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Safety and beyond? Exploring children's priorities for their participation in the child protection and welfare process

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ABSTRACT

Background: Participation by children and young people is an increasingly important guiding principle in child protection policy and practice, thanks to the influence of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and other factors. However, the scope, terms and timing of such participation are still often determined by adults.

Objective: Drawing on secondary qualitative data, this conceptual study explores children's experiences of participation in their own and their family's involvement in the child protection process.

Participants and setting: Twenty children and young people living in Ireland participated in the source study which provides illustrative material for this conceptual paper. They were aged 10–18 years and had experienced child protection involvement over the 18 months prior to interview.

Methods: A reanalysis of semi-structured individual interviews provided illustrative material for a conceptual exploration of children's experiences of participation in child protection involvement with their family.

Results: The conceptual analysis suggests that the children generally shared adult concerns about the child protection issues in their case, but that they also saw participation differently from adults especially in relation to certain aspects of risk and safety. They had concerns about the risk of stigma among peers and the community due to the intervention, and what they saw as the risk of insufficient ongoing dialogue between them and the professionals.

Conclusions: This conceptual paper opens up new child-centred perspectives on children's participation in child protection, arguing that more attention to child centred participation can enhance participatory and protective practices in the field of child protection.

1. Introduction

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has lent momentum to the case for participation by children in processes that help shape policies affecting their lives. Article 12 of the UNCRC is underpinned by the principle of respect for children's views, with an obligation on adults to afford children participatory rights to have their views known. Thanks in no small part to the influence of Article 12, participation (broadly understood) has therefore become an important test of the validity of any children's policy process in terms of children's rights. This has resulted in a specific issue becoming critical. Has there been consultation and engagement with

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actual children in the development or review of a given measure or the implementation of a key decision? However, we suggest that there are certain challenges about the process of children's formal 'participation' as currently understood and conducted. The practice of 'participation' brings adults and children together in a shared process, but who determines what happens and how? While there are, broadly, two sets of parties involved – the adults and the child or children, it is arguably the adults who mostly determine the focus, the purpose, the timing, and the structure of participation (van Bijleveld et al., 2015). Participation is thus generally an adult led exercise in which children do not play any *(co-)leadership* role, although there can be exceptions in certain arenas, as for example participatory action research (e.g. Montreuil et al., 2021).

Would participation look different, or address different priorities, or have different outcomes, or yield different insights if children were to play a part in the *shaping of the process*, rather than just playing out parts within the pre-determined process assigned by adults? In this largely conceptual paper, we set out to investigate these questions in relation to child protection. We explore issues in relation to how child participation plays out in child protection processes *from the vantage point of the child*. To do so, we draw on illustrative data from a recent study of children's experience of child protection processes in one system.

As we develop and evidence our argument, we will foreground the importance of a *child-centered* rather than child-focused approach and emphasize how children's constructions of 'safety' in child protection may be broader than adults' in subtle yet significant ways. There are of course many valid reasons for a largely adult led process in the context of child protection – given the multiple and complex issues to be balanced across child safety, family wellbeing, social and medical evidence, and legal requirements / provisions and more. We also note that in our view a rights or participation perspective does not cast the child as the main 'decider' but rather emphasizes the importance of adults listening to children and taking their wishes and feelings into account (in accordance with the child's age and maturity) when adults make decisions that affect children's lives. We are motivated here, however, by what is lost if the gap between the child as 'decider' and the child as 'informed participant' becomes too wide.

While child participation gains more attention in policy terms, we recognize that there may be many reasons why child participation may not yet be fully embraced across all child protection systems (see McCafferty, 2021; Strømland et al., 2022). In their recent systematic review of systematic reviews of children's participation in the child welfare field, McCafferty and Mercado Garcia (2024) reach some sobering and pivotal conclusions: 'children's voice is not taken seriously', participation processes are inherently relational, and the context of participation (legal, social etc.) is critical. The inevitable reality appears to be that child protection *systems* across the world may vary widely, may be at different stages of development, have different levels of resourcing and staff training, reflect different cultural, legal and political assumptions about childhood, children's agency, child safety and child participation, have different levels of policy articulation and operationalization, and face different operational pressures. Given these realities, child participation may not always be a priority, and where child participation in child protection is embraced it most likely proceeds from adult assumptions. The focus is often on facilitating the child to be heard in the adult processes. Too often the result may be a process that is experienced as tokenistic – with too little real *dialogue* between the child and the worker (Toros, 2021). Adult conceptualizations of children as vulnerable in certain contexts (child protection and health for example) can aggravate such problems resulting in adult centric decision-making processes that exclude or give little heed to children's views (Garcia-Quiroga & Agoglia, 2020). Commenting on this point over two decades ago, Archard (2004) concluded that ideological tensions between children's agency and participatory rights on the one hand, and the paternalistic drive to protect them from harm on the other hand can result in adults determining participatory processes and leading the processes involved (Warrington & Larkins, 2019). With the dominance of adult constructions of child participation on the one hand, or neglect of the notion of child participation on the other, in either case there seems to remain a relative gap in terms of attending to *children's* perspectives on their own participation (within participation processes based on adult models) in the child protection process. Such a gap poses a challenge in terms of achieving a comprehensive picture of the child's experience of child protection and welfare services and what that can teach us about how to strengthen the overall child protection response. We will argue that attending carefully to the *child's* perspective on both the child protection process and on how child participation is conducted in the context of child protection and welfare can deepen our understanding of the overall dynamics driving processes and outcomes in child protection efforts.

