Guardian for Children and Young People

Participation of children and young people in decisions made about their care: A literature review

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Contents

Introduction

For most children and young people, decisions about where to go to school, where to live and who they spend time with are made by their parents. Children and young people in care have these decisions made in formal processes such as case conferences by a number of adults, some of whom a child or young person might not know (Thomas & O'Kane 1998, 1999). Participation is important for all children and young people, but even more so for children and young people in state care.

This literature review examines the participation of children and young people who are in state care in decisions about their lives. It focuses on individual case planning and review meetings as a venue in which participation can be exercised. Participation, of course, is also an ongoing process and participation can occur in other settings such as family group conferences.[1]

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[1] For overviews of family group conferencing see (McDonald *et al* 1995, (Kiely 2005, Harris 2008 and Connolly 2007. For a discussion of family group conferencing in the juvenile justice sector in South Australia see Hetzel & McInnes 1996. Much of the research about participation that informs this review has focussed on children and young people who participate in groups to inform services rather than on case planning meetings. For overviews see Department of Health 2000, Pinkerton 2004 Sinclair 2004. See Spicer and Evans (2006) for a discussion of benefits and limitations of this type of participation.

1 Emergence of participation

Participation has emerged as an important issue in recent years for several reasons. First is the rise of the consumer movement since the 1970s, based on the notion that consumers, including children and young people, should be able to inform the services they receive (Sinclair 2004; Sinclair 1998*).* Here, 'participation' invokes a consumer perspective – it is a means of promoting 'customer satisfaction' (Croft & Beresford 1990 in Katz 1995).

Second, children and young people are now seen as citizens with rights. Rights to protection received expression in the 1959 UN *Declaration of the Rights of the Child*, but children's citizenship rights emerged on the political agenda relatively recently (Sinclair 1998; James *et al* 1998; Munro 2001; Murray & Hallett 2000; Foley *et al* 2003). Article 12 of the 1989 UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* states, "the child who is capable of forming his or her own views [has] the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child". Under Article 12, children and young people are not objects of adult concern but subjects of rights who are entitled to be heard (Prout 2003; Lansdown 2001).

Third, views about children and young people have changed. Children's small physical stature, reliance on adults for basic needs such as food and shelter and adults' perceptions of children's behaviour fuelled beliefs that children lacked 'adult' skills such as reasoning, social skills and maturity and that childhood was a time of inherent vulnerability, dependence and immaturity (Lansdown 1995; Meyer 2007; Trinder 1997; Alanen 2005; Jenks 1996). The 'new sociology' of childhood (James *et al* 1998), emphasises children's ability to influence their own lives, their voice, and argues for a view of children not as passive recipients of adult teaching but as active in making sense of their world, as people in their own right, with their own 'standpoint' (Freeman 1998; Alanen 2005; see also Smith 1974). Childhood is not necessarily less important than adulthood and while children and young people might have different skills from adults this does not suggest inferiority (Freeman 1998; Thomas & O'Kane 2000).

2 Importance of participation

Participation in decision making is seen as important in several respects. One is from a legal, rights-oriented perspective, which sees participation as a vital demonstration of children and young people's citizenship rights (Lansdown 1994, in Smith 2002; Hill *et al* 2004). Participation is a mechanism by which citizenship rights become reality, not just an ideal (Warming 2006). As Lansdown argues, "we only truly learn that we have rights and come to believe in them through the process of acting on them" (2001, p. 7). Research has demonstrated that children themselves see participation as a priority right (Morrow 1999; Taylor Smith and Nairn 2001, both cited in Smith 2002).

Participation has also been seen as an important means for improving social work services. The logic of listening to children and young people is that only children and young people themselves have knowledge about their own lives and have their own views (Lansdown 2001; Warming 2006). Research has shown that adults who make decisions on children's behalf have not always enhanced children's wellbeing (Kelly 1994). Children and adults interpret the meaning of child protection terms such as 'protection' and 'being safe' differently, suggesting that obtaining children and young people's perspectives is valuable to social work practice (Sinclair 2004). It is claimed that listening to children and young people can lead to better informed, more relevant child protection decisions (Sinclair & Franklin 2000, cited in Sinclair 2004).

Finally, participation is seen as important to children and young people's development, particularly social and citizenship skills. Scholars argue that participation can help build empowerment. It can add to children and young people's social education, by developing awareness of debate, communications, negotiation and decision-making (Treseder 1995; Lansdown 2001). Receiving respect from others can help develop a sense of respect for others and social responsibility (Lansdown 2001). In terms of personal development, research has found that children who experienced abuse could have a measure of healing as a result of participation, knowing that their views were taken seriously (Schofield & Thoburn 1996). Having their views respected and being active in shaping their own care is important for children and young people's confidence (Cashmore 2002), and participation is one means by which children and young people can develop better health, resilience and a sense of wellbeing (Prilleltensky *et al* 2001).

3 Understanding participation

While participation is a prominent issue, "there is considerable confusion, both about what counts as participation [and] what participation is for", note Davis and Edwards (2004, p. 103). Participation is a process with varying levels of involvement and degrees of power-sharing between children and adults (Department of Health 2000). Two elements to consider in evaluating 'participation' are control over the process and control over the power to make decisions.

Scholars have tended to understand participation in terms of levels of power-sharing. The term 'participation' can span interactions ranging from manipulation through to partnership and control, according to Arnstein (1969). Hart (1992), following Arnstein, models participation as a ladder with eight rungs. The first three indicate children's 'non-participation' through *manipulation; decoration;* and *tokenism*. The next rungs describe increases in children and young people's power over the process and outcomes: children are *assigned* a role but are *informed*; children are *consulted and informed*; children *share in decisions*; proceedings are *child-initiated and directed*; children *initiate* proceedings and *share* decisions with adults. Thoburn, Lewis and Shemmings (1995) set out nine levels of participation, with the bottom two being *manipulation* and *placation*. Above these are *keeping children informed*, *consultation, involvement*, *participation, partnership* and *involvement,* with children's *delegated power* at the top. Treseder (1997) offers five degrees of participation, ranging from *adult-initiated and children share decision-making*, through to child-initiated processes where *adults have a supporting role.* Shier (2001) uses five statements to guide evaluation: *children are listened to*; *children are supported in expressing their views*; *children's views are taken into account*; *children are involved in decision-making processes*; *children share power and responsibility for decision-making*.

