Journal of Children's Services
Research informing policy and practice

Volume 14 Number 3 2019

Children’s participation in safeguarding: ethical and practical considerations
Guest Editors: Camille Warrington and Cath Larkins

133 Guest Editorial

143 Participation as a methodological and ethical issue in child protection research
Johanna Kiili and Johanna Molanen

162 Independent Reviewing Officers’ and social workers’ perceptions of children’s participation in Children in Care Reviews
Clive Diaz, Hayley Pert and Nigel Patrick Thomas

174 Challenging dominant notions of participation and protection through a co-led disabled young researcher study
Geraldine Brady and Anika Franklin

186 Next steps in children and young people’s research, participation and protection from the perspective of young researchers
Dan, David, Evie, Ollie, Donna Thomas and Cath Larkins

194 Qualitative research with primary school-aged children: ethical and practical considerations of evaluating a safeguarding programme in schools
Vicki Jackson-Hollis

205 Co-producing and navigating consent in participatory research with young people
Elsie Whittington

217 Young people and police making “Marginal Gains”: climbing fells, building relationships and changing police safeguarding practice
Fiona Jane Factor and Elizabeth Lillian Ackerley

228 From the ground up: young research advisors’ perspectives on relationships between participation and protection
C.J. Hamilton, Abbie Rodgers, Keeley Howard and Camille Warrington

ISBN 978-1-83909-844-4

www.emeraldinsight.com/loi/jcs
Children at the centre of safety: challenging the false juxtaposition of protection and participation

Setting the scene: the principle of indivisible rights

In total, 30 years on from the adoption of the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), the indivisible and mutually reinforcing relationship between children’s rights to both “protection” and participation is long-standing. Yet despite its longevity, the practical realisation of this relationship remains significantly under-explored.

Child participation is variously understood as having a say, being involved in decision making and achieving influence (through words and actions): within personal lives, communities, practice, research and policy. Children’s rights to participation, enshrined in the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), tend to be associated with children’s right to have their views taken into account in matters that affect them (Article 12), the rights to freedom of expression (Article 13), freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 14), the right to associate with others (Article 15), the right to privacy (Article 16) and the right to access information (Article 17). Crucially Article 12 as one of the general principles of the UNCRC, should be considered in the interpretation and implementation of all other rights.

Meanwhile children’s rights to protection are more often related to rights explicitly focused on children’s physical and psychological safety. They are noted to draw attention to the special status of children due to their relative immaturity and associated dependency, vulnerability and potential defencelessness (Archard, 2004). Centrally this includes the three remaining general principles: children’s rights to protection from discrimination (Article 2), upholding their best interests in decision making (Article 3) and their right to survival and development (Article 6). Further rights address more specific forms of maltreatment and neglect, including physical and mental violence (Article 19), harmful work (Article 32); sexual abuse (Article 34) and cruel or harmful punishment (Article 37).

Despite these perceived distinctions the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child helpfully draws attention to the interdependency of all children’s rights. Crucially for this journal, they provide guidance on the implementation of Article 12 (General Comment Number 12) which includes the statement that:

“Much of the violence perpetrated against children goes unchallenged both because certain forms of abusive behaviour are understood by children as accepted practices, and due to the lack of child-friendly reporting mechanisms [...] Thus, effective inclusion of children in protective measures requires that children be informed about their right to be heard and to grow up free from all forms of physical and psychological violence. (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009, Paragraph 120)”

Furthermore General Comment 12 states that there can be no assessment of best interests without giving due weight to children’s views.’ Noting for example:

“Whenever a decision is made to remove a child from her or his family because the child is a victim of abuse or neglect within his or her home, the view of the child must be taken into account in order to determine the best interests of the child. (Paragraph 53)"

Despite this framework, multiple authors point to perceived tensions between these two sets of rights and the challenges in simultaneously prioritising them (Healy, 1998; Archard, 2004; Hinton, 2008; Healy and Darlington, 2009; Coppock and Phillips, 2013). Frustratingly few examples exist which seeks to more deeply explore or resolve these tensions. Instead several authors suggest...
that in reality a pragmatic approach is often adopted that has tended to prioritise children’s protection rights above those of participation (Feinstein and O’Kane, 2008; Lefevre et al., 2018). Both the unique power relationships pertinent to the socio-legal position of children (Archard, 2004) and cultural expressions of childhood and youth (Hart, 1992; Boyden and Ennew, 1997) lead in favour of paternalistic approaches that sideline children’s perspectives while claiming to champion their needs for protection.

In an early response to the UNCRC Archard (2004) suggests the heart of this tension is rooted in two distinct ideological perspectives on childhood that informed the convention’s creation: the paternalism of provision and protection rights defined by adults, which foreground specific vulnerabilities associated with childhood, alongside emancipatory concerns rooted in recognition of children’s agency and potential influence.

The resulting false juxtaposition of participation and protection is all too familiar for us both. Throughout our own experiences working in participatory practice and research over the last 20 and 30 years, respectively, we have repeatedly encountered perceived child protection concerns used to explicitly and tacitly block or limit children’s involvement in decision-making processes (spanning practice, policy and research settings). We have witnessed how this in turn has stymied children’s opportunities to inform change, take part in social action and unlock potential benefits for themselves and others that flow from that. Outside of research the implications of this false juxtaposition are even starker – most obviously within the pages of serious case reviews and child protection inquiries which repeatedly note a failure to listen to children as critical in institutional failures to protect (Laming, 2003; Ayre and Preston-Shoot, 2010; Munro, 2011; Jay, 2014).

It is our belief that despite some notable progress (Welsby, 1996; Jamieson, 2009; Moore, 2017) until there is a more explicit articulation of the indivisibility of children’s rights to participation, protection and provision, safety concerns will continue to “trump” participation rights. Evidence from national and international monitoring of children’s participation rights suggests as much (Crowley and Larkins, 2018; Rosa et al., 2019). Protection must not be considered distinct from participation: recognising the latter (information, expression and influence) as a necessary component of protection. However without practical examples of this relationship children’s opportunities to participate can remain a non-essential “add on” – rather than part of the “glue” through which protective rights are upheld (Brodie, 2016).

Furthermore a consideration of social provision must also remain central in this debate – recognising both its relationship to keeping children safe and children’s potential role in directing the allocation of resources. This is especially noteworthy given evidence that the focus on childhood competence and vulnerability – so often used to justify limitations on children’s opportunities to participate – are themselves contextual and related to the resources and opportunities available to children (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis, 1998).

Moreover striking evidence of children’s competence in assessing risk and outcomes in relation to child protection (Hershkowitza et al., 2007; Rees et al., 2010) highlights the potential (though as yet unexplored) role of children in directing decision making regarding social provision of resources that could promote their safety.

In order to adequately respect, protection and participation, with and for children and young people it is imperative to name and remove the barriers to these intersecting rights in both practice and policy within UK and globally. Whilst this journal draws on content from the UK, we hope the contributions throughout this journal will be relevant in global contexts – suggesting that in order for children’s to access lives free from abuse, maltreatment and oppression, in which they can thrive in socially just societies, their participation rights must be held. This builds on the work of writers like van Bueren (1998) noting the relationship between participation and protection and their relationship to distributive justice, and Lansdown (2012) noting that children’s protection from abuse is dependent on cultures (organisational, community or state based) which respect and amplify children’s “voices” thus challenging cultures of silence and impunity in which abuse flourishes.

However, it is also vital to build on work that highlights the inadequacy of conceptualising child participation as limited to promoting individual children’s “voice” and influence – what Wyness (2013) terms “discursive voice-based” participation (Imoh, 2012). Here there is value in looking to
writing and research from the majority world which more prominently foregrounds children as relational beings and highlights participation in “material practices” or action, as much as through voice. Abebe and Ofosu-Kusi (2016), for example, draw attention to the ways in which children shape and are shaped by social processes through their engagement in everyday contexts. They note how children’s agency is an intergenerational and relational process where children materially contribute to and change circumstances for themselves, their families and communities. When considering children’s safety and protection these considerations are no less significant – both within institutional and everyday settings. For example, children may be involved in changing social circumstances to protect themselves and others through participating in drafting legislation (see for example Jamieson, 2009, explaining the development of the South Africa Children’s Act) and, in the face of spatial infrastructural inequalities (the lack of a water supply), female children may participate in protecting themselves and their families by carrying water (Phiri and Abebe, 2016). Such writing reminds us that removing the barriers to both protection and participation within the UK and globally, requires further recognition of the intersection of both children’s discursive and material participation, alongside their inter- and intra-generational agency within global and local economic and cultural structures.

Notwithstanding the UK-centric limitation of this special edition, the exploration and application of these ideas is apparent throughout the contributions to this journal. Their content captures a range of approaches and perspectives and research and practice with diverse groups of children and young people. This includes those known to have been subject to various forms of oppression or marginalisation: care experienced/‘looked after’ children (Diaz et al.), disabled children (Brady and Franklin), children subject to violence and abuse (Ackerley and Factor), LGBT + youth (Whittington) and broader cohorts of children accessed through mainstream schools and youth provision (Whittington; Hollis). The articles therefore provide steps forward in understanding the barriers and enables to participation and protection in a variety of intersecting experiences of childhood which may be encountered in both minority and majority worlds.

Alongside more traditional articles in this special edition we were also keen to find ways of embedding young people’s perspectives on the connection between participation and protection. Mindful of our own privilege and power as editors this was an attempt to find ways of including younger, non-academic authors: aiming for young people’s presence in the journal to feature in more direct and less mediated forms. The result is two contributions from young researcher groups: UCAN (based at the University of Central Lancashire) and YRAP (based at the University of Bedfordshire), whose work focuses on themes relating to both participation and protection. In both cases their authorial voices are introduced and framed by academic co-authors – highlighting our own difficulties in challenging traditional academic forms and extending the challenge for more radical children’s participation in future journals.

In the remaining sections of this editorial we provide an overview of the articles, drawing out their contributions to understanding of both barriers to children’s participation in contexts of highlighted concerns about safety; and conditions and strategies for overcoming these. We then draw together some implications for future practice and research.

### Articles in this edition

In a review of existing literature concerning child participation in research about child protection, Killi and Moilanen highlight how conceptions of children’s vulnerability and risk are translated into practices resulting in an absence of their access to information and influence. Their paper evidences the pervasive nature of risk averse practices in research with children, particularly influenced by the role of ethics committees and the consequences of this for policy and practice where children’s influence remains absent from decision-making processes. They therefore set an agenda for future child protection research that is co-designed and co-led by child and academic researchers who are competent in navigating the potential for distress, reflective on their own practice and backed by adequate funding to maintain consistent relationships with children involved in the research. They note that to be inclusive, such research would also need to be backed by critical and informed discussions with parents, professionals and institutions to minimise the tendency for risk averse practice which deny children access to potentially beneficial participation in research activities.
This theme of risk averse practice is echoed in the article by Diaz et al. who describe research into social work practices relating to children’s participation in “children in care reviews”. The findings exemplify the gap between policy rhetoric and practice realities in relation to children’s participation. While the authors note social workers shared nominal commitment to children’s involvement in reviews they evidence confusion about what this means in practice. This context where professionals hold variable understanding and attitudes, coupled with limited resources, means decades on from the establishment of statutory duties to realise children’s participation rights in these settings – and the development of innovative practice to support it (Welsby, 1996), provision for children to have a say in social work decisions that affects them remains wrongly conceived as optional practice. In contrast to a particular form of procedural protection which is recognised as a (statutory) duty, the article demonstrates child protection professionals continue to perceive the role of children in decision making as aspirational rather than fundamental.

However rather than criticising individual professionals or local authorities, it is important also to acknowledge the current organisational context in which the practices described in both this article and wider journal operate. Diaz et al., again in line with Kiili and Molanen, draw further attention to the ways in which risk averse attitudes combine with embedded practices and structural contexts, limiting potential for new strategies to emerge that might enhance both participation and protection. By embedded practices we mean both interpersonal (e.g. the dynamics of agenda setting, information flows and relationships management within meetings) and organisational (e.g. the availability of time and consistent personnel which enable practitioners to build trusting relationships in which safety can flourish). Meanwhile structural contexts include the way in which the public sector remains constrained by austerity-minded economic and social policy alongside cultural assumptions about childhood and risk (Featherstone et al., 2018).

The theme of trust surfaces again in the several articles in this journal – reflecting wider research which both identify trust as the basis for effective “safeguarding” relationships (Warrington, 2013) and note its dependence on rights respecting practice which recognise children’s agency (Lefevre et al., 2018; Hallett, 2016). In this volume, strategies that enable trust to be built are described by Brady and Franklin in settings linked to research, social work, education, health and care. Again the issue of resources (specifically professionals time) is identified as critical to enabling the relationships of trust through which safe and meaningful participatory processes flourish. Opportunities to hold and respond to the risks described are clearly dependent on this relational practice – ensuring the young researchers exploration and exposure of injustice is a shared experience that is manageable and motivational rather than disempowering or unduly distressing.

Going beyond notions of trust however, Brady and Franklin’s work also offers an example of more radical collaborative decision-making processes with children in the safeguarding arena; applied co-led research exploring disabled children’s involvement in Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). Disabled children and young people are here positioned as co-researchers - part of the academic/youth researcher collective “RIP Stars” – co-leading the work that identifies, analyses and challenges these shortcomings. As in the article by Diaz et al., their findings show that similar processes to those encountered in looked after children’s review meetings are at play in EHCP; children’s perspectives and rights present in guidance and policy while marginalised in practice, and children’s view sometimes sought without available resources to respond to them. Here disabled children and young people are encountering the dual attitudinal barriers of discrimination based on conceptions of both disability and childhood/youth. Significantly this article also foregrounds strategies for enabling participatory practice which promotes protection rather than protectionism. In doing so it suggests ways of countering the silencing and marginalisation of disabled children strongly associated with their additional vulnerability to violence and abuse (Franklin et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2015). While risks to the young researchers are present and acknowledged here (namely in relation to the difficult feelings of frustration, upset and anger evoked by reflecting on experiences of marginalisation from decision making) these are noted to be something the young researchers do not wish to be “protected from”. Rather, as Freire (1973) highlighted, opportunities to reflect on and learn from personal experiences and to connect these to structural conditions such as discriminatory attitudes or austerity policies are integral to challenging (and protecting children from) arguably greater risks of a long term lack of social justice.
The contribution co-authored by a second group of young researchers and colleague academics (UCan) reinforces this point, and demonstrates the capacity of experienced young researchers to reflect on and minimise risk when recounting their own experience. As Kiili and Moilanen point out, co-led research with children and young people needs to be conducted by researchers competent in navigating the potential for distress. The UCan contribution highlights that this competence is not age dependent. Competence to navigate and define risk is related to opportunities to access information and reflect on experiences.

In addition to emphasising the competence of young researchers to navigate risks during participatory activities, the UCan contribution draws attention to the benefits of participatory practice in promoting protection for children when they are outside of participatory group settings. UCan argue that participation supports protection by promoting inclusion in social life, providing information and enhancing young people’s communication skills. But, they stress, participatory activity also makes safeguarding a community endeavour rather than an individualised responsibility. By gathering and sharing evidence about the consequences of discriminatory and abusive attitudes and practices, young people promote safety for themselves and their peers.

Articles by Hollis and Whittington also contribute to the theme of the importance of access to information to enable informed and safe decision making. Reflecting on a non-participatory evaluation of a schools-based safeguarding programme Hollis describes how researchers who critically reflect on their practice can develop multi-method and creative approaches to facilitate young children’s decision making about participation. However she also highlights the need to involve children in developing accessible information, without which consent to participation is not informed.

Although Hollis’ argument for co-designed information is developed through reflections on safeguarding research, her argument for co-designed information is equally relevant in other safeguarding settings. But children are not the only people who need accessible and relevant information, and Hollis also makes a strong case for policy makers and service deliverers needing information about children’s views and experiences so that adult professional’s decision making about safeguarding services can be evidence based. Similarly, academics would benefit from information about successful strategies for responding to disclosures during research activities, and this again would promote safe participatory practice. As Kiili and Moilanen previously note, reflecting on our practice – together with children and young people – would enable us to improve it.

The article by Whittington goes some way towards responding to these identified needs by reflecting on practice activities within a Participatory Action Research (PAR). Like Hollis, Whittington’s article describes how to support young participants to make meaningful decisions about participation in the research itself and to give (or withhold) consent through sensitive discussions. However, like Brady and Franklin, Whittington describes a PAR process in which young people are afforded a range of opportunities to inform and steer a research agenda focused on safeguarding and also the research process itself. While the article focuses on the methodological issues it is framed by the context of debates around relationship and sex education (the focus of the research) highlighting how some adults’ desires to “protect” children and young people from access to information, denies them knowledge that is protective. This provides a really practical exploration of how young people’s participation in discussions and opportunities to influence policy are often undermined by adults acting as gatekeepers to those opportunities – be those parents, ethical reviewers or professionals. The article describes the practice realities of negotiating these processes – with young people and institutions and the dilemmas involved. It speaks again to the importance of managing rather than avoiding risk and above all recognising young people’s rights and capacities to access the information and opportunities for critical reflection that help keep them safe.

The article by Ackerley and Factor similarly responds to the needs identified by Hollis, and by Kiili and Moilanen, for participatory practice to be conducted by well-informed researchers. Ackerley and Factor represents a relatively novel contribution to literature on children’s participation, at least within the UK as they hint at an as yet underexplored alignment between participatory and trauma informed principles of practice. The article describes dialogical practice with young
“experts by experience” addressing police responses to child sexual exploitation – a dynamic process of constantly negotiating protective and participatory rights. In this example a unique opportunity for managed dialogue, between police professionals and young people, is presented as both an individual and collective response to trauma, and a process in which the potential for re-traumatisation remains a “live” concern. Here participatory processes hold both protective potential and psychological risk. Balancing these clearly requires skill and the authors remind us that while encouraging further uptake of participatory approaches we must be careful not to underplay the skills that participation workers need – particularly when navigating situations where participants vulnerabilities may be significant or conflict likely.

Relatledly the role of dialogue and the “group” is also explored here – demonstrating another recurring theme (Whittington; Brady and Franklin; YRAP – all this volume). Interestingly within this debate groups – so often seen as fundamental to participatory practice seeking to influence social change – are also often cited as a sites of risk for particular individuals or groups of children and young people (see for example Warrington and Brodie, 2017). Undeniably group work is unpredictable, involves potential conflict and dramatically shifts the balance of power – yet tied up in these dynamic qualities are transformative, protective and democratising potential – as evidenced here. Key considerations again relate to commitment and resources: namely staff time and skill alongside organisational support through which to anticipate, manage and respond to risk, whether potential or actual.

The final contribution in this journal comes from members of another group of young research advisors and academic co-authors (YRAP) whose work is focused on supporting research addressing sexual violence experienced by young people. As individuals with direct experience of being considered “too vulnerable” to participate in individual and collective decision making their contribution seeks to name tangible protective benefits of participatory practice. They challenge notions that such benefits are obscure or hard to discern – citing experiences of care, enhanced confidence and self-efficacy, solidarity and politicisation derived from their experiences of participatory group work. Echoing themes identified by Ackerley and Factor their contributions also suggest the as yet under-explored potential of participatory work in addressing trauma with children and young people – and the intersections with therapeutic approaches. Similarly their contribution further reiterates the role of young people in assessing risk as highlighted by several articles.

**Implications**

From the articles drawn together for this special edition we can see that there are risks associated with both participatory practice and its absence. When children are not provided with opportunities to express their views, to talk about their experiences or to access relevant information, their participatory rights are denied. This is a process of silencing which is oppressive in and of itself, which allows abuse to flourish and which prevents change in decision making, structural conditions of inequality and exposure to harm. When “risk” is used as the key rationale for excluding particular individual or groups of children and young people from certain decision-making processes the absence of these (potentially more challenging) perspectives means research policy and practice is ill-informed. When risks are assessed by juxtaposing participation and protection, dominant conceptions of childhood vulnerability, alongside issue specific concerns, are used to justify practices which we believe are themselves risky.

None of this is to deny the potential for risk, as with any social context, particularly where children have already been exposed to harm. But, an alternative approach to managing and navigating these risks is needed. A first step would be to name and identify any risks which are anticipated, and to question whether these relate to participating children and young people, practitioners and institutions, or for progress towards long term social justice. The risks which tend to be named currently are framed as risks to children, for example through exposure to distress in group-based discussions or exposure to publicity when they advocate for themselves. Behind these there is a climate of risk aversion, particularly in social care settings, where negative media attention has led to the growth of risk-avoidant and blaming institutional cultures (Parton, 2014). The questions arising are: why are children and young people denied opportunities to participate? What sorts of risks are being avoided (risks of conflict or raised expectations, risks to reputations or psychological risks)? And who or what is being protected by avoiding this risk
(organisations; the status quo; professions; individual professionals or children and young people)? And finally, why are the risks of young people not taking part in decision making so rarely considered? We suggest the answer lies in part in the failure to recognise children as actual citizens, with rights to receive and influence the distribution of social resources (Larkins, 2014).

In addition, the risks arising from an absence of children and young people’s participation may be harder to identify and quantify. Many will be long term and direct causality may be hard to trace (although serious case reviews in the UK are starting to highlight this). Only by looking at the potential positive impact of participatory practice – on children, families, communities, services and policy – can we make tangible the potential risk arising from absence of participation. Just as children’s vulnerability and competency is noted to be contextually specific – dependent on the allocation of resources – so too can risk be managed and reduced with the right resources. This highlights the role of professional commitment and understanding of inclusive participation which must underpin this work and the need to recognise children as able assessors of risk, and therefore part of risk management processes.

To move forward there is need to come to terms with the fact that adult instincts to protect children can often be silencing, to acknowledge this and talk honestly about it where it happens. As participatory practitioners we both know of moments when we ourselves have followed these instincts. The task is therefore for practitioners and institutions to ask ourselves difficult questions – are there times when protective silencing is justifiable? Who gets to decide? How do we determine what’s in a child’s best interests when the consequences of participating or not participating are often based on speculation? There is no single answer to these questions as they are context specific but, as growing opportunities for children to name the violence they experience has shown, a shift away from silencing is protective.

Once risks are named and critically assessed, the evidence collated in this special edition suggests that collectively we do have the knowledge which could mitigate risks if adequate resourcing is available. The relevant resources in this context are long term financial decision making and funding strategies which enable trusting relationships to be built, and adequate time to be allocated. With time and relationships, existing strategies for protective participatory practices could be shared and further critical reflection on how to deepen these would be facilitated. Group-based critical dialogue, when facilitated with an understanding of the power dynamics within groups, can offer immediate benefit. It provides participants with opportunities to reduce self-blame associated with many forms of oppression and vulnerability – recognising “it’s not just me” and to pursue structural change, linking the personal to the political. Group-based critical dialogue also provides participants with opportunities offer and receive care and access to both physical and psychological safety – as so eloquently highlighted within the YRAP contribution. This counters existing gaps in literature making the case for the life-saving potential and properties of participatory practice.

A second problem that arises from juxtaposing participation and protection arises from a conception of participation as voice, rather than influence. In this special edition, Kiili and Moilanen suggest that child protection research uncritically reproduces an understanding of children’s participation as a formal and institutional process. Similarly Diaz et al. demonstrate how practitioners are confused about what participation actually means. In contrast, Brady and Franklin promote a rights-based understanding of participation, which connects to the use of Freire by other authors. The evidence how children learning about rights to participation and protection, alongside broader theoretical frameworks enhances children and young people’s capacity to challenge existing policy and provision. It suggests how one measure of the effectiveness of participatory practice in promoting protection might be to track the extent to which children’s views about their personal and collective wishes are translated into changes in practice and policy. If children and young people’s wishes are not translated into practice, explicit and accessible information about why is required, enabling scrutiny of professional and institutional decisions.

To promote the conditions in which protective participatory practice is possible, the lines between participation, research and activism need to be blurred. Stronger action-orientation practice focused on social justice would provide greater potential to achieve the changes that children and
young people seek, and to understand the conditions that are limiting these changes. At the same time, caution and critical awareness are also needed as reviews of co-production and child participation have shown that neo-liberal participatory practice can be a means of responsibilising service users of any age (Beresford, 2008; Needham and Carr, 2009; Kiili and Larkins, 2018) – placing greater emphasis on individual’s responsibility to care for themselves and denying them the social resources (or control over these) that would enable them to direct social action. Further, current financial “austerity” measures and shifting working environments in which child protection services shuffle between being outsourced and then brought back into local authorities are limiting opportunities for professionals to dedicate the time needed to develop continuity of relationships and to be able to share and learn from each other’s examples of effective protective participatory practice.

The task of bringing about change through participatory practices that promote personal and social protection of children is necessarily intergenerational. It requires changes in adult attitudes about children, risks and priorities. It requires collaboration between and within generational groups, to understand how progress towards social justice can be achieved. It also requires political challenge to dominant ideologies that lead to decision making based on neo-liberal market principles rather than on evidence. Many of the children, young people and adults participating in the research and environments described in the articles within this volume are already engaged in trying to achieve these changes. We hope that this edition will provide readers with some inspiration for how further changes might be achieved.

References
Franklin, A., Raws, P. and Smeaton, E. (2015), Unprotected, Overprotected: Meeting the Needs of Young People with Learning Disabilities who Experience, or are at Risk of, Sexual Exploitation, Barnardos, Barkingside.


Lansdown, G. (2012), “Participation as protection”, BAPSCAN 8th Congress, Queens University, Belfast, 16 April.


**Further reading**


Participation as a methodological and ethical issue in child protection research

Johanna Kiili and Johanna Moilanen

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore how children have been involved in research activities in recent international child protection research and what kinds of ethical and methodological decisions are made by researchers regarding children’s participation.

Design/methodology/approach – In the paper, the complexity of children’s participation in research activities is analysed through an integrative literature review.

Findings – Children’s right to self-determination and the right to make informed decisions were the most challenging ethical principles to implement in practice. The study shows that researchers usually decide on the research design, and child welfare professionals and parents assess the eligibility of the children as research subjects.

Originality/value – More ethical reflection and critical discussion on the rights that adults, both parents and professionals, have in deciding the involvement of children in research activities is required.

Keywords Research ethics, Integrative literature review, Child protection research, Children as research subjects, Children’s participation, Informed decisions

Paper type Literature review

Introduction

Adoption of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the most widely ratified international human rights treaty, has been followed by a lively debate on the participation of children and young people in child protection research and social work practices. In child protection research, the interrelatedness of children’s rights is central, as the duty of adults is not only to protect children but also to protect their rights, including their right to participation. This, in turn, prompts questions about power relations between adults and children. Researchers keen on developing research methods with children have discussed this issue and its complexity in different contexts and from different perspectives (e.g. Crowley, 2014; Erikson and Näsman, 2012; Houghton, 2015; Leeson, 2014).

The aim of this integrative review was to find out how children are involved in research activities in child protection research and what kinds of methodological and ethical decisions are made by researchers regarding children’s participation. More specifically, the review focusses on research methods and ethics in recent child protection research. Child protection refers to the obligation of the states to take appropriate legislative, administrative and social measures to support families with children and to protect children from harm and neglect. If the support is insufficient, children can be removed from their birthparents and take into state care, meaning, for example, being placed in foster families or child welfare institutions (Burns et al., 2016).

The fundamental premise is that methodological and ethical decisions are inevitably interconnected aspects of research activities and should therefore be considered together. Further, in the current era of “democratisation” or the so called “participatory turn” in research, in which moral commitments and ethical responsibilities towards research participants and broader audiences have been in the spotlight, well-established methodological approaches have also come to be questioned (Canosa et al., 2018, pp. 401-2). Researchers have, for instance,
pondered the issue of vulnerability, including its complexity and context-dependent nature in relation to research activities with groups positioned as vulnerable to exploitation, and have called for more participant-led research practices. However, this is challenging as democratisation in research entails that also research participants find the goals of the research meaningful for themselves (e.g. Von Benzon and van Blerk, 2017; Aldridge, 2014; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004).

For this paper, the complexity of children’s participation in research activities is analysed through an integrative literature review. The aim is to attempt a holistic conceptualisation and synthesis of the literature on an emerging topic (Torraco, 2016, p. 410) that has rarely been comprehensively reviewed (e.g. Holland, 2009). The existing reviews have mainly focussed on analysing children’s participation in social work practices, neglecting their participation in research practices (e.g. Kennan et al., 2018; Van Bijleveld et al., 2015; Vis et al., 2011).

Children’s participation in research: a notion in motion

The UNCRC, and especially Article 12, stating that children have the right to express their views freely, serves as a central reference point for many researchers doing research with children (e.g. Van Bijleveld et al., 2015; Lundy, 2007). However, no common framework exists for defining and measuring participation in child protection, let alone child protection research; instead a diversity of definitions, approaches and models coexists (Gallagher et al., 2012; Kennan et al., 2018). While children’s participation is inevitably considered important, researchers have reported several challenges in studying it, such as differences between professionals, children and family members on what participation actually means. For instance, in their review, Van Bijleveld et al. (2015) find that children and young people primarily wanted to be heard, informed and taken seriously, whereas child welfare professionals perceived participation as an instrument for ensuring cooperation. Krž and Skivenes (2017) state that the way professionals conceptualise children’s participation is decisive for how they act and work. They give as an example the distinction between children having a voice and having the authority to decide certain matters for themselves. These two conceptualisations lead to two different types of child protection practices.

Willumsen et al. (2014, p. 341) argue that in developing children’s participation in social research, researchers have largely focussed on children’s right to participate and less on the vulnerability of children, such as the potential stress or re-traumatisation, during the research process. However, a paternalistic view of childhood can result in an emphasis on the right to protection to the relative neglect of issues related to participation (e.g. Erikson and Näsmann, 2012). Some researchers have underlined the importance of reflecting on the entire research process and not just the ways children can provide data for the use of adults (Larkins et al., 2014; Crowley, 2014). For instance, researchers should ask what kinds of resources and support are needed to enable the participation of children and young people and in what ways children’s and young people’s involvement can be promoted at each stage of the research, who the children involved are, and who decides on their participation and with what criteria (Larkins et al., 2014, p. 733). This is also emphasised by Houghton (2015), who states that it is necessary and ethically important that studies address questions important for children from different perspectives. She makes the further point that children’s agency should be acknowledged when designing research activities, such as methodologies, research questions and ethical decisions, which involve children. Hooper and Gunn (2014), in turn, draw on Axel Honneth’s theory of recognition as a foundation for designing a research project where looked-after children and young people worked as co-researchers. The researchers argue that while looked-after children experience many forms of disrespect, Honneth’s theory of recognition, which emphasises love, rights and solidarity, offers a useful and ethical framework for addressing both political goals, such as improving services, and the methodological and epistemological benefits of participation.