2. Background

In developing our approach in this conceptual paper, we lay out some assumptions or propositions that underpin our thinking. In the daily cut and thrust child protection and welfare practice, professionals typically set the agenda in relation to the specific set of circumstances / issues to be addressed, determine the priorities for attention, and the timing and methodology of key processes. These same professionals also conceptualize, implicitly or explicitly, the model of participation to be applied in the child protection process (if at all) (Henriksen, 2022; Merkel-Holguin et al., 2020). Adults (professionals and family members) also determine the actual specifics of which children get to participate and how, for example the extent of engagement with different children in the same household. In approaching this topic, we suggest therefore that there are a number of key concepts to unpack. Opportunities for children to participate in child protection depend on a range of factors, including, crucially, adult (and child) conceptualizations of 'child', 'child participation' and 'child safety'.

2.1. Conceptualizations of the 'child'

Is the 'child' seen primarily as a passive victim to be protected, or as a social actor with their own unique voice and active agency in their own life whose views are to be given ongoing attention in the child protection process? Does the view held of the child consider their positionality including their age, gender, socio-economic circumstances, social and cultural identities, their social roles and

relationships in daily life (family member, neighbor, student, friend, club member etc.) and more (see Coyne et al., 2021; Tisdall & Punch, 2012)? The concept of positionality reminds us that children have different lived experiences from adults (and from each other) for a number of reasons, by virtue of each child being a different human being, living within both a separate life course and social ecology (Konstantoni & Emejulu, 2017). Children in the child protection process have lives in their families, but also in schools and neighborhoods and possibly in communities or other clubs/ organizations – all with connections which influence their positionality. Additional differences in positionality arise because of variation in power and vantage points that may emerge between adults and children. Dutch colleagues also remind us why professional understanding of the implications of such differences is an important issue in child protection:

> *if we truly wish to protect children from harm, it is crucial to understand their lifeworld and what is at stake for them and to show respect for their perspectives, experiences, and needs* (van Bijleveld et al., 2020: 292).

In this paper exploring child participation, we are motivated and guided by van Bijleveld and colleagues' (and others) assertion. As our starting point, we conceptualize the participating child in child protection and welfare as having capacity to exercise agency, as having their own distinctive positionality and perspective, and as bringing their own unique set of experience all within their particular life world or social ecology. We develop this point throughout this paper proposing that a more child-centered approach to child participation will lead to a more effective approach to child protection, and child participation within child protection.

Before unpacking further our approach to the key concepts in the paper, we should also declare our understanding of the phrase '*child* protection and welfare intervention', the meaning of which may differ in subtle or significant ways across different cultural and legal contexts. We see each enactment of a formal process of child protection investigation / intervention occurring within a given legal and administrative framework, but also within the wider social ecology of the life of the child and family, and in our interviews, aspects of this backdrop were often referred to when relevant by the children and/or the interviewer. We see 'child protection intervention' as consisting of work at two levels: firstly in terms of mandated investigative and intervention work at different stages by actors with a formal role in that process, and secondly support work in another layer of less formal intervention / activity valued by the child which could involve trusted adults (youth workers, sports coaches, family members etc.) supporting the child in a range of ways often relevant to the formal process but not necessarily fully prescribed by that process. In a sense, how these processes are seen and understood depends on the lens chosen, the view of the child protection professionals, the child, or the supporting actors. The implications of such differing perspectives are at the heart of the argument in this paper.

2.2. *Conceptualizations of 'children's participation'*

Coming from their own 'lifeworld', children may each have somewhat different views regarding the issues 'at stake' in the child protection and welfare process as compared to adults – or the professionals involved. Yet, how professionals conceptualize child participation may influence their practices when engaging with children, and whether they heed the notion of children potentially having different issues 'at stake' (van Bijleveld et al., 2015). There have been efforts to enhance opportunities for children's participation in child protection (Woodman et al., 2018). But how well do these efforts engage with children's own concerns as service users in child protection and welfare services? What do we know about the specific concerns of *children* in this arena, and how do they converge or diverge with those of adults in the same processes? What do we know about what might be children's priorities as to how participation is (or should be) framed or focused? These are important questions since adults and children see the world differently, a message with key implications for child protection (Woodman et al., 2023). This difference in perspective can be related to many issues including developmental stage, power and positionality.

Adults and professionals may also interpret differently how to honor the principle of participation. For example, Middel et al. (2021) report from their study (also in the Netherlands) that professionals may prioritise 'hearing' children over 'informing' or 'involving' them, despite their view (also reported) that each of these three processes is important for enacting participation. Research suggests that being listened to is of crucial importance to children, to the extent that in Van Bijleveld et al.' (2015) study, children reported that being heard is more important than getting what they wanted. However, being informed seems equally important. Research has found that children who reported they were well informed were most positive about social work investigations, even in cases where the intervention was not what they wanted (Jobe & Gorin, 2013). The purpose of participation may also be understood differently by professionals and children. For example, a Dutch study of case managers and young people found that case managers viewed participation as a means to ensure a child's cooperation, whereas young people understood it as a mechanism for being heard and informed (van Bijleveld et al., 2014).