It has been claimed that in the real world, participation is complex, might involve several approaches and that meaningful participation needs to be seen as more than striving for the top rung of a participation ladder (Schofield & Thoburn 1996; Sinclair 2004; Treseder 1997). Kirby *et al* (Department for Education and Skills 2003) offer a model with four statements that are not hierarchical*: children and young people's views are taken into account by adults; children and young people are involved in decision-making with adults; children and young people share power and responsibility for decision-making with adults; children/young people make autonomous decisions.*

Scholars also distinguish between *participation* and *consultation*, terms that are often used interchangeably. In consultation, adults seek and incorporate children's views but retain decision-making power and the adult-child power relationship is not challenged (Hill *et al* 2004; Treseder 1995; Lansdown 2001).

'Participation' connotes children's direct involvement in decision making and that their involvement has the potential to influence outcomes (Sinclair 2004).

4 Experience of participation

Evidence about participation in practice as opposed to its conceptual meaning is limited, partly because it has emerged relatively recently (Thomas & O'Kane 1999; Vernon & Fruin 1986). What research tells us is that not all children and young people in care participate and that participation is often structured to benefit adults.

4.1 Who participates and why

Being invited and attending meetings is one way to identify participation. A New South Wales study found that almost half of respondents had attended a case conference meeting (NSW Community Services Commission 2000). A four-year study of 1,100 children in the United States found that less that one-third had informed decisions about their case management (Wilson & Conroy 1999, in Cashmore 2002). In Ireland, one study reported that 40 per cent of young people attended their reviews (Horgan & Sinclair 1997, in Sinclair 1998). Studies in England and Wales all found that about half of children and young people surveyed were invited and attended case meetings (Thomas 1995, in Sinclair 1998; Grimshaw & Sinclair 1997, in Sinclair 1998; Thomas & O'Kane 1999).

Children and young people gave a variety of reasons for attending meetings. These include a desire to be heard and to find out what was happening with their case plan. Children avoided meetings because they considered them boring, ran for too long, felt that adults did not listen to them, did not know what the meeting was for, or found meetings a source of conflict or embarrassment (Thomas & O'Kane 1999). Scutt (1995) found that some children and young people did not wish to attend case conferences as they felt they might be pressured to speak if they attended.

Adults' views influenced who participated. For example, many social workers expressed a lack of confidence in their skills to draw out children and young people's wishes and feelings; children under eight years of age were particularly excluded from meetings due to workers' uncertainty about how best to involve them (Schofield & Thoburn 1996; Thomas & O'Kane 1999). Views of younger children as 'vulnerable' also informed professionals' decisions to exclude them (Neale 2004). A similar outcome has been identified for children with disabilities (Franklin & Sloper 2006; Roche 1995). Children and young people whose care situations were stable were more likely to be invited to meetings and an invitation was less likely if a major decision was to be made (Thomas & O'Kane 1999). Workers did not invite children if they believed they would not understand proceedings or would be bored, or so that adults could speak freely. Workers were more likely to invite children and young people if they valued participation (Thomas & O'Kane 1999).

4.2   Who benefits from participation and why

Simply attending a meeting does not guarantee meaningful participation or shared power in decision-making (Schofield & Thoburn 1996). Research into participation in decision-making has found that for many children and young people it is a positive experience - they feel supported, they contribute, they believe their views are heard and taken seriously and they believe they can influence outcomes (Thomas & O'Kane 1999; Shemmings 2000; Murray & Hallett 2000).

However, a consistent message from children and young people is that participation seems designed for adults' benefit. Common observations include: feeling ill-prepared for meetings; feeling powerless over who could attend the meetings, when and where they were held; feeling resentful of unwelcome personal questions and pressured to say what they believed adults wished to hear; feeling unable to speak in front of some attendees; not having a trusted adult because of frequent changes of social worker; being ignored or treated in a tokenistic manner; that meetings were boring; worrying about making the 'wrong' decision and making adults angry (Boylan & Braye 2006; Munro 2001; Hayward 2001; Marchant & Kirby 2004; Sinclair 1998; Leeson 2007).

Information about outcomes for children and young people arising from participation in decisions is limited (Thomas 2002). Here too, however, children and young people offer mixed views. A New South Wales study found that over 60 per cent of respondents felt that they had 'a lot' or 'a fair bit' of say in decisions about their lives but their narrative accounts revealed very low expectations of being heard. Many reported that attending did not seem to make a difference to their care (Community Services Commission 2000). In other studies, children and young people expressed views that their influence was restricted to minor decisions, that they were listened to but could not influence outcomes and that there was no explanation given if their wishes were overridden (Boylan & Braye 2006; Munro 2001; Hayward 2001; Marchant & Kirby 2004; Sinclair 1998). However, many children and young people wished to attend meetings so they could hear what was being said about them, could ask questions and have a say (Sinclair 1998; Thomas & O'Kane 1999; Bell 2002).

Research highlights that workers and clients see 'participation' differently. For example, in one survey adults said that children who attended case meetings spoke freely almost half of the time, but only one-third of children in the same survey believed that they had spoken freely (Thomas & O'Kane 1999; see also Marsh & Fisher 1992; Westcott 1995). The same survey showed that in general, a majority of social workers thought that children and young people had 'a lot' of influence over decisions. However, this perception reduced in relation to the degree of difference between children and young people's and social workers' views on the issues under consideration.

5 Key issues from theory and practice

5.1 Barriers to participation

Even with the right to participate and with policies and standards in place, children and young people are not always able to participate in their own way (Prout 2003). Barriers to participation are both practical and ideological.

