. The current structure/flow of the paper can be confusing to the reader. On the one hand,

you demonstrate multiple misalignments among the documents, which makes it more critical to analyze the root causes of the discrepancies. On the other hand, these misalignments are not necessarily dangerous oversights but could be rather a reasonable adaptation of the international treaty. Your paper does not take one course over the other; it is rather unclear what your message is. My recommendation is to frame your work as a case study of national-level adaptation, analyzing what was done well and where growth is needed. Having considered the feedback from all five reviewers, we have decided to retain the document-analysis approach as the core methodological frame of the article. To address the reviewer's concern, we now more explicitly discuss national adaptation and prioritisation as an inherent feature of multi-level governance. We also clarify why the absence of child-friendly justice is analytically relevant in the context of ESF+ funding, while acknowledging that responsibility for this theme mat lie primarily in other policy domains. General 4 While the authors have a great grasp on the documents they review, the constant reference to each document reduces the readability of the paper. I suggest you group documents into international, regional, and national categories, and refer to a specific set in the text where appropriate. Alternatively, propose a shorter version of the documents' titles Thank you for this helpful suggestion regarding readability. In the revised manuscript, we have streamlined references to policy documents by grouping them where analytically appropriate and referring to EU-level and national-level documents as sets rather than repeatedly naming each individual document. Full document titles are retained where specific distinctions are necessary for the analysis, but otherwise a grouped reference approach is used to improve the flow and clarity of the text. We have chosen this approach instead of introducing new abbreviations to maintain accessibility. General 4 Several times, you suggest that the documents are examples of the UNCRC "implementation". I suggest considering using "operationalization" or "codification" instead, as implementation often refers to specific frontline programs directly affecting children and youth Thank you for this helpful terminology-related comment. We have now revised the manuscript to use the term "operationalization" instead of "implementation," as you suggest. This adjustment has been applied systematically throughout the text to ensure conceptual accuracy and consistency. General 5 There was some degree of repetition of methodology across the introduction, methods, and findings and it is suggested that these details could be streamlined further in the paper. Thank you for this observation. We have streamlined the manuscript by reducing repetitive descriptions of the methodology across sections. Methodological details are now primarily concentrated in the Methods section, while the Introduction and Findings focus on contextualisation and interpretation, respectively. Title 1 Although your title is clear and well-crafted. However, I would like to suggest that you do not use abbreviations in a title. Please write every in Full, EU should be European Union, and ESF+ should be European Social Fund Plus. It is good that you have indicated a geographic demarcation of your study. This is good for context. We acknowledge the reviewer's recommendation and agree that fully written titles can enhance clarity. In this case, however, expanding the abbreviations would exceed practical title length constraints. As the abbreviations used are well established and defined at the outset of the article, we have opted to retain them in the title. Abstract 1 Your abstract is solid; it includes some essential background information and adequately describes the methodology. It also briefly highlights the findings and the conclusion. See whether it is possible to also include a brief recommendation that emerged from the study, and to briefly indicate the theoretical framework that guided the study; you seem to be leaning towards

either a rights-based approach or a social justice framework. We have revised the Abstract to more explicitly indicate the normative children's rights perspective guiding the study and to include a brief recommendation emerging from the findings. Keywords have been provided in line with the journal's guidelines, although they do not appear to be displayed consistently in published articles. Abstract 1 See whether adding keywords at the end of the abstract is a possibility. We have submitted the keywords in accordance with the journal's guidelines, but they do not appear to be displayed alongside the published articles. This also seems to apply to other articles published in the journal. Abstract 2 The Conclusion section of the Abstract raises confusion over policy competence and objectives, by stating that "national-level priorities may obscure specific EU objectives". Nearly all the operational services which support children, ranging from education to health care, and including justice services, are national competencies. European Commission activities in these areas primarily are to establish shared values and principles, and as appropriate to set targets, identify effective practices, set standards by EU-wide consensus, and provide targeted financial and other enablement. Thus national policies legally are pre-eminent; they cannot 'obscure' EU policies, though they can fail to promote them or to align optimally with their achievement, and this rightly can be called out. We have revised the Abstract to remove wording that could be interpreted as suggesting that national priorities override EU competence. The revised formulation now reflects the EU's coordinative role and the principle of subsidiarity more accurately. Introduction 1 In your introduction, you state, "However, the visibility of UNCRC-based strategies in EU-funded projects has not been systematically studied." I am suggesting that you rephrase this statement, as some might not agree with it. You could potentially rephrase it to: "However, the visibility of UNCRC-based strategies in EU-funded projects appears not to have been systematically studied." Thank you, the sentence has been revised according to your suggestion. Introduction 1 I am happy that your introduction has a very clear research aim and research questions. For improved flow, consider moving the research aim and questions to the end of the introduction section, just before the data and methods section. This will ensure a chronological and seamless flow into the data and methods section. However, this is just a suggestion; see what works best for your paper. We combined the introduction and background sections and moved the research questions to the end of the section. Introduction 1 In your introduction, I was also expecting to see the theoretical framework that guided the study, e.g rights-based approach or a social justice framework. Other than that, well done for such a solid introduction section. Rather than introducing a formal theory-driven framework, we clarified the normative children's rights perspective guiding the analysis. The Introduction now explicitly explains how the UNCRC, social justice, and social sustainability inform the interpretation of policy documents. Introduction 5 It is recommended that the authors consider referring to other such national level studies in the introduction to provide more context and potential comparative examples if they exist, and if not, they should be mentioned. We have clarified the research landscape by noting that while national child strategies and UNCRC implementation have been studied, comparable analyses of EU-funded programme documents and funding calls focusing on children and families are scarce. Background 1 Also, see whether the background and conceptual framework section can be integrated into the introduction section (you can make it a subheading within the introduction section) We combined the introduction and background sections and adjusted the subheadings to improve the clarity of the overall structure. Background 1 Whilst I appreciate the detailed conceptual and legislative

framework, I was also expecting to see a little bit of discussion/context about child and family services in Finland, what they entail, who the stakeholders are, who the service providers are, what challenges are faced by children and Families in Finland, which then makes an argument for funding to provide services. We added a brief description of how services for children and families are organised in Finland to the "Introduction" section. We also have strengthened the Background section by clarifying both the organisation of child and family services in Finland and the key challenges faced by children and families, including growing inequalities in mental health, learning outcomes, and regional access to services. Background 1 Although this is a Finnish / EU study, you can increase the global relevance of the study by aligning it to the Sustainable Development Goals and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This is just a suggestion, see whether you want to take it on board. Thank you, but we will leave this outside the scope of the present analysis. Background 3 My recommendation would be to engage more with theory coming from research, not only from legal documents, to lift the findings and make them relevant beyond your case study; or, if it is a deliberate choice not to do so in this paper, to explain or remove the reference to 'theory-driven'. We have removed the misleading term "theory-driven," as the analytical framework is based on guiding policy documents rather than academic theory. Background 3 On p. 5, you introduce the Finnish Innovation and Skills programme and mention that 'Applicants' can apply for funding. For understanding the context, it would be good to know who these applicants are (government entities? NGOs?). A description of the applicant types has been added to the "Background and conceptual framework" section. Background 4 Is this mismatch in themes an issue or just a product of prioritization? Countries have the right to adapt the UNCRC to their local contexts. The literature review should reflect research on the UNCRC's adaptation and localization. This would position this study better and support its significance We have revised the Background section to explicitly acknowledge that differences between international guidance and national priorities may reflect legitimate processes of adaptation and localisation of the UNCRC, rather than shortcomings. Background 5 It would be helpful to develop the analysis further in relation to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child ([CRC]; 1989) and related current literature. The paper's title highlights the emphasis of ESF+ funding for child and family services in Finland but the introduction and one of the research questions highlight children's rights as per the EU Strategy and Council Recommendation. The CRC is presented on p. 4 as the conceptual framework but it does not seem to inform the paper much, rather seems cursory or superficial. This is a missed opportunity as greater attention to the CRC would be beneficial to develop the analysis further. For instance, the authors have identified the importance of coordination within governance but they have not identified how it is a key CRC general measure of implementation. We agree that the UNCRC general measures of implementation are highly relevant. While the study does not empirically assess implementation outcomes, the discussion now more explicitly acknowledges coordination, funding, and governance as core structural mechanisms through which children's rights are advanced. These points are also highlighted as priorities for future research. Methods 1 See whether the title can be rephrased to "Materials and Methods", instead of "data and Methods" The title has been revised according to the suggestion. Methods 1 In this section (material and methods), you write about sample selection, but the inclusion and exclusion criteria are not clearly explained. The description of the inclusion and exclusion criteria has now been added to the "Data and sample selection" section. Methods 1 You also talk about a systematic

examination of data, yet the “systematic” is not adequately explained; just be careful that you do not give an impression that this was a systematic review. Because then you need a clear PRISMA flowchart and a PICo framework. Thank you for this important observation. We have replaced the term systematic with structured to avoid methodological misunderstandings. Methods 2 While the European Strategy on the Rights of the Child is a detailed social and legal underpinning, the more recent and specific pragmatic document rightly used in the review is the European Child Guarantee. As shown in the Commission's own publications (such as the Commission's dedicated web page European Child Guarantee - Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion and its public fact sheet https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/5307cc11-6413-482c-84f4-17d4b5ef97a6_en) the core basis of the Child Guarantee comprises six core service promises. Unfortunately, the review loses this clarity. Two of the figures - Tables 1 and 3 - focus on the Strategy on the Rights of the Child, but give two different summaries of the key points. Table 2 looks to the Child Guarantee, erroneously summarising it as having two principles, of which the first is not an explicit Guarantee; the second is a concatenation of three guarantees, while three (access by marginalised children to adequate nutrition, housing, and free healthcare) are not mentioned. Figure 2's policy summaries do not replicate those of the earlier figures, and its classification of thematic areas is blatantly wrong. This is a great shame, as better analysed and presented this could have been a useful summary comparing the different emphases of the Finnish policies compared with Commission priorities. We clearly presented the analysis in an insufficiently clear manner. In the original manuscript, we had included only selected examples of the analysis, which of course does not mean that our full analysis was limited to these examples. We have now corrected this ambiguity by reconstructing the figures and the table in a clearer format, making all six key service guarantees of the ECG visible. The figures and tables have been reconstructed to clearly reflect all six core service guarantees, and inconsistencies across tables have been corrected. Methods 2 This study will only meaningfully add value and create actionable knowledge if it sharpens its analysis of the themes of the Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the much more focused Child Guarantee, ensures consistency of analyses across its different tables and figures, identifies areas where Finnish policies and Finnish funding calls do not offer support to these priorities, and then ascertains whether these omissions are justified on the basis of current good services or alternatively represent continuing areas of under-provision for marginalised children. We have sharpened the analysis by ensuring consistency across tables and figures and by explicitly addressing areas where Finnish policies and funding calls do not reflect EU-level priorities, while carefully distinguishing between programme mandate and potential under-prioritisation. Methods 3 The paper is primarily an empirically focused presentation of a policy analysis. It is a legitimate choice to keep the focus on the empirical level and less on theory, but the absence of any theory in the paper is still noteworthy. Your ‘conceptual framework’ section outlines various international legal document (UNCRC, the EU child rights-related documents) rather than introducing a research-based conceptual framework. On p. 5, you write that the two European Commission documents on child rights and the child guarantee are used ‘as a theory-driven analytical framework for examining the other documents included in the study.’ This requires further explanation: how are EU documents ‘theory-driven’? Which theories do you derive from these documents? Why is it not simply a comparative analysis of priorities in EU vs. Finnish policy documents? We have removed the term “theory-driven” because it caused methodological ambiguity. The analysis is based on

guiding policy documents rather than academic theory. However, we have added relevant research to the introduction and drawn on this theoretical basis in the discussion section; please see the respective sections. Methods 3 The phrase 'Accordingly, the focus of the study is on existing material' (p. 5) seems redundant – it is already clear that the study is on existing material. The sentence has been removed as suggested. Methods 4 I recommend using the UNCRC as a theoretical framework and a baseline for comparison, at least to the EU Strategy to connect the dots. As mentioned in the literature review, the documents are reviewed against one another rather than against the CRC. Thank you for this suggestion. We have clarified that the UNCRC functions as a normative and ethical reference point informing the interpretation of EU- and national-level strategies, rather than as a direct analytical baseline. The analysis therefore focuses on policy documents reviewed in relation to one another, while being guided by a children's rights perspective grounded in the UNCRC. Methods 4 The textual explanation of the analytical framework is hard to follow. I recommend creating a matrix with documents on one axis and the children's rights areas (ex. Nutrition, justice, etc.) on another, and mark the documents that reflect each area We acknowledge that the analytical framework required clearer presentation. The figures and tables have been revised to present the analysis in a matrix-like format that more transparently links children's rights areas with the analysed document groups, thereby improving clarity and consistency. Methods 5 p. 6 note spelling issue in last text box of image; should be "Third" not "Thrid" Thank you for the remark; this has been corrected. Findings 2 The review paper does highlight the lack of Finnish policy inclusion of child-friendly justice. However, access to adequate nutrition, adequate housing, and healthcare, are very largely omitted, yet these are central to child wellbeing and are areas strongly compromised by poverty, social exclusion, and other social challenges. Thus one element of the Strategy on the Rights of the Child, and half of the six elements of the Child Guarantee, do not explicitly appear in Finnish policy documents or in calls for proposals under the three ESF+ funding rounds. It may of course be that Finland considers it meets these four service provision requirements adequately, but it is not reassuring to find no evidence presented to claim this achievement - though recognising the limitations of document analysis removed from the core objective of the documents analysed. But a strategy review should have looked for such evidence, as the authors have looked at wider literature for some policy lines. We agree with this important observation. The revised manuscript places greater emphasis on omissions related to access to nutrition, housing, and healthcare, alongside child-friendly justice. We have systematically revisited the analysed national documents and funding calls to clarify how these themes are addressed—or remain absent—and strengthened the Discussion by drawing on previous research highlighting the challenges of realising health-related commitments under the European Child Guarantee. Findings 2 This review has usefully started to address the issue of how national priorities in Finland have sought to address and fit with European Commission policies as well as funding qualification criteria. It then analyses that Finland has introduced some additional commitments, while identifying that two European policy objectives are partially or totally omitted, but itself overlooks three other fundamental European priorities which are omitted. As noted earlier, the tables presented in the article were only illustrative examples of the analysis. The full analysis naturally takes all priority areas into account. We have now clarified our presentation and made all priority areas more explicitly visible. Findings 3 The first paragraph in 'Findings' may also be redundant – the documents have just all been introduced, and it is slightly repetitive when reading. The paragraph has been

removed as suggested. Findings 4 In Figure 2, what do you mean by operational? By operational, we refer to the fact that these thematic areas are visibly reflected in the ESF funding calls. We have now clarified this in the text. Findings 5 One question that did not seem considered was the assumption that coherence across the studied documents would necessarily mean that these strategies would be implemented and reflected in practices in Finland. While there is growing literature that recognizes that while law and policy may be established, there are challenges and obstacles that hinder or prevent implementation. For instance, the table on p. 10 uses the term "operational:" to indicate a relationship between the Innovation and Skills in Finland program and EU-level strategies but how do we know about the status of the implementation in the program other than it is identified? How is "operational" defined? We have clarified how the term "operationalised" is used in this study to refer to the explicit presence of strategic priorities in programme documents and funding calls, rather than to their implementation in practice. Discussion 1 Although this section (Discussion) is well written and reflects mastery over the data, I felt that it has several missed opportunities. Firstly, you alluded to the influence of national political priorities but did not elaborate on what these are and how they influence the ESF+. We have expanded the Discussion to more explicitly describe national political priorities and demographic considerations, and to analyse how these shape ESF+ funding decisions in the Finnish context. Discussion 1 Reorganising this section (conclusions) could improve clarity. You might consider structuring it as follows: Conclusions Significance and implications of the study Limitations Recommendations and future research directions All the necessary content is already present; it simply needs clearer organisation. This is a suggestion rather than a requirement; please use your discretion. We appreciate this structural suggestion and have strengthened the internal organisation of the Discussion and Conclusions sections while retaining a separate and clearly defined section on limitations and further research. Discussion 2 Comparative data from sources such as WHO and Eurostat, as well as bibliographic searches, would be valuable underpinning. Thank you for this suggestion. We agree that comparative data from WHO, Eurostat, and broader bibliographic searches would be valuable in a study assessing children's wellbeing or service outcomes. However, the present article is a qualitative documentary analysis focused on the visibility and operationalisation of children's rights commitments in selected policy documents and ESF+ funding calls. We therefore chose not to add a wider comparative statistical analysis, as this would broaden the scope beyond the study's research questions. Instead, the Discussion includes selected research and policy literature where directly relevant to interpreting the documentary findings, and the need for further research on implementation, outcomes, budgeting, and structural conditions is acknowledged in the Limitations and further research section. Discussion 3 Your main recommendation seems to be more strategic coherence across documents, which would support children's rights. But the analytical move from strategic coherence to better children's rights implementation, is not clear to me. How do we know that children's rights would not be better supported with, for example, less EU involvement, more decentralisation and more 'different' rather than more 'aligned' child rights policies across Member States? Your discussion on p. 10 of how the Finnish documents are products of much more than EU strategies, is very useful, and more of this type of reflection would be good. We appreciate the reviewer's nuanced reflections on coherence and localisation. In the revised discussion, we have refined our argument to avoid implying that greater alignment across governance levels is inherently preferable. Instead, we emphasise the balance between legitimate national adaptation and the need to

ensure that fundamental children's rights are not systematically rendered invisible in funding processes. Discussion 3 In the Discussion (p. 13), you write: 'the fragmented nature of strategic guidance raises questions about coherence, coordination, and accountability in the implementation of children's rights. When multiple strategies intersect without a clear overarching framework, it becomes difficult to assess whether the entirety of the strategic landscape is truly governed or understood by any single actor.' I understand this as a call for more EU-level coordination and less decentralisation when it comes to strategic decision making for children's rights? Is that correctly understood? If yes, is that really what would 'implement' children' rights better, that one actor (implicitly, the EU) 'truly governs (...) the entirety of the strategic landscape' when it comes to child rights? I understand the importance of accountability, but is accountability created through exact coherence of policies at different levels? Are there not many other – and more important and efficient – measures of accountability for rights? To address the concern regarding decentralisation and EU-level coordination, we have added an explicit sentence to the Discussion section clarifying that EU child rights strategies function primarily as normative and coordinative instruments, while responsibility for prioritisation and funding allocation remains at the national and sub-national levels in accordance with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality. This clarification aims to prevent interpretations suggesting advocacy for stronger centralisation. This clarification also responds to concerns regarding the relationship between strategic coherence and national discretion. Discussion 3 Similarly, you write that 'Allocation decisions are influenced not only by shared strategic goals but also by domestic political agendas and demographic considerations. This raises concerns about strategic coherence and the visibility of children's rights in funding processes.' Why should allocation decisions not be influenced by domestic demographic considerations? Is local relevance not more important than 'strategic coherence'? Would 'strategic coherence' really increase the visibility of children's rights? I read this as a call for more top-down children's rights and less bottom-up children's rights (the latter would be the opposite of strategic coherence, and reflecting Finnish children's realities more). If I am reading this wrong – please explain in more detail in the paper, so others do not misunderstand it in the same way. Thank you for this important clarification request. We have revised the Discussion section to explicitly state that national demographic and political considerations are both legitimate and necessary in funding allocation. Our reference to strategic coherence is not intended as a call for top-down governance, but rather as a call for transparency regarding how children's rights considerations are weighed alongside other national priorities. We have clarified this to avoid interpretations suggesting that local relevance should be subordinated to EU-level coordination. Discussion 3 It would be refreshing with some additional recommendations based on the findings – should we really aspire for coherence across documents? Could the findings not say something more than that, about the importance of localising and decentralising children's rights to make them relevant for local realities, for example? As argued by Sally Engle Merry, domestic implementation of rights will always include adaptation, translation etc. to resonate in local realities, so why is it a 'bad' thing that EU strategies and Finnish policies differ? If your aim is to inform future funding calls, could a recommendation then not also be to be more open to reflect local realities? Arguably, some aspects of local discrimination issues, for example, could get lost of the EU funding coordination on child rights were more coherent and streamlined. If children's participation and input are important (as you highlight in the introduction), would their lived realities and

experiences not be very different in Finland or in Portugal, calling for less coherence and more diversity in approaches? You mention on p. 13 that more aligned policies would ensure more equitable funding allocation throughout the Member States. This begs the question of whether equality between children is best addressed at EU level or domestic level – a question to which the answer is of course 'it depends' and 'both', but engaging in this difficult discussion would bring more nuance and add a greater contribution of the paper. We appreciate this nuanced reflection. In the revised Discussion, we clarify that the study does not advocate coherence as an end in itself, nor does it view divergence between EU and national policies as inherently problematic. Rather, we acknowledge localisation and adaptation as necessary features of children's rights governance. Our use of "strategic coherence" refers to transparency and accountability in prioritisation, not to uniformity of approaches across Member States. We have revised the text to make this distinction explicit and to avoid interpretations suggesting that diversity or local relevance should be reduced. Discussion 3 Regarding child friendly justice, is it an interesting observation that it is not included in the Finnish National Child Strategy Committee report, the Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027 programme, or the three funding calls. But could this be because it is not the mandate of an 'innovation and skills' programme to deal with child friendly justice? Wouldn't it rather be reflected in policies about juvenile justice, policing, judicial system etc.? You mention some of these limitations on pp. 12-13, but you do not comment on why one should expect child friendly justice to be present in the Innovation and Skills programme. In general, it could be explained a little clearer why exactly the Innovation and Skills programme was chosen to analyse above other child rights-related programmes in Finland? What does it represent? We agree that child-friendly justice primarily falls within other policy domains and does not constitute the core mandate of an innovation and skills programme. We have clarified in the Methods section why the Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027 programme was selected for analysis and what it represents within Finland's ESF+ governance. The observation regarding child-friendly justice is not intended as a critique of programme mandate, but as an illustration of how certain rights-related themes may remain less visible within cross-sectoral funding frameworks that explicitly target children and families. Discussion 3 The phrase 'It is both important and ethically necessary to critically examine how funding is allocated, especially when it concerns children's rights and well-being' on p. 13 would benefit from being moved to the Introduction rather than Discussion – the underlying justification for the need of the study is important to put clearly in the beginning. Moved as suggested. Discussion 4 When discussing the findings, the process of creating national-level documents should be discussed. Who is the main decision-maker? Are there participatory processes underlying policymaking? Did children and youth contribute to the national policy creation? Were statistical data and needs assessment used to support the prioritization process? Without knowing that, it is easy to misjudge the results of the comparison and make wrong conclusion on the source of misalignment We have added contextual clarification regarding national policy-making processes to avoid misinterpretation of observed misalignments as purely technical or strategic shortcomings. Discussion 4 Discussion: This section needs to be more structured. Probably focusing on specific discrepancies and using them as headings would help with this. The Discussion section has been restructured using thematic subheadings that focus on specific discrepancies and interpretive dimensions, thereby improving clarity and coherence. Discussion 4 Page 12, para 1 missing citation This is the authors' own reflection; therefore, no source references are provided.