This fuller and more rounded understanding (and more diversified practice) of facilitating children's participation may, for example, uncover issues less obvious to adults, or differences in how key terms are understood. The importance of these processes of 'informing' and 'involving' children in child protection will loom large as we explore their participation throughout the paper.

2.3. *Conceptualizations of 'child safety'*

The third pillar concept in our argument, in addition to the 'child' and 'participation', relates to the notion of 'safety', so pivotal in child protection and welfare. But do children and adults necessarily both understand safety in the same way? Based on their review of 39 studies of children's experience of child protection, Wilson, Hean, Abebe and Heaslip (2020, pp. 11-12) report that children place a high value on information and transparency about the child protection process in their lives. Additionally, they suggest that children may see 'safety' in more nuanced and broader terms than adults. Children may prioritise emotional as well as physical safety and may

also have concerns about the risk of stigma arising from their association with the child protection system. Such stigma may carry the risk of misrecognition within their social networks, of being seen negatively or as less worthy with adverse consequences for their own sense of positive identity (Korkiamäki & Gilligan, 2020). This concern about stigma was also flagged by children in a study of child protection service users by Buckley, Carr and Whelan (2011, p. 104). Besides stigma, another substantial safety issue (from the child's perspective) was how information relating to the child was handled – information to them, information about them, and about what. Concerns about privacy were an important aspect of safety for many children (Buckley, Carr & Whelan, 2011; Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Sanders et al., 2017). Finally, it is worth noting that a lack of participation may itself cause harm to children. Where children feel they do not have influence on important decisions affecting them, they can feel extremely upset (Tierney, Kennan, Forkan, Brady, & Jackson, 2018) and report that a lack of participation can adversely affect their sense of identity (Buckley, Whelan, Carr, & Murphy, 2008). In this sense, we suggest that a lack of participation may not merely represent a relatively benign missed opportunity, but rather may pose an actual threat to children's sense of safety throughout the process.

Bearing in mind the earlier point that children may have (at least some) different issues 'at stake' when compared to adults in the context of child protection and welfare, the challenge then becomes one of conducting participation and wider child protection processes in such a way that children feel able to disclose their personal concerns relating to safety *on their terms*. These concerns may extend beyond the precipitating triggers for the child protection system's engagement in their lives. The study on which this primarily conceptual paper is based provides some preliminary evidence that children may indeed have distinctive concerns, attention to which may improve the overall effectiveness of child protection efforts and children's satisfaction with same (Holt, Gilligan, Caffrey, & Brady, 2023). We have not sought nor are we claiming to deliver definitive findings here about how children see the process of participation. We believe, however, that our analysis of children's responses in the original study suggests that the issue of how children perceive the process of participation in child protection processes carries implications for better understanding, both of their well-being and the effectiveness of interventions. Our aim is to flag this issue and highlight the potential value of giving it more attention across policy, research, practice, and professional education.

2.4. The focus of the current paper

Drawing on the concepts we have set out above and a re-analysis of data from a study of children's experience of the national child protection service in Ireland, our aim in this paper is to i) open a wider discussion of this arguably neglected aspect of child participation in child protection, that is how children construct the notion of such participation, and ii) explore the implications of any insights emerging as to children's distinctive viewpoint**.** The focus of the paper is not on children's participation but rather on children's *constructions of the process of children's participation*. We suggest that how the child sees - and engages with participation - in child protection can have considerable bearing on the impact of child protection efforts The core argument of the paper is that the practice of participation risks falling short of its intention if it is not adequately informed by *children's* understandings of children's participation, and by attention to their specific concerns linked to their positionality in the child protection process. Attention to children's participation in this context is important in two ways. Firstly, it honors children's general participation rights, but it also potentially yields fresh insights that widen the information base for child protection practice at the case level and beyond. Secondly, it can help illuminate the specific dynamics pertinent to the child protection process in *this* case both in terms of a better understanding of the substantive issue, and in terms of the methodological and ethical approaches to participation.

In this paper, we suggest that there is a gap to be filled in terms of better understanding children's views about their own participation in child protection processes. What are the most pertinent issues and priorities from children's perspective? What do they wish to influence in the child protection process in their life through their participation at the case or personal level? What forms of participation do they find most relevant or meaningful? What do they see as helping or hindering the kind of participation they value? Answers to these key questions can inform efforts to promote deeper understanding of the still elusive 'how to' of child participation in child protection, (van Bijleveld et al., 2014; Woodman et al., 2023). This 'how to' is not just about facilitative techniques for assisting children to engage with tasks assigned by adults (although children may have ideas on this front (van Bijleveld et al., 2014)). It must also be about, we suggest, ensuring that the overall process engages with concerns and priorities as understood and formulated by the child.

3. Methodology

In a recent study of the experiences of children within child protection and welfare processes in Ireland (Holt et al., 2023), our data set offered opportunities to return to explore the concerns and priorities of children relevant to aspects of participation. This source study had a qualitative design, chosen primarily due to the dearth of empirical research in this area in this country, but also taking account of learnings from other jurisdictions including the UK (Cossar et al., 2016), Estonia (Arbeiter & Toros, 2017), Spain (Balsells et al., 2017) and Norway (Husby et al., 2018). This study achieved a final sample of 20 children and young people, 12 females and 8 males, aged between 10 and 18 at the point of interview, all of whom had had personal experience of engagement with the national child protection and welfare service in Ireland over the 18 months prior to interview. With full institutional and organizational ethical approval, the interview process in the research study gave priority to engaging with the child in a respectful and sensitive manner, at their pace, and with the consent process making clear that the child could opt out of or pause their individual interview at any point. A full account of the methodology can be accessed through Holt et al. (2023).