On some occasions, child protection researchers regard adults as their main research partners, also in relation to informed consent. Ferguson (2016, 2018), for example, published several articles on how social workers interact with parents and children during home visits. The author concluded that “the culture of practice in child protection needs to become more organised
around children’s worlds” (Ferguson, 2016, p. 292). Despite this finding, child-related methodological and ethical issues such as informed consent are not considered despite participant observations and visits to children’s private spaces, such as their homes and rooms. While the author reports receiving approval from the relevant ethics committee and informed consents from service users, the service users themselves remain unspecified (Ferguson, 2018, 2016, pp. 67, 285). It is described that the researcher entered the homes only if parents gave their permission (Ferguson, 2018, p. 67).

The notion of participation operationalised in this paper is based on Article 12 of the UNCRC and on the approach proposed by Lundy (2007) and Lundy et al. (2011). The latter has four interrelated elements which, to be realised, require four specific resources: space (children must be given the opportunity to express their views), voice (children must be facilitated to express their views), audience (children’s views must be listened to) and influence (children’s views must be acted upon, as appropriate) (Lundy, 2007; Lundy et al., 2011). Here, the approach is used as an analytical tool to capture the different dimensions of research processes, especially the ethical issues that have been noted by researchers when conducting research with children.

Research ethics in research with children

Houghton (2015) argues that children’s voices are typically absent when research ethics are under consideration. In addition, Powell et al. (2016) state that while researchers have recognized the importance of child involvement in research ethics, approaches to realising this objective remain under-developed. It is arguable that the main emphasis would appear to be on adult-centred procedural ethics – an ethical dimension that Guillemin and Gillam (2004, p. 263) distinguish in the context of qualitative research. Procedural ethics refers, for example, to guidelines and procedures, such as ethical committee permits and pre-prepared research contracts (consent forms) that confirm in writing an individual’s consent to participate in the proposed research. While these procedural codes and guidelines derive from biomedical research, in many countries they are also used in research involving human subjects, including in the humanities and social sciences. Applying biomedical research ethics paradigms in qualitative research has been acknowledged as a source of significant problems as the research practices themselves are often subjective, person-bound, non-linear and messy (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; see also Hammersley, 2009; Holland, 2007; Doyle and Buckley, 2017; Vermeylen and Clark, 2017). Another ethical dimension that Guillemin and Gillam (2004) outline is ethics in practice. Ethics in practice refers to day-to-day ethical issues that arise when conducting research and that persist long after ethics approval has been granted (Canosa et al., 2018). Researchers are increasingly paying attention to such issues, particularly those of anonymity (e.g. in cases where the research participants request their first names to be included in the report) and the emotional harm and distress that research activities may cause (Canosa et al., 2018).

However, while Guillemin and Gillam (2004) focus on qualitative research in general, different methodologies require different ethical considerations, as Doyle and Buckley (2017, p. 96) state. In social science research, and especially in child protection research, the relationship between researcher and researched has been considered important and special, particularly in qualitative research practices. Whereas the notion of ethics in practice resonates highly with the ethical challenges encountered in qualitative research, it is somewhat more challenging to apply the notion to quantitative research, where the researcher is usually working from a distance. Despite this, it is important to consider day-to-day ethical challenges in relation to all research premises and practices. These challenges include, for instance, deciding how to best to ensure participants are adequately informed about the research, considering which skills are needed in order to participate in specific research methods (e.g. reading and writing skills) and agreeing on who makes the decision on children’s participation in research (children, parents and/or professionals).

In a previous study by the present authors (Kiili and Moilanen, 2019), an integrative literature review was used to synthesise the evidence from 78 research articles on how research methods and ethics were discussed and reported in the child protection research published in them.
Close reading of the studies revealed that the methodological and ethical emphasis was on procedural ethics, even though most of the studies included in the review were qualitative. This means a focus on issues of anonymity, privacy and avoidance of harm as well as acquiring informed consent either in writing or verbally, especially from parents and/or child welfare professionals but also from the children who participated in the research. The methods of securing anonymity and informing children on the aims of the study were well documented and routinely reported in most studies, as these were seen to constitute the core elements of research ethics. The children were also informed of their right to discontinue the research process or decline to answer questions they found uncomfortable (Kiili and Moilanen, 2019). In this paper, the authors continue their analysis on the participation of children, focusing especially on the day-to-day ethical issues (ethics in practice) that researchers have reported encountering when conducting research with children.

Method and data

As the broadest type of research review, the integrative review methodology allows for the inclusion of various sources, such as quantitative and qualitative research and empirical and theoretical research, thereby avoiding the limitations of the more traditional forms of systematic review. Systematic reviews require well-specified research questions and explicit methodology (usually quantitative), as the task of an integrative review is to summarise and synthesise research from a diverse range of methodologies so as to provide a more comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon (Whittenmore and Knafl, 2005; Torraco, 2016). According to Whittenmore and Knafl (2005, p. 546), integrative reviews may “present the state of the science, contribute to theory development, and have direct applicability to practice and policy.” However, criticism has also been levelled at the integrative review methodology; first, integrating diverse data sources and various methodologies is likely to complicate data analysis and synthesis. Further, Torraco (2016, pp. 408-9) notes that in a number of integrative reviews, critical analysis of the literature is covered in a cursory way, providing censorious lists of the deficiencies and weaknesses of the reviewed literature, without any profound analysis or adequate synthesis of the data. Moreover, if any low-standard studies are selected for review, this may lead to bias in synthesis, and thereby undermine the overall quality of the review (Evans, 2007, p. 142).

In this study, the integrative literature review was used as a method for summarising the recent research literature and allowing the inclusion of diverse research methodologies. Searches were made in December 2017 and January 2018 in five electronic databases: ProQuest Social Services Abstracts, ProQuest Sociological Abstracts, Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts, IngentaConnect and Academic Search Elite. These databases, which are widely used and relevant to social work and child protection research, were searched to identify primary sources. To be included in the review, studies had to meet the following inclusion criteria, derived from the review question: focus on child protection, peer-reviewed, published in English, and published between 2007 and 2017. Various combinations of search terms were used to capture the topic of interest while the focus was on child protection practices (see Figure 1). Additional search strategies included a review of the reference lists of candidate articles, hand search of the table of contents of key journals and non-systematic searches using Google Scholar. However, the lack of uniformity in the terms describing children’s participation in child welfare and protection services was challenging, and therefore diverse search terms and combinations were also utilised (see also Van Bijleveld et al., 2015; Kennan et al., 2018).

Four rounds of searches were made to find pertinent studies. The initial search based on abstracts and subject or keywords indicated a large number of studies (2,442 records) published in a variety of fields. In the second stage, records were screened according to the inclusion criteria, their titles and the availability of abstracts. In accordance with the UNCRC, the inclusion criteria were also revised to restrict the search solely to studies concerning children under age 18. A further criterion was that research data had been collected, at least in part, directly from children involved with child protection services. Screening based on the revised criteria yielded 266 studies.
In the third stage, the 266 full-text articles were read and assessed for the eligibility by both authors. Guided by the research interest, only publications based on empirical research were included, while literature reviews and methodological or theoretical studies were excluded. Duplicates and studies that were not obtainable through the databases at the authors’ disposal were removed. This resulted in 109 studies. In the final stage, studies focussing not primarily on child protection but instead on, e.g. learning outcomes, schooling or criminal behaviour, were excluded. Where multiple articles based on a single research study were found, only the most comprehensive one was included. After the four-step screening process, records were finally reduced to 78 studies (Figure 1).

There is no gold standard for evaluating data quality in an integrative review that includes diverse primary sources (Whittemore and Knaff, 2005, p. 549). In this review, study quality was assessed
by the authors according to the following principles (e.g. Evans, 2007, pp. 142-3): studies were expected to be peer-reviewed, use original data and be explicit about their methodological choices, along with a distinct and clearly defined research question and research aim. Both of the present authors performed the screening and data extraction processes. During screening, each author first independently appraised the studies, and only then discussed their assessments with the other author to achieve consensus. However, no overall quality appraisal criteria were applied, as the focus was on the argumentation related to research ethics, not the research results per se (Evans, 2007, p. 143).

Characteristics of reviewed studies and thematic synthesis

Most of the reviewed studies had been conducted in the UK (21/78) and USA (16). This is unsurprising given that the search was limited to publications written in English. In addition, the remainder had mainly been conducted in Minority World countries, namely, Sweden (6), Australia (4), Spain (4), Canada (3), Ireland (3), Netherlands (3), New Zealand (3), Norway (3) and Italy (2). The search also yielded single studies from Chile, Finland, Estonia, Germany, Ghana, Iran, Kenya, Serbia, South Africa and South Korea.

Of the 78 studies, 50 used a qualitative design, 20 a quantitative design and 8 a mixed methods framework. The three most popular publishing journals were *Children and Youth Services Review* (14 studies) and *Child and Family Social Work* (14 studies). Studies were, for the most part, published between 2013 and 2017 (42 studies), which may indicate an increase in child research participation in recent years. The details of each reviewed study are presented in Table A1.

In reviewing the data, the aim was to build a theory-led thematic synthesis of the selected studies (Thomas and Harden, 2008). More specifically, the UNCRC-informed approach with four key concepts (space, voice, audience and influence) proposed by Lundy (2007) and Lundy *et al.* (2011) was used as an analytical tool in synthesising data thematically.

Lundy’s framework was used to audit studies’ research practices on the question of children’s research participation, especially from the ethical viewpoint (ethics in practice), as outlined above (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). As Lundy’s framework was not originally designed for the purpose of conducting literature reviews, it was further developed, based on the present research data, to aid review of the various supportive strategies that children need throughout the research process, from the building of their capacity for engagement from the outset to supporting their involvement in the dissemination of the research findings to its funders (Lundy, 2007; Lundy *et al.*, 2011). However, in this paper, the concept of voices is used, instead of a voice, as used by Lundy, as children should be viewed as having multiple voices, rather than a single voice.

The results of the thematic synthesis are presented in the following sections and structured under the three main themes visualised in Figure 2: entering (space and voices), collaborating (voices and audience) and influencing (audience and influence). Entering can be viewed chronologically as the first stage of the research process in which who is to take part in the research activities is defined. The themes influencing and collaborating should be seen as encompassing dimensions of the research process and are analysed in relation to children’s possibilities to be participants during the research process.

Entering (space and voices)

The initial stage of the research process, known as entering, presents many challenges for children’s participation in research. Entering is a critical stage, as it defines who takes part and in what ways. The concept of space refers to the possibilities that children, such as those involved with child protection services, have to enter the research process and express their views, including their possibilities to be informed about the research process. The concept of voices, in turn, refers to whether, and if so how, children’s participation in the research process is facilitated in the entering stage. In practice, facilitation means, for instance, ensuring that children are furnished with adequate information about the research (Lundy, 2007; Lundy *et al.*, 2011).
Most studies (72/78) routinely reported that permission to take part in the research had been sought from parents and/or child welfare professionals, from children selected by professionals and/or parents or from children who independently decided on their participation. Over half of the studies (41/78) reported that adults, mainly professionals, defined in what ways children could take part in the research project or that adults acted as gatekeepers. This was at its most evident in research projects where adults selected the children or decided their participation on their behalf (e.g. Arbeiter and Toros, 2017; Balsells et al., 2017; Lundström and Sallnäs, 2012; Wigley et al., 2011):

Each participating agency was asked to generate a list of children. Child protection workers reviewed the original list to determine which children were likely to be able to participate in a 30-minute interview. (Morrison et al., 2011, p. 1477)

In such cases, children have a limited space to reflect on their participation. This is usually due to perceived vulnerabilities in children’s lives. Some studies (12/78) mentioned that it may be hard to recruit children involved with child protection services as research participants, as they tend to have multiple challenges in their lives (e.g. Bijleveld et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2017). Child protection professionals, in particular, exercise their authority and act as gatekeepers to protect children from potential stress or re-traumatisation. However, researchers are reluctant to problematise the gatekeeping role of the professionals, as they are dependent on them. Cooperation with professionals was seen a fundamental condition for research activities and thus researchers must trust in professional ethics and competence in determining what is “in the child’s best interests”:

As minors, the adolescents gave their consent under the guidance of the social worker or the head of the centre. (Mnisi and Botha, 2015, p. 229)

Some studies (10/78) reported that parents had forbidden their children to take part in research (e.g. Muench et al., 2017; Softestad and Toverud, 2012). Generally, the reasons for refusal were not explicitly given, either because parents were unwilling to do so or the researchers simply did not report any reasons. Some parents argued that their children were
not old, mature or healthy enough to participate in academic research or were not motivated to do so:

Many parents did not want their children to be interviewed. The reasons given for this were, for example, that they had already had many other contacts, that the child recently had begun a treatment contact or that the child had a neuropsychiatric disorder and could thus not be expected to concentrate in an interview setting. (Rasmusson, 2011, p. 307)

In a few studies (7/78), researchers set the criteria for children entering the study, as learning difficulties, mental health diagnoses or disabilities were cited as obstacles to participation (e.g. Nourian et al., 2016; Narendorf et al., 2012; Quiroga and Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2017):

Adolescents who had a history of mental, developmental, seizure disorders, and physical or motor disabilities according to their health records were excluded from the study. (Nourian et al., 2016, p. 3)

Research data were collected from children under the age of seven in only seven studies (7/78) (e.g. Cossar et al., 2014; Moss, 2009; Winter, 2010). Age can be thus be seen as a central criterion for defining who is old enough to be included as a research participant.

Young people, who are usually deemed old enough to decide their participation on their own (e.g. Mann et al., 2007), were however considered a difficult group to access for research. It was reported that these “older young people” might be less motivated to take part because they are busy, uninterested in talking to researchers they do not know or critical of child protection professionals (e.g. Larkins et al., 2015; Severinsson and Markström, 2015):

Around half the children and young people were unavailable or refused an interview and had to be substituted. The majority of refusals came from older teenagers, though not all. […] children and young people who were least engaged with their social workers were not reached. (Larkins et al., 2015, p. 301)

Severinsson and Markström (2015) also stress that many children and young people have had difficult and negative experiences of adults in general, and especially of child welfare officials, and for this reason, they may not have a strong enough motivation to take part in research activities. Wood and Selwyn (2017) found that while young people were interested in taking part in research as informants, they were also fed up with being asked questions by adults:

The children and young people attending the groups were keen to participate but also let us know that they were "fed up" with answering questions and completing forms that made no difference to their lives. (p. 24)

These young people were critical of the way researchers use the knowledge they provide for research purposes, as it seldom has any effects on their own lives (Wood and Selwyn, 2017). Young people were willing to use their voices, but they were sceptical of the space they have for defining how this data they provide is analysed.

At the stage of entering the research, the possibilities for children having a space for using their voices are clearly limited, as both professionals and parents act as gatekeepers. Procedural ethics (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004), in the form of professional appraisal and consent, seems, however, to be considered important, and hence children who take part in research are routinely also asked to give their consent. Ethics in practice (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004) and the realities researchers face during the entering stage were closely linked with discussion of the vulnerabilities of children, such as stress and re-traumatisation, and adults’ primary duty to protect children.

Collaborating (voices and audience)

After entering the research process, a wide spectrum of possibilities opens up for collaboration between children involved with child protection services and researchers, although challenges for children’s participation in this collaborative dimension also exist. Here, the concept of voices refers to strategies used to facilitate children’s possibilities to express their views during the heart of research process. Audience refers to the researchers listening to children’s views and reporting what became of them (Lundy, 2007; Lundy et al., 2011).
Most of the studies (58/78) included in the review utilised qualitative research methods or a mixed methods approach. The most commonly used qualitative methods were semi-structured, thematic and/or in-depth interviews (56/78). In a few studies, the researchers also used focus group interviews or discussions (16/78), observations or written materials (narratives, text messages) (8/78). In studies taking a quantitative approach, the most commonly used method was a survey or questionnaire (19/78).

In less than a third of studies (21/78), primarily qualitative or mixed methods studies, the researchers reported using “trigger material” or “creative methods” as prompts to facilitate interviews with children and to supporting them in using their voices:

[…] regardless of age or ability, children and young people were offered a choice of methods by which to participate. This included the use of pictures to act as visual representations of reviews. Most younger children chose to use these more creative methods; for many, this acted as a prompt for fuller discussion. (Pert et al., 2017, pp. 2-3)

A few researchers used red and green cards that children could signal with if they wanted to stop the interview or not answer a question (e.g. Aldgate, 2009). The use of trigger materials and creative methods was especially common with young children, i.e. under ten-year-olds. The most popular were visual methods, such as pictures and drawings, timelines, network maps and feelings faces (e.g. Hedin, 2014; Mitchell and Kuczynski, 2010; Winter, 2010; Wood and Selwyn, 2017). For instance, in the study by Moss (2009), the research material was collected with a large variety of methods, such as pictorial representations, storytelling and artwork, which enabled the participation of very young children, aged four to seven. The researcher also used interviews and questionnaires, especially with older children.

In a few studies (5/78), to establish confidential relationships with children and to give them space and time for their ideas and thoughts to develop during the process, they were interviewed several times at regular intervals. These studies reported that this method generated livelier and more diverse interviews and data (e.g. Lindahl and Bruhn, 2017; Mullan et al., 2007; Winter, 2010). In the study by Emond (2014, pp. 196-7), the researcher interviewed children and young people six times over a six-month period, and the informants also participated in focus groups. She ended up doing short individual interviews, as this form of processual data gathering allowed children to control the topics of discussion and the way the interviews were conducted:

The interviews were held monthly and were approached almost as one long interview broken up into short pieces. These short interviews allowed for a relationship to develop between the researcher and the children as well as affording them much greater control over the themes and topics discussed each month. (Emond, 2014)

Lindahl and Bruhn (2017) also report that each child was interviewed on three occasions, and each time the notes of the previous interview were discussed with the child. This method allowed the researchers to document a child’s experiences more accurately (Lindahl and Bruhn, 2017).

Winter (2010) emphasises that encounters between researcher and informants must be based on ethically sustainable interaction. To achieve this, Winter suggests that researchers must be sensitive to and consider the everyday realities and routines of the participating children. They must also be able to change their ways of communicating and being with children during the research encounter:

With regards to researcher sensitivity, this involved respecting children’s choices, freedoms (in short their social agency) and being flexible and responsive to the changing dynamics in every interview encounter. (Winter, 2010, p. 189)

The dimension of collaboration, in the sense of having one’s views taken into account (voices), was primarily reported in qualitative or mixed method studies in relation to the question of ethics in practice (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). The researchers reflected on the questions of how to best engage the children and cooperate with them during the research process and what ethical challenges exist in collecting the data. However, this was done in greater depth in only less than one-third of the studies included in this review. The strategies the researchers
adopted to collaborate with children during the research process were mostly limited to providing different methods and “trigger materials” that children could select from, as this was perceived as strengthening ethical sustainability and collaboration in research with children. In a few studies, time was described as necessary resource for building ethical relationships with the children, especially when interviews occurred on several occasions at regular intervals, and not as single long interview. However, most of the data collecting processes reported were adult-led, meaning that the researchers usually decide the variety of methods they use with children.

Influencing (influence and audience)

The research process comprises several stages and individual points at which children could influence the implementation of the research activities. Influencing refers to engaging children in decisions, for instance about research questions or methods. Audience refers to children’s right to have their views listened to, not just heard, not only by researchers but also by other suitable audiences, such as professionals, policy makers and politicians. Influence refers to treating children’s views with respect and acting upon them as appropriate (Lundy, 2007; Lundy et al., 2011).

Researchers in only a few studies (9/78) reported that children were involved in the study design, in areas such as making decisions on methods, timetables, recruitment strategies, analyses or how the findings were to be disseminated to a wider community or the “right” audiences. It was emphasised in some studies that children should have the possibility to influence in advance the themes and questions to be addressed by the research project (Cossar et al., 2014; Mullan et al., 2007; Pert et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2014; Winter, 2010):

Unicef (2016) have recommended that children’s voices should always be built into data collection processes, stating that “children need to be able to shape the questions asked in surveys of their own lives and well-being” (p. 41) (Wood and Selwyn, 2017, p. 24).

Leeson (2007) argues that in their research designs, and when investigating painful issues, researchers should challenge their assumptions and, by applying sensitivity, actively engage children in these processes.

Only a few studies reported that the findings had been processed together with the informants and that children had participated in the analysis and/or reporting of the findings (e.g. Kiraly and Humphreys, 2013; Seim and Slettebo, 2011; Stanley, 2007). Kiraly and Humphreys (2013) describe how children and young people had an opportunity to comment the analysis and final reporting, and, in Stanley (2007), young people and researchers worked together to compile a report targeted to young people. In contrast, in Arbeiter and Toros (2017), while interview data were also gathered from children, the researchers report conducting member checking (respondent validation) with just a few randomly selected parents and professionals to ensure that their responses were accurately interpreted. No consideration is given to why children’s views were left out. This can be interpreted as an ethical decision made by the researchers.

In a few studies (5/78), the researchers issued children with diplomas for taking part in research activities, such as working as co-researchers and conducting interviews as a peer interviewer (e.g. Taylor et al., 2014), or taking part in an advisory group set up to design and plan the research project and disseminating its outcomes, such as via reports and lobbying (e.g. Cossar et al., 2014; Stanley, 2007). The children who acted as advisors and co-researchers were reported of to provide important support for the other children taking part in the research. They also helped the researchers to “gain meaningful insights” from the child participants as all the children shared common experiences (e.g. Taylor et al., 2014).

The dimension of influence emphasises the importance of critically pondering research settings by asking who has the power to determine the participants and their participation, how to best to ensure that children’s perspectives are taken seriously, and whether these have any influence over the proposed research activities (methods, research questions, reporting, etc.). Citing Gallagher (2008, p. 398) on children’s participation, it is important to consider
the context of the research activities in question and how power is exercised in different networks of relations. Such reflections were present in only a few studies, even though in the current era of “democratisation” and the “participatory turn” social science researchers have been questioning well-established methodologies and highlighting researchers’ ethical responsibilities towards research participants (cf. Canosa et al., 2018). It seems that such questioning does not yet extend, at least widely, to research on children’s issues in child protection.

Discussion and conclusions

Discussion

Studies on child protection were reviewed in this paper using the adapted framework proposed by Lundy (2007) and Lundy et al. (2011) on the aspects of ethics in practice outlined by Guillemin and Gillam (2004). The results revealed that children’s right to self-determination and the right to make informed decisions were the most challenging ethical principles to implement in practice, particularly in the entering stage of the research process. Children’s participation is often decided beforehand and on their behalf by adults, especially if they are considered too young (mainly under 16 or 15 in this review) or if adult gatekeepers have perceived participation as a risk for them. Despite this, critical reflection by researchers on how they might include all children, including those suffering from traumatic experiences or who have mental health problems, learning difficulties, addictions or other vulnerabilities in their lives or have very negative attitudes towards adult professionals was observed to only a small extent in the reviewed studies (see also Kilii and Moilanen, 2019).

According to Wyness (2018, pp. 54-5), the dominant modes of children’s participation are formal and institutional, focussing on pre-existing institutional arrangements and with an emphasis on adult regulation. The findings presented above prompt the question whether these modes are somewhat uncritically reproduced in child protection research. Given that the aim of child protection as a professional duty is to support children and their families, it is disconcerting that research processes and designs leave very little room for the inclusion of all children. This has serious implications for the diversity of research-based knowledge on child protection. Thomas (2012) argues that participation is never a static state but relational, as it is based on relationships. This notion is all the more important when analysing methodological and ethical decisions as in many of the reviewed studies the relationships between the researchers and researched were seen as a cornerstone of research ethics.

In the review by Van Bijleveld et al. (2015), the personal relationship between the young person and the social worker is seen as one of the most important facilitators of youth participation in child welfare and protection services. Kennan et al. (2018), drawing on the results of their systematic review also conclude that “a positive, trusting and stable relationship is instrumental to creating a safe space for children’s participation”. The same observation is supported by the present results as well as in more broadly in the research literature (Van Bijleveld et al., 2015; Gallagher et al., 2012). It should therefore be further discussed whether it is possible for a child protection researcher to achieve a positive, trusting and stable relationship with children or young persons involved in the research and, if so, under what conditions. Erikson and Näsman (2012) emphasise researcher flexibility and that research methods and ethical decisions can adhere simultaneously to principles of children’s citizenship rights to participation and to principles of child protection and support. Many of the children in their research project were willing to talk about their experiences of being exposed to violence, leading the researchers to view the interviews as part of the recovery process, as it was through these that their experiences became recognised and affirmed.

Thus, if researchers are to take these challenges into account and facilitate children’s influence on research questions and methods and on ways of disseminating findings to relevant audiences, a more radical participatory turn is needed in the funding and commissioning of research, along with ethical persistence and other resources such as time. The fact that children are, self-evidently, participants in child protection research means that they should also be active
participants in child protection research practices. However, professionals and researchers seem to set different criteria for children’s eligibility to take part in research. This may partly be due to the persistence of gatekeeping by adults and partly due to methodological choices that require, for example, reading and writing skills (see also Kiili and Moilanen, 2019).

Finally, it is somewhat surprising that none of the reviewed studies reflected on the role of ethical boards or committees in determining the parameters for ethical decisions, even though these committees usually require the informed consent of, in the first instance, adults, who also have the right to decline participation even in cases where the children in question would be willing to participate. To address the problematic nature of adults as gatekeepers, more reflection is needed on the roles of research ethics committees, as there has been widespread criticism of their workings in the social sciences in general. For example, they have been criticised for favouring biomedical approaches that are poorly applicable to social science research (e.g. Hammersley, 2009; Smith and Rust, 2011; Vermeylen and Clark, 2017).

**Study limitations**

This integrative review has its limitations. The first is the diversity of terms used in child welfare and protection services to describe children’s participation. This may mean that some relevant search terms may have been overlooked in formulating the search strategies (Van Bijleveld et al., 2015; also Kennan et al., 2018). Second, in evaluating the results of the review attention must be paid to the fact that this review was confined to journal articles, and thus does not cover all studies in the child protection research field. Journal word limits and style constraints, for example, may influence the comprehensiveness of published reports (Evans 2007, p. 142). As we know, scientific journals in general impose strict word limits that may reduce the space available, for example, for ethical description and discussion.

A further limitation is that only studies written in English were included in the review, a choice that may bias the results. Furthermore, the fact that 20 studies were conducted in the UK and 16 in the USA means that cultural and policy differences must be critically appraised when pondering the wider meaning and applicability of the results. The UNCRC has been ratified by all the countries in the world except the USA; this can be considered a significant factor when interpreting the results of US child protection research. More broadly, countries vary substantially not only in their child welfare and protection policies (e.g. Gilbert et al., 2011), but also differences in their social norms, and values and cultures.

**Conclusions**

Most the studies included in this review took a rather traditional researcher-led approach in doing research with children, and thus examples in which children acted as co-researchers were relatively few. Researchers, it seems, decide unilaterally on the research design while the central duty of professionals and parents is to assess the eligibility of the children as research subjects. In short, children must suit (through screening) the research, and not vice versa. As Aldridge (2014) has pointed out, research among groups positioned as vulnerable needs to transform from top-down research to bottom-up participant-led research. It must, of course, be remembered that child co-research or child-led research is not free from ethical complexities. For instance, child co-researchers may be exposed to distressing information during the research process, researchers might take advantage of children’s relationships, or child co-researchers might pressure other children to take part in the research (Spriggs and Gillam, 2019).