Discussion 4 Funding of the priority areas often reflects the social construction of children and childhood in society (mostly the decision-makers). What do your results suggest about the way Finnish society sees children? We have added a reflective interpretation addressing how funding priorities implicitly construct understandings of childhood within Finnish policy contexts. Discussion 5 This paper highlights the efforts, successes and ongoing fragmentation challenges according to publicly-available documentation, which could be acknowledged on p. 13 of the article but it is not. The Discussion now explicitly acknowledges both achievements and ongoing fragmentation challenges in Finnish child-related policies. Discussion 5 It also points to the potential of future research emphasizing these general measures further and how they can advance not only strategies but their implementation with attention to such general measures as budgets, etc.

In addition, there are relevant questions of capacity and political will beyond simply whether regional priorities are recognized in national strategies. Questioning this relationship would be useful to acknowledge at a minimum, and also suggests additional future research directions that have not yet been recognized. We have expanded the future research section to highlight the importance of examining structural measures such as funding, administrative capacity, and political will in advancing children's rights beyond strategic alignment. Discussion 5 p. 11 awkward language in second line: "Research highlights the need to for equality in education..." Thank you for pointing out the typo; the sentence has now been corrected.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Report 14 March 2026

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.23731.r69609

© 2026 Shamrova D. This is an open access peer review report distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

?

Dasha Shamrova
School of Social Work, Texas State University, San Marcos, TX, USA

Dear authors,
Thank you for the opportunity to review and for your patience with this process! Your manuscript represents a rare contribution to the children's rights literature, specifically regarding the localization of the UNCRC. This study allows us to track the steps in the institutionalization of children's rights through international, regional, and national mechanisms, which is a unique example of such integration. However, the paper requires revisions to improve clarity, logical flow, and readability.

1. The main concern is that the study needs better framing. I recommend that you consider framing this paper as a case study of the localization of the UNCRC in Finland rather than just an analysis of documents. The current structure/flow of the paper can be confusing to

the reader. On the one hand, you demonstrate multiple misalignments among the documents, which makes it more critical to analyze the root causes of the discrepancies. On the other hand, these misalignments are not necessarily dangerous oversights but could be rather a reasonable adaptation of the international treaty. Your paper does not take one course over the other; it is rather unclear what your message is. My recommendation is to frame your work as a case study of national-level adaptation, analyzing what was done well and where growth is needed.

2. Is this mismatch in themes an issue or just a product of prioritization? Countries have the right to adapt the UNCRC to their local contexts. The literature review should reflect research on the UNCRC's adaptation and localization. This would position this study better and support its significance
3. Readability: While the authors have a great grasp on the documents they review, the constant reference to each document reduces the readability of the paper. I suggest you group documents into international, regional, and national categories, and refer to a specific set in the text where appropriate. Alternatively, propose a shorter version of the documents' titles
4. Theoretical framework: I recommend using the UNCRC as a theoretical framework and a baseline for comparison, at least to the EU Strategy to connect the dots. As mentioned in the literature review, the documents are reviewed against one another rather than against the CRC.
5. Analytical framework: The textual explanation of the analytical framework is hard to follow. I recommend creating a matrix with documents on one axis and the children's rights areas (ex. Nutrition, justice, etc.) on another, and mark the documents that reflect each area
6. When discussing the findings, the process of creating national-level documents should be discussed. Who is the main decision-maker? Are there participatory processes underlying policymaking? Did children and youth contribute to the national policy creation? Were statistical data and needs assessment used to support the prioritization process? Without knowing that, it is easy to misjudge the results of the comparison and make wrong conclusion on the source of misalignment
7. Several times, you suggest that the documents are examples of the UNCRC "implementation". I suggest considering using "operationalization" or "codification" instead, as implementation often refers to specific frontline programs directly affecting children and youth
8. In Figure 2, what do you mean by operational?
9. Discussion: This section needs to be more structured. Probably focusing on specific discrepancies and using them as headings would help with this.
10. Discussion: It is not clear whether the existing research evidence supports the prioritization reflected in the national documents. More research needs to be integrated into the discussion. For example, is juvenile justice even a significant issue in Finland?
11. Page 12, para 1 missing citation
12. Discussion: Funding of the priority areas often reflects the social construction of children and childhood in society (mostly the decision-makers). What do your results suggest about the way Finnish society sees children?

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?

Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Yes

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Children's rights implementation, child and youth participation in decision-making, international child well-being

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 17 Mar 2026

Laura Ortju

Dear Dr Shamrova, Thank you sincerely for your careful reading of our manuscript and for the helpful comments you provided. We appreciate the time and expertise you have invested in the review process. We would especially like to thank you for your remarks concerning the national perspectives. These comments are very important for strengthening the comparative dimension of our work, and we will address them carefully in the revised manuscript. All feedback will be considered in full as we prepare the revision.
Best regards,
Laura, Kati and Elina

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Author Response 01 Oct 2026

Laura Ortju

Dear Reviewers, Please accept our apologies that the structured response we submitted at the beginning of the summer has apparently not been made available to you. Below, we have included a copy of our responses to the valuable comments you provided to help us improve the manuscript. We sincerely hope that you will have an opportunity to review the revisions we have made and assess whether our manuscript can be accepted for

publication. Thank you very much for the time and expertise you have already contributed to supporting our research. **On behalf of the authors,**
Laura Section Reviewer Comment Authors' response General 1 The lack of a clear theoretical framework to guide the study made it very difficult for you to nicely package your discussion section. Kindly revisit my earlier comment about the need for a theoretical framework, e.g. if you were using the rights-based framework and then in the discussion section you can reflect on how these findings are compared to the principles of a rights-based approach e.g participation, transparency, accountability, empowerment, partnerships, accessibility, acceptability, sustainability, appropriateness, etc, of which all these principles are clearly visible in the findings section. See whether you would like to take this theoretical framework on board, as it would strengthen the discussion section. We appreciate the reviewer's suggestion regarding a more explicit theoretical framework. Due to the documentary nature of the study, we have chosen not to introduce a new academic theory-driven framework, as this would require reconfiguring the analytical design. Instead, we have strengthened the normative and children's right-based framing of the study by clarifying the role of the UNCRC as an overarching normative reference and by incorporating a stronger child-centred and social justice-oriented perspective throughout the introduction and discussion sections. General 2 It is primarily a documentary analysis, and in such there is always the challenge of going deeper into necessary semantic analysis and in so doing moving away from positive advocacy for the societal members (in this case marginalised children) on whom the policies are intended to be centred. In general the review manages this, but deeper investigation of the significance of the gaps identified, and more vehemence on behalf of children whose needs are omitted, would have more impact than solely stating gaps in textural content. We thank the reviewer for this important observation. In the revised manuscript, we have placed greater emphasis on the significance of identified gaps from a children's rights perspective. The findings and discussion sections have been strengthened to explicitly address omissions related to healthcare, nutrition, housing, and child-friendly justice, and to reflect on the implications of these gaps for children in vulnerable situations. We also clarify the limitations of documents analysis while adopting a more explicit advocacy-oriented stance in interpreting the findings. General 2 The review seeks to identify where European policies have been supported, rather than majoring on those areas which are largely or totally omitted. This does little to actively promote children's best interests, nor to promote stronger achievement of European Commission principles and policies; it is solely a commentary on a government. Thank you for this important observation. In the revised manuscript, we have strengthened the focus on areas that are partially or entirely omitted from national strategies and ESF+ funding calls, rather than primarily highlighting areas of alignment. In particular, the Discussion section now more explicitly addresses the implications of missing themes—such as child-friendly justice and core elements of the European Child Guarantee—from a children's rights perspective. This shift aims to move beyond descriptive commentary towards a more critical examination of how omissions in policy and funding frameworks may affect the visibility of children's rights. General 2 The paper does have one quotation expressing the voice of a child, but this child-centricity and advocacy could well have been carried on in spirit in the main text, by highlighting more strongly the children and child needs omitted, rather than framing this solely in terms of missing text. We agree that a child-centred perspective should be reflected throughout the manuscript, even when the analysis is based on policy documents. In the revised version, we have

strengthened the children's rights perspective across the Discussion by emphasising how omissions in strategies and funding calls may affect the visibility of children's needs, rather than framing the analysis solely in terms of missing textual references. This approach seeks to carry the spirit of child-centric advocacy throughout the interpretation of findings. General 2 In the absence of evidence, though, concerns must remain, as the review does not seem to promote Finnish disadvantaged children's needs actively. Indeed, one Finnish policy document cited in the study is quoted as including the statement: "Children and young people are considered as part of adult services" in the response to education and healthcare inclusion - within health this amazing statement airbrushes out post-natal care, immunisation, developmental health, good access to child-sensitive primary care, and adolescent health. By contrast, a simple literature search shows that issues in achieving the health aims of the Child Guarantee have been raised, such as Rigby. "A commitment to marginalized children in the European Union: The hope and challenges of the EU Child Guarantee." Child: Care, Health and Development 48.1 (2022): 170-174; and Rigby. European Union Child Guarantee—challenges raised by the welcome promise of free healthcare for marginalized children, European Journal of Public Health, Volume 31, Issue 5, October 2021, Pages 943–950, https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckab062 . Thank you for this important and challenging comment. We acknowledge the concern that the manuscript could be read as insufficiently promoting the needs of disadvantaged children. In revising the manuscript, we have clarified the scope of the analysis as a document-based review focusing on how children's rights commitments are articulated within selected EU- and national-level strategies and ESF+ funding calls, rather than as an assessment of the availability or quality of child health or other basic services in Finland. We have removed potentially misleading formulations that could be interpreted as endorsing a marginalisation of child-specific health needs and clarified that references to health-related gaps concern the visibility of such commitments within funding frameworks, not service provision in practice. In addition, we have situated our findings within the broader EU-level discussion on the challenges of realising the health-related aims of the European Child Guarantee by referring to previous research (Rigby, 2021), while explicitly noting the limitations of drawing conclusions beyond the analysed documents. General 3 Relatedly, a consequence of the paper's primary relevance being on a policy level and never moving away from the documents (neither 'up' to theories or 'down' to children's lives), is that it comes across as detached from realities. Seeing what kind of project the article is a product of, and its collaboration with both NGOs and government, I do not presume that your work is detached from reality at all – I'm just asking if your vast ground knowledge on children's participation could be better reflected in the paper. For example, you do have a few mentions of what role documents play, and why it is ethically important to study documents – if these types of reflections were more present throughout the article, it would make for more engaging reading aware of children's realities. Thank you for this thoughtful reflection. While the study deliberately focuses on policy documents, we have revised the manuscript to more clearly articulate why documents matter from a children's rights perspective and how they shape the realities within which services and participation opportunities are organised. We have also strengthened reflexive elements in the Discussion to better reflect the ethical significance of document analysis and to acknowledge the authors' grounding in practice-based knowledge, while remaining methodologically consistent with the study's documentary focus. General 3 I would also ask the authors to clarify or reconsider the role of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in the paper. It is presented under a

'background' section, but not referred to throughout the analysis, only briefly mentioned again under 'Limitations'. On p. 4, you write that 'To meaningfully assess the implementation of the UNCRC principles at the national level, it is essential to include relevant European and national policy documents in the review' – this phrase implicitly says that you aim to assess the UNCRC principles at a national level (and not only the EU child rights principles). Is this correctly understood? If yes, why is the UNCRC not included as a 'source document' and included in the analysis? If no, why the introduction to the UNCRC at all, and especially, why the mention of 'assess[ing] the implementation of UNCRC principles at the national level'? If the UNCRC is part of the 'conceptual framework', it should also be engaged with in the analysis. We have now clarified the role of the UNCRC in the manuscript. The UNCRC is now explicitly positioned as a normative and legal framework guiding the interpretation of EU- and national-level policy documents, rather than as an object of direct document analysis. This clarification has been integrated into the introduction and conceptual background sections. General 4 The main concern is that the study needs better framing. I recommend that you consider framing this paper as a case study of the localization of the UNCRC in Finland rather than just an analysis of documents. The current structure/flow of the paper can be confusing to the reader. On the one hand, you demonstrate multiple misalignments among the documents, which makes it more critical to analyze the root causes of the discrepancies. On the other hand, these misalignments are not necessarily dangerous oversights but could be rather a reasonable adaptation of the international treaty. Your paper does not take one course over the other; it is rather unclear what your message is. My recommendation is to frame your work as a case study of national-level adaptation, analyzing what was done well and where growth is needed. Having considered the feedback from all five reviewers, we have decided to retain the document-analysis approach as the core methodological frame of the article. To address the reviewer's concern, we now more explicitly discuss national adaptation and prioritisation as an inherent feature of multi-level governance. We also clarify why the absence of child-friendly justice is analytically relevant in the context of ESF+ funding, while acknowledging that responsibility for this theme mat lie primarily in other policy domains. General 4 While the authors have a great grasp on the documents they review, the constant reference to each document reduces the readability of the paper. I suggest you group documents into international, regional, and national categories, and refer to a specific set in the text where appropriate. Alternatively, propose a shorter version of the documents' titles Thank you for this helpful suggestion regarding readability. In the revised manuscript, we have streamlined references to policy documents by grouping them where analytically appropriate and referring to EU-level and national-level documents as sets rather than repeatedly naming each individual document. Full document titles are retained where specific distinctions are necessary for the analysis, but otherwise a grouped reference approach is used to improve the flow and clarity of the text. We have chosen this approach instead of introducing new abbreviations to maintain accessibility. General 4 Several times, you suggest that the documents are examples of the UNCRC "implementation". I suggest considering using "operationalization" or "codification" instead, as implementation often refers to specific frontline programs directly affecting children and youth Thank you for this helpful terminology-related comment. We have now revised the manuscript to use the term "operationalization" instead of "implementation," as you suggest. This adjustment has been applied systematically throughout the text to ensure conceptual accuracy and consistency. General 5 There was some degree of repetition of

methodology across the introduction, methods, and findings and it is suggested that these details could be streamlined further in the paper. Thank you for this observation. We have streamlined the manuscript by reducing repetitive descriptions of the methodology across sections. Methodological details are now primarily concentrated in the Methods section, while the Introduction and Findings focus on contextualisation and interpretation, respectively. Title 1 Although your title is clear and well-crafted. However, I would like to suggest that you do not use abbreviations in a title. Please write every in Full, EU should be European Union, and ESF+ should be European Social Fund Plus. It is good that you have indicated a geographic demarcation of your study. This is good for context. We acknowledge the reviewer's recommendation and agree that fully written titles can enhance clarity. In this case, however, expanding the abbreviations would exceed practical title length constraints. As the abbreviations used are well established and defined at the outset of the article, we have opted to retain them in the title. Abstract 1 Your abstract is solid; it includes some essential background information and adequately describes the methodology. It also briefly highlights the findings and the conclusion. See whether it is possible to also include a brief recommendation that emerged from the study, and to briefly indicate the theoretical framework that guided the study; you seem to be leaning towards either a rights-based approach or a social justice framework. We have revised the Abstract to more explicitly indicate the normative children's rights perspective guiding the study and to include a brief recommendation emerging from the findings. Keywords have been provided in line with the journal's guidelines, although they do not appear to be displayed consistently in published articles. Abstract 1 See whether adding keywords at the end of the abstract is a possibility. We have submitted the keywords in accordance with the journal's guidelines, but they do not appear to be displayed alongside the published articles. This also seems to apply to other articles published in the journal. Abstract 2 The Conclusion section of the Abstract raises confusion over policy competence and objectives, by stating that "national-level priorities may obscure specific EU objectives". Nearly all the operational services which support children, ranging from education to health care, and including justice services, are national competencies. European Commission activities in these areas primarily are to establish shared values and principles, and as appropriate to set targets, identify effective practices, set standards by EU-wide consensus, and provide targeted financial and other enablement. Thus national policies legally are pre-eminent; they cannot 'obscure' EU policies, though they can fail to promote them or to align optimally with their achievement, and this rightly can be called out. We have revised the Abstract to remove wording that could be interpreted as suggesting that national priorities override EU competence. The revised formulation now reflects the EU's coordinative role and the principle of subsidiarity more accurately. Introduction 1 In your introduction, you state, "However, the visibility of UNCRC-based strategies in EU-funded projects has not been systematically studied." I am suggesting that you rephrase this statement, as some might not agree with it. You could potentially rephrase it to: "However, the visibility of UNCRC-based strategies in EU-funded projects appears not to have been systematically studied." Thank you, the sentence has been revised according to your suggestion. Introduction 1 I am happy that your introduction has a very clear research aim and research questions. For improved flow, consider moving the research aim and questions to the end of the introduction section, just before the data and methods section. This will ensure a chronological and seamless flow into the data and methods section. However, this is just a suggestion; see what works best for your paper. We combined the introduction and

background sections and moved the research questions to the end of the section. Introduction 1 In your introduction, I was also expecting to see the theoretical framework that guided the study, e.g rights-based approach or a social justice framework. Other than that, well done for such a solid introduction section. Rather than introducing a formal theory-driven framework, we clarified the normative children's rights perspective guiding the analysis. The Introduction now explicitly explains how the UNCRC, social justice, and social sustainability inform the interpretation of policy documents. Introduction 5 It is recommended that the authors consider referring to other such national level studies in the introduction to provide more context and potential comparative examples if they exist, and if not, they should be mentioned. We have clarified the research landscape by noting that while national child strategies and UNCRC implementation have been studied, comparable analyses of EU-funded programme documents and funding calls focusing on children and families are scarce. Background 1 Also, see whether the background and conceptual framework section can be integrated into the introduction section (you can make it a subheading within the introduction section) We combined the introduction and background sections and adjusted the subheadings to improve the clarity of the overall structure. Background 1 Whilst I appreciate the detailed conceptual and legislative framework, I was also expecting to see a little bit of discussion/context about child and family services in Finland, what they entail, who the stakeholders are, who the service providers are, what challenges are faced by children and Families in Finland, which then makes an argument for funding to provide services. We added a brief description of how services for children and families are organised in Finland to the "Introduction" section. We also have strengthened the Background section by clarifying both the organisation of child and family services in Finland and the key challenges faced by children and families, including growing inequalities in mental health, learning outcomes, and regional access to services. Background 1 Although this is a Finnish / EU study, you can increase the global relevance of the study by aligning it to the Sustainable Development Goals and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This is just a suggestion, see whether you want to take it on board. Thank you, but we will leave this outside the scope of the present analysis. Background 3 My recommendation would be to engage more with theory coming from research, not only from legal documents, to lift the findings and make them relevant beyond your case study; or, if it is a deliberate choice not to do so in this paper, to explain or remove the reference to 'theory-driven'. We have removed the misleading term "theory-driven," as the analytical framework is based on guiding policy documents rather than academic theory. Background 3 On p. 5, you introduce the Finnish Innovation and Skills programme and mention that 'Applicants' can apply for funding. For understanding the context, it would be good to know who these applicants are (government entities? NGOs?). A description of the applicant types has been added to the "Background and conceptual framework" section. Background 4 Is this mismatch in themes an issue or just a product of prioritization? Countries have the right to adapt the UNCRC to their local contexts. The literature review should reflect research on the UNCRC's adaptation and localization. This would position this study better and support its significance We have revised the Background section to explicitly acknowledge that differences between international guidance and national priorities may reflect legitimate processes of adaptation and localisation of the UNCRC, rather than shortcomings. Background 5 It would be helpful to develop the analysis further in relation to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child ([CRC]; 1989) and related current literature. The paper's title highlights

the emphasis of ESF+ funding for child and family services in Finland but the introduction and one of the research questions highlight children's rights as per the EU Strategy and Council Recommendation. The CRC is presented on p. 4 as the conceptual framework but it does not seem to inform the paper much, rather seems cursory or superficial. This is a missed opportunity as greater attention to the CRC would be beneficial to develop the analysis further. For instance, the authors have identified the importance of coordination within governance but they have not identified how it is a key CRC general measure of implementation. We agree that the UNCRC general measures of implementation are highly relevant. While the study does not empirically assess implementation outcomes, the discussion now more explicitly acknowledges coordination, funding, and governance as core structural mechanisms through which children's rights are advanced. These points are also highlighted as priorities for future research. Methods 1 See whether the title can be rephrased to "Materials and Methods", instead of "data and Methods" The title has been revised according to the suggestion. Methods 1 In this section (material and methods), you write about sample selection, but the inclusion and exclusion criteria are not clearly explained. The description of the inclusion and exclusion criteria has now been added to the "Data and sample selection" section. Methods 1 You also talk about a systematic examination of data, yet the "systematic" is not adequately explained; just be careful that you do not give an impression that this was a systematic review. Because then you need a clear PRISMA flowchart and a PICo framework. Thank you for this important observation. We have replaced the term systematic with structured to avoid methodological misunderstandings. Methods 2 While the European Strategy on the Rights of the Child is a detailed social and legal underpinning, the more recent and specific pragmatic document rightly used in the review is the European Child Guarantee. As shown in the Commission's own publications (such as the Commission's dedicated web page European Child Guarantee - Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion and its public fact sheet https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/5307cc11-6413-482c-84f4-17d4b5ef97a6_en) the core basis of the Child Guarantee comprises six core service promises. Unfortunately, the review loses this clarity. Two of the figures - Tables 1 and 3 - focus on the Strategy on the Rights of the Child, but give two different summaries of the key points. Table 2 looks to the Child Guarantee, erroneously summarising it as having two principles, of which the first is not an explicit Guarantee; the second is a concatenation of three guarantees, while three (access by marginalised children to adequate nutrition, housing, and free healthcare) are not mentioned. Figure 2's policy summaries do not replicate those of the earlier figures, and its classification of thematic areas is blatantly wrong. This is a great shame, as better analysed and presented this could have been a useful summary comparing the different emphases of the Finnish policies compared with Commission priorities. We clearly presented the analysis in an insufficiently clear manner. In the original manuscript, we had included only selected examples of the analysis, which of course does not mean that our full analysis was limited to these examples. We have now corrected this ambiguity by reconstructing the figures and the table in a clearer format, making all six key service guarantees of the ECG visible. The figures and tables have been reconstructed to clearly reflect all six core service guarantees, and inconsistencies across tables have been corrected. Methods 2 This study will only meaningfully add value and create actionable knowledge if it sharpens its analysis of the themes of the Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the much more focused Child Guarantee, ensures consistency of analyses across its different tables and figures, identifies areas where Finnish policies and