Simply put, participation requires effort. Meetings might need to be re-structured, new tasks and activities for younger participants developed, language and cultural barriers addressed, adequate follow-up provided. Resources might not support participative practice or it might seem too time consuming. Often, it is easier to make decisions rather than support someone with different skills who is unfamiliar with participation. Of course, participation carries the risk of 'getting it wrong' (New Zealand Ministry of Social Development n.d.; Treseder 1995; *Australian Children's Rights News* 1999; Sanders & Mace 2006).

Children and young people also face barriers. They might be unfamiliar with meetings and have different communications skills from those commonly used in meetings. They might not attend meetings that are held at inconvenient times, if they struggle with transportation and lack support (Treseder 1995). Some might hesitate to participate due to disability or cultural factors (Hill *et al* 2004). Children and young people who are homeless, young offenders, young parents, those from racial and ethnic minority groups and those who have experienced abuse or neglect can be marginalised, lack confidence and experience in communicating their views and might not trust adults (Social Care Institute for Excellence, n.d).

Adult beliefs about children and young people's capacity to participate have been called one of the "foremost barriers to participation" (Hill *et al* 2004, p. 82). Adult assessments and views are important because participation rights under Article 12 are qualified by the ability to form a view and a child's age and maturity – adults are central in determining these matters (Schofield & Thoburn 1996).

5.1.1 Biological and developmental beliefs about children

Adults' views about children and young people are often not as 'objective' as they might appear. Children's physical difference has been a foundation for seeing children as limited in cognitive, psychological and social capacities. For most of the twentieth century, research into children's cognitive abilities construed children as 'incomplete persons' who developed in 'stages' (Piaget 1926, in Thomas 2002; Mason 2005; Mayall 2005). Younger children were seen as lacking the social

awareness needed to think rationally (Piaget 1962). Views about children's development were ascribed to nature rather than culture or society, thus all children's capabilities were viewed as biologically determined (Mason 2005; Moss & Petrie 2005). Social policies and practices that granted adults authority over children and young people had roots in views about children as inherently 'less than' adults (Mason 2005).

These ideas inform decisions to include or exclude children and young people from participation. Studies show that social work professionals believe that children are too young to participate, have a 'childlike' understanding, are unreliable and have limited rationality relative to adults. Workers discount the knowledge and experience children do have and decide that a child is or young person lacks the 'competence' to participate (Mayall 2005; Morrow & Richards 1996; Leeson 2007; Kiely 2005; Shemmings 2000; Thomas & O'Kane 2000; Trinder 1997).

The idea that development is strictly biological, predictable and age-related has been challenged (Smith 2002; Marchant & Kirby 2004). The idea that childhood is a stage of development implicitly assumes that adulthood is when full 'personhood' is reached, which diminishes children (Smith 2002). Scholars argue that "children do not become any more deserving of recognition, respect or participation simply by virtue of growing older" (Neale 2004, p. 13; *Australian Children's Rights News* 1999).

Ideas about incompetence are challenged by recent views that see children and young people as competent in similar ways as adults (James 1998, in Thomas & O'Kane 2000). Another view is that adults and children might interact with the world in different ways, but that this does not mean that adults are 'competent' and children 'incompetent' (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Fattore & Turnbull 2005). This perspective suggests that practitioners can work with children and young people's strengths, while acknowledging their differences (Thomas & O'Kane 2000; Vygotsky 1978, in Smith 2002; Rogoff 1997, in Smith 2002). Complex issues might require that children receive extra help and support to enhance confidence and proficiency, not that children should be excluded (Lansdown 1995; Schofield & Thoburn 1996; Leeson 2007). Even when children's views change, this does not mean that children and young people are inherently 'unreliable' (Marchant & Kirby 2004).

5.1.2   *Cultural beliefs about children and young people*

Theories and beliefs about childhood and children's capacity have roots in history, culture and society as much as in biology (Smith 2002; Katz 1995; Prout 2001; Trinder 1997). For example, industrialisation, the growth of the 'social welfare' movement and the emergence of child protection legislation in England saw children moved out of the 'public' sphere of employment and into the 'private' sphere of the family and longer formal schooling - this lessened children and

young people's civil status in relation to adults and contributed to views of children as vulnerable innocents (Thane 1981, in Thomas 2002; Trinder 1997; Piper 2005; Hendrick 2005). Social scientists studied children as a distinct cultural group, perpetuating their status as 'different' (James 1998, in Thomas & O'Kane 2000). In cultural terms, children have been seen as a means for protecting society's 'future' (Prout 2003), as 'sacred' (Zelizer 1985, in Meyer 2007), while childhood became a 'special' time of life, which should be protected (Foley *et al* 2003; Prout 2003).

Cultural views about children and young people influence practice decisions about participation. Research shows that some workers see children as dependent and vulnerable and thus minimise their views (Trinder 1997), believe that participation reduces the freedom to be children (Sanders & Mace 2006; New Zealand Ministry of Social Development n.d), exposes children and young people to inappropriate responsibilities (Alderson 2000, in Treseder 1995; Trowell & King 1992, in Schofield &, Thoburn 1996) and places an undue burden on them (Cantwell & Scott 1995).

Scholars challenge assumptions that children's dependence on adults is a reason for depriving them of choice (Freeman 1998). They caution against generalising about vulnerability (Piper 2000) and show evidence that children and young people do want to be involved even when the proceedings are contentious (Lyons *et al* 1999; Farnfield 1997, in Kiely 2005). It has been argued that children and young people are capable of resilience and that adults "cannot delete negative experiences simply by excluding children from discussions" (Thomas & O'Kane 1999, p. 229).

Basing participation decisions on 'certainties' belies the complexities in children and young people's views and thoughts (Trinder 1997; Shemmings 2000). Views about children as competent and autonomous (suggesting a belief that they must participate); as vulnerable (contributing to a belief that making choices and giving opinions might be harmful); as dependent (thus practitioners should make the 'best' decision) (James 1998, in Thomas & O'Kane 2000) can result in practice being "founded on certainties, the perfected (single) procedure, based on the single conception of the child" (Trinder 1997, p. 301). In practice, as Meehan's research shows (1985, in Trinder 1997), children and young people do not fit neatly into any single conceptualisation.

