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Systematic Bibliographic Database Searching for an Overview of Reviews: A Practical Guide Using Children's Participation as a Case Study

Paul McCafferty^{1,*} and Esther Mercado Garcia²

¹*School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast BT7 1LP, UK*

²*Department of Social Work & Social Services, Faculty of Social Work, Complutense University of Madrid, Pozuelo de Alarcón, Madrid 28223, Spain*

*Correspondence to Dr Paul McCafferty, Senior Lecturer in Social Work, Programme Director Social Work (Relevant Graduate Route), School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast, 6 College Park, Belfast BT7 1LP, UK. E-mail: p.mccafferty@qub.ac.uk

Abstract

Systematic literature reviews are crucial in research. Identifying relevant research is the first stage in a systematic review, yet challenges exist hindering their efficacy. Through a case study search strategy addressing the question 'What do we know about children's participation in child welfare decision-making?', this article seeks to promote efficiency in searching by building on existing conceptual and practical guidelines for conducting systematic literature searches and appraisal of database performance in social work research. Thirteen databases were utilised in this study. The total citations, unique hits, sensitivity and precision for each database were calculated to gauge database performance before conducting a cross-study comparison with five previously published social work systematic reviews to begin recognising emergent themes. Social Science Citation and PsycINFO are effective high-performing databases in social work. Social Services Abstracts, Applied Social Science Index and Abstracts are also recommended. The article emphasises the pitfalls of relying on a single database, highlighting the importance of comprehensive searches to avoid bias and increase relevance. The findings underscore the need for social work professionals to develop

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effective database searching skills, leveraging the information age to inform and enhance practice, promoting efficiency and addressing the challenges faced in this critical stage of research.

Keywords: bibliographic database appraisal, child welfare, children's participation, database searching, decision-making, overview of reviews

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Introduction

Data overload is occurring in every discipline (Alfandari and Taylor, 2022), making staying abreast of the latest research challenging. Nevertheless, professionals still require evidence that is reliable before they can develop interventions and policies that will improve the lives of service users (Thyer and Myers, 2011; McCafferty, 2020). Part of the process of undertaking scientifically robust research to inform decisions is the careful consideration that needs to be given to analysing the evidence that exists (Lundahl and Yaffe, 2007). Within this, consideration needs to be given to how best to access and appraise good quality evidence.

Systematic literature reviews play a critical role here, given their inherent ability to retrieve and appraise potentially relevant data, thus providing professionals with a thorough body of knowledge upon which they can make decisions. There is an innate assumption, therefore, that social workers should learn core database searching skills and be able to analyse and synthesise the findings. Unfortunately, however, social work appears to lag behind other disciplines in creating and using syntheses of research (Soilemezi and Linceviciute, 2018). The enormity of the task to bridge this knowledge gap in social work cannot be exaggerated (McCafferty and Taylor, 2022). That said, with growing guidance for social workers on how to conduct systematic reviews (e.g. Social Care Institute for Excellence, n.d.), social work is improving in the production of high-quality evidence syntheses to the point where systematic reviews are gradually improving in quality and frequency (e.g. searching the Cochrane library with the search term 'social work' in the title or abstract retrieved eleven hits, but more are available if one widens the search). It is important that we continue in this vein and examples of how to conduct systematic reviews already exist (e.g. Rutter, 2013; Higgins *et al.*, 2023). This guidance is welcomed although with the general increase in systematic reviews comes with the accompanying requirement to go one step further and complete overviews of the findings—that is, systematic reviews of reviews (sometimes called

umbrella reviews) (Aromataris *et al.*, 2020)—gathering all we know from different systematic reviews on single topics into one overarching review. The process of identifying and appraising all published reviews allows researchers to go one step further than a straightforward systematic review and begin to describe the quality of this evidence base, summarise and compare the review's conclusions and discuss the strength of these conclusions. These overviews of reviews provide professionals with more of the knowledge they need to make decisions in an efficient, overarching and all-encompassing report (Aromataris *et al.*, 2015).

