

# Operationalising children's participation: Competing understandings of the policy to practice 'gap'

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## Abstract

There is widespread discourse and policy on children's participation in decision-making. This is not matched with an equal level of implementation in practice. This qualitative research explores the policy to practice gap with senior decision makers in the child protection system in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. Their reflections on the challenges associated with translating the participation principles into practice are deconstructed to understand the complex and overlapping ways in which participation is perceived. The research data indicate there are competing understandings of participation at play, depending on the actor, their role and organisation. This paper suggests that genuine participation in practice relies on bridging the epistemic

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differences and interests of different stakeholder groups who are all critical to achieving children's participation in service decision-making.

#### KEYWORDS

children, participation, policy, practice, rights, voice

## BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

That child's thoughts, their feelings, their relationship, what they're interested in, what they care about, what they want to do, who they want to be with, that's, that's privileged within that policy, that matters, it counts. But to what extent that can actually be operationalized ... for a range of reasons, not just resource, values and attitudes, yeah, I'm not necessarily convinced that that is being realized all the time or even most of the time.

Key Informant (KI) #3

The literature on children's participation is ever expanding, in part because of the theory to practice gap, with over 200 models of child participation that have made important contributions to children being heard (Karsten, 2012). Generally, models of participation are based on the concept of 'best interests' of the child which may not always align with children's views (Bessell, 2007), so while they are useful frameworks, the lack of and failed implementation remains an issue. Two renowned models based on the impact and outcomes of participation are Shier's Pathways to Participation (Shier, 2001) and Lundy's Model that sees 'space', 'voice', 'audience' and 'influence' key for participation (Keenaghan & Redmond, 2016). Cahill and Dadvand (2018) developed a 'thinking tool' to bridge the 'gap' that incorporates the influences of cultures, discourses, structures, emotions, material conditions and actions, perhaps as noted by Theis (2010) because models of participation are not guaranteed to work if they do not capture this complexity. Yet, many organisations continue to struggle to meet the right of children and young people to express their views in decision-making processes.

This paper contributes to an understanding of why this is the case. It argues that different notions of participation exist that reflect epistemic differences that are foundational to operationalising participation. KI#3 (Key Informant) in the opening quote describes the challenge of translating research and policy into practice being a complex mix of policy, resources, values, and attitudes. Therefore, it is not about the 'right' way of doing participation but recognising that all the ways of understanding and implementing participation have merit and together give a truer picture of what participation is.

There are calls for a critical review of the discourse about child voice that is integral to quality welfare services for children (Hartung, 2017; Spyros, 2011). There is significant literature acknowledging the role of micro elements of practice and programme delivery in shaping child voice (Gal, 2017) that needs to be merged with ideas about the influence of larger public changes. The changing nature of the welfare state, social movements, and powerful political agendas impact children's participation. Further, "... there are policy-level, organizational, inter-actional, individual and situational prerequisites for the participation of children in care" (Polkki et al., 2012, p. 123) and many of these can serve as either barriers or pathways to participation

(Križ & Roundtree-Swain, 2017, p. 34). An analysis of these multiple influences may provide some insight into how systems can genuinely engage with every child. For brevity, this paper refers to ‘children’ which includes ‘children and young people’.

## The concept of participation in policy and the challenges of operationalising policy

The concept of participation empowers children by valuing their voices and perspectives and is formally acknowledged in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989). This milestone document of universal standards guides the treatment of children relevant to all cultural, social, and political frames of ratifying countries. However, the guidance of the UN General Comment on Article 12(1) acknowledges the legal, political, economic, social, and cultural barriers of State Parties that impede children's participation and highlights these barriers may need to be dismantled for children to be heard (“Concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Australia”, 2019). Article 12 of the UNCRC sits at the centre of research, advocacy and policy focused on the importance of child voice and participation.

This research was based in New South Wales (NSW). It is one of six Australian states and territories that takes a strong, paternalistic, child protectionist stance and intervenes in families to ensure children are not maltreated (Harding, 1991, p. 186). The UNCRC principles are embedded in legislation in many countries, including all Australia's states and territories. They inform the development of policy designed to guide service provision for children (e.g., Commonwealth of Australia, 2009; NSW Office of the Senior Practitioner, 2020) and are embedded in state and national child protection legislation (Council of Australian Governments; NSW Parliament, 1998). Recently, the Australian Government (2017) established the *NSW Child Safe Scheme* where *Child Safe Standard 2* that requires organisations to create environments in which children participate in decisions that affect them and are taken seriously.