Finnish funding calls do not offer support to these priorities, and then ascertains whether these omissions are justified on the basis of current good services or alternatively represent continuing areas of under-provision for marginalised children. We have sharpened the analysis by ensuring consistency across tables and figures and by explicitly addressing areas where Finnish policies and funding calls do not reflect EU-level priorities, while carefully distinguishing between programme mandate and potential under-prioritisation. Methods 3 The paper is primarily an empirically focused presentation of a policy analysis. It is a legitimate choice to keep the focus on the empirical level and less on theory, but the absence of any theory in the paper is still noteworthy. Your 'conceptual framework' section outlines various international legal document (UNCRC, the EU child rights-related documents) rather than introducing a research-based conceptual framework. On p. 5, you write that the two European Commission documents on child rights and the child guarantee are used 'as a theory-driven analytical framework for examining the other documents included in the study.' This requires further explanation: how are EU documents 'theory-driven'? Which theories do you derive from these documents? Why is it not simply a comparative analysis of priorities in EU vs. Finnish policy documents? We have removed the term "theory-driven" because it caused methodological ambiguity. The analysis is based on guiding policy documents rather than academic theory. However, we have added relevant research to the introduction and drawn on this theoretical basis in the discussion section; please see the respective sections. Methods 3 The phrase 'Accordingly, the focus of the study is on existing material' (p. 5) seems redundant – it is already clear that the study is on existing material. The sentence has been removed as suggested. Methods 4 I recommend using the UNCRC as a theoretical framework and a baseline for comparison, at least to the EU Strategy to connect the dots. As mentioned in the literature review, the documents are reviewed against one another rather than against the CRC. Thank you for this suggestion. We have clarified that the UNCRC functions as a normative and ethical reference point informing the interpretation of EU- and national-level strategies, rather than as a direct analytical baseline. The analysis therefore focuses on policy documents reviewed in relation to one another, while being guided by a children's rights perspective grounded in the UNCRC. Methods 4 The textual explanation of the analytical framework is hard to follow. I recommend creating a matrix with documents on one axis and the children's rights areas (ex. Nutrition, justice, etc.) on another, and mark the documents that reflect each area We acknowledge that the analytical framework required clearer presentation. The figures and tables have been revised to present the analysis in a matrix-like format that more transparently links children's rights areas with the analysed document groups, thereby improving clarity and consistency. Methods 5 p. 6 note spelling issue in last text box of image; should be "Third" not "Thrid" Thank you for the remark; this has been corrected. Findings 2 The review paper does highlight the lack of Finnish policy inclusion of child-friendly justice. However, access to adequate nutrition, adequate housing, and healthcare, are very largely omitted, yet these are central to child wellbeing and are areas strongly compromised by poverty, social exclusion, and other social challenges. Thus one element of the Strategy on the Rights of the Child, and half of the six elements of the Child Guarantee, do not explicitly appear in Finnish policy documents or in calls for proposals under the three ESF+ funding rounds. It may of course be that Finland considers it meets these four service provision requirements adequately, but it is not reassuring to find no evidence presented to claim this achievement - though recognising the limitations of document analysis removed from the core objective of the documents analysed. But a strategy review should have

looked for such evidence, as the authors have looked at wider literature for some policy lines. We agree with this important observation. The revised manuscript places greater emphasis on omissions related to access to nutrition, housing, and healthcare, alongside child-friendly justice. We have systematically revisited the analysed national documents and funding calls to clarify how these themes are addressed—or remain absent—and strengthened the Discussion by drawing on previous research highlighting the challenges of realising health-related commitments under the European Child Guarantee. Findings 2 This review has usefully started to address the issue of how national priorities in Finland have sought to address and fit with European Commission policies as well as funding qualification criteria. It then analyses that Finland has introduced some additional commitments, while identifying that two European policy objectives are partially or totally omitted, but itself overlooks three other fundamental European priorities which are omitted. As noted earlier, the tables presented in the article were only illustrative examples of the analysis. The full analysis naturally takes all priority areas into account. We have now clarified our presentation and made all priority areas more explicitly visible. Findings 3 The first paragraph in 'Findings' may also be redundant – the documents have just all been introduced, and it is slightly repetitive when reading. The paragraph has been removed as suggested. Findings 4 In Figure 2, what do you mean by operational? By operational, we refer to the fact that these thematic areas are visibly reflected in the ESF funding calls. We have now clarified this in the text. Findings 5 One question that did not seem considered was the assumption that coherence across the studied documents would necessarily mean that these strategies would be implemented and reflected in practices in Finland. While there is growing literature that recognizes that while law and policy may be established, there are challenges and obstacles that hinder or prevent implementation. For instance, the table on p. 10 uses the term "operational:" to indicate a relationship between the Innovation and Skills in Finland program and EU-level strategies but how do we know about the status of the implementation in the program other than it is identified? How is "operational" defined? We have clarified how the term "operationalised" is used in this study to refer to the explicit presence of strategic priorities in programme documents and funding calls, rather than to their implementation in practice. Discussion 1 Although this section (Discussion) is well written and reflects mastery over the data, I felt that it has several missed opportunities. Firstly, you alluded to the influence of national political priorities but did not elaborate on what these are and how they influence the ESF+. We have expanded the Discussion to more explicitly describe national political priorities and demographic considerations, and to analyse how these shape ESF+ funding decisions in the Finnish context. Discussion 1 Reorganising this section (conclusions) could improve clarity. You might consider structuring it as follows: Conclusions Significance and implications of the study Limitations Recommendations and future research directions All the necessary content is already present; it simply needs clearer organisation. This is a suggestion rather than a requirement; please use your discretion. We appreciate this structural suggestion and have strengthened the internal organisation of the Discussion and Conclusions sections while retaining a separate and clearly defined section on limitations and further research. Discussion 2 Comparative data from sources such as WHO and Eurostat, as well as bibliographic searches, would be valuable underpinning. Thank you for this suggestion. We agree that comparative data from WHO, Eurostat, and broader bibliographic searches would be valuable in a study assessing children's wellbeing or service outcomes. However, the present article is a qualitative documentary analysis focused on the visibility and

operationalisation of children's rights commitments in selected policy documents and ESF+ funding calls. We therefore chose not to add a wider comparative statistical analysis, as this would broaden the scope beyond the study's research questions. Instead, the Discussion includes selected research and policy literature where directly relevant to interpreting the documentary findings, and the need for further research on implementation, outcomes, budgeting, and structural conditions is acknowledged in the Limitations and further research section. Discussion 3 Your main recommendation seems to be more strategic coherence across documents, which would support children's rights. But the analytical move from strategic coherence to better children's rights implementation, is not clear to me. How do we know that children's rights would not be better supported with, for example, less EU involvement, more decentralisation and more 'different' rather than more 'aligned' child rights policies across Member States? Your discussion on p. 10 of how the Finnish documents are products of much more than EU strategies, is very useful, and more of this type of reflection would be good. We appreciate the reviewer's nuanced reflections on coherence and localisation. In the revised discussion, we have refined our argument to avoid implying that greater alignment across governance levels is inherently preferable. Instead, we emphasise the balance between legitimate national adaptation and the need to ensure that fundamental children's rights are not systematically rendered invisible in funding processes. Discussion 3 In the Discussion (p. 13), you write: 'the fragmented nature of strategic guidance raises questions about coherence, coordination, and accountability in the implementation of children's rights. When multiple strategies intersect without a clear overarching framework, it becomes difficult to assess whether the entirety of the strategic landscape is truly governed or understood by any single actor.' I understand this as a call for more EU-level coordination and less decentralisation when it comes to strategic decision making for children's rights? Is that correctly understood? If yes, is that really what would 'implement' children' rights better, that one actor (implicitly, the EU) 'truly governs (...) the entirety of the strategic landscape' when it comes to child rights? I understand the importance of accountability, but is accountability created through exact coherence of policies at different levels? Are there not many other – and more important and efficient – measures of accountability for rights? To address the concern regarding decentralisation and EU-level coordination, we have added an explicit sentence to the Discussion section clarifying that EU child rights strategies function primarily as normative and coordinative instruments, while responsibility for prioritisation and funding allocation remains at the national and sub-national levels in accordance with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality. This clarification aims to prevent interpretations suggesting advocacy for stronger centralisation. This clarification also responds to concerns regarding the relationship between strategic coherence and national discretion.
Discussion 3 Similarly, you write that 'Allocation decisions are influenced not only by shared strategic goals but also by domestic political agendas and demographic considerations. This raises concerns about strategic coherence and the visibility of children's rights in funding processes.' Why should allocation decisions not be influenced by domestic demographic considerations? Is local relevance not more important than 'strategic coherence'? Would 'strategic coherence' really increase the visibility of children's rights? I read this as a call for more top-down children's rights and less bottom-up children's rights (the latter would be the opposite of strategic coherence, and reflecting Finnish children's realities more). If I am reading this wrong – please explain in more detail in the paper, so others do not misunderstand it in the same way. Thank you for this important clarification

request. We have revised the Discussion section to explicitly state that national demographic and political considerations are both legitimate and necessary in funding allocation. Our reference to strategic coherence is not intended as a call for top-down governance, but rather as a call for transparency regarding how children's rights considerations are weighed alongside other national priorities. We have clarified this to avoid interpretations suggesting that local relevance should be subordinated to EU-level coordination. Discussion 3 It would be refreshing with some additional recommendations based on the findings – should we really aspire for coherence across documents? Could the findings not say something more than that, about the importance of localising and decentralising children's rights to make them relevant for local realities, for example? As argued by Sally Engle Merry, domestic implementation of rights will always include adaptation, translation etc. to resonate in local realities, so why is it a 'bad' thing that EU strategies and Finnish policies differ? If your aim is to inform future funding calls, could a recommendation then not also be to be more open to reflect local realities? Arguably, some aspects of local discrimination issues, for example, could get lost of the EU funding coordination on child rights were more coherent and streamlined. If children's participation and input are important (as you highlight in the introduction), would their lived realities and experiences not be very different in Finland or in Portugal, calling for less coherence and more diversity in approaches? You mention on p. 13 that more aligned policies would ensure more equitable funding allocation throughout the Member States. This begs the question of whether equality between children is best addressed at EU level or domestic level – a question to which the answer is of course 'it depends' and 'both', but engaging in this difficult discussion would bring more nuance and add a greater contribution of the paper. We appreciate this nuanced reflection. In the revised Discussion, we clarify that the study does not advocate coherence as an end in itself, nor does it view divergence between EU and national policies as inherently problematic. Rather, we acknowledge localisation and adaptation as necessary features of children's rights governance. Our use of "strategic coherence" refers to transparency and accountability in prioritisation, not to uniformity of approaches across Member States. We have revised the text to make this distinction explicit and to avoid interpretations suggesting that diversity or local relevance should be reduced. Discussion 3 Regarding child friendly justice, is it an interesting observation that it is not included in the Finnish National Child Strategy Committee report, the Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027 programme, or the three funding calls. But could this be because it is not the mandate of an 'innovation and skills' programme to deal with child friendly justice? Wouldn't it rather be reflected in policies about juvenile justice, policing, judicial system etc.? You mention some of these limitations on pp. 12-13, but you do not comment on why one should expect child friendly justice to be present in the Innovation and Skills programme. In general, it could be explained a little clearer why exactly the Innovation and Skills programme was chosen to analyse above other child rights-related programmes in Finland? What does it represent? We agree that child-friendly justice primarily falls within other policy domains and does not constitute the core mandate of an innovation and skills programme. We have clarified in the Methods section why the Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027 programme was selected for analysis and what it represents within Finland's ESF+ governance. The observation regarding child-friendly justice is not intended as a critique of programme mandate, but as an illustration of how certain rights-related themes may remain less visible within cross-sectoral funding frameworks that explicitly target children and families. Discussion 3 The phrase 'It is both important and ethically

necessary to critically examine how funding is allocated, especially when it concerns children's rights and well-being' on p. 13 would benefit from being moved to the Introduction rather than Discussion – the underlying justification for the need of the study is important to put clearly in the beginning. Moved as suggested. Discussion 4 When discussing the findings, the process of creating national-level documents should be discussed. Who is the main decision-maker? Are there participatory processes underlying policymaking? Did children and youth contribute to the national policy creation? Were statistical data and needs assessment used to support the prioritization process? Without knowing that, it is easy to misjudge the results of the comparison and make wrong conclusion on the source of misalignment We have added contextual clarification regarding national policy-making processes to avoid misinterpretation of observed misalignments as purely technical or strategic shortcomings. Discussion 4 Discussion: This section needs to be more structured. Probably focusing on specific discrepancies and using them as headings would help with this. The Discussion section has been restructured using thematic subheadings that focus on specific discrepancies and interpretive dimensions, thereby improving clarity and coherence. Discussion 4 Page 12, para 1 missing citation This is the authors' own reflection; therefore, no source references are provided. Discussion 4 Funding of the priority areas often reflects the social construction of children and childhood in society (mostly the decision-makers). What do your results suggest about the way Finnish society sees children? We have added a reflective interpretation addressing how funding priorities implicitly construct understandings of childhood within Finnish policy contexts. Discussion 5 This paper highlights the efforts, successes and ongoing fragmentation challenges according to publicly-available documentation, which could be acknowledged on p. 13 of the article but it is not. The Discussion now explicitly acknowledges both achievements and ongoing fragmentation challenges in Finnish child-related policies. Discussion 5 It also points to the potential of future research emphasizing these general measures further and how they can advance not only strategies but their implementation with attention to such general measures as budgets, etc.

In addition, there are relevant questions of capacity and political will beyond simply whether regional priorities are recognized in national strategies. Questioning this relationship would be useful to acknowledge at a minimum, and also suggests additional future research directions that have not yet been recognized. We have expanded the future research section to highlight the importance of examining structural measures such as funding, administrative capacity, and political will in advancing children's rights beyond strategic alignment. Discussion 5 p. 11 awkward language in second line: "Research highlights the need to for equality in education..." Thank you for pointing out the typo; the sentence has now been corrected.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Report 04 March 2026

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.23731.r69610

© 2026 Mortensen T. This is an open access peer review report distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

?

Therese Boje Mortensen
School of Liberal Studies, BML Munjal University (Ringgold ID: 435516), Gurugram, Haryana, India

Summary
This study evaluates how the EU funding scheme, the European Social Fund+ (ESF+), is translated into Finnish policy documents under the theme of 'Developing services for children, youth and families and promoting well-being towards equality', with a particular focus on children's rights. The study further explores how the ESF+ funding in Finland contributes to the European Commission's Strategy for the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee. It does so through a document analysis of three Finnish government-produced documents (the Finnish National Child Strategy Committee report, the Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027 programme, and three funding calls) in relation to two EU-produced documents (the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, and the Council recommendation establishing the European Child Guarantee). The study finds that while there are many overlaps between national and EU priorities related to children's rights, there are also additional priorities in the Finnish documents, such as 'promoting family-friendliness in education and working life and enhancing equity and children's perspectives in leisure activities'. Furthermore, some EU priorities, such as child friendly justice and digital competence in family services, are not reflected in Finnish policy. With these findings, the authors call for more strategic coherence, which they argue would increase the visibility of children' rights in funding processes.

The article is clearly communicated through both writing, tables and figures. The method is sound and replicable. The findings reflect the analysis. The aim of generating 'insights into key considerations for policy implementation and to inform the future formulation of funding calls' is clear. Overall, I assess the work done to be of good quality, but I suggest to address the following two queries before acceptance – related to (1) engagement with theory, and (2) the assumption that more 'strategic coherence' will support children's rights (then follows further smaller recommendations):

1. **Theory, documents and 'reality'**

   The paper is primarily an empirically focused presentation of a policy analysis. It is a legitimate choice to keep the focus on the empirical level and less on theory, but the absence of any theory in the paper is still noteworthy. Your 'conceptual framework' section outlines various international legal document (UNCRC, the EU child rights-related documents) rather than introducing a research-based conceptual framework. On p. 5, you write that the two European Commission documents on child rights and the child guarantee are used 'as a theory-driven analytical framework for examining the other documents included in the study.' This requires further explanation: how are EU documents 'theory-driven'? Which theories do you derive from these documents? Why is it not simply a comparative analysis of priorities in EU vs. Finnish policy documents?

My recommendation would be to engage more with theory coming from research, not only from legal documents, to lift the findings and make them relevant beyond your case study; or, if it is a deliberate choice not to do so in this paper, to explain or remove the reference to 'theory-driven'.

Relatedly, a consequence of the paper's primary relevance being on a policy level and never moving away from the documents (neither 'up' to theories or 'down' to children's lives), is that it comes across as detached from realities. Seeing what kind of project the article is a product of, and its collaboration with both NGOs and government, I do not presume that your work is detached from reality at all – I'm just asking if your vast ground knowledge on children's participation could be better reflected in the paper. For example, you do have a few mentions of what role documents play, and why it is ethically important to study documents – if these types of reflections were more present throughout the article, it would make for more engaging reading aware of children's realities.

2. **(Why) is the recommendation more coherence across documents?**

Your main recommendation seems to be more strategic coherence across documents, which would support children's rights. But the analytical move from strategic coherence to better children's rights implementation, is not clear to me. How do we know that children's rights would not be better supported with, for example, less EU involvement, more decentralisation and more 'different' rather than more 'aligned' child rights policies across Member States? Your discussion on p. 10 of how the Finnish documents are products of much more than EU strategies, is very useful, and more of this type of reflection would be good.

In the Discussion (p. 13), you write: 'the fragmented nature of strategic guidance raises questions about coherence, coordination, and accountability in the implementation of children's rights. When multiple strategies intersect without a clear overarching framework, it becomes difficult to assess whether the entirety of the strategic landscape is truly governed or understood by any single actor.' I understand this as a call for more EU-level coordination and less decentralisation when it comes to strategic decision making for children's rights? Is that correctly understood? If yes, is that really what would 'implement' children' rights better, that one actor (implicitly, the EU) 'truly governs (...) the entirety of the strategic landscape' when it comes to child rights? I understand the importance of accountability, but is accountability created through exact coherence of policies at different levels? Are there not many other – and more important and efficient – measures of accountability for rights?

Similarly, you write that 'Allocation decisions are influenced not only by shared strategic goals but also by domestic political agendas and demographic considerations. This raises concerns about strategic coherence and the visibility of children's rights in funding processes.' Why should allocation decisions not be influenced by domestic demographic considerations? Is local relevance not more important than 'strategic coherence'? Would 'strategic coherence' really increase the visibility of children's rights? I read this as a call for more top-down children's rights and less bottom-up children's rights (the latter would be the opposite of strategic coherence, and reflecting Finnish children's realities more). If I am reading this wrong – please explain in more detail in the paper, so others do not

misunderstand it in the same way.

It would be refreshing with some additional recommendations based on the findings – should we really aspire for coherence across documents? Could the findings not say something more than that, about the importance of localising and decentralising children's rights to make them relevant for local realities, for example? As argued by Sally Engle Merry, domestic implementation of rights will always include adaptation, translation etc. to resonate in local realities, so why is it a 'bad' thing that EU strategies and Finnish policies differ? If your aim is to inform future funding calls, could a recommendation then not also be to be more open to reflect local realities? Arguably, some aspects of local discrimination issues, for example, could get lost of the EU funding coordination on child rights were more coherent and streamlined. If children's participation and input are important (as you highlight in the introduction), would their lived realities and experiences not be very different in Finland or in Portugal, calling for less coherence and more diversity in approaches? You mention on p. 13 that more aligned policies would ensure more equitable funding allocation throughout the Member States. This begs the question of whether equality between children is best addressed at EU level or domestic level – a question to which the answer is of course 'it depends' and 'both', but engaging in this difficult discussion would bring more nuance and add a greater contribution of the paper.

