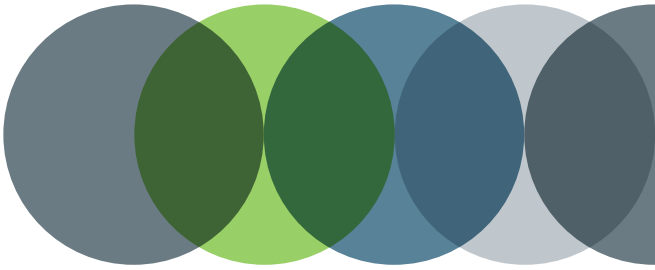

Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare

Monograph

Their voice:

Involving children and young people in decisions, services and systems

Centre for Excellence
in Child and Family Welfare Inc.

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Their voice: involving children and young people in decisions, services and systems

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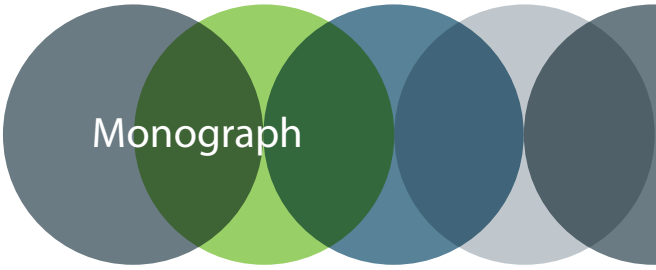


About the Centre of Excellence in Child and Family Welfare

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare is a not-for-profit peak body for nearly 100 child and family services in Victoria.

Working for vulnerable children, young people and families, the Centre provides sector training, facilitates and publishes research, advocates through campaigns and media liaison and sustains ongoing programs focusing on key areas of the State care system.

These include the voice of children and young people, and specific programs for foster care, kinship care and residential care. We also work and advocate for better transitions for young people leaving State care.

The Centre represents small, medium and large community service organisations across the State, enhancing their capacity to deliver services through engagement and voice in State policy and service development.

An incorporated association, the Centre is guided by a board of 12 directors drawn from our member organisations, together with a chief executive officer and an expert academic member.

Contents

Introduction

The late twentieth century has seen significant changes to our understanding of childhood. Today, there is recognition of the critical role of the child's perspective to any valid and effective policy, program, community, educational or legislative endeavour that affects their lives. New and developing ideologies such as consumerism and the need to include service user perspectives in the development of social policy and programs have influenced this.[1, 2] However, the greatest influence comes from a deliberate philosophical shift in the conceptualisation of the integrity and position of the child in society, changes in the children's rights agenda and new approaches within social science and policy.[3, 4]

Current perspectives view children as competent experts on their own lived experiences, capable of contributing to the decisions that affect their lives.[5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10] Children and young people have both the right and the knowledge to have a voice in their world and in the way the world responds to them. The argument that there is validity in children and young people's voice is no longer contentious. Our challenge, however, is to ensure that we do more than acknowledge their right to voice.[11, 12]

We must consider the extent to which we include the child's perspective in a true spirit of respect and collaboration – particularly those children who are most vulnerable, disengaged or in need of society's protection. It is time to actively work to ensure the voice of the child and young person is heard in the decisions, policy and services that affect them.

Dr. Lynette Buoy
Chief Executive Officer
Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare

1 R. Sinclair, 'Participation in practice: Making it meaningful, effective and sustainable', *Children and Society*, vol. 18, 2004, p. 106-118.
2 J. Fleming, 'Young people's involvement in research: Still a long way to go?' *Qualitative Social Work*. vol. 10, 2011, p. 207-223.
3 Sinclair, loc. cit.
4 Fleming, loc. cit.
5 Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), *Involving children and young people in research: Compendium of papers and reflections from a think tank*, Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth & NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2008.
6 J Cashmore, 'Reflection 2: Research with children: Thinking about method and methodology.' Involving children and young people in research: Compendium of papers and reflections from a think tank, Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) & NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2008, p. 26-27.
7 S Dockett & B Perry, 'Trusting children's accounts in research.' *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, vol. 5, 2007, p. 47-63.
8 M J Drummond, C E Drummond & D J Birbeck, 'Listening to Children's voices in qualitative research', Journal *of Student Wellbeing*, 2009, vol. 3, no. 1, p. 1-13.
9 L Gallacher & M Gallagher, 'Methodological immaturity in childhood research? Thinking through participatory methods'. *Childhood*, vol. 15, 2008, p. 499-516.
10 Sinclair, loc. cit.
11 S Grover, 'Why Won't they listen to us? On giving power and voice to children participating in Social Research.' *Childhood*, vol. 11, 2004, p. 81-92.
12 S Wise, 'Enabling 'look after' children to express their competence as participants in research'. *Involving children and young people in research: Compendium of papers and reflections from a think tank*, Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) & NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2008, p. 156-167.

Glossary

Participation/participatory process

In a participatory process the service and client, and researcher and researched, are equally involved in the process as co-producer of the data, the analysis and the outcomes or decisions made. Participatory processes aim to redress power imbalances in research or service relationships and promote mutual respect for the views and abilities of the child, young person, client and researched.

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) represents the world's commitment to universal ideals of human dignity. The Commissioner is the principal human rights official of the United Nations and spearheads the United Nations' human rights efforts. The Commission educates and takes action to empower individuals and assist States in upholding human rights.

Paternalism

Paternalism is the interference of a state or an individual with another person, against their will, and defended or motivated by a claim that the person interfered with will be better off or protected from harm. Two conditions are sufficient to define paternalistic actions. Those conditions are (1) the paternalistic action is primarily intended to benefit the recipient, and (2) the recipient's consent or dissent is not a relevant consideration for the initiator.

Positivism

Enquiry that contends that there is an objective reality 'out there' to be studied, captured and understood.[13]

13 N K Denzin & Y S Lincoln, 'Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research' in N K Denzin & Y S Lincoln (eds), *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Y S Sage, Thousand Oaks, 2000, p.1-29.