While the aim of the overall study was to investigate the children's experiences in their encounter with the child protection and welfare process, the data gathered included many interesting observations and references relevant to the concept of 'child

participation'. We felt a duty to honor this material by developing a conceptual paper drawing on a re-analysis of the data with the specific focus of child participation. Our intent here is therefore not to present a conventional empirical study of children's views of their participation experiences in child protection since this was not the primary and ethically approved focus in the original study. Nevertheless, the semi-structured format of the interviewing afforded children the opportunity to focus on issues of special significance to them personally within the general frame of agreed topics to be covered, and for some this included quite a deal of attention to issues relating in some way to this question of their participation in the process. On subsequent reflection, we felt that this material as presented to us merited a *conceptual* exploration of the stimulating issues posed by their accounts, especially given the relative paucity of material engaging with this issue –children's take on participation issues in *child protection*. Therefore, our overarching aim in returning to the interview data and focusing specifically on the theme of 'participation', was to generate additional insights on an issue of importance to the participants that had not been the primary focus of the original study.

4. Findings

We now explore examples of children's experience of how the child protection process can disrupt, unsettle, and raise fears of losing face, or not knowing properly what is going on. We then look at how the children responded, how they try to mitigate the additional risks that they perceived that their involvement in child protection processes may pose in their lives.

4.1. Children's concerns about the reputational risks of association with child protection

The children had two main areas of concern in terms of the public implications of their involvement in the child protection process. In a sense, these were two sides of the same coin – issues relating to privacy and issues relating to exposure and losing face. By their nature, these issues could arise in many different contexts, but school was reported for some as an especially challenging location in this regard, both as a physical location in the child protection process, but also in terms of the implications of teacher engagement in the process.

Adam (12) recalled social workers coming to see him out of the blue at his school during the school day. He did not know why the meeting was happening, nor why it was taking place in his school. Having the meeting in school left him feeling *'confused'* and asking himself *'what did it have to do with school?'*. The discomfort he felt being called out of his classroom – and then having to return - still remained vivid.

Interviewer: *When you went back to class did anyone in your class say, 'where were you?'?*

Adam: *Yeah, it was a bit awful really.*

In his emphatic response to the interviewer, we can sense his dread as to what he faced in the moment, and later, in terms of the threat of exposure among his peers implicit in the social workers' visit to the school. For the social workers, the location was very likely an incidental detail in their busy schedule, but for Adam it posed the risk of an enduring loss of face among his peers. Undoubtedly, there may have been good reasons for the social workers' choice of venue – from their perspective, but from Adam's perspective their choice posed risks that he could see but which presumably were invisible to the workers. There was a further issue for Adam in relation to the school's connection to the child protection process. He had concerns about how much the teachers should know about his life, and expressed a reservation about the school having too much information about him:

> '*I just don't get the school knowing every bit*'.

This comment again illustrates the potential gap between the priorities or logic of the professionals in the process, and those of a given child, whose different positionality will potentially give rise to different concerns, for the child when compared to those of the professionals. The link between child protection and school life also loomed large for Ciara (aged 16). She had ready recall of what had occurred at a formal set piece meeting for professionals about her case which she was also attending. She found that the details of her case suddenly became available to all present, including her school principal. Up to that point, she believed that the school principal only knew those things about her case that she herself had shared with her. She had previously thought

> '[that she only] *knew the things I came into school about, like [I] told her about and she'd go back and contact Tusla about it. She only knew that*'.

But she was horrified about how much detail actually emerged in the meeting, meaning that the principal now knew '*everything that happened [in her family], I was like 'oh God this is like no'*.

Ciara went on to reflect on the impact of this exposure and its profound implications for other roles in her wider life beyond child protection service user. She sensed that the principal now saw her and her family in a new light as the fuller picture was uncovered at the meeting:

Ciara: *I was really upset. You could see [during the meeting] that she didn't know all this was happening. She was kind of nodding her head and I think she said 'I didn't really understand all of this'. It was kind of obvious that she didn't know because she kind of gave that look, really listen like 'oh ok so I should be aware of this' - like if I come in looking sad, it could be a possibility that something happened. Sometimes I don't say everything or tell them everything.*

Interviewer: *Is that kind of like because you want to be in charge of what people know about your private life?*

Ciara: *Yeah that's exactly it – I know some people like teachers have to know some important stuff but does everyone need to know everything? It's a bit rough to be honest – like your life is open wide.*

Interviewer: *So, what I hear you saying is that on the one hand it's good that the school know because then perhaps they're looking out for*

you and they're more sympathetic if you don't have your homework done or whatever. But on the other hand it sounds like it feels a little bit of an invasion of your privacy?