Finally, I have a few smaller comments/queries which are not crucial for accepting the paper, but which I think could improve it:

1. Regarding child friendly justice, is it an interesting observation that it is not included in the Finnish National Child Strategy Committee report, the Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027 programme, or the three funding calls. But could this be because it is not the mandate of an 'innovation and skills' programme to deal with child friendly justice? Wouldn't it rather be reflected in policies about juvenile justice, policing, judicial system etc.? You mention some of these limitations on pp. 12-13, but you do not comment on why one should expect child friendly justice to be present in the Innovation and Skills programme. In general, it could be explained a little clearer why exactly the Innovation and Skills programme was chosen to analyse above other child rights-related programmes in Finland? What does it represent?

2. I would also ask the authors to clarify or reconsider the role of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in the paper. It is presented under a 'background' section, but not referred to throughout the analysis, only briefly mentioned again under 'Limitations'. On p. 4, you write that 'To meaningfully assess the implementation of the UNCRC principles at the national level, it is essential to include relevant European and national policy documents in the review' – this phrase implicitly says that you aim to assess the UNCRC principles at a national level (and not only the EU child rights principles). Is this correctly understood? If yes, why is the UNCRC not included as a 'source document' and included in the analysis? If no, why the introduction to the UNCRC at all, and especially, why the mention of 'assess[ing] the implementation of UNCRC principles at the national level'? If the UNCRC is part of the 'conceptual framework', it should also be engaged with in the analysis.

3. The phrase 'It is both important and ethically necessary to critically examine how funding is allocated, especially when it concerns children's rights and well-being' on p. 13 would benefit from being moved to the Introduction rather than Discussion – the underlying

justification for the need of the study is important to put clearly in the beginning.

4. The phrase 'Accordingly, the focus of the study is on existing material' (p. 5) seems redundant – it is already clear that the study is on existing material.

5. The first paragraph in 'Findings' may also be redundant – the documents have just all been introduced, and it is slightly repetitive when reading.

6. On p. 5, you introduce the Finnish Innovation and Skills programme and mention that 'Applicants' can apply for funding. For understanding the context, it would be good to know who these applicants are (government entities? NGOs?).

Recommendations for further reading

- Gamze Erdem Türkelli's work on children's rights and multi-stakeholder partnerships
- Sally Engle Merry (and others') work on 'vernacularisation' of human rights from the global to the local and vice versa

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Yes

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Child rights; global-local dynamics of human rights

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 17 Mar 2026

Laura Ortju

Dear Dr Mortensen, Thank you very much for your thoughtful and constructive comments. We truly appreciate the time and care you have devoted to reviewing our manuscript. We are particularly grateful for your observations regarding the theoretical background. These insights are highly valuable, and we will carefully integrate them as we refine and clarify the theoretical framework in our revised version. All of your comments will be reviewed thoroughly and addressed in detail. Kind regards,
Laura, Kati and Elina

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Author Response 01 Oct 2026

Laura Ortju

Dear Reviewers, Please accept our apologies that the structured response we submitted at the beginning of the summer has apparently not been made available to you. Below, we have included a copy of our responses to the valuable comments you provided to help us improve the manuscript. We sincerely hope that you will have an opportunity to review the revisions we have made and assess whether our manuscript can be accepted for publication. Thank you very much for the time and expertise you have already contributed to supporting our research. **On behalf of the authors,**
Laura Section Reviewer Comment Authors' response General 1 The lack of a clear theoretical framework to guide the study made it very difficult for you to nicely package your discussion section. Kindly revisit my earlier comment about the need for a theoretical framework, e.g. if you were using the rights-based framework and then in the discussion section you can reflect on how these findings are compared to the principles of a rights-based approach e.g participation, transparency, accountability, empowerment, partnerships, accessibility, acceptability, sustainability, appropriateness, etc, of which all these principles are clearly visible in the findings section. See whether you would like to take this theoretical framework on board, as it would strengthen the discussion section. We appreciate the reviewer's suggestion regarding a more explicit theoretical framework. Due to the documentary nature of the study, we have chosen not to introduce a new academic theory-driven framework, as this would require reconfiguring the analytical design. Instead, we have strengthened the normative and children's right-based framing of the study by clarifying the role of the UNCRC as an overarching normative reference and by incorporating a stronger child-centred and social justice-oriented perspective throughout the introduction and discussion sections. General 2 It is primarily a documentary analysis, and in such there is always the challenge of going deeper into necessary semantic analysis and in so doing moving away from positive advocacy for the societal members (in this case marginalised children) on whom the policies are intended to be centred. In general the review manages this, but deeper investigation of the significance of the gaps identified, and more vehemence on behalf of children whose needs are omitted, would have more impact than solely stating gaps in textural content. We thank the reviewer for this important observation. In the revised manuscript, we have placed greater emphasis on the significance of identified gaps from a children's rights perspective. The findings and discussion sections have been strengthened to explicitly address omissions related to healthcare, nutrition, housing, and child-friendly justice, and to reflect on the implications of

these gaps for children in vulnerable situations. We also clarify the limitations of documents analysis while adopting a more explicit advocacy-oriented stance in interpreting the findings. General 2 The review seeks to identify where European policies have been supported, rather than majoring on those areas which are largely or totally omitted. This does little to actively promote children's best interests, nor to promote stronger achievement of European Commission principles and policies; it is solely a commentary on a government. Thank you for this important observation. In the revised manuscript, we have strengthened the focus on areas that are partially or entirely omitted from national strategies and ESF+ funding calls, rather than primarily highlighting areas of alignment. In particular, the Discussion section now more explicitly addresses the implications of missing themes—such as child-friendly justice and core elements of the European Child Guarantee—from a children's rights perspective. This shift aims to move beyond descriptive commentary towards a more critical examination of how omissions in policy and funding frameworks may affect the visibility of children's rights. General 2 The paper does have one quotation expressing the voice of a child, but this child-centricity and advocacy could well have been carried on in spirit in the main text, by highlighting more strongly the children and child needs omitted, rather than framing this solely in terms of missing text. We agree that a child-centred perspective should be reflected throughout the manuscript, even when the analysis is based on policy documents. In the revised version, we have strengthened the children's rights perspective across the Discussion by emphasising how omissions in strategies and funding calls may affect the visibility of children's needs, rather than framing the analysis solely in terms of missing textual references. This approach seeks to carry the spirit of child-centric advocacy throughout the interpretation of findings. General 2 In the absence of evidence, though, concerns must remain, as the review does not seem to promote Finnish disadvantaged children's needs actively. Indeed, one Finnish policy document cited in the study is quoted as including the statement: "Children and young people are considered as part of adult services" in the response to education and healthcare inclusion - within health this amazing statement airbrushes out post-natal care, immunisation, developmental health, good access to child-sensitive primary care, and adolescent health. By contrast, a simple literature search shows that issues in achieving the health aims of the Child Guarantee have been raised, such as Rigby. "A commitment to marginalized children in the European Union: The hope and challenges of the EU Child Guarantee." Child: Care, Health and Development 48.1 (2022): 170-174; and Rigby. European Union Child Guarantee—challenges raised by the welcome promise of free healthcare for marginalized children, European Journal of Public Health, Volume 31, Issue 5, October 2021, Pages 943–950, https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckab062 . Thank you for this important and challenging comment. We acknowledge the concern that the manuscript could be read as insufficiently promoting the needs of disadvantaged children. In revising the manuscript, we have clarified the scope of the analysis as a document-based review focusing on how children's rights commitments are articulated within selected EU- and national-level strategies and ESF+ funding calls, rather than as an assessment of the availability or quality of child health or other basic services in Finland. We have removed potentially misleading formulations that could be interpreted as endorsing a marginalisation of child-specific health needs and clarified that references to health-related gaps concern the visibility of such commitments within funding frameworks, not service provision in practice. In addition, we have situated our findings within the broader EU-level discussion on the challenges of realising the health-related aims of the European Child Guarantee by referring to previous

research (Rigby, 2021), while explicitly noting the limitations of drawing conclusions beyond the analysed documents. General 3 Relatedly, a consequence of the paper's primary relevance being on a policy level and never moving away from the documents (neither 'up' to theories or 'down' to children's lives), is that it comes across as detached from realities. Seeing what kind of project the article is a product of, and its collaboration with both NGOs and government, I do not presume that your work is detached from reality at all – I'm just asking if your vast ground knowledge on children's participation could be better reflected in the paper. For example, you do have a few mentions of what role documents play, and why it is ethically important to study documents – if these types of reflections were more present throughout the article, it would make for more engaging reading aware of children's realities. Thank you for this thoughtful reflection. While the study deliberately focuses on policy documents, we have revised the manuscript to more clearly articulate why documents matter from a children's rights perspective and how they shape the realities within which services and participation opportunities are organised. We have also strengthened reflexive elements in the Discussion to better reflect the ethical significance of document analysis and to acknowledge the authors' grounding in practice-based knowledge, while remaining methodologically consistent with the study's documentary focus. General 3 I would also ask the authors to clarify or reconsider the role of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in the paper. It is presented under a 'background' section, but not referred to throughout the analysis, only briefly mentioned again under 'Limitations'. On p. 4, you write that 'To meaningfully assess the implementation of the UNCRC principles at the national level, it is essential to include relevant European and national policy documents in the review' – this phrase implicitly says that you aim to assess the UNCRC principles at a national level (and not only the EU child rights principles). Is this correctly understood? If yes, why is the UNCRC not included as a 'source document' and included in the analysis? If no, why the introduction to the UNCRC at all, and especially, why the mention of 'assess[ing] the implementation of UNCRC principles at the national level'? If the UNCRC is part of the 'conceptual framework', it should also be engaged with in the analysis. We have now clarified the role of the UNCRC in the manuscript. The UNCRC is now explicitly positioned as a normative and legal framework guiding the interpretation of EU- and national-level policy documents, rather than as an object of direct document analysis. This clarification has been integrated into the introduction and conceptual background sections. General 4 The main concern is that the study needs better framing. I recommend that you consider framing this paper as a case study of the localization of the UNCRC in Finland rather than just an analysis of documents. The current structure/flow of the paper can be confusing to the reader. On the one hand, you demonstrate multiple misalignments among the documents, which makes it more critical to analyze the root causes of the discrepancies. On the other hand, these misalignments are not necessarily dangerous oversights but could be rather a reasonable adaptation of the international treaty. Your paper does not take one course over the other; it is rather unclear what your message is. My recommendation is to frame your work as a case study of national-level adaptation, analyzing what was done well and where growth is needed. Having considered the feedback from all five reviewers, we have decided to retain the document-analysis approach as the core methodological frame of the article. To address the reviewer's concern, we now more explicitly discuss national adaptation and prioritisation as an inherent feature of multi-level governance. We also clarify why the absence of child-friendly justice is analytically relevant in the context of ESF+ funding, while

acknowledging that responsibility for this theme mat lie primarily in other policy domains. General 4 While the authors have a great grasp on the documents they review, the constant reference to each document reduces the readability of the paper. I suggest you group documents into international, regional, and national categories, and refer to a specific set in the text where appropriate. Alternatively, propose a shorter version of the documents' titles Thank you for this helpful suggestion regarding readability. In the revised manuscript, we have streamlined references to policy documents by grouping them where analytically appropriate and referring to EU-level and national-level documents as sets rather than repeatedly naming each individual document. Full document titles are retained where specific distinctions are necessary for the analysis, but otherwise a grouped reference approach is used to improve the flow and clarity of the text. We have chosen this approach instead of introducing new abbreviations to maintain accessibility. General 4 Several times, you suggest that the documents are examples of the UNCRC "implementation". I suggest considering using "operationalization" or "codification" instead, as implementation often refers to specific frontline programs directly affecting children and youth Thank you for this helpful terminology-related comment. We have now revised the manuscript to use the term "operationalization" instead of "implementation," as you suggest. This adjustment has been applied systematically throughout the text to ensure conceptual accuracy and consistency. General 5 There was some degree of repetition of methodology across the introduction, methods, and findings and it is suggested that these details could be streamlined further in the paper. Thank you for this observation. We have streamlined the manuscript by reducing repetitive descriptions of the methodology across sections. Methodological details are now primarily concentrated in the Methods section, while the Introduction and Findings focus on contextualisation and interpretation, respectively. Title 1 Although your title is clear and well-crafted. However, I would like to suggest that you do not use abbreviations in a title. Please write every in Full, EU should be European Union, and ESF+ should be European Social Fund Plus. It is good that you have indicated a geographic demarcation of your study. This is good for context. We acknowledge the reviewer's recommendation and agree that fully written titles can enhance clarity. In this case, however, expanding the abbreviations would exceed practical title length constraints. As the abbreviations used are well established and defined at the outset of the article, we have opted to retain them in the title. Abstract 1 Your abstract is solid; it includes some essential background information and adequately describes the methodology. It also briefly highlights the findings and the conclusion. See whether it is possible to also include a brief recommendation that emerged from the study, and to briefly indicate the theoretical framework that guided the study; you seem to be leaning towards either a rights-based approach or a social justice framework. We have revised the Abstract to more explicitly indicate the normative children's rights perspective guiding the study and to include a brief recommendation emerging from the findings. Keywords have been provided in line with the journal's guidelines, although they do not appear to be displayed consistently in published articles. Abstract 1 See whether adding keywords at the end of the abstract is a possibility. We have submitted the keywords in accordance with the journal's guidelines, but they do not appear to be displayed alongside the published articles. This also seems to apply to other articles published in the journal. Abstract 2 The Conclusion section of the Abstract raises confusion over policy competence and objectives, by stating that "national-level priorities may obscure specific EU objectives". Nearly all the operational services which support children, ranging from education to health care, and

including justice services, are national competencies. European Commission activities in these areas primarily are to establish shared values and principles, and as appropriate to set targets, identify effective practices, set standards by EU-wide consensus, and provide targeted financial and other enablement. Thus national policies legally are pre-eminent; they cannot 'obscure' EU policies, though they can fail to promote them or to align optimally with their achievement, and this rightly can be called out. We have revised the Abstract to remove wording that could be interpreted as suggesting that national priorities override EU competence. The revised formulation now reflects the EU's coordinative role and the principle of subsidiarity more accurately. Introduction 1 In your introduction, you state, "However, the visibility of UNCRC-based strategies in EU-funded projects has not been systematically studied." I am suggesting that you rephrase this statement, as some might not agree with it. You could potentially rephrase it to: "However, the visibility of UNCRC-based strategies in EU-funded projects appears not to have been systematically studied." Thank you, the sentence has been revised according to your suggestion. Introduction 1 I am happy that your introduction has a very clear research aim and research questions. For improved flow, consider moving the research aim and questions to the end of the introduction section, just before the data and methods section. This will ensure a chronological and seamless flow into the data and methods section. However, this is just a suggestion; see what works best for your paper. We combined the introduction and background sections and moved the research questions to the end of the section. Introduction 1 In your introduction, I was also expecting to see the theoretical framework that guided the study, e.g rights-based approach or a social justice framework. Other than that, well done for such a solid introduction section. Rather than introducing a formal theory-driven framework, we clarified the normative children's rights perspective guiding the analysis. The Introduction now explicitly explains how the UNCRC, social justice, and social sustainability inform the interpretation of policy documents. Introduction 5 It is recommended that the authors consider referring to other such national level studies in the introduction to provide more context and potential comparative examples if they exist, and if not, they should be mentioned. We have clarified the research landscape by noting that while national child strategies and UNCRC implementation have been studied, comparable analyses of EU-funded programme documents and funding calls focusing on children and families are scarce. Background 1 Also, see whether the background and conceptual framework section can be integrated into the introduction section (you can make it a subheading within the introduction section) We combined the introduction and background sections and adjusted the subheadings to improve the clarity of the overall structure. Background 1 Whilst I appreciate the detailed conceptual and legislative framework, I was also expecting to see a little bit of discussion/context about child and family services in Finland, what they entail, who the stakeholders are, who the service providers are, what challenges are faced by children and Families in Finland, which then makes an argument for funding to provide services. We added a brief description of how services for children and families are organised in Finland to the "Introduction" section. We also have strengthened the Background section by clarifying both the organisation of child and family services in Finland and the key challenges faced by children and families, including growing inequalities in mental health, learning outcomes, and regional access to services. Background 1 Although this is a Finnish / EU study, you can increase the global relevance of the study by aligning it to the Sustainable Development Goals and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This is just a suggestion, see whether you want to

take it on board. Thank you, but we will leave this outside the scope of the present analysis. Background 3 My recommendation would be to engage more with theory coming from research, not only from legal documents, to lift the findings and make them relevant beyond your case study; or, if it is a deliberate choice not to do so in this paper, to explain or remove the reference to 'theory-driven'. We have removed the misleading term "theory-driven," as the analytical framework is based on guiding policy documents rather than academic theory. Background 3 On p. 5, you introduce the Finnish Innovation and Skills programme and mention that 'Applicants' can apply for funding. For understanding the context, it would be good to know who these applicants are (government entities? NGOs?). A description of the applicant types has been added to the "Background and conceptual framework" section. Background 4 Is this mismatch in themes an issue or just a product of prioritization? Countries have the right to adapt the UNCRC to their local contexts. The literature review should reflect research on the UNCRC's adaptation and localization. This would position this study better and support its significance We have revised the Background section to explicitly acknowledge that differences between international guidance and national priorities may reflect legitimate processes of adaptation and localisation of the UNCRC, rather than shortcomings. Background 5 It would be helpful to develop the analysis further in relation to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child ([CRC]; 1989) and related current literature. The paper's title highlights the emphasis of ESF+ funding for child and family services in Finland but the introduction and one of the research questions highlight children's rights as per the EU Strategy and Council Recommendation. The CRC is presented on p. 4 as the conceptual framework but it does not seem to inform the paper much, rather seems cursory or superficial. This is a missed opportunity as greater attention to the CRC would be beneficial to develop the analysis further. For instance, the authors have identified the importance of coordination within governance but they have not identified how it is a key CRC general measure of implementation. We agree that the UNCRC general measures of implementation are highly relevant. While the study does not empirically assess implementation outcomes, the discussion now more explicitly acknowledges coordination, funding, and governance as core structural mechanisms through which children's rights are advanced. These points are also highlighted as priorities for future research. Methods 1 See whether the title can be rephrased to "Materials and Methods", instead of "data and Methods" The title has been revised according to the suggestion. Methods 1 In this section (material and methods), you write about sample selection, but the inclusion and exclusion criteria are not clearly explained. The description of the inclusion and exclusion criteria has now been added to the "Data and sample selection" section. Methods 1 You also talk about a systematic examination of data, yet the "systematic" is not adequately explained; just be careful that you do not give an impression that this was a systematic review. Because then you need a clear PRISMA flowchart and a PICo framework. Thank you for this important observation. We have replaced the term systematic with structured to avoid methodological misunderstandings. Methods 2 While the European Strategy on the Rights of the Child is a detailed social and legal underpinning, the more recent and specific pragmatic document rightly used in the review is the European Child Guarantee. As shown in the Commission's own publications (such as the Commission's dedicated web page European Child Guarantee - Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion and its public fact sheet https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/5307cc11-6413-482c-84f4-17d4b5ef97a6_en) the core basis of the Child Guarantee comprises six core service

promises. Unfortunately, the review loses this clarity. Two of the figures - Tables 1 and 3 - focus on the Strategy on the Rights of the Child, but give two different summaries of the key points. Table 2 looks to the Child Guarantee, erroneously summarising it as having two principles, of which the first is not an explicit Guarantee; the second is a concatenation of three guarantees, while three (access by marginalised children to adequate nutrition, housing, and free healthcare) are not mentioned. Figure 2's policy summaries do not replicate those of the earlier figures, and its classification of thematic areas is blatantly wrong. This is a great shame, as better analysed and presented this could have been a useful summary comparing the different emphases of the Finnish policies compared with Commission priorities. We clearly presented the analysis in an insufficiently clear manner. In the original manuscript, we had included only selected examples of the analysis, which of course does not mean that our full analysis was limited to these examples. We have now corrected this ambiguity by reconstructing the figures and the table in a clearer format, making all six key service guarantees of the ECG visible. The figures and tables have been reconstructed to clearly reflect all six core service guarantees, and inconsistencies across tables have been corrected. Methods 2 This study will only meaningfully add value and create actionable knowledge if it sharpens its analysis of the themes of the Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the much more focused Child Guarantee, ensures consistency of analyses across its different tables and figures, identifies areas where Finnish policies and Finnish funding calls do not offer support to these priorities, and then ascertains whether these omissions are justified on the basis of current good services or alternatively represent continuing areas of under-provision for marginalised children. We have sharpened the analysis by ensuring consistency across tables and figures and by explicitly addressing areas where Finnish policies and funding calls do not reflect EU-level priorities, while carefully distinguishing between programme mandate and potential under-prioritisation. Methods 3 The paper is primarily an empirically focused presentation of a policy analysis. It is a legitimate choice to keep the focus on the empirical level and less on theory, but the absence of any theory in the paper is still noteworthy. Your 'conceptual framework' section outlines various international legal document (UNCRC, the EU child rights-related documents) rather than introducing a research-based conceptual framework. On p. 5, you write that the two European Commission documents on child rights and the child guarantee are used 'as a theory-driven analytical framework for examining the other documents included in the study.' This requires further explanation: how are EU documents 'theory-driven'? Which theories do you derive from these documents? Why is it not simply a comparative analysis of priorities in EU vs. Finnish policy documents? We have removed the term "theory-driven" because it caused methodological ambiguity. The analysis is based on guiding policy documents rather than academic theory. However, we have added relevant research to the introduction and drawn on this theoretical basis in the discussion section; please see the respective sections. Methods 3 The phrase 'Accordingly, the focus of the study is on existing material' (p. 5) seems redundant – it is already clear that the study is on existing material. The sentence has been removed as suggested. Methods 4 I recommend using the UNCRC as a theoretical framework and a baseline for comparison, at least to the EU Strategy to connect the dots. As mentioned in the literature review, the documents are reviewed against one another rather than against the CRC. Thank you for this suggestion. We have clarified that the UNCRC functions as a normative and ethical reference point informing the interpretation of EU- and national-level strategies, rather than as a direct analytical baseline. The analysis therefore focuses on policy documents reviewed in relation