'We must consider the extent to which we include the child's perspective in a true spirit of respect and collaboration ... It is time to actively work to ensure the voice of the child and young person is heard in the decisions, policy and services that affect them'

Convention on the Rights of the Child

Relevant Articles:

Article 12

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

Article 13

1. The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.
2. The exercise of this right may be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary:

   (a) For respect of the rights or reputations of others; or

   (b) For the protection of national security or of public order (order public), or of public health or morals.[14]

14 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, November 1989, retrieved 12/11/11 from http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm#art4

The voice of children and young people

From an adult-centered perspective

The early to mid-twentieth century emphasised the study and conceptualisation of childhood from a positivist construction and in relation to specific developmental stages of life. Childhood was viewed as a series of 'stage(s)... on the road to adulthood'.[15] From this perspective, disciplines of study and practice across psychology, sociology, anthropology and education perceived children as 'incomplete beings' or 'becomings'.[16] Sociological construction of childhood emphasised the irrationality, naturalness and universality of childhood and defined children in relation to dominant social institutions — as being at stages in the 'steps towards maturity up to the level of adulthood' and in the process of becoming fully 'human'.[17] Childhood was seen as a period of dependency and powerlessness, and children as recipients of adult input and objects of adult actions and adult research.[18]

Early discussion of children's rights reflected this paternalistic construction. Beginning with the Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act (1904) and culminating in the adoption of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child by the United Nations in 1959, children's rights were couched in terms of protection and provision.[19, 20]

Historically, child welfare services have reflected this perception of the child. Despite having the best of intentions for the well-being of the child, welfare services were nevertheless constructed from a view of the child as helpless, dependent and unable to make reasonable decisions. Coady points out that such an approach to 'rights' coming from an utilitarianism framework 'justify[ies] great harms to individual[s] by appeals to values such [as] the common good or efficiency... If we understand rights as the powers or freedoms to act, the original United Nations Declaration actually removed rights from children… It was not a document aimed at increasing the autonomy of children, but at protecting them'.[21]

15 J Mason & B Steadman, *The significance of the conceptualisation of childhood for promoting children's contributions to child protection policy*, 1996, p. 2-3, retrieved June 20 2011 from AIFS Conference Paper: http://www.aifs.gov.au/conference/aifs5/mason.html

16 Ibid.

17 A James & A Prout, *Constructing and reconstructing childhood?* The Falmer Press, 1990 cited in Mason & Steadman, loc. cit.

18 Mason &Steadman, loc. cit.

19 P. Alderson, 'The effects of participation rights on research methodology' in P. Christensen & A. James (Ed), *Research with Children: Perspectives and Practices*. London: Falmer Press, 2000, p. 241-257.

20 C. Pascal & T Bertram, 'Listening to young citizens: the struggle to make real a participatory paradigm in research with young children.' *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, vol 17, 2009, p. 249-262.

21 M M Coady, *Reflections on Children's Rights*. Australian Institute of Family Studies, 1995.

The powerlessness this perspective brings to children and young people has been well recognised in recent literature. Makrinotti described how the ideology of familism has been one such oppressive force.[22] From a developmental perspective, childhood is seen as a process of familiarisation, 'fused with the institution of the family' [so that] 'children and their needs cannot be defined independently of those of the family… they do not exist as a distinct social entity'.[23] As such, 'in the negotiations between family and state which occur in the development and implementation of social policy, children are generally not participants... it is assumed that the child's needs are met as dependents within the family'.[24]

Rayner vocalised the disempowerment of children and young people from this perspective.[25] She argued that children are marginalised in social policy when there is a refusal to take them seriously.[26] This is based on a belief that children are so incompetent they do not know what they really want or need and the perception of children as objects or possessions whose views don't really matter.[27, 28]

'A large uninfluential section of the community, [children] do not have access to the means of exerting power, or protecting their own vulnerability. They are restricted in the extent to which they can make decisions about their own lives. They do not play any part in the process which determines the policies which affect them. They, unlike other subjects of discrimination, are peculiarly unable to organize themselves politically. But there is something more at work. Even the concerns of those adults who advocate for children and young people have a low political priority.' [29]

Recognising the 'personhood' of children and young people

The last 20 years have seen challenges to this paternalistic conceptualisation of the child. By the mid-90s, social theorists proposed an alternative concept in which childhood is made meaningful as a social, cultural and historical construct.[30, 31, 32, 33, 34] Understanding children's immaturity as a fact of culture, rather than a developmental stage, challenges the assumption of children as being inferior to adults.[35] This alternative view gives 'priority to the 'personhood' of children, to their lived experience',[36] and to them as 'human beings' rather than as 'human becomings'.[37] It recognises children as active social beings constructing and creating social relationships and acknowledges the active role children play in shaping their environment and co-constructing the meaning of their world.[38] This approach challenges longstanding assumptions about the competence of children, even very young children, recognising them as both commentators on their own lives and as being able to be involved in decision-making.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1990) recognised children's rights from this perspective.[39] Based on the premise that every child has the right to maximise his or her potential and to be treated with respect, the UNCRC encompassed a range of areas, including freedom of expression, access to information, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, freedom of association, the protection of privacy, the right to be brought up in an atmosphere of love and acceptance, to take part in the life of the community as an individual and the right to not be removed from parents without consent or without judicial proceedings and a fair process.[40] The UNCRC also recognised the child's right to have and express their views, to have those views taken seriously, and be considered, and the right to participate in the decisions that affect them:[41]

> *Article 12: The Governments of all countries shall ensure that a child who is capable of forming his or her own views should have the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting that child and that the views of that child should be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child;*
>
> *Article 13 (which includes the right to freedom of expression): This right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart ideas of all kinds, regardless of*

22 D Makrinotti, 'Conceptualisation of childhood in a welfare state: A critical reappraisal' in Qvortrup et al (eds) *Childhood Matters Social Theory: Practice and Politics*, Averbury, England. 1994, cited in Mason & Steadman, loc. cit.
23 Mason & Steadman, op. cit.
24 Ibid.
25 M Rayner, 'Children's voices, adults' choices: Children's rights to legal representation, Family Matters, vol. 33, Dec 1992, p. 4-10. retrieved from www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/fm1/fm33mr.html
26 M Rayner, 'Taking seriously the child's rights to be heard.' In P. Alston & G. Brennan, The U.N. Children's Convention and Australia, The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Sydney, 1991.
27 Rayner, 1991 loc.cit.
28 G Melton, 'Children, Politics and Morality: The Ethics of Child Advocacy.' Journal of Clinical Child Psychology, vol. 13, 1987, p. 357-367 cited in Mason & Steadman op. cit., p. 3.
29 Rayner, 1991, loc. cit., p. 36.
30 A James & A Prout, Constructing and reconstructing childhood?, The Falmer Press, 1990, cited in Mason & Steadman, op. cit., p. 5.
31 Qvortrup et al 1994 as cited in Mason & Steadman, op. cit.
32 Sinclair, op. cit.
33 Gallacher & Gallagher op. cit.
34 Mason & Steadman, op. cit.
35 Ibid., p. 5.
36 A James & A Prout, Constructing and reconstructing childhood?, The Falmer Press, 1990, cited in Mason & Steadman, op. cit., p. 5.
37 Mason & Steadman, op. cit., p. 5.
38 A James & A Prout, Constructing and reconstructing childhood?, The Falmer Press, 1990, cited in Sinclair op. cit., p. 108.
39 Ratified by Australia in 1991
40 Rayner, 1992, op. cit.
41 Ibid.

frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.[42]

Through placing children's rights to participate alongside (and not as subsidiary to) their need for protection and for the provision of services, the UNCRC 'goes a considerable way to deflect the former paternalistic notions that accepting responsibility for (sic) someone resulted in taking responsibility away (sic) from them'.[43]

The last 20 years has seen challenges to the concept of what childhood means in law, education, social policy and research rejecting the perception of children as dependent and incompetent and recognising the 'citizenship of the child'.[44] Children and young people are increasingly recognised as having conceptual autonomy, as being subjects rather than objects in their own lives and as rightfully able to contribute actively to decisions' about their lives.[45]

From this perspective, every child has an individual and unique experience of his or her childhood. We have much to learn about children and their experiences from children and through hearing them we can empower and validate children and young people as citizens and participants in society and their world.[46]

'We have to concern ourselves with listening to children... We [need to] see [their] perspectives, and those of the practitioner or researcher, as not in competition but standing together in the construction of dialogues, in which there is mutual respect, active participation and the negotiation and co-construction of meaning. Listening to children and encouraging participation in research, evaluation, decision-making and planning is important for many reasons…empowering children as learners, enabling them to make choices, express their ideas and opinions and develop a positive sense of self… the benefits of their participation to society as a whole and for the development of citizenship.' [47]

42 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, op. cit.
43 Sinclair, op. cit., p. 107.
44 Mason & Steadman, op. cit., p. 5.
45 Ibid.
46 Dockett & Perry, op. cit.
47 Mason & Steadman, op. cit., p. 5.

Including the voice of children and young people in social policy

Today's policy makers, program providers and legislators recognise that children have a legitimate perspective, and a right to have that perspective heard. A new model of childhood, growing emphasis on the intent of the UNCRC and recognition of the invisibility and marginalisation of children in social policy arenas, has prompted acceptance of the need to add children to our thinking and to inform social policy by the child and young person's perspective.[48] The participation of children and young people in decisions that affect them is increasingly a guiding principle in modern legislation and policy.

In many European countries, as in Australia, the principle of participation of children and young people in decisions that affect them, particularly welfare decisions, is supported through legislative mandate.[49, 50, 51] In the United Kingdom (UK), by 1992, common law recognised children's rights to participate in decisions that affect them and their rights to information, choice, advice and advocacy.[52] In Australia, care and protection legislation in each state and territory enshrines the principle that children should have the opportunity to participate in decisions made about them, the right to adequate information and assistance to express their views.[53]

The argument that we should recognise and include the voice of children and young people is compelling. However, though grounded in statute and increasingly embedded in philosophy, recent reviews of attempts to give children and young people a voice have questioned the extent to which this is realised in day-to-day operation. The Child Rights Taskforce reviewed the situation in Australia in their Listen to Children Report (2011) convened by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Australia and the National Children's and Youth Law Centre (NCYLC). It found that 'despite ratifying the [UNCRC] Convention in 1991, Australia has not effectively

48 Ibid., p. 5.
49 C Creegan, G Henderson, & C King, *Children and young people's experiences of advocacy support and participation in the Children's Hearings System: Big words and big tables*. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive: Getting it right for every child. 2006
50 Young People's Participation Consortium for Wales: The Participation Unit. *The National Children's and Young People's Participation Standards and the Youth Justice sector*, 2010-2011, Retrieved August 2011, from http://www.participationworkerswales.org.uk/userfiles/file/STC%20E%20sector%20guide%201%20YJ.pdf
51 Department for Education and Skills; U.K. *Care Matters: Time for Change*, 2007, https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DFES-00541-2007.pdf
52 Rayner, 1992, op. cit.
53 Child Rights Taskforce. *Listen to children: 2011 Child rights NGO report Australia*, 2011, May, p. 8. retrieved from www.childrights.org.au

incorporated children's rights into policy and legislative frameworks to nurture and support Australian children. Instead, successive governments have maintained a traditional welfare approach to children's well-being and have not learned to listen to and work with children – to create child-sensitive bodies, systems and initiatives'. [54]

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) and the NSW Commissioner for Children and Young People reviewed literature and input from researchers and policy makers in 2008.[55] They reported that…

'progress in establishing a rationale or case for children's participation has not been matched by evidence of change for children in their everyday lives. As one of the most governed groups and highest users of state services in western societies, children continue to have little, if any input into the policy, research and practice decisions made about them.'[56]

Our challenge is not only to recognise that children have an important perspective but is to ensure that our commitment to this is not rhetoric. We must work to actively break the barriers preventing input from children and build processes that facilitate, promote, hear and respond to the child's voice. As has been the case in giving voice to other oppressed groups in society, this will involve 'altering adult [and] institutionalised ways of behaving, to accommodate the difference inherent in contributions by children'. [57]

'No laws can compensate for a lack of voice or lack of recognition to be heard. That is why the basis of decision-making for children needs to be founded on respect for them, and ways of allowing children to be heard are so tremendously important… A child whose views are not valued, whose perception of reality is discounted as unreliable, who has no social or economic clout and how, when in trouble and involved in adult justice or welfare systems, can neither approach a lawyer nor use any outside support systems, is not involved in a 'justice' system. Any system, including a family system, which does not give children an effective opportunity to be heard, is not a just one… We must remove the legal and administrative barriers which keep them silent and equip them with the means of protecting their open rights to dignity, respect and personal integrity.' [58]

The child protection perspective

If powerlessness and difficulties in being heard is a feature of childhood in general, the impact is more acute for the most vulnerable children in society. The earliest Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959) recognised children's vulnerability and their vulnerability to abuse. However, children in the child welfare system – both as individuals and collectively — have been systematically denied the opportunity to have their voices heard and to participate in decision-making. Children, and adults who as children have been in care, have demonstrated how their attempts to speak out and voice their wishes, opinions and experiences have been, and continue to be, ignored or trivialised by their caretakers, the courts, program and policy makers and government.[59]