In 2019, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (Committee) acknowledged structures and processes established in Australia to support Article 12 of the Convention in its Concluding Observations. In part due to the Australian Child Rights Taskforce (2011), a National Children's Commissioner was established in 2012. NSW and every state and territory has an Advocate or Commissioner for children focused on improving their social conditions by giving serious consideration to their views on a range of social issues. Most Australian states and territories have government funded youth peak advocacy bodies and many non-government organisations (NGOs) have youth advisory groups. Peak consumer bodies, such as CREATE (the national association of children in care) and CanTeen (the national association for young people living with cancer) represent, advocate for, and support the voices of children to be heard. However, the Committee also called on Australia to “*Enact comprehensive national child rights legislation ... providing clear guidelines for its consistent and direct application...*” section A 7(a) as it remains seriously concerned about the rates of violence against children in the home and in alternate care (Section D).

The large number and range of practice guides available to practitioners, support meeting children's rights to be part of decision-making, but without consistent and meaningful outcomes for children. In NSW, the most recent include *Empowerment and Participation: A guide for organisations working with children and young people* (NSW Office of the Children's Guardian, 2021), and *Engaging Children and Young People in Your Organisation* (NSW Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People, 2019). There is ample information on how to ‘do participation’

alongside critique of the extent to which rights have been operationalised (Canosa et al., 2022; Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2020; Morley et al., 2022) including for young people in juvenile justice (Cunneen et al., 2016), and children in detention-seeking asylum (Bochenek, 2015). Children who already experience marginalisation are less likely than others to have their rights extended to them. Furthermore, participation in practice can fail to meet the expectations of policy when the assumptions that underpin the policy are not congruent with the socio-political landscapes in which practice occurs (Toros, 2020).

Practitioners are increasingly asked to implement children's participation. However, what this entails, who is responsible for it, and how much influence children's voices should have remains nebulous (Strømmland et al., 2022). Discourse on child-centredness emphasises the need to attend to the child or young person and not the conditions necessary for adults to centre the child. As Lundy (2007) argues, participation is more than providing opportunity for voice, it is about the structures and processes adults need to operationalise participation, for example providing children with 'audience' (adults to listen to children) and 'influence' (acting on what children have communicated).

The experiences of senior child protection decision makers in this paper offer insights into what supports adults to operationalise participation. Their experiences suggest four complex and overlapping dimensions that describe competing understandings and interests at play, depending on the agendas of different stakeholders and political contexts. These dimensions progress dialogue on child participation, from a focus on *why* it is important for children to participate and *how* this might be achieved in practice settings, to a more nuanced discussion on the '*multi-layered levels of influence*' in determining how child and youth participation can be successfully embedded within practice.

## METHODOLOGY

The research is embedded within the ReSPECT (Reconceptualising Services from the Perspectives of Experienced Children and Teens) project, a mixed-methods, multi-phase, innovative project trialling a model that combines youth engagement, professional development, and service innovation. The project acknowledges young people as key stakeholders and decision-makers in service contexts and key to service reform. The project (LP170100570) is funded by the Australian Research Council and a collaboration between Western Sydney University, Macquarie University, University of Melbourne, Carers NSW, Uniting, and Winangay Aboriginal Resources and based in NSW.

The ReSPECT project is designed to: (1) explore the manifestation of child voice in child protection in NSW over time; (2) determine the influence of changing structural and procedural factors; and (3) articulate the intersections of these factors and how they may or may not lead to genuine child voice. This paper reports on findings that problematise child voice by locating participation in systemic relationships.

## Design and research context

The research explores child participation across the three different service contexts that represent the leadership structure of the child protection system in NSW. Participants came from three key stakeholder groups: (1) government service agencies; (2) non-government service (NGO)

providers; and (3) children's advocacy bodies. The research focus was on participants' views about participation in child protection,<sup>1</sup> based on their rich experiences across the course of their career, often working across all three sectors.

The 1960s was selected as the earliest time point for the project as this decade marked the professionalisation of the child protection field following the introduction of the 'Battered Child Syndrome' (Kempe et al., 1962) and second wave of the Child Rescue Movement (Swain, 2010). At this time Australian child protection practice became an independent sphere of government responsibility with major changes in government welfare provision and the establishment of the NSW Welfare Department. KIs who hold senior positions today may not have had direct experience of child protection practice in the 1960s; however, several participants saw and experienced many structural changes and approaches over their working life that were a consequence of this initial period of reform.

## Participants

Participants (known as Key Informants or 'KIs') are/were Senior Executives in NSW community services between 1960 and 2021. They were responsible for statutory services and setting state child safeguarding policy, play a key role in NGO service provision with firsthand practice concerns, and/or senior leaders who maintain discourse and action on meeting the rights of children in both policy and practice. All the KIs had varied careers, often working as practitioners prior to strategic or policy roles. It is this discussion of their roles that provides insights into the different perspectives of participation.