to one another, while being guided by a children's rights perspective grounded in the UNCRC. Methods 4 The textual explanation of the analytical framework is hard to follow. I recommend creating a matrix with documents on one axis and the children's rights areas (ex. Nutrition, justice, etc.) on another, and mark the documents that reflect each area We acknowledge that the analytical framework required clearer presentation. The figures and tables have been revised to present the analysis in a matrix-like format that more transparently links children's rights areas with the analysed document groups, thereby improving clarity and consistency. Methods 5 p. 6 note spelling issue in last text box of image; should be "Third" not "Thrid" Thank you for the remark; this has been corrected. Findings 2 The review paper does highlight the lack of Finnish policy inclusion of child-friendly justice. However, access to adequate nutrition, adequate housing, and healthcare, are very largely omitted, yet these are central to child wellbeing and are areas strongly compromised by poverty, social exclusion, and other social challenges. Thus one element of the Strategy on the Rights of the Child, and half of the six elements of the Child Guarantee, do not explicitly appear in Finnish policy documents or in calls for proposals under the three ESF+ funding rounds. It may of course be that Finland considers it meets these four service provision requirements adequately, but it is not reassuring to find no evidence presented to claim this achievement - though recognising the limitations of document analysis removed from the core objective of the documents analysed. But a strategy review should have looked for such evidence, as the authors have looked at wider literature for some policy lines. We agree with this important observation. The revised manuscript places greater emphasis on omissions related to access to nutrition, housing, and healthcare, alongside child-friendly justice. We have systematically revisited the analysed national documents and funding calls to clarify how these themes are addressed—or remain absent—and strengthened the Discussion by drawing on previous research highlighting the challenges of realising health-related commitments under the European Child Guarantee. Findings 2 This review has usefully started to address the issue of how national priorities in Finland have sought to address and fit with European Commission policies as well as funding qualification criteria. It then analyses that Finland has introduced some additional commitments, while identifying that two European policy objectives are partially or totally omitted, but itself overlooks three other fundamental European priorities which are omitted. As noted earlier, the tables presented in the article were only illustrative examples of the analysis. The full analysis naturally takes all priority areas into account. We have now clarified our presentation and made all priority areas more explicitly visible. Findings 3 The first paragraph in 'Findings' may also be redundant – the documents have just all been introduced, and it is slightly repetitive when reading. The paragraph has been removed as suggested. Findings 4 In Figure 2, what do you mean by operational? By operational, we refer to the fact that these thematic areas are visibly reflected in the ESF funding calls. We have now clarified this in the text. Findings 5 One question that did not seem considered was the assumption that coherence across the studied documents would necessarily mean that these strategies would be implemented and reflected in practices in Finland. While there is growing literature that recognizes that while law and policy may be established, there are challenges and obstacles that hinder or prevent implementation. For instance, the table on p. 10 uses the term "operational:" to indicate a relationship between the Innovation and Skills in Finland program and EU-level strategies but how do we know about the status of the implementation in the program other than it is identified? How is "operational" defined? We have clarified how the term "operationalised" is used in this

study to refer to the explicit presence of strategic priorities in programme documents and funding calls, rather than to their implementation in practice. Discussion 1 Although this section (Discussion) is well written and reflects mastery over the data, I felt that it has several missed opportunities. Firstly, you alluded to the influence of national political priorities but did not elaborate on what these are and how they influence the ESF+. We have expanded the Discussion to more explicitly describe national political priorities and demographic considerations, and to analyse how these shape ESF+ funding decisions in the Finnish context. Discussion 1 Reorganising this section (conclusions) could improve clarity. You might consider structuring it as follows: Conclusions Significance and implications of the study Limitations Recommendations and future research directions All the necessary content is already present; it simply needs clearer organisation. This is a suggestion rather than a requirement; please use your discretion. We appreciate this structural suggestion and have strengthened the internal organisation of the Discussion and Conclusions sections while retaining a separate and clearly defined section on limitations and further research. Discussion 2 Comparative data from sources such as WHO and Eurostat, as well as bibliographic searches, would be valuable underpinning. Thank you for this suggestion. We agree that comparative data from WHO, Eurostat, and broader bibliographic searches would be valuable in a study assessing children's wellbeing or service outcomes. However, the present article is a qualitative documentary analysis focused on the visibility and operationalisation of children's rights commitments in selected policy documents and ESF+ funding calls. We therefore chose not to add a wider comparative statistical analysis, as this would broaden the scope beyond the study's research questions. Instead, the Discussion includes selected research and policy literature where directly relevant to interpreting the documentary findings, and the need for further research on implementation, outcomes, budgeting, and structural conditions is acknowledged in the Limitations and further research section. Discussion 3 Your main recommendation seems to be more strategic coherence across documents, which would support children's rights. But the analytical move from strategic coherence to better children's rights implementation, is not clear to me. How do we know that children's rights would not be better supported with, for example, less EU involvement, more decentralisation and more 'different' rather than more 'aligned' child rights policies across Member States? Your discussion on p. 10 of how the Finnish documents are products of much more than EU strategies, is very useful, and more of this type of reflection would be good. We appreciate the reviewer's nuanced reflections on coherence and localisation. In the revised discussion, we have refined our argument to avoid implying that greater alignment across governance levels is inherently preferable. Instead, we emphasise the balance between legitimate national adaptation and the need to ensure that fundamental children's rights are not systematically rendered invisible in funding processes. Discussion 3 In the Discussion (p. 13), you write: 'the fragmented nature of strategic guidance raises questions about coherence, coordination, and accountability in the implementation of children's rights. When multiple strategies intersect without a clear overarching framework, it becomes difficult to assess whether the entirety of the strategic landscape is truly governed or understood by any single actor.' I understand this as a call for more EU-level coordination and less decentralisation when it comes to strategic decision making for children's rights? Is that correctly understood? If yes, is that really what would 'implement' children' rights better, that one actor (implicitly, the EU) 'truly governs (...) the entirety of the strategic landscape' when it comes to child rights? I understand the importance of accountability, but is accountability created through exact

coherence of policies at different levels? Are there not many other – and more important and efficient – measures of accountability for rights? To address the concern regarding decentralisation and EU-level coordination, we have added an explicit sentence to the Discussion section clarifying that EU child rights strategies function primarily as normative and coordinative instruments, while responsibility for prioritisation and funding allocation remains at the national and sub-national levels in accordance with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality. This clarification aims to prevent interpretations suggesting advocacy for stronger centralisation. This clarification also responds to concerns regarding the relationship between strategic coherence and national discretion.
Discussion 3 Similarly, you write that 'Allocation decisions are influenced not only by shared strategic goals but also by domestic political agendas and demographic considerations. This raises concerns about strategic coherence and the visibility of children's rights in funding processes.' Why should allocation decisions not be influenced by domestic demographic considerations? Is local relevance not more important than 'strategic coherence'? Would 'strategic coherence' really increase the visibility of children's rights? I read this as a call for more top-down children's rights and less bottom-up children's rights (the latter would be the opposite of strategic coherence, and reflecting Finnish children's realities more). If I am reading this wrong – please explain in more detail in the paper, so others do not misunderstand it in the same way. Thank you for this important clarification request. We have revised the Discussion section to explicitly state that national demographic and political considerations are both legitimate and necessary in funding allocation. Our reference to strategic coherence is not intended as a call for top-down governance, but rather as a call for transparency regarding how children's rights considerations are weighed alongside other national priorities. We have clarified this to avoid interpretations suggesting that local relevance should be subordinated to EU-level coordination. Discussion 3 It would be refreshing with some additional recommendations based on the findings – should we really aspire for coherence across documents? Could the findings not say something more than that, about the importance of localising and decentralising children's rights to make them relevant for local realities, for example? As argued by Sally Engle Merry, domestic implementation of rights will always include adaptation, translation etc. to resonate in local realities, so why is it a 'bad' thing that EU strategies and Finnish policies differ? If your aim is to inform future funding calls, could a recommendation then not also be to be more open to reflect local realities? Arguably, some aspects of local discrimination issues, for example, could get lost of the EU funding coordination on child rights were more coherent and streamlined. If children's participation and input are important (as you highlight in the introduction), would their lived realities and experiences not be very different in Finland or in Portugal, calling for less coherence and more diversity in approaches? You mention on p. 13 that more aligned policies would ensure more equitable funding allocation throughout the Member States. This begs the question of whether equality between children is best addressed at EU level or domestic level – a question to which the answer is of course 'it depends' and 'both', but engaging in this difficult discussion would bring more nuance and add a greater contribution of the paper. We appreciate this nuanced reflection. In the revised Discussion, we clarify that the study does not advocate coherence as an end in itself, nor does it view divergence between EU and national policies as inherently problematic. Rather, we acknowledge localisation and adaptation as necessary features of children's rights governance. Our use of "strategic coherence" refers to transparency and accountability in prioritisation, not to uniformity of

approaches across Member States. We have revised the text to make this distinction explicit and to avoid interpretations suggesting that diversity or local relevance should be reduced. Discussion 3 Regarding child friendly justice, is it an interesting observation that it is not included in the Finnish National Child Strategy Committee report, the Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027 programme, or the three funding calls. But could this be because it is not the mandate of an 'innovation and skills' programme to deal with child friendly justice? Wouldn't it rather be reflected in policies about juvenile justice, policing, judicial system etc.? You mention some of these limitations on pp. 12-13, but you do not comment on why one should expect child friendly justice to be present in the Innovation and Skills programme. In general, it could be explained a little clearer why exactly the Innovation and Skills programme was chosen to analyse above other child rights-related programmes in Finland? What does it represent? We agree that child-friendly justice primarily falls within other policy domains and does not constitute the core mandate of an innovation and skills programme. We have clarified in the Methods section why the Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027 programme was selected for analysis and what it represents within Finland's ESF+ governance. The observation regarding child-friendly justice is not intended as a critique of programme mandate, but as an illustration of how certain rights-related themes may remain less visible within cross-sectoral funding frameworks that explicitly target children and families. Discussion 3 The phrase 'It is both important and ethically necessary to critically examine how funding is allocated, especially when it concerns children's rights and well-being' on p. 13 would benefit from being moved to the Introduction rather than Discussion – the underlying justification for the need of the study is important to put clearly in the beginning. Moved as suggested. Discussion 4 When discussing the findings, the process of creating national-level documents should be discussed. Who is the main decision-maker? Are there participatory processes underlying policymaking? Did children and youth contribute to the national policy creation? Were statistical data and needs assessment used to support the prioritization process? Without knowing that, it is easy to misjudge the results of the comparison and make wrong conclusion on the source of misalignment We have added contextual clarification regarding national policy-making processes to avoid misinterpretation of observed misalignments as purely technical or strategic shortcomings. Discussion 4 Discussion: This section needs to be more structured. Probably focusing on specific discrepancies and using them as headings would help with this. The Discussion section has been restructured using thematic subheadings that focus on specific discrepancies and interpretive dimensions, thereby improving clarity and coherence. Discussion 4 Page 12, para 1 missing citation This is the authors' own reflection; therefore, no source references are provided. Discussion 4 Funding of the priority areas often reflects the social construction of children and childhood in society (mostly the decision-makers). What do your results suggest about the way Finnish society sees children? We have added a reflective interpretation addressing how funding priorities implicitly construct understandings of childhood within Finnish policy contexts. Discussion 5 This paper highlights the efforts, successes and ongoing fragmentation challenges according to publicly-available documentation, which could be acknowledged on p. 13 of the article but it is not. The Discussion now explicitly acknowledges both achievements and ongoing fragmentation challenges in Finnish child-related policies. Discussion 5 It also points to the potential of future research emphasizing these general measures further and how they can advance not only strategies but their implementation with attention to such general measures as budgets, etc.

In addition, there are relevant questions of capacity and political will beyond simply whether regional priorities are recognized in national strategies. Questioning this relationship would be useful to acknowledge at a minimum, and also suggests additional future research directions that have not yet been recognized. We have expanded the future research section to highlight the importance of examining structural measures such as funding, administrative capacity, and political will in advancing children's rights beyond strategic alignment. Discussion 5 p. 11 awkward language in second line: "Research highlights the need to for equality in education..." Thank you for pointing out the typo; the sentence has now been corrected.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Report 19 February 2026

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.23731.r69611

© 2026 Rigby M. This is an open access peer review report distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

?

Michael Rigby
Keele University, Keele, England, UK

This publication is a review of three specific developmental funding calls in Finland set against the objectives of the European Commission in furthering the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the implementation of the European Child Guarantee, and matched to targets on the use of European Social Fund ESF+ allocations to Member States. It is primarily a documentary analysis, and in such there is always the challenge of going deeper into necessary semantic analysis and in so doing moving away from positive advocacy for the societal members (in this case marginalised children) on whom the policies are intended to be centred. In general the review manages this, but deeper investigation of the significance of the gaps identified, and more vehemence on behalf of children whose needs are omitted, would have more impact than solely stating gaps in textural content.

The review seeks to identify where European policies have been supported, rather than majoring on those areas which are largely or totally omitted. This does little to actively promote children's best interests, nor to promote stronger achievement of European Commission principles and policies; it is solely a commentary on a government.

The Conclusion section of the Abstract raises confusion over policy competence and objectives, by stating that "national-level priorities may obscure specific EU objectives". Nearly all the operational services which support children, ranging from education to health care, and including justice services, are national competencies. European Commission activities in these areas primarily are to establish shared values and principles, and as appropriate to set targets, identify effective

practices, set standards by EU-wide consensus, and provide targeted financial and other enablement. Thus national policies legally are pre-eminent; they cannot 'obscure' EU policies, though they can fail to promote them or to align optimally with their achievement, and this rightly can be called out.

The paper does have one quotation expressing the voice of a child, but this child-centricity and advocacy could well have been carried on in spirit in the main text, by highlighting more strongly the children and child needs omitted, rather than framing this solely in terms of missing text. While the European Strategy on the Rights of the Child is a detailed social and legal underpinning, the more recent and specific pragmatic document rightly used in the review is the European Child Guarantee. As shown in the Commission's own publications (such as the Commission's dedicated web page European Child Guarantee - Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion and its public fact sheet https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/5307cc11-6413-482c-84f4-17d4b5ef97a6_en) the core basis of the Child Guarantee comprises six core service promises.

Unfortunately, the review loses this clarity. Two of the figures - Tables 1 and 3 - focus on the Strategy on the Rights of the Child, but give two different summaries of the key points. Table 2 looks to the Child Guarantee, erroneously summarising it as having two principles, of which the first is not an explicit Guarantee; the second is a concatenation of three guarantees, while three (access by marginalised children to adequate nutrition, housing, and free healthcare) are not mentioned. Figure 2's policy summaries do not replicate those of the earlier figures, and its classification of thematic areas is blatantly wrong. This is a great shame, as better analysed and presented this could have been a useful summary comparing the different emphases of the Finnish policies compared with Commission priorities.

The review paper does highlight the lack of Finnish policy inclusion of child-friendly justice. However, access to adequate nutrition, adequate housing, and healthcare, are very largely omitted, yet these are central to child wellbeing and are areas strongly compromised by poverty, social exclusion, and other social challenges. Thus one element of the Strategy on the Rights of the Child, and half of the six elements of the Child Guarantee, do not explicitly appear in Finnish policy documents or in calls for proposals under the three ESF+ funding rounds. It may of course be that Finland considers it meets these four service provision requirements adequately, but it is not reassuring to find no evidence presented to claim this achievement - though recognising the limitations of document analysis removed from the core objective of the documents analysed. But a strategy review should have looked for such evidence, as the authors have looked at wider literature for some policy lines.

In the absence of evidence, though, concerns must remain, as the review does not seem to promote Finnish disadvantaged children's needs actively. Indeed, one Finnish policy document cited in the study is quoted as including the statement|: "Children and young people are considered as part of adult services" in the response to education and healthcare inclusion - within health this amazing statement airbrushes out post-natal care, immunisation, developmental health, good access to child-sensitive primary care, and adolescent health. By contrast, a simple literature search shows that issues in achieving the health aims of the Child Guarantee have been raised, such as Rigby. "A commitment to marginalized children in the European Union: The hope and challenges of the EU Child Guarantee." *Child: Care, Health and Development* 48.1 (2022): 170-174; and Rigby. European Union Child Guarantee—challenges raised by the welcome promise of free healthcare for marginalized children, *European Journal of Public Health*, Volume 31, Issue 5,

October 2021, Pages 943–950, https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckab062 .

This review has usefully started to address the issue of how national priorities in Finland have sought to address and fit with European Commission policies as well as funding qualification criteria. It then analyses that Finland has introduced some additional commitments, while identifying that two European policy objectives are partially or totally omitted, but itself overlooks three other fundamental European priorities which are omitted. This study will only meaningfully add value and create actionable knowledge if it sharpens its analysis of the themes of the Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the much more focussed Child Guarantee, ensures consistency of analyses across its different tables and figures, identifies areas where Finnish policies and Finnish funding calls do not offer support to these priorities, and then ascertains whether these omissions are justified on the basis of current good services or alternatively represent continuing areas of under-provision for marginalised children. Comparative data from sources such as WHO and Eurostat, as well s bibliographic searches, would be valuable underpinning.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Partly

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Yes

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
No source data required

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Health policy, child health, health planning, digital health

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 20 Feb 2026

Laura Ortju

Dear professor Rigby, Thank you very much for your careful and insightful comments. We appreciate the time and consideration you have given to our manuscript. Based on your

feedback, together with the earlier review we received, we will prepare a revised version of the article promptly. We will re-examine the European Child Guarantee in greater depth and reopen our analysis to ensure a more accurate and coherent interpretation. In the original manuscript, we included only two examples of our analytical approach in the tables; in the revision, we will present this analysis more clearly and comprehensively. We will also strengthen the child-centered perspective and address more explicitly how policies affect children's wellbeing and rights. Thank you again for your valuable input, which will significantly improve our work. Best regards, Laura, Kati and Elina

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Response 09 Mar 2026

Michael Rigby

Thank you for this positive response. I hope that it helps strengthen your work to promote the wellbeing of disadvantaged and marginalised children in Finland.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Author Response 01 Oct 2026

Laura Ortju

Dear Reviewers, Please accept our apologies that the structured response we submitted at the beginning of the summer has apparently not been made available to you. Below, we have included a copy of our responses to the valuable comments you provided to help us improve the manuscript. We sincerely hope that you will have an opportunity to review the revisions we have made and assess whether our manuscript can be accepted for publication. Thank you very much for the time and expertise you have already contributed to supporting our research. **On behalf of the authors,**
Laura Section Reviewer Comment Authors' response General 1 The lack of a clear theoretical framework to guide the study made it very difficult for you to nicely package your discussion section. Kindly revisit my earlier comment about the need for a theoretical framework, e.g. if you were using the rights-based framework and then in the discussion section you can reflect on how these findings are compared to the principles of a rights-based approach e.g participation, transparency, accountability, empowerment, partnerships, accessibility, acceptability, sustainability, appropriateness, etc, of which all these principles are clearly visible in the findings section. See whether you would like to take this theoretical framework on board, as it would strengthen the discussion section. We appreciate the reviewer's suggestion regarding a more explicit theoretical framework. Due to the documentary nature of the study, we have chosen not to introduce a new academic theory-driven framework, as this would require reconfiguring the analytical design. Instead, we have strengthened the normative and children's right-based framing of the study by clarifying the role of the UNCRC as an overarching normative reference and by incorporating a stronger child-centred and social justice-oriented perspective throughout the introduction and discussion sections. General 2 It is primarily a documentary analysis,

and in such there is always the challenge of going deeper into necessary semantic analysis and in so doing moving away from positive advocacy for the societal members (in this case marginalised children) on whom the policies are intended to be centred. In general the review manages this, but deeper investigation of the significance of the gaps identified, and more vehemence on behalf of children whose needs are omitted, would have more impact than solely stating gaps in textural content. We thank the reviewer for this important observation. In the revised manuscript, we have placed greater emphasis on the significance of identified gaps from a children's rights perspective. The findings and discussion sections have been strengthened to explicitly address omissions related to healthcare, nutrition, housing, and child-friendly justice, and to reflect on the implications of these gaps for children in vulnerable situations. We also clarify the limitations of documents analysis while adopting a more explicit advocacy-oriented stance in interpreting the findings. General 2 The review seeks to identify where European policies have been supported, rather than majoring on those areas which are largely or totally omitted. This does little to actively promote children's best interests, nor to promote stronger achievement of European Commission principles and policies; it is solely a commentary on a government. Thank you for this important observation. In the revised manuscript, we have strengthened the focus on areas that are partially or entirely omitted from national strategies and ESF+ funding calls, rather than primarily highlighting areas of alignment. In particular, the Discussion section now more explicitly addresses the implications of missing themes—such as child-friendly justice and core elements of the European Child Guarantee—from a children's rights perspective. This shift aims to move beyond descriptive commentary towards a more critical examination of how omissions in policy and funding frameworks may affect the visibility of children's rights. General 2 The paper does have one quotation expressing the voice of a child, but this child-centricity and advocacy could well have been carried on in spirit in the main text, by highlighting more strongly the children and child needs omitted, rather than framing this solely in terms of missing text. We agree that a child-centred perspective should be reflected throughout the manuscript, even when the analysis is based on policy documents. In the revised version, we have strengthened the children's rights perspective across the Discussion by emphasising how omissions in strategies and funding calls may affect the visibility of children's needs, rather than framing the analysis solely in terms of missing textual references. This approach seeks to carry the spirit of child-centric advocacy throughout the interpretation of findings. General 2 In the absence of evidence, though, concerns must remain, as the review does not seem to promote Finnish disadvantaged children's needs actively. Indeed, one Finnish policy document cited in the study is quoted as including the statement: "Children and young people are considered as part of adult services" in the response to education and healthcare inclusion - within health this amazing statement airbrushes out post-natal care, immunisation, developmental health, good access to child-sensitive primary care, and adolescent health. By contrast, a simple literature search shows that issues in achieving the health aims of the Child Guarantee have been raised, such as Rigby. "A commitment to marginalized children in the European Union: The hope and challenges of the EU Child Guarantee." Child: Care, Health and Development 48.1 (2022): 170-174; and Rigby. European Union Child Guarantee—challenges raised by the welcome promise of free healthcare for marginalized children, European Journal of Public Health, Volume 31, Issue 5, October 2021, Pages 943–950, https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckab062 . Thank you for this important and challenging comment. We acknowledge the concern that the manuscript could be read as

