



## Do they have a voice? Perspectives on participation and democratic values in child and youth welfare

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EDITORIAL



## Do they have a voice? Perspectives on participation and democratic values in child and youth welfare

Children and young people's participation, ensuring that their voices are heard and considered in decisions that affect their lives is a crucial element of social work practice within a rights-based social justice framework. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) emphasizes the right of children to express their views freely in matters that concern them, and this is enshrined in many states' domestic legislation. Meaningful participation involves children being informed about, listened to, and able to influence decisions that effect their lives. It can take the form of individual participation in decisions directly impacting on a child or young person's life or collective participation to influence wider practices and policies to improve child and youth welfare services (Tunestveit et al., 2023)

Meaningful participation promotes children and young people's well-being, helping them feel valued and increasing their self-esteem and confidence. Plans can be tailored more effectively to their wishes and needs enhancing likelihood of success (Dickens et al., 2015). Collective participation may also have therapeutic and empowering effects for the young people, and well as improving service delivery through the unique insight offered by their lived experiences (Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2012). Children's participation has both intrinsic and instrumental value. On the one hand, it contributes to their dignity and self-worth by allowing them to express their views and influence decisions about their lives. On the other, it has the potential to influence policy and individual developmental outcomes. However despite this wide spread recognition and legal frameworks promoting children and young people's participation rights, there remain numerous challenges in achieving these benefits (Collins, 2017; Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2020)

The participation of children and young people individually and collectively is shaped by children's own agency, individual practitioner's values and skills, systemic processes within organisations, as well as social structures that may limit or enhance the autonomy of children (Reynaert et al., 2015). For example a pre-occupation on protection rights can lead to children's views being sidelined reflecting a paternalistic understanding of what is necessary for the child's best interests (Collins, 2017). Power relationships and social contexts impact on which children's voices are heard and valued (McNeilly et al., 2015)

In this special edition we explore the complexities of promoting children and young people's and developing democratic structures from different perspectives, in varied contexts and using a range of methodologies. We have divided the articles into five sections; however various themes relevant to the genuine promotion of children and young people's participation rights and democratic values cut across the different sections. These themes include the balancing of rights, cultural values and societal norms; the importance of relationships; and how intersecting inequalities and organisational contexts frame the opportunities children and young people are offered to exercise their CRC Article 12 rights.

The first section in this special issue is recent research in the field of **Child Protection**. To begin with, the article *Balancing Paternalism and Child Centrism: A Nordic Population Study on Children's Rights in Child Protection* by Marit Skivenes and colleagues provides insights into institutional contexts and societal views on children's participation in child protection services in five Nordic European countries. In their survey vignette experimental study with representative population samples, the authors explore how the age of children influences adults' attitudes toward involving

them in child protection investigations regarding their right to information and giving weight to their opinions. Their findings show age-related differences, indicating a paternalistic trait in populations. When comparing countries there is some indication of the importance having the UNCRC as national legislation.

Next, in their article '*Is it a positive or a negative?*' *Children's participation in discharge of care order proceedings*, Jessica Roy and colleagues report on findings from a mixed-methods study exploring children's participation in discharge decisions and processes of care order proceedings in England and Wales. By applying Lundy's model of participation, the study indicates that professionals support child's participation in general. However, the authors conclude that the model should be extended to a fifth concept of 'impact' on the children's well-being.

The section on child protection completes with the article *A qualitative study of youth and child participation in Norwegian specialist child welfare services support measures: dilemmas, ideals, and outcomes* by Stian Thoresen and colleagues exploring factors promoting the collaborative participation of young people in three specialised child protection services in Norway. Their findings highlight the importance of therapists in these services building rapport and developing a trustful relationship with the young people to facilitate their participation.

The second section of this special issue focuses on **Participation in Out-of-home Care**. In their article *Characteristics of child participation in different types of alternative care in Croatia: adults's and children's perspectives* Ivana Borić and colleagues provide valuable insights into children's participation within alternative care settings in Croatia. Based on a qualitative study involving both children and professionals, it highlights that while children formally hold participation rights, these often have little real influence on decision-making. Notably, the degree of participation varies significantly depending on the type of care setting and the perceived level of risk behaviour—findings that raise important questions for social care systems across Europe.

Maria Appel Nissen and Mona Kragelund Ravn follow with a critical examination of supervised contact between children in care and their parents. Their article *Going beyond dichotomous political discourses about children's participation and voice: Unfolding the complexities of children's needs in and around supervised contact in Denmark* challenges the dominant political discourse that frames children's and parents' rights as opposing forces. Based on qualitative research, it highlights how children in out-of-home care often experience participation as constrained by institutional structures and conflicting interests. The study calls for a shift towards more collaborative practices that enable children to make sense of their relationships with their parents, emphasising the need for nuanced, context-sensitive approaches to participation in child welfare.