The conclusion drawn from this study is that reflection on the position of adults as gatekeepers in child protection research is of paramount importance and must be continuous. More ethical reflection and critical discussion on the rights that adults, both parents and professionals, have in deciding the involvement of children in research activities is required. This also entails developing means for enabling stronger child involvement in the field of child protection research.
References


**Further reading**


### Table A1: Research data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s), year, title</th>
<th>Journal</th>
<th>Methodology, country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Aldgate, J. (2009), Living in kinship care: a child-centred view</td>
<td>Adoption &amp; Fostering, 33 (3), 51-63</td>
<td>Qualitative study, UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Van Bijleveld, G.G., C.W.M. Dedding and J.F.G. Bunders-Aalen (2014), Seeing eye to eye or not? Young people’s and child protection workers’ perspectives on children’s participation within the Dutch child protection and welfare services</td>
<td>Children and Youth Services Review, 47, 253-259</td>
<td>Qualitative study, Netherlands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Cooper, E. (2012), Following the law, but losing the spirit of child protection in Kenya</td>
<td>Development in Practice, 22 (4), 486-497</td>
<td>Qualitative study, Kenya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Eltink, E.M.A., Ten Hoeve, J., De Jongh, T. et al. (2018), Stability and change of adolescents’ aggressive behavior in residential youth care</td>
<td>Child Youth Care Forum, 47, 199-207</td>
<td>Quantitative study, the Netherlands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Euser S., L.R.A. Alink, A. Tharner, M. H. van Uzendoorn and M.J. Bakermans-Kranenburg (2014), Out of home placement to promote safety? The prevalence of physical abuse in residential and foster care</td>
<td>Children and Youth Services Review, 37, 64-70</td>
<td>Quantitative study, the Netherlands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Fawley-King, K., E.V. Traska, J. Zhang and G. A. Aarons (2017), The impact of changing neighborhoods, switching schools, and experiencing relationship disruption on children’s adjustment to a new placement in foster care</td>
<td>Child Abuse &amp; Neglect, 63, 141-150</td>
<td>Quantitative study, USA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s), year, title</th>
<th>Journal</th>
<th>Methodology, country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22. Geenen, S., L.E. Powers and L.A. Phillips (2015), Better futures: a randomized field test of a model for supporting young people in foster care with mental health challenges to participate in higher education</td>
<td>The Journal of Behavioral Health Services &amp; Research, 42 (2), 150-171</td>
<td>Quantitative study, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Gillum, N. and M. O'Brien (2010), Adoption satisfaction of Black adopted children</td>
<td>Children and Youth Services Review, 32, 1656-1663</td>
<td>Qualitative study, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. Larkins, C., J. Ridley, N. Farrelly, H. Austerberry, A. Bilson, S. Hussein, J. Manthorpe, and N. Stanley (2015), Children’s, young people’s and parents’ perspectives on contact: findings from the evaluation of social work practices</td>
<td>British Journal of Social Work, 45 (1), 296-312</td>
<td>Mixed methods study, UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34. Lindahl, R. and A. Bruhn (2017), Foster children's experiences and expectations concerning the child-welfare officer role – prerequisites and obstacles for close and trusting relationships</td>
<td>Child &amp; Family Social Work, 22 (4), 1415-1422</td>
<td>Qualitative study, Sweden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38. Mateos, A., E. Vaquero, M.A. Balsells and C. Ponce (2017), “They didn’t tell me anything; they just sent me home”: children’s participation in the return home</td>
<td>Child and Family Social Work, 22 (2), 871-880</td>
<td>Qualitative study, Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40. Merritt, D.H. (2008), Placement preferences among children living in foster or kinship care: a cluster analysis</td>
<td>Children and Youth Services Review, 30 (11), 1336-1344</td>
<td>Qualitative study, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41. Miglioniri, L., N. Rania, D. Cavanna, P. Cardinali and V. Guiducci (2016), Comparing maltreating and foster families in Italy</td>
<td>Journal of Child and Family Studies, 25 (3):746-755</td>
<td>Qualitative study, Italy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42. Mitchell, M.B. and L. Kuczynski (2010), Does anyone know what is going on? Examining children’s lived experience of the transition into foster care</td>
<td>Children and Youth Services Review, 32 (3), 437-444</td>
<td>Qualitative study, Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author(s), year, title</td>
<td>Journal</td>
<td>Methodology, country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43. Mnisi, R. and P. Botha (2015), Factors contributing to the breakdown of foster care placements: the perspectives of foster parents and adolescents</td>
<td>Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk, 52 (2), 5, 227-244</td>
<td>Qualitative study, South Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46. Muench, K., C. Diaz and R. Wright (2017), Children and parent participation in child protection conferences: a study in one English local authority</td>
<td>Child Care in Practice, 23 (1), 49-63</td>
<td>Qualitative study, UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47. Mullen, C., S. McAlistar, F. Rollock and L. Fitzsimons (2007), “Care Just Changes Your Life”: factors impacting upon the mental health of children and young people with experiences of care in Northern Ireland</td>
<td>Child Care in Practice, 13 (4), 417-434</td>
<td>Qualitative study, Ireland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50. Narendorf, S.C., N. Fedoravicius, J.C. McMillen, D. McNelly and D.R. Robinson (2012), Stepping down and stepping in: youth’s perspectives on making the transition from residential treatment to treatment foster care</td>
<td>Children and Youth Services Review, 34 (1), 43-49</td>
<td>Qualitative study, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51. Nourian K.F., M. Shahbolagh, K. N. Tabrizi, M. Rassouli and A. Biglarian (2016), The lived experiences of resilience in Iranian adolescents living in residential care facilities: a hermeneutic phenomenological study</td>
<td>International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Health &amp; Well-being, 11(1), 30485</td>
<td>Qualitative study, Iran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52. Pert, H., C. Diaz and N. Thomas (2017), Children’s participation in LAC reviews: a study in one English local authority</td>
<td>Child and Family Social Work, 22 (S2), 1-10</td>
<td>Qualitative study, UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55. Punch, S., L. McIntosh and R. Emond (2012), “You have a right to be nourished and fed, but do I have a right to make sure you eat your food?”: children’s rights and food practices in residential care</td>
<td>The International Journal of Human Rights, 16 (8), 1250-1262</td>
<td>Qualitative study, UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56. Pöllki, P., R. Vormanen, M. Pursiainen and M. Riikonen (2012), Children’s participation in child-protection processes as experienced by foster children and social workers</td>
<td>Child Care in Practice, 18 (2), 107-125</td>
<td>Qualitative study, Finland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57. Quiroga, M.G. and C. Hamilton-Giachritsis (2017), The crucial role of the micro caregiving environment: factors associated with attachment styles in alternative care in Chile</td>
<td>Child Abuse &amp; Neglect, 70, 169-179</td>
<td>Mixed methods study, Chile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58. Rasmussen, B. (2011), Children’s advocacy centers (Barnahus) in Sweden experiences of children and parents</td>
<td>Child Indicators Research, 4 (2), 301-321</td>
<td>Qualitative study, Sweden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60. Ryan, J.P., M.F. Testa and F. Zhai (2008), African American males in foster care and the risk of delinquency: the value of social bonds and permanence</td>
<td>Child Welfare, 87 (1), 115-140</td>
<td>Qualitative study, USA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
### Table AI

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s), year, title</th>
<th>Journal</th>
<th>Methodology, country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>63. Scannapieco, M., K. Connell-Carrick and K. Painter (2007), In their own words:</td>
<td>Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal,</td>
<td>Qualitative study, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American adolescents in kinship and non-kinship foster care placements</td>
<td>Race and Social Problems, 2(1), 31-49</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>services: partnership or tokenism?</td>
<td>497-512</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>accountability in child welfare institutions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingold, J. Manthorpe, J. Ridley and V. Strange (2014), Establishing social work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>practices in England: the early evidence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>needs of looked-after adolescents</td>
<td>International Journal of Child Youth and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family Studies, 5 (3), 447-465</td>
<td>Qualitative study, New Zealand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relationships and implications for practice: the experiences of young people who use</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>multiple services</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70. Strolin-Goltzman, J., S. Kollar and J. Trinkl (2010), Listening to the voices of</td>
<td>Qualitative Social Work, 12 (5), 603-619</td>
<td>Qualitative study, Norway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>children in foster care: youths speak out about child welfare workforce turnover and</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>selection</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perspectives on child–parent interaction when suspicion of child sexual abuse is raised</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72. Taylor, J., C. Bradbury-Jones, H. Hunter, K. Sanford, T. Rahilly and N. Ibrahim</td>
<td>Child Abuse Review, 23 (6), 387–401</td>
<td>Qualitative study, UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2014), Young people’s experiences of going missing from care: a qualitative investigation using peer researchers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73. Waid, J. and A. Stevenson Wojcia (2017), Evaluation of a multi-site program</td>
<td>Evaluation and Program Planning, 64, 69–77</td>
<td>Quantitative study, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>designed to strengthen relational bonds for siblings separated by foster care</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>young people’s outcomes in children’s services: findings from a longitudinal study</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>circumstances and implications for social work practice</td>
<td>Child Abuse &amp; Neglect, 63, 41–50</td>
<td>Quantitative study, Australia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>children’s perspectives of engagement with their carers using factor analysis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>77. Wood, M. and J. Selwyn (2017), Looked after children and young people’s views on</td>
<td>Adoption &amp; Fostering, 41 (1), 20–34</td>
<td>Qualitative study, UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>what matters to their subjective well-being</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>78. Wooffson, R.C., E. Heffernan, M. Paul and M. Brown (2010), Young people’s views</td>
<td>British Journal of Social Work, 40 (7), 2069-2085</td>
<td>Qualitative study, UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of the child protection system in Scotland</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Corresponding author**

Johanna Kiili can be contacted at: johanna.j.kiili@jyu.fi
Independent Reviewing Officers’ and social workers’ perceptions of children’s participation in Children in Care Reviews

Clive Diaz, Hayley Pert and Nigel Patrick Thomas

Abstract

Purpose – The research reported here forms part of a study of children’s participation in care reviews and decision making in one local authority in England. The purpose of this paper is to outline the views of 11 social workers and 8 Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and explores their perceptions of children’s participation in reviews. The paper considers the barriers to young people participating meaningfully in decision making and how practice could be improved in this vital area so that children’s voices are more clearly heard and when possible acted upon by professionals.

Design/methodology/approach – The data reported here derive from a qualitative cross-sectional study in one English local authority. The entire study involved interviewing children in care, IROs, social workers and senior managers about young people’s participation in their reviews. Findings from the interviews with young people and senior managers have been reported elsewhere (Diaz and Aylward, 2018; Diaz et al., 2018); this paper focuses on the interviews with social workers and IROs. Specifically, the authors were interested in gaining insight into their views about the following research questions: To what degree do children and young people meaningfully participate in reviews? What are the barriers to participation? What can be done to improve children and young people’s participation in reviews?

Findings – During this process seven themes were identified, five of which concerned barriers to effective participation and two which concerned factors that appeared to support effective participation. These are summarised below and explained further in the following sections. Barriers to effective participation: social workers and IROs’ high caseloads and ensuing time pressures; high turnover of social workers and inexperienced staff; lack of understanding and training of professionals in participation; children and young people’s negative experiences of reviews and consequent reticence in taking part; and structure and process of the review not being child-centred. Factors which assist participation: quality of the relationship between the child and professionals; and the child or young person chairing their own review meeting.

Research limitations/implications – Although these findings reflect practice in one local authority, their consistency with other research in this area suggests that they are applicable more widely.

Practical implications – The practice of children chairing their own reviews was pioneered by The Children’s Society in North West England in the 1990s (Welsby, 1996), and has more recently been implemented with some success by IROs in Gloucestershire (see Thomas, 2015, p. 47). A key recommendation from this study would be for research to explore how this practice could be developed and embedded more widely. Previous research has noted the tension between the review being viewed as an administrative process and as a vehicle of participation (Pert et al., 2014). This study highlighted practitioner reservations about young people chairing their own reviews, but it also gave examples of how this had been done successfully and how it could improve children’s participation in decision making. At the very least, it is essential that young people play a role in deciding where the review is going to take place, when it will take place, who is going to be invited and what will be included on the agenda.

Social implications – The paper highlights that in this Local Authority caseloads for social workers were very high and this, combined with a high turnover of staff and an inexperienced workforce, meant that children in care struggled to have a consistent social worker. This often meant that young people were not able to build up a positive working relationship with their social worker, which negatively impacted on their ability to play a meaningful role in decision making.

Originality/value – There have been very few recent studies that have considered professionals’ perspectives of children’s participation in key meetings and decision making, so that this provides a timely and worthwhile contribution to this important area of work.

Keywords Participation, Child protection, Children in care, Childcare reviews, Childcare social work, Looked after children

Paper type Research paper

Received 8 January 2019
Revised 2 May 2019
9 June 2019
Accepted 28 June 2019

The authors wish to thank the many participants who shared their experiences and gave their time to this study. The authors would like to thank Dawn Mannay and Alyson Rees for their feedback on this paper.
Introduction

There were 72,670 children in care in England as of March 2017, an 8 per cent increase compared to 2012, and the numbers continue to rise steadily (Department for Education, 2018). It is well established that the life chances for children in care in England are poor in comparison to their peers, culminating in pronounced difficulties in their transition to adult life (Berridge et al., 2015). It is challenging to disentangle how far this stems from care system failings, the effect of earlier abuse, multiple returns to an abusive home or the culmination of all these factors (Forrester et al., 2009). However, research suggests that pre-care adversities are particularly influential for the life chances of children in care (Wade et al., 2011).

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), ratified by the UK in 1991, and the Children Act 1989, implemented in the same year, represented a shift from viewing children as objects of concern towards seeing them as citizens with human rights (Cashmore, 2002). In this paper, we are principally concerned with examining young people’s participation in decisions which affect their lives during the period in which they are looked after by the state. In accordance with previous studies in this area, we are interested in “finding out what is going on: to discover how and how far children take part in decision making processes, what factors influence, enhance or impede their participation” (Thomas, 2002, p. 96). Hart’s (1992) ladder provides a helpful framework for assessing professionals’ perception of children’s participation, and we refer to this later[1]. More recently, Lundy (2013) has reminded us that Article 12 of the CRC requires more than “giving children a voice”: that for effective participation they also require a space, an audience and influence. Others have challenged the “Article 12 model” (where children express their views and then adults decide) in favour of dialogue, where all voices come together in a process that looks for consensus (Fitzgerald et al., 2010; Mannion, 2010).

The Child in Care (CiC) review is a key process for ensuring professionals hear and respond to children’s views. The principal aim is to ensure that the state consistently meets a child’s needs until they reach adulthood. The Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) has been tasked with overseeing this process since 2004, to ensure that children play a meaningful role (Pert et al., 2014). The IRO decision-making powers are provided by Section 22 of the Children Act 1989 which requires that LAs consider the wishes and feelings of children in care when reviewing their care plans (Schofield and Thoburn, 1996). Additional legislation to support the care and participation of children in care is provided by the Adoption and Children Act 2002, which introduced the role of the IRO.

Amid concerns over the independence and efficacy of the IRO role, the 2008 amendment to the Children Act 1989 extended their responsibilities with regard to care planning and performance monitoring. This was strengthened further by the 2010 Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations (Department for Children Schools and Families, 2010), which came into force in England and Wales alongside statutory guidance for IROs with the introduction of the IRO Handbook (Department for Education and Skills, 2010). These provide clear guidance of how IROs should undertake their role. Consultation and participation are highlighted as a requirement in recognition that the IRO role and the review process should encourage meaningful participation for children in care and their parents (Department for Education and Skills, 2010).

Despite successive changes to policy and practice in pursuit of this, children in care have continued to report a lack of opportunity to engage in decisions about their lives (Pert et al., 2014). There has been extensive research documenting the views of children in care in relation to involvement in decision making (Murray and Hallett, 2000), efficacy of children’s advocates (Barnes, 2012), the role of IROs (Pert et al., 2014; Dickens et al., 2015; Ofsted, 2013), care planning and the courts (Timms and Thoburn, 2006) and experiences of the care system generally (Ofsted, 2011). Overall, these studies show that children’s voices are often not heard by professionals and that they experience limited involvement and power in decisions concerning their lives.

Specifically, research has shown that children have a limited role in their reviews and that their views are often not considered by professionals (Sinclair, 1998; Thomas and O’Kane, 1999; Munro, 2001; Thomas, 2011). A common theme is that children “report that the purpose of the meeting is to talk about, rather than to, them” (Munro, 2001, p. 9). More recently, Munro et al. (2011) concluded that although most young people (71 per cent) reported that they were
encouraged to express their wishes and feelings at review meeting, and only 53 per cent felt they were listened to. Pert et al. (2014) also found that few children were offered a genuine opportunity to influence any aspect of their meeting, and that they did not enjoy the experience:

The strength of feeling from the participants in this study confirms that children and young people do not enjoy being part of adult centric decision-making forums. Reviews were enjoyed when they were more child friendly, where they had choice in how they were run and in which they did not feel embarrassed or overwhelmed. (Pert et al., 2014, p. 8)

These findings are consistent with Thomas and O’Kane’s (1999) earlier study, suggesting that the introduction of the IRO role since 2004 has not made the difference in terms of improving children’s participation which might have been expected. A recent study by Jelicic et al. (2014) found that children’s experiences of IROs varied greatly, some having a very positive experience, others more negative. In this context, it is important that research seeks to understand the process from the perspective of social workers and IROs. The present study does just that, as part of a larger project which also studied children and managers (Diaz et al., 2018; Diaz and Aylward, 2018).

The research

The data reported here derive from a qualitative cross-sectional study in one English local authority. The entire study involved interviewing children in care, IROs, social workers and senior managers about young people’s participation in their reviews. Findings from the interviews with young people and senior managers have been reported elsewhere (Diaz et al., 2018; Diaz and Aylward, 2018); this paper focusses on the interviews with social workers and IROs. This paper focusses solely on adult perspectives to supplement and further elucidate the organisational, professional and structural barriers to children’s meaningful participation in reviews and to try to support improved practice. We interviewed eight of the nine IROs in the local authority (the ninth being unavailable) and we interviewed 11 social workers in childcare teams, all of whom had worked for at least a year with children in care. The research design was cross-sectional which means the collection of data at a single point in time from a number of participants (Bryman, 2012). Specifically, we were interested in gaining insight into their views about the following research questions:

RQ1. To what degree do children and young people meaningfully participate in reviews?

RQ2. What are the barriers to participation?

RQ3. What can be done to improve children’s and young people’s participation in reviews?

Through a purposive sampling method (Babbie, 2004), professionals were recruited who currently worked with children in care, either as social workers or IROs, and who had attended at least one CiC review. Invitations were sent to professionals using the local authority employee database. All participants were provided with information about the research prior to interviews. Ethical approval was given by the Social Research Ethics Committee at the sponsoring university and the local authority ethics committee.

Data were collected through audio-recorded semi-structured interviews with 8 IROs and 11 social workers practicing across multiple sites within 1 English local authority area. This is a large, rural authority characterised by a broad spectrum of deprivation and wealth. An inductive approach to data analysis was used to examine the interview data (Babbie, 2004). Data were thematically analysed, which involved identifying common themes and testing against deviations considered and addressed within the context of the participant’s interview (Silverman, 2005).

During this process seven themes were identified, five of which concerned barriers to effective participation and two which concerned factors that appeared to support effective participation. These are summarised below and explained further in the following sections:

1. Factors which act as barriers:
   - minimal available planning time due to high caseloads and management deadline pressures;
   - high turnover of social workers and inexperienced staff;
Barriers to effective participation

A common theme that emerged during the interviews with the IROs and social workers concerned the fact that they were under a great deal of pressure and were struggling to carry out their role as outlined in statutory guidance such as the IRO Handbook (Department for Education and Skills, 2010). Barriers to IROs enabling effective participation of children covered a range of different aspects of the working life and practices of IROs and social workers.

Minimal available planning time due to high caseloads and management deadline pressures. High caseloads were an especial challenge highlighted by all IROs and social workers:

IRO 3: We’ve got so many kids coming into care […] for me, any Child in Care Review, you wing it and if you don’t wing it – I know that’s awful to say. That’s what social work is about. You know, you deal with crises don’t you […].

This notion of “winging it” described above was consistent with how other IROs and social workers described review meetings. A plethora of research has demonstrated that frontline childcare social work can be extremely challenging, not to mention that it is difficult to plan for every single eventuality (Shoesmith, 2016; Bowyer and Roe, 2015; Munro, 2012). However, the above quote also suggests that meetings are responded to in the context of crisis focussed working as opposed to a planned feature of the overall review process. It is reasonable to extrapolate from this that reviews held in an unplanned and ad hoc fashion are likely to present a significant challenge for how far children and young people can actively engage in the review process.

All the social workers and IROs expressed that high caseloads had a detrimental impact on their ability to ensure that the child or young person was able to participate in their review in a meaningful manner. This routinely accepted reality of having too much work relates closely to the culture of the profession as often being in a state of crisis (Muench et al., 2017; Leigh, 2017; Shoesmith, 2016):

Researcher: Do you think social workers have the time and resources to prepare people for the meetings?
IRO 3: No. But I think they could make time and find time to some degree. They’re so busy […] they’re so, so, busy, and I don’t mean just on the ground but in their heads. They’ve got so many things they’re carrying, so many pressures […] they’re not able to think ahead or plan ahead because everything is on the ground.

This notion of being mentally and emotionally over-stretched is in line with research carried out by Ruch (2012), as well as Forrester (2016) who describes this as “zombie social work”. Reflecting on the challenges of modern-day child protection social work, Forrester (2016) contends:

In research we frequently observe social workers doing a visit because they are meant to do one within a certain timescale (the “stat visit”). Their computer is literally flashing at them, they do the visit, fill in the form and the computer stops flashing. But the visit itself is often characterised by a purposelessness that leaves worker and family confused about what is happening […] To me this is symptomatic of a system which has developed an obsession with effective management, without sufficient attention to the wider values and aims of the service. It is like a zombie social work - moving and busy (very, very busy!) without any sense of being truly alive. (p. 12)

The IROs interviewed for this study also reported feeling subjected to this bureaucracy. A significant majority acknowledged that some reviews took place without young people even
being present so as to meet agency timescales. This meant that the young people would not always attend their review simply because it did not fit with the IRO’s or social worker’s diary:

IRO 3: If there were more time to prepare then IROs would insist on children being present, because you’d have the time to help prepare for that and to meet those around, and social workers would have the time to prepare [...] and plan for it.

Researcher: Do reviews ever take place where children just wouldn’t be able to attend because of your diary and the social worker’s diary?

IRO 3: Yeah. Sadly, yes [...].

Within this particular local authority, some review meetings took place without children and young people even being aware that they were happening, because professionals were under such pressure to ensure that they occurred within a set timeframe. One IRO cited an example of a review meeting (to which the young person was invited) taking place on the child’s birthday to meet the statutory timescale. As a time-saving measure, several social workers reported that they would combine CiC reviews with Personal Educational Plan meetings at the school:

Researcher: Did that seem to work well?

SW 1: [...] they can end up being quite long meetings and a child might be more comfortable if it is in their home instead of being dragged out of class, sitting around with however many professionals looking at them and then leaving again [...] I have one boy that very much just thought it was a process and he’d sit there like “great, I’ve just got to do this”.

High turnover of staff and inexperienced social workers. Almost all professionals interviewed raised the issue of high turnover of social workers serving as a potential barrier to children’s participation in reviews. The interview extract below from IRO 3 illustrates the impact of the inexperience of many of the social workers in this local authority upon how children and young people were prepared for reviews. This was presented as being due, in part, to the social workers themselves not understanding the purpose of the review:

IRO 3: I think the challenge is though, a lot of social workers don’t really know what to expect from a Child in Care Review [...] So, often the social worker comes to a review and they might not know what to expect so aren’t really able to prepare the child, which makes it very difficult then [...] and also we all practice slightly differently, so I think there’s an issue about IROs being consistent because we’re independent.

This quote raises two issues: first, inconsistencies within the IRO team pertaining to the way different IROs manage the process; and, second, less experienced social workers do not always understand the purpose of the review themselves. This was also noted in the interview with IRO 7:

IRO 7: they [social workers] should be talking with them and asking questions [...] that, in my experience, often doesn’t happen and so I’ve been at reviews, sadly, where young people don’t know what the plan’s going to be, let alone think about things that we need to talk about, so that can make it really, really difficult to have an honest and open discussion.

The implication is that if the social worker has not explained to the young person the plan, and in some cases may not even be clear what the care plan is themselves, then there is automatically a significant barrier to fulfilling one of the core purposes of the CiC review, namely, reviewing the care plan, as well as to ensuring that the young person can participate.

Lack of social workers understanding of children’s participation rights and limited training of professionals in enabling children’s participation in decision making. One interesting finding from this research was that although IROs, like social workers, recognised how important participation is, IROs had greater awareness of the barriers within current practice. This could be because the IROs were more experienced social care professionals. It may also be because a central tenet of the IRO role is to ensure that all views are heard and considered. A key finding was that despite the recognition of the importance of children’s participation in decision making, only one professional interviewed (an IRO) had received any training on participation:

IRO 5: I went on some IRO training (name of externally commissioned provider) a few years ago in Manchester, which covered stuff like that [participation][...] the training for IROs is atrocious, I have to say. We used to look at as a team for training and find bits and pieces from BAAF or whoever and we’d go on it and we’d think, actually – not being arrogant – but we knew that!
This extract reflects the IRO interviewees’ experiences of the inadequacy of current provision for IRO training, and in particular the dearth of training on children’s participation.

All the social workers interviewed agreed that it was very important that children participate meaningfully in their review meetings. However, there was confusion about what this actually meant in practice. Social Worker 8 put forward a definition of participation, which was fairly typical of those provided by other social workers in the study:

SW 8: Participation to me just means a group of people all working together for the same goal or achievement.

Arguably, this definition of participation more adequately describes inter-agency working, and bears little resemblance to the legal or theoretical definitions of children’s participation outlined in the introduction. In terms of Hart’s (1992) ladder of participation, children’s participation in reviews was most frequently described by social workers implicitly as “tokenistic” or “manipulative.”

One potential reason for social workers’ limited understanding of participation in practice is that none of our respondents had attended any training on participation. In addition to this, there appeared to be a disconnection between the importance social workers attributed to children’s participation and how far they actively sought to ensure that children participated in reviews and decision making. Although all 11 social workers interviewed asserted that children’s participation in review meetings was extremely important, they also reported that either they or the IRO would make all key decisions regarding the arrangements for the meeting. This may be seen as an example of what Argyris and Schön (1974) identify as a disjunction between “espoused theory” (what professionals say they do) and “theory in use” (what they actually do). Whilst these social workers appeared to view children’s participation as important, there was little evidence that their practice ensured that this happened. The reasons for this may be outside social workers’ control, in the shape of structural barriers such as heavy workloads and bureaucracy, but there remains a pronounced dissonance between what is espoused and what actually takes place in practice: one social worker acknowledged that in practice children’s participation in reviews was often tokenistic:

Social worker 6: I think […], that a lot of what we do can be quite tokenistic. You know, it’s one thing going and getting the child’s view before the review which is what I’ve done, but on reflection that’s still quite tokenistic. That’s a visit to a child with a pre-set of questions for a meeting that isn’t going to change it in structure, and the actual issues can be pretty abstract and complex and they are very, very difficult to explain to a child.

The social worker here is articulating a view that many of the participants had in this study, namely, they had a paternalistic approach which means that they think that the concepts are too complex for children to understand, and that even if they see the child ahead of the review it will not impact on the agenda, structure or focus of the review. This ties in with a notion that all professionals had which was that “keeping children safe” was more important than upholding their rights to participate meaningfully in decisions made about their lives.

Children and young people’s negative experiences in reviews and ensuing reticence about attending. The IRO Handbook states that the review meeting should be child-centred, i.e. it is the child’s meeting and they should be given the opportunity to give their opinions and whenever possible for those opinions to be acted upon. Notably, all the IROs interviewed for this study reported instances of professionals, in particular school staff and foster carers, using review meetings to chastise, rebuke or shame the young person. The research by Pert et al. (2014) and Dickens et al. (2015) did not highlight this as an issue, although it is mentioned briefly in Thomas’ (2002)[2] research. The following interview extracts testify to this problematic practice:

IRO 1: Foster carers and teachers will use the review as an opportunity to shame the child by bringing up their bad behaviour. I did a review at a secondary school the other day. The boy is in Year 7[3] with quite a few additional needs and his care plan is complex, but he was on that day facing permanent exclusion and the head had made a decision that he couldn’t enter the school that day for his review. That got turned around but then there were about four education representatives
and […] the big male teacher, head of year, he wanted to take us through the whatever, 28 incidents, and he was a tiny little boy, very small for his age with some physical disability, and I could just see him shrivelling up. So, how on earth can that child have a voice in that meeting? And foster carers sometimes will talk about behaviour incidents, I think sometimes to justify or to defend their own position.

Overall, the IROs in this study reported that such practices of blaming, shaming or being placed under the spotlight served as a significant barrier to children and young people attending, engaging and participating in reviews:

Researcher: What do you think the main things are that lead to good participation from young people in children’s care reviews?

IRO2: Well, I suppose they’ve got to feel safe […] [They] feel like they’re under the spotlight. They’re being kind of criticised, everyone’s talking about them, everyone’s looking at them, they’re worried about bad things that will be said and so that’s the kind of thing which deters young people.

Both of these extracts from IROs 1 and 2 outline how these meetings can lead to young people feeling blamed. The organisation VCC (2005) has outlined how stressful, difficult and oppressive a review meeting can be for young people, whilst more recent research (Mannay et al., 2017) found that some teachers had prejudicial views about children in care and that this was borne out in CiC reviews.

Factors which assist participation in review meetings

Social workers and IROs also identified two factors in particular which they felt helped young people to participate in their reviews. These are considered below.

Quality of the relationship between the child and professionals. All the social workers and IROs interviewed agreed that participation in the review process was very important for young people and that a trusting relationship with the social worker and IRO was integral to this:

SW 1: It’s that child and it’s that child’s life, so they need to know what’s going on and have a say, because it’s them that’s got to live with it every day. It shouldn’t just be a tick-box exercise […] it’s normally done with an IRO, isn’t it? So, in the hope that they have the same IRO every year that they can build a relationship with and speak honestly with, because they may have had several changes of social workers. But it’s […] whether that relationship is built with them or it’s just another meeting that the child’s got to sit in and whether they feel they can speak honestly about it […] it can only be meaningful if that relationship [with the IRO] is actually there.

All participants concurred that the concept of a positive relationship (between the IRO, social worker and child/young person) should be at the heart of meaningful participation but for the reasons explained below it was very difficult for them to build this relationship in practice. As a result of having high caseloads none of the IROs in this study visited children either prior to or between reviews as suggested by the IRO Handbook (Department for Education and Skills, 2010) unless they were in formal dispute with the local authority which was extremely rare. Moreover, they all acknowledged that this had a detrimental impact upon their ability to build and maintain meaningful relationships with young people.

Studies of children’s participation in decision making suggest that “developing an effective procedure for eliciting children’s perspectives and establishing a trusting relationship takes time” (Anderson et al., 2003, p. 212). Each IRO reported a caseload in the region of 85 children, which is considerably higher than the IRO Handbook recommends (50–70 cases). Six of the eight IROs reported that they did not need long to build rapport with a young person and, in fact, that they were able to do so in just a few minutes prior to a meeting. This appears contrary to research (Ruch, 2012) which suggests that it takes a considerable amount of time to build up a trusting relationship with a young person. With respect to this issue, and the fact that they only meet young people twice a year, social workers raised concerns about the ability of IROs to build relationships with young people:

SW 1: I wonder whether he would have actually spoken truthfully to his IRO about this, because he took a long time to build a relationship with (me) and a lot of intense direct work.
The child or young person chairing their own review meeting. Most IROs and social workers spoke positively about their experiences of young people chairing their own reviews, although they also raised some reservations:

SW 5: It can go either way, can’t it. It can become extremely productive with a really engaged young person. I can think of one or two over the years that would, I think, be really switched on and really actually would have made a lot of professionals maybe buck their ideas up and maybe become a bit more child-focused. I can obviously think of one or two where they might feel it is an opportunity to rub a few people’s noses in it and maybe have a bit of fun at everyone else’s expense.

This view was shared by other social workers and IROs, who also voiced concerns around how far the procedural functions of the review could be carried out in such circumstances. Most social workers spoke positively about young people chairing their own reviews and, indeed, saw it as an effective way through which to increase meaningful participation by young people in the review process:

SW 4: I did a Child in Care review about six-months ago where it was chaired by the young person […] and he decided how he wanted to do it, and we started off by playing “hangman” to work out what his favourite things were […] so it was completely different to how a normal Child in Care review would be. My experience would be that when things are calm and settled and straightforward then participation is thought of more. When things are falling apart or in crisis, or we feel like adults need to step in and make those decisions.

Although here the social worker acknowledges the importance of participation, it is still deemed to only be realistic if the placement is settled and things are going well. The implication, then, is that participation is a choice (for professionals), rather than being essential to the functioning and ethos of the process.

There have been a range of studies exploring social workers’ views of children’s participation, which have considered care vs control within statutory social work practice. For example, Shemmings (2000) found that social workers had a desire to “protect children”, including protecting them from “adult decisions and discussions”; and viewed this as more important than upholding children’s rights to participate in decisions made about their lives, whilst Vis et al. (2010) observed that professionals often consciously sought to prevent participation by children within the child protection system as they did not think young people were mature enough to be involved in decision making and they needed to be protected from such decisions.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted multiple barriers to children’s effective participation in their reviews, including organisational culture, inadequate workforce training and resources, and a lack of understanding or strong commitment to meaningful participation. Although these findings reflect practice in one local authority, their consistency with other research in this area suggests that they are applicable more widely.