insufficiently promoting the needs of disadvantaged children. In revising the manuscript, we have clarified the scope of the analysis as a document-based review focusing on how children's rights commitments are articulated within selected EU- and national-level strategies and ESF+ funding calls, rather than as an assessment of the availability or quality of child health or other basic services in Finland. We have removed potentially misleading formulations that could be interpreted as endorsing a marginalisation of child-specific health needs and clarified that references to health-related gaps concern the visibility of such commitments within funding frameworks, not service provision in practice. In addition, we have situated our findings within the broader EU-level discussion on the challenges of realising the health-related aims of the European Child Guarantee by referring to previous research (Rigby, 2021), while explicitly noting the limitations of drawing conclusions beyond the analysed documents. General 3 Relatedly, a consequence of the paper's primary relevance being on a policy level and never moving away from the documents (neither 'up' to theories or 'down' to children's lives), is that it comes across as detached from realities. Seeing what kind of project the article is a product of, and its collaboration with both NGOs and government, I do not presume that your work is detached from reality at all – I'm just asking if your vast ground knowledge on children's participation could be better reflected in the paper. For example, you do have a few mentions of what role documents play, and why it is ethically important to study documents – if these types of reflections were more present throughout the article, it would make for more engaging reading aware of children's realities. Thank you for this thoughtful reflection. While the study deliberately focuses on policy documents, we have revised the manuscript to more clearly articulate why documents matter from a children's rights perspective and how they shape the realities within which services and participation opportunities are organised. We have also strengthened reflexive elements in the Discussion to better reflect the ethical significance of document analysis and to acknowledge the authors' grounding in practice-based knowledge, while remaining methodologically consistent with the study's documentary focus. General 3 I would also ask the authors to clarify or reconsider the role of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in the paper. It is presented under a 'background' section, but not referred to throughout the analysis, only briefly mentioned again under 'Limitations'. On p. 4, you write that 'To meaningfully assess the implementation of the UNCRC principles at the national level, it is essential to include relevant European and national policy documents in the review' – this phrase implicitly says that you aim to assess the UNCRC principles at a national level (and not only the EU child rights principles). Is this correctly understood? If yes, why is the UNCRC not included as a 'source document' and included in the analysis? If no, why the introduction to the UNCRC at all, and especially, why the mention of 'assess[ing] the implementation of UNCRC principles at the national level'? If the UNCRC is part of the 'conceptual framework', it should also be engaged with in the analysis. We have now clarified the role of the UNCRC in the manuscript. The UNCRC is now explicitly positioned as a normative and legal framework guiding the interpretation of EU- and national-level policy documents, rather than as an object of direct document analysis. This clarification has been integrated into the introduction and conceptual background sections. General 4 The main concern is that the study needs better framing. I recommend that you consider framing this paper as a case study of the localization of the UNCRC in Finland rather than just an analysis of documents. The current structure/flow of the paper can be confusing to the reader. On the one hand, you demonstrate multiple misalignments among the documents, which makes it more

critical to analyze the root causes of the discrepancies. On the other hand, these misalignments are not necessarily dangerous oversights but could be rather a reasonable adaptation of the international treaty. Your paper does not take one course over the other; it is rather unclear what your message is. My recommendation is to frame your work as a case study of national-level adaptation, analyzing what was done well and where growth is needed. Having considered the feedback from all five reviewers, we have decided to retain the document-analysis approach as the core methodological frame of the article. To address the reviewer's concern, we now more explicitly discuss national adaptation and prioritisation as an inherent feature of multi-level governance. We also clarify why the absence of child-friendly justice is analytically relevant in the context of ESF+ funding, while acknowledging that responsibility for this theme mat lie primarily in other policy domains. General 4 While the authors have a great grasp on the documents they review, the constant reference to each document reduces the readability of the paper. I suggest you group documents into international, regional, and national categories, and refer to a specific set in the text where appropriate. Alternatively, propose a shorter version of the documents' titles Thank you for this helpful suggestion regarding readability. In the revised manuscript, we have streamlined references to policy documents by grouping them where analytically appropriate and referring to EU-level and national-level documents as sets rather than repeatedly naming each individual document. Full document titles are retained where specific distinctions are necessary for the analysis, but otherwise a grouped reference approach is used to improve the flow and clarity of the text. We have chosen this approach instead of introducing new abbreviations to maintain accessibility. General 4 Several times, you suggest that the documents are examples of the UNCRC "implementation". I suggest considering using "operationalization" or "codification" instead, as implementation often refers to specific frontline programs directly affecting children and youth Thank you for this helpful terminology-related comment. We have now revised the manuscript to use the term "operationalization" instead of "implementation," as you suggest. This adjustment has been applied systematically throughout the text to ensure conceptual accuracy and consistency. General 5 There was some degree of repetition of methodology across the introduction, methods, and findings and it is suggested that these details could be streamlined further in the paper. Thank you for this observation. We have streamlined the manuscript by reducing repetitive descriptions of the methodology across sections. Methodological details are now primarily concentrated in the Methods section, while the Introduction and Findings focus on contextualisation and interpretation, respectively. Title 1 Although your title is clear and well-crafted. However, I would like to suggest that you do not use abbreviations in a title. Please write every in Full, EU should be European Union, and ESF+ should be European Social Fund Plus. It is good that you have indicated a geographic demarcation of your study. This is good for context. We acknowledge the reviewer's recommendation and agree that fully written titles can enhance clarity. In this case, however, expanding the abbreviations would exceed practical title length constraints. As the abbreviations used are well established and defined at the outset of the article, we have opted to retain them in the title. Abstract 1 Your abstract is solid; it includes some essential background information and adequately describes the methodology. It also briefly highlights the findings and the conclusion. See whether it is possible to also include a brief recommendation that emerged from the study, and to briefly indicate the theoretical framework that guided the study; you seem to be leaning towards either a rights-based approach or a social justice framework. We have revised the Abstract

to more explicitly indicate the normative children's rights perspective guiding the study and to include a brief recommendation emerging from the findings. Keywords have been provided in line with the journal's guidelines, although they do not appear to be displayed consistently in published articles. Abstract 1 See whether adding keywords at the end of the abstract is a possibility. We have submitted the keywords in accordance with the journal's guidelines, but they do not appear to be displayed alongside the published articles. This also seems to apply to other articles published in the journal. Abstract 2 The Conclusion section of the Abstract raises confusion over policy competence and objectives, by stating that "national-level priorities may obscure specific EU objectives". Nearly all the operational services which support children, ranging from education to health care, and including justice services, are national competencies. European Commission activities in these areas primarily are to establish shared values and principles, and as appropriate to set targets, identify effective practices, set standards by EU-wide consensus, and provide targeted financial and other enablement. Thus national policies legally are pre-eminent; they cannot 'obscure' EU policies, though they can fail to promote them or to align optimally with their achievement, and this rightly can be called out. We have revised the Abstract to remove wording that could be interpreted as suggesting that national priorities override EU competence. The revised formulation now reflects the EU's coordinative role and the principle of subsidiarity more accurately. Introduction 1 In your introduction, you state, "However, the visibility of UNCRC-based strategies in EU-funded projects has not been systematically studied." I am suggesting that you rephrase this statement, as some might not agree with it. You could potentially rephrase it to: "However, the visibility of UNCRC-based strategies in EU-funded projects appears not to have been systematically studied." Thank you, the sentence has been revised according to your suggestion. Introduction 1 I am happy that your introduction has a very clear research aim and research questions. For improved flow, consider moving the research aim and questions to the end of the introduction section, just before the data and methods section. This will ensure a chronological and seamless flow into the data and methods section. However, this is just a suggestion; see what works best for your paper. We combined the introduction and background sections and moved the research questions to the end of the section. Introduction 1 In your introduction, I was also expecting to see the theoretical framework that guided the study, e.g rights-based approach or a social justice framework. Other than that, well done for such a solid introduction section. Rather than introducing a formal theory-driven framework, we clarified the normative children's rights perspective guiding the analysis. The Introduction now explicitly explains how the UNCRC, social justice, and social sustainability inform the interpretation of policy documents. Introduction 5 It is recommended that the authors consider referring to other such national level studies in the introduction to provide more context and potential comparative examples if they exist, and if not, they should be mentioned. We have clarified the research landscape by noting that while national child strategies and UNCRC implementation have been studied, comparable analyses of EU-funded programme documents and funding calls focusing on children and families are scarce. Background 1 Also, see whether the background and conceptual framework section can be integrated into the introduction section (you can make it a subheading within the introduction section) We combined the introduction and background sections and adjusted the subheadings to improve the clarity of the overall structure. Background 1 Whilst I appreciate the detailed conceptual and legislative framework, I was also expecting to see a little bit of discussion/context about child and

family services in Finland, what they entail, who the stakeholders are, who the service providers are, what challenges are faced by children and Families in Finland, which then makes an argument for funding to provide services. We added a brief description of how services for children and families are organised in Finland to the “Introduction” section. We also have strengthened the Background section by clarifying both the organisation of child and family services in Finland and the key challenges faced by children and families, including growing inequalities in mental health, learning outcomes, and regional access to services. Background 1 Although this is a Finnish / EU study, you can increase the global relevance of the study by aligning it to the Sustainable Development Goals and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This is just a suggestion, see whether you want to take it on board. Thank you, but we will leave this outside the scope of the present analysis. Background 3 My recommendation would be to engage more with theory coming from research, not only from legal documents, to lift the findings and make them relevant beyond your case study; or, if it is a deliberate choice not to do so in this paper, to explain or remove the reference to ‘theory-driven’. We have removed the misleading term “theory-driven,” as the analytical framework is based on guiding policy documents rather than academic theory. Background 3 On p. 5, you introduce the Finnish Innovation and Skills programme and mention that ‘Applicants’ can apply for funding. For understanding the context, it would be good to know who these applicants are (government entities? NGOs?). A description of the applicant types has been added to the “Background and conceptual framework” section. Background 4 Is this mismatch in themes an issue or just a product of prioritization? Countries have the right to adapt the UNCRC to their local contexts. The literature review should reflect research on the UNCRC's adaptation and localization. This would position this study better and support its significance We have revised the Background section to explicitly acknowledge that differences between international guidance and national priorities may reflect legitimate processes of adaptation and localisation of the UNCRC, rather than shortcomings. Background 5 It would be helpful to develop the analysis further in relation to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child ([CRC]; 1989) and related current literature. The paper’s title highlights the emphasis of ESF+ funding for child and family services in Finland but the introduction and one of the research questions highlight children’s rights as per the EU Strategy and Council Recommendation. The CRC is presented on p. 4 as the conceptual framework but it does not seem to inform the paper much, rather seems cursory or superficial. This is a missed opportunity as greater attention to the CRC would be beneficial to develop the analysis further. For instance, the authors have identified the importance of coordination within governance but they have not identified how it is a key CRC general measure of implementation. We agree that the UNCRC general measures of implementation are highly relevant. While the study does not empirically assess implementation outcomes, the discussion now more explicitly acknowledges coordination, funding, and governance as core structural mechanisms through which children’s rights are advanced. These points are also highlighted as priorities for future research. Methods 1 See whether the title can be rephrased to “Materials and Methods”, instead of “data and Methods” The title has been revised according to the suggestion. Methods 1 In this section (material and methods), you write about sample selection, but the inclusion and exclusion criteria are not clearly explained. The description of the inclusion and exclusion criteria has now been added to the “Data and sample selection” section. Methods 1 You also talk about a systematic examination of data, yet the “systematic” is not adequately explained; just be careful that

you do not give an impression that this was a systematic review. Because then you need a clear PRISMA flowchart and a PICo framework. Thank you for this important observation. We have replaced the term systematic with structured to avoid methodological misunderstandings. Methods 2 While the European Strategy on the Rights of the Child is a detailed social and legal underpinning, the more recent and specific pragmatic document rightly used in the review is the European Child Guarantee. As shown in the Commission's own publications (such as the Commission's dedicated web page European Child Guarantee - Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion and its public fact sheet https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/5307cc11-6413-482c-84f4-17d4b5ef97a6_en) the core basis of the Child Guarantee comprises six core service promises. Unfortunately, the review loses this clarity. Two of the figures - Tables 1 and 3 - focus on the Strategy on the Rights of the Child, but give two different summaries of the key points. Table 2 looks to the Child Guarantee, erroneously summarising it as having two principles, of which the first is not an explicit Guarantee; the second is a concatenation of three guarantees, while three (access by marginalised children to adequate nutrition, housing, and free healthcare) are not mentioned. Figure 2's policy summaries do not replicate those of the earlier figures, and its classification of thematic areas is blatantly wrong. This is a great shame, as better analysed and presented this could have been a useful summary comparing the different emphases of the Finnish policies compared with Commission priorities. We clearly presented the analysis in an insufficiently clear manner. In the original manuscript, we had included only selected examples of the analysis, which of course does not mean that our full analysis was limited to these examples. We have now corrected this ambiguity by reconstructing the figures and the table in a clearer format, making all six key service guarantees of the ECG visible. The figures and tables have been reconstructed to clearly reflect all six core service guarantees, and inconsistencies across tables have been corrected. Methods 2 This study will only meaningfully add value and create actionable knowledge if it sharpens its analysis of the themes of the Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the much more focused Child Guarantee, ensures consistency of analyses across its different tables and figures, identifies areas where Finnish policies and Finnish funding calls do not offer support to these priorities, and then ascertains whether these omissions are justified on the basis of current good services or alternatively represent continuing areas of under-provision for marginalised children. We have sharpened the analysis by ensuring consistency across tables and figures and by explicitly addressing areas where Finnish policies and funding calls do not reflect EU-level priorities, while carefully distinguishing between programme mandate and potential under-prioritisation. Methods 3 The paper is primarily an empirically focused presentation of a policy analysis. It is a legitimate choice to keep the focus on the empirical level and less on theory, but the absence of any theory in the paper is still noteworthy. Your ‘conceptual framework’ section outlines various international legal document (UNCRC, the EU child rights-related documents) rather than introducing a research-based conceptual framework. On p. 5, you write that the two European Commission documents on child rights and the child guarantee are used ‘as a theory-driven analytical framework for examining the other documents included in the study.’ This requires further explanation: how are EU documents ‘theory-driven’? Which theories do you derive from these documents? Why is it not simply a comparative analysis of priorities in EU vs. Finnish policy documents? We have removed the term “theory-driven” because it caused methodological ambiguity. The analysis is based on guiding policy documents rather than academic theory. However, we have added relevant

research to the introduction and drawn on this theoretical basis in the discussion section; please see the respective sections. Methods 3 The phrase 'Accordingly, the focus of the study is on existing material' (p. 5) seems redundant – it is already clear that the study is on existing material. The sentence has been removed as suggested. Methods 4 I recommend using the UNCRC as a theoretical framework and a baseline for comparison, at least to the EU Strategy to connect the dots. As mentioned in the literature review, the documents are reviewed against one another rather than against the CRC. Thank you for this suggestion. We have clarified that the UNCRC functions as a normative and ethical reference point informing the interpretation of EU- and national-level strategies, rather than as a direct analytical baseline. The analysis therefore focuses on policy documents reviewed in relation to one another, while being guided by a children's rights perspective grounded in the UNCRC. Methods 4 The textual explanation of the analytical framework is hard to follow. I recommend creating a matrix with documents on one axis and the children's rights areas (ex. Nutrition, justice, etc.) on another, and mark the documents that reflect each area We acknowledge that the analytical framework required clearer presentation. The figures and tables have been revised to present the analysis in a matrix-like format that more transparently links children's rights areas with the analysed document groups, thereby improving clarity and consistency. Methods 5 p. 6 note spelling issue in last text box of image; should be "Third" not "Thrid" Thank you for the remark; this has been corrected. Findings 2 The review paper does highlight the lack of Finnish policy inclusion of child-friendly justice. However, access to adequate nutrition, adequate housing, and healthcare, are very largely omitted, yet these are central to child wellbeing and are areas strongly compromised by poverty, social exclusion, and other social challenges. Thus one element of the Strategy on the Rights of the Child, and half of the six elements of the Child Guarantee, do not explicitly appear in Finnish policy documents or in calls for proposals under the three ESF+ funding rounds. It may of course be that Finland considers it meets these four service provision requirements adequately, but it is not reassuring to find no evidence presented to claim this achievement - though recognising the limitations of document analysis removed from the core objective of the documents analysed. But a strategy review should have looked for such evidence, as the authors have looked at wider literature for some policy lines. We agree with this important observation. The revised manuscript places greater emphasis on omissions related to access to nutrition, housing, and healthcare, alongside child-friendly justice. We have systematically revisited the analysed national documents and funding calls to clarify how these themes are addressed—or remain absent—and strengthened the Discussion by drawing on previous research highlighting the challenges of realising health-related commitments under the European Child Guarantee. Findings 2 This review has usefully started to address the issue of how national priorities in Finland have sought to address and fit with European Commission policies as well as funding qualification criteria. It then analyses that Finland has introduced some additional commitments, while identifying that two European policy objectives are partially or totally omitted, but itself overlooks three other fundamental European priorities which are omitted. As noted earlier, the tables presented in the article were only illustrative examples of the analysis. The full analysis naturally takes all priority areas into account. We have now clarified our presentation and made all priority areas more explicitly visible. Findings 3 The first paragraph in 'Findings' may also be redundant – the documents have just all been introduced, and it is slightly repetitive when reading. The paragraph has been removed as suggested. Findings 4 In Figure 2, what do you mean by operational? By

operational, we refer to the fact that these thematic areas are visibly reflected in the ESF funding calls. We have now clarified this in the text. Findings 5 One question that did not seem considered was the assumption that coherence across the studied documents would necessarily mean that these strategies would be implemented and reflected in practices in Finland. While there is growing literature that recognizes that while law and policy may be established, there are challenges and obstacles that hinder or prevent implementation. For instance, the table on p. 10 uses the term "operational:" to indicate a relationship between the Innovation and Skills in Finland program and EU-level strategies but how do we know about the status of the implementation in the program other than it is identified? How is "operational" defined? We have clarified how the term "operationalised" is used in this study to refer to the explicit presence of strategic priorities in programme documents and funding calls, rather than to their implementation in practice. Discussion 1 Although this section (Discussion) is well written and reflects mastery over the data, I felt that it has several missed opportunities. Firstly, you alluded to the influence of national political priorities but did not elaborate on what these are and how they influence the ESF+. We have expanded the Discussion to more explicitly describe national political priorities and demographic considerations, and to analyse how these shape ESF+ funding decisions in the Finnish context. Discussion 1 Reorganising this section (conclusions) could improve clarity. You might consider structuring it as follows: Conclusions Significance and implications of the study Limitations Recommendations and future research directions All the necessary content is already present; it simply needs clearer organisation. This is a suggestion rather than a requirement; please use your discretion. We appreciate this structural suggestion and have strengthened the internal organisation of the Discussion and Conclusions sections while retaining a separate and clearly defined section on limitations and further research. Discussion 2 Comparative data from sources such as WHO and Eurostat, as well as bibliographic searches, would be valuable underpinning. Thank you for this suggestion. We agree that comparative data from WHO, Eurostat, and broader bibliographic searches would be valuable in a study assessing children's wellbeing or service outcomes. However, the present article is a qualitative documentary analysis focused on the visibility and operationalisation of children's rights commitments in selected policy documents and ESF+ funding calls. We therefore chose not to add a wider comparative statistical analysis, as this would broaden the scope beyond the study's research questions. Instead, the Discussion includes selected research and policy literature where directly relevant to interpreting the documentary findings, and the need for further research on implementation, outcomes, budgeting, and structural conditions is acknowledged in the Limitations and further research section. Discussion 3 Your main recommendation seems to be more strategic coherence across documents, which would support children's rights. But the analytical move from strategic coherence to better children's rights implementation, is not clear to me. How do we know that children's rights would not be better supported with, for example, less EU involvement, more decentralisation and more 'different' rather than more 'aligned' child rights policies across Member States? Your discussion on p. 10 of how the Finnish documents are products of much more than EU strategies, is very useful, and more of this type of reflection would be good. We appreciate the reviewer's nuanced reflections on coherence and localisation. In the revised discussion, we have refined our argument to avoid implying that greater alignment across governance levels is inherently preferable. Instead, we emphasise the balance between legitimate national adaptation and the need to ensure that fundamental children's rights are not systematically rendered invisible in