But how does one carry out such a review of reviews, because generating high-quality systematic reviews of this nature is often met with concerns about time scarcity, lack of knowledge about which databases harvest the best evidence and a skills deficit in relation to searching them (McCafferty and Taylor, 2022). The inability to decipher what can be opaque guidance, which inexperienced searchers find a challenge to navigate because it is not practically applied, also presents challenges for others to follow. So, even though general guidance exists, the primary and unique contribution this article makes to the field is to adapt this guidance and provide a more specific and comprehensive step-by-step guidance that others can follow to do an overview of reviews. Thus, through an applied case study search strategy—based on our own systematic overview of reviews on children's participation published elsewhere (McCafferty and Garcia, 2023)—and addressing the question 'What do we know about children's participation in child welfare decision-making?', this article seeks to promote efficiency in searching by providing a conceptual and practical guide for conducting systematic overviews of reviews that others can follow.

However, the article has a secondary but by no means less important purpose that extends the value of this article beyond providing guidance for conducting systematic overviews of reviews. Hence, in addition to providing step-by-step guidance on producing systematic overviews of reviews, we will also provide an equally important facet of producing high-quality evidence and that is to provide an appraisal of database performance in social work research. We will do this in two ways: (i) appraise the performance of databases based on our specific case study of children's participation and then (ii) compare our performance appraisal with five other performance appraisals of social work practice across a range of issues. Doing the database appraisal in this thorough way will give a more complete cross-sectional analysis of database performance in social work generally. Based on our findings, this article's second contribution to the literature then is to support social work researchers to focus their valuable time and efforts more expertly on those databases that we argue are more likely to be of benefit to them.

Method

This study employed a systematic search of bibliographic databases on children's participation to address the question 'What do we know about children's participation in child welfare decision-making'? Each step is examined and accompanied by a rationale for decisions taken to make the guidance accessible for future researchers and practitioners. A summary of databases used with an assessment of their performance is integrated to advance awareness of the significance of database choice and how rigour and time can be suitably balanced. Adapting the steps proposed by Pascoe *et al.* (2021), this systematic overview of reviews followed fifteen steps:

1. develop a research question;
2. determine the inclusion and exclusion criteria;
3. identify a list of potential databases;
4. test the precision of potential databases;
5. final selection of databases for overviews of reviews;
6. construct concept groups and terms;
7. develop a search formula, including specific search facilities across databases;
8. trial and adjustment of the search strategy;
9. run the searches making use of available facilities (Boolean phrases, index terms and filters);
10. screen the title and abstracts;
11. appraise full articles;
12. group consultation;
13. create a combined list of citations, manually removing duplications;
14. calculate unique hits, precision and sensitivity of each database; and
15. appraise of database performance.

Developing a research question

It is important to have a clear question that will help focus the research question. Here, the Population, Intervention, Context and Outcome framework (Schardt *et al.*, 2007) was of use to structure the question and to increase the likelihood of retrieving papers which were relevant. This systematic overview of reviews then sought to examine, 'What do we know about (P) children and young people's (I) participation (C) in child welfare: (O) A systematic overview of reviews'.

Determining inclusion and exclusion criteria

- Articles had to be peer reviewed and describe a review which captured empirical data on children's participation in child welfare

from a range of previously conducted reviews. Policy documents, theoretical material and grey literature such as dissertations were excluded because of practical reasons, they are generally not peer reviewed and can be difficult to access.

- As many child welfare issues transcend disciplinary boundaries (e.g. justice, education and health) it was decided that these studies would be included provided the population was C&YP within the child welfare context.
- Databases differ in their schedules for updating and indexing literature. The cutoff date for inclusion—10 August 2022—was selected as the upper limit for the date range for articles to be considered—2 weeks prior to the first database search. Articles dating back to 1989 were considered; this was the year the UNCRC was ratified, requiring state bodies to formally involve C&YP in decisions that impacted their lives under Article 12. The ratification of the UNCRC Article 12 predicated a significant increase in academic interest in C&YP participation, so this date was chosen for that reason.
- Only studies in English were considered. Despite advances in translation software, it still takes a significant amount of time to search for and then translate articles into English. In addition, the research team's common language was English.
- Available as full text.

Identifying potential databases

Researchers should make informed decisions on which databases to use. However, in the social care field, the evidence on which to select databases to use is limited and there is inconsistency between databases. For example, [Pascoe *et al.* \(2021\)](#) compared the performance of three previously published systematic reviews in social work and found no consistency in the best-performing database based on unique hits, sensitivity and precision (see [Table 1](#)).