5.2   Participation and power

Children and young people's power to make decisions about their lives is often constrained by adults, be they parents or care and protection professionals (Murray & Hallett 2000; Mason 2005). Participation can be a means by which children and young people in care achieve a greater level of power in their own lives (Katz 1995; Treseder 1995; Lansdown 2001). The empowerment of children

and young people suggests the need to reconsider ideas about vulnerability and competence. Participation implies the need to reconfigure the power relationships between adults and children and young people. These are among the most contentious and challenging elements of putting participation into practice (Such & Walker 2005).

Adults' reluctance to relinquish power to children and young people is a consistent theme in research on participation. Resistance is rationalised as concern that participation can bestow an inappropriate amount of power on children and young people. Giving power to children and young people gives them "licence to say and do what they like", in the words of one worker (quoted in Trinder 1997). Warshak argues, "giving children too much authority can create excessive anxiety, a narcissistic sense of entitlement, and impaired relations with adults" (2003, p. 375). In one study, children and young people who participated in case planning meetings listed their chief desire in participating as to 'have my say,' and listed 'to get what I want' near the bottom. When social workers in the same study were asked about children and young people's motivations for participating, many ranked 'to get what I want' at the top of the list (Thomas & O'Kane 1999).

Others challenge the view of power as a contest, that giving children and young people more responsibility "inevitably takes something away from adults" (Hill *et al* 2004, p. 82). Participation does not imply that children will assume control over decision-making, have complete self-determination or that their views transcend adults' views (Lansdown 1995, 2001). Neale (2004) argues that children and young people prefer to make decisions with supportive adults rather than autonomously. This suggests that children and young people do not seek to participate to wield 'power', but as a means for ensuring fair and transparent decision making.

5.3   Social work norms and culture

The values, beliefs and methods guiding social work practice pose another potential barrier to participation. Social work norms and beliefs about appropriate practice are closely linked to ideas about childhood and to power relationships. Boylan and Braye argue, "children's participation is highly dependent on professional practice and attitudes, suggesting that law and procedures alone are far from being enough to ensure success" (2006, p. 246). Cultural beliefs about childhood as a time of vulnerability and of children as lacking competence influenced the development of social work practice - practitioners' interactions with children and young people occurred within broader constructions of the adult as a 'professional' holder of 'expert knowledge' and the child or young person as a passive recipient of services (Harris 1999; Alanen 2005). Norms include the perspective that clients' views are not a reliable indicator of effective practice (Croft & Beresford 1999, in Katz 1995). Modern social work practice is based around

quantifiable, 'objective' knowledge gathered through assessment tools and other devices, which contributes to the sense of the social worker as 'expert' (Doolan 2004). Participation implies working in partnership with children and young people, accepting children and young people as 'experts' in their own lives and being prepared to make mistakes and get things wrong (Lansdown 2001).

5.4 Reconciling rights

5.4.1 Participation and protection

Article 3 of the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* sets out the right to protection and care while Article 12 sets out the right to participate. Is there a dilemma between the two? If a child or young person is at risk and being protected how can he or she also be empowered to make decisions? Children's rights to protection, survival and development seem obvious to adults, but participation rights are more complex (Flekkoy 1991, in Murray & Hallett 2000). Social workers tend to adopt either a 'rights' or 'rescue' position (Shemmings 2000) emphasising children and young people's rights to self-determination, or seeing participation within the broader context of children's welfare and protection needs and their limited power in society (Littlechild, 2000; Cloke & Davies, eds. 1995; Thomas 2002). Thus, social welfare professionals might 'protect' children and young people by excluding them from having a say (CREATE 2000a, in Queensland Department of Child Safety 2006). It has been argued that as children and young people are often the victims of power abuses, it can enhance their care and protection to participate, that is, the two rights are not exclusive. Rather, participation is inherently protective (Schofield & Thoburn 1996; Marchant & Kirby 2004). Kirby *et al* note that the right to participation implies a shift in professional thinking - "accepting responsibility for someone does not mean taking responsibility away from them" (Department for Education and Skills 2003, p. 19).

5.4.2 The 'best interests' principle

Another tension is how to promote a child or young person's 'best interests' as well as the right to have his or her say (Such & Walker 2005; Thomas & O'Kane 1998; Sanders & Mace 2006). Research has found that practitioners' views about whether children should attend child protection conferences were based on judgments about what was in their best interests (Shemmings 2000; Scutt 1995; Thomas & O'Kane 1998). The meaning of 'best interests' is open to interpretation, adults' discretion, norms of social work practice and cultural preference (Thomas & O'Kane 1998; Mason 2005). Shemmings notes that professionals seeking to empower children "need to create the conditions whereby children can decide what they would prefer to do; but this becomes difficult if adults believe they already know what is best" (2000, p. 242). The role of participation in defining a child's 'best interests' was captured by one foster carer, who said, "people say they're in

the best interests of the child but if they never talk to the children … we [are] deciding what's in their better interest, it's our best interest for them really" (Thomas & O'Kane 1998, p. 152). Cases are often too complex for a clear division to emerge between best interests and wishes and it is more likely that there will be a number of choices, each of which are likely to meet a child's needs *and* wishes to varying degrees (Schofield & Thoburn 1996).

5.4.3   Rights and responsibilities

There is a belief that children and young people are unable or do not want to assume the responsibilities that come with participation rights. The ability to cope with responsibility is an attribute associated with maturity and adulthood and childhood is seen as a period free of responsibility (Such & Walker 2005). Evidence suggests that children's understanding of the relationships between rights and responsibilities is more sophisticated than adults assume (Such & Walker 2005). However, the right to participate does not imply that children and young people should be held 'responsible' for their choices (Lavalette 2005; Foley *et al* 2003). It has been argued that many rights, such as the right to life, are not contingent on how 'well' they are exercised and that children and young people seem to be expected to demonstrate capability before being granted participation rights, whereas adults' rights are not qualified in this way (Leeson 2007; Lansdown 1995; Cooper 1998).

6 How to achieve participation

Research indicates that meaningful participation does not simply happen. It is supported by a 'culture of participation' that rests upon several principles.