Claudia Equit and colleagues draw attention in *Participation at the Margins – Participation Practices from the Viewpoint of Young People in Residential Care* to the experiences of young people in residential care in studies in Germany and Switzerland. They highlight how children and youth navigate formal participation structures and develop resistant practices when faced with hierarchical power dynamics that limit their agency. The study critically challenges normative discourses on children's rights, demonstrating that young people's self-initiated forms of participation often fall outside the structured frameworks designed by adults. These insights call for a rethinking of participatory approaches in child welfare, ensuring they align more closely with young people's lived realities and strategies for agency.

This is followed by Zoë Clark's and Arne Wohlfarth's scrutinization of the relation of structural and cultural aspects of participation in out-of-home care. The article *Democratic Participation in Residential Youth Care – A Matter of Structure or Relations?* draws on a large-scale survey to explore the interplay between formal participatory structures—such as group meetings and spokespersons—and informal power dynamics, highlighting how interpersonal hierarchies and punitive practices can undermine genuine participation. The findings raise important questions about how to establish democratic structures that are resilient to informal dependencies and capable of fostering real deliberative freedoms for young people in care.

In *The Interconnectedness of Vulnerability and Agency from the Perspective of Children in Child and Youth Services*, Carina Pohl and Marion Pomey explore the complex relationship between children's vulnerability and agency within child and youth services, focusing on out-of-home placements in Switzerland. Through qualitative research, how children navigate their right to participation while simultaneously experiencing restrictions due to their perceived need for protection is illustrated. The study highlights that while children often attempt to assert their agency in placement decisions, they frequently find themselves excluded from meaningful influence, raising critical questions about how participation and protection can be better balanced in child welfare systems.

*The meaning of care: How relationships can strengthen the well-being and participation of young people in residential care* by Petra Göbbels-Koch and Anna Gupta closes the section. Based on qualitative focus group data and informed by the Capability Approach, their study explores residential care as a capability space for young people to voice their needs and interests. The findings based on the perspectives of young people with experience in residential care in England provide insights into what they consider good care and options for being involved in decisions in their lives. The study reflects on the crucial role of the relationship with their carers for the young people to participate in decision-making processes and contributing to their well-being in residential care.

The section **Self-organization and Advocacy** broadens questions of participation. With *Participation in practice in child welfare: Processes, benefits and challenges*, Bernadine Brady and colleagues are opening the section by investigating the practical implementation of children's participation rights within child welfare services, using the Youth Advocate Programme (YAP) in Ireland as a case study. Drawing on qualitative research with young people, parents, advocates, and staff, the study analyses how participation is embedded in organisational structures, decision-making processes, and advocacy efforts. While the findings highlight the benefits of a strengths-based and youth-guided approach, they also point to challenges such as ensuring consistency in participatory practice and addressing structural barriers. The study underscores the importance of sustained commitment to participation at all levels of child welfare organisations to create meaningful and impactful engagement.

The article by Robin Sen and Katie Ellis, *Meeting the challenges of participation? Care experienced people's involvement in social work practice and policy development*, explores the perspectives of care experienced people who had been involved in activism to influence change for children in care and care leavers in Scotland and England. The findings illustrate the potential of knowledge gained through lived experience to strengthen practice and policy developments, as well as the challenges faced by care experienced campaigners. The paper concludes with discussions of good practice that ensures participation is appreciated, valued, and ethically informed.

Mimi Petersen and colleagues analyse the outcomes of transformative participation in child welfare through case studies from Brazil, Denmark, Israel, Norway, and Nicaragua. *Children and Young People's Participation in Child Protection: Outcomes of Transformative Participation in International Contexts* argues that transformative participation goes beyond conventional involvement by enabling children to make meaningful choices, develop agency, and actively influence their lives and communities. The study demonstrates that inclusive and caring professional practices create the conditions for children to feel recognised and empowered. By fostering collaboration between children and local-level practitioners, transformative participation can lead to shifts in cultural norms and innovations in child welfare policy and practice.

The article *Excluded Voices in Inclusive Child and Youth Welfare Services* by Alexandra Klein and Stephanie Langer critically examines the paradox of 'inclusive' child and youth welfare services in Germany, where participation, self-advocacy, and self-representation are increasingly emphasised but not equally accessible to all. Drawing on historical and theoretical perspectives on social closure, the study highlights how certain groups—particularly those facing intersecting forms of marginalisation—continue to struggle for recognition and influence. Through interviews with self-advocates and analysis of organisational documents, the research sheds light on the persistent

inequalities within participatory structures and calls for a more reflexive approach to inclusion in child and youth welfare policy and practice.