Ciara: *Yeah it does. It does.*

Ciara felt that the meeting had robbed her of her privacy, and that now the details of her life were *'open wide'* to everyone. Part of her shock at the meeting was her realization that she no longer had control of the narrative that she felt was circulating about her life. In the exchange above she acknowledges that there is *'important stuff'* that teachers need to know, but there were also tensions for her in this regard since the exposure of her personal life felt like an *'invasion of privacy'*. She had previously seen the detail of her life as her possession, and she now felt that she needed more say in how her personal privacy was honored. (There are echoes in her viewpoint of the governing principles of (personal) data protection legislation in the European Union that personal data is owned by the person[1]).

From the child's perspective, Adam and Ciara both show how the child protection process can disrupt previous certainties or stability in children's lives, with potential for longer term relational, reputational or emotional harm. For Ciara, the interaction of the formal child protection process with her school life, meant that her family life was now more exposed to the gaze of her teachers and fellow students, and Adam had similar concerns about the potential consequences of exposure of his child protection status to his peers.

Compared to Ciara, James (12) had a slightly different take or rationale on how and when information should be shared about him at school. So long as he was convinced that there was a need for a teacher to know then he was comfortable with that information being shared. This perhaps relates to his need to understand *why* information about him would be shared with his teachers. But he was much more cautious about his peers knowing, wanting to have control over that narrative: '[it's] *my business cause, it's just like if they spread it around and add lies, that's gonna be horrible, so that's why I don't tell them'*. Essentially, he saw such misuse of his personal information as a potential seedbed for stigma.

For children with troubled home circumstances school could be an important haven, a precious secure base in a wider sea of instability. Yet, ironically, the child protection process may inadvertently diminish, for some, this sense of security at school. It may lead to a shift in the child's perception of 'school' in their lives, disrupting its possibly precious 'neutral' status in their eyes in the contested space between home life and the child protection system. The point here is not about excluding school and teachers from the child protection process, but about adults being alert (and responsive) to children's sensitivities in how engagement is managed.

4.2. Children's concerns about understanding the process – being in the loop

Feeling fully informed was also an important issue for the children – to really have a sense of what was going on in *their* child protection process. For the professionals, the process may have a certain order or familiarity, but for each child it is typically a novel and unique experience. Sinead (15) feared the potential consequences of not giving the right answer for what she saw as the text represented by one of the Signs of Safety exercises used within the child protection service. Based on rumors she had heard, she was afraid that getting the answer wrong in some way could mean that she would end up being taken away (into care).

Sineád: *I was very scared. So, I was like, 'if I do this wrong, then they're gonna take me but how do you draw a house wrong? I just remember them saying that we had to draw the house for them and then they would talk to my Mam or Dad about it - it was like a test that I didn't really know how to do properly - I didn't know the rules.*

Not understanding the process or its rules could be an issue more broadly in ways beyond the sense explained by Sinead. For some of the children, words used by social workers could sometimes be puzzling, an example of how information might be transmitted but not actually received as intended. Aisling (11) for example, told us that she sometimes found it hard to understand the words that social workers used: '*sometimes* [they used] *big words*' [gesturing big by her arms stretched wide].

Encounters with the child protection process could also leave young people and their family with challenging material to digest afterwards as hinted at in the account of Cathy (18). Her experience suggests that reaching *understanding* is not just about the transfer of information but is also an ongoing iterative process which at times may need some kind of involvement in de-briefing.

Cathy recalled a very difficult meeting that she attended with her parents. Echoing some of Ciara's account (above), Cathy described her experience of information overload and exposure. She felt that her sense of not being properly involved and not having her say was compounded by how the meeting ended. With no debriefing on the day to make sense of what had happened, she and her parents '*just had to go home and get on with it'*, describing the resulting atmosphere at home as '*unhappy'*:

> *I think* Tusla - Child and Family Agency *should have a meeting with, not with everyone there, but just the family after, and explain… I think they should sit us down after it, talk to us when all the professionals aren't there.*

James (10) made an important point about the level of information which children may seek about the child protection process. When the workers came to the house to meet his mother, they had closed the room door leaving him in another room. He tried to sneak a glimpse of what was going on but gave up trying. He recalled that he '*didn't really care* [what was going on in the room], [I] *just wanted to see if it was good or bad'*. He just needed some sense of what was happening rather than to be right in the middle of things. While each child is different and the context varies in each scenario, finding the right balance in relation to information sharing was a recurring concern – not too much, not too little, and in a form that was accessible.

While the theme of not knowing or not understanding – in different senses – was a pattern in many of the young people's comments, there were also examples where children felt involved and reported feeling heard and understood. Aoife (18) reflected on a meeting she

[1] https://commission.europa.eu/law/law-topic/data-protection_en

attended which was convened to decide on family contact time over a holiday period. Aoife remembered that she went into the meeting with clear requests about the type of contact she wanted. Looking back, she felt she had been listened to and had *'had a say'*.

> *…..when she was actually asking me questions like 'how would you feel about this' [if there was a concern about her safety]… I just felt like wow, this woman's actually asking me how I feel, and she was writing notes down after I said how I feel, so it made me feel like she was actually going to follow up on what I thought, and then after the meeting was over, she had sent me out a letter about what the plans were [for contact time]. And my things … were in it that I wanted and why went through [were agreed], obviously some things didn't go through, and looking back, it wasn't really a good idea, so she did listen to what I wanted but made them… better… do you get me?*

Aoife recalled her feelings about being heard, about the professional decision being explained very clearly to her. While Aoife did not get everything she had been asking for in the discussion, being listened to and understanding why the decision was made, were more important to Aoife, than getting what she wanted. She felt *involved '……..I think that she actually cooperated with me, and interacted with me'*.