This comparative work by [Pascoe *et al.* \(2021\)](#) underlines the critical importance of using more than one database to ensure the capture of all relevant literature, decreasing the potential for bias and increasing confidence in the reliability of the search. Because social work is a broad discipline, a list of thirteen databases and online search engines was compiled (see [Table 2](#)), using the following pragmatic and methodological reasons, sources and criteria:

- those that were available from the first author's library;
- those recommended by the specialist subject librarian;

Table 1. Database performance in social work.

Study	Unique hits	Sensitivity	Precision
Taylor et al. (2007a) (Social work practice with older people).	1. SSCI 2. Medline 3. SSA	1. Medline 2. SSCI 3. CINAHL	1. AgelInfo 2. PsycINFO 3. SSA
McFadden et al. (2012) (Child protection social workers' resilience).	1. Google Scholar 2. SSCI	1. ASSIA 2. SSCI 3. SSA	1. PsycINFO 2. CINAHL
McGinn et al. (2016) (Perpetrators of intimate partner violence).	1. PsycINFO 2. SSA	1. PsycINFO 2. SSA 3. ASSIA	1. SSA 2. ASSIA

Note: Taken from [Pascoe et al. \(2021\)](#).

- those search facilities commonly used by the authors of systematic reviews related to social work published by the Campbell and Cochrane collaborations;
- sources which have been critiqued through the course of previous investigations into literature search methods in social work; and
- sources which were reviewed favourably by relevant blogs and on-line social networks in the social care field (adapted from [McGinn et al., 2016](#)).

The thirteen selected databases:

Table 2. The thirteen selected databases.

#	Database
1	PsycINFO
2	Child Development and Adolescent Studies
3	CINAHL
4	Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ)
5	International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS)
6	Scopus
7	Social Care Online
8	Social Policy and Practice
9	The Social Science Citation Index
10	SSAs
11	Sociological Abstracts
12	The Cochrane Library
13	Campbell Collaboration

Using the underlying principle which supports pilot work in research normally, a test search was created and conducted on the databases chosen. Piloting produces primary data that can help steer the focus of the sampling frame. This afforded the researchers with an opportunity to enhance both the search formulae and the inclusion criteria. Variations in

indexing between databases combined with ambiguously classified research papers required subject expertise on the part of the researchers to detect and test likely terms. Index terms on databases were used where available. This exercise also confirmed that there were sufficient articles available to analyse.

Establishing general concept groups and terms

Simply inserting one's research question into a database is unlikely to be beneficial in the search for relevant literature. A critical first step therefore when systematically searching for relevant literature is to establish an appropriately defined search criteria, otherwise, researchers run the risk of returning quite literally thousands of irrelevant hits. A search formula refers to the arrangement of terms keyed into a database to recover articles relating to a specific research question. According to McGinn *et al.* (2016, p. 269), search formulae are made up of:

- groupings of terms pertaining to a particular concept referred to by McFadden *et al.* (2012, p. 2) as 'concept groups';
- Boolean algebra (AND, OR and NOT) is used to link concepts; and
- database-specific search features (such as the proximity filter 'adjn' in OVID SP, or * for truncation).

Derived from our question, 'What do we know about children and young people's participation in child welfare: A systematic overview of reviews', the following four concepts were created:

1. children and young people;
2. participation;
3. child welfare; and
4. review/s.

Developing search formula, including specific search facilities across databases

A draft search strategy was developed for databases hosted on the ProQuest platform using the Boolean operators 'AND' to combine terms and 'OR' to include various terms as ('Systematic review' OR 'literature review' OR 'narrative review' OR 'review' OR 'systematic scoping review' OR 'scoping review' OR 'meta-analysis' OR 'meta analysis' OR 'meta-synthesis' OR 'meta synthesis') AND 'child* participation' OR 'child* inclusion' OR 'child* collaboration' AND ('social work*' OR 'child* welfare' OR 'child* protection' OR 'child* safeguarding' OR 'child* safeguarding' OR 'child safe-guarding'). Boolean operators

decrease or increase retrieved records, saving time by narrowing down searches for relevant results. Each search engine or database uses operators differently, requiring attention to uppercase letters or special punctuation. Specific instructions can be found in the database guide or search engine help screens.