Participants were purposively selected from NSW, the Australian state with the highest number of children in out-of-home care (Child Protection Australia 2020–21, 2022). This purposeful sampling is related to the qualitative research design of the study and each interview offers rich nuanced data because each KI is considered a case in themselves that "... embody and represent meaningful experience–structure links..." (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006, p. 493). The identities of senior executives were publicly available knowledge. Their seniority made it difficult to access them directly, but the researcher was based in NSW and had experience in the industry, so was able to identify and email an invitation to participate in the study. A total of 12 professionals were invited to be participants in the study, 4 from each of the service groups. Three of the invited professionals did not respond to our invitation before our recruitment cut-off date. Nine agreed to participate in the study, with representation across each of the three service groups. The majority of participants were female, aged between 40 and 70 years of age, reflecting the gender imbalance that exists within the Australian statutory child protection workforce comprising over 80% women (Institute of Child Protection Studies, 2012). Table 1 summarises the participants' relevant experience and employment information.

## Data collection

Two data collection methods were employed, as described below.

### Semi-structured interviews

The aim of the KI interviews was to understand the landscape of child voice over the last 60 years and how participation was operationalised in different parts of the child protection system. KIs

TABLE 1 Key Informants by service context (*n* = 9).

	Current role	Qualifications/ training	Background/experience	Experience in child protection	Sector experience
NGO	Independent Consultant	Social Work Early Childhood	Social work practitioner- family violence, Indigenous families; NGO management	50+ years	NGO; Independent Consultancy
	Independent Consultant	Communication Legal Studies	NGO management – children’s services, child protection early intervention	2years	NGO; Government
	Senior Executive	Sociology	NGO management; social policy; children’s welfare advocacy		NGO; Government
Government	Independent Consultant; Academic	Economics	Journalism & media; education; management child protection services	10years	Government
	Senior Executive	Social Work	Social policy; child protection training and development; disability; mental health; housing	20years	Government; Academia
	Senior Executive	Social Work	Child protection	18years	Government; Independent Consultancy
Advocacy	Senior Executive	Social Science	Child protection; government and NGO policy	20+ years	Government; NGO
	Senior Executive	Social Psychology	Independent government consultancy and research	14 years	Advocacy; Academia
	Independent Consultant; Academic	Psychology; Education Social Care Markets	Disability; welfare; child protection; government; advocacy	16+ years	Advocacy; Government

TABLE 2 Interview topic areas.

Topic issues	Example questions
Ideas, discourse, definitions and social constructions of child protection	What do you understand about terms that are used to describe practice, like 'child-focused', 'child-centred', 'person-centred', 'child-led', 'youth-led', 'child friendly'?
Changes in perception of child protection	What policy shifts have you observed? What do you think has driven these shifts?
Awareness of the broader context (political, social, historical) in which children and young people are protected or not protected	Have there been any changes in the last 50 years in the way children are valued and protected?
Connections between different parts of the child protection sector linked with child voice	What influences people to listen to children and young people?
Issues related to practitioner or organisational characteristics	Can you identify and describe any ways in which organisations listen to children and young people?
Relevant legislation, policy, political processes, social climate – related to changes to child voice	What do you think encourages listening, hearing, and acting on the views of children and young people?

engaged in narrative semi-structured interviews (See Table 2 for topics covered in the interview). They were asked to share their experiences of children's participation in child protection over their career. Each interview was approximately 1–1.5 h in duration and took place between July 2020 and June 2021.

All KI interviews were conducted online using Zoom, necessitated by COVID-19 lock-down restrictions during the data collection phase. There are both advantages and disadvantages to using online interviews. It is efficient and cost effective but also may limit researcher engagement and rapport building with participants, or impact the willingness of participants to be candid in their responses (Samuk Carignani & Burchi, 2022). These barriers were somewhat mitigated using a shared online document as an additional data collection tool (see below). The interviews were recorded and transcribed using NVIVO transcription, and the researcher made field notes.

## Shared online document

A shared online document asked KIs to provide additional written responses to three topic areas:

1. What policy, legislation or socio-political shifts have occurred in NSW that you think have influenced the participation of children and young people in decision-making?
2. Please comment on the place of ideas such as child-focussed, child-centred, child-led, youth-led, and child-friendly in child protection work, noting any challenges and/or changes over time that you have noticed in your career.
3. What do you think influences organisations to support children and young people to be part of decision making about their own well-being using examples if you can?

This technique captured KIs experiences anonymously and allowed them to exchange ideas as they responded to each other's comments. They indicated which key stakeholder group they represented while maintaining their anonymity from other participants. This method allowed

the researcher to ask clarifying questions on comments KIs made in the document that might not have been raised in the interview otherwise. Not all the KIs chose to contribute data online. KIs from each major group responded to all three questions, and a majority of responses were from KIs in the NGO sector. The document was about 7 pages long.