From a rights based perspective that recognises the integrity and 'personhood' of childhood, the child welfare system can be viewed as an example of subordinating children to adult power. This perspective challenges the assumptions that, without taking children's voice and experience into account, child protection and child welfare policies are implemented in the child's best interests.[60]

Typically, children in the protection and welfare systems have been treated within the system as objects whose voices and views on their own lives were consistently ignored when decisions were being made about them.[61] Wise notes that 'despite increasing recognition of the importance of listening to children's views and opinions, the perspectives of children are relatively absent in the field of out-of-home care (OOHC) research'.[62]

Rayner suggests the right to participate in all decisions that affect children is 'especially apposite to decisions which will affect where, and with whom, a child lives…'. [63] Yet, if a child's contribution to this decision is even considered, their wishes are often ignored. A common assumption is that children's evidence is untruthful or unreliable compared with adult statements.[64]

While there are many demands on child protection services, the priority is protection of the child in their best interests. However, when adult views assume the child's perspective as being of less relevance, the child is effectively silenced. Although based on the best interest principles, the child protection and welfare system must be challenged for the way it reinforces adult power over children by asserting the supremacy of adult knowledge of what is best for them.

54 Child Rights Taskforce, op. cit., p. iii.
55 Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), op. cit.
56 Fitzgerald & Graham, op. cit.
57 Mason & Steadman, op. cit., p. 6.
58 Rayner, 1992, op. cit., p. 8.
59 Mason & Steadman, op. cit.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
62 Wise, op. cit.
63 Rayner, 1992, op. cit.., p. 6.
64 Mason & Steadman, op. cit.

For the most disadvantaged children the challenge is two-fold. We must ensure that the voice of children and young people in the child protection and family welfare system is included in all aspects of the policies that affect them and in the decisions that are made about them. We must also ensure that the opportunity to participate and to influence decision-making is not disrupted due to their disadvantage or exclusion.[65] This requires enabling children and young people to improve their social and communication skills, develop positive relationships, be rehabilitated from trauma, and empowering children and young people of all backgrounds to communicate their wishes and feelings. This means charging social services staff, program managers, policy makers, and the legal system with the responsibility, and equipping them with the skills, to take the views of children and young people seriously and to allow children and young people to be understood as individuals.[66]

'Reconceptualising childhood in a way which emphasize(s) the conceptual autonomy of children also implies the importance of developing child protection strategies that acknowledge and reinforce children's own strategies, identifying and challenging their powerlessness. Child protection practice [should] be about joining with children in a struggle to increase their proactive options and transform the social and political worlds in which the institution of childhood exists.' [67]

Increasing pressure on children's services should not stall positive change. We must critically examine the institutionalised methods and assumptions of child protection and family services practice and policy and determine ways in which the voice of the child in the family services and child protection systems can be amplified, heard and included.

Conceptualising voice

The concept of participatory voice

The discourse of participatory methods provides insight into the challenge of truly ensuring the voice of children and young people is heard in community, service, program and policy, and in the decisions that affect their lives. It provides a lens from which to examine the opportunity for, and barriers to, the voice of children in child protection and welfare systems.

Building understanding through ongoing inclusion and active participation

A participatory perspective requires that we consider two critical elements of facilitating the voice of children and young people. First, processes and procedures must do more than just 'demonstrate that they [are] listening to young people and being responsive to their needs and wishes'.[68] Participatory processes demand constant review of the extent to which voice is actually being heard and what is being done to ensure full and active participation of children and young people.

Fully revealing and taking account of the voice of children and young people will require more than once-off feedback or consultation. It will require including continuous feedback where children and young people are heard, their voices acted upon, and then reheard in terms of the effectiveness of the actions and improvements that can and have been made. Moreover, the processes must be iterative; whereby it is repeated and the knowledge base built on to ensure ongoing quality improvement and increasingly child relevant and effective policy, service and programs.

A participatory concept of voice recognises that 'we need to pursue ongoing opportunities for children and young people to be consulted in matters that concern them and to act ethically, purposefully and inclusively on their views'.[69] We then need to pursue more opportunities for research, review and inclusion in an ongoing loop of participatory and active voice. Truly including the voice of the child and young person will require we provide children with 'a respectful and legitimate opportunity for hearing of their ideas, views and opinions… [and ensuring] these standpoints are acted upon and are seen to be acted upon'.[70]

65 Young People's Participation Consortium for Wales: The Participation Unit, op. cit.
66 Ibid.
67 Kitzinger, 'Who are you kidding? Children, power and the struggle against sexual abuse' in A James & A Prout, *Constructing and reconstructing childhood?*, The Falmer Press, London, 1990, cited in Mason & Steadman, op. cit., p. 6.
68 Creegan, Henderson, & King, op. cit., p. 54.
69 D. Harcourt, 'Standpoints on quality: Young children as competent research participants.' *Involving children and young people in research: Compendium of papers and reflections from a think tank*. Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) / NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2008, p. 83.
70 Ibid. p. 83.

Empowering individual voice

Secondly, active participatory voice requires that, while important at the group and advocacy level, voice must also be heard and included at the individual level. Through encouraging active participation in the service, policy, program and research endeavours that impact their lives, it is contended that participatory voice from children and young people will contribute to participatory citizenship and empowerment of children as citizens with voice and power.[71, 72] Where children have been researched using participatory methods, authors have noted personal benefits including the development of new skills, personal resources, self-confidence, self-esteem and enhancing connectedness to communities.[73] Through being empowered to investigate, evaluate and effect change and through being personally involved in the co-construction of their lives, children can gain from being involved in a constructive and respectful experience and develop a greater understanding of the impact of effective action in and on their lives.[74]

While there are several models of participation in literature[75, 76] all models assume that, ideally, participation requires that the child is given full information about what is happening to him or her, full opportunity to provide his or her voice, is fully supported to speak up, is provided feedback on the impact of his or her voice, and that he or she is empowered to share decision-making with adults.[77] A participatory approach requires that we facilitate individual participation and empowerment thorough the process of active involvement in the decisions, services, programs and policies that impact each individual child.

A typology of voice

In 2001, Frederico and Davis proposed a typology of client feedback strategies for child protection based on two dimensions.[78] The vertical axis recognises the extent of participation of the client – the child or family. The level of involvement (horizontal axis) recognises whether the client's voice is at the individual level or represented via a group or body, such as an advocacy body. The axes of this typology are represented in figure one (see page 12).

Frederico and Davis defined the level of a child and family's participation by the extent the child is free to initiate the form of the participation, to determine how to participate, the extent the child's own words and meanings are recognised and included and the extent of influence of their participation.[79] Sheirs' model of participation recognises five levels of participation.[80] When placed over the Frederico and Davis typology (vertical axis – figure one) this further explains the characteristics of participation. This is also illustrated in figure one.

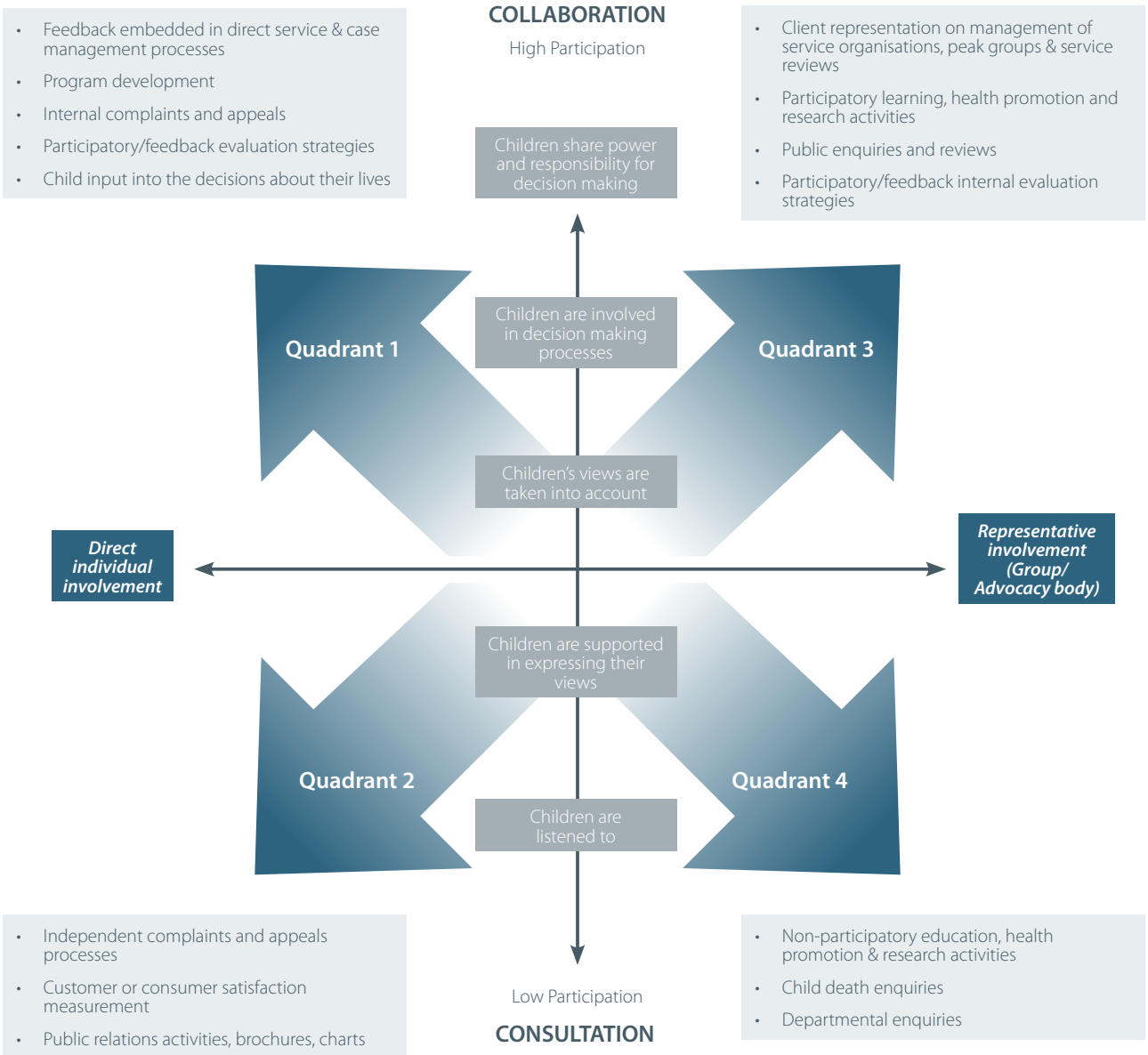
Frederico and Davis suggest that the place (quadrant) of any strategy or process for a child's feedback or input on these two dimensions represents the likelihood that this approach will promote the 'real voice of the clients'.[81] They also suggest there is validity in including voice at each of the levels indicated in each of the quadrants in figure one depending on the purposes of the program seeking feedback.[82] Programs that encourage and enhance effective feedback in child protection services must 'comprise a mix of strategies',[83] however, strategies from quadrant one will optimally include individual and participatory voice. This view is agreed by modern participation theorists.[84]

The Frederico and Davis typology (further explained by Shier) (figure one) is a useful way to explore the role, context and opportunity for the voice of children and young people in our community, and, in particular, in child protection and family services. It also provides a context from which to discuss the challenges involved in being vigilant about the extent that the voice of children and young people is facilitated and heard.[85, 86] This typology allows us to review current efforts to include

71 Pascal & Bertram, op. cit.
72 E Fern & G. Kristinsdottir, 'Young people act as consultants in child directed research: An action research study in Iceland'. *Child & Family Social Work*, 2011, vol. 16, p. 287-297.
73 Pascal & Bertram, op. cit.
74 K Bishop. 'Involving young people in research: Lessons from the 10mmm project in South Western Victoria. *Involving children and young people in research: Compendium of papers and reflections from a think tank*, Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) & NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2008, p. 30.
75 P Treseder, *Empowering Children and Young People*, Training Manual. Save the Children Fund, London, 1997, cited in NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2011, kids.nsw.gov.au. Retrieved September 2011, from Research and resources about participation: http://kids.nsw.gov.au/uploads/documents/tps_resources.pdf
76 C Lardner, *Youth Participation – A new model*, 2001, www.lardner.demon.co.uk cited in NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2011, kids.nsw.gov.au. retrieved September 2011, http://kids.nsw.gov.au/uploads/documents/tps_resources.pdf
77 NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2011, kids.nsw.gov.au. retrieved September 2011, http://kids.nsw.gov.au/uploads/documents/tps_resources.pdf
78 M Frederico & C Davis, *Finding a voice: The development of a model for client feedback in child protection services. A report for the National Council for the Prevention of Child Abuse.* National Council for the Prevention of Child Abuse and La Trobe University, Bundoora, 2001.
79 Ibid.
80 H Shier, 'Pathways to Participation: Openings, Opportunities and Obligations'. *Children and Society*, vol. 15, 2001, p. 107-111 cited in NSW Commission for Children and Young People op cit.
81 Frederico & Davis, loc. cit., p. 45.
82 Ibid.
83 Ibid., p. 45.
84 NSW Commission for Children and Young People, op. cit.
85 Frederico & Davis, loc. cit.
86 H Shier, 'Pathways to Participation: Openings, Opportunities and Obligations'. *Children and Society*, vol. 15, 2001, p. 107-111 cited in NSW Commission for Children and Young People op. cit.

voice from a participatory perspective and ask three questions: First, what are the barriers and challenges to active participatory voice; second, while including the child's voice, to what extent are we ensuring it is participatory in the decisions, services delivery and policy that affect him or her; and third, to what extent are children's voices actively collaborating in the co-construction of the decisions that affect them?

Figure one: A typology of participation and involvement of voice. Based on Frederico & Davis[87] and Sheir.[88]



87 Frederico & Davis, op. cit.

88 H Shier, 'Pathways to Participation: Openings, Opportunities and Obligations'. *Children and Society*, vol. 15, 2001, p. 107-111, cited in NSW Commission for Children and Young People op. cit.

Barriers to child participation: ethical and legislative challenges

Participative processes which include children and young people raise interesting ethical considerations. Rayner recognised the challenges in enabling the participation of children in child protection and family services.

'Child-centered research is challenging. It raises practical and methodological issues about establishing trust and rapport but also, in acknowledging and addressing ethical considerations, [it raises] issues of power and control and, of course, more practical issues of gaining access and ensuring informed consent.'[89]

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) concluded that conducting participatory research in Australia has 'met with resistance because some ethical and methodological aspects are contentious'.[90] Children in out-of-home care and welfare services are especially invisible in Australian research due to ethical concerns that invoke barriers to accessing and including them. These concerns also affect including children and young people's voice in policy, service delivery and decision-making.[91]

The tension between protection and participation is at the heart of the issue when considering the voice of vulnerable children and young people.[92] We cannot advocate for more participative inclusion of the voice of the vulnerable child in policy, service delivery and research without considering the ethical implications and the barriers that 'protect' vulnerable children from participation. Consideration of these issues is critical for understanding the ethical, legislative and methodological challenges of including the voice of the child at the individual, program and service delivery level and informs the development of voice through participatory research methods.

Considering power imbalance

The process of redistributing power is challenging. We must acknowledge that with the best of intentions, children will always be, or may well perceive themselves to be, in an inferior position to the adults to, and with whom, they are speaking.[93, 94] When including the voice of children we must explicitly recognise and respond to this. Frederico and Davis noted that when participative processes explicitly recognise power imbalances this can significantly redress the imbalance, enhancing voice and improving personal growth outcomes. [95]

'Several positive outcomes were associated with relationships in which power differences were made explicit. Community partnerships were found to function either as mechanisms that replicate and reinforce dominant relations of power or as vehicles for personal and social transformation. The determining factors appear to be: making a commitment to collaboration; understanding the impact of common beliefs and practices on limiting consumer participation; openly recognising power differences; and accepting responsibility for addressing power issues.'[96]

For looked-after children, the consideration of power imbalance is at tension with child protection services in two ways. First, there is concern for doing harm when involving the child in recalling potentially traumatic life experiences. Second, acting in the child's best interests implies adult control of decisions regarding participation in decision-making and the extent that the child's wishes are achievable.[97] Legislation and legal responsibility put the onus to protect children on the State, giving legal authority to make decisions without consultation when it is deemed necessary for the child's protection. This has a direct impact on the power relationships between case worker, child protection and the child and family in their care.[98] Moreover, the state is mandated to develop policies to protect the child over and above the views of client or advocacy groups in policy development.[99] Redressing power balances and enabling children to be heard under these conditions is challenging.

Mason asks us to think carefully about challenging convention and roles to allow participatory voice.[100] She suggests 'it is understandable that adults are likely to find children's perspectives a challenge when they

89 Rayner, 1992, op. cit.
90 Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), op. cit.
91 Wise, op. cit.
92 J Mason, 'Strategies and Issues in including children as participants in research on children's needs in care: A Case study.' *Involving children and young people in research*: *Compendium of papers and reflections from a think tank,* Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) & NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2008, p. 89-98.
93 S Bessel, 'Participating in research: What's it really like for kids?, *Involving children and young people in research*: *Compendium of papers and reflections from a think tank,* Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) & NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2008, p. 17-27.
94 Mason, loc. cit.
95 Frederico & Davis, op. cit.
96 K Krogh. 'A conceptual framework of community partnerships: Perspectives of people with disabilities on power, beliefs and values.' *Canadian Journal of Rehabilitation.* 1998, vol. 12. no. 2, p. 123-33 cited in Frederico & Davis, op cit., p. 9.
97 Wise, op. cit.
98 Frederico & Davis, op. cit.
99 Ibid.
100 J Mason, 'In respect of Children'. *Sydney's Child,* 2010, p. 18-20 retrieved from www.webchild.com.au

threaten the status quo… [but] (t)hose of us, who support research with, or by children, would do well to think through and make explicit our roles as advocates for them.'[101] A participatory approach to the inclusion of voice demands, as first principles, the recognition that children are experts in their own lives.[102, 103] 'The right and responsibility of the State to take [action]... has to be balanced with the right of parents and children to participate in decisions which affect their lives.'[104] Ethical practice in research, policy and service delivery must critically review its assumptions and the adult-child power imbalances these construct to allow looked-after children a voice in the decisions that affect them.

Considering access and consent

Legislative requirements mandate privacy and confidentiality for all individuals and particularly in relation to children in protective and family services. There is an ethical requirement for informed consent from both children and the gatekeepers of their lives – including parents, carers and state-based authorities.[105, 106] Ensuring informed consent is a critical consideration for the ethical inclusion of the voice of the child in program participation, policy design and in decisions about service delivery. Furthermore, ethical research and participation of children will require processes for positive consent (being allowed the opportunity to say 'yes' rather than 'no'), and provisional consent, also referred to as process assent (being allowed to agree to continue or withdraw at any stage).[107] However, processes traditionally in place to assure confidentially and privacy can also present barriers to the inclusion of the voice of the child in decision-making and program evaluation. Providing these critical conditions while also facilitating voice is challenging.

There is a further tension involved in ensuring privacy and consent when children are included in participatory processes. There is tension between the considerations of ethics committees and consent from gatekeepers; the requirements of either or both of these can delimit who is allowed to participate in research or collaborative processes and can work directly against a child's right to have their voice heard.[108, 109]

If we are to hear voice it must be authentic and representative of the vulnerable and disadvantaged as a group and heard at the level of the individual. However, there will also be a need to protect those who have been traumatised from further harm and to protect their privacy and confidentiality.[110, 111] There is a need to recognise that, ethically, it is the right of every individual to be allowed a voice. This must be weighed against measures taken to ensure children's safety and protection from potentially distressing experiences. Wise notes that denial of access has been an issue affecting quality data and robust research outcomes in several out-of-home care studies.[112] There is a case for ethics and ethics committees to go beyond current evolution to deal more specifically with qualitative processes for research, evaluation and participation and to ask whether the participatory exercise represents the voice of the respondent or places them into a judgmental policy framework.

CREATE recognised such challenges in including the voice of the child when transitioning from care. They noted limited access to the details of the whereabouts of young people and institutional barriers which made it difficult to represent the voice of all children and young people.[113]

'On the one hand, jurisdictions show concern for learning what young people think by providing financial support; however, operationally, they maintain traditional barriers in limiting access to the same young people (under the guise of confidentiality and privacy). Better systems need to be developed … so that all young people who might want to be involved in a particular project have the opportunity to ensure that their voices are heard.'[114]

We need to be sure that adult researchers and practitioners facilitating children's participation in any collaborative engagement are able to remain open to new approaches and can respond to concerns raised

101 Mason, op. cit., 2010, p. 18-20.
102 Ibid.
103 Frederico & Davis, op. cit.
104 Ibid., p. 46.
105 Australian Health Ethics Committee/ National Health and Medical research Council. (2003). *National Statement on the Ethical Conduct of Research with Humans.* retrieved September, 2011, from http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/_files_nhmrc/publications/attachments/e72.pdf
106 National Health and Medical Research Council, Australian Research Council, Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee, 2007, National *Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.* Australian Government / Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee.
107 S Dockett, 'Engaging Young Children in Research.' *Involving children and young people in research: Compendium of papers and reflections from a think tank, Australian* Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) & NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2008, p. 47-63.
108 NSW Commission for Children and Young People, op. cit.
109 Wise, op. cit.
110 T Moore, M McArthur, & D Noble-Carr, 'Taking little steps: Research with Children - a Case Study.' *Involving children and young people in research Involving children and young people in research: Compendium of papers and reflections from a think tank,* Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) & NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2008, p. 99-110.
111 Wise, op. cit.
112 Ibid.
113 J McDowell, *Transitioning from care in Australia: An evaluation of CREATE's 'What's the Plan?' campaign: CREATE Report Card 2011.* CREATE Foundation, Sydney, 2011, p. 1.
114 Ibid., p. viii.

by the children themselves.[115, 116] Furthermore, we must ask: at what point do restrictions on access to client information, personal protection of privacy and concerns about the possible harmful consequences of participation prevent competent children from freely exercising their right to participate in research and the decisions that affect their lives? [117]

Considering veracity of voice

Concerns for the validity, reliability and fidelity of the input from children are cited as dilemmas for collaborative and participatory processes. It is clear that, if the voice of children is to be included in the decisions about their lives, then there is much to be done in terms of understanding methods for data collection with, and facilitation of voice from, children – especially young children.

Researchers have experimented with a variety of 'child-friendly' data collection methods for use with children of various ages, at varying levels of developmental maturity, from differing cultural realities and designed to make research fun and relevant to children.[118] The Mosaic Approach, for example, draws together data from different sources to create what is contended to be a more complete picture of children's perspectives and includes the use of participatory tools, such as cameras, bookmaking, tours and map-making.[119] However, different methodologies remain contentious and there is debate about the relative merits of in-depth interviews, multiple interviews, ethnography and the validity of attempts by the adult researcher to 'become a child' or take a 'least adult perspective'.[120, 121]

In practice, we need greater understanding of processes for the assessment of capacity to participate and to promote participation – especially in younger children. There is much work to do to understand processes that can be used to enable children and families in protective services to participate. There is much to be learned about the conditions that work to create an environment that empowers workers to provide protection while not diminishing children and young people's right to be heard.[122]

However, a participatory approach to including the voice of the child suggests that this is more than a question of methodology. It recommends another perspective on the reliability, validity and fidelity of the child's point of view. Part of the ideology that constructed childhood as incompetent was the premise that children's views are less credible, coming from unreliable memories, egocentric judgments and being open to suggestibility.[123] From a participative approach, however, children may have different perspectives on the same issue and these are reflective of context – cultural, historical and situational.[124] Involving children as participants in a participative process provides for shared understanding and co-construction of meaning – the meaning that the world holds for them and its implication for the policies, programs and decisions that impact them. From this perspective, ethical concerns raised by participatory techniques are counter-balanced by heightened reliability and validity of the data obtained. Compared to the artificiality of an adult world, a participative approach that gives children control over the process and methods used to include them better recognises the child's perspective, is more in tune with children's ways of seeing and is better able to relate to the child's world.[125] As such, the ethical acceptability of children's participation and the credibility of the data obtained from them are strengthened.

Objective evidence suggests that if 'one engages children appropriately they are able to make a significant and insightful contribution.'[126] Birbeck and Drummond concluded that children's voices and perspectives can be captured rigorously when age-appropriate interviewing methods are used and when children are provided with an environment where they feel safe, supported and valued.[127] Davis and Bottoms used an experimental design comparing active listening methodology with the use of non-leading questioning and found that children in supportive research conditions – with an empathetic listener – felt more able to resist suggestion and more able to challenge misleading questions.[128]

Grover concludes that research and other participative endeavours to actively discern the voice of even young children will enhance our understanding of the child's

115 J Mason, 'Reflection 1: Involving Young People in Research: Lessons from the 10MMM Project in South Western Victoria. ' *Involving children and young people in research Involving children and young people in research*: *Compendium of papers and reflections from a think tank,* Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) & NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2008, p. 49.
116 Moore, McArthur & Noble-Carr, op. cit.
117 Wise, op. cit.
118 Gallacher & Gallagher, op. cit., p. 501.
119 Pascal & Bertram, op. cit.
120 Dockett & Perry, op. cit.
121 H Warming, 'Getting under their skins? Accessing young children's perspectives through ethnographic fieldwork.' *Childhood, 2011*, vol. 18, p. 39-52.
122 Frederico & Davis, op. cit.
123 Drummond, Drummond, & Birbeck, op. cit.
124 Dockett & Perry, op. cit.
125 N Thomas & C O'Kane, 'The ethics of participatory research with children.' *Children & Society*, 1998, vol. 12, p. 336-337 cited in Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), op. cit., p. 1.
126 Drummond, Drummond, & Birbeck, op. cit., p. 2.
127 D J Birbeck & M Drummond,'Very young children's body images: bodies and minds under construction.' *International Education Journal, 2006, vol* 7. no. 4, p. 423-434.
128 NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2011, kids.nsw.gov.au. retrieved September 2011, http://kids.nsw.gov.au/uploads/documents/tps_resources.pdf

subjective world, the extent to which we can generalise our understanding to real world situations, the predictive power of research models and, hopefully, the relevance and empathy of our response. Including the voice of the child becomes therefore, an ethical requirement of research and consultation with children. From this stand point, it is unethical not to involve the voice of children in any research, policy or other decision process that affects their lives.[129, 130, 131, 132]

Participative processes are logistically and methodologically complex, expensive and ask researchers and practitioners to operate in new and reflective ways that constantly question the processes used to ensure voice against the needs to provide understanding, personal privacy and protection.[133, 134] These issues are also essential to any consultative, advocacy, community or agency-based initiative to include the voice of the child. How do we balance individual outcomes with research or program outcomes? How do we ensure balance between encouraging young people's leadership and achieving voice for all – or at least a representative sample of all? How do strategies we use promote the engagement of some children but not others?[135] How do we do ensure an authentic voice for children and young people while attending to compliance and process issues in our services, programs and research processes?[136] Most critically, how do we prove to young people that their views have been heard, changes have been made and that their contributions have been respected and valued?[137, 138]

Ultimately the way forward will seek to balance privacy and protection from harm with a responsibility to empower and support children in protective and family services and in the decision-making and policy that impacts their lives.[139]

129 Grover, op. cit.
130 Dockett & Perry, op. cit.
131 S Punch, 'Research with Children: the same or different from research with adults?' *Childhood,* vol. 9, no. 3, 2002, p. 321-341.
132 L Lundy & L McEvoy, 'Children's rights and research processes: Assisting children to (in)formed views.' *Childhood*, 2011 p. 1-16.
133 Wise, op. cit.
134 J Mason, 'Reflection 1: Enabling 'Looked After' Children to express their competence as participants in research. *Involving children and young people in research*: *Compendium of papers and reflections from a think tank.* Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) & NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2008, p. 163-164.
135 Dockett, op. cit.
136 J Brown, P Collits & K Scholfield, ' Involving Young People in Research: Lessons from the 10MMM Project in South Western Victoria.' *Involving Young People in Research*: *Compendium of papers and reflections from a think tank,* Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) & NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2008, p. 38-51.
137 Dockett, op. cit. p. 59.
138 G Graham & R Fitzgerald, 'Children's participation in research: Some possibilities and constraints in the current Australian research environment', Journal *of Sociology*, vol. 46, *no*. 2, 2010, p. 133-146.
139 Wise, op. cit.

The voice of young people as individual service users and citizens

Promoting the active participatory voice of the individual child (figure one, quadrant one, page 12) is the ultimate challenge for the child in protective and family services.[140] There are two levels of individual participatory voice for child protection practice: individual participation in the decisions that affects his or her life, and the inclusion of client feedback in program and service evaluation.

Individual participation of the child and family in decision-making

Some current approaches to including children and the family in decision-making are outlined below.

Case conferencing

The participation of parents, and less so children, at case conferencing is a process aimed at encouraging participation and the voice of the child and family in the decisions that affect their lives. A London study found that while information and understanding of parents increased, empowerment and participation of children in decision-making did not.[141] It has been suggested that the conflict and power imbalance intrinsic to child protection service processes limits any real attempts by child protection workers to 'work in partnership' with their clients. Instead of addressing the conflicting interests of all those involved, workers are trained to manage conferences to specifically avoid conflict. Most clients had little opportunity to disagree with assessments, challenge professional's views, or voice their own concerns.[142, 143]

Family group conferencing

Family group conferences were first legislated for application in New Zealand in 1989 based on approaches to family resolutions within the Maori community and have been variously trialed over the last 20 years across most Australian states and territories, and in Ireland, the United Kingdom and the United States.[144] Family group conferencing embraces shared family decision-making, explicitly acknowledges the potential conflict between different parties and provides a structure for

140 Frederico & Davis, op. cit.
141 B Corby, M Millar & L Young, (1996) 'Parental participation in child protection work: Rethinking the rhetoric.' *British Journal of Social Work,* vol. 26, 1996, p. 475-492 cited in Frederico & Davis, op. cit., p. 6-7.
142 Corby, Millar & Young, loc. cit. cited in Frederico & Davis, op. cit., p. 6-7.
143 Frederico & Davis, op. cit.
144 N Harris, *Family Group Conferencing in Australia 15 years on.* Australian Government: Australian Institute of Family Studies. National Child Protection Clearinghouse, 2008, retrieved July 28 2011 from http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/issues/issues27/issues27.html

addressing and resolving conflict through a process of negotiation.[145] 'Family group conferencing is a collaborative practice that puts the child, their parents and the extended family at the heart of the decision-making process and has been successful at engaging families and communities in problem-solving. A central aim is family empowerment.'[146]

The model is based on the assumptions that:

- families have the right to participate in decisions that affect them
- families are competent to make decisions if properly engaged, prepared and provided with necessary information
- decisions made within families are more likely to succeed than those imposed by outsiders
- empowering a wider family and community network than the immediate nuclear family will provide for better outcomes.

Family group conferencing attempts to move away from a paternalistic welfare model