Leah (16) stressed how important it was to her that she had *'a say'* or could influence who attended an important child protection meeting in her school. She had specifically asked that one professional not be invited to the meeting and this person did not attend. This left her feeling heard and involved.

5. The children's concerns and child participation

Taking us close to the children's view of their 'lifeworld' (van Bijleveld et al., 2020), the selected data from our source study reveals that children's concerns were often focused on more subtle aspects of the daily process of child protection as it affected them. While children clearly shared priority commitment to the aim of the child(ren) and family being - and feeling - *safe*, for them there were also other issues 'at stake'. In our analysis of the children's priority concerns (for both the child protection process and their participation in same), they seemed to have a somewhat broader understanding of what constituted 'safety' for them: they tended to emphasize certain issues more than professionals might have done. For the children in our study, a critical aspect of participation seemed closely linked to the flow of information about 'their' child protection 'case'. This was also related to their access to, and influence on, that flow of information about them and their family. For the children, the handling of that (formal and informal) information itself proved an important consideration in their feeling 'safe'.

5.1. Fear of losing face

The children's focus on information going to others was linked to their concern that they did not want to lose face (nor see their family lose face) among peers or the community on account of what they might see as unwarranted exposure of the family's difficulties in the wider world of their school or community. Not losing face was a fundamental part of safety for many of the children. They wanted to minimize the risk of stigma or misrecognition as collateral damage from the child protection process (Korkiamäki & Gilligan, 2020). It is important to stress that the insights we present here are derived from both what children said they valued and disliked in their lived experience of the child protection process.

A key concern in terms of potential loss of face for children was observing or imagining how information about their circumstances flowed through different networks in their lives, and how such information was treated on arrival, whether in its intended state, or in distorted variations. The children were conscious of their positionality as social actors in different roles in their networks – as family member, school student, peer group member, child in their neighborhood and more. They were also concerned not only about formal/official information within the child protection process, but also about how revelations about their status as service user or about their circumstances, could prompt rumor and speculation in different networks. They feared this could lead potentially to stigma or loss of face. They were keen to protect their reputation, and to restrict the degree of leakage of personal or family business into other domains. Their desire was to preserve spaces in their lives where they could avoid or reduce the negative implications, they saw for themselves in association with the child protection process. This issue highlights how different positionality results in different stakes that the children and professionals hold in the child protection process. It illuminates how children's view of 'safety' may become broader than that of professionals. They do not necessarily oppose the professional viewpoint or mandate, but for them the child protection process itself may pose a secondary threat that goes beyond the harm that that very process seeks to mitigate.

5.2. Knowing what is going on

Broadly, children were telling us that, for them, participation was less an issue of making decisions or formally taking part in 'set piece' decisions, but more often about *feeling involved*, about *knowing what was going on*. This knowing seemed to help them feel safer and more secure. An important issue for them seemed to be about the handling of information in different ways, how information they saw as critical was shared with them - and with others - *day to day*. Questions linked to this included whether the relevant information was shared with them on an ongoing basis, whether they could understand what was said when information was being shared, and whether they felt they got all of the information they needed. They were concerned about having sufficient access to information about *their* child protection process as it unfolded, and about the potential risk of stigma flowing from association with child protection processes. For the children, what they experienced as the toxic potential of stigma was seen as a very real threat to their safety, but one that was often invisible to the workers.

The children had two priorities that can be discerned in the data from the main study. The first was to know what was going on, to stay fully briefed, to be *in the loop* – in broad terms - on the ongoing child protection process. This point resonates with the finding mentioned above from the Middel et al. (2021) study about 'informing' and 'involving' being necessary but less evident forms of professional practice relating to child participation. There was also evidence that the children had a second concern - to protect their own and their family's reputation: as in they wanted information about the family's child protection issue to be handled with tact and respect, and they wanted a part in *influencing the narrative* as in how the public flow of that information was managed. We use the term 'public flow' to represent flows of information that reached networks beyond the family, or immediate professionals responsible for their child protection process. There was information as it flowed to them, and then also information as it flowed to others; flows in either direction could work well, or could raise issues in terms of risk to reputation and identity.

6. Discussion

What are the implications of what the children told us for our thinking about child participation in child protection? The children's comments have relevance for two key aspects of our understanding as to the timing of participation. As they see it, participation is not a once-off step in a process, nor an issue that only kicks in at points of formal decision making. Echoing Middel et al.'s (2021) assertions, children may instead regard participation as something that needs to be seen as a constant, adaptive and iterative process of *involvement*, embedded across daily developments, rather than as an action that punctuates the process in some formal way from time to time as determined by the adults. Daily practice needs to accommodate this iterative process of involvement since, arguably, a more fluid approach to participation better aligns with the daily and dynamic lived realities of the child's life world.