## Ethical considerations

Ethics approval for the study was obtained from Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval Number: H13569).

### Protecting anonymity

Every effort was made to maintain the anonymity of responses and be sensitive to potential personal, professional, or political impact. There are risks for KIs in high profile public positions if they are identified in published results because of their relationships and connections within the industry. These risks were clearly articulated in the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form and discussed with KIs during the consent process, before and on completion of the interview.

To reduce the risk of anonymity breaches, general terms, rather than specific position titles or individual names with alternative descriptors (e.g., management or senior staff) were used to refer to high profile individuals in the field. Specific organisations were not named and only referred to by the sector in which they function (e.g., 'non-government' or 'advocacy').

### Concerns for child safety

An ethical risk was the possibility of KIs disclosing a failing to report risk of harm to children while employed in a senior executive role. KIs were made aware the researcher was a mandatory reporter required by NSW child protection law to make a Report of Risk of Harm if they became aware of a situation in which a child was not safe. KIs were not asked about individual children, but the overall approach to engaging children in decision-making. They were asked to ensure that any examples provided did not include identifying detail.

## Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used for data analysis. This is an approach where qualitative research is conducted within an interpretivist paradigm, that is, with a need to understand or interpret the beliefs, motives, and reasons of social factors to understand social reality. In this case, the focus was child voice, how it was understood and what was reported as necessary for child voice to occur. The research question was informed by critical organisational studies and literature on child rights which led to a methodology that offered an analytical focus on organisational practices and motivations, collectively then providing an organising framework by which to analyse the data. The thematic analysis entailed familiarisation with the data (interview transcripts and online document), generating codes inductively using



NVivo (Release 1.6 [4825] 1999–2022) and based on recurring ideas (by categorising responses). Researcher team members who did not conduct the interviews blind coded 30% of the interviews and confirmed the final list of codes. The data were then integrated into more developed unifying ideas, and this was followed by a process of defining and naming these themes.

## RESULTS: THE FOUR DIMENSIONS OF PARTICIPATION

Figure 1 below represents four distinct dimensions of participation from our reconstruction of KIs reflections. Participation was spoken about in diverse ways, across interviews and participants, but also within a single interview. What became evident in our analysis are these dimensions of participation related to *where* participation is located, and *what* participation involves at different institutional settings. The dimensions are unlike other frameworks as they do not represent ‘how to do participation’ but describe understandings of participation based on different stakeholder positions. These descriptions demonstrate the potential tensions when participation is seen as personal or public in nature and located within either procedural or conceptual aspects of individuals or societies.