It is lamentable that after decades of policy commitments, guidance, research and initiatives to promote children’s right to be heard in decisions taken about their lives (Grimshaw and Sinclair, 1997; Thomas and O’Kane, 1999; VCC, 2005), and despite the introduction of the role of the IRO, so little progress has been made in this area. This study has found that this problem is multifaceted and requires structural, as well as individual levels of change. Whilst many professionals in this and other studies clearly wish to include and involve children, there appears to be a disconnect between what this means to practitioners and how this can be realised in practice. Workplace stress, agency bureaucracy, inadequate resources and limited training were all found to be contributing factors, in conjunction with a limited understanding about what “participation” is and its implications for individual practice. Furthermore all the professionals interviewed for this study saw their primary role as “keeping the children safe” and this always had to be the priority over ensuring they participated meaningfully in decisions about their lives. This was evidence of adults having a paternalistic approach which appears in line with previous research carried out on children’s participation in decisions about their lives. We would argue, rather, that children’s views on their safety should always be considered, that children’s rights to
participation and protection should go together rather than be set in opposition to each other, and that empowering children is in important ways crucial to their safety and wellbeing.

It is frustrating to see that, while there is ongoing work in the theory and practice of children’s participation that challenges the Article 12 model of adults listening to children and then deciding whether to take any notice of what they say, this research confirms that routine social work practice has not yet reached that basic level, and shows in many respects very limited real progress since 1991. Some questions that this research prompts are: is the IRO part of this problem or part of the solution; how do we strengthen relationships between children and practitioners (Munro et al., 2011); and does the phenomenon of children chairing reviews have the potential to take us into a new place in terms of participation as collaboration?

The practice of children chairing their own reviews was pioneered by The Children’s Society in North West England in the 1990s (Welsby, 1996), and has more recently been implemented with some success by IROs in Gloucestershire (see Thomas, 2015, p. 47). A key recommendation from this study would be to research how best this practice could be embedded and developed more widely. Previous research has noted the tension between the review being viewed as an administrative process and as a vehicle of participation (Pert et al., 2014). Indeed, Munro (2001) suggested that the idea of the review meeting itself needed to be entirely reconsidered for this precise reason. This study highlighted practitioner reservations about this issue, alongside highlighting how the personal motivation of professionals is integral to the success, or otherwise, of children chairing their own reviews. Evidently, there are manifold complicating factors that require consideration and, of course, chairing reviews will not be right for every child; however, it is one way through which to ensure that the child, as a person, is more authentically involved at the centre of decisions about their life. At the very least, it is essential that young people play a role in deciding where the review is going to take place, when it will take place, who is going to be invited and what will be included on the agenda.

Notes

1. Hart’s ladder, with which readers may be familiar, distinguishes levels of participation of which the highest is “young people and adults share decision making” and the lowest is where young people are merely informed; and also levels of non-participation (manipulation, decoration and tokenism). Also useful is Shier’s (2001) typology of the steps that organisations can take to embed children’s participation.

2. “Children fiercely resented occasions when the review was used to focus on negative aspects of their own behaviour, sometimes including episodes which they thought were over and done with” (p. 149).

3. Age group 11–12.

References


VCC (2005), Start with the Child, Stay with the Child: A Blueprint for a Child-centred Approach to Children and Young People in Public Care, Voice for the Child in Care, London.


Further reading


About the authors

Clive Diaz is Lecturer in Social Work at the School of Social Sciences Cardiff University. He was previously a social worker, social work manager and principal social worker in two local authorities. His research interests are in how social workers work with parents and young people and the role that service users play in decision making. Clive Diaz is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: Diazcp@cardiff.ac.uk

Hayley Pert is Associate Lecturer for the Open University and Lecturer Practitioner within the Pan Dorset and Wiltshire Teaching Partnership. Hayley is a social worker with a background in statutory child protection services. Her research interests lay in children’s participation and decision making within statutory services.

Nigel Patrick Thomas is Professor Emeritus of Childhood and Youth at the University of Central Lancashire and founded The Centre for Children and Young People’s Participation. He was previously a social work practitioner, manager and advisor, and a social work educator. His research interests are in child welfare, children’s rights and children and young people’s participation. His publications include Children, Family and the State (2002); Social Work with Young People in Care (2005); Children, Politics and Communication (2009); A Handbook of Children and Young People’s Participation (2010); and Participation, Citizenship and Intergenerational Relations in Children and Young People’s Lives (2014).

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website: www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm
Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com
Challenging dominant notions of participation and protection through a co-led disabled young researcher study

Geraldine Brady and Anita Franklin

Abstract
Purpose – In the UK, the Children and Families Act (2014) aims to create one assessment process for children with special educational needs or disability, through Education, Health and Care Plans. It also aims for greater participation from children and young people in decisions about their own lives. Current evidence suggests that children’s needs and desires across education, health and social care are not being fully met, partly because adult agendas drive policy, practice and standards of care. Furthermore, little attention is paid to the way in which disabled children and young people are included either within decisions about their own support or within research processes. The purpose of this paper is to present a research process designed to address these issues.

Design/methodology/approach – Six disabled young people co-led this participatory research project; for the first time under this new legislation disabled young people had the opportunity to define a research agenda which spoke to what “quality” might look like in planning for their own future and that of other disabled children and young people.

Findings – This paper presents findings from this process, addressing important ethical issues relevant for policy, practice and research, identified through this rights based, collaborative way of working in partnership. Three key issues were identified and are explored here. They include first, tensions between young people becoming leaders and dominant ideas about safeguarding and child protection; second, being empowered through engagement within the project yet restricted in other areas of personal life and, finally, the emotional impact on new researchers of gathering evidence of a continuing lack of autonomy for disabled children and young people. We argue that challenging dominant notions concerning the participation and protection of disabled children is required in order to ensure that they access their right to be decision-makers in their own lives, and to being empowered within research processes.

Originality/value – This is the first disabled young people-led study to investigate quality and rights for disabled children and young people using this rights-based methodology.

Keywords Participation, Children, Disabled, Protection, Rights, Co-researcher

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Many disabled children and young people face multi-dimensional exclusion, often denied opportunities to be decision-makers in their own lives and mostly excluded from active roles in research (Beresford, 2002). They are rarely seen as actors in their own lives, are frequently involuntary passive recipients of support and services, and treated as research objects, rather than active participants. The dominant discourse is often one of “being done to” rather than a discourse of “working with” or disabled children being in a position of control (Franklin and Martin, 2018; Shakespeare and Watson, 1998).

The study reported here challenges both notions of disabled children and young people as passive recipients of support and passive research subjects by presenting learning from a co-led disabled young researcher study. At the core of this project was an ideal of empowering disabled
young people to be as close to equal partners with academic staff in a research study as possible. Although research by children has grown in popularity in recent years (see for example, Alderson and Morrow, 2011; Lundy et al., 2011; Bradbury-Jones and Taylor, 2015), there has rarely been discussion of the involvement of disabled young people as co-researchers or research leaders. Rare exceptions to this include Watson et al.’s (2014) study with children with little or no speech and Liddiard et al.’s (2018) online co-researcher collective. Such attempts to address issues of inequality and power imbalance in a research study with disabled young people are unusual, and thus learning from studies which aim to push boundaries is vital. Barriers are often placed in the way, with many funders and institutions not prepared to see the value of lived experience and/or the potential of disabled young people to become competent co-researchers often citing risks to the rigour of the research or not being willing to allow a more fluid approach to research design/approach at the outset of a project. This study, funded by DRILL/Big Lottery, aimed to address these gaps through:

- training and supporting a group of disabled young people to co-lead, undertake and share research which defines quality and rights-based Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs); and
- supporting disabled young people to develop a framework and resources to ensure that quality and rights are at the forefront in the development and review of EHCPs.

Policy context

EHCPs were introduced in England under the Children and Families Act (2014) which created one assessment of the education, health and social care needs of children with special educational needs or disability leading to an EHCP. The legislation also aimed for greater participation from disabled children and young people in decisions about their own lives. It sought to support them to identify issues that are of importance to them in their EHCP and to be involved in the review of their plan. However, concerns remain that disabled children’s needs and desires across education, health and social care are not being fully met within this new legislative framework, partly because adult agendas drive policy, practice and standards of care in this arena.

Prior to this study, the quality of EHCPs and whether they met the rights of disabled children and young people had not been examined, despite the fact that EHCPs are legal documents and should provide holistic support. The plan should also prepare disabled young people for independent living and for having choice and control in their lives. The wider findings from the study are reported elsewhere (www.ripstars.net) the purpose here is to explore the often unreported reflections from working in partnership with disabled young researchers and to share that many of the perceived barriers or concerns to working in inclusive, empowering ways are often unfounded. Through reflective practice and working with values that recognise the strengths and rights of disabled young people, this paper aims to challenge dominant notions of passivity and/or the inability of disabled young people to be involved in decision-making, and produce rigorous research.

A co-led research study does not take place in isolation and therefore ideals of empowerment had to be balanced with demands, and rightful obligations, to protect and safeguard the safety and well-being of the disabled young researchers. This raised tensions on a number of levels:

1. The balancing act within the research study between the young disabled researchers becoming leaders and decision-makers but subject to imposed institutional and procedural constraints.
2. The young disabled researchers becoming empowered within the project but managing personal experiences in their own life where they have been, and continue to be, afforded few empowerment opportunities and are often subject to many restrictions in the name of protection or due to denial of their rights.
3. Considerations concerning the impact on well-being of the negative research evidence the young researchers gathered. Evidence which starkly highlighted to them entrenched tensions of ableism and over-protection and the lack of autonomy in the lives of disabled young people generally.
Each of these sets of tensions will be explored through an honest account of how the research team (university academics and disabled young people) managed the situation through continuous dialogue and reflective practice.

**Background**

**Disabled children and participation**

Under the United Nations (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child, “participation” is understood as the right of the child to express their views in matters affecting them and for their views to be acted upon as appropriate (Article 12). All children have this right regardless of any impairment or how they might communicate. Participation, involvement, co-design and co-production are all terms that are often used interchangeably to describe in essence a shared decision-making process. However, for shared decision-making to be meaningful it is important to be explicit about the level or degree of power that the child has in that process. This is to ensure that the child’s involvement (participation) refers to more than them merely being present and enables them to actively influence decision-making or to take a lead (Cavet and Sloper, 2004; Franklin and Sloper, 2006). It is argued that levels of power shared with children should be determined by the circumstances and the wishes of the children taking part (Kirby et al., 2003).

This right to participation is embedded in Article 12 of the UNCRC and in domestic law in England (e.g. Children Act, 1989, 2004) and within the Children and Families Act (2014). Lundy (2007) conceptualised Article 12, outlining four chronological steps to be followed in the realisation of this right:

1. **Space**: children must be provided with the opportunity to express their views in a space that is safe and inclusive.
2. **Voice**: children must be facilitated to express their voice.
3. **Audience**: the view must be listened to.
4. **Influence**: the view must be acted upon as appropriate and the reasons for the decision taken must be communicated to the child.

In all, 30 years after a child’s right to involvement in decision-making was established in international law, disabled children and young people continue to report that they do not feel listened to and are not involved in key decisions being made about them (Franklin and Martin, 2018). The lack of space, voice, audience and influence remains starkly in short supply for this marginalised group. Research indicates that basic rights, such as access to communication and information, are denied to this group, with access to a communication system/method and access to people who understand a young person’s preferred communication method a first consideration for participation (Franklin and Sloper, 2009). Realising a child’s right to participate is of particular importance when decisions are taken concerning a disabled child – as they are subjected to more surveillance and intervention by services and adults than non-disabled children. Often decisions are made about their lives by professionals who have not even met them and they have little say in aspects of their lives, thus impacting on their autonomy and dignity.

Once it is accepted that disabled children and young people should be included in matters affecting their own lives, decisions need to be made about how best to do so. This has received far less attention especially in terms of the way in which disabled children and young people are included. Disabled children face barriers to being part of groups who are vocal and used to having influence on policy or practice. There is often an assumption that asking a child a question equates to participation and will reduce unequal power relations, however, for disabled children who are rarely afforded control in their lives, experience of choice and decision-making can be lacking. This lack of experience can often be interpreted as a sign of incapacity or incompetence to be decision-makers thus creating a cyclical barrier to enacting their right to participation. This is an assumption often made of children generally (Alderson, 2007; Lundy et al., 2011), however, for disabled children what is understood by “participation” varies and is heavily influenced by whether disabled children are...
perceived as having the right to a level of autonomy, choice and self-determination or discourses which define disabled children as too vulnerable to be decision-makers and therefore in need of protection from risk of harm.

**Dominant ideas about safeguarding of disabled children**

The idea that disabled children are passive and dependent (Shakespeare and Watson, 1998), not always capable, needing adult intervention and protection and liable to make inappropriate choices, has led to strong leanings towards over protection of those who are deemed “vulnerable”. Yet, at the same time, disabled children can be under-protected from very real harm, such as abuse and exploitation (Franklin *et al*., 2015) and this is not always recognised. Engagement with children in decision-making is a firmly established principle in the government’s statutory guidance on safeguarding and protecting children (Working Together to Safeguard Children, DfE, 2017). Yet evidence shows that rarely are disabled children involved in conversations about their own safety and welfare or are listened to when they do disclose abuse (Jones *et al*., 2017). In practice, disabled children’s rights to protection and participation are often seen as in opposition, yet they are interlinked and indivisible (United Nations, 1989). Within research which seeks to address power imbalances and fully facilitate disabled young people’s participation, attention to both is required to ensure meaningful, ethical and safe co-led research with disabled young people.

**Methodology**

As previously described, it is still very rare for disabled young people to be in positions of power within a research project. This study set out to share all decision-making with the young researchers, aiming for the highest level of recommended participation (Shier, 2001; Hart, 1992). In reality, three parameters on this were discussed at the outset of the project – decisions had to keep everyone safe and we had to comply with research ethics, the overall research question had to be answered as this is what we were funded to do, and we had to sensibly use the budget to achieve our goals. These parameters were fully explained, agreed and taken seriously by the young disabled researchers who understood the importance of them. All other decisions were then jointly undertaken.

The research team consisted of the authors, a research assistant for some of the time and six disabled young people (aged 16–23 years). Together the group had the opportunity to define a research agenda which aimed to address what “quality” and a rights-based approach might look like in planning for their lives and futures and that of other disabled children and young people.

As all fieldwork was to be undertaken by the young disabled researchers the University team developed a training package to ensure that the group of disabled young people had the knowledge, skills and confidence to be researchers. This involved building on the award-winning methodology developed by VIPER (2012) by: introducing them to the research process, understanding issues of ethics, confidentiality, anonymity and safeguarding, designing interview schedules, sampling, how to undertake peer interviews and interviews with parents/carers and professionals, undertake data analysis, report writing, developing policy and practice recommendations and designing an accessible report and practice framework for professionals. In addition the young researchers also wrote think pieces, blogs, co-designed and co-produced all project outputs and associated resources. They also worked with internationally renowned disabled activists, graphic design students, an actor coach and graphic illustrator. This was important in supporting them to establish their individual and group identity, in upskilling them and giving them the confidence and, in their words, professionalism to be treated as bona fide researchers and respected by the people they wished to research and influence.

The group worked on creating their identity, Research into Plans: Skilled Team with Ambition, Rights and Strength (RIP: STARS) – this was the shared name across all of us – we all became a RIP: STAR. Whilst we developed a strong research identity, we were also all very different individuals. In thinking about the identity of particular marginalised groups “there often exists a misapprehension that people who share the same group identity or label are a homogeneous group. But just as there are
differences between insiders and outsiders so there are differences between insiders” (Brady et al., 2012, p. 155). While the label of disability was shared there remained differences amongst the group in terms of social background, educational experience, access to resources, gender, ethnicity and age. From the outset we aimed to recognise and acknowledge this diversity and identified the skills and interests of all, finding opportunities to apply skills to the project and to further develop them through the introduction of new opportunities.

Our values were anchored in the social model of disability and the rights of disabled young people to be involved in decision-making, as enshrined in the UNCRC and United Nations (2006) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The social model of disability defines disability as the social restriction placed on people with impairments by society. Thus people are disabled by discrimination, prejudice and by a society that fails to address their needs in terms of social relations and structures, and not as a result of their individual impairment (Oliver, 1996). Beresford (2002) argues that the social exclusion of disabled children continues because authorities locate the “problem” in the disabled child rather than considering external factors such as social, physical and organisational structures that contribute. Although the social model of disability has been critiqued and further developed (e.g. Thomas, 2004), it does provide a helpful framework for considering how the lack of participation of disabled children is shaped by structures and attitudes rather than seeing disabled children through a medicalised lens of being “incapable” or locating “the problem” within. Thus the onus was on the academic team, in partnership with the young researchers, to address any barriers faced by the young disabled researchers to their participation and to the enactment of their rights to be involved at all levels of delivery of the research.

Although the above formed our value base and theoretical underpinning, as professionals, we also had the responsibility to consider the ethical implications of this approach. Others such as Bradbury-Jones and Taylor (2015) have considered some of the challenges and solutions in co-researching with children. However, given the additional discriminatory barriers experienced by disabled children, a focus on this group is much needed. Both the training of young researchers and the delivery of the research necessarily involved engagement in thinking through tensions between the right to participate and the right to be protected and safeguarded from harm, in daily life and in the research setting and process.

Ethical and practical issues considered within the context of empowerment and safeguarding of disabled young researchers in the study

_Becoming leaders, decision-makers and complying with safeguarding procedures_

One of the tensions throughout the project was the balance between the young disabled researchers becoming leaders, decision-makers but subject to imposed institutional and procedural constraints and, in particular, our duty of care to keep the young researchers safe when attending training meetings, fieldwork visits and conferences. Although we endeavoured to reduce power imbalances between the academic staff and young people wherever possible, the need for intrusive questions about medical details, medications, parent notification in the name of safeguarding had the potential to change the dynamic of the group, and undo our desires to create as much equality of power as possible.

In interactions with university colleagues and organisers of meetings and conferences the starting point for interaction with the group was often, “what are their conditions? What disability do they have?” and judgements about “how disabled are they?” We were keen not to label young people and resisted describing any individual in terms of conditions or diagnoses, in keeping with the social model of disability. It became apparent that this was not usual and a social model of disability was not well known about. Davis and Watson (2002) found that disabled children are often not recognised as children first, in discourses on childhood and on disability, with an over-focus on their impairment which can lead to them being “othered”, regarded as different from the normative concept of “the child”.

In order to address some legitimate need for information and as an alternative to objectifying assessments we created “About Me” documents which were about the young person, sharing what we needed to know to keep them safe. This included their likes and dislikes and how we
could make the sessions, interviews and conferences accessible in terms of meeting their needs. Importantly information was only asked for on a “need to know” basis. The group agreed that this was more empowering than their previous experiences of their personal information being managed. It enabled us to accommodate preferences for expression of views and ensure young researchers were as comfortable as possible participating in each session or activity. An additional consequence was that, over time, the young disabled researchers became adept themselves at challenging those that wished to define them by an impairment label.

Inevitably, university risk assessment forms also needed to be completed as part of research ethics procedure. We ensured that any “risk” described was always contextualised, based on a situation or circumstance, rather than appearing to be located within an individual young person themselves and without reference to notions of any inherent “vulnerability”. Whilst all of the young researchers were 16 or over, and we did not require parental consent, we asked permission from the young researchers to contact their parents if we needed to (e.g. when activity required an overnight stay). It was their choice whether to allow any contact, apart from in the event of an emergency. This was a choice that had been denied for some previously. Disabled young people are familiar with parents making decisions and choices on their behalf. Our alternative approach signified our attention to power disparities between the young person and their parent, and the young person and the researcher. Where possible we communicated only with the young person, respecting their autonomy.

Inevitably, safeguarding the well-being of the young people within the training and research process involved the question of what would happen when the project was over. Managing expectations; thinking about the end at the beginning; planning an exit strategy and process for closure; and not over-promising were key to the success of this project. It was crucial for the RIP: STARS group that we provided some structure to the process, notwithstanding the need for some flexibility or potential for new directions led by them. The group needed to trust that we knew what we were doing, had belief in them and it was crucial that we all trusted each other.

Towards the close of the project, in reflecting on our research journey, we were interested to know at what point of the 15 month project the young people trusted the researchers. The first response to our question of when did you trust us was “When you were human”. In unpicking what was meant by this we learnt that young people needed to know who they were talking to, know about us, things about us and our lives that we were willing to share. They compared us to some other professionals that they had encountered in their lives and whilst they understood that professionals are busy people, which may have implications for building personal relationships, they stated appreciating us “not being emotionless”. Feeling that they were able to trust the researchers was particularly important for the young people that had often been disappointed by adults.

We built in time to talk and listen, opportunity for each to talk separately to one of the team if they wanted to, especially about difficulties outside of the project. This was possible as there were usually three researchers and six young people, the sessions were between 2.5 (evening) and 5 h (weekend) and we met over 30 times. We had all been involved in previous research projects where such matters were not as well considered and had learnt from experience that taking a genuinely co-creative, participatory approach with children and young people involves time, consistency and adequate resourcing.

Being clear about what was possible over the course of the project also seemed to aid relationship building. Although we were confident that there would be a number of “added value” opportunities arising through our networks of contacts we were nevertheless careful to under-promise and over-deliver. We found, as O’Kane (2008) also did, that having the space to take part on their own terms led to young people becoming greatly involved in taking on new challenges and expressing a sense of ownership of the project. It was made clear at the outset that each aspect of the project was open to re-negotiation and potential changes of focus and direction – within constraints/boundaries imposed by the budget, which was set by the funder.

Empowering disabled young people whilst managing disempowering experiences

Early on in the project the young researchers were introduced to the social model of disability and the notion of disabled children’s rights. It was fundamental to the research approach being adopted, that all members of the team knew what the differences between a medical model and
social model of disability were and how the model impacts on views of disability. However, all of these took place within a context where we were aware of the differing experiences of the group, and the impact that this had on their need for training and support. As the young people became empowered within the project, and we developed trust with each other and shared more personal experiences it became evident of the tensions the young researchers faced in becoming empowered within the project but managing personal experiences in their own life where they have been, and continue to be, afforded few empowerment opportunities. They also shared how they were often subject to many restrictions in the name of protection or due to a denial of their rights.

Equally, the research evidence that they gathered highlighted to them high levels of entrenched ableism and the lack of autonomy in the lives of disabled young people generally. Concerns were raised by the researchers regarding the impact of the negative research evidence on their well-being and whether it was right to expose young people to this. Yet we were also conscious that it was also their right to be informed about and aware of the issue. At an early steering group meeting the potential consequences of involving children and young people in addressing issues of injustice which they themselves may face was discussed. Our partners (a disabled people-led organisation and disability activist) also had experience of working with children who had become angry or upset at the injustices experienced by themselves and those in a similar position. Raising awareness of oppression and discrimination through research can raise difficult emotions (Brady and Brown, 2013). These emotions manifested variously in our young researchers. One young man’s anger about injustice was evident; in one session he was raising his voice, pacing around, talking about the unfairness and coming to the realisation, which he had always felt, that he should not have had the poor treatment that he had experienced across a number of schools and from a range of professionals who should have provided support.

In a further example, another young man began to challenge his parents and his college lecturers once he knew that he had rights under the UNCRPD. He asked more questions than usual and wanted to know about his own EHCP and to be more fully involved in any decisions which were being taken about his life. As a result of participation in the project he was no longer willing to passively accept a lesser role in discussions about his life.

A young woman who was generally very quiet did not show any outward signs of being distressed by what was discussed during the sessions, however, when asked to lead a collaborative article to be published in the Alliance for Inclusive Education’s “Inclusion Now” magazine she was able to freely express how she felt:

> We have also learned about the social model of disability […]. we now feel angry because through our research we have found out that in reality we cannot make a complaint or change our EHCP without a legal process. We are also angry because we have found that EHCP’s are not always carried through correctly. Disabled young people are not always involved in their plans and do not get a real say into what is in them. (p. 3)

In discussion with the group, some young people said that they had always spoken out and known when they or others were not being treated fairly but had previously been told that they were in the wrong “I nearly got kicked out of college for speaking out”. In this case the young man was asking for support at college which was denied, he was unable to start his preferred course and told us “I feel cheated out of my life” because he was excluded from being able to make his own decision.

We raised the question, which other researchers have considered, of whether involvement in the project had raised expectations about how much power disabled young people could and should have when, in reality, this is not always available to them. He and the group strongly felt “if you never give them hope then how can they achieve their best?” They appreciated that through the project they had been given hope, they said that we had never given them guarantees but also not simply said no, that things were not possible. In other areas of life promises had often been made and then not kept, leaving the young people feeling let down, disappointed and sometimes angry. Anger, however, was not always regarded as a negative emotion as it meant that young people were passionate and motivated to speak up. The effect of anger needed to be managed […] “angry that the world is like that and you want to make it better”.

PAGE 180 JOURNAL OF CHILDREN’S SERVICES VOL. 14 NO. 3 2019
Our response to the emergence of these feelings and emotions was to make time for discussion about how, during interviews, such feelings could be channelled into challenging the EHCP decision-maker participants in appropriate and socially acceptable ways. We talked about asking poignant questions, using our research evidence to state a case, not relying too heavily on personal experience but also still feeling able to talk about lived experience. Yet, we were aware that we were attempting to carefully manage the young researcher reactions to our action of introducing the idea of rights and the social model of disability.

**The emotional impact on disabled young people of co-leading research**

Evaluating the impact of this research is important and will consider societal change, improvement in the lives of the wider group of children, young people and parents and influence on policy over time. The impact of engagement in this research and fieldwork on the young people involved is more difficult to measure as it was only one part of their lives, changes and development over the previous 15 months. Yet, when asked, the RIP: STARS were able to say directly how they felt they had benefited from participating in the project. One young person said:

That is easy. Think about it. What would I have done if I had not done this project? Woken up in dread every day, thinking about college, saying I don’t know why I’m here […] I was shy, scared, sad, angry and I developed, as a person, because of this.

Another young man gave an example of how he had made a complaint when he was unable to access his computer account at college for some time, saying that he was now more aware of what he was able and entitled to do “when things go wrong” and that he would not have said anything or raised the issue before his involvement in the project.

The RIP: STARS identified what they regarded as the key personal and group successes of the project. Predominantly this centred on the fact that they had co-led the project and had been involved in decision-making throughout the process – they identified that they had planned, developed and delivered the project at all stages. Of equal importance was the development of their own knowledge particularly concerning their rights and gaining a more empowering perspective of disability through utilising a social model approach. This was an approach which they could identify with, which motivated them and which they could use as a framework for understanding how their research could impact on policy and practice. Successes also centred on the impact they felt their work was making through numerous dissemination events, contributing to other policy and practice development opportunities which came their way as people within the sector learned of their work. On a personal level they spoke of gaining skills, confidence, friendships and being proud of themselves.

However, with dedication to the project and stories of positive impact in the lives of the young people involved also came accounts of the emotional impact of the huge responsibility to improve the lives of participants. One young person told the group that if the project had failed “I would have been in tears every day, with the burden of the other voices we’d heard we had got to make it work”.

This sombre revelation caused us to question whether it is even appropriate for researchers and research involvement to put that “burden” on disabled or any young person. The group felt that no, it would not be right for individual young people to be burdened but this is where team work is important, as the burden is shared across the team. With the responsibility to make a difference also came hope and a sense of possibility – “we can edit the future now, for young people”.

**Discussion**

Drawing on examples from the RIP: STARS DRILL funded project, this paper has argued that disabled children and young people have a right to be included in research about their lives and the lives of other disabled children and young people. When researchers commit to young people having a right to be heard, taking part in decisions, and influencing action, the ways in which this happens may be unconventional. For example, the act of sharing power and control during the process can appear to be taking risks around the safety of young people and can challenge procedures and practice that operate to reinforce the vulnerability and dependence of
disabled children. However, this is highly necessary, otherwise medicalised and objectifying ideas which often categorise, “other” and limit possibilities will be perpetuated. Researchers and indeed practitioners and policymakers need to ensure that any participation of disabled children and young people in decision-making about their lives is not limited by narrow assumptions of their abilities. Young people involved in this project did not want to be defined solely in terms of their impairment. In fact at the start of the project a minority rejected being regarded as disabled or having additional needs as this had always been a marker of difference and been experienced negatively. By the close of the project they had a different view, claiming their disabled identity, their rights and being able to challenge assumptions by others of individual deficit. As identified by them, this change was facilitated by an understanding of their rights and a more empowering view of disability through working within a social model of disability. This study enabled the young researchers to use their skills, their voice and undertake leadership roles of which they were all capable but all of which had previously been denied to them in their lives, especially within education. Utilising this framework could easily be undertaken in practice settings, supporting the involvement of disabled children in decisions about their own lives, mirroring the research process.

Throughout this project, as academic researchers, we wanted to motivate, encourage, raise aspirations yet not raise hopes unrealistically. Providing disabled young people with the opportunity to co-lead a research project over 15 months necessitated finding a balance between the constraints of, at times, rigid procedures and supporting young people to lead. The following is an example of how one young man thinks this worked out:

Before I started this project I had no voice to make a change but being on this project has changed my life and will change everyone else’s life. Especially the University team have helped me to be confident in speaking. I’m really proud of this project, and of myself, and the group. We have all worked really hard, we’ve committed 110%, we’ve never missed a meeting, we are now work colleagues. The young researchers expressed frustration, anger and sadness about being kept in the dark and not having known about their rights as disabled persons before starting the project. The research led them to argue that children and young people need to know this information from an early age. Their passion for focusing on influencing social change came from direct, lived experience of inequality and injustice, particularly within education. Many of their painful life experiences were linked with their school or college educational experience and often a lack of support. As one young man said in a final reflection session on what being involved in the project had meant to the RIP: STARS:

Growing up in education I have been ignored or moved to one side. I have been neglected by staff, support has been taken away and growing up I have always wanted to make a change for the better for children so I did everything I could to support them in lessons, an unpaid teacher, risking my exams to help someone in a wheelchair because the staff would not help. And being able now to actually make a change for the future to make so many children’s lives better and getting my voice heard is amazing and if I wasn’t here now I wonder what I would have spent all of this time doing because I feel like this was the best way to spend it.