While some of the children may undoubtedly have valued joining in set piece decision making events, a wider concern for the children generally seemed to be this desire for a more subtle, informal and ongoing type of participation through *involvement* with two goals in mind. In keeping with previous studies (Wilson et al., 2020), they wanted *to be kept in the loop*, to be kept briefed (broadly) on what was going on. They also wanted *to influence the narrative* about their case, a finding that echoes previous research illustrating that privacy and being assured that their information will remain confidential is important to children (Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Sanders et al., 2017). In many of the accounts from the children, this wish to influence the narrative seemed to represent a coping strategy in face of what they saw as the risk and uncertainty posed by information about them seemingly floating around different networks in a disruptive way. If they could influence the narrative, this could potentially serve to reduce the risk of a negative public narrative about themselves and their family, thus allowing them retain respect and dignity – and for them a vital status of *normality* – within their networks.

For the children, diverging from such normality carried the risk of stigma. Seen from the perspective of the child rather than the adult professional or policy maker, we suggest that the notion of child participation in child protection and welfare may look different to how it is represented in much of the literature on child participation (van Bijleveld et al., 2014; van Bijleveld et al., 2015). For the children in our study, the avoidance of negative difference linked to the child protection process could be a major concern, and a key motive and priority in participation for the child – on their terms. Indeed, this finding demonstrates how, from a child's perspective participation was not necessarily positive and sometimes seemed to carry a risk of harm through stigma.

The scope of our study does not allow us to claim to have generalizable or universal findings in this area. Nevertheless, we offer our study as a contribution to the search for fuller forms of child-friendly participation in child protection, for more grounded understandings of child participation and child involvement that reflect both adult *and* child realities. The argument we develop here is that the children and the professionals (unsurprisingly) have different perspectives on the child protection process. The children and the adults certainly share common concerns in the process. But our analysis also suggests that since the positionality of the children in the process is different to that of the professionals, this leads inevitably to the children having a different set of 'stakes' in the process with different implications for them, when compared to the stake(s) held by professionals and to different implications linked to those two sets of stakes. We therefore suggest that this divergence implies the need for greater attention to children's experience of participation in the child protection process, understood as greater attention to *their* issues and concerns, rather than the process being confined only to the legitimate but different concerns flowing from an adult agenda.

6.1. Contexts, actors, concerns, priorities

Four contexts were foregrounded as relevant in the analysis of children's experiences of the child protection process reported in the main study) (Holt et al., 2023): the contexts of their own family system, their school life, their neighborhood and community, and formal meetings. Each context involved its own specific set of relevant actors. Most of these actors were adults, although other children and young people (under 18 years) were also significant in certain contexts (family, school, community). Each context contributes to the range of positionalities that the children occupy in everyday life. Each context brought its own concerns for them. These four contexts are also relevant to this focus on children's view of participation, and to a greater or lesser extent have featured in our examples above.

A more expansive view of 'safety': The children may have had varying views as to their experience of the child protection process and their involvement within the process. That involvement for each child could range across different levels of engagement from passive to active. The level of engagement could vary over time for the same child, and the pattern of engagement could vary between each of the children (even in the same family), and across different contexts.

In our analysis here (and in the earlier study) we found that the children shared with the adults a concern with *safety*. Their responses revealed, however, a tendency for a more 'spacious' and nuanced understanding of safety that went beyond meanings to be

found in the adult-centric frameworks typically framing child protection practice. Such frameworks may be *child-focused*, with the child as the object of concern. However, our analysis of the children's responses leads us to suggest that child protection practices may be experienced by the child as less often *child – centered*, as in drawing on the logic, insights and concerns of the children as sensitive and agentic social actors in the child protection process, and as positioned within a life world or social networks on which the child protection process impinges.

In this more expanded view of safety, there were two dimensions that we identified that reflected the children's additional safety concerns, what they saw as their priorities when involved with the child protection process. These related to:

- Feeling 'safe', which they understand as an emotional as well as a physical state, and which is threatened in their view not only by any harm triggering the onset of Tusla - Child and Family Agency involvement, but also by the stress of what was typically their unfamiliarity with the child protection system. A significant part of feeling safe for the children was feeling that they truly had a sense of what was going on, of *being in the loop*, of having the right information – relevant and understandable.
- Protecting reputation, their own and that of their family, which they see as potentially threatened by the risk posed by the circulation of rogue stigmatizing versions of their and their family's engagement with the child protection process. While child protection might bring benefits, it could also pose these potential threats to their reputational and emotional safety. They feared loss of face for themselves or their family. They thus felt a big concern about the risk of potentially stigmatizing narratives circulating outside the family about the child protection concern. Stigma in this context could become a threat to their emotional safety, quite apart from the other threats that may have triggered or sustained the child protection intervention. Influencing the narratives circulating about them surfaced as a concern for many of the children.

We suggest that attending to these various concerns would represent priorities for at least some of the children in our study in terms of what they would seek to influence in their engagement and participation within the child protection process. For these children, they want to feel safer (as they understand it) and they want to avoid the risk of feeling shamed by association with the process. Participation could be meaningful for the children in the context of child protection when it ensured both of these priorities were addressed, when it displayed sensitivity to these concerns.

Overall, we have stressed the different perspectives that children and professionals may bring to their involvement in the child protection process and considerations of 'safety'. This observation is not to challenge the relevance or importance of child protection intervention. Nor are the children themselves questioning the overall point of intervention. But these examples of different 'takes' on safety highlight the importance of reviewing the intended and actual intervention from the different vantage points of the child and the professionals. This wider range of perspectives, and sources of information for the process, arguably will produce a fuller picture to inform and support a more productive and sustainable form of intervention.