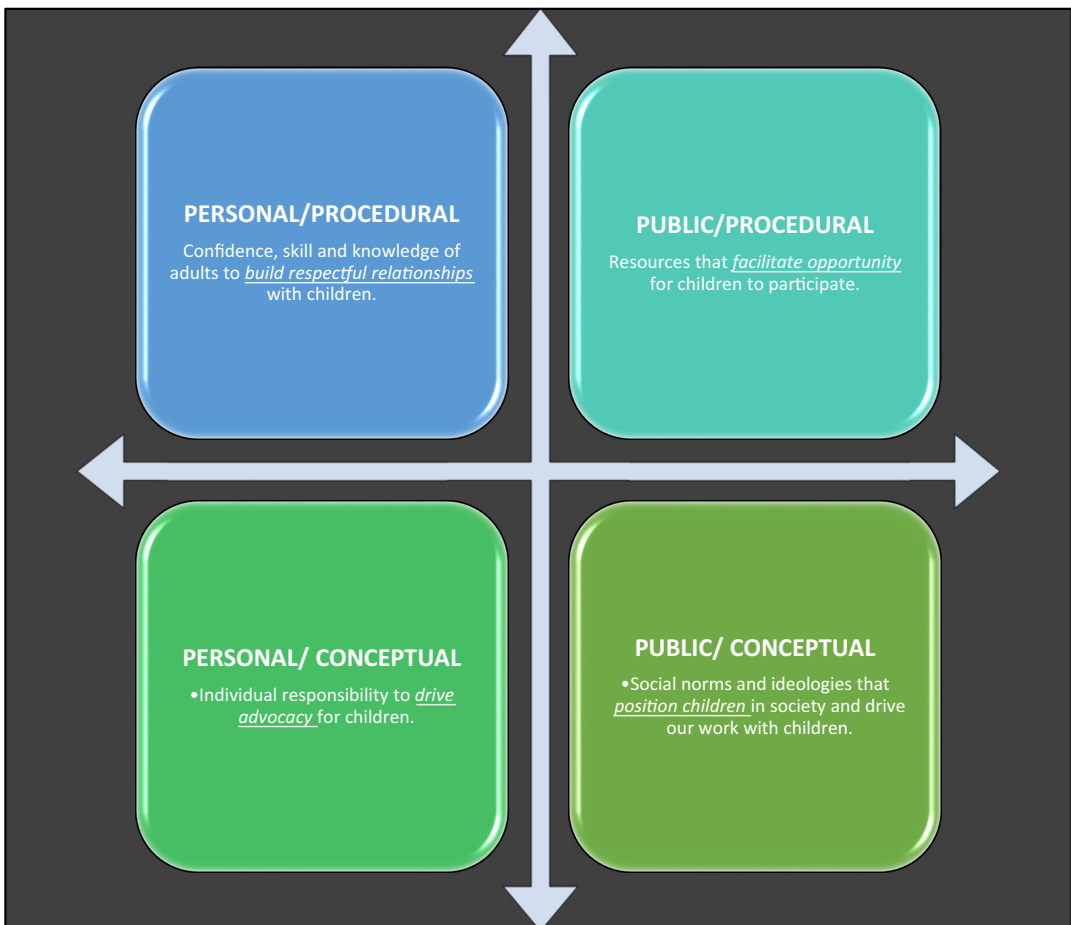


FIGURE 1 Four dimensions of children's participation. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

The personal/procedural dimension is about the confidence, skill, and knowledge of adult professionals to *build respectful relationships* with children, whereas the personal/conceptual dimension refers to the individual responsibility to *drive advocacy* for children. The public/procedural dimension relates to the resources that *facilitate opportunity* for children to participate and the public/conceptual dimension to the social norms and ideologies that *position children* in society and drive our work with children.

Each of these dimensions exists in the literature, separately, and is often thought of as participation itself rather than as *component* of participation. Building respectful relationships is linked with making participation meaningful for children and promoting children's rights (Bell, 2002; Bessell, 2015; Cossar et al., 2014; Tisdall, 2017). Child advocacy is a growing area of professional practice, seen as a commitment to increase children's representation and further participation individually and collectively (Barnes, 2012; Boylan & Braye, 2007; Boylan & Dalrymple, 2009; Cascardi et al., 2015). Facilitation of opportunities for children to participate is discussed in the literature predominantly as creating 'space' (Lundy, 2007) and recognising the diverse formal and informal ways in which participation can be offered to children (Percy-Smith, 2010). There is copious work on the role of ideologies associated with children's participation (Hartung, 2017; Mason & Fattore, 2021; Trevithick, 2014). This includes a strong body of work on the sociology of childhood that positions children as rights holders and adults as duty bearers (James et al., 1998; Qvortrup, 1985) in terms of a broader understanding of relationships beyond the child-adult dyad and towards relationships between children, adults, spaces and materials (Tisdall & Punch, 2012). There is also literature encouraging rights-based professional practice when keeping children safe, that positions children as having the right to be more deeply involved in decision-making processes as used in changes to child safeguarding work (McCafferty, 2017; McMellon & Tisdall, 2020; Rasmusson et al., 2010; Ruiz-Casares et al., 2017).

Below is a detailed description of each dimension, with the varied actions that KIs described for each. The four dimensions of participation are related to *where* participation is located, and therefore implicate *what* might be required in that setting. In this way, the dimensions offer an alternative, non-linear, description of the policy to practice gap. Whilst other models of participation focus on what actors 'do' to operationalise children's involvement (i.e., task-based models of participation), the dimensions add a new focus – *institutional and located understandings of participation*, thus emphasising the different interests of adults associated with organisational positions involved in 'doing participation'.

The centre of both axes is intended to represent participation as multilocational and that there is no corresponding organisational counterpart for this overlap of dimensions.

## How do the four dimensions of participation manifest and impact practice?

### The Personal/Procedural dimension

The *Personal/Procedural* dimension refers to the competency of the adult to interact with children in age appropriate, relationship-based ways, spontaneously and for sustained engagement – whether as part of practice strategies or in language, tone, and form. Competency here means knowledge, skills, and confidence to engage children. It is observed as formal training in participation and application of participation practice models at the practitioner-child, or practitioner-group level. Examples of competency in this dimension include, making time for

children, using assessment tools that have questions seeking children's views embedded in them, and having knowledge of relevant resources that direct participatory work with children such as Section 10.1 on the principle of participation in the *NSW Children and Young Person's (Care and Protection) Act 1989 No 157* and *CREATE Foundation* resources.

The dimension establishes positive connections between children and adults as a base for supportive *relationships*. It is observed as the quality of communication with children to share information, listen to and document the detail of their lived experiences. It manifests in tangible achievements to create physical and metaphorical spaces of inclusion in decision-making. The following KI describes what was understood from a consultation activity with young people about metaphorical space.

I needed to support the idea of having at least one trusted adult in a young person's life, because that was very clearly obvious from what the young people were saying.