6.1 The fundamentals

6.1.1 Seeing participation as a right

Case planning forums such as meetings tend to be adult-oriented and controlled. Participation can easily be seen as an opportunity created by adults 'for' children and young people. However, being heard in decisions about one's life is a right, set out in Article 12 of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child,* not a 'gift' from adults for which children and young people should be grateful (Lansdown 1995; Treseder 1995). Seeing participation as a right helps establish in culture and practice a view of children and young people as citizens and partners, not simply as recipients of adult protection or as 'adults in the making'. The right to participate is not qualified by age, by whether children and young people choose to exercise it, or how they choose to exercise it (Hill *et al* 2004; Scutt 1995; Trinder 1997; Lansdown 2001). Organisations that work with children and young people can incorporate the view of participation as a right into statements of principles and values. For example, the first of the four principles guiding the *Premier's Memorandum on Youth Participation* (2007) is, "participation as a fundamental right". The South Australian *Charter of Rights for Children and Young People in Care* tells children and young people, "you have the right to understand and have a say in the decisions that affect you," to "express your opinion" and to "be involved in what is decided about your life and your care". To date, 42 agencies have endorsed this Charter and pledged to apply it in their policy and practice.

6.1.2 Clear purpose

The purpose of participation should be clear. Clarity about the goals of participation assists understandings of what 'effective' participation means (Lansdown 2001). Practitioners might ask: 'Why do we want to do this?' 'What are we trying to achieve?' 'What do children and young people get out of participation?' This is not the same as asking what professionals think children and young people will get out of participation (Treseder 1995). Clarity of purpose involves developing goals for effective participation, knowing how children and young people's views will be interpreted and acted upon and assessing the impact of their involvement (Lansdown 2001; Sinclair 2004). For example, Families SA's *Standards of Alternative Care* states that children and young people will have a voice in the decisions that affect their life. The standard of effective practice is that

children and young people "are heard, supported to actively participate in decision-making and make choices in case planning". Participation means "inclusion" and that children and young people "are involved in the decisions that affect them". The desired outcome is that children and young people will be "active participants in all related decision making". The Office for Youth's Participation Toolkit highlights the need for clear purpose when working with children and young people, including clarity about the process, about how information received is to be used, what feedback will be provided to children and young people and what involvement children and young people will have in evaluation processes (Government of South Australia n.d).

6.1.3 Participation is part of organisational culture

Institutional structures, processes and culture underpin practice. Participative practice requires a long-term, institutionalised commitment based on a clear sense of the need for participation. It needs support within management, structural capacity, adequate resources, staff training and support to understand what participation means and how to work effectively with children and young people. it means that participation is a priority and that all involved show interest (Katz 1995; Treseder 1995; Littlechild 2000; Lansdown 2001; Department for Education and Skills 2003; NSW Commission for Children and Young People 2003; Willow *et al* 2004; Queensland Department of Child Safety 2006; NSW Office of the Children's Guardian 2003). Most important is an organisation's cultural commitment to participation as a process, "not simply the application of isolated participation activities or events" (Department for Education and Skills 2003, p. 145).

6.1.4 Participation is child-centred

Child-centred practice suggests beginning from the position of each child or young person, working to ascertain his or her capability and desire to participate, rather than from generalised views about children and young people as a group, expectations of the 'right' practice approach, or entrenched organisational concerns, norms and values that position the social worker as the 'expert' rather than a child or young person (Doolan 2004; Pozatek 1994; Bell 2002; Fattore & Turnbull 2005; Sinclair 2004). 'Child-centred' implies a framework of practice defined by the view that adults do not speak for children (D'Cruz & Stagnitti 2008) and of practice as a process negotiated jointly with children and young people (Sinclair 2004). It means participation is more than attendance in a process designed by adults that fulfils an adult agenda (Lansdown 1995, 2001). It suggests working in ways that suit children and young people rather than adults (NSW Commission for Children and Young People 2003; Kiely 2005) based on the acknowledgement that "life looks different when viewed from [children's] perspective" (Prout 2001, p. 195).

6.1.5   Participation is based on established, trusting relationships

Scholars see a dependable relationship with a trusted adult as the "most determinative factor of children's participation" (Sanders & Mace 2006, p. 95; Schofield & Thoburn 1996; Thomas & O'Kane 1999; Munro 2001; Department for Education and Skills 2003). Research has shown that children and young people who feel they do not have trusting relationships might be deliberately evasive or diversionary when interacting with adults – this is an effort to control information, rather than reluctance to participate (McLeod 2007; Bell 2002). One issue was high worker turnover, which increased children and young people's sense of isolation and reduced their sense of having someone they could trust (Leeson 2007). Building trusting relationships requires time and ongoing commitment (Treseder 1995). It means that interactions between professionals and children and young people move beyond being reactive, event-driven and time-limited (Boylan & Braye 2006). It involves adults and children and young people establishing a mutual understanding of expectations of participation (Treseder 1995) and suggests that adults are "prepared for resistance and challenge … flexible enough to be open to the unexpected, and confident enough to allow their own assumptions to be questioned" (McLeod 2007, p. 285).

6.1.6   Participation is meaningful

The process is as important as the outcome in making participation meaningful. Research shows that children and young people do not see getting their way as the primary goal of participation, but that having a say as legitimate participants in decision making is also vital. Children and young people who do not understand meetings' purpose and lack information about the process, or who are treated patronisingly during meetings, are likely to see participation as tokenistic. Children and young people need access to decision-making processes as well as clear understanding of those processes and their role in them (Lansdown 1995, 2001). They need opportunities to develop their understanding of participation and why it is important, how they would like to participate and to build skills such as listening and communicating (Queensland Department of Child Safety 2006). Critically, children and young people need to know that, whether they attend a meeting or not, professionals know what they feel about prospective decisions (Sanders & Mace 2006).

The right to participate does not need to be justified by evidence, or 'prove' that it 'works' (Sinclair 2004). However, monitoring and evaluation to ascertain whether children and young people influence decisions, what benefits children and young people receive from participation and how participation benefits casework practice are vital means of learning whether participation is meaningful for adults and for children and young people (Littlechild 2000; Cashmore 2002; Kirby & Bryson 2002).