Trial and adjustment of search strategy

The sensitivity of a search (the extent to which all relevant articles are included) is largely dictated by the range of terms used to represent each concept. However, whilst broadening the terms can give a high degree of sensitivity it also reduces the precision of a search if the net contribution of each term is not considered. Each term must therefore be checked for relevance. The draft search strategy was tested on ProQuest Social Services Abstract (SSA). This was selected as SSA is a database reported by [McFadden *et al.* \(2012\)](#) and [McGinn *et al.* \(2016\)](#) as having a high sensitivity and high precision, and ProQuest was used as it is the operating platform for several of the databases used. This exercise was a valuable learning opportunity to refine search terms and test the relevance of the results they produced in a systematic way. This trial showed that we had too many key terms for each concept, returning thousands of hits which were irrelevant. Thus, we refined the concept terms further to search for ('review') AND ('child*') AND ('participation' OR 'collaboration' OR 'Inclusion') AND ('welfare' OR 'social work*').

Screening total hits for relevant articles

With minor variations, the above search formula was applied across thirteen databases to identify relevant articles. This was done in three stages. First, the authors individually screened each search output to identify relevant hits. Titles which were relevant or warranted further discussion were exported to excel—excel was used because one of the authors had substantial practical experience using excel—with their abstract and filed under their database name. Secondly, each author, independent of the other, reviewed the full abstracts and selected the relevant articles for discussion and agreement. Thirdly, both authors came together and agreed through discussion as to which articles were relevant. This was helped by colour coding each potential article, that is, green for 'maybe' blue for 'yes' and red for 'no.' This process served as a measure of the reliability of the chosen articles. This process deselected 98 per cent of initial search outputs.

Identifying unique hits

Unique hits are journal articles retrieved from one database only. In the context of the purpose of this article, it is useful to know which databases are likely to have the most unique hits, helping guide researchers as they determine where to focus their valuable time when searching children's participation. Unique hits were identified by:

1. Tagging all selected articles with the databases they were located on.
2. Pooling all selected articles together in a single list.
3. Reviewing this list and noting which articles were found just once and upon which database.

Calculating sensitivity and precision

The extent to which each database retrieved all relevant articles in existence—called database sensitivity—was calculated using the total number of relevant items retrieved across all databases, as a denominator (Taylor *et al.*, 2015):

$$\text{database sensitivity} = \frac{\text{relevant database hits}}{\text{relevant hits from all databses}}$$

Calculating precision

The capability of each database to avoid retrieving irrelevant items—the precision of the database—was also calculated:

$$\text{database precision} = \frac{\text{relevant database hits}}{\text{total database hits}}$$

Results

This study's primary aim was to use a case study based on children's participation to appraise a comprehensive search of thirteen databases to inform the development of more skilful searching for academic literature reviews. We wanted to describe the methods used to identify and appraise published reviews systematically, drawing on our experiences and good practice in the conduct and reporting of systematic reviews and to investigate which databases work best for the topic under scrutiny and compare these with previous appraisals. Adapting the by now standard PRISMA diagram (Moher *et al.*, 2009) to suit our study's purpose, the flow of the study selection process is outlined in Figure 1. The