Although the emotional impact on qualitative researchers of fieldwork relating to sensitive issues has been much discussed (Letherby, 2003; Mannay, 2018), less discussion has taken place around the emotional impact and labour of disabled young researchers. Having created an inclusive space where personal and sometimes quite traumatic experiences were shared the impact of the stories heard stayed with some young people and gave them resolve to make a difference. It is thus important that researchers and funders who wish to work in empowering ways with disabled children allow time and a space of support and safety, to reflect on this together:

When you first start off (a co-led research project) most disabled children will have their stories and if they have had a past like mine will want to make a change. Some children will think that they can’t do it or they are not as good as someone else. You need to remind them that it doesn’t matter who you are or what you have in your background if you want to make a change to children’s lives then you are welcome in the room to do it.

Taken the points raised above together, engaging in raising critical consciousness and introducing disabled young people to their membership of an oppressed group needs to be
approached carefully. It is unethical practice to raise such emotions and not provide an outlet for young people to be able to express their voice. The opportunity to be heard and to make a difference is crucially important in the validation of the experience. Given the considerable emphasis placed on creating change by the young researchers, it is vital that attention to dissemination and achieving impact is seen as an integral part of any research and not just an "add on". When considering the impact of research on policy and on practice consideration also needs to be given to the impact on those who are becoming researchers, particularly when they are part of a marginalised group. In investing in the aims of the project the young researchers felt a responsibility for its success; they would have felt accountable and a sense of failure had the research findings and recommendations not been listened to or acknowledged as important.

Working with disability activists – and one of the academic team having a background in policy, practice development and lobbying – has supported the young people to achieve their goals in this area. The research report and framework developed to aid professional practice has also been widely welcomed by professionals and parents and carers.

Most recently, the RIP: STARS presented their evidence to a government cross-party Parliamentary Inquiry into Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) provision in England; following this, UK Members of Parliament have been widely citing and quoting their words. There is evidence that the impact of this research is beginning to make a significant contribution to the on-going debates around SEND.

Attention to the process of research as well as the outcome or outputs is essential when aiming to influence social change and research in an ethical and socially responsible way particularly when researching with (young) people understood to be marginalised (Brady et al., 2012; Brady and Brown, 2013; Mannay, 2018). Participatory research methods are often equated with the enabling of the exercise of agency, as children and young people become involved in the construction of knowledge about themselves. Gallacher and Gallacher (2005) state that researchers, in acting in socially just ways, must be honest and open about what they aim to achieve through engaging young people. Most importantly, they need to address the "messy contingencies of research encounters" (p. 8). Throughout our 30 plus working meetings with the young researchers we were required on several occasions to address and prioritise such messiness, our loose plan did not always go to plan as each step was open to discussion and joint decision-making which shaped the direction, often in more creative ways.

As Larkins et al. (2015) have argued, much children’s rights framed research lacks critique, this paper has engaged with the challenges of rights led co-research to challenge dominant ideas about participation, inclusion and protection relating to disabled children and young people. Change is required to the cultural context of how their lives are currently perceived, including the development of a rights-based framework against which to ensure quality within the new assessment framework and development of subsequent EHCPs, and young people’s meaningful inclusion in research about the lived experience of disabled young people.

References


VIPER (2012), What We Found, National Children’s Bureau, London.


Corresponding author

Geraldine Brady can be contacted at: g.brady@coventry.ac.uk

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website: www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm
Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com
Next steps in children and young people’s research, participation and protection from the perspective of young researchers

Dan, David, Evie, Ollie, Donna Thomas and Cath Larkins

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore young researchers perspectives on children and young people’s research, participation and protection.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is co-authored by young people and academics involved in a young researcher group. This paper provides a brief introduction from the young researchers and some academic context to their work, then the young researcher group’s contribution. Their contribution is followed by a brief discussion of the issues they raise in the light of current academic debate.

Findings – This paper contains our critical reflection on participation and protection.

Originality/value – The paper presents a unique contribution capturing children and young people’s perspectives on the journal’s theme and other contributions to it.

Keywords Young researchers, Participation, Protection

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

Children and young people need to be at the heart of all decisions that affect them. And all the people working with them need to understand this. (Ollie)

This is what Ollie said to Cath as they walked from our meeting writing this paper towards the next meeting they were attending, a youth council special event at the university where they are both researchers. Cath is an old researcher. Ollie is a young researcher. The young researcher group we all belong to is called UCan. It is facilitated by an old researcher called Donna, with help from Cath and other people. The young researchers who take part are aged from 12 to 25 years. The old researchers are aged up to 50 years. We meet once a month at the University of Central Lancashire.

This paper contains our critical reflection on participation and protection. We read summaries of the things other people have written for this special issue. We then shared stories of our own experiences. We discussed how our stories link up with each other’s and the things other people have written about child participation. Cath typed up our conversation and grouped things together around themes. We all looked at what she had written and made changes, sometimes adding new ideas.

Children and young people “at the heart of all decisions that affect them” (Ollie) is a powerful way of describing child participation, which more conventionally tends to be associated with notions of having a say, consultation, involvement or influence within personal lives, practice, research and policy. In this paper we are pursuing collaborative research practice which challenges “the donor recipient model of top down, academically informed practice or policy recommendations” (Clayson et al., 2018). Participatory research is a process that “involves youth and adults in collaborative process of research, reflection, analysis and action” (Kohfeldt and Langhout, 2011, p. 316). It is grounded in an epistemology of shared knowledge...
production and “seeks to engage both researchers and community members in collaboratively determining problem definitions via problematisation [...] goals include the democratisation of knowledge production and the empowerment of subordinated communities” (Kohfeldt and Langhout, 2011, p. 316). This is distinct from research with simply uses participatory methods. Starting from children and young peoples’ issues, challenges preconceived, normally institutional ideas, of what priorities may be for certain groups. Although participatory practice within research with children and young people can involve a variety of degrees of influence in the processes and products of research (Larkins et al., 2014) children and young people setting agendas is at the heart of our practice in UCan. Our collaboration then involves “young and old” researchers exploring ideas they have generated and taking action, through research, teaching, community engagement and impact activities.

In research with children and young people, stories have a significant value for making sense of the world and UCan use stories to initiate, generate, analyse and disseminate research. Stories co-create peer relationships (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008) and enable storytellers to “negotiate and renegotiate a sense of self” (Thomas, 2019). The storytelling process in writing this paper involved critical reflexivity (see Larkins, 2016, 2019) with other discourses (“the things other people have written about child participation”) and their own shared experiences of participation. This gives an account assembled from all of our voices of how participation helps protect children and how participation work needs to focus on getting evidence; sharing information; and building opportunities for change. We conclude with ideas about what should happen next for young people interested in research, participation and protection from discrimination.

UCan’s perspectives on participation and protection

Ollie’s statement that children and young people participating in all decisions is part of the reason we set up our UCan group started back in 2012. There were three other young researchers in our writing meeting – David, Dan and Evie. David, Dan and Cath have been part of the group from the beginning. We all have lots of experiences of different participation activities. Many of us have experience of being disabled. We all come together to be part of UCan because we want to find out from other people about what they think and experience. We try to change the way people view and understand the world and to end discrimination. We do this through participatory research – choosing issues, doing research and telling people what we find out. One of the young researchers described this as “a wonderful experience for all of us, allowing us to socialise with more people, as well as achieve a lot more, than we could before. I am looking forward to having more public speaking or recording sessions”. We are pleased to have this opportunity to contribute to the journal special issue. We are about to start more activities to enable other children and young people to share their research findings – so stay in touch!

How does child participation help protect children and young people?

The young researchers reflected that individual and collective participation helps keep children safe because:

- It allows them to get involved in society, increasing the chances of getting noticed.
- It helps them communicate and improves their communication skills, and this helps keep them happy.
- I think participation keeps young people safe because it gets them involved and included and it gives them a voice in decisions.
- It gives them more information about their rights.
- It helps us keep the safeguarding right, it makes safeguarding better because it puts a community-centred core to safeguarding.

Getting evidence

Some of the things that are going well in child participation are to do with the different ways we are gathering evidence of other children and young people’s ideas. One example we talked about
was groups of young people inspecting short break services to make sure they are of a good enough standard:

We inspect short break services. Most of them we have been involved with, and we know what should and shouldn’t be there. Because the people are closer to our age they are more likely to open up to us than to someone in a suit. 10-11-year-olds talk to us about what they think about the services. They say things about how they should have more things to do, and more choice in what they do. We tell other people about these things in our reports.

Another example was young people voting on priority campaign issues through their youth parliaments, then conducting research to gather evidence on these:

I’m a MYP, this would be considered my last term. We’ve just recently had a reshuffle as one MYP has stepped down. At first, we weren’t sure about what our national campaign is going to be. But we met with researchers. And we have talked about knife crime.

And tonight you are going to start planning the research about it, thinking about different research techniques and how to choose between different sources of information. You will get evidence for a big summit meeting in the summer. You will decide what you do, how you do it. The only boundaries are about safety and about money.

There were difficulties however about gathering information and data. And these were to do with funding cuts:

I have these sessions where I go out with a specific person and talk about matters with him. I figure that I have a lot of opportunities like that. But unfortunately the service has been cut and I have so much useful information to give.

A Lack of data sharing platforms was also an issue:

Data.

If only there was a way we could create an avenue where people could share information.

And their data, as just said.

Thinking of ways to gather data from other children is important because we need evidence to convince people to make changes. We also need to make sure that all children’s ideas are included, not just the ideas of the people lucky enough to take part in groups. One young researcher noted that finding different ways to gather evidence is important because “It will help improve your case when making an important point” but there are challenges:

Finding the right sources to get it from, so the material is not biased.

[…] the value that organisations place on certain types of communication. For example, many organisations value reports and statistics. Yet, children and young people express their experiences in many different ways. How these ways are presented (and kept authentic to what children and young people mean) can become a challenge. New technologies can offer a way to overcome this.

Sharing information about children’s and young people’s ideas

After gathering evidence, we have experience of lots of different ways of sharing information about children’s and young people’s ideas with other people. This includes film making and sharing films with national and local authority committees, for example:

I was involved in making a film. We did it like around stereotypes of different people with different disabilities and needs. Autism, dyslexia, […] They were talking about bullying as well.

It’s been shown at the SEND boards.

It also includes making and sharing fictionalised stories using digital objects so that they can be seen by anyone:

We went around the room discussing what experiences we had. We took those discussion interviews, two or three, and we then merged them together to form an entirely new story. The stories were based on the people we interviewed. We first merged their stories together, then made up a fictional character that basically managed to fit all elements of the story. And then with the aid of authors and illustrators, we then shared them with the general public as tales, using phygitals. Phygitals are our own
personal inventions. They come in many [digital object] forms – the Suitcase, the Arcarde Machine, the Rabbit in the magic hat with a wand, and the map. On the map you scan specific areas with your phone or ipad and there you would see a story. Those were our ways of giving the stories away. We were doing what we could to make these stories known.

It is important to find different ways of sharing information about children lives and opinions, to promote safety:

- Young people get asked to tell their story or to go and tell their story to decision-makers. And that can be a bit exposing. If you can tell a fictional story, that is still true but puts different people’s ideas together it connects to something that Elsie was saying in her article, about how young people can talk about difficult experiences whilst also keeping themselves safe.
- Fictional stories embody collectivity too, highlighting shared experiences and minimising the risk of exposure for children and young people. It is also important that professionals do not confuse the identity of young people with the stories they tell. Fictional stories can reduce the risk of this happening.
- I think it is good because you do not feel like you are on your own. And using a story it is almost like it is not you it is the fictional character but you are putting your emotions onto the fictional character. So, it is not you, you are talking about.

Building opportunities for change

When we started talking about how we use information about the data we have gathered to get things to change, we realised that it is really important to keep building the right opportunities for change. Opportunities include meeting with the right people and giving them clear suggestions, building good working relationships and building networks:

We do a lot of work with the SEND (Special Educational Need and Disability) partnership board to try to get young people’s voices heard and to change the EHCP (Education, Health and Care Plans) and to make sure that young people’s views are put in there. I think we made a change to how the EHCP plans are being done. We made it so that young people are having a one-page profile about themselves, that they update themselves. An adult at school sits down with the person at school and they update it together.

This connects with what Geraldine and other young and adult researchers are doing together. They have developed a rights framework for thinking about EHCP. They said that they had to challenge and change people’s ideas and attitudes about disabled young people being seen as always vulnerable and dependent.

Yeah “cos a lot of people think we haven’t got any views about ourselves and we have. We should have the primary views. And the problem is as well, we didn’t know our targets, they were made by the school, so we didn’t know we had to meet them.

Developing networks is a crucial element of meaningful change, making sure all organisations and “stakeholders” are informed and understand the relevance of the participation activity/process.

Changing attitudes is also important. This means not just attitudes of individual people, but attitudes across the whole system, about involving children and young people in decisions about their own lives and making sure they have information in accessible forms:

You have to make sure that every decision about a young person, is put it in better language for them and make sure they are involved in every decision. Why shouldn’t they be? It is going to affect them.

I agree, as a professional I would produce a young-person friendly document/visual to make sure participation is retained across the whole process. This also links back to the earlier point about communications. Some ‘literacies’ are valued over others and this needs to be challenged.

When you are trying to make changes across a whole system it helps to have the director and the head of participation in the meeting. We need to be able to set agenda items for these meetings and to help take the decisions about how money is spent. Cath has written about this in another article too (Larkins, 2019). This is important for ensuring also resources are allocated and maintained for children and young peoples’ participation. Senior leaders have a tendency to avoid
these types of meetings, always placing responsibility with professionals who cannot make decisions that can implement change.

One of the difficulties we discussed when trying to build opportunities for change related to funding cuts, and the lack of involvement of children and young people in decisions about where cuts should and should not be made:

They are making cuts to the funding but the consultation has not gone out to children. Basically they didn’t want to consult the young people about it because obviously it would pull people’s heart strings too much. So obviously they wanted to block them out!

So what have you done about it?

We were promised and promised and promised that we were going to have our views heard and then it got to the last week and we wouldn’t have had a meeting until after the deadline. Now the deadline has been changed. Apparently, it will be sorted.

It can be difficult to establish ourselves in society on account of financial issues.

There are “red flag” situations where a decision is already made but they still have a legal duty to consult. In these cases, consultation becomes meaningless. Institutions need to be more upfront about this with children and young people, being honest when consultation is lip service and when it can really bring about change.

Funding cuts are an important issue. We need to make sure that funding cuts do not stop children and young people sharing their ideas with other people or and that cuts do not stop children and young people from being involved in making decisions about services.

We need to keep developing opportunities to share the evidence we gather and to use this to protect everyone from discrimination. Another thing is making sure that young researchers have a clear understanding of safeguarding, including having safeguarding training as young researchers (that also covers cyberbullying).

Discussion

In the story assembled in this paper, we note that “many of us (in UCan) have experiences of being disabled” this means protection and discrimination are important to us, as well as participation. Our research has shown that in the UK and Japan the rights of disabled children and young people are not protected and that conditions of austerity and neo-liberal family policies increase children and young people’s exposure to harm (Larkins, 2012; Larkins et al., 2018). It is unsurprising then that UCan sees child protection as including interpersonal, environmental and social protection of children and young people. As other research they have conducted shows, ending discrimination against children and young people and promoting this protection, therefore necessitates addressing the underlying causes of inequalities (Larkins et al. forthcoming).

Their reflections emerge from a committed process of doing research differently. This is underpinned by a rationale for doing collaborative research with children and young people that generates valid knowledge about self and experience and it requires that we attend to the “immersion, friction, strain and quivering unease of doing research differently”. Traditional ethics can at times pose safeguarding issues for some children and young people (as explored by Kiili et al. elsewhere in this issue). As Pickles (2019) observes during “hate research” with young people, noting that “seeking parental consent placed young participants in a position of greater risk than what would occur during participation” (Pickles, 2019, p). We are fortunate that through UCan we have been able to build the long term relationships that enable safe, ethical and adventurous research.

The process of peer-inspections described by UCan has much in common with peer research, in which children and young people are researchers, enquiring into the experiences of their peers. Dixon et al. (2019) highlight the value of peer researcher methods, noting that “most young people (57 per cent) who were surveyed about their experience of being interviewed by the peer researcher said that they would prefer to be interviewed by someone with care experience” (p. 10). In both research and inspections, young people offer an epistemological authority in relation to the focus of investigation. A different type of space opens between two young people
with shared experiences and peer to peer work can shift power to children and young people “leading to children being acknowledged as competent social actors” (Dixon et al., 2019, p. 10).

Service cuts impact upon children and young people’s participation. Despite the passion of professionals working in this area, lack of resource for participation leads to cuts in service-provision. As UCAN note, the potential for meaningful participatory activities is limited by safety and money. This is recently echoed by Dixon et al. (2019) who notes “realistic timescales, costs and flexibility are key areas to get right when working with young people” (p. 11).

UCAN noted that data collection and distribution can have challenges. Again this is reflected in other recent literature as Manney et al. (2019) point out, “a recurring issue for researchers is that of whose voice is being spoken and, simultaneously whose voice is being heard” (p. 6). This can result in difficulties translating children and young peoples’ recommendations into policy and practice. There are nuanced challenges that arise for researchers working with marginalised groups and with multimedia data, where children and young people can both increase their reach to wider audience, yet may be exposed to greater criticisms. UCAN suggest reports and statistics are examples of institutional discourses which prioritise language. This is problematic for children and young people who communicate in non-conventional ways. As Barad (2007) notes “Language has been granted too much power […] at every turn lately every ‘thing’ […] is turned into a matter of language” (p. 108). We should not reject language, only start to understand its limitations in representing self, experience and reality; and in doing so, consider how other modes of expression can capture experiences that sit outside the realms of conventional thought and language. For example, Barton, uses art as “a vehicle to express a personal journey” (p. 64); while Trowsdale and Hayhow (2013) work with a “psycho-physical process […] that is communal where all interpretations feed others and shape the collective experience” (p. 72). Blaisdell et al. (2018) note ways of working with younger children “that centred their own creativity and play” (p. 86).

Data collection at UCAN can be innovative and interdisciplinary. Data are becoming more varied in research with children and young people. Data can include written and digital formats (see Heron, 2018), puppet shows (see Mayes, 2016), models (see Clayson et al., 2018), Collages (see Marcu, 2016) and body movement, poetry and art (see Norton and Sliep, 2018). Songwriting is also effective in enabling children and young people to challenge adult stereotypes about youth. These diverse types of data are referred to as “reflexive material” (Clayson et al., 2018), and the process of their production involves “collaborative analysis” (Mayes, 2016) with all participants.

Digital technologies have been used by UCAN to represent experiences and share information with other young people and service providers. UCAN note that film-making is an effective mode of communication because “it’s a visual thing, they [decision-makers] can’t hide away from it” (young person). As UCAN stated above, sharing information in different ways means the materials are “given more exposure to as many people as possible”. This supports the aim to share information with “people who can help us [young people] obtain more opportunities in society”. UCAN note the therapeutic element of merging fiction and selves in the creation of retelling stories. Contemporary research with children and young people prioritises the telling of personal stories in the pursuit of social truths. Self, experience and stories are treated synonymously, “sustaining an idea that children and young people are their stories, whether painful or soothing” (Thomas, 2019). Fictional storytelling as a method for representing experience allows children and young people to become disentangled from their inner narratives, as one young person notes: “it’s almost like it’s not you, it’s the fictional character” (young person). The epistemological position of the young person shifts from the “story I”, to a collective “I”, developing a “transpersonal reflexivity” (see Thomas, 2019) about self, experience and the ideas being shared.

Researching and communicating a diversity of experiences requires a diversity of research approaches and dissemination tools. Groups of children and young people may have experienced trauma (as is the case for children and young people with experience of care, violence and seeking asylum). Innovative approaches to child participation are therefore foregrounding the well-being of children and young people (see Mayes, 2016; Marcu, 2016; Norton and Sliep, 2018) using reflexive epistemologies and therapeutic methods for dialogue.
For example, methods currently used in psychotherapeutic contexts, are transferrable and valuable for working with vulnerable groups of children and young people in collaborative research processes. These methods were seen by Norton and Sliep (2018) as valuable in “allowing participants to reveal more about themselves in a manner that is not confrontational breaks down power and helps youth explore the meaning of their experiences” (p. 3).

As the insights from UCAN highlight, the retelling of findings in the process of disseminating the findings of participatory research and action requires equal attention to well-being. Raising the voices of children and young people is not just engagement in recounting stories but “also about disseminating their messages in accessible ways that can engender changes in both policy and everyday practices” (Manney et al., 2019, p. 53). Fictional story work transcends personhood, offering protection from “exposure” and providing a platform for collective action.

Information provision is an important aspect of child participation, allowing for children and young people to make informed decisions. Digital media can promoted children’s rights, including the rights contained in UNCRC article 17 “to access socially and culturally beneficial information and material” (Sakr, 2016) and the right to information which can enable children and young people to keep themselves safe. UCAN are currently planning ways to use social media and web-based platforms to disseminate research findings and information for and with other young people and decision-makers. Networking is an important aspect of collaboration and dissemination of knowledge. A risk competent rather than risk averse approach to young people’s engagement with digital media can therefore promote both participation and protection. Digital spaces are not sufficient. It is also important for young people to have a presence in organisational spaces where decision-making takes place. As noted by UCAN, where their collaborative work with SEND resulted in changes to practice.

Conclusion

There is a lot more work to do to help children’s and young people’s participation bring about greater protection, but also a lot of knowledge amongst children, young people and adults about how to achieve this. As one young person notes, “We need to keep developing opportunities to share the evidence we gather and to use this to protect everyone from discrimination”. At the level of practice, innovative and emancipatory collaborative research are affording opportunities for children and young people to meaningfully contribute to and shape policy-direction. However, systemic barriers can affect how children and young people influence change. The potential for networks, collaborative partnerships and social media platforms to address a lack of resource is evident. Commitment and honest information are required from decision-makers for child participation to make a meaningful contribution. Finding ways to make emotional connections with people who make decisions is very important, as is making it safe for people to share their experiences without having to be exposed. Stories are a great way of doing this, and so are films, websites, songs and short summaries of research. The value of children and young people’s participation cannot be underestimated and there remains an urgency to ensure that children and young people are protected, listened to and have opportunities to create change, in their own communities and society at large.

References


Corresponding author

Donna Thomas can be contacted at: DThomas15@uclan.ac.uk

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website: www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm
Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com
Qualitative research with primary school-aged children: ethical and practical considerations of evaluating a safeguarding programme in schools

Vicki Jackson-Hollis

Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the ethical and practical challenges of working with primary school-aged children to conduct qualitative service evaluations regarding sensitive safeguarding topics.
Design/methodology/approach – The paper centres on the author’s learnings from conducting school-based, task-assisted focus groups with 5–11 year olds. The reflections are drawn from notes made during fieldwork, debrief discussions with evaluation colleagues and wider team debates. This was a consultative participatory evaluation and the findings are situated within the wider literature around rights-based approaches to research.
Findings – Using multi-method and creative approaches can facilitate young children to assent and dissent from service evaluation in a school setting. However, the challenges of helping children understand confidentiality are highlighted, as is the challenge for researchers in recognising and responding in situ to disclosures. Using suitable and creative activities, this evaluation demonstrates that primary school children can contribute meaningful data to assist with service development. However, the approach to collecting these data from the youngest children needs careful consideration.
Practical implications – Researchers may need to adopt full participatory methods to better help children understand the confidentiality bounds of research and to form views on the subject matter. More discussion is needed in the wider safeguarding research literature to show how researchers have navigated the challenges of handling disclosures.
Originality/value – This paper contributes to the literature by providing examples of how to overcome issues of children’s participation, consent and protection in service evaluation focussed on a sensitive topic.
Keywords Ethics, Children, Safeguarding, Research methods, Disclosures, Informed consent

Introduction

Children’s views and opinions should be central to the development and evaluation of programmes and services designed for them. The 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) is well-cited by authors who advocate including children in research and evaluation (Beazley et al., 2011; Lundy and McEvoy, 2011). In particular, children’s rights to “express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously” (Article 12). However, a tension can exist between this right and conceptions of children’s vulnerability, innocence and lack of awareness of their best interests (Powell et al., 2016). This is heightened for research in the safeguarding sphere where sensitive topics are discussed and participating children may be at greater risk of experiencing distress.

A host of papers have debated the ethical involvement of children in research, focussing on issues such as children’s ability to give informed consent/assent (Cocks, 2006; Dockett and Perry, 2011), their comprehension of research and what it involves (Gallagher et al., 2010;...
However, children’s participation and protection need not be at odds and children can participate safely to provide valuable and rich data. Indeed, there is a relatively longstanding recognition of children as competent and willing research participants (Alderson and Morrow, 2011). There are also numerous empirical examples of children’s active participation in social research and service evaluation exploring sensitive safeguarding topics. This includes: participatory approaches to gaining children’s views on their experiences of emotional and physical abuse (Beazley et al., 2005); qualitative and quantitative research with children as young as six involved in the child protection system (Cossar et al., 2011; Selwyn et al., 2017); service evaluation data from children as young as four who have been exposed to violence (Wall et al., 2018); and research exploring the views of children who have experienced sexual abuse (Warrington et al., 2016).

The movement of ethical rights-based approaches to research has been hugely instrumental in facilitating children’s participation in research, showing how reflection on moments of children’s competence, dependence and vulnerability should inform, not prevent, their engagement (Graham et al., 2015). Lundy (2007) discusses the importance of children being given the opportunity to discuss their views and to be facilitated to do so and have their views listened to and acted upon, as appropriate. Beazley et al. (2009) also discuss the need for suitable research methods conforming to the highest scientific standards to aid children in expressing their views. A recent international collaborative project (Graham et al., 2013) also attends to this. This advocates the role of the reflexive researcher; someone who moves beyond the identification of ethical issues as a “tick box” exercise identified and “addressed” within a project’s initial planning stages, to instead focussing on navigating and addressing ethical tensions throughout the project lifecycle (Powell et al., 2016).

Whilst the literature discussing the importance of including children in research is now well developed, there are fewer practical examples of how the tensions between children’s participation and protection have been navigated (Oulton et al., 2016). There is also a noticeable lack of discussion regarding the recognition of, and response to, disclosures made by children during research. This is an issue particularly pertinent to research discussing sensitive safeguarding topics where the subject matter may prompt disclosures. Whilst ethical issues that arise during research will be unique to each situation (Beazley et al., 2009), further discussion will help researchers prepare to recognise safeguarding issues and respond appropriately in situ.

Aims and contributions of the current paper

This paper is a reflective piece which adds to the existing literature by discussing some of the author’s challenges when collecting evaluation data from 5 to 11 year olds about a programme focussed on child maltreatment and bullying. Informed by ethical rights-based approaches to research, the evaluation involved children in a consultative way, recognising the need to gain their valuable perspectives during programme review and development (Lansdown and O’Kane, 2014). However, it was adult-led in its approach as specific evaluative information was sought within a set timeframe and budget, preventing the use of more child-led, participatory methods.

This paper adds to the existing rights-based research literature to provide practical examples which demonstrate that multi-modal, creative techniques can help young children exercise agency to assent and dissent throughout the research process, and to contribute meaningful data to assist with service development. It also adds new reflections regarding children’s comprehension of what they are disclosing and how the researcher responds to these disclosures in the focus group setting. This is with the aim of prompting further research and discussion of these issues. Whilst the current evaluation is an example of meaningful consultation with children, the learning has applicability to others considering participatory and rights-based research with children.

Methods

This paper draws on the author’s learnings from evaluating the NSPCC’s “Speak out Stay safe” programme (Hollis and Churchill, 2018). This internal evaluation was conducted to understand the potential impact of the programme and to identify areas for development, seeking the views of
children to assist with this. It included 77 children aged 5–11 years across ten school-based focus groups conducted on the same day as programme delivery.

Whilst there is debate regarding the appropriateness of gaining children’s assent vs consent (Coyne, 2010; Graham et al., 2013), this evaluation sought parental consent for children to participate, followed by child assent. This is in-line with the NSPCC’s Research Ethics Committee guidance (Barnard et al., 2012). Nevertheless, the four key principles underpinning informed consent were adhered to: children gave explicit, confirmatory agreement to participate; they were given information about participation in a way that recognised their evolving capacities; their participation was voluntary; and participation was renegotiable (Graham et al., 2013). Children were also given assurances of confidentiality, important when adopting an ethical rights-based approach to research (Beazley et al., 2011). The key factors differentiating our “assent” from “consent” were that we did not record individual agreement to participate, and we did not feel confident that the young children involved fully understood the complexities of participation, particularly confidentiality. We recognise, however, that taking a more participatory approach to evaluation would have facilitated additional work with children to help ensure they fully grasped the risks and benefits of participation, including confidentiality.

Focus groups comprised of six to eight pupils from the same school year, mixed according to sex, socio-economic background and educational abilities. At least two adults were present in each group which included the lead evaluator and a colleague, and often one or two members of school staff upon the school’s request. This adult to child ratio was not ideal due to the power imbalance this can create and the impact this may have on children’s willingness and ability to participate. However, it was necessary to have two evaluators present in case school staff were unexpectedly unavailable, leaving the evaluator to manage behaviour and respond to disclosures alone. Nevertheless, children appeared relaxed in the presence of the adults, engaging well and appearing to speak freely. The groups lasted between 45 minutes (children aged 5–7) and 1 hour (children aged 7–11). Children’s engagement levels and the feedback from them and their teachers suggested these groups worked well and children enjoyed participating.

However, evaluating a service focussed on child maltreatment with young children in a school setting brought many challenges, namely, how to:

- explain the nature of the research in a way that young children could understand;
- gain their initial and ongoing informed assent;
- navigate the complexities and norms of the school environment;
- manage discussions around a sensitive subject matter;
- respond to disclosures and safeguarding issues in situ within a group setting; and
- facilitate the collection of useful data using appropriate, fun and engaging techniques.

These challenges and the attempts to overcome them are discussed below. The reflections come from research notes made following the focus groups with children, debrief discussions with assisting colleagues, and wider team discussions about carrying out research and evaluation with children. These notes and reflections were reviewed to identify significant themes and focus group recordings were revisited to help develop these. An iterative approach was taken to reviewing the research notes, data and the current literature to add to, and extend, current knowledge and practice.

Findings

The findings presented in this paper focus on three main issues. The first discusses the ethical challenges and considerations when gaining informed assent from young children in a school setting. This addresses the challenges of ensuring children comprehend what participation involves and describes the multi-modal and creative methods used to gain informed and ongoing assent. The second section explores children’s comprehension of confidentiality, the challenges of recognising and responding to disclosures in a focus group setting, and the importance of the
researcher’s in situ response to these. The third section outlines the methods and creative techniques used to facilitate young children’s participation in this evaluation to systematically gain meaningful data that could contribute to programme development.