KI #5 Interview

In this quote, the KI has listened to and heard a child's need to be connected to a trusted adult stating clearly what action must be taken to support the child's articulated view. This dimension captures the knowledge of the KI and the procedure employed by the practitioner to respond appropriately and respectfully.

## The Public/Procedural dimension

The *Public/Procedural* dimension is the formal system of resources, infrastructure and policy tools designed to support direct work with children. This includes policy models, frameworks, standards, guidelines, legislation, and conventions. They emphasise structured ways of engaging with children. Some examples of this dimension include, creating mechanisms of collaboration that bring adults together with children, like co-design work, youth advisory bodies, and reference groups to connect children's views with the formal system of care and protection. Whereas the personal/procedural is about individual competency, this dimension is about the public formal structures that have been established for government and societies to address the needs of children. Two examples of public and procedural resources are; Standard #1 'Enacting Children and Young People's Rights' in the NSW (NSW Office of the Senior Practitioner, 2020), and the resource by the NSW Commission for Children and Young People (2000).

The dimension forms the terms on which children may have *opportunity* to participate. It sets some parameters of practice used in the personal/procedural dimension. Relationship-based work cannot be scripted or standardised. Setting standard ways of engaging with children is an attempt to simplify and distil knowledge of how to work relationally to make it easier and more attractive for adults to take up. However, this public/procedural dimension can remove the spontaneity of engagement with children and hide the responsibility to provide bespoke caseworker interaction. Here a KI reflects on the functional value of setting uniform boundaries for participation when working with children:

...systemized action is important. It's a trade-off. It's like, is it good enough? Probably not. But there are some things that actually need systemized child focus and systemized children's voices.

KI #6 Interview

The KI in this quote identifies some benefit to having standard ways of working with children and indicates this alone is not good enough for participation but necessary, nonetheless. Alone, the public/procedural dimension is limited, largely translating into children's views being documented for public purposes in a 'tick box' manner. It can be reduced to descriptions of the way an organisation has engaged or collaborated with children and/or affirms the participation principles in policy documents, discourse, and research literature.

See, for me, it's the machinations of what needs to happen from an organizational perspective. So, you know, they need to be putting in certain forms and they need to be formatted a certain way, and it needs to you know, the language needs to speak to this and, you know, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Which is actually all very, very valid because that's how it becomes palatable to the people who have to pass it.

KI #8 Interview

This KI emphasises how the translation of participation practice skills (using forms, formats and language) can risk losing the relational aspects of participation and flatten participation into a bureaucratic process. However, the KI refers to the procedures as potentially elevating participation from an optional personal practice to a collective mandate set by organisations.

## The personal/conceptual dimension

The *Personal/Conceptual* dimension indicates the individual internalised attitudes, beliefs, tacit understanding, and ideologies held about children. These private and subjective qualities determine the internal sense of responsibility for children's well-being and shape behaviours such as emotionality and trust, that are crucial for participation. Literature refers to the personal attributes required to develop relationships with children that promote participation (Bessell, 2015; Testro, 2006; van Bijleveld et al., 2015). A belief in children's rights ideals as part of a practitioner's personal work ethic might motivate them to see engagement with children as a private responsibility. This means that participation work has both a skills component (personal/procedural dimension) and a personal values component (personal/conceptual dimension) that are related to each other. This duality is often emphasised in practice and less so in policy work, in that it is not only procedural knowledge that is required to make participation successful, but a particular attitude *towards* children that is also essential. Benbenishty et al. (2015) found that individual attitudes have a bearing on decisions about the substantiation of abuse, risk assessments and recommendations in child protection work, and Bessell (2009) talks about adults' three types of ideas; world views, principled beliefs and causal beliefs that can all be both obstructive and facilitative of child participation.

This dimension determines the quality of *advocacy* for children, that is, the strength of determination to claim or defend support for children. Although this dimension is not easily discernible, it has substantial influence as the founding motivation to prioritise or undermine children's needs and rights in policy, practice, and research. It speaks to the individual willingness and quality of engagement with children that is private and subjective as explained by these KIs.

Look, I think if they're going to do it [children's participation], they'll [staff] come from a space where they fundamentally believe in the rights of children. And that's a cultural piece, not everybody does.

KI#5 Interview

Prior to this...she actively supported the participation of children in decisions that affected their lives. She was a ferocious character and intimidated many...workers and bureaucrats. She often got her way and was on occasion very influential.