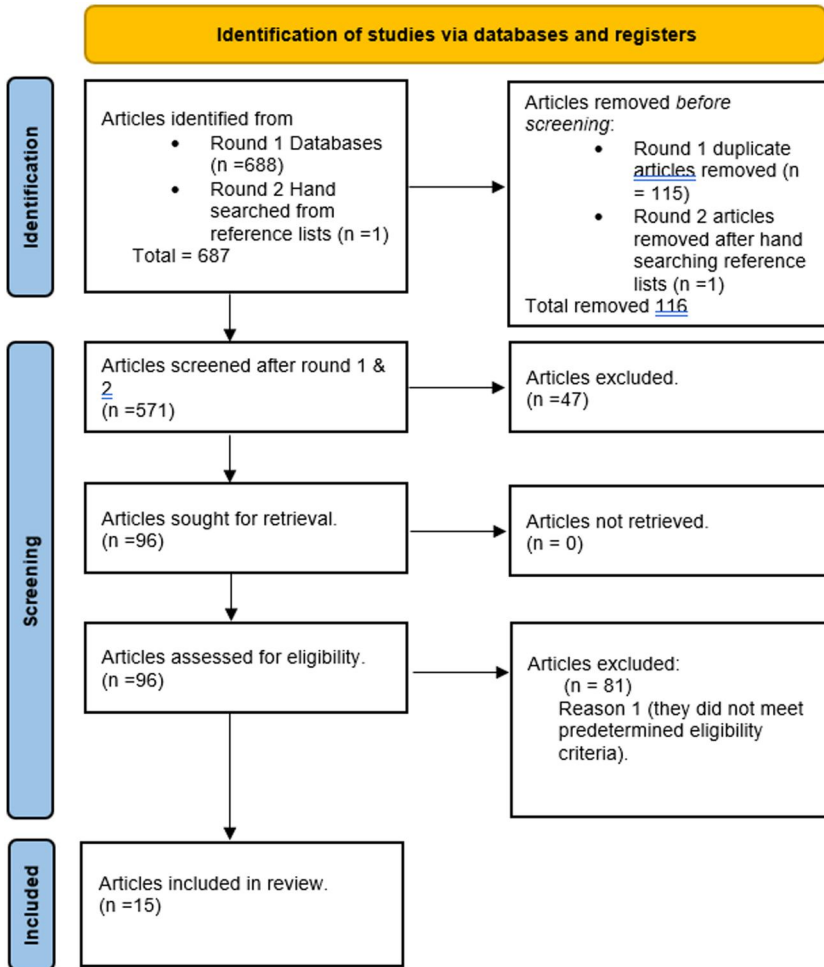


Figure 1: Flowchart of the search and screening process.Ä

performance of the databases is summarised in Table 4. The total number of relevant articles retrieved across all databases was 15, having started with 790. The articles were published across nine different journals (see Table 3), with *Child and Family Social Work* representing the largest proportion of publications (four out of fifteen). All journals are familiar journals within social work. The mean impact factor was 2.27, with a range between 1.16 (*Journal of Human Rights Review*) to 4.863 (*Child Abuse and Neglect*). Thirteen of the articles comprised titles pertinent to the inclusion criteria, that is a literature review, a systematic review, an integrative review, a systematic scoping review, a systematic literature review, a narrative review, a review, a scoping review, a state-

Table 3. Journals from which systematic reviews were retrieved with impact factor.

#	Journal	Number of publications	Impact Factor
1	Child and Family Social Work	4	1.337
2	Child Abuse and Neglect	1	4.863
3	Children and Society	2	1.9
4	British Journal of Social Work	1	2.352
5	Children and Youth Services Review	3	2.63
6	Journal of Human Rights Review	1	1.16
7	Social Sciences	1	2.28
8	Research on Social Work Practice	1	2.19
9	Child and Adolescent Mental Health	1	1.770
			Mean Impact Factor 2.27

Table 4. Data performance indicators.

#	Database	Total hits	Relevant hits	Rank	Unique hits	Rank	Sensitivity %	Rank	Precision %	Rank
1	Child Development and Adolescent Studies	42	6	3	0	2	40	3	14	5
2	Directory of Open Access Journals	0	0	5	0	2	0	5	0	10
3	International Bibliography of the Social Sciences	18	5	4	0	2	33.3	4	28.7	1
4	PsycINFO	54	5	4	0	2	33.3	4	9.25	7
5	Scopus	106	7	2	0	2	46.7	2	6.6	8
6	Social Care Online	17	0	5	0	2	0	5	0	10
7	Social Policy and Practice	56	7	2	1	1	46.7	2	12.5	6
8	Social Science Citation Index	50	8	1	1	1	53.3	1	16	4
9	SSAs	20	5	4	0	2	33.3	4	25	2
10	Sociological Abstracts	29	7	2	1	1	46.6	2	24.1	3
11	Campbell Library	0	0	6	0	2	0	5	0	10
612	CINAHL	295	6	3	1	1	40	3	2.0	9
13	Cochrane	0	0	5	0	2	0	5	0	10
TOTAL		790	Articles included for review 15							

of-the-art review, a synthesis of the evidence of qualitative evidence and a review of the literature. We mention the titles because the difference in them impacts the standardisation of the searchable terms, in turn impacting the success, or otherwise, of retrieving relevant articles easily.

We shall elaborate further on the issue of standardised search terms for children's participation in the discussion. We elaborate on the issue of the impact factor in the conclusion.