6.2   Participation in practice

6.2.1   *Participation in day-to-day practice*

Opportunities for participation exist outside of meetings. Opportunities include decisions about placement and unplanned changes (such as in the case of a placement breakdown), participation in complaints processes, planning around transitioning from care and seeing and providing comment on reports written about them (Leeson 2007). A study of children in foster care in New South Wales found that children and young people who experienced genuine participation attributed it to regular contact and a good relationship with a worker as well as support in developing the skills and confidence to give their views and wishes (Community Services Commission 2000). Participation as part of routine casework promotes a culture where children and young people's voice is heard and acted upon (Boylan & Braye 2006). It builds participative processes in which adults can work with children and young people to ascertain their views and wishes on several issues over time, rather than being focussed on isolated forums such as meetings (Leeson 2007). Participation in formal settings such as meetings should not be seen as a substitute for an ongoing quality relationship (Boylan & Braye 2006).

Considerations for good practice are neatly summed up by a young person in the UK: "we need real choices, we need time to think and we need people who are prepared to listen and help" (Leeson 2007, p. 276).

6.2.2   *Thinking about meetings*

Careful planning and structuring of meetings to include children and young people is essential (Treseder 1995). This means scheduling meetings at times and in places that are accessible to children and young people, without disruption to school or to the care routines of younger children or children and young people with disabilities (Schofield & Thoburn 1996; NSW Commission for Children and Young People 2003; Wilson & Powell 2001). Organisers should ensure that an interpreter is provided where necessary, that arrangements for a support person if required are in place and that any food and drinks provided suit children and young people. Meetings should be timed to include sufficient breaks (NSW Commission for Children and Young People 2003). Invitations should be issued in a format that suits the child or young person (NSW Commission for Children and Young People 2003). Mailed invitations should be addressed directly to the child or young person, perhaps with a photo of the meeting facilitator or chairperson (Department for Education and Skills 2003).

6.2.3   Before the meeting

Research indicates that preparation is vital to effective participation. Before the meeting, a child or young person's case worker should meet with the child or young person to discuss the meeting's purpose, explain who will attend, what each person's role is and what kinds of decisions will be made at the meeting. The worker can also explain some of the terms associated with meetings, such as 'agenda,' minutes' and 'chairperson' (Scutt 1995). Preparation provides the opportunity to ask the child or young person whether and how they would like to participate, where they would like the meeting to be held and whether they would like a support person to attend (Lansdown 1995). Informing the agenda is vital because "the issues most pertinent to the child … may be very different from those that most concern the professional" notes Sinclair (Department of Health 2000, p. 6; Davis & Edwards 2004). Children and young people need adequate time to prepare what they would like to say (NSW Commission for Children and Young People 2003; Thomas & O'Kane 1999; Scutt 1995). Preparation allows for discussion of feelings about a meeting, for planning what to do to stay calm and focussed and for practicing communication skills (Portland Research and Training Centre on Family Support and Children's Mental Health, n.d. & 2008).

Children and young people require information about meetings, presented in an accessible way, with enough time to take it in (Cashmore 2002; Treseder 1995). While many adults do not believe that children and young people should receive information about their case plan or circumstances that is potentially distressing, transmitting information helps build transparency (Cashmore 2002). Children and young people have indicated to researchers that being denied information about them was sometimes worse than the actual content (Marshall 1997, in Cashmore 2002).

The range of choices open to children and young people in a meeting should be explained, as there may be decisions over which they can have little control. Honesty about choices helps avoid tokenism (Lansdown 1995). Knowing what limitations social workers face (such as placement alternatives) can help children and young people understand that an outcome they did not want does not mean that they were not listened to (Cashmore 2002; McLeod 2007).

6.2.4   During the meeting

Research on participation suggests that adults often overlook what makes a meeting valuable for children and young people. One basic consideration is to let children and young people sit where they like. Clear explanations of the process can help children and young people understand why they might be asked certain questions (Wilson & Powell 2001). Meeting facilitators should ensure that children and young people know all the other participants. Ice-breakers and other activities can make the setting less formal (Treseder 1995). Meetings should be chaired in

a manner that encourages feedback, questions and opinions (NSW Commission for Children and Young People 2003).

Meetings should accommodate the variety of ways children and young people might communicate. These include reading from a prepared text, using graphics, art or music, participating via teleconference or videoconference, or having someone speak their views for them (Thomas & O'Kane 1999). Plain language should be used and acronyms or jargon avoided (Treseder 1995). Adults should be aware of communication methods that reinforce power inequalities – adults can unconsciously ask leading questions, signal that there is a 'correct' answer to a question, offer false choices and discuss children and young people as if they were not present (Kirby & Gibbs 2005). Questions should be asked simply and clearly (Thomas & O'Kane 1999) but if something is not clear it may be necessary to re-phrase a question or to provide additional context (Wilson & Powell 2001). It is important to consider a child's perspective when communicating, including differing concepts of time, use of slang and body language (Wilson & Powell 2001). Murray and Hallett (2000) note that open-ended questions and questions about specific options work better than vague questions such as "is there anything you wanted to ask?"

Alternative communication methods could be used for children and young people with limited language skills.[2] Children and young people might be asked about their wishes and feelings on a specific issue as well as their 'views' as even very young children can usually communicate feelings (Schofield & Thoburn 1996). Care should be taken not to assume that different communications methods automatically apply to different age groups (Leeson 2007). Adults will need to monitor their expectation that communications will reflect 'rational' thinking and communicate a clear 'message' of intent. Ambiguities might create incentives for adults to interpret or insert meanings on children's communications (Komulainen 2007). Prout (2001) notes that children and young people's 'voice' needs to be seen not as a 'given' but as the product of relationships and variation - children will sometimes act and speak, sometimes not.