6.2. Children's agentic responses to child protection process

In our analysis we can discern three possible responses by the children as they seek to exert some influence over what is happening in the child protection process, and thereby reducing risk to safety or reputation. From this preliminary analysis, we suggest that these (related) strategies may include:

- Seeking visibility on what is going on in 'their' child protection process (having up to date and understandable information);
- Resisting negative difference linked to association with the child protection process;
- Seeking some influence over the flow of information (content and recipients) relating to the process, some influence over the narrative that crosses into public networks linked to their lives.

These three strategies revolve around the narratives surrounding their child protection experience, and there are some other related points that should be noted. From the child's perspective, the flow of information about their case arguably involves four separate threads of narrative about their involvement with child protection that are of concern to them:

- the formal professional narrative among core key professional actors in their lives;
- the semi-public narrative available to professionals on the periphery of the child protection process (as in teachers in their school, or at least those teachers more involved in their lives, additional to designated teachers in relation to child protection);
- the 'grassroots' public narrative(s) reflected in discussions among their peers, school mates, neighbors and others within and beyond the child's gaze; and
- the private (within family) narrative which may reflect inter-personal politics across and within generations in the family system (nuclear and wider).

7. Implications for practice and policy

Our data suggests that children are sensitive to how the different narratives may come to affect them adversely, and seem especially sensitive to the public narrative, with what they perceive as its potentially high risk for them of stigmatization and misrecognition. This helps make sense of their urge for more control over narratives about them and where they flow.

While the children certainly thought that they should be heard individually and collectively, they definitely did not speak with one

'child voice' (nor did they think they did), just as adults do not speak with one 'adult voice' in comparable scenarios. The children had a range of views on, for example, the preferred nature of their involvement in child protection processes:

- while the children in our study did not speak with one voice on all issues, they did agree however that children should have their voices heard;
- they differed as to whether (and how) to be involved in formal decision making;
- they seemed to share broad agreement on their need to understand *the rules of the information game*;
- there were other issues that sometimes seemed more salient (or at least as salient) for them compared to the issues prioritized in adult decisions and decision-making.

This point on children's preferences implies that professionals and agencies must not take a single position on how to respond to children, other than to recognize that while every child may wish to have a voice, they may also have quite an individual take on how to use that voice, on how they would wish their case to be handled. This variation of preference among children requires careful discussion with each child in terms that they fully understand: 'One size does not fit all'.

Children saw that sharing information could bring benefits, but they were also sensitive to the potential downsides of such sharing. It is also important to note that children are not seeking to veto intervention (or what they would regard as appropriate information sharing) but to reduce the potential for secondary or collateral damage for them from leakage of the 'facts' or what they might perceive as distorted and stigmatizing versions of the 'facts' surrounding that intervention. For the children, issues about information could be about too much information about them floating about in their networks, whereas they could also be about too little information as in feeling left outside the loop. They were concerned to know what was going on by having the right amount of the right information.

We offer these preliminary insights from our exploratory, conceptual and still tentative analysis, in the hope of stimulating more reflection and debate on the 'what', 'how' and 'why' of child participation in child protection, and further the importance of attention to whose 'what' and 'how' understandings. Adult and child understandings may diverge as our data suggests, and such divergences may have important implications.

8. Conclusion

We have seen how children broadly endorse adult intent in child protection but may also have additional concerns. We have explored how children may prioritise (i) feeling safe (with their broader understanding of safety than that often applied within adult systems), (ii) being fully briefed and (iii) avoiding stigma / misrecognition. If child protection practice can *involve* and *inform* children (Middel et al., 2021) in new ways that better reflect their concerns (and preferences), then the reach of participation principles is extended in a potentially important and *child-centered* way. We do not underestimate the challenges facing practitioners in child protection and are in awe of what they achieve under the typically challenging dynamics of their daily practice. Yet, finding viable and meaningful ways to involve children more fully in the process is likely to lead to more positive and sustainable outcomes overall. This is partly about facilitative techniques, but even more it is about a system mind set. We are likely to be better attuned to risk and to what is at stake for the child if we involve children more fully in our approach to child protection, if we enhance the scope for their participation, if we demonstrate clear attention to *their* specific understandings, concerns and priorities in the day-to-day practice and processes of child protection. While we know that child protection and welfare systems are challenged by the burden of expectation they face, we suggest that attention to the issues we raise may yield tangible benefits for children in these systems, for the morale of workers for those children, and broader community support for the mandate of child protection.

We believe that our analysis supports the case for more attention to the child's world, the child's logic, the child's own concerns in navigating the complexities of everyday child protection practice. This implies the need for greater investment in sensitizing the 'system' to these issues, through renewed approaches in professional education, in-service training, professional supervision, practice guidance and more. We propose that such an investment has the potential to enhance how child protections processes are perceived and experienced by the children, families and workers involved, and how they are judged by wider society.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Robbie Gilligan: Writing – original draft, Conceptualization, Formal analysis. **Stephanie Holt:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Project administration, Formal analysis. **Eavan Brady:** Writing – review & editing. **Louise Caffrey:** Writing – review & editing. **Stephanie Holt:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Project administration, Formal analysis.

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Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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