funding processes. Discussion 3 In the Discussion (p. 13), you write: 'the fragmented nature of strategic guidance raises questions about coherence, coordination, and accountability in the implementation of children's rights. When multiple strategies intersect without a clear overarching framework, it becomes difficult to assess whether the entirety of the strategic landscape is truly governed or understood by any single actor.' I understand this as a call for more EU-level coordination and less decentralisation when it comes to strategic decision making for children's rights? Is that correctly understood? If yes, is that really what would 'implement' children' rights better, that one actor (implicitly, the EU) 'truly governs (...) the entirety of the strategic landscape' when it comes to child rights? I understand the importance of accountability, but is accountability created through exact coherence of policies at different levels? Are there not many other – and more important and efficient – measures of accountability for rights? To address the concern regarding decentralisation and EU-level coordination, we have added an explicit sentence to the Discussion section clarifying that EU child rights strategies function primarily as normative and coordinative instruments, while responsibility for prioritisation and funding allocation remains at the national and sub-national levels in accordance with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality. This clarification aims to prevent interpretations suggesting advocacy for stronger centralisation. This clarification also responds to concerns regarding the relationship between strategic coherence and national discretion. Discussion 3 Similarly, you write that 'Allocation decisions are influenced not only by shared strategic goals but also by domestic political agendas and demographic considerations. This raises concerns about strategic coherence and the visibility of children's rights in funding processes.' Why should allocation decisions not be influenced by domestic demographic considerations? Is local relevance not more important than 'strategic coherence'? Would 'strategic coherence' really increase the visibility of children's rights? I read this as a call for more top-down children's rights and less bottom-up children's rights (the latter would be the opposite of strategic coherence, and reflecting Finnish children's realities more). If I am reading this wrong – please explain in more detail in the paper, so others do not misunderstand it in the same way. Thank you for this important clarification request. We have revised the Discussion section to explicitly state that national demographic and political considerations are both legitimate and necessary in funding allocation. Our reference to strategic coherence is not intended as a call for top-down governance, but rather as a call for transparency regarding how children's rights considerations are weighed alongside other national priorities. We have clarified this to avoid interpretations suggesting that local relevance should be subordinated to EU-level coordination. Discussion 3 It would be refreshing with some additional recommendations based on the findings – should we really aspire for coherence across documents? Could the findings not say something more than that, about the importance of localising and decentralising children's rights to make them relevant for local realities, for example? As argued by Sally Engle Merry, domestic implementation of rights will always include adaptation, translation etc. to resonate in local realities, so why is it a 'bad' thing that EU strategies and Finnish policies differ? If your aim is to inform future funding calls, could a recommendation then not also be to be more open to reflect local realities? Arguably, some aspects of local discrimination issues, for example, could get lost of the EU funding coordination on child rights were more coherent and streamlined. If children's participation and input are important (as you highlight in the introduction), would their lived realities and experiences not be very different in Finland or in Portugal, calling for less coherence and

more diversity in approaches? You mention on p. 13 that more aligned policies would ensure more equitable funding allocation throughout the Member States. This begs the question of whether equality between children is best addressed at EU level or domestic level – a question to which the answer is of course 'it depends' and 'both', but engaging in this difficult discussion would bring more nuance and add a greater contribution of the paper. We appreciate this nuanced reflection. In the revised Discussion, we clarify that the study does not advocate coherence as an end in itself, nor does it view divergence between EU and national policies as inherently problematic. Rather, we acknowledge localisation and adaptation as necessary features of children's rights governance. Our use of "strategic coherence" refers to transparency and accountability in prioritisation, not to uniformity of approaches across Member States. We have revised the text to make this distinction explicit and to avoid interpretations suggesting that diversity or local relevance should be reduced. Discussion 3 Regarding child friendly justice, is it an interesting observation that it is not included in the Finnish National Child Strategy Committee report, the Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027 programme, or the three funding calls. But could this be because it is not the mandate of an 'innovation and skills' programme to deal with child friendly justice? Wouldn't it rather be reflected in policies about juvenile justice, policing, judicial system etc.? You mention some of these limitations on pp. 12-13, but you do not comment on why one should expect child friendly justice to be present in the Innovation and Skills programme. In general, it could be explained a little clearer why exactly the Innovation and Skills programme was chosen to analyse above other child rights-related programmes in Finland? What does it represent? We agree that child-friendly justice primarily falls within other policy domains and does not constitute the core mandate of an innovation and skills programme. We have clarified in the Methods section why the Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027 programme was selected for analysis and what it represents within Finland's ESF+ governance. The observation regarding child-friendly justice is not intended as a critique of programme mandate, but as an illustration of how certain rights-related themes may remain less visible within cross-sectoral funding frameworks that explicitly target children and families. Discussion 3 The phrase 'It is both important and ethically necessary to critically examine how funding is allocated, especially when it concerns children's rights and well-being' on p. 13 would benefit from being moved to the Introduction rather than Discussion – the underlying justification for the need of the study is important to put clearly in the beginning. Moved as suggested. Discussion 4 When discussing the findings, the process of creating national-level documents should be discussed. Who is the main decision-maker? Are there participatory processes underlying policymaking? Did children and youth contribute to the national policy creation? Were statistical data and needs assessment used to support the prioritization process? Without knowing that, it is easy to misjudge the results of the comparison and make wrong conclusion on the source of misalignment We have added contextual clarification regarding national policy-making processes to avoid misinterpretation of observed misalignments as purely technical or strategic shortcomings. Discussion 4 Discussion: This section needs to be more structured. Probably focusing on specific discrepancies and using them as headings would help with this. The Discussion section has been restructured using thematic subheadings that focus on specific discrepancies and interpretive dimensions, thereby improving clarity and coherence. Discussion 4 Page 12, para 1 missing citation This is the authors' own reflection; therefore, no source references are provided. Discussion 4 Funding of the priority areas often reflects the social construction of children

and childhood in society (mostly the decision-makers). What do your results suggest about the way Finnish society sees children? We have added a reflective interpretation addressing how funding priorities implicitly construct understandings of childhood within Finnish policy contexts. Discussion 5 This paper highlights the efforts, successes and ongoing fragmentation challenges according to publicly-available documentation, which could be acknowledged on p. 13 of the article but it is not. The Discussion now explicitly acknowledges both achievements and ongoing fragmentation challenges in Finnish child-related policies. Discussion 5 It also points to the potential of future research emphasizing these general measures further and how they can advance not only strategies but their implementation with attention to such general measures as budgets, etc.

In addition, there are relevant questions of capacity and political will beyond simply whether regional priorities are recognized in national strategies. Questioning this relationship would be useful to acknowledge at a minimum, and also suggests additional future research directions that have not yet been recognized. We have expanded the future research section to highlight the importance of examining structural measures such as funding, administrative capacity, and political will in advancing children's rights beyond strategic alignment. Discussion 5 p. 11 awkward language in second line: "Research highlights the need to for equality in education..." Thank you for pointing out the typo; the sentence has now been corrected.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Report 13 January 2026

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.23731.r67207

© 2026 Sibanda S. This is an open access peer review report distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

?

Sipho Sibanda
The University of Western Australia, Perth, Western Australia, Australia

Journal: F1000
Type: Review
Title: Between EU objectives and national guidance: a documentary analysis of ESF+ funding for child and family services in Finland
Date of Review: 12/01/2026

- **General**

Thank you for undertaking such a valuable study. This is a very interesting topic that analyses the calls for funding vis-à-vis the funding and policy frameworks and the service obligations. The manuscript sheds light on the misalignment of the two and on the factors that contribute to the misalignment. The article has implications for social justice, social policy, social welfare, and child

protection.
I appreciate the effort, thought, and reflection evident in your manuscript. Your dedication is clear, and it is commendable.
However, a few aspects of the manuscript require further attention before it can be considered ready for publication. As such, my recommendation is acceptance after minor revisions. Below, I have outlined detailed suggestions to support you in strengthening the manuscript.
Please take these comments in the spirit in which they are offered, constructively and collegially. Your work is distinctive and has the potential to make a significant impact and attract a wide readership. I am confident that your revised version will be even stronger and more refined. More strength to your arm.

- **Title**

Although your title is clear and well-crafted. However, I would like to suggest that you do not use abbreviations in a title. Please write every in Full, EU should be European Union, and ESF+ should be European Social Fund Plus. It is good that you have indicated a geographic demarcation of your study. This is good for context.

- **Abstract**

Your abstract is solid; it includes some essential background information and adequately describes the methodology. It also briefly highlights the findings and the conclusion. See whether it is possible to also include a brief recommendation that emerged from the study, and to briefly indicate the theoretical framework that guided the study; you seem to be leaning towards either a rights-based approach or a social justice framework.
See whether adding keywords at the end of the abstract is a possibility.

- **Introduction**

The introduction is well-organised and provides a strong foundation. Key concepts are clearly defined, and the contextual background is excellent. Your use of literature is impressive; well done.
In your introduction, you state, “However, the visibility of UNCRC-based strategies in EU-funded projects has not been systematically studied.” I am suggesting that you rephrase this statement, as some might not agree with it. You could potentially rephrase it to: “However, the visibility of UNCRC-based strategies in EU-funded projects appears not to have been systematically studied.”
I am happy that your introduction has a very clear research aim and research questions. For improved flow, consider moving the research aim and questions to the end of the introduction section, just before the data and methods section. This will ensure a chronological and seamless flow into the data and methods section. However, this is just a suggestion; see what works best for your paper. Also, see whether the background and conceptual framework section can be integrated into the introduction section (you can make it a subheading within the introduction section)
Whilst I appreciate the detailed conceptual and legislative framework, I was also expecting to see a little bit of discussion/context about child and family services in Finland, what they entail, who the stakeholders are, who the service providers are, what challenges are faced by children and Families in Finland, which then makes an argument for funding to provide services.
Although this is a Finnish / EU study, you can increase the global relevance of the study by aligning it to the Sustainable Development Goals and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This is just a suggestion, see whether you want to take it on board.
In your introduction, I was also expecting to see the theoretical framework that guided the study, e.g rights-based approach or a social justice framework.
Other than that, well done for such a solid introduction section.

- **Materials and Methods**

This section is solid. I am impressed by your description and justification of using qualitative document analysis. Well done.
This section provides a very clear picture of how the study was done. Well done for such a well-written and clear methodology section.
See whether the title can be rephrased to “Materials and Methods”, instead of “data and Methods”
In this section, you write about sample selection, but the inclusion and exclusion criteria are not clearly explained. You also talk about a systematic examination of data, yet the “systematic” is not adequately explained; just be careful that you do not give an impression that this was a systematic review. Because then you need a clear PRISMA flowchart and a PICo framework.

- **Results / Findings**

This section is clearly written, it is very strong and has compelling findings, well done.

- **Discussion**

Although this section is well written and reflects mastery over the data, I felt that it has several missed opportunities. Firstly, you alluded to the influence of national political priorities but did not elaborate on what these are and how they influence the ESF+. Secondly, the lack of a clear theoretical framework to guide the study made it very difficult for you to nicely package your discussion section. Kindly revisit my earlier comment about the need for a theoretical framework, e.g. if you were using the rights-based framework and then in the discussion section you can reflect on how these findings fare compared to the principles of a rights-based approach e.g participation, transparency, accountability, empowerment, partnerships, accessibility, acceptability, sustainability, appropriateness, etc, of which all these principles are clearly visible in the findings section. See whether you would like to take this theoretical framework on board, as it would strengthen the discussion section.

- **Conclusions**

Your conclusions are strong and well-reasoned. However, reorganising this section could improve clarity. You might consider structuring it as follows:
Conclusions
Significance and implications of the study
Limitations
Recommendations and future research directions
All the necessary content is already present; it simply needs clearer organisation. This is a suggestion rather than a requirement; please use your discretion.
Thank you for the opportunity to review such an engaging manuscript. I want to reiterate the originality and value of your manuscript. Wishing you all the best as you revise the paper.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Partly

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?

Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: child protection, child welfare, social development, social policy, social justice, human rights, refugees, social work

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 19 Jan 2026

Laura Ortju

Authors' response to reviewer comments Dear Dr Sibanda,
We would like to thank you for the careful reading of our manuscript and for the constructive and valuable comments you have provided. We appreciate the time and effort you have invested in the review process. At this stage, we note that we are still awaiting the comments from the second reviewer. We therefore plan to address all feedback at once to ensure consistency across the revisions. We would like to thank you for your comments related to the theoretical framework. These remarks are highly valuable, and we will give them careful consideration in our discussion. All comments will be reviewed thoroughly and addressed in detail in the revised version of the manuscript. Kind regards, Laura, Kati and Elina

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Author Response 01 Oct 2026

Laura Ortju

Dear Reviewers, Please accept our apologies that the structured response we submitted at the beginning of the summer has apparently not been made available to you. Below, we have included a copy of our responses to the valuable comments you provided to help us improve the manuscript. We sincerely hope that you will have an opportunity to review the revisions we have made and assess whether our manuscript can be accepted for publication. Thank you very much for the time and expertise you have already contributed to supporting our research. **On behalf of the authors,**
Laura Section Reviewer Comment Authors' response General 1 The lack of a clear theoretical framework to guide the study made it very difficult for you to nicely package your discussion section. Kindly revisit my earlier comment about the need for a theoretical

framework, e.g. if you were using the rights-based framework and then in the discussion section you can reflect on how these findings are compared to the principles of a rights-based approach e.g participation, transparency, accountability, empowerment, partnerships, accessibility, acceptability, sustainability, appropriateness, etc, of which all these principles are clearly visible in the findings section. See whether you would like to take this theoretical framework on board, as it would strengthen the discussion section.

We appreciate the reviewer's suggestion regarding a more explicit theoretical framework. Due to the documentary nature of the study, we have chosen not to introduce a new academic theory-driven framework, as this would require reconfiguring the analytical design. Instead, we have strengthened the normative and children's right-based framing of the study by clarifying the role of the UNCRC as an overarching normative reference and by incorporating a stronger child-centred and social justice-oriented perspective throughout the introduction and discussion sections.

General 2 It is primarily a documentary analysis, and in such there is always the challenge of going deeper into necessary semantic analysis and in so doing moving away from positive advocacy for the societal members (in this case marginalised children) on whom the policies are intended to be centred. In general the review manages this, but deeper investigation of the significance of the gaps identified, and more vehemence on behalf of children whose needs are omitted, would have more impact than solely stating gaps in textural content. We thank the reviewer for this important observation. In the revised manuscript, we have placed greater emphasis on the significance of identified gaps from a children's rights perspective. The findings and discussion sections have been strengthened to explicitly address omissions related to healthcare, nutrition, housing, and child-friendly justice, and to reflect on the implications of these gaps for children in vulnerable situations. We also clarify the limitations of documents analysis while adopting a more explicit advocacy-oriented stance in interpreting the findings.
General 2 The review seeks to identify where European policies have been supported, rather than majoring on those areas which are largely or totally omitted. This does little to actively promote children's best interests, nor to promote stronger achievement of European Commission principles and policies; it is solely a commentary on a government. Thank you for this important observation. In the revised manuscript, we have strengthened the focus on areas that are partially or entirely omitted from national strategies and ESF+ funding calls, rather than primarily highlighting areas of alignment. In particular, the Discussion section now more explicitly addresses the implications of missing themes—such as child-friendly justice and core elements of the European Child Guarantee—from a children's rights perspective. This shift aims to move beyond descriptive commentary towards a more critical examination of how omissions in policy and funding frameworks may affect the visibility of children's rights. General 2 The paper does have one quotation expressing the voice of a child, but this child-centricity and advocacy could well have been carried on in spirit in the main text, by highlighting more strongly the children and child needs omitted, rather than framing this solely in terms of missing text. We agree that a child-centred perspective should be reflected throughout the manuscript, even when the analysis is based on policy documents. In the revised version, we have strengthened the children's rights perspective across the Discussion by emphasising how omissions in strategies and funding calls may affect the visibility of children's needs, rather than framing

the analysis solely in terms of missing textual references. This approach seeks to carry the spirit of child-centric advocacy throughout the interpretation of findings.
General 2 In the absence of evidence, though, concerns must remain, as the review does not seem to promote Finnish disadvantaged children's needs actively. Indeed, one Finnish policy document cited in the study is quoted as including the statement: "Children and young people are considered as part of adult services" in the response to education and healthcare inclusion - within health this amazing statement airbrushes out post-natal care, immunisation, developmental health, good access to child-sensitive primary care, and adolescent health. By contrast, a simple literature search shows that issues in achieving the health aims of the Child Guarantee have been raised, such as Rigby. "A commitment to marginalized children in the European Union: The hope and challenges of the EU Child Guarantee." Child: Care, Health and Development 48.1 (2022): 170-174; and Rigby. European Union Child Guarantee—challenges raised by the welcome promise of free healthcare for marginalized children, European Journal of Public Health, Volume 31, Issue 5, October 2021, Pages 943–950, https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckab062 . Thank you for this important and challenging comment. We acknowledge the concern that the manuscript could be read as insufficiently promoting the needs of disadvantaged children. In revising the manuscript, we have clarified the scope of the analysis as a document-based review focusing on how children's rights commitments are articulated within selected EU- and national-level strategies and ESF+ funding calls, rather than as an assessment of the availability or quality of child health or other basic services in Finland. We have removed potentially misleading formulations that could be interpreted as endorsing a marginalisation of child-specific health needs and clarified that references to health-related gaps concern the visibility of such commitments within funding frameworks, not service provision in practice. In addition, we have situated our findings within the broader EU-level discussion on the challenges of realising the health-related aims of the European Child Guarantee by referring to previous research (Rigby, 2021), while explicitly noting the limitations of drawing conclusions beyond the analysed documents. General 3 Relatedly, a consequence of the paper's primary relevance being on a policy level and never moving away from the documents (neither 'up' to theories or 'down' to children's lives), is that it comes across as detached from realities. Seeing what kind of project the article is a product of, and its collaboration with both NGOs and government, I do not presume that your work is detached from reality at all – I'm just asking if your vast ground knowledge on children's participation could be better reflected in the paper. For example, you do have a few mentions of what role documents play, and why it is ethically important to study documents – if these types of reflections were more present throughout the article, it would make for more engaging reading aware of children's realities. Thank you for this thoughtful reflection. While the study deliberately focuses on policy documents, we have revised the manuscript to more clearly articulate why documents matter from a children's rights perspective and how they shape the realities within which services and participation opportunities are organised. We have also strengthened reflexive elements in the Discussion to better reflect the ethical significance of document analysis and to acknowledge the authors' grounding in practice-based knowledge, while remaining methodologically consistent with the study's documentary focus.

General 3 I would also ask the authors to clarify or reconsider the role of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in the paper. It is presented under a

'background' section, but not referred to throughout the analysis, only briefly mentioned again under 'Limitations'. On p. 4, you write that 'To meaningfully assess the implementation of the UNCRC principles at the national level, it is essential to include relevant European and national policy documents in the review' – this phrase implicitly says that you aim to assess the UNCRC principles at a national level (and not only the EU child rights principles). Is this correctly understood? If yes, why is the UNCRC not included as a 'source document' and included in the analysis? If no, why the introduction to the UNCRC at all, and especially, why the mention of 'assess[ing] the implementation of UNCRC principles at the national level'? If the UNCRC is part of the 'conceptual framework', it should also be engaged with in the analysis. We have now clarified the role of the UNCRC in the manuscript. The UNCRC is now explicitly positioned as a normative and legal framework guiding the interpretation of EU- and national-level policy documents, rather than as an object of direct document analysis. This clarification has been integrated into the introduction and conceptual background sections.