Children and young people require support during the meeting, including respect from other attendees, to avoid participation becoming tokenistic (Treseder 1995; Schofield & Thoburn 1996). Some children and young people have little or no experience in discussing complex issues and meeting participants should not rush a child or young person. Children might be reluctant to be honest if they believe that doing so will hurt someone else and might need assistance to reconcile their

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[2] These might include picture boards, toys, pictures, a whiteboard onto which children and young people can write or draw their views during the meeting, a 'talking wall' (a number of incomplete statements posted on flipcharts for participants to complete), activity sheets, simple 'treasure hunt' activities where each object to be 'found' has a question about how the child or young person feels about a certain decision attached, or picture storybooks with the questions about case planning written into it (Thomas & O'Kane 1999; Willow *et al* 2004; World Health Organisation 2001).

need to be honest and their need not to hurt others (Kiely 2005). It might be necessary to develop strategies to respond to silences, avoidance of some topics or changes of subject – adults might feel uncomfortable with evasion because it suggests that the encounter is not proceeding according to expectations (McLeod 2007). A child or young person might change his or her mind about speaking. Meetings can be flexible so that a child or young person can leave at any point if he or she needs to and provision should be made for a support person to be available so that a child or young person does not have to be alone if they leave the meeting (Sanders & Mace 2006). Children and young people may not wish to elaborate on matters in a formal session so it might be useful to return to the subject at another meeting (Wilson & Powell 2001).

Participation does not always mean being present, it means knowing that one's views are represented. Children might benefit from indirect and direct mechanisms of representation (Winkworth & McArthur 2006). In the UK, the use of independent advocacy services has become part of children and young people's participation in meetings (Scutt 1995; see Boylan & Braye 2006 for an evaluation of professional advocacy services).

6.2.5   *Between meetings*

The time around meetings is as important as the meeting itself (Sinclair 1998). Participation can become tokenistic where there is involvement without follow-up (Treseder 1995). Research suggests that children and young people want to see action resulting from participation, or at least to receive feedback on decisions (Hill *et al* 2004; Lansdown 1995; Kirby & Bryson 2002). Children should have the opportunity to talk about their feelings regarding meetings and decisions (Treseder 1995; Schofield & Thoburn 1996).

7 Summary

Participation is an important means for improving decision making in social work practice, promoting children and young people's citizenship rights and developing their personal and citizenship skills. While legislation and policy provide an essential foundation for effective participation, they are not the end of the story. Research shows that not all children and young people are invited to, or attend, meetings. Children and young people who do attend report positive experiences, but there is also evidence to suggest that many are excluded, have little power and that participation is tokenistic.

For participation to have real meaning for children and young people and for the adults involved in their care, it is important not only to do it, but to do it well. Doing it well means examining practical and ideological barriers toward including children and young people. It means developing a workplace culture that supports participation, including education and training for professionals on effective ways to include children and young people and communicate with them. It means being clear about what we understand participation to mean and about how children and young people will influence decisions. It means seeing participation as part of a broader process in which children and young people have the opportunity to be heard in a variety of ways, underpinned by sound relationships in which getting it right for children and young people in care is our priority.

Selected resources

Australia

The Office for Youth in South Australia offers several services and tools to guide consultation and participation. These include a *Youth Consultation toolkit*, which sets out guidelines for organisations that wish to consult with children and young people. Other resources include free youth participation training for agencies who want to know how to involve young people in decision-making, Youth Participation Grants for agencies to support consultation with young people, practical youth consultation information on how to plan and run consultations with young people, and policy advice and support. See <http://www.officeforyouth.sa.gov.au/Policy/PremiersMemorandum/tabid/207/Default.aspx>.

The Youth Affairs Council of South Australia offers youth participation training for member organisations, which is tailored to each network or organisation. See <http://www.yacsa.com.au/cgi-bin/wf.pl?pid=359529895674930&mode=cd&file=./html/documents//Youth%20Participation>.

The New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People has produced a participation toolkit and resource guide, called *Taking PARTicipation Seriously.* The guide includes an overview of participation and several booklets to aid organisations seeking to involve young people in conferences, events and other settings. One booklet is dedicated to children and young people in formal meetings. Called "Participation: Meeting together – deciding together", the booklet outlines the rationale for participation, provides guidelines and a 'participation checklist' for practitioners and examples of 'kid-friendly' meeting agendas, minutes, activities for children to express their views, among other items. See <http://www.kids.nsw.gov.au/kids/resources/participationkit.cfm>.

The Victorian Government, through the Office for Youth and with the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, has produced information brochures and tools that discuss meaningful participation and provide a guide to working effectively with children and young people. See <http://www.youth.vic.gov.au/Web21/ofy/dvcofy.nsf/allDocs/RWPC26E050A4E61D8E5CA2570F200807FF2?OpenDocument>.

The Queensland Department of Child Safety is developing a framework to guide participation in decision-making. The framework encompasses participation in service planning and development as well as decision-making pertaining to individual children.
See <http://www.childsafety.qld.gov.au/practice-manual/introduction/framework.html>.

"SPLAT" is a social development tool designed to assist children and young people become involved in community-based participation and influence policy as well as enhancing stakeholder and departmental awareness of the views of children and young people in care (Daly, McPherson & Reck, 2004).

The CREATE Foundation's Be.Heard program operates in Queensland, Tasmania and is to be introduced in Victoria. Be.Heard is participatory consultation with children and young people in out-of-home care about their circumstances, which informs advice and training to social work practitioners in government (Queensland Department of Child Safety 2006; Giddings 2008).

Facilitating Participation: Learning Through Action is a training program directed toward service providers designed to enhance the participation of children and young people in out-of-home care. See CREATE Foundation, 2002, P*articipation of Children and Young People in Care in the Western Australian Legislation Review*, CREATE Foundation, Perth.

New Zealand

The Ministry of Social Development offers a Toolkit on Participation, directed at organisations that wish to develop or review policies and programs.
See <http://www.msd.govt.nz/work-areas/children-and-young-people/providers-toolkit/intro.html>.

Good Practice Participate offers resources for working with non-government organisations and others in community participation.
See <http://www.goodpracticeparticipate.govt.nz/>.

The Ministry of Youth Affairs has produced *Keepin' it Real: A resource for involving young people.* This is a guide for organisations wishing to increase youth participation in their policy development, programmes and services.
See <http://www.myd.govt.nz/uploads/docs/00.7.6.3keepinitreal.pdf>.