Google Doc Response

These KI's refer to an individual being motivated to support children's participation as a cultural response and how a personal belief in the rights of children can lead to strong advocacy and influence on others. This dimension is intangible but manifests in frontline and policy contexts in the way individuals conceptualise children, the way children are described, and the language used around how, when, where and why they should participate. This aspect of participation speaks to what must be personally offered up for child voice, as explained by this KI,

But when the rubber hits the road, and you hear something, or you see something and you're not sure what to do, what is it that helps you make your decision? And the bottom line is because the key thing that stops people from doing anything is answering that question. What does this mean for me? And I feel like this is not to oversimplify again, but I feel like this is the same. We can give people all the values in the world. We can, you know, shower them with external requirements and training and development and support systems and all of that sort of stuff. But we actually have to get down to the person, and what it is specifically for them that they grapple with in these situations, you know, ... what is it about them that needs to be resolved in order for them to then carry out this behaviour? That's what's missing for me in all of this. I don't think we know how to do that very well.

KI #8 Interview

The KI expresses deeply private values and fears of adults as strong influences on how they respond to children.

## The Public/Conceptual dimension

The *Public/Conceptual* dimension involves theories about children's participation in academic terms, and social norms towards childhood often obscure in discourse. By way of example, child development theories are pervasive in their influence, leading to aged-based thinking about children's capacities. As a result, children can be left out of decision-making processes based on serious concerns about their own safety. This dimension manifests in the way society responds to child protection concerns, for example as design flaws in assessment or court processes that do not cater to children's views on their own safety. Society's views about children's legitimate role and what their needs are reflect normative orders regarding childhood, for example, as a time of vulnerability in need of protection or as a period of emerging competence (Hutchby & Moran-Ellis, 1998).

This dimension can be made explicit in research knowledge. Evidence on trauma-informed approaches to child protection work shows children's views are not well respected in child serving systems that utilise trauma informed care (TIC), despite this being a necessary tenant of the TIC approach for children in trauma recovery (Bargeman et al., 2021). This dimension is about the collective cultural perspective on the place of children in society, which informs policy epistemes (Haas, 1992), including whether children's participation is something to be valued or not.

This also relates to perspectives of children taken by global communities, such as the *United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child*, and how these global bodies frame children's rights as related to child safeguarding and participation.

The Public/Conceptual dimension strongly shapes the formal *positioning* of children on the broadest scale. Its influences are gradual and therefore unremarkable on a day-to-day basis, yet exceptional as collective authority over the direction of work with children. It is a dimension present in international, government or community discourse reflecting aspirations we have for children as a society, and children's roles as citizens and potential future roles as adults. Pinkney (2011, pp. 272–273) found “the first framing discourse identified in the policy texts was developmentalism. The second and related discourse is protectionism which often involves essentialist notions of childhood ...as a time of innocence and play...”. These ways of knowing about children expressed in policy, (that children need to be protected) may be at odds with ‘doing’ building relationships with children as individuals with decision-making rights and expert capacities of their own, about how to be safe. An example is the UNCROC participation principle embedded in NSW child protection legislation. The KI below talks historically about child protection in NSW, referring to the role of formal rights documents.

Plus, I think there remain very paternalistic attitudes towards children, especially in our political classes. You know, who were mostly of a generation that's done it without a Charter of Rights or a Bill of Rights in this country is not a very sophisticated understanding of rights. In fact, there's a lot of anti-rights kind of people in decision making spaces. I think that will change.

KI #5 Interview

While I note significant work by NSW Ombudsman and former Community Services Commission in advocating for systemic policy and practice changes there was limited work focused on children and young peoples' participation in decision making.

Google Doc Response

The first KI's quote indicates their experience with paternalism, class, and the generation of decision-makers. The second KI notes the disconnect between overarching policy and actual participation work with children. This public/conceptual dimension is understated in relation to frontline work with children but can be seen in the overall trends in service delivery guidelines or funding schemes that dictate practice. Moreover, the emphasis on children's participation argued as children's rights can be fuelled by individualism resulting in a public show of participation as ingenuine and tokenistic (Duncan, 2019). The power of the public concept in positioning children is evident in the following KI quote about caseworker to child ratios.

It was clear that the department in theory knew that you had to listen to the child, that the voice of the child was important. But when they themselves were responsible for these children, they did not act like that, and they did not seek to reduce that ratio of twenty-nine to one to anything feasible that would enable conversations [with children].

KI #2

The KI talks about the accepted theoretical understanding in the statutory body that is not enacted by individuals which maintained the exclusion of children from conversations and decisions.