**Informed assent**

This section describes the adoption of techniques informed by an ethical, rights-based approach to research to help young children understand the nature of evaluation and make an informed decision about participating. It demonstrates that children as young as five can exercise agency to join and leave a school-based focus group at their will when sufficient attention is paid to this as part of the research process.

A debate exists about children’s true understanding of the nature of research and what they are signing up to. Children may agree to participate in research on sensitive issues, such as bullying, on the basis that they do not know the exact issues to be explored and the questions asked (Bourke and Loveridge, 2014). This can be complicated by the language adults use to describe the research, which is often incongruent with children’s language (Ford et al., 2007). In particular, a readability gap exists between information sheets and children’s reading levels (Grootens-Wiegens et al., 2015). It is therefore important that due diligence is given to describing the nature of an evaluation to children, particularly when focussing on a potentially distressing subject matter. The research setting must also be understood to consider how this may impact on children’s ability to freely participate (Bourke and Loveridge, 2014). The hierarchical nature of school settings can make it difficult for children to exercise agency, as many adult-initiated activities are compulsory (Skånfors, 2009) and teacher’s introductions to research can be directive and authoritative (Slepickova et al., 2014).

Drawing from the current literature describing rights-based approaches to research, the author adopted a number of techniques to help children understand the evaluation and feel able to freely assent and dissent. This included building a relationship with the children, managing the time effectively, having open conversations about consent, considering the context in which the evaluation was situated, and adopting a reflexive approach (Dockett and Perry, 2011). For example, the author was present during programme delivery to familiarise herself to children, and carried out ice-breaker tasks at the start of each focus group to get to know the children (e.g. “tell me your name and something you like”). She also sat on the floor with children in a circle, which helps reduce the power differentials between the researcher and children and assists conversations (Leeson, 2014).

A two-step assent process involving different adults and methods was used. This drew upon varied and creative techniques which allowed children to directly and indirectly signal dissent; important when working with young children (Leeson, 2014). First, the teacher followed a script to explain the nature of the focus group in class, stating that participation was voluntary and children would not be penalised for dissenting. The teacher read out the names of the children selected for the group and asked them to assent using their feet by remaining sat down if they did not want to participate or to follow the researcher if they did. This provided them with a more indirect way of giving their decision than would have been afforded in a direct conversation with their teacher or researcher. At this stage, four children chose not to participate, suggesting this process allowed children to exercise agency even when the teacher was making the request.

Once the group had moved to a separate space, the researcher provided a more thorough discussion of the focus group and checked children’s comprehension using a mini-quiz, as has been found to be useful in other research (Chu et al., 2008). This mainly gauged children’s grasp of the evaluation’s purpose and the recording and confidentiality of their information. For example, children were told their words would be recorded on a Dictaphone and this was demonstrated by recording them saying the name of their school and playing this back to them. Children enjoyed this and it appeared to make this concept more concrete, with some children noting at different stages of the group that they were being recorded. This quiz suggested children grasped who the researcher was, what their participation meant, and the evaluation’s purpose. When asked why the researcher was there and what would be discussed in the group, for example, children replied:

“you’re the NSPCC.” (Year 1 child)
all the types of abuse that can occur to children.” (Year 4 child)

to record everything we say to make the workshop better.” (Year 6 child)

Some of the younger children also described aspects of the assembly – such as the programme’s mascot, Buddy – which showed they were aware that we would be talking about the assembly, even if they did not articulate it as such. However, children appeared to struggle more with understanding the concept of confidentiality and this was more pronounced amongst the younger children aged 5–9. This is discussed in more detail in the next section which pays particular attention to this issue.

Each child then created an “assent flag” which they used to indicate their assent to proceeding with the group, and throughout to indicate dissent. An additional seven children chose to leave the focus groups at this stage and once the activities were underway. Children can find it easier to dissent to someone who is unknown to them (Dockett and Perry, 2011) and this may be one reason why children left the group after initially assenting to their teacher. It must be noted, however, that school staff were often present during the focus groups when these children chose to dissent. This may suggest that children benefit from multiple discussions about participation and opportunities to directly and indirectly assent in front of different adults. It may also show that incorporating consent into one of the focus group activities illustrated to children that this was taken seriously, and their active decision making was expected and provided for (Dockett and Perry, 2011).

In summary, this evaluation shows that children as young as 5 could grasp the nature of the evaluation and exercise agency in their choices about whether to participate within the school setting. It also reiterates the findings from earlier research, which suggests that creative, non-direct methods are needed to gain children’s free and ongoing assent from research and evaluation (Leeson, 2014). As discussed in the next section, however, the methods used to explain confidentiality to the children in this evaluation may have prevented the youngest children from having a full understanding of this concept. As such, we were left feeling uncertain that all children had a thorough grasp of the nature and repercussions of participation. More participatory, rights-based approaches may be needed to achieve the latter.

Confidentiality and disclosures

This section describes how the confidentiality bounds of the evaluation were explained to children, the author’s reflections on how well this was understood, and the challenges of recognising and responding to in situ disclosures.

Researchers often provide statements to children stipulating that confidentiality will be broken if they disclose that they or someone they know is being hurt, yet participants and researchers may define “harm” differently (Alderson and Morrow, 2004). Discussing this issue in more detail, Williamson et al. (2005) assert that “Without an understanding of the meanings children attach to the words that we, as adults, use to communicate potential harm and/or abuse; it is difficult to argue that we can adequately protect them when discussing the limitations of confidentiality and child protection” (p. 401). They suggest that researchers should define abusive behaviour to children to help them understand what is meant by “harm” within the context of confidentiality. However, there is a lack of consensus as to the most appropriate wording to use and limited research to address this.

During this evaluation, the author told children that only the people in the room would know what they have said, and that no-one they knew would be able to listen to the audio recording. They then described the confidentiality message in a standardised way but used some variation in the wording: “It is important that I can help to keep you all safe, so if you tell me something that makes me feel [worried about you or another child/you or another child are not safe/you or another child will be hurt] then I will have to talk to a teacher about it”. As children had just received an assembly and/or workshop describing the different harms children can face, it was hoped (and assumed) they would be primed to understand which situations may make the researcher feel worried about them and cause a breach in confidentiality (i.e. abuse, bullying and neglect).

Children’s comprehension of this message was checked at the start of the focus group. Their responses suggested that some children, particularly the younger ones (aged 5–9) had struggled to grasp confidentiality and when this would be broken. For example, one focus group of year 2
children replied “Anybody. All teachers and you” when asked who would be able to listen to the recording, despite being told specifically that their teachers would not be able to. At this point, any misunderstandings were clarified, but it was unclear whether this cemented children’s understanding. There was variation in this however, and some groups grasped it better than others. The oldest children (aged 9–11) demonstrated a better understanding of confidentiality. In response to the question “when might we need to tell someone what’s recorded on this Dictaphone?” responses were:

“If we need help” (year 5 child)

“If one of us is in danger” (year 6 child).

This was promising as children had not simply repeated back what they had heard, but rather internalised and rephrased it. However, the way some of the children responded when they were told by the researcher that she had concerns she needed to share – which was done privately at the end of the group – made her question their true comprehension. Some children appeared surprised that what they said had worried the researcher and some asked her not to tell. It may be that the children did not mean to disclose and did so by accident: young children have been found to make accidental disclosures more often than older children (Ullman, 2002). It may also be the case that children did not perceive what they were saying to be serious enough to warrant a breach of confidentiality. Alternatively, the information given to children about confidentiality may not have been specific enough to help them think through the implications of what they were sharing. To address this issue, it would be useful for research adopting a more participatory approach to explore “confidentiality” with children and provide examples of concerns that would need to be shared to keep them safe. A young person’s advisory group may also be useful for exploring this. Further research exploring children’s understandings of these concepts and the most appropriate language to use when describing confidentiality is also needed.

In total, safeguarding concerns were raised by 11 children across the ten evaluation focus groups, requiring the researcher to enact the pre-planned safeguarding procedure. Seven of these children made direct disclosures of bullying, abuse and neglect and four children disclosed concerning information which prompted a safeguarding response. This posed a number of challenges for the researcher in; identifying disclosures; knowing when an action was required; and responding appropriately to the child within a group setting. This is something that has received scant attention within the current safeguarding literature, surprising when acknowledging that engaging children in a dialogue about the topic of abuse can prompt a child to disclose (Reitsema and Grietens, 2016). Researchers working in the safeguarding arena must therefore be prepared to receive and respond to disclosures. While guidance helps researchers define harm and recognise when safeguarding procedures need to be enacted (e.g. the Children Act 1989, n.d.), Williamson et al. (2005) highlight the “real-life” challenges of doing this, such as identifying who already knows about the issue. Children may release snippets of information before fully disclosing and adults may fail to recognise the disclosure or may not know what to do with it (Allnock and Miller, 2013). This is further complicated within focus group settings where disclosures are made in front of a child’s peers and the researcher needs to be mindful about drawing too much attention to the issue. It may be the first time the child has told anyone and the response given can impact on the child’s self-perception, psychological adjustment, physical health and relationships (Reitsema and Grietens, 2016; Ullman, 2002). An appropriate reaction that does not dismiss what the child has disclosed is therefore necessary.

Whilst the author had a clear safeguarding protocol to follow, they were less clear on how to recognise and respond to safeguarding concerns during focus groups as this has been afforded little attention in published safeguarding research. Some guidance for the public and professionals on how to respond to disclosures was identified (e.g. the NSPCC (2019) guidance on “What to do if a child reveals abuse”) and the author drew upon her previous experience of volunteering as a telephone counsellor for children which was invaluable preparation for these groups. Her stance was to respond to disclosures by acknowledging that she had heard what the child said, to clarify the information given where appropriate and, where direct disclosures were made, to let the child know that what happened was wrong and not their fault. The reality of the group setting and the way children disclosed, however, meant that following this procedure could be challenging.
Children often presented concerning information in a very flippant and conversational manner which made it hard to detect. The second evaluator’s presence was therefore invaluable for listening out for any comments that required a response. Multiple disclosures were also made in some groups and keeping track of these was challenging. Where indirect disclosures were made, the member of school staff assisting with the group was asked to speak privately with the child afterwards to clarify the concern establish and whether a safeguarding response was required. This was useful as they already had a relationship with the child and could follow this up once the evaluation had ended. This option will not be available to all researchers, however, and more attention to this issue is therefore required within the research literature and training guidance.

Learning from others about how these issues are navigated in safeguarding research would be a useful start. This is particularly so for those carrying out research with children who are known to have already suffered abuse and/or neglect, where separating-out new disclosures from previously known concerns can be difficult. Second, guidance and training for researchers in identifying and responding to safeguarding concerns presented by children when conducting research should be given and sought out as part of routine practice. The way children disclose abuse and neglect will vary according to age, the nature of the research and associated activities, and working through example scenarios in a supportive learning environment that incorporates role play will provide the researcher with some useful practice prior to data collection. Guidance documents alone do not provide enough preparation for this.

Facilitating young children to provide meaningful data

In this final section, the approach taken by the author to facilitate children’s participation to contribute meaningful data to assist with service development is discussed.

Establishing the most appropriate research methods to use with children can be challenging. For this service evaluation, it was recognised that “childhood” is heterogeneous and that children develop at different stages (Beazley et al., 2011). This is in-line with the “competence paradigm”, which emphasises the social construction of childhood and rejects the linear picture of development and maturation suggested by developmental psychology (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis, 1998). Nevertheless, research with younger children requires a different set of skills and sensibilities to facilitate their engagement compared to that with older children (aged 10–17; Beazley et al., 2011).

Adopting a consultative participatory approach, the evaluation focussed on gaining the answers to three main questions from children across all ages: what could they recall from the programme, what new learning they gained and what they liked and disliked about the programme. This recognised that primary school children, in spite of their age, have the competencies, and should be afforded the right, to provide their views on programmes aimed at them. It also helped to standardise the approach to data collection to assist analysis.

To inform the methods used, the author gained consultancy from an external agency and utilised educational resources (e.g. Northern Ireland Curriculum, 2007) and published guidance to help engage young children (e.g. Johnson et al., 2014). Focus groups were chosen as they have been found to be effective formats for eliciting young children’s understanding and experiences of services (Aubrey and Dahl, 2005). The group setting has been found to be less intimidating and more engaging for children than one-to-one interviews (Hennessy and Heary, 2005; Jadue Roa et al., 2018) and discussion amongst peers may provoke new ideas and help clarify understanding (Coad and Lewis, 2004). This latter point was particularly important as we unfortunately did not have the resource to spend time helping children form their views on the topic in advance, as is necessary when adopting a children’s rights approach to research (Lundy and McEvoy, 2011). Nevertheless, the author recognised children’s desire to please adults (Gibson, 2012) and the importance of encouraging them to express divergent views (Moore et al., 2018). They therefore spent time practicing this with the children using neutral topics, and this appeared to help them express a range of views throughout the groups. However, individual differences were noted in children’s willingness to do this, with one child stating they “would not dare say that” to a peer who expressed boredom with one of the programme’s activities.

During the focus groups, flexible, multi-modal creative tasks were incorporated to help engage children who were less socially confident (Jadue Roa et al., 2018). Previous authors have
suggested that research with younger children should adopt short, specific and concrete language (Christian et al., 2010), whilst older primary school-aged children appear able to participate for longer, respond to more complex questions, and recall and share relevant personal experiences (Gibson, 2012). The focus group tasks were therefore adapted for children in key Stage 1 (aged 5–7 years), lower key Stage 2 (7–9 years) and upper key Stage 2 (9–11 years). For example, physical and verbal activities were used with the youngest children and more individual, written activities were carried out with the oldest. Group discussion followed each exercise and the research design was flexible so that additional discussion and tasks could be incorporated to respond to the group dynamics.

Children provided useful information and expressed sophisticated views throughout these focus groups. For example, children as young as six articulated that they valued learning about abuse and neglect and how to respond, despite the mild discomfort they experienced. Whilst the information gathered from the youngest children in the evaluation (aged 5–6) was limited in comparison to that from the oldest, this may be a reflection of the evaluation design. Research including young children in service evaluation may need to adopt a more participatory approach to help them form a view on the subject and facilitate them to express this, in-line with true rights-based research (Lundy and McEvoy, 2011).

The learning from this evaluation has enabled the NSPCC to gain a better understanding as to the potential outcomes from this programme, and to hear children’s views on what worked and what could be improved. The feedback children gave was triangulated with data collected from school staff and service delivery staff and volunteers, helping to shape programme delivery and development. This feedback demonstrates that children should be consulted in matters that affect them and is particularly pertinent for this programme where some adults feel children are too young to learn about abuse and neglect and choose not to have the programme in their school. Their feedback has also been instrumental in tightening quality assurance around programme delivery as their reflections on aspects of the programme which made them feel “bored” matched with observations of sessions which overran and veered from the programme’s script.

Conclusions

The paper adds to the existing evidence base regarding the inclusion of children in safeguarding research. This is by providing examples of how the tension between children’s participation and protection can be balanced when evaluating a safeguarding programme with primary school children.

It shows how taking a consultative approach to participation informed by a rights-based approach to research can allow children to exercise agency to freely assent and dissent within a school setting. To do this, gaining children’s assent should be an integral part of the research process and multiple creative methods should be employed to provide them with direct and indirect opportunities to withdraw. Whilst the children appeared to comprehend the purpose of this evaluation, their understanding of confidentiality was questionable. This could have been related to the methods used to explain this to them and a more participatory approach may have been beneficial, exploring this issue in greater detail through a young person’s advisory group, for example. Additional research investigating children’s comprehension of confidentiality, the most appropriate wording to use, and the issues children perceive as being serious enough to lead to a breach would also be useful. The author relied on the fact that children had very recently been exposed to a programme discussing different types of harm to children, assuming this would have primed them to know what types of things may make the researcher worried about them. However, children’s responses when told that the information they had shared was worrying suggests this was not enough.

It is also important that further discussion takes place within safeguarding research regarding the recognition of, and response to, disclosures and the sharing of concerning information. This evaluation highlighted the challenges of achieving this in focus group settings and responding appropriately so that children do not suffer additional trauma. Shared knowledge and experience of how this can be done safely within research and evaluation settings would better help researchers prepare for this in practice.
Finally, this evaluation demonstrates that, irrespective of age, children can provide meaningful feedback on services designed for them if due diligence is given to designing research methods that will help them express their views. Focus groups offer a useful setting for this as children can be assisted in developing and expressing a view in response to their peers’ opinions. Compared to the information gained from the oldest children, however, the limited information gained from the youngest children in this evaluation suggests that more participatory approaches may be required to help them form their views.

References

Alderson, P. and Morrow, V. (2004), Ethics, Social Research and Consulting with Children and Young People, Barnardo’s, Ilford.


Corresponding author

Vicki Jackson-Hollis can be contacted at: vicki_jackson_1@hotmail.com

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website: www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm

Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com
Co-producing and navigating consent in participatory research with young people

Elsie Whittington

Abstract

Purpose – Research within the fields of youth sexuality and safeguarding, and ethical governance more broadly, has traditionally prioritised risk aversion over the rights of young people to participate in and shape research. This excludes younger people from setting agendas and directly communicating their lived experience to those in power. The paper aims to discuss these issues.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper describes and draws upon findings from an innovative two year participatory action research study exploring sexual consent with young people through embedded and participatory research across seven sites. The project was designed with young people and practised non-traditional approaches to research consent. As well as co-producing research data, the findings highlight how methods of co-enquiry and being explicit about the research consent process enabled young people to develop competence that can be applied in other contexts.

Findings – The paper addresses ethical tensions between young people’s rights to participation and protection. It argues that alongside robust safeguarding procedures, there is equal need to develop robust participation and engagement strategies with an explicit focus on young people’s competence, agency and rights to participate regardless of the perceived sensitivity of the topic.

Originality/value – The paper concludes with proposals for future youth-centred research practice. These relate to research design, ethical governance processes around risk and sensitive topics, emphasis on working collaboratively with young people and practitioners, a greater focus on children and young people’s rights – including Gillick competence and fluid models of consent. In doing so, it presents an essential point of reference for those seeking to co-produce research with young people in the UK and beyond.

Keywords Consent, Negotiation, Gillick, Children’s rights, Participation, Ethics

Introduction

For safeguarding, educational agendas and policy and practice to relate better to the people they seek to affect, it is essential that research in these areas actively involve children and young people. There are a host of practical and ethical challenges that could arise from this. Many topics that are part of, or related to, safeguarding are considered sensitive and, in research terms, viewed as "high-risk", especially if they are to be discussed with young people. While ethical considerations are undoubtedly important, age-specific power imbalances mean that younger researchers and children and young people are rarely able to set the agenda and directly communicate their lived experience to those in power (Allen, 2008; Cammarota and Fine, 2008; Tisdall, 2017). Their rights to participate in decisions that may affect them are routinely under prioritised and, in some instances, stifled by protective policies or practices, which seek to avoid, rather than manage, risk (Tisdall, 2017).

The following paper’s methodological focus reflects on some ethical tensions associated with modelling and celebrating youth agency in a participatory research context. The study committed to ensuring that the research questions and methods were shaped by young people, who chose to explore the topic of sexual consent.

Whilst exploring sexual consent participants in this study consistently implied sexual consent was: "fluid", "constantly renegotiated", "communicated, verbally and non-verbally", "voluntary", "mutual" and "withdrawable". The terms they used to describe sexual consent unsurprisingly...
resonated with terms associated with participatory action research (PAR) approaches and with youth work relationships that share a common concern with power sharing (Banks et al., 2011; Davies, 2009). Not only did this highlight the complexity of consent in sexual encounters, it also called into question the parallel processes and practices of seeking and formalising consent to research participation. It became apparent that alternative processes of research consent needed to be explored. Thus, the author’s experience of practicing non-traditional research consent is the primary focus of this paper. In doing so, it presents an important point of reference for those seeking to proactively include young people in every phase of research.

This paper begins by outlining key literature on sexual consent, children’s rights, safeguarding, participatory research ethics and research consent. It then briefly describes the PAR project about sexual consent to contextualise the reflective commentary that follows. The author focusses on the possibilities and tensions experienced while attempting to uphold participatory research principals and balance young people’s rights to protection and participation. It reflects on different processes of navigating consent with young people and advocates that a continuous reflexive approach to research consent that prioritises young people’s rights to participation and education about sensitive topics is essential. The paper closes with a discussion about deprivitising parental consent to research participation and the application of a Gillick approach to research.

The author acknowledges that anyone under 18 is legally afforded the status and protection of a “child” (UNCRC, 1989). However to avoid over use of “children and young people”, this paper refers to young people throughout to reflect how the participants defined themselves.

**Contextualising consent: from sexual consent to research consent**

Issues of consent in varying contexts can be contentious and difficult to navigate. Debates and developments relating to sexual consent have emerged and shifted in focus over the last half century (see Whittington and Thomson, 2018 for a recent genealogy of sexual consent in the UK). so also has the discourse around “informed consent” to medical intervention and to research participation (Murray, 1990; Nelson-Marten and Rich, 1999; Wiles et al., 2005). Over this period, attention to children and young people’s rights to consent to sexual, medical and research encounters has come in and out of focus, usually in response to controversy and change.

A notable example (and significant to arguments later in this paper) is the 1982 *Gillick v. West Norfolk* case in the UK. This case was “the beginning not the conclusion” of developments, debates and negotiations around children’s rights, parent’s rights and the duty of doctors and the state in relation to medical treatment and sexual activity (De Cruz, 1987). The court recognised that young people under 16 are “capable of making a reasonable assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of the treatment proposed, so the consent, if given, can be properly and fairly described as true consent” (*Gillick v. West Norfolk*, 1984). It resulted in the statement of an explicit methodology, known as the “Gillick approach”, for evaluating competence using Fraser guidelines[1] (Thomson, 1995; De Cruz, 1987). This case encapsulated the tensions of the moment in relation to changing sexual practices, individualism, public health and children’s rights. These tensions are still lived today. For example, in contemporary discussion about the content and “age appropriateness” of new Relationship and Sex Education (RSE) in England’s curriculum (EVAW, 2018); approaches to child protection (Pearce, 2013; Tisdall, 2017); and young people’s rights to consent to research participation in their own right (Coyne, 2010; Pickles, 2019).

Presently public discourses surrounding young people’s sexuality are acutely focussed on risk, safety and exploitation (Clapton et al., 2012). This is not unjustified, given recent revelations of historic and institutional sexual violation. Consequently, there has been renewed policy and academic focus on defining who counts as children, how to recognise sexual agency and abuse in different contexts, and how best to balance children’s rights to protection and participation (Firmin et al., 2016; Lefevre et al., 2018; Beckett and Warrington, 2015; Pearce, 2013). Much of the aforementioned work actively prioritises young people’s experiences, opinions and rights while reframing discussion about protection. Yet, there remains a gap in literature where “few UK researchers have explicitly explored sexual consent with young people” outside the context of violence and abuse (Coy et al., 2013, p. 9; Whittington and Thomson, 2018; Whittington, 2019).
As sexual cultures shift and develop, there is a compelling case to include, and learn from young people in research (Coy et al., 2013). This will ensure education and safeguarding policy can respond to their needs, interests and experiences; not simply to adult fears, and extreme but minority experiences of trafficking and exploitation (Alldred and David, 2007; Whittington and Thomson, 2018; Carmody, 2009; Allen, 2008). In order to do this, young people should be included in setting the agenda for new research that could inform RSE content and safeguarding policy and practice more broadly.

Researching “sex” with young people, however, is deemed “high risk” by ethical review committees as stimulating conversations about sexual knowledge and practice can be risky or awkward and present a series of ethical dilemmas for researchers and practitioners (NCB, 2014). This in itself parallels and reinforces anxieties about children’s participation and access to information about sex that are visible in current discussions about the content of RSE (Robinson, 2012; EVAW, 2018).

Managing risk in research with young people

Lee and Renzetti note that “we cannot safeguard people by avoiding sensitive or controversial research” (1990, p. 252). A priority towards avoiding risk, and a limited view of child protection which overlooks the protective potential of engaging in research and reflective conversations, can come at the expense of youth participation (Coyne, 2010; Tisdall, 2017; Cammarota and Fine, 2008). This limits young people’s opportunities to be heard on matters of concern for them (Allen, 2008; Cammarota and Fine, 2008). Indeed, ethical governance has been critiqued for a tendency to protect institutional power at the expense of community empowerment (Malone et al., 2006, p. 1915, cited in Banks et al., 2011, p. 9).

By virtue of being a “political statement as well as a theory of knowledge” (Reason and Bradbury, 2011, p. 10), participatory approaches can enable communities and researchers to approach research differently. A key aim of much participatory or collaborative knowledge production is that the topic and mode of enquiry are developed with participants who themselves become active in the research process. This provides an alternative to positivist research by focussing on the co-creation of experiences and findings rather than on generating generalisable data (Cammarota and Fine, 2008). Some of the benefits include: the democratisation of research process; rich findings that help to provide deeper understanding of social phenomena; and a less extractive research process. Opportunities for learning and analysis are embedded in process and so retained by participants (Brydon-Miller and Coghlan, 2014; Cammarota and Fine, 2008; Banks et al., 2011). The ways in which this is instigated and practiced vary according to the needs and interests of different participants, funders and researchers.

The research, child protection and educational contexts above combine to create a difficult landscape to navigate if attempting to co-produce research with children and young people about sexual consent, or other sensitive topics.

Weston (2010) has suggested that the role of ethics is not to moralise or provide rules but to:

[...] offer some tools for thinking about difficult matters [...] recognizing that the world is seldom so simple or clear cut. Struggle and uncertainty are part of ethics, as they are part of life. (p. 8)

As such, it is important to weigh up the relative risk and ethical considerations of involving young people in research against young people’s rights to freedom, participation and inclusion in matters that concern them. This involves viewing ethics as a reflexive and ongoing process (Beckett and Warrington, 2015) which includes ethical governance considerations as well as safeguarding and risk management.

In order to cultivate a more ethical sexual culture and embolden young people with protective knowledge, it is essential that we create space for talking about risks and consent in an open and exploratory way (NCB, 2014; Carmody, 2009; Warrington, 2018). For the project below, it was deemed ethically and politically important that young people contribute to new agendas for RSE and safeguarding now and in the future. PAR, which focusses on education, can attend to both immediate and longer-term risks for both the individual and for society more widely by managing rather than avoiding risk (Banks et al., 2011;
Thus, the research outlined below had a key aim of “starting where young people are at” (Davies, 2009) to collaboratively develop a research project about sexual health, wellbeing and education.

The participatory research project: methodology

This research project was designed with young people and aimed to co-produce an account of sexual consent that is congruent with young peoples’ lived experiences. The research was co-funded by the UK’s largest sexual health and wellbeing charity for young people (the charity hereafter) and they supported the commitment to PAR principals. As such, the research aims, questions and methodology were co-created throughout the research process with the young people who were involved. In order to enable varied youth participation, the researcher was hosted to run and support a series of action based projects in seven sites in England outlined next.

In PAR, research and practice, design, process, analysis and findings are often interwoven and it can be difficult to explain a project in discrete sections; however, for brevity, the project can be described in three phases:

1. Research development and piloting (October 2014–November 2015): the charity’s participation groups, an alternative youth group and a university.


3. Practitioner insight (February–July 2016): revisiting an education hub of the charity and a sanctuary and supported living home for young people recently migrated to the UK. This phase involved research with educational practitioners who were all tasked with delivering “consent education”. Practitioner participation is not the focus of this paper so phase 3 will not be discussed here.

Members of staff at each site became gatekeepers and allies supporting recruitment by mediating the researcher’s access to groups and advocating for the research intervention. The study generated data about sexual consent and sex education with 103 young people aged 13–25 and 12 educational practitioners. In sum, 71 young women, 31 young men and 1 young person who identified as non-binary participated; 75 participants were under 18.

The topic of study, the age and potential vulnerability of the participants, and the public and group work nature of the project were significant factors that meant this research was considered “high risk” by ethical governance criteria. These concerns were attended to in detail in the ethical review application which was granted approval. Much of the application highlighted the researcher’s experience as a practitioner and their knowledge and competence regarding safeguarding practice and ethically managing risky conversations. It also drew on the support of the co-funder charity which had robust safeguarding policies and procedures for disclosures.

In line with participatory approaches, ethics was framed and practiced as an ongoing process of “reflexive concern, rather than a discrete procedural requirement” (Beckett and Warrington, 2015, p. 11) in all phases of the research. This included phase 1, which began before formal ethical approval was gained, but ethics were also revisited at every stage as all participants were given the space to consent, or withdraw. Additionally, some amendments were made to the ethics application during the research process.

The ways in which data were captured throughout the work were negotiated with participants according to their interest in the research and data collection elements of the project. In the early stages of research encounters, activities were captured with reflective field notes or by photographing group outputs (such as spider diagrams and definitions) to maintain anonymity before consent was more formally negotiated. As relationships with participants developed and a clearer sense of their interests and consent to the process emerged, data that would allow individual comments and views to be attributed were co-produced and recorded.
Co-producing the research

Generally, it would be expected that a detailed methodology, timetable and ethical application has been submitted and verified before access to institutions and young people is granted (Heath et al., 2009, p. 64). There are valuable and important reasons behind these requirements which can ensure that research endeavours do not under inform or exploit potential participants (Wiles et al., 2005). However, they leave little room for participants to contribute meaningfully to the design of research, with several authors noting that traditional ethical review processes and funding applications do not easily accommodate a more contextual, community focussed and reflexive approach to ethics (Weston, 2010; Banks et al., 2011; Brydon-Miller and Coghlan, 2014).

Phase 1, which occurred before ethical approval was sought, can be characterised in Sassen’s (2013) terms “before the method”. It is the creative, messy thinking and networking that is often not spoken about in papers and ethical applications but which is essential for gaining insight into what methods might actually be practical, and which questions are realistic in conducting a collaborative study. During this phase, a group of young volunteers, all 16+, at the charity were consulted about the research topic. Then a series of exploratory workshops were delivered to co-develop research methods and ways of engaging with other groups of young people who may not ordinarily get involved in this kind of work. Interactive research activities were co-designed to enable and elicit group learning and conversation about the nuances of the chosen topic – sexual consent[2].

In phase 2, the researcher spent over a school term at each site where research activities involved interactive workshops, discussion groups, film projects and the co-development of educational tools and resources. She also practiced ethnographic methods such as participant observation and taking field notes. At the school, the researcher was invited to support a year eleven class who were doing a project on sexual consent. Here she performed a class assistant role at times, and supported different groups with tasks such as blog writing, film making and school conference planning in addition to facilitating small group discussion sessions that could be transcribed. At the youth club, the researcher had been invited to facilitate a film project (part of the research/action designed by the group in phase 1). Rather than start with the film project the researcher spent time at the club developing relationships, running drop in discussion sessions and cultivating interest in the chance to engage in participatory research and a film project about sexual consent. The prolonged period at each site helped develop rapport with potential participants and meant that young people at the youth club and school who might not ordinarily self-select into this kind of research felt confident about navigating their participation and subsequent consent to participation.