Calculating unique hits, precision and sensitivity of each database

This study applied three independent measures to objectively explore the comparative efficacy of each database for this research question: (i) the number of relevant articles uniquely identified (uniqueness), (ii) sensitivity and (iii) precision. Table 4 positions each of the databases against each of these performance markers and ranks them in order. The total number of relevant articles (fifteen) was used to calculate uniqueness, sensitivity and precision prior to performing a cross-study analysis. Social Policy and Practice, Social Science Citation Index, Sociological Abstracts and CINAHL all scored 1 unique hit each with all the other databases scoring 0. The highest sensitivity was the Social Science Citation Index with 53.3 per cent, followed by Social Policy and Practice with 46.7 per cent. The lowest was a three-way split between Cochrane, Campbell Library and Directory of Open Access Journals each sharing 0 per cent sensitivity. Precision was generally low with seven of the databases scoring less than 10 per cent but the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS), scored best with 28.7 per cent precision, followed by SSAs at 25 per cent. The lowest precision was another three-way split between Cochrane, Campbell Library and Directory of Open Access Journals, all scoring 0 per cent.

Discussion

It is critical that decisions, assessments and interventions used to afford help to vulnerable individuals and groups are informed by and based on high-quality evidence (McCafferty, 2023). The systematic retrieval of empirical research from quality databases is a critical first step in the process of ensuring practice is informed by evidence, that it is ethical and trustworthy and that interventions can withstand scrutiny by service users, and other key stakeholders. Making use of a wide range of databases, what this study has achieved then is to analyse and rank the utility of each database in terms of its practical value for retrieving material on C&YP participation. Thirteen databases were included; a decision based on prior systematic literature reviews in the discipline, the availability of these databases in the first author's university library (Queen's University Belfast) and in consultation with the subject specialist librarian based at Queen's University Belfast.

This article builds on previous research into critical appraisals of search facilities, contributing in two unique ways. The article's primary

contribution is in describing a detailed method of literature searching using a unique case study of C&YP participation as an example. The expertise developed via this exercise will further advance effective techniques in comprehensive literature searching in this area, and act as a guide for others to follow as they attempt to conduct their own systematic searches in a more efficient, scientific and accurate manner. We anticipate that by following our guidance others will avoid conducting unempirical searches which are open to bias and criticised for being nothing more than *fishing exercises*, somewhat predisposed to miscalculation and misrepresentation. So, the approach we describe will promote other comprehensive and reliable searches, enabling others to identify relevant publications from a range of sources that can be synthesised into a summary of the best evidence available in their own subject area.

Systematic literature searching demands a sizable amount of time and skill, so the question is, how do we maximise time and efficiency whilst maintaining the high standards expected of evidence-informed practice. In this, database selection becomes a vital consideration for the researcher for there are multiple options available. It is neither practical nor achievable—unless one is funded—to search all the databases available, nor can it be presumed that a database, even if it is principally social work/care oriented, will yield the best results for the topic under investigation. Based on our findings, this article's second contribution to the literature then is to support researchers to focus their time and efforts more expertly on those databases that are more likely to be of benefit to them thus avoiding time-consuming, uneconomic searching practices when choosing which databases to search. We will achieve our second aim in two separate ways. First, we will present our analysis of a quality appraisal of the thirteen databases searched. The quality appraisal will use the objective measures of (i) unique hits, (ii) sensitivity and (iii) precision to provide information on the effectiveness of each database. Second, we will extend this analysis and compare our analysis with five other research papers into database quality (i.e. Taylor *et al.*, 2007a; McFadden *et al.*, 2012; McElhinney *et al.*, 2016; McGinn *et al.*, 2016; Pascoe *et al.*, 2021). This extended comparative analysis (see Table 5) provides further empirical evidence of each database's performance, now over six instead of five searches which can better inform deliberations as to which database is more advantageous to use in a systematic literature search.

Database performance

Uniqueness

The capability of a database to retrieve articles not found in other databases (unique hits) is a significant issue when deciding on which database to choose for your search. SSCI, Social Policy and Practice,

Table 5. Comparison of the top three databases across six systematic literature searches.