General 4 The main concern is that the study needs better framing. I recommend that you consider framing this paper as a case study of the localization of the UNCRC in Finland rather than just an analysis of documents. The current structure/flow of the paper can be confusing to the reader. On the one hand, you demonstrate multiple misalignments among the documents, which makes it more critical to analyze the root causes of the discrepancies. On the other hand, these misalignments are not necessarily dangerous oversights but could be rather a reasonable adaptation of the international treaty. Your paper does not take one course over the other; it is rather unclear what your message is. My recommendation is to frame your work as a case study of national-level adaptation, analyzing what was done well and where growth is needed. Having considered the feedback from all five reviewers, we have decided to retain the document-analysis approach as the core methodological frame of the article. To address the reviewer's concern, we now more explicitly discuss national adaptation and prioritisation as an inherent feature of multi-level governance. We also clarify why the absence of child-friendly justice is analytically relevant in the context of ESF+ funding, while acknowledging that responsibility for this theme mat lie primarily in other policy domains. General 4 While the authors have a great grasp on the documents they review, the constant reference to each document reduces the readability of the paper. I suggest you group documents into international, regional, and national categories, and refer to a specific set in the text where appropriate. Alternatively, propose a shorter version of the documents' titles Thank you for this helpful suggestion regarding readability. In the revised manuscript, we have streamlined references to policy documents by grouping them where analytically appropriate and referring to EU-level and national-level documents as sets rather than repeatedly naming each individual document. Full document titles are retained where specific distinctions are necessary for the analysis, but otherwise a grouped reference approach is used to improve the flow and clarity of the text. We have chosen this approach instead of introducing new abbreviations to maintain accessibility. General 4 Several times, you suggest that the documents are examples of the UNCRC "implementation". I suggest considering using "operationalization" or "codification" instead, as implementation often refers to specific frontline programs directly affecting children and youth Thank you for this helpful terminology-related comment. We have now revised the manuscript to use the term "operationalization" instead of "implementation," as you suggest. This adjustment has been applied systematically throughout the text to ensure

conceptual accuracy and consistency. General 5 There was some degree of repetition of methodology across the introduction, methods, and findings and it is suggested that these details could be streamlined further in the paper. Thank you for this observation. We have streamlined the manuscript by reducing repetitive descriptions of the methodology across sections. Methodological details are now primarily concentrated in the Methods section, while the Introduction and Findings focus on contextualisation and interpretation, respectively. Title 1 Although your title is clear and well-crafted. However, I would like to suggest that you do not use abbreviations in a title. Please write every in Full, EU should be European Union, and ESF+ should be European Social Fund Plus. It is good that you have indicated a geographic demarcation of your study. This is good for context. We acknowledge the reviewer's recommendation and agree that fully written titles can enhance clarity. In this case, however, expanding the abbreviations would exceed practical title length constraints. As the abbreviations used are well established and defined at the outset of the article, we have opted to retain them in the title. Abstract 1 Your abstract is solid; it includes some essential background information and adequately describes the methodology. It also briefly highlights the findings and the conclusion. See whether it is possible to also include a brief recommendation that emerged from the study, and to briefly indicate the theoretical framework that guided the study; you seem to be leaning towards either a rights-based approach or a social justice framework. We have revised the Abstract to more explicitly indicate the normative children's rights perspective guiding the study and to include a brief recommendation emerging from the findings. Keywords have been provided in line with the journal's guidelines, although they do not appear to be displayed consistently in published articles. Abstract 1 See whether adding keywords at the end of the abstract is a possibility. We have submitted the keywords in accordance with the journal's guidelines, but they do not appear to be displayed alongside the published articles. This also seems to apply to other articles published in the journal. Abstract 2 The Conclusion section of the Abstract raises confusion over policy competence and objectives, by stating that "national-level priorities may obscure specific EU objectives". Nearly all the operational services which support children, ranging from education to health care, and including justice services, are national competencies. European Commission activities in these areas primarily are to establish shared values and principles, and as appropriate to set targets, identify effective practices, set standards by EU-wide consensus, and provide targeted financial and other enablement. Thus national policies legally are pre-eminent; they cannot 'obscure' EU policies, though they can fail to promote them or to align optimally with their achievement, and this rightly can be called out. We have revised the Abstract to remove wording that could be interpreted as suggesting that national priorities override EU competence. The revised formulation now reflects the EU's coordinative role and the principle of subsidiarity more accurately. Introduction 1 In your introduction, you state, "However, the visibility of UNCRC-based strategies in EU-funded projects has not been systematically studied." I am suggesting that you rephrase this statement, as some might not agree with it. You could potentially rephrase it to: "However, the visibility of UNCRC-based strategies in EU-funded projects appears not to have been systematically studied." Thank you, the sentence has been revised according to your suggestion. Introduction 1 I am happy that your introduction has a very clear research aim and research questions. For improved flow, consider moving the research aim and questions to the end of the introduction section, just before the data and methods section. This will ensure a chronological and seamless flow into the data and methods section. However, this is just a

suggestion; see what works best for your paper. We combined the introduction and background sections and moved the research questions to the end of the section. Introduction 1 In your introduction, I was also expecting to see the theoretical framework that guided the study, e.g rights-based approach or a social justice framework. Other than that, well done for such a solid introduction section. Rather than introducing a formal theory-driven framework, we clarified the normative children's rights perspective guiding the analysis. The Introduction now explicitly explains how the UNCRC, social justice, and social sustainability inform the interpretation of policy documents. Introduction 5 It is recommended that the authors consider referring to other such national level studies in the introduction to provide more context and potential comparative examples if they exist, and if not, they should be mentioned. We have clarified the research landscape by noting that while national child strategies and UNCRC implementation have been studied, comparable analyses of EU-funded programme documents and funding calls focusing on children and families are scarce. Background 1 Also, see whether the background and conceptual framework section can be integrated into the introduction section (you can make it a subheading within the introduction section) We combined the introduction and background sections and adjusted the subheadings to improve the clarity of the overall structure. Background 1 Whilst I appreciate the detailed conceptual and legislative framework, I was also expecting to see a little bit of discussion/context about child and family services in Finland, what they entail, who the stakeholders are, who the service providers are, what challenges are faced by children and Families in Finland, which then makes an argument for funding to provide services. We added a brief description of how services for children and families are organised in Finland to the "Introduction" section. We also have strengthened the Background section by clarifying both the organisation of child and family services in Finland and the key challenges faced by children and families, including growing inequalities in mental health, learning outcomes, and regional access to services. Background 1 Although this is a Finnish / EU study, you can increase the global relevance of the study by aligning it to the Sustainable Development Goals and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This is just a suggestion, see whether you want to take it on board. Thank you, but we will leave this outside the scope of the present analysis. Background 3 My recommendation would be to engage more with theory coming from research, not only from legal documents, to lift the findings and make them relevant beyond your case study; or, if it is a deliberate choice not to do so in this paper, to explain or remove the reference to 'theory-driven'. We have removed the misleading term "theory-driven," as the analytical framework is based on guiding policy documents rather than academic theory. Background 3 On p. 5, you introduce the Finnish Innovation and Skills programme and mention that 'Applicants' can apply for funding. For understanding the context, it would be good to know who these applicants are (government entities? NGOs?). A description of the applicant types has been added to the "Background and conceptual framework" section. Background 4 Is this mismatch in themes an issue or just a product of prioritization? Countries have the right to adapt the UNCRC to their local contexts. The literature review should reflect research on the UNCRC's adaptation and localization. This would position this study better and support its significance We have revised the Background section to explicitly acknowledge that differences between international guidance and national priorities may reflect legitimate processes of adaptation and localisation of the UNCRC, rather than shortcomings. Background 5 It would be helpful to develop the analysis further in relation to the UN Convention on the

Rights of the Child ([CRC]; 1989) and related current literature. The paper's title highlights the emphasis of ESF+ funding for child and family services in Finland but the introduction and one of the research questions highlight children's rights as per the EU Strategy and Council Recommendation. The CRC is presented on p. 4 as the conceptual framework but it does not seem to inform the paper much, rather seems cursory or superficial. This is a missed opportunity as greater attention to the CRC would be beneficial to develop the analysis further. For instance, the authors have identified the importance of coordination within governance but they have not identified how it is a key CRC general measure of implementation. We agree that the UNCRC general measures of implementation are highly relevant. While the study does not empirically assess implementation outcomes, the discussion now more explicitly acknowledges coordination, funding, and governance as core structural mechanisms through which children's rights are advanced. These points are also highlighted as priorities for future research. Methods 1 See whether the title can be rephrased to "Materials and Methods", instead of "data and Methods" The title has been revised according to the suggestion. Methods 1 In this section (material and methods), you write about sample selection, but the inclusion and exclusion criteria are not clearly explained. The description of the inclusion and exclusion criteria has now been added to the "Data and sample selection" section. Methods 1 You also talk about a systematic examination of data, yet the "systematic" is not adequately explained; just be careful that you do not give an impression that this was a systematic review. Because then you need a clear PRISMA flowchart and a PICo framework. Thank you for this important observation. We have replaced the term systematic with structured to avoid methodological misunderstandings. Methods 2 While the European Strategy on the Rights of the Child is a detailed social and legal underpinning, the more recent and specific pragmatic document rightly used in the review is the European Child Guarantee. As shown in the Commission's own publications (such as the Commission's dedicated web page European Child Guarantee - Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion and its public fact sheet https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/5307cc11-6413-482c-84f4-17d4b5ef97a6_en) the core basis of the Child Guarantee comprises six core service promises. Unfortunately, the review loses this clarity. Two of the figures - Tables 1 and 3 - focus on the Strategy on the Rights of the Child, but give two different summaries of the key points. Table 2 looks to the Child Guarantee, erroneously summarising it as having two principles, of which the first is not an explicit Guarantee; the second is a concatenation of three guarantees, while three (access by marginalised children to adequate nutrition, housing, and free healthcare) are not mentioned. Figure 2's policy summaries do not replicate those of the earlier figures, and its classification of thematic areas is blatantly wrong. This is a great shame, as better analysed and presented this could have been a useful summary comparing the different emphases of the Finnish policies compared with Commission priorities. We clearly presented the analysis in an insufficiently clear manner. In the original manuscript, we had included only selected examples of the analysis, which of course does not mean that our full analysis was limited to these examples. We have now corrected this ambiguity by reconstructing the figures and the table in a clearer format, making all six key service guarantees of the ECG visible. The figures and tables have been reconstructed to clearly reflect all six core service guarantees, and inconsistencies across tables have been corrected. Methods 2 This study will only meaningfully add value and create actionable knowledge if it sharpens its analysis of the themes of the Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the much more focused Child Guarantee, ensures consistency of

analyses across its different tables and figures, identifies areas where Finnish policies and Finnish funding calls do not offer support to these priorities, and then ascertains whether these omissions are justified on the basis of current good services or alternatively represent continuing areas of under-provision for marginalised children. We have sharpened the analysis by ensuring consistency across tables and figures and by explicitly addressing areas where Finnish policies and funding calls do not reflect EU-level priorities, while carefully distinguishing between programme mandate and potential under-prioritisation. Methods 3 The paper is primarily an empirically focused presentation of a policy analysis. It is a legitimate choice to keep the focus on the empirical level and less on theory, but the absence of any theory in the paper is still noteworthy. Your 'conceptual framework' section outlines various international legal document (UNCRC, the EU child rights-related documents) rather than introducing a research-based conceptual framework. On p. 5, you write that the two European Commission documents on child rights and the child guarantee are used 'as a theory-driven analytical framework for examining the other documents included in the study.' This requires further explanation: how are EU documents 'theory-driven'? Which theories do you derive from these documents? Why is it not simply a comparative analysis of priorities in EU vs. Finnish policy documents? We have removed the term "theory-driven" because it caused methodological ambiguity. The analysis is based on guiding policy documents rather than academic theory. However, we have added relevant research to the introduction and drawn on this theoretical basis in the discussion section; please see the respective sections. Methods 3 The phrase 'Accordingly, the focus of the study is on existing material' (p. 5) seems redundant – it is already clear that the study is on existing material. The sentence has been removed as suggested. Methods 4 I recommend using the UNCRC as a theoretical framework and a baseline for comparison, at least to the EU Strategy to connect the dots. As mentioned in the literature review, the documents are reviewed against one another rather than against the CRC. Thank you for this suggestion. We have clarified that the UNCRC functions as a normative and ethical reference point informing the interpretation of EU- and national-level strategies, rather than as a direct analytical baseline. The analysis therefore focuses on policy documents reviewed in relation to one another, while being guided by a children's rights perspective grounded in the UNCRC. Methods 4 The textual explanation of the analytical framework is hard to follow. I recommend creating a matrix with documents on one axis and the children's rights areas (ex. Nutrition, justice, etc.) on another, and mark the documents that reflect each area We acknowledge that the analytical framework required clearer presentation. The figures and tables have been revised to present the analysis in a matrix-like format that more transparently links children's rights areas with the analysed document groups, thereby improving clarity and consistency. Methods 5 p. 6 note spelling issue in last text box of image; should be "Third" not "Thrid" Thank you for the remark; this has been corrected. Findings 2 The review paper does highlight the lack of Finnish policy inclusion of child-friendly justice. However, access to adequate nutrition, adequate housing, and healthcare, are very largely omitted, yet these are central to child wellbeing and are areas strongly compromised by poverty, social exclusion, and other social challenges. Thus one element of the Strategy on the Rights of the Child, and half of the six elements of the Child Guarantee, do not explicitly appear in Finnish policy documents or in calls for proposals under the three ESF+ funding rounds. It may of course be that Finland considers it meets these four service provision requirements adequately, but it is not reassuring to find no evidence presented to claim this achievement - though recognising the limitations of document analysis removed

from the core objective of the documents analysed. But a strategy review should have looked for such evidence, as the authors have looked at wider literature for some policy lines. We agree with this important observation. The revised manuscript places greater emphasis on omissions related to access to nutrition, housing, and healthcare, alongside child-friendly justice. We have systematically revisited the analysed national documents and funding calls to clarify how these themes are addressed—or remain absent—and strengthened the Discussion by drawing on previous research highlighting the challenges of realising health-related commitments under the European Child Guarantee. Findings 2 This review has usefully started to address the issue of how national priorities in Finland have sought to address and fit with European Commission policies as well as funding qualification criteria. It then analyses that Finland has introduced some additional commitments, while identifying that two European policy objectives are partially or totally omitted, but itself overlooks three other fundamental European priorities which are omitted. As noted earlier, the tables presented in the article were only illustrative examples of the analysis. The full analysis naturally takes all priority areas into account. We have now clarified our presentation and made all priority areas more explicitly visible. Findings 3 The first paragraph in 'Findings' may also be redundant – the documents have just all been introduced, and it is slightly repetitive when reading. The paragraph has been removed as suggested. Findings 4 In Figure 2, what do you mean by operational? By operational, we refer to the fact that these thematic areas are visibly reflected in the ESF funding calls. We have now clarified this in the text. Findings 5 One question that did not seem considered was the assumption that coherence across the studied documents would necessarily mean that these strategies would be implemented and reflected in practices in Finland. While there is growing literature that recognizes that while law and policy may be established, there are challenges and obstacles that hinder or prevent implementation. For instance, the table on p. 10 uses the term "operational:" to indicate a relationship between the Innovation and Skills in Finland program and EU-level strategies but how do we know about the status of the implementation in the program other than it is identified? How is "operational" defined? We have clarified how the term "operationalised" is used in this study to refer to the explicit presence of strategic priorities in programme documents and funding calls, rather than to their implementation in practice. Discussion 1 Although this section (Discussion) is well written and reflects mastery over the data, I felt that it has several missed opportunities. Firstly, you alluded to the influence of national political priorities but did not elaborate on what these are and how they influence the ESF+. We have expanded the Discussion to more explicitly describe national political priorities and demographic considerations, and to analyse how these shape ESF+ funding decisions in the Finnish context. Discussion 1 Reorganising this section (conclusions) could improve clarity. You might consider structuring it as follows: Conclusions Significance and implications of the study Limitations Recommendations and future research directions All the necessary content is already present; it simply needs clearer organisation. This is a suggestion rather than a requirement; please use your discretion. We appreciate this structural suggestion and have strengthened the internal organisation of the Discussion and Conclusions sections while retaining a separate and clearly defined section on limitations and further research. Discussion 2 Comparative data from sources such as WHO and Eurostat, as well as bibliographic searches, would be valuable underpinning. Thank you for this suggestion. We agree that comparative data from WHO, Eurostat, and broader bibliographic searches would be valuable in a study assessing children's wellbeing or service outcomes. However,

the present article is a qualitative documentary analysis focused on the visibility and operationalisation of children's rights commitments in selected policy documents and ESF+ funding calls. We therefore chose not to add a wider comparative statistical analysis, as this would broaden the scope beyond the study's research questions. Instead, the Discussion includes selected research and policy literature where directly relevant to interpreting the documentary findings, and the need for further research on implementation, outcomes, budgeting, and structural conditions is acknowledged in the Limitations and further research section. Discussion 3 Your main recommendation seems to be more strategic coherence across documents, which would support children's rights. But the analytical move from strategic coherence to better children's rights implementation, is not clear to me. How do we know that children's rights would not be better supported with, for example, less EU involvement, more decentralisation and more 'different' rather than more 'aligned' child rights policies across Member States? Your discussion on p. 10 of how the Finnish documents are products of much more than EU strategies, is very useful, and more of this type of reflection would be good. We appreciate the reviewer's nuanced reflections on coherence and localisation. In the revised discussion, we have refined our argument to avoid implying that greater alignment across governance levels is inherently preferable. Instead, we emphasise the balance between legitimate national adaptation and the need to ensure that fundamental children's rights are not systematically rendered invisible in funding processes. Discussion 3 In the Discussion (p. 13), you write: 'the fragmented nature of strategic guidance raises questions about coherence, coordination, and accountability in the implementation of children's rights. When multiple strategies intersect without a clear overarching framework, it becomes difficult to assess whether the entirety of the strategic landscape is truly governed or understood by any single actor.' I understand this as a call for more EU-level coordination and less decentralisation when it comes to strategic decision making for children's rights? Is that correctly understood? If yes, is that really what would 'implement' children' rights better, that one actor (implicitly, the EU) 'truly governs (…) the entirety of the strategic landscape' when it comes to child rights? I understand the importance of accountability, but is accountability created through exact coherence of policies at different levels? Are there not many other – and more important and efficient – measures of accountability for rights? To address the concern regarding decentralisation and EU-level coordination, we have added an explicit sentence to the Discussion section clarifying that EU child rights strategies function primarily as normative and coordinative instruments, while responsibility for prioritisation and funding allocation remains at the national and sub-national levels in accordance with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality. This clarification aims to prevent interpretations suggesting advocacy for stronger centralisation. This clarification also responds to concerns regarding the relationship between strategic coherence and national discretion. Discussion 3 Similarly, you write that 'Allocation decisions are influenced not only by shared strategic goals but also by domestic political agendas and demographic considerations. This raises concerns about strategic coherence and the visibility of children's rights in funding processes.' Why should allocation decisions not be influenced by domestic demographic considerations? Is local relevance not more important than 'strategic coherence'? Would 'strategic coherence' really increase the visibility of children's rights? I read this as a call for more top-down children's rights and less bottom-up children's rights (the latter would be the opposite of strategic coherence, and reflecting Finnish children's realities more). If I am reading this wrong – please explain in more detail in the paper, so

others do not misunderstand it in the same way. Thank you for this important clarification request. We have revised the Discussion section to explicitly state that national demographic and political considerations are both legitimate and necessary in funding allocation. Our reference to strategic coherence is not intended as a call for top-down governance, but rather as a call for transparency regarding how children's rights considerations are weighed alongside other national priorities. We have clarified this to avoid interpretations suggesting that local relevance should be subordinated to EU-level coordination. Discussion 3 It would be refreshing with some additional recommendations based on the findings – should we really aspire for coherence across documents? Could the findings not say something more than that, about the importance of localising and decentralising children's rights to make them relevant for local realities, for example? As argued by Sally Engle Merry, domestic implementation of rights will always include adaptation, translation etc. to resonate in local realities, so why is it a 'bad' thing that EU strategies and Finnish policies differ? If your aim is to inform future funding calls, could a recommendation then not also be to be more open to reflect local realities? Arguably, some aspects of local discrimination issues, for example, could get lost of the EU funding coordination on child rights were more coherent and streamlined. If children's participation and input are important (as you highlight in the introduction), would their lived realities and experiences not be very different in Finland or in Portugal, calling for less coherence and more diversity in approaches? You mention on p. 13 that more aligned policies would ensure more equitable funding allocation throughout the Member States. This begs the question of whether equality between children is best addressed at EU level or domestic level – a question to which the answer is of course 'it depends' and 'both', but engaging in this difficult discussion would bring more nuance and add a greater contribution of the paper. We appreciate this nuanced reflection. In the revised Discussion, we clarify that the study does not advocate coherence as an end in itself, nor does it view divergence between EU and national policies as inherently problematic. Rather, we acknowledge localisation and adaptation as necessary features of children's rights governance. Our use of "strategic coherence" refers to transparency and accountability in prioritisation, not to uniformity of approaches across Member States. We have revised the text to make this distinction explicit and to avoid interpretations suggesting that diversity or local relevance should be reduced. Discussion 3 Regarding child friendly justice, is it an interesting observation that it is not included in the Finnish National Child Strategy Committee report, the Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027 programme, or the three funding calls. But could this be because it is not the mandate of an 'innovation and skills' programme to deal with child friendly justice? Wouldn't it rather be reflected in policies about juvenile justice, policing, judicial system etc.? You mention some of these limitations on pp. 12-13, but you do not comment on why one should expect child friendly justice to be present in the Innovation and Skills programme. In general, it could be explained a little clearer why exactly the Innovation and Skills programme was chosen to analyse above other child rights-related programmes in Finland? What does it represent? We agree that child-friendly justice primarily falls within other policy domains and does not constitute the core mandate of an innovation and skills programme. We have clarified in the Methods section why the Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027 programme was selected for analysis and what it represents within Finland's ESF+ governance. The observation regarding child-friendly justice is not intended as a critique of programme mandate, but as an illustration of how certain rights-related themes may remain less visible within cross-sectoral funding frameworks that explicitly

target children and families. Discussion 3 The phrase 'It is both important and ethically necessary to critically examine how funding is allocated, especially when it concerns children's rights and well-being' on p. 13 would benefit from being moved to the Introduction rather than Discussion – the underlying justification for the need of the study is important to put clearly in the beginning. Moved as suggested. Discussion 4 When discussing the findings, the process of creating national-level documents should be discussed. Who is the main decision-maker? Are there participatory processes underlying policymaking? Did children and youth contribute to the national policy creation? Were statistical data and needs assessment used to support the prioritization process? Without knowing that, it is easy to misjudge the results of the comparison and make wrong conclusion on the source of misalignment We have added contextual clarification regarding national policy-making processes to avoid misinterpretation of observed misalignments as purely technical or strategic shortcomings. Discussion 4 Discussion: This section needs to be more structured. Probably focusing on specific discrepancies and using them as headings would help with this. The Discussion section has been restructured using thematic subheadings that focus on specific discrepancies and interpretive dimensions, thereby improving clarity and coherence. Discussion 4 Page 12, para 1 missing citation This is the authors' own reflection; therefore, no source references are provided. Discussion 4 Funding of the priority areas often reflects the social construction of children and childhood in society (mostly the decision-makers). What do your results suggest about the way Finnish society sees children? We have added a reflective interpretation addressing how funding priorities implicitly construct understandings of childhood within Finnish policy contexts. Discussion 5 This paper highlights the efforts, successes and ongoing fragmentation challenges according to publicly-available documentation, which could be acknowledged on p. 13 of the article but it is not. The Discussion now explicitly acknowledges both achievements and ongoing fragmentation challenges in Finnish child-related policies. Discussion 5 It also points to the potential of future research emphasizing these general measures further and how they can advance not only strategies but their implementation with attention to such general measures as budgets, etc.

In addition, there are relevant questions of capacity and political will beyond simply whether regional priorities are recognized in national strategies. Questioning this relationship would be useful to acknowledge at a minimum, and also suggests additional future research directions that have not yet been recognized. We have expanded the future research section to highlight the importance of examining structural measures such as funding, administrative capacity, and political will in advancing children's rights beyond strategic alignment. Discussion 5 p. 11 awkward language in second line: "Research highlights the need to for equality in education..." Thank you for pointing out the typo; the sentence has now been corrected.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.