While the data in this study identify four dimensions of children's participation they are not siloed. They should be considered descriptions of the setting for participation, and as heuristic constructs of what participation is. These results encourage thinking about participation as located in multiple dimensions, in tandem, and all at once. UNCRC can be used by individuals as an everyday practice tool to guide engagement with children (personal/procedural dimension). It can offer confidence and support for a positive attitude towards children's participation, (personal/conceptual dimension), but also guide public policy and provide authority for government legislation (part of the public/conceptual and public/procedural dimensions). Using our previous example of the NSW child protection system, children's rights to participation are clearly embedded in state legislation (Public/Procedural) but other managerial based processes may not support organisational practice and staff in building a conceptual understanding of children's participation, the procedural skills required and/or address individual and social values that exist counter to children's participation rights.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The four dimensions of participation conceptualise children's participation differently resulting in distinctive implementation strategies. The Personal/Procedural dimension creates supportive relationships at the level of one-to-one and one-to-several practice; the Public/Procedural provides opportunity to develop capacities through guidelines and training; the Personal/Conceptual promotes advocacy for children, calling for practice and policy that embody children's rights; and the Public/Conceptual dictates the formal positioning of children within society in abstract attitudes to children. It informs the other dimensions in ways akin to Weiss (1982) 'enlightenment function' of research in policy processes. This set of dimensions may help assess the extent to which features of policy and practice may be misaligned. This is because it emphasises different notions of what participation is and different institutional/role/policy functions and responsibilities in the carriage of participation. Together they convey more effectively the underlying range of responsibilities and actions that lead to 'space, voice, audience and voice' (Lundy, 2007) which have begun to be operationalised in Ireland. The Irish National Strategy indicates substantial progress in collaborative work between government departments and agencies (National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision Making 2015–2020, 2015) which reflects some synergies have been developed between the Public/Procedural and Public/Conceptual dimensions. Understanding the links of Personal dimensions with Public ones is harder to evaluate. Furthermore, the four dimensions align comfortably with the UN General Comment list of basic requirements for the implementation of participation ("Concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Australia", 2019), including for example, respect, transparency, adult training, accountability. All the requirements pertain to both personal and public capacities.

This research characterises the implementation of participation as multimodal, offering a way to discern where participation efforts are focussed. If a practitioner has no personal/procedural skills, we likely observe poor engagement practice with children. If a policy-maker lacks personal/procedural skills, its likely they develop policy that does not engage with the lived experiences of children. If there is minimal public/procedural support, there are no clear policy mandates for children's participation. Disregard for children and the value of their agency stem from a range of personal standpoints about children as vulnerable, incapacitated, or dangerous. The absence of a progressive public conception of children, or one that is secondary to other

ideologies like managerial principles, capitalist economy or patriarchal systems, leads to attitudes that disrespect children as individual people with rights. Working in a one-dimensional way yields limited participation results for children whether in direct engagement or broader policy and positioning work. Participation efforts are often limited to a focus on individual training of practitioners (individual/procedural) or improved generic policy (collective/conceptual) and are regularly siloed from each other.

Implementing children's participation policy is reliant on the actor within the context of their work who has their own internal logic and epistemic assumptions about what participation is. *Individual practitioners* support children to bring about change in their lives and therefore the personal/procedural dimension of participation. A *manager or trainer* may seek to improve the workforce of practitioners engaging with children by changing skills and knowledge of individual practitioners in their team, as described in the public/procedural dimension. *Policymakers* are well intentioned but bound by political pressure work to improve the capacities of managers/trainers/organisations through policies that dictate broad approaches work with children, so maintain the public/conceptual dimension. *Peak bodies and academia* may pursue cutting edge thinking on approaches to children's well-being, which lies within the personal/conceptual dimension. While the reality of practice is more complex than the distinction between contexts and logics suggests, the dimensions help identify competing frames used to understand participation, and how the prioritising of frames has some relationship with the institutional setting and associated imperatives of different actors. Each of these enterprises is important to children's participation and play a significant role.

The dimensions encourage awareness of the variety of understandings of participation within a complex ecosystem of policy and practice. They function as pointers to individual and collective differences, capacities, and responsibilities. As we have suggested in this article, different actors will advocate for different solutions, and what is required is a combination of actions ideally functioning together efficiently for the best outcomes for children. The dimensions accentuate the need to overcome the problem of epistemic differences (ways of knowing) and stakeholder interests (different ways of doing) amongst individuals, groups and societies that look to implement children's participation. By bringing to the surface epistemic differences, it potentially enables a nuanced way to dialogue around the policy-practice gap in children's participation. It extends discourse beyond conversations on resources and workplace culture, to understanding the politically sensitive platforms that are foundational to implementing children's participation. In this way, the four dimensions move beyond singular strategies to a conglomeration of strategies and approaches that coalesce and acknowledge participation as the complex work it is.

This research was limited to practitioners with experience in the NSW child protection system. Additional research is needed to explore the generalisability of the proposed dimensions in diverse service and environmental contexts.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Research Direct at <https://researchdirect.westernsydney.edu.au/>.



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## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> The definition of child protection used here is ‘safeguarding children from harm’ as used by Save the Children <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/save-childrens-definition-child-protection/>. Accessed 18/10/22.

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