Study	Unique hits	Sensitivity	Precision
Taylor et al.(2007a)	1. SSCI 2. Medline 3. SSA	1. Medline 2. SSCI 3. CINAHL	1. AgeInfo 2. PsycINFO 3. SSA
McFadden et al. (2012)	1. Google Scholar 2. SSCI	1. ASSIA 2. SSA 3. SSCI	1. PsycINFO 2. CINAHL
McGinn et al. (2016)	1. PsycINFO 3. SSA	1. PsycINFO 2. SSA 3. ASSIA	1. SSA 2. ASSIA
McElhinney et al. (2016)	1. Ovid MEDLINE 2. CINAHL	1. CINAHL 2. Ovid MEDLINE 3. PsycINFO	1. CINAHL 2. PsycINFO 3. Ovid MEDLINE
Pascoe et al. (2021)	1. SSCI 2. SSA	1. SSA 2. SSCI 3. ASSIA	1. PsycINFO 2. SSCI 3. Sociological Abstracts
Current study (2023)	1. SSCI 2. Social Policy and Practice 3. Sociological Abstracts	1. SSCI 2. Scopus 3. SSCI	1. IBSS 2. SSA 3. Sociological Abstracts

Sociological Abstracts and CINAHL, all returned one unique hit apiece, indicating their utility as databases to search for the topic of children's participation. By itself, SSCI retrieved eight (53 per cent) out of the fifteen included studies for our study alone. This may not be a surprise given that SSCI is one of the main databases for child welfare. However, it is important to note that each of the databases (SSCI, Social Policy and Practice, Sociological Abstracts and CINAHL) covers different topics related to health and sociology and perhaps draws attention to the fact that the topic of children's participation is cross-disciplinary, and researchers need to bear this in mind when searching—particularly important given that by themselves, these databases returned 50 per cent of the total relevant hits in our search. Had we searched just SSCI, Social Policy and Practice, Sociological Abstracts and CINAHL we would have returned twenty-eight of the fifty-six relevant studies (50 per cent), missing 50 per cent.

Whilst each database has different target audiences, we see an emerging trend from our database comparison (see [Table 5](#)) regarding unique hits across studies. SSCI still appears to be a database that performs well across the six social work studies. It is the top-performing database for unique hits, appearing in three of the six top-performing databases across the six studies. We therefore see the benefit for researchers in accessing this database as an important source of information not only when studying children's participation, but for social work interrelated

issues generally given its performance across a range of social work practice areas.

Sensitivity

The degree of sensitivity of a database is critical for it helps ensure papers retrieved from the search are pertinent to the study (Patole, 2021). In terms of sensitivity, again SSCI scored well with a 53.3 per cent rating, closely followed by Social Policy and Practice and Scopus both at 46.7 per cent apiece, followed by Child Development and Adolescent Studies at 40 per cent. These four databases between them returned 50 per cent of the relevant hits. SSCI is not the first-ranked database in the other five studies in Table 5, but it is ranked second in three of the four databases, which indicate a reliable level of value as a database. Scopus was second in our study but interestingly it does not feature at all in the other five studies across any of the quality indicators. Best *et al.* (2014) however in their study of social networking sites ranked Scopus first for sensitivity and Alfandari and Taylor (2022) state that Scopus can be a one-stop bibliographic resource for researchers. Our view, given the empirical evidence presented across six social work-related studies, is that Scopus, whilst generally useful, did not have a high level of sensitivity in the following areas (i) decision-making for institutional care for older people (Taylor *et al.*, 2007a); (ii) child protection social workers' resilience (McFadden *et al.*, 2012); (iii) intimate partner violence (McGinn *et al.*, 2016); (iv) child protection issues related to pregnant women McElhinney *et al.* (2016); and (v) frontline social workers' experiences of bureaucracy (Pascoe *et al.*, 2021). Perhaps, we can conclude from this that sensitivity is subject/topic dependent and implies a correlation between the nature of the research question and the specific field of practice, strengthening the importance of utilising a widespread range of databases for a better, wider-ranging search on social work topics.

Precision

Efficient searching is signalled by the precision scores of a database. For precision in our study of children's participation, IBSS scored best with a percentage score of 28.7 per cent, followed by SSA in second place with 25 per cent and Sociological Abstracts in third place at 24.1 per cent. IBSS and SSA are two major social science databases so provide high precision for this search and are worthwhile databases to search in this area. The fact that Sociological Abstracts are third perhaps confirms the fact that children's participation is of interest to others further afield than social work and so again, researchers need to bear this in mind

when searching, confirming studies on other social work topics and in related disciplines (e.g. [Subirana et al., 2005](#); [Taylor et al., 2007b](#)).