The methods and cyclical, reflective nature of this research have produced a learning situation for the participants and the research generating “learning about learning, or meta learning”, both in situ and during analysis (Coghlans and Brdon-Miller, 2014, p. 240). Sessions involved much co-analysis through discursive activities; however, the final thematic analysis of the research data about “what young people think about consent” was analysed by the researcher (a limitation of this as a truly participatory project). These findings are discussed elsewhere and outside the scope of this paper (see Whittington and Thomson, 2018; Whittington, 2019 and forthcoming work). The methodological learning and process that can contribute further to youth participatory research agendas are discussed next.

Method as pedagogy. In their publication about teaching sexual consent, the National Children’s Bureau (2014) note that “asking ourselves and young people what we think consent means is revealing” (p. 2). This was certainly the case in the research outlined above. Not only did research conversations with young people highlight some limitations of current formal education around sexual consent (see Whittington and Thomson, 2018; Whittington, 2019), they also sparked critical conversations about consent in every-day interactions and in the research relationship itself.

Group research activities enabled the researcher to capture the opinions and learning experiences of participants, many of whom were initially uninterested in or had not heard about the term “sexual consent” before this project. A positive impact of this research approach is discussed below. It reflects a wider finding from the data analysis of increased critical thinking as a result of participation in the project.
At the Youth Club Shanella[3], like other attendees had not covered sexual consent in school. Research intervention here meant that over time she went from having “never heard about consent before you [researcher] came to the club” and initially speaking about it in quite an abstracted way, to recognising the complexities and nuances involved in sexual negotiation:

Elsie: Why is body language risky?
Shanella: Because it can be misinterpreted. So it’s like, someone, like, their body could be saying one thing, but then they’re not actually saying that, kind of thing, and especially like, downstairs I was talking to Dave, and umm, he was saying “what if someone’s afraid of the other person, but they don’t wanna say it”. So, you know, you don’t really know if what their body’s telling you is the truth.

Shanella’s interaction with the topic, researcher and youth workers illustrates how participation can enable critical thinking and reflection, which, in turn, contribute to building awareness and the capacity for self-protection (Robinson, 2012; Carmody, 2009). Throughout the project, Shanella and many other participants developed a new vocabulary, began to construct consent in a more nuanced way and were able to reflect on and develop terms that had salience for them and their peers.

By practicing a method of co-enquiry which viewed participants as experts and creators of knowledge, the research encounters became spaces in which the young people developed skills and gained information as well as co-producing research data (Chambers, 2004; Cammarota and Fine, 2008). This was acknowledged by the participants themselves, an example of which is 15-year-old Nina, speaking about being involved in the research in her school:

I just realised that like we don’t really talk about this. Like I think without this [sessions with the researcher] I wouldn’t talk about consent […] and it’s good to know this stuff.

The quote above demonstrates that “risky”, awkward and critical research conversations can be managed safely and become a resource for learning and developing competence, which is a key part of safeguarding. This paper now moves onto discuss how research consent can be negotiated in youth-centred and non-traditional ways.

Co-producing youth-centred research consent

By encouraging participants to think critically about consent in a sexual context, they were empowered to question and reflect on their rights to consent in other circumstances — most explicitly, the research process. It was acknowledged that the process of obtaining formal “one off” written consent to research (required by university research governance) jarred, challenging the culture of a project that was itself fluid and iterative. Thus, by paying close attention to how young people understood and framed sexual consent, the researcher, with the support of practitioners at different sites, made a special effort to navigate research consent in a way that mirrored participants view that consent is about “asking every time”.

Navigating research consent

Within all forms of social science research, “informed consent” is considered a key element to ethical research participation (David et al., 2010). Yet, the current usage of “informed consent” (in research) has also come under criticism for being too static when, in practice, it can be a complex and changeable element of the research process (Boddy and Oliver, 2010; David et al., 2010; Alderson and Morrow, 2011). Given the participatory, and therefore semi-planned nature of the action projects in this study, it was not always possible to provide enough information to participants for them to “know” and ‘understand’ what they were ‘getting themselves into” (David et al., 2010, p. 348) from the beginning. For instance, while research activities were loosely planned in advance of some sessions, the participants were encouraged and supported to ask questions of each other and the researcher to lead and direct discussions. This disrupted traditional research dynamics.

Ensuring the research participation and consent were informed and voluntary was attempted in a variety of ways at each site. Sometimes formal written consent was sought at the start of a project or session; at other times, it was not gained until later in research encounters. Both approaches
had their challenges and rewards. In order to ensure that participation was ethical, the author constantly checked in with participants about their expectations and understandings of the research. Participants were regularly reminded that they could leave, or, at least, disengage at any time. An example of practicing continuous and more explicit processes of research consent is discussed next.

"Asking every time"

During research activities in the first week at the school site, where consent forms were signed at the start of the research partnership, participants often spoke about how sexual consent had to be sought “every time”. In line with this, the researcher decided to model this approach with research consent and brought fresh consent forms each week:

Elsie: [...you know that you did the definitions of consent last week, and some people thought that like consent is mutual; and lots of people said it’s like retractable and that it has to be asked for every time.

Adz + Nina: Yea.

Elsie: Well cos of that I thought that I should ask every time [They all laughed at this] to make sure that I am doing it properly. So, I brought in some extra ones this week for you all to do again if you’re willing [...].

Field notes and transcripts from subsequent weeks noted that as time went on the participants did not feel they needed to sign new forms and that they were “getting in the way” (Azmin) of conversations and activities. Interestingly, this perspective seemed to mirror a view shared by some research participants that in sexual context explicitly talking about “consent” can disrupt the flow of interaction and “ruin the moment” (Charlie).

The researcher persisted each week in requesting signed consent despite it feeling a little awkward. Through persisting in this way the consent form became a useful prop for exposing the research process. By continually negotiating research consent, it exposed power relations that are rarely made explicit and stimulated conversations and learning about power, decision making and agency in different spaces. This self-conscious activity – although part of an approach to addressing research ethics in the PAR context – also helpfully mirrored realities of formalising or negotiating consent to sexual activity, highlighting the temporal/context specific nature of consent and the need for constant re-negotiation. In modelling an explicit process of research consent, these interactions could be considered an opportunity to develop skills for negotiating consent that could be applied in different scenarios.

Establishing and recording formal consent every time, while enabling research participation to be fluid, was time consuming. Significant sections of group discussion centred around the form limiting time to discuss other things. It also made the research process and opportunities to “capture” data precarious as participation waxed and waned over the course of the projects. For instance, at the youth club, there were weeks where there was little interest in talking about consent or engaging with the researcher. Similarly, at the school, there were occasions where no students wanted to participate in smaller group sessions that involved leaving the classroom. While this was sometimes frustrating for the researcher, it suggested that she was practising “good consent”, in that (potential) participants felt able to say “no”, and dissent or negotiate different levels of participation in the research process. This indicated that, when they did volunteer, their contributions were genuine and freely given.

Prioritising young people’s right to participation

It is not unheard of for researchers to “rely on children’s consent without parents’ consent” (Alderson, 2005; Morris et al., 2012; Pickles, 2019); however, this is largely unreported and not often included in ethical review applications, regardless of the perceived risk of topic or age of participants (Coyne, 2010). The educational nature of this research project and the more continuous process of consent practised with young participants called the standard of parent/carer consent to participation into question at each research site. The researcher experienced significant tension here between reconciling rights to participation and protection: on the one hand, upholding young people’s rights to information/education, confidentiality and a recognition of developing capacity (UNCRC, 1989), and, on the other, adhering to common practices of safeguarding which view parents/carer as protective gatekeepers (NSPCC, 2018b; Alderson and Morrow, 2011).
A number of scholars note that “viewing children as social actors adds new complexities and uncertainties to the research process, creates greater scope for ethical dilemmas and imposes new responsibilities on researchers, particularly in relation to the consent process” (Coyne, 2010, p. 227; Christensen and Prout, 2002). Additionally, arguments and case law relating to the Gillick ruling and the UNCRC offer grounds for viewing young people (in line with their evolving capacity) as capable of consenting and negotiating decision making about research participation (Coyne, 2010).

Although Gillick competency and Fraser guidelines arose from a medical context, the approach is used more widely by practitioners working with young people under 16 to establish whether they are competent enough to make their own decisions and to give “informed consent” (NSPCC, 2018a). In dialogue with staff at each venue and given the topic of study, a Gillick approach to research consent was practiced at all sites, apart from the school-based site where the teacher acted in loco-parentis. Combining this with a PAR and youth work approach, it was seen essential to support young people to make their own choices about participating in the research. Thus, the researcher and particularly practitioners who knew (potential) participants well not only assessed competence but also actively informed and negotiated levels of participation with young people in terms that made sense to them.

Making parental consent for young people under 16 age requirement for any level of participation in the educational research activities was deemed, by the practitioners hosting the research, as exclusive and out of step with sexual health and educational service provision. This echoes arguments by Pickles (2019), who notes that:

- Excluding under 16’s from sensitive research when practitioner services identify that there is a specific social need for this widens the fissures between academic research and practitioner based operations. This creates an inconsistent ethical framework that excludes young people from partaking in research, due to the adult-centric perceptions that curtail agency rather than provide the safest means to empower. (p. 12)

Putting the approach above into practice was anxiety inducing and caused some tension for the researcher. Following the practices of the venues did not always align with the ethical governance guidance at the university. This highlights a mismatch in what is often viewed as best practice regarding safeguarding, knowledge production and dissemination of data. Embracing and responding to these and other dilemmas (reflexively and collectively with practitioners and young participants arguably resulted in a youth-centred and ethical practice, something that can be limited when gaining parental consent, and children’s consent/assent at the start of a research project (Coyne, 2010; Skelton, 2008; Pickles, 2019).

Despite some recognised shortcomings (for critiques of Gillick approach, see Pearce, 2013; Cave, 2014), foregoing parental consent is more often accepted in what could be seen as “higher risk” areas (Pickles, 2019). It may be seen as more “defensible” to deprioritise parental consent in situations where the research concerns confidential areas (such as mental health, sexual and reproductive health provision or LGBT+ services). This is explored in detail by Pickles (2019) who argues “the standard of parental consent for [young LGBT+] participants [could] potentially put them in greater harm” (p. 7). Paradoxically, parental consent is still generally assumed to be required as the norm in settings where there is less potential risk of harm.

Where parental consent is still routinely prioritised, regardless of the topic under research, it can maintain a problematic ethic, which is inconsistent with children’s rights and safeguarding agendas (Coyne, 2010; Pickles, 2019). There is a parallel here with legislation in England that will afford parents the right to withdraw their children from school RSE classes, which arguably serve an important role in safeguarding through equipping students with knowledge that could help them navigate a changing social/sexual world (EVAW, 2018; Robinson, 2012; Whittington and Thomson, 2018).

Coyne (2010) notes that “The parental consent requirement may be seen as a well-intentioned safeguard meant to protect children” (p. 228) but highlights that this can restrict their ability to participate voluntarily in research. She goes further, suggesting that parental consent can at times result in researcher complacency regarding time and energy spent informing and negotiation participation with the young participants (2010). There are a number of issues to contend with if parental consent is not sought and this approach is not without its tensions/risks.
Ultimately, it requires gatekeeping organisations and researchers to be confident in assessing and managing risk, and to recognise that the benefits of youth participation mitigate the risk of deprioritising parent/carer input. The decision to forego parental consent in this study certainly ensured more time and consideration was given to ethically negotiating consent and participation throughout the research. This resulted in positive learning outcomes for young people as well as data for analysis. By continuing to negotiate participation and to acknowledge power dynamics, the researcher ensured that young peoples’ right to consent – or not – to each session, was actively upheld. This arguably created more safety for all concerned.

Conclusion: towards a youth-centred ethic of participation

In the interests of promoting, a more youth-centred approach to research ethics and consent this paper has showcased work which used PAR and prioritised young people’s rights, desires and competence to be heard on matters of concern for them (Pickles, 2019; Morris et al., 2012). Research with young people around “risky” topics present a number of challenges. However, this paper demonstrated that avoiding sensitive research topics, such as sexual consent, can reduce opportunities to co-produce knowledge with young people that can actively contribute to safeguarding in different contexts (Lee and Renzetti, 1990; Robinson, 2012).

The paper has demonstrated how utilising non-traditional models of research design and consent can enable a more ethical and democratic research process. This research was rooted in a commitment to active and reflexive ethics (Beckett and Warrington, 2015) and a youth work and participatory politics that sought to acknowledge power relations and prioritise young people’s autonomy and participation as much as possible.

The paper advocated that facilitating and supporting younger people to make informed choices about participation in research provides learning that can be a protective factor as they navigate decision making in other areas of their lives. Here learning is characterised by gaining vocabulary, skills and concepts that help make sense of experiences critically and contribute to safeguarding by developing competence.

It is argued that, alongside robust safeguarding procedures that seek to manage rather than avoid risk, youth-focussed research should have participation and engagement strategies with an explicit focus on acknowledging and nurturing young people’s competence, agency and rights to participate regardless of the perceived sensitivity of the topic (UNCRC, 1989; Coyne, 2010).

By working in partnership with practitioners and young people, the researcher ensured participants were informed about the research process in terms that made sense to them. They applied what could be termed a Gillick approach to the research by prioritising young people’s confidentiality and autonomy to make decisions about participation above a need to establish parental consent/permission. This paper argues that a youth-centred ethic for research would routinely prioritise young people’s rights to give informed consent and that ethical review applications should explicitly address how this is to be obtained and supported. This would also have the effect of widening access as young people, deemed competent, who wished to participate in research could not be excluded for lack of parent/carer consent.

Learning from this research therefore suggests the following practice proposals for future youth-centred research practice:

■ Introduction of an exploratory “before the method” stage of research (Sassen, 2013) as standard would enhance young people’s opportunities to contribute to research and agendas and challenge adult-centric policies.

■ Current ethical review guidelines would benefit from revision to support managed risks and flexibility with the balance between participation and protection reviewed (Coyne, 2010).

■ Emphasis on working collaboratively with young people and practitioners and a greater focus on children and young people’s rights – including Gillick competence and fluid models of consent – are required. Researchers need to consider competence and risk in a way that is congruent with both research ethics and ethics of intergenerational inclusion (Banks et al., 2011; Cammarota and Fine, 2008; Pickles, 2019).
It has been shown that maintaining a focus on the ongoing process of research consent can scaffold ethical research in “sensitive” areas. Modelling respect for young people’s capacity to make informed choices keeps them safe in the research process whilst emboldening them to explore risky topics and develop both their confidence and competence to navigate decision making in differing contexts.

Notes

1. “Gillick Competency” and “Fraser guidelines” help practitioners to make judgements about a young person’s capacity to “make their own decisions and to understand the implications of those decisions” (NSPCC, 2018a), and thus their capacity to give “informed consent” to, a medical procedure, treatment and sexual activity.

2. Many of these activities have been developed into training and educational resources for educators. These are freely available at https://learn.brook.org.uk

3. Young participants have chosen pseudonyms.

4. The youth-led film project at one site for instance required a different approach given potential issues of anonymity, photo/film release and research consent, which is not the focus of the current paper.

References


Robinson, K. (2012), “‘Difficult citizenship’: the precarious relationships between childhood, sexuality and access to knowledge”, Sexualities, Vol. 15 Nos 3-4, pp. 257-76.


Corresponding author

Elsie Whittington can be contacted at: e.whittington@mmu.ac.uk

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website: www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm
Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com
Youth and police making “Marginal Gains”: climbing fells, building relationships and changing police safeguarding practice

Fiona Jane Factor and Elizabeth Lillian Ackerley

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to describe a youth work model of participatory research practice which utilises a range of methods within non-traditional research settings, highlighting the importance of trust, risk-taking and the creation of mutually respectful and non-hierarchical relationships. The paper suggests that such methods enable the development of new insights into previously intractable challenges when working with adolescents needing a safeguarding response from professionals.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper reflects on the challenges and successes of a project which brought police officers and young people together to develop solutions to improving safeguarding responses to young people affected by sexual violence and related forms of harm in adolescence. In particular, this paper focuses on a residential held in October 2016 in the Lake District involving 7 officers and 15 young people.

Findings – Despite a number of ethical challenges throughout the project, this paper makes the case that potentially high-risk participatory research projects can be supported and managed by university research centres. However, for these to be successful, staff need to work in trauma-informed ways, and possess high-level expertise in group work facilitation. Transparency, honesty, constancy and a range of different and creative activities, including mental and physical challenges, all contributed to the success of the project.

Originality/value – By detailing the empirical steps taken to develop, support and realise this project, this paper advances a youth work model of participatory research practice, filling an important gap within the methodological literature on participatory work with young people affected by sexual violence.

Keywords Participation, Safeguarding, Police practice, Young people, Child sexual exploitation, Youth work

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Children’s and young people’s right to express their views, be heard and exert agency in matters affecting their lives is enshrined in Article 12 of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), alongside their right to protection from harm, including sexual exploitation (Articles 31 and 35). Despite commitments to involving young people both in policy making and practice development (HM Government, 2018), multiple studies document the difficulty of achieving this in practice (Tisdall, 2013; Brodie et al., 2016; Lefevre et al., 2018). Recognised by participants and stakeholders as a successful participatory project, this paper describes the process undertaken to bring together police officers and young people affected by sexual violence and related forms of harm in adolescence to co-create solutions to improving professionals’ safeguarding responses to young people.

The authors are incredibly grateful to the young people and police officers who took part in the project for their commitment, enthusiasm and creativity. The authors wish to thank Abi Billinghamurst and Joanne Walker and the rest of the CSE and Policing Knowledge Hub team, without whom this project would not have been possible, and Isabelle Brodie for her insightful comments on an early draft of this article.
Background

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) has been the focus of much policy, academic and media attention over the last two decades in the UK (Beckett and Pearce, 2018) following a number of high profile cases and serious case reviews (Coffey, 2014; Bedford, 2015). The impacts of this form of abuse are pervasive and wide-ranging and can cause significant emotional, physical and psychological harm (Beckett et al., 2017); improving prevention and intervention efforts with young people at risk of or experiencing CSE is therefore a priority for policy and practice (Public Health England, 2017). Serious case reviews and public inquiries have identified areas of professional practice, including policing, that require significant improvement to better protect young people from this form of harm (Coffey, 2014; Bedford, 2015).

Young people affected by CSE often describe feeling powerless and that they have limited control as a result of the abuse they have experienced and the subsequent criminal justice processes in which they are required to engage (Beckett and Warrington, 2015; Hallett, 2016). In recognition of this young people’s participation is seen as increasingly important within CSE policy and many services are evolving and adapting to redress this balance by making space for young people’s voices (Brodie et al., 2016). Increasing evidence suggests that young people want to, should and can be active in sexual violence prevention efforts (Cody, 2017), and that young people’s meaningful participation in safeguarding processes is valued highly by young people and can significantly contribute to their safety and the effectiveness of interventions (Warrington, 2013; Hallett, 2016; Lefevre et al., 2017).

Reconciling young people’s rights to participation and protection is, however, a challenge for many professionals, with multiple studies reporting a tension between young people’s right to participate and current safeguarding processes (Gilligan, 2015; Lefevre et al., 2017, 2018; Warrington and Brodie, 2018). Furthermore, evidence shows that young people may resist professional intervention and support for a variety of reasons, including a lack of trust in professionals, a lack of faith in the child protection system and fear of the consequences following disclosure of sexual abuse (Beckett and Warrington, 2015; Lefevre et al., 2017).

Considering the police in particular, young people cite additional reasons that inhibit disclosure and help-seeking behaviour, such as previous negative experiences of the police, fear of negative repercussions either for themselves or their family, or feeling in some way to blame for what has happened (Beckett et al., 2016). These factors can often be compounded by race, class and gender (Beckett et al., 2016). There is evidence of work being done to remove barriers to young people’s engagement with the police and improve police practice (All Party Parliamentary Group for Children, 2014), but there is limited evidence of participatory work being done to engage young people in these processes.

Over the years, a number of participation models have emerged delineating young people’s involvement in projects or decision-making processes which allow practitioners and academics to explore and develop their understanding of young people’s participation (Shier, 2001; Hart, 2008; Larkins et al., 2014; Percy-Smith, 2018). Positing participation as a “process of learning for change rooted in the everyday lives of young people”, Percy-Smith (2018, p. 161) argues for young people’s participation to be present throughout project cycles, involving five stages: “identifying issues; understanding the issues; developing plans (decision-making); taking action; evaluating action” (p. 169). Critical work on participation has identified multiple ways in which the concept is understood and operationalised. This work highlights the misleading ways in which by labelling a process as participatory, it could be assumed that young people are empowered by the process, that they are actively involved in every stage of the work and that the project has influence on decision making or positively benefits young people’s lives in some way, when this is not always the case (Gallagher, 2008; Larkins et al., 2014; Percy-Smith, 2018). Recent theoretical work on young people’s participation critiques some of the ways in which participation can be seen to have been co-opted to validate or improve service delivery, without taking into account the radical and emancipatory roots of participatory work (Gallagher, 2008; Larkins et al., 2014; Percy-Smith, 2018). The work cited above also acknowledges that realising young people’s meaningful, non-tokenistic and ethical participation is challenging, messy and time-consuming work, as evidenced throughout this paper.
Methodology

Project aims

The activities discussed within this paper were coordinated by staff from the International Centre: researching CSE, violence and trafficking (research centre hereafter), at the University of Bedfordshire; a research centre committed to ensuring the participation of young people affected by CSE and related forms of harm in all projects undertaken. In 2015, the research centre was awarded funding from the College of Policing, Home Office and Higher Education Funding Council for England to establish the CSE and Policing Knowledge Hub (www.uobcsepolicinghub.org.uk). The overall aim of the Hub was to improve police responses to CSE and other forms of harm and involved a number of activities designed to encourage police officers to use research evidence in their professional response to CSE. An initial strategic needs analysis carried out by the team identified engagement with young people affected by CSE and related forms of harm as a priority area for the police (Firmin, 2015); a number of activities were therefore developed over 18 months to address this. This included consultation with young people across the country, workshops and a residential experience alongside police officers, followed by multiple co-created dissemination activities and outputs.

Participant recruitment and engagement process

From early 2016, young people were recruited to the project through specialist organisations with whom the research centre had previously established working relationships, a factor that contributed towards sustained organisational engagement during the project. Contacting “experts”[1] through these organisations had additional benefits: engaging participants through project staff ensured safeguarding concerns were considered, support made available, and staff members’ knowledge and understanding of where experts were in their recovery processes enabled careful consideration of the appropriateness of inviting experts to participate. The lead facilitator (also lead author) was aware that a trauma-informed approach, which recognises the journey for young people affected by CSE and associated harms is complex, non-linear and sometimes lengthy, would need to be embedded within the project at every stage to recognise and validate experts’ experiences (Hickle, 2016).

The engagement process with organisations was time consuming and complex; it was a difficult project to pitch as the outcomes were unprescribed. Rightly, staff at the organisations wanted to know what young people would receive in return for their participation, and more importantly, whether it would have any impact upon policing practice. Aware of the dangers of engaging young people in participative work which does not create the intended change, the lead facilitator was clear that this project had the potential to have considerable impact, but at this early stage there was no guarantee, especially given that at this point there was not yet buy-in from police officers. This honest approach became a key element of the engagement of both experts and police officers as the work developed over the next 18 months.

In March 2016, the lead facilitator was asked to predict the likely cost implications of this element of the wider CSE and Policing Knowledge Hub work. Despite the project’s uncertainty at this stage, the lead facilitator optimistically requested funding for a residential experience to bring together police officers and experts to develop solutions to the challenges previously identified within police safeguarding practice (Beckett et al., 2016). Brathay Hall in the Lake District, chosen for its beautiful setting by Lake Windermere and its offer of a variety of outdoor activities, was booked for a weekend during October half-term 2016. Additionally, the lead facilitator agreed to the wider team working on the CSE and Policing Knowledge Hub that she would secure the services of some of the residential participants to disseminate key messages at a research forum for police officers following the residential.

During the Summer of 2016, five workshops took place with experts around the country to explore the project’s potential. Messages from previous research undertaken by the research centre were explored and key areas of concern prioritised. The workshops also provided an opportunity to test the idea of a residential experience. A number of experts thought the idea was possible, but doubted that police officers would want to share a weekend away with them. Some experts made it clear their involvement with the project would end after the workshop as they did not feel comfortable to spend a weekend so far away from home or with police officers.
A parallel process involving numerous different and significant challenges was underway to recruit police officers. Hours were spent on the phone securing involvement and slowly, some officers began to express interest in the opportunity offered. It was constantly reiterated that the process would be managed as an environment of mutual respect, experts and police officers would be involved in all aspects of the process as equals, and this process was to be managed by experienced facilitators in whom the police would need to place their trust.

**Principles of practice**

For the lead facilitator, a youth worker in her earlier professional life, the key principle of engagement with experts was to ensure that the process was ethical and that those who participated felt that their voice was heard and their lived experience validated. It was important that the experts’ engagement did not become another research project which merely reaffirmed messages that had already been derived elsewhere; a new approach was required. Key to the development of the methods was the involvement of an experienced co-facilitator, Abi Billinghamurst, who was chosen because of her skill fit with the lead facilitator. Abi’s organisation, Abianda (http://abianda.com), works with gang-affected young women; her approach is both trauma-informed and solution-focused.

Care was taken to allow the project to develop in line with experts’ priorities and interests and to share decision making with experts about which areas of police practice to focus on; the solutions developed at the residential were a result of these conversations. However, having an aim and focal point for the work (the residential and the subsequent police forum) helped maintain focus and commitment to the project, a finding evidenced in other participatory work with young people (Larkins et al., 2014). Fundamentally, the approach developed throughout the project drew on established foundational youth work knowledge about the effectiveness and power of groups when brought together in different settings to undertake a given task, and the unpredictable nature of group dynamics that can unfold in such circumstances (Adams, 2001; Young, 2004). Trust in the ability to create safe and respectful spaces where potentially difficult conversations can take place and a strong emphasis on personal development and learning were at the core of this endeavour.

This was particularly evident in planning the residential element where four practice imperatives were employed to guide and underpin the experience; these applied to indoor workshop-based tasks, outdoor exercises and free time:

1. The creation of a mutually respectful space in which participants feel safe and comfortable, and where individuals are treated equally so that good, honest relationships can be established.
2. A shared understanding of the intense and inevitably tiring nature of the weekend and the need to be engaged in all sessions, taking care of self and others both in the sessions and during break times.
3. The need to be solution-focused and forward thinking rather than focus on previous negative engagement experienced by both experts and police.
4. For participants to leave the weekend having had a new experience, an opportunity to reflect, gain new insights and learning, and to have contributed to meaningful debate about how systems could be improved.

What follows will describe and reflect on the participatory approach adopted throughout this project, from the initial planning of the residential, through to dissemination of the co-created outputs. Written notes, facilitator and participant reflections, and photographs and video evidence have been consulted in the development of the model of participatory practice described here.

**Residential planning**

By September 2016, 7 officers from four force areas and 15 experts representing five of the six areas where workshops were held confirmed their attendance at the residential. All 15 experts had attended a summer workshop and therefore had met one or both of the facilitators.
Unfortunately, bringing the police participants together prior to the event inevitably proved unrealistic due to geographical distance and time. The police officers and experts were given pre-residential tasks to complete; a crucial step in establishing the nature of the environment over the residential period. This included completing pre-residential questionnaires identifying hopes and anxieties for the weekend ahead, all of which informed the contract and boundaries established on the first night together.

Inevitably, ethical considerations, safeguarding protocols and endless risk assessments were undertaken to enable the smooth organisation of the residential experience. These were highly complex and required careful and diligent negotiation with all stakeholders concerned; the organisations, parents/carers, experts, university’s ethics committee and health and safety departments, police officers and staff at Brathay Hall. Early on it was established that there were no previous relationships between the experts and police officers attending, making the process a little less fraught. However, moving experts from one part of the country to another, ensuring safeguards were in place, booking train tickets, negotiating shift patterns for police officers and securing appropriate staff attendance from organisations was extremely time-consuming and in some cases highly problematic.

The two facilitators were clear that to ensure a high-quality residential experience, it was important that experts’ individual support needs were facilitated by (paid) organisational staff, rather than residential facilitators, as this could be distracting and impact upon the ambitious task at hand. Organisational staff were not expected to participate in sessions, but to be there if needed and to check in with their groups after sessions to ensure that the experts felt comfortable and safe and to resolve any conflicts. Two research assistants also attended to record the discussions, capture thoughts and feelings of participants throughout the weekend, and to be helpful observers of group dynamics and reflect back their impressions to the facilitators following each session to allow for appropriate de-briefing. Undoubtedly, high staff ratios significantly contributed to the weekend’s success.

**Design and methods**

The programme utilised a balance of methods to reflect different learning styles. Participants’ diverse backgrounds and experiences were considered with care, alongside continual reflection of how power dynamics might require careful and sensitive management. A number of activities designed to give everyone the opportunity to shine were organised; these activities underlined the idea that everyone brought something different and valuable to the residential and acted as a leveller amongst participants. Additionally, it was important not only to ensure the process had in-built evaluative tools for research and funding purposes, but also to provide participants with a mechanism for reflection and learning to embed these processes throughout.

Friday night was spent getting to know each other, sharing information derived from the workshop feedback and pre-residential tasks, and developing the group agreement: a contract detailing how participants were going to work together including expected standards of behaviour during the weekend was key. Four groups were established, comprising a mix of experts and police officers, with the intention of embedding the positive relationship building that would be required to ensure the weekend’s success. Solutions to some of the identified anxieties on both sides were explored and agreed. At this point, a participant realised the challenge of changing the culture of 48 police force areas across England and Wales was too great, but that small steps could be taken to improve current police safeguarding responses. As an accomplished sportswoman, she explained this to the group by using the metaphor of the British Olympic Cycling team making “marginal gains” by tweaking their bikes to achieve success. “Marginal Gains” was then adopted as the project’s title.

Saturday’s programme combined discussion-based workshops involving vision trees, role play activities and an activity on long boats on Lake Windermere. After the session on the Lake, participants were encouraged to reflect upon the experience and identify what behaviours had been helpful/unhelpful in enabling success or completion of the challenges set. After dinner a session took place using creative methods to begin to identify solutions to previously identified priorities in terms of making a difference to police safeguarding practices. Using props and role
play, each group made a pitch to suggest possible tools that would be helpful to achieve this. At the end of the day, the facilitators reviewed feedback and information captured about the day to ensure the intentions for the next day were still relevant and achievable.