Jemma Venables and colleagues start the section **Marginalized Voices** with their article *Diminishing their voice through choice? How 'self-placing' in out-of-home care affects children and young people's participation in decision-making*. They explore the phenomenon of 'self-placing' in out-of-home care in Queensland, Australia, where children and young people leave approved care placements to stay in unapproved locations, such as with friends or family. Based on qualitative interviews, the study highlights how self-placing can be both an act of agency and a response to structural constraints, yet it often results in further disconnection from formal decision-making processes. The findings underscore the paradox of participation in child protection systems, where young people seeking autonomy may face heightened vulnerabilities, raising important questions about how care systems can better support meaningful and safe participation.

Maja Müller continues the theme with her focus in *Youth perspectives as a driving force in social work innovation – trying to counteract deviance and structural vulnerability of youth at risk* on perspectives of young people in Denmark who are excluded from education and the labour market, highlighting the structural barriers that contribute to their marginalisation. Drawing on biographical interviews and participatory workshops, it sheds light on how early labelling in school contributes to long-term exclusion and how young people navigate social services. Using Howard Becker's labelling theory, the study underscores the need for co-productive and user-driven innovations in social work that empower young people and create more inclusive welfare structures.

With the article *Contested and Unheard Voices within the Asylum Framework – Participation Challenges of Unaccompanied Minors in Germany and Norway*, Jakob Junghans and Hilden Lidén provide a comparative analysis of how Germany and Norway approach the participation rights of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers (UMAs). While Germany treats UMAs primarily as children within the youth welfare system, Norway places them within the asylum framework, affecting their agency and participation in legal and everyday decision-making. Drawing on qualitative research, the study highlights how these contrasting legal structures shape the lived experiences of UMAs, exposing critical gaps in their ability to influence their own futures. The findings underscore the tension between protection and participation, raising important questions about how asylum and welfare systems can better uphold children's rights.

In "*Adults need the refresh button: LGBTIQ adolescents' perceptions, resilience and beliefs regarding social support services*", Langarita Adiego and colleagues examine the perceptions of LGBTIQ adolescents in Spain regarding professional support services, resilience strategies, and their expectations for social care. Through a mixed-methods study combining survey data from 974 young people and focus group discussions, the research highlights how LGBTIQ adolescents frequently experience discrimination and inadequate support in various settings, particularly in schools. The findings emphasise the need for professionals to adopt affirmative and culturally competent approaches to ensure effective support, while also recognising the agency and resistance strategies that young people employ in response to anti-LGBTIQ violence. These insights contribute to broader discussions on how social services can better address the needs and rights of LGBTIQ youth.

The final paper in this section is Donna-Maree Humphery's *'The first initial bit was trying to get her to speak to me': Trauma informed relationship-based practice with female offenders in care*. The article examines how youth offending practitioners in England apply a trauma-informed, relationship-based approach when working with girls in state care who have contact with the criminal justice system. Based on interviews with practitioners across three local authorities, the study highlights the significance of building strong, supportive relationships tailored to the complex needs of young women. It challenges the traditional care/control dichotomy in youth justice, arguing that an intersectional trauma-informed approach provides a more effective framework for supporting care-experienced girls. The findings underscore the ethical and systemic challenges in balancing welfare needs with criminal justice interventions, raising crucial questions about the future of gender-responsive youth justice practices.

The next section focuses on **Participatory Research and Practice Development** in the context of out-of-home care. In their article *Codesigning rights-based recordkeeping for childhood out-of-home care*, Joanne Evans and Rhiannon Abeling report on their experiences in a co-design research team on care recordkeeping. The authors discuss a participatory recordkeeping infrastructure, the use of digital technologies, and explain how the users and, thus, subjects of records, can participate in their care recordkeeping.

Amy Lynch and colleagues report in their article *Developing care experienced young peoples' participation as peer researchers in an inter-disciplinary study: applying the 'Ability-Motivation-Opportunity' framework* on the experiences of care-experienced peer researchers in an interdisciplinary study on the transition from care. The qualitative study explores peer researchers contribution in research by reflecting on the Activity-Motivation-Opportunity (A-M-O) theoretical framework and its role for peer researchers.

This section on participatory research and practice development finalises with the co-designed study by Jade Purtell and colleagues in their article 'If a tree falls in the forest ...': *organisational readiness for children and young people's voices in alternative care systems*. The authors report on findings of an international study exploring peer employment models aiming to enhance participation rights of people with care experience in the design of (leaving) care policies and systems. The findings show that organisational factors contribute to barriers and enablers for increasing participation opportunities.

We hope you find these papers insightful, thought-provoking and useful in work promoting children and young people's voices through meaningful participation.

Thank-you from the co-editors:

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