However, our study differs in terms of the top-performing databases related to precision with the previous five studies (see [Table 5](#)). AgeInfo, PsycINFO and SSA all scored higher than IBSS, which does not even feature in any of the top three across all the studies. Interestingly though, whilst IBSS scored highly in our study of children's participation, it did not produce any unique hits implying that the number of unique hits produced is not contingent on precision. Conceivably then, there exists a relationship with the nature of the research question and the explicit field of practice, something [Pascoe et al. \(2021\)](#) also observed in their study. Cochrane, Campbell Library and DOAJ all scored 0 per cent indicating they are not effective for this search. Social Care Online also scored 0 per cent which will disappoint British child welfare researchers as this database is generally set to cover child safeguarding, but the database was not useful for this search; a finding echoed by [McElhinney et al. \(2016\)](#) in their study of child protection issues related to pregnant women. Creating an accepted lexis and thesaurus that remains consistent across databases for searching literature, not only on children's participation but also on other topics may help.

Compared to the other studies in [Table 5](#) though, overall precision was low in our study (see [Table 6](#)). A total of 790 hits were screened to find just 15 to the selection criteria. However, this low precision rate is not an exceptional phenomenon: [Akoensi et al. \(2013\)](#) screened 10,446 hits to find just 12 studies and [Sugavanam et al. \(2013\)](#) screened 53,998 studies to find 17 studies. This may indicate a growing trend towards having to screen increasingly large numbers of hits in future systematic reviews.

To summarise, as an overall aggregate over all six studies, SSCI performs well in terms of unique hits and sensitivity and PsycINFO performed well in relation to precision. Recognising that each topic was unique, SSCI and PsycINFO are nevertheless identified as effective high-performing databases in social work. Possibly, due to their more all-encompassing scope, these databases remain valuable for social workers and are recommended by us as a valuable source of information. SSAs and ASSIA are also recommended for further literature searching.

Limitations of the study include the fact that slightly different databases were used in each of the six studies examining database performance which mirrored the different research questions in each question and this study did not include ASSIA and [Pascoe et al. \(2021\)](#) excluded CINAHL. Other smaller databases were not used which seem to be losing out to the larger multidisciplinary databases. As reported elsewhere, the range of vocabulary within social work and within children's rights discourse impedes endeavours at getting a coherent analysis of the subject. The potential for the World Wide Web, specifically Google Scholar,

Table 6. Quantity and precision of previous studies.

Study	Total search hits	Relevant hits	Precision (%)
Taylor <i>et al.</i> (2007a)	597	332	56
McFadden <i>et al.</i> (2012)	2,088	607	29
McGinn <i>et al.</i> (2016)	3,455	136	4
McElhinney <i>et al.</i> (2016)	866	28	3
Pascoe <i>et al.</i> (2021)	8,305	184	2
Current study (2023)	790	56	7

was not investigated but [McFadden *et al.* \(2012\)](#) report encouragingly on its functionality as an increasingly worthwhile search engine.

5. Conclusion

To ensure professional social work practice is based on evidence, is sensitive to service users' needs and is ethical and robust, practitioners require the knowledge and skills ([McCafferty, 2023](#)) outlined in this article to fully utilise the benefits afforded by advancements in the information age. However, to take full advantage of these benefits, professionals require guidance and the skills and knowledge to be able to choose which databases to access and when accessed, be able to search the databases systematically. This article is of value then as it provides detailed step-by-step guidance to follow in conducting systematic literature overviews of reviews, suggesting ways in which search facilities, search terms, concept groups and search formulae can be chosen and tested which in turn can be modified and replicated by others. In this way, searches can become more scientific and higher quality and the searcher's valuable time is maximised. This may be important within our own area of interest (children's participation in child welfare), supporting the production of more robust systematic reviews which are publishable in high-impact journals—we noted that more than half of published articles in our study were in journals with an impact factor of less than 2 and a mean of 2.27 across all the journals (see [Table 3](#)).

We also recommend searchers link with subject-specific librarians or information specialists, drawing on their expertise to produce high-quality literature searches. We also suggest that others share the outcomes of thorough searches on social work topics, just as we have done here, thus creating an increasingly extensive suite of guidance that can act as a knowledge repository for the social work profession. Finally, we propose that accessible training and education is offered to students at the undergraduate level on conducting systematic literature searches and that once qualified, this training is built on by social work organisations.

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Conflict of interest statement

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