Sunday started with a walk up a nearby fell, during which participants were tasked with speaking to someone new about what had most surprised them over the weekend. At the top, time was spent enjoying the stunning view of the Lake before heading back for lunch. The afternoon was devoted to action planning for the research forum alongside evaluating the residential experience. Considerable time was given to closing and carefully managing endings as everyone prepared to leave by 4 p.m.

By all accounts, the weekend was an outstanding success and exceeded all expectations. In particular, the strength of respectful and caring relationships developed within the short but intensive experience, proved the power of all participants’ ability to give their trust and engage in many activities which took them out of their comfort zone. This all took place in an unknown environment, with multiple strangers and no clear notion of any particular outcome:

  Expert: seeing the police officers let down their guard and just talk to us like how they would talk to their friends […] not enforcing their authority on us […] that was really really nice.

Ethical challenges and solutions

Unsurprisingly, managing a project of this nature brings multiple, unanticipated ethical challenges which no end of contingency planning can predict. During the Marginal Gains project, they coalesced around four themes; working with gatekeepers, direct work with young people and the police, personal and professional challenges, and wider system challenges.

Working with gatekeepers

The involvement of gatekeepers can be both helpful and problematic. One organisation decided to withdraw an expert from the project following a disclosure made to another expert on the train home from the residential. This expert was obviously still experiencing post-traumatic stress and clearly felt the residential was an opportunity to take herself out of her current chaotic life. At the residential, she was evidently exhausted and had arrived with a bag of dirty clothes asking to use the washing machine. The lead facilitator experienced a great deal of internal professional conflict about the decision to withdraw the expert and initially resisted this decision; she wanted to continue supporting this individual who had contributed so much at the weekend and who was excited to continue her involvement in the project. However, to adhere to the particular organisation’s safeguarding policy, it was understandable that this decision was taken and the young person was withdrawn. Assurances were given that key workers would stay in touch with the individual concerned and offer a different form of support. Delightfully, the expert concerned presented at a conference a year later where she reflected on her journey and her aim to join the police to further improve safeguarding practice.

One worker had to back out of the residential the day before as she was birthing partner for a young person who had gone into premature labour. Multiple discussions took place about the appropriateness of her experts participating without her being present. They were both aged 17 plus and it was agreed that one of the research assistants (also co-author) would offer on-site support. Risk assessments were re-visited and travel arrangements from London to the Lake District reviewed to ensure safety.

Another unanticipated role for the lead facilitator was undertaking informal support to gatekeepers who were sometimes at the end of their tether with their experts at various stages throughout the process from recruitment, workshops, residential to dissemination events. Becoming a “non-managerial supervisor” in this way, whilst time-consuming, was helpful in giving further insight to the needs of experts participating in the project, undoubtedly enhancing the effectiveness of the engagement strategies employed.

Direct work with experts and the police

When immersed in projects of this nature, it can be difficult to remember that young people also have broader interests and lives outside their experience as an “expert”. This is crucial for all
professionals working with experts who are participating in projects; they are more than a "survivor of abuse", they too have aspirations. An expert who was integral to the weekend’s success and due to be the keynote speaker at the end of project conference, pulled out of the event the day before. After much soul searching, she had rightly decided that her priority was to stay at college in the hope she would be selected for the English Women’s Basketball team. She was and continues to represent her country.

Some of the more memorable challenges in working directly with experts during Marginal Gains included managing group dynamics at the residential after what was perceived as an “unhelpful” look was given in the dining hall to another group, creating conflict before the work had even begun; having to remove a young person’s name from the credits of the film as a result of safeguarding concerns and asylum status; retaining the participation of an expert who had moved to London and wanted to remain involved but was no longer associated with a project that could offer support.

All officers who attended the residential were drawn from their force’s specialist teams working in safeguarding roles; however, several viewed this as an opportunity to come and “tell” the experts what they were doing to improve the situation. Others said they would bring their own resources to show the experts what they were doing in their area to seek out the experts’ opinions. Unbeknown to the lead facilitator, alongside many other more commendable reasons for attendance, there were some officers who thought it would be a good “jolly” and others who had never been to the Lake District who decided to come for these reasons alone. These dynamics required honest conversations to allow officers to fully understand the purpose of residential.

**Personal and professional challenges**

For the lead facilitator, there were a number of personal and professional challenges. She originally applied for the Project Manager role for the wider CSE and Policing Knowledge Hub and was unsuccessful. Research centre managers had helpfully asked her take the lead in young people’s engagement. She needed a job as her previous research contract was ending and therefore was pleased to retain an income; however, for her it felt like a consolation prize. Additionally, as an older member of the team, she felt somewhat out of her comfort zone to re-engage in direct work with young people. This was echoed at initial meetings when young people frequently expressed they expected to be meeting someone younger! It was also very apparent in late night reflections when stuck on a cold, frequently wet and dark train platform hundreds of miles away from home after project visits. It felt like she had come full circle and was now re-engaging in youth work practices that she had been involved with nearly 30 years earlier.

It was also a professional and personal ethical challenge to manage the tension between remaining solution-focused and participative within an extremely short funding timescale and balancing the needs for protection and participation with a vulnerable group of experts alongside project demands. The need to continually review risk assessments and engage stakeholders in discussions about experts’ participation at the different project events was sometimes all-consuming and cannot be underestimated in terms of worry time. Fortunately, having another experienced facilitator alongside provided support when decisions required further review.

**Internal and external system challenges**

System challenges existed internally and externally. As workers from projects were being paid for their time, a legally approved partnership agreement was in place to clarify payment terms and partnership parameters; endless toing and froing between legal departments in respective organisations prior to agreement sign-off inevitably created delays in the project’s start. Sadly, no such agreement was in place for the police force areas involved. An immutable challenge in this regard was the refusal of a senior manager to release his staff members to stay involved with Marginal Gains after the residential which was difficult for both police and experts.

The perceived lack of engagement from colleagues on the wider CSE and Policing Knowledge Hub project was also difficult. Initially, this worked for the lead facilitator as it meant she had free rein to develop the project as she saw fit. However, the disinterest in what was happening with
this aspect of the work can be explained by either, she was a safe pair of hands and the team knew a quality output would be delivered, or, frustratingly at times, her feeling that this element of the project was less important than the more “serious” research work being undertaken. Ensuring the right number of young people had been engaged in line with bid intentions appeared the priority at meetings, rather than the nature and quality of the actual engagement. The dangers of “tick box” participative practice felt ever apparent.

Initially, the lead facilitator asked for a budget and was given a very small sum to run some workshops with police and experts as identified in the original bid, then money was made available for the residential. In the final three months, the realisation of an under-spend in other areas became apparent and the newly found money was used to make the film and poster. These additional outputs were unexpected and enabled the Marginal Gains team to come together again on multiple occasions to create these exciting outputs in time for the end of project conference in March 2017. A considerable amount of unexpected and additional work was required to meet the timescale and the facilitators were extremely concerned about suddenly having to drive the process without the same due regard for participative practice that had been evident previously. They need not have worried as the opportunity to come together again overrode any concerns in that regard from participants. However, earlier clarity of resources available would have allowed for a more considered approach in pitching the project to potential participants, as well as a less rushed final three months.

Impact, outputs and legacy

The Marginal Gains project had impact in multiple and unexpected ways. Participants presented at the research forum a few weeks later in November 2016, to an audience of over 70 officers from across the country. Between January and March 2017, the group made a film which is now embedded in the College of Policing training materials for new recruits. A poster about police engagement with young people was co-created with professional artists and 2,000 were distributed to every custody suite in England and Wales.

Additionally, the group ran workshops for police officers at the CSE and Policing Knowledge Hub final conference in London in March 2017. The work was also presented at a number of individual organisation events, annual conferences and the Metropolitan and Bedfordshire Police’s Safeguarding Conferences. Of particular note was an invitation from the College of Policing to deliver the keynote address at the end of their Police Knowledge Fund conference in November 2017, where Marginal Gains was cited as an exemplar of police co-production.

A youth work model of participatory research practice

The model of practice guiding and facilitating this research project was embedded from the project’s inception (see page 5); however, it continued to emerge and evolve throughout as facilitators responded and adapted to the multiple challenges that arose. The underlying principle was respect for all participants and recognition of their potential contribution throughout the process, echoing Larkins et al.’s (2014, p. 733) argument that participatory practice can only facilitate social change within a context that values children and young people as “competent citizens”. In particular, whilst there were no pre-determined outcomes or outputs, all activities were designed to be solution-focused and future facing, drawing on methods derived from youth work theory about group development, personal growth and learning derived from activities undertaken in non-traditional settings (Young, 2004).

Tension between participants was managed by an honest approach which did not shy away from conflict, but instead identified it and sought to create solutions together. Facilitators acknowledged that the residential would not be easy at times, and recognised the need to sometimes sit with discomfort, “hold the space” and work with the risks that bringing disparate groups together can create. Some of this was managed by modelling positive respectful behaviours, some by creating an environment in which everyone was treated as equal; a perception of a hierarchy of knowledge was eradicated by a combination of levelling activities, the group agreement and flexibility around how experts engage. This approach was embedded
throughout the project, providing stability and consistency for participants, thereby fostering a sense of safety and trust:

PO: I’ve loved working in teams with the young people and we’ve all been equals, everyone’s participated and been able to have their opinion, everybody’s listened really well which has been great, everyone’s taken part.

By utilising a range of different and creative methods of engagement, a mix of physical and mental challenges, and the opportunity to support one another throughout the weekend’s activities, everyone’s contributions were recognised as equal and valid by all. By establishing a level playing field in an unfamiliar setting the first time oppositional groups came together, the opportunity to push the transactions and engagement further, and over a longer period, began to reveal themselves. As a result, the outputs, designed to disseminate messages from a shared understanding and language to wider audiences, possess a highly credible voice rooted in research and lived experience:

Expert: Just you know, hearing the police officers’ like points of view and them giving us knowledge, because we didn’t know circumstances and sections of the police force and because it’s more detailed now we know certain processes that they have to go through […] we know where we need to work on, what’s fine or doesn’t need that much improvement. So just you know having a more clear outview of what we need to be doing. It’s been amazing, once in a lifetime opportunity.

PO: The best part of this has been being able to get to know the young people, building a rapport with them, enjoying just spending time with them, knowing them as people and getting them to know us as people rather than just police officers […] Now we’ve got some really good ideas going forward […] hopefully we can […] make this a bit of an epidemic going through the police service.

Involving “experts” in research processes is highly desirable and research outputs are usually enhanced by retaining their voices as central; no more so is this the case than with vulnerable young people. The experts’ desire to make safeguarding processes better for other young people was palpable throughout Marginal Gains. The opportunity to value and embed their lived experience was never in question; it was the coming together with previously oppositional voices that made the process more challenging.

Without the high-level expertise in group work facilitation, as well as being trauma-informed practitioners, such methods would not ordinarily be comfortably or successfully used by staff located in university research centres with more traditional academic skill sets. The understanding and acknowledgement that there was a risk the project would not be successful created an honesty and transparency within the relationships formed, increasing trust, a level of risk-taking and ultimately success. This was taking place whilst managing and balancing the priorities of an award-winning research centre for whom failure was a non-option: it was a gamble and the option to play it safe was never far from the lead facilitator’s mind. Inevitably, the intensity of effort and nature of resource to facilitate this process was never adequately accounted for in the funding or time available.

Finally, the geographical setting of the residential and impact of the environment cannot be overstated. For some experts, rarely having been away from their home town, the opportunity to lie out at night looking at the Milky Way and discuss their aspirations for the future was a unique and incredibly special experience; it is the joy of youth work practice in residential settings recognised in time and memorial (Brew, 1968). The ability for newly acquainted experts and police officers, normally in oppositional roles, to work together like this is a testament to the relationships of trust established and an undeniable respect for each other’s lived experience. The team provided the framework within which this impactful experience took place; a number of previously identified factors enabled its success. Whilst it remains a highlight of the careers of those who were responsible, undoubtedly, it could have been a completely different story:

Expert: This weekend’s been absolutely amazing how everyone’s just pulled together to make a change for the young people. Me, my past I had bad experiences as a young person, so for my son I want to see a change […] with all the people being here today and through this weekend I can see that can happen. I definitely will be going back home with a great confidence boost as I made it up the mountain and got on the biggest Lake in England!
Note

1. Following discussions with participants and how we, and they, saw their role in the project, young people will mainly be referred to as experts throughout this paper as a way of recognising and valuing their lived experience.

References


About the authors

Dr Fiona Jane Factor’s professional background is in youth work. Her academic career began at the University of Bedfordshire in 1995 developing youth work training. Since then she has run her own consultancy company, established numerous professional and academic partnerships in the UK and overseas and undertaken multiple research projects focusing on how professionals support vulnerable young people, particularly within youth justice systems. As Senior Research Fellow, she led on the young people’s work within the Child Sexual Exploitation and Policing Knowledge Hub. She has developed a number of undergraduate and postgraduate courses and is now Principal Lecturer, Teaching and Learning, for the School of Applied Social Studies.

Elizabeth Lillian Ackerley is currently undertaking an ESRC funded CASE PhD studentship at the University of Manchester looking at “Youth Activism in an Age of Austerity” partnered with RECLAIM, a youth leadership and social change organisation. Prior to this she was Research Assistant at the International Centre: Researching child sexual exploitation, violence and trafficking, where her work focussed on developing creative, meaningful and ethical ways of involving children and young people in research into sexual violence and related forms of harm. Elizabeth Lillian Ackerley is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: elizabeth.ackerley-2@manchester.ac.uk

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website: www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm
Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com
From the ground up: young research advisors’ perspectives on relationships between participation and protection

C.J. Hamilton, Abbie Rodgers, Keeley Howard and Camille Warrington

Abstract

Purpose – This contribution is co-authored by three members of the Young Researchers’ Advisory Panel (YRAP) at the International Centre: Researching child sexual exploitation, violence and trafficking (IC) at the University of Bedfordshire, and supported by an academic researcher (Camille). The purpose of this paper is to reflect the group’s discussions about the relationship between children’s participation and protection, considered within the context of the group’s role and work.

Design/methodology/approach – A collaborative reflection piece co-produced through discussions between young research advisors and academic colleagues.

Findings – This paper shows the young researchers’ perspectives on the relationship between and interdependencies of child protection and child participation.

Originality/value – A unique contribution capturing children and young people’s perspectives on the journal’s theme and other contributions to it.

Keywords Co-production, Ethics, Child protection, Child sexual exploitation, Peer research, Child participation

Paper type Viewpoint

This contribution is co-authored by three members of the Young Researchers’ Advisory Panel (YRAP) at the International Centre: Researching child sexual exploitation, violence and trafficking (IC) at the University of Bedfordshire, and supported by an academic researcher (Camille). As with the UCan’s paper (2019, this volume), this contribution starts by explaining the role and work of the group before reflecting on the group’s discussions and contributions about the relationship between children’s participation and protection. The first discussion took place in a face to face meeting with two YRAP members and Camille. The second took place as part of an online meeting where details of the discussion were shared with a third member who added their reflections. In addition members shared additional thoughts in writing following these meetings.

Camille transcribed notes of the discussions and shared them with those present so we could think further together about whether we were happy for them to be presented in this way. The group considered whether sharing this information (some personal) was a good choice for everyone now and in the longer term; and whether it properly captured the key points we want to share. A decision was made to acknowledge people’s contributions as named authors but leave specific attributions purposefully ambiguous (hence cited as young researcher 1; 2 etc.).

The text below represents the outcomes from these discussions. YRAP comments are followed with some of Camille’s reflections on how these ideas link to some of the wider literature in this field including within this journal.
An introduction to the YRAP – in our own words

When we are explaining our work to other people we explain:

The Young Researchers’ Advisory Panel consists of young people (aged 16 – 25 years) from varied backgrounds who all share a passion for raising awareness against sexual exploitation and violence. The group was set up as the International Centre (IC) wanted to ensure that young people have an important say within every level of research they do.

Up until now there have been three main aspects to our role: informing new research, improving how the IC involves other children and young people in their research and helping share research findings in accessible ways with wider audiences. Through new funding, our future work will also include designing and undertaking our own research.

As a group, YRAP members and academic staff from the IC have all worked together for nearly three years. Before joining the YRAP, all of us who contributed to this paper, along with the other members had experience of participating in individual research projects with the IC from 2010 onwards. Within these projects, all YRAP members had experience of using participatory research methods, taking on advisory roles or working on participatory action projects[1]. Many YRAP members also contribute to, or have set up other participatory work outside of the IC in the fields of mental health provision, voluntary sector services, the criminal justice sector and local youth politics; often drawing on expertise from lived experience to promote social justice.

Because of the focus of our work in the YRAP, the relationship between participation and protection is a regular theme: we talk about it in group discussions, conference presentations and as consultants on other IC research processes. For example, some of YRAP work is about piloting and advising on the IC’s research methods – providing a “testing ground” to check that the centre’s research approaches (participatory or otherwise) are safe and accessible for other children and young people.

We often get asked whether the YRAP’s own work (and young people’s participation in research and practice addressing sexual violence more widely) is safe and appropriate. We also often encounter surprise or scepticism from other professionals that it is possible for us (and the academic professionals we work with) to do this work safely. YRAP members regularly challenge notions of being “too vulnerable” to participate in research, on behalf of ourselves and other young people. We ask professionals to rethink how they assess risk and what they consider children and young people to be capable of. This discussion builds on those themes and talks about how our participation work can help to protect:

I think what gets missed when we talk about safeguarding children a lot is this capacity that children have to keep themselves safe and they play a big role in that – I think that gets overlooked.

This was young researcher 1 (YR1)’s first response when Camille asked the group how they thought children’s participation and protecting children were linked. The discussion was prompted by Camille’s (the Academic Researcher) role in editing this journal. She asked us if we wanted to add our views to the journal, which we did. Camille also shared some examples of key findings from different articles and asked us what we thought about the them.

Although many themes came out of our discussion, we have highlighted three key themes that we felt were important and grouped our ideas.

Building self-worth and self-esteem through participatory activity

YR 1 explains:

I think what participation does, is it engages a young person in a process where their safety, their health, their well-being is thought about and cherished and – [pause] – given the priority that it deserves. It tells a young person that they are worth protecting. I think that’s the kind of safeguarding that goes far beyond a social worker making a child protection plan, putting a child into care – you know all these things that they can do to safeguard children – that can go as far as putting them in secure unit […] but actually if you build up their self-esteem and make them believe that their safety is important and worth protecting and worth cherishing and worth thinking about and improving.
Camille responded that she had not seen the issue of self-esteem written about much in either children’s participation literature or in the world of “safeguarding” and child protection. We wondered if maybe researchers or practitioners do not feel they have the evidence to make claims that participatory work contributes to better self-esteem – or do not see this as significant?

YR1 continues, reflecting on the value of what he suggests as an alternative approach to safeguarding; one that is focused on developing self-esteem and informing children about their rights (mirroring ideas shared by other young people in the Brady and Franklin article (Brady and Franklin, 2019 – this volume)):

What you’re doing is – you’re giving the child tools to take action – or perhaps not take action – which means that they’re safer – and that will carry through quite possibly far beyond childhood. That’s more of the kind of safeguarding that we need – we don’t need more young people going into secure units – taken away from their families – taken away from their communities – what we need is young people that are able to make sensible informed decisions, that are grounded in good self-esteem – that means that they are safer anyway without all the interventions – that’s all I have to say.

This idea of participatory activity building confidence came up again and again in our discussions. In addition, we highlighted the particular importance of participatory opportunities for children and young people who have faced marginalisation, abuse and trauma – themes present in much of the YRAP’s work. YR2 explained how they saw these links:

I agree that after a young person has experienced something negative that this can make them more vulnerable, however I do not feel that this should stop them being considered for helping to make decisions. In most cases, these “negative experiences” that have happened have taken away the power and control that young people have over their lives and this can make young people feel insignificant or like they don’t have any say in what happens to them […] by excluding young people from decision making, this just adds to that feeling and actually can make things a lot worse for that young person. Giving them a choice or say in decision making can be a really powerful tool which can help young people to realise that how they feel does matter and that their opinions are important; it could be the first time that their opinions have actually been listened to before.

As YR2 explains participation is an opportunity not only to build self-worth but also create a feeling that you are able to influence change (what some people call “self-efficacy”).

In our second discussion, young researcher 3 (YR3) reflected on these comments and shared that: “being in a participation group – helped make me discover who I was – made me more emotionally resilient – so much more than my one to one work”.

**Participatory opportunities as a route to accessing protective information**

As the initial conversation continued YR2 introduced a new theme that links to other journal articles. This focused on the protective potential of access to information explaining:

I think as well – it’s about being aware and raising that awareness as well […] if a young person was involved in participatory work there might just be a little bit of information that sticks out to them and they might just learn from that and cling onto it and that can help them inform their own decisions later on. I think it’s a lot different when you’re in school and teacher are like we’ll have a lesson on safeguarding and everyone kind of thinks “ughh” – but if they’re actively involved in participation it’s at much deeper level […] Participation work offers opportunities for learning to take place in a setting where you might not usually associate learning with. […] Speaking from past experiences, I am aware of someone who used to hate school and who would not engage in lessons which explored “healthy relationships” however it was not until that person became involved in participation work that they could recognise certain signs and red flags in their own life and this helped that person make better choices.

**The protective value of group work with peers**

When we shared these ideas with YR3 at a later date they strongly reiterated the value of learning from peers, explaining how it had the power to change how a young person saw themselves and the wider world. They drew attention to the value of working with peers who they held
experiences in common with, but also the power of being exposed to different perspectives and ideas from other people in your age group:

I do really agree with that statement about listening more to a young person whose your peer – rather than say – a social worker – to feel that connection with them. Participation is so important because there’s a chance to meet people who have actually shared what others have been through […] you just connect at a deeper level […] You get to hear so many different views and perspective on one situation – it’s more likely to help you think outside the box. There’s all these different attitudes and personalities.

This brings us more to a focus on the issue of group-work. It is something Camille is keen to ask us about. She explains that it is a topic that arises a lot in discussions about children’s participation in practice addressing sexual violence. She notes that there is an understandable (and sometimes justifiable) reluctance to bring young people together who have been at risk of, or directly affected by, sexual violence because of fears about the risks involved. However, we also know from our own work that group work is one of the central ways through which young people engage in participatory action or research. It also links to the ideas we have shared above – about the value of being with, and learning from peers.

We know that there are some risks in bringing young people together in this field – things that other practitioners and research ethics committees often highlight. These include how young people might connect each other in with risky networks; engage in making difficult comparisons with other group members; or be exposed to distressing information. But what we chose to think about here is whether there is anything specific to groups that we feel is particularly protective. We ask ourselves: “What opportunities might be missed if young people are never given the chance to work in groups?” and “Is there anything that happens in a group that doesn’t happen in a one to one setting?”

YR1 generously shared a really personal example of how being in a group led to his own experience of greater safety – building on the discussion about peer support:

The first time I had a real big “aha moment” – I think I wouldn’t have had that if I hadn’t had the chance to meet someone else who was groomed and targeted and I wouldn’t have had that if […] It was quite a painful realisation – and I needed support afterwards because I was very young at the time – I was only 14 – but you know – I – through meeting other young people [in a participation group] that that been groomed and targeted in the same way as me – it made me realise – you know – this person [who abused me] is not my friend – they’re a user.

And I don’t know if I would have came to that realisation in the same way if I’d not met with other young people that it was happening to. And I think that was very protective – because I was still in the early stages of coming out of a secure unit and I could easily have ended up back in that network and I think that meeting other young people built up my self-esteem and it made me realise what happened to me was wrong. Loads of professionals were telling me it was wrong – for ages before that – but hearing it from someone that’s actually been through it and actually know what they’re talking about – that was – that was a lot more powerful than a social worker saying – “you know it’s against the law what they’re doing?” [pause] Do you know what I mean?

YR2 responds:

I think that’s definitely a big thing as well – when you’re working with professionals and you’re speaking to people who have actually been through something – I don’t want to say you have a different kind of respect but it’s on a deeper level […] Thinking about yourself and what’s happened to you – you can have a very biased view. Whereas if you hear someone else you might be able to recognise certain things that aren’t right [you think] “they’re going through something that’s very similar to what’s happening to me and I don’t think it’s right – maybe I should start thinking that it’s not fair that it’s happening to me?” – it’s really powerful.

Following the meeting we shared further thoughts on this issue by e-mail. YR2 explained the sense of solidarity groups provided, helping young people counter stigma and a sense of being “othered”, and also imagining their own futures in more hopeful ways:

In my own past experiences I was once involved in a group in which we explored different topics around staying safe. Nobody in this group shared any stories or directly talked about what happened to them but just the simple fact of knowing that other people in this group have experiences similar to mine made me feel like I wasn’t so much of an outsider and that other people have been able to have positive lives even after something negative has happened. This helped to motivate me to actually care about myself more and look out for myself and make better decisions.
When we shared our discussion at our online meeting with YR3 they strongly advocated for the role of participation groups and noted “I very much agree already with what’s been said – if someone says to me ‘group works too risky’ – I just disagree”.

As our discussion drew to a close we all reflected a feeling of frustration that there was not more time to talk about this when there felt like there was much more to stay. We agree that a way forward is to do further work on this – beyond the pages of this journal – and to write a briefing to share our group’s views and experiences with others who may be considering the role of children’s participation in either this or a related sector.

A researcher’s reflections on the discussion

As an academic researcher (Camille) feel like there is so much to consider in both the YRAP perspectives on this topic, and their appetite to share their experiences. Space precludes a full consideration of these ideas and their relationship to the wider literature. However, the short section below aims to highlight striking observations on each of the themes – hoping to encourage a deeper exploration of this initial learning in our future research and writing.

Building self-worth and self-esteem through participatory activity

The discussion above about the relationship between self-esteem and participatory activity was particularly salient – this theme repeatedly got emphasised and supported by all three YRAP members. Identifying the role of participatory work in raising young people’s sense of self-worth appears to have been underexplored – either talked about in glib, uncritical terms (i.e. “participation builds self-confidence”) or underplayed in favour of emphasising participation’s value in terms of children’s presence, voice and influence in decision making. The YRAP’s decision here to centralise the contribution of participation to their own confidence, and highlight its direct relationship to their experience of safety is therefore striking. It aligns to Nigel Thomas’ writing that frames participatory action in terms of young people’s access to “love, rights and solidarity” (building on Honneth’s “recognition theory”, 1995). It supports his contention of the relationship between friendship, opportunity, rights and an experience of being recognised and held in esteem that participation work can enable. It too highlights the significance of relationships with, and between, other young people, workers and wider stakeholders; of feeling a sense of self efficacy and perhaps most importantly, status and entitlement (in this case to safety).

The idea that some children and young people may not consider themselves entitled to, or worth protecting is not a new one (Pearce et al., 2002; Coy, 2009; Dingwall et al., 2014), nor the idea that young victims of sexual violence may normalise and render invisible their own abuse (Beckett et al., 2013; Hallett, 2016). However, recognising a specific role for participatory practice with children in challenging these internalised narratives deserves further exploration. It provides evidence that participatory activities provide opportunities to build a sense of “esteem” (Thomas, 2012), and help children recognise their entitlement to save lives. It suggests a more integrated view of participation rights and practice within protective responses – one which relies less on individualistic bureaucratic interventions and reframes safeguarding as a collective and community endeavour. This in turn echoes a shift towards “social models of child protection” (see Featherstone et al., 2018). It also mirrors themes explored by the “RIP Stars” in Brady and Franklin’s article (this volume) highlighting the importance of children recognising their entitlement to protection, care and respect as the foundation of accessing both safety and justice – individually and collectively.

Participatory opportunities as a route to accessing protective information

The YRAP’s reflections also link to the point raised elsewhere in this journal about the value of supporting young people’s access to protective information (Whittington, 2019 – this volume). However, as YRAP explain, it is not just about what information is shared with young people but also how. This echoes findings from some of the International Centre’s other research (see “CSE Principles Comics”[2]) and elsewhere, research highlighting the limitations of “top down, didactic teaching styles” in preventative education about abuse (Livingstone et al., 2018). It supports the evidence of children and young people’s appetite for dialogue and knowledge
exchange as a route to effective learning. However, it also goes further suggesting that opportunities to learn with and through other young people, including those who share significant aspects of your identity or lived experience are often more persuasive than information derived from professionals – where differences in status and power are noted to inhibit opportunities to make personal sense and value from the information given. This echoes comments made throughout this journal and elsewhere about the value of opportunities for critical dialogue (Ackerley and Factor, 2019 – this volume).

The protective value of group work with peers

Finally, interwoven with both of the themes above is the importance of providing opportunities to engage in dialogue and action with one’s peers. For YRAP members their discussion repeatedly highlighted the unique opportunities offered to them by group work settings with their peers. YR1 provides a powerful example of how their presence in a group setting with others who shared similar experiences helped to challenge their previous acceptance of injustice – recognising their abuse for what it was for the first time. Their account suggests that involvement in collective dialogue and action contributes to a new internal dialogue that can ultimately help to keep young people safer – the links here between individual and collective agency echo themes explored in Larkins’ (2019) work and reiterate the value of continuing to build on Freire’s (1973) work – advocating collective discussion and critical dialogue as a route to challenging structural forms of violence.

While it is important to acknowledge that participatory action and peer support are not synonymous (nor indeed that participatory work has to be group based) YRAP contributions highlight how peer support emerges in group based participatory spaces regardless of whether an explicit intention exists to foster this.

Conclusion: recognising children’s capacity and protecting them from undue responsibility

Ever present in this discussion is an acknowledgement of children and young people’s own contributions in promoting safety for themselves and others. However, it is important to acknowledge that this presents an ongoing challenge in this field: promoting recognition of children’s agency while avoiding communicating messages that perpetuate self-blame or minimise the duties and roles of adults and professionals to keep children safe (Beckett, forthcoming). This can appear as a hard line to navigate. It is clear from the YRAP’s article that in order for them and other young people to access experiences of safety, recognising their own agency is key. However we must not confuse this with any sense children and young people who experience abuse or maltreatment have a choice or inadvertently locate responsibility with them. If we can walk this line successfully we can then highlight the legitimacy of children as partners in safeguarding and reposition them as central (both individually and collectively) in all endeavours to promote children’s safe lives.

Notes


2. www.alexiproject.org.uk/participation/cse-principles-comics

References


Corresponding author
Camille Warrington can be contacted at: camille.warrington@beds.ac.uk

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website: www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm
Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com