The Ministry of Social Development has produced *Involving children: A guide to engaging children in decision-making.* This is a guide for organisations and government when involving children and young people in policy development, programmes, services and organisations.
See <http://www.msd.govt.nz/documents/publications/sector-policy/involving-children.pdf>.

United Kingdom

The UK government has created *Every Child Matters,* a range of resources directed to organisations that work with children and young people. Resources include a list of frequently asked questions, a handbook called *Building a Culture of Participation* and links to participation models used in various local counties. The handbook contains advice on practical implementation such as the need to set realistic objectives, to develop organisational capacity, to reach out to marginalised children and young people and to monitor efforts. See <http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk>.

The Social Care Institute for Excellence has developed *Assess your participation*, which is a 21-question survey of services and carers. See <http://www.scie-peoplemanagement.org.uk/audits/start_audit.asp?survey_id=104>.

The UK government's *Quality Protects* system emphasises participation. A training pack, ('Total Respect') for front-line staff was published in August 2000. Within this program, reports have been published such as *Listening, Hearing and Responding: Department of Health Action Plan: Core Principles for the Involvement of Children and Young People* and guidelines such as *Quality Protects Research Briefing No 3: Young People's Participation.*
*S*ee Department for Children, Schools and Families, 'Quality Protects,' <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/qualityprotects/work_pro/project_2.shtml> and Department of Health,
<http://www.york.ac.uk/depts/spsw/mrc/documents/QPRNo3.pdf>.

The Investing in Children organisation supports partner organisations to uphold the rights of young people and children, including the right to participate in decisions that affect them (Durham County Council, "Investing in children (IIC)" viewed 30 June 2008,
<http://www.durham.gov.uk/durhamcc/usp.nsf/pws/Partnership+Websites+-+IIC+Information+Page> and see <http://www.iic-uk.org/>.

Learning to Listen is a Department for International Development document about building children and young people's participation in developing policies and services. The document sets out the principles of participation and includes practical application issues.
See <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Pubs/files/learningtolisten.pdf>.

A non-government consortium in the UK has launched Participation Works, a range of resources directed toward organisations that work with children. These include information about participation rights, such as *Listen and Change: A Guide to Children and Young People's Participation Rights,* which sets out the rights perspective on participation, outlines the positive impacts of participation, outlines tools for building a culture of participation, dealing with dilemmas and difficulties and practical resources.
See <*http://www.participationworks.org.uk/Portals/0/Files/resources/k-items/participationworks/listenandchange/listen%20and%20change.pdf*> and <http://www.participationworks.org.uk/ResourcesHub/ParticipationWorksResources/tabid/316/Default.aspx>.

Children in Scotland has a website dedicated to participation. It provides an overview of the principles guiding effective participation and a series of practice guidelines. See < http://www.childreninscotland.org.uk/html/par_mak.htm>. Links to other resources are provided also.
See <http://www.childreninscotland.org.uk/html/par_res.htm>. Children in Scotland also has a practical guide to encouraging the participation of children and young people with disabilities, called *What Matters to Me.* See <http://www.childreninscotland.org.uk/docs/participation/Whatmatterstome.pdf>.

Children in Wales has developed the *Children and Decision Making* toolbox and training pack for distribution to all local authorities in Wales and Scotland. The pack includes picture cards and audiovisual materials for use in direct work with children. Children in Wales, *Children & Decision Making: Toolbox & Training Pack*, <http://www.childreninwales.org.uk/publications/purchasepubs/1350.html>.

Having Your Say is a training resource that uses video to show a mock case conference meeting and provides a training booklet. Towl, G et al. (2000) *Having Your Say. A Video Resource for all those Involved in Child Protection Conferences*, Pavilion Publishing.

Triangle is an organisation it has produced 'How It Is,' an image vocabulary comprising 383 image cards designed to assist communication with children and young people who have disabilities. There are guidelines for their use and a range of additional resources are available. See <http://www.howitis.org.uk/#how_used>/ and < http://www.triangle-services.co.uk/index.php?page=links>.

The National Youth Agency has developed *Hear by Right*, a standards framework that aims to facilitate statutory and non-statutory bodies' work with children. The framework includes information on participation, action plans and examples of creative practice such as 'Four faces", an exercise designed to allow children and young people to communicate their views on key areas. Key statements are developed and put forward, and four faces (Very Happy, Happy, Unhappy, Very unhappy) are placed around a room. Participants stand next to the face that represents their views on the statement.
See <http://hbr.nya.org.uk/resources/4_faces>.

The National Youth Agency has developed *Act by Right*, a skills workbook directed toward children and young people's participation in community and policy decision-making. The workbook was reviewed by several young people, who tested out some of the exercises. The National Youth Agency 2004, *Act by right: skills for the active involvement of children and young people in making change happen,* prepared by B Badham, The National Youth Agency.

The Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE) and other non-government groups have produced *Ready Steady Change,* a training program to increase children's participation in decision-making. This includes a comprehensive Participation library, a list of resources around rights, communicating with children, research and publications.
See <http://www.crae.org.uk/help/rsc.html>.

Save the Children has published several resources. These include a resource guide called *Empowering Children and Young People: Promoting involvement in decision-making* (Children's Rights Office and Save the Children 1997) and a toolkit for organisations that work with children and young people. It is directed principally at organisations' consultations of children and young people, and participation in conventions and similar events, but contains principles that translate to a case planning context. International Save the Children Alliance, 2003, *So you want to consult with children? A toolkit of good practice,* International Save the Children Alliance, London. See <http://www.savethechildren.net/alliance/resources/childconsult_toolkit_final.pdf>.

United States

The "Achieve My Plan" project within the Research and Training Centre on Family Support and Children's Mental Health, at Portland State University offers a range of participation information packages and resources. These include guidelines for achieving meaningful participation in planning, an introductory video, tools to monitor and assess participation and youth empowerment.
See <http://www.rtc.pdx.edu/pgProj_3partnerships.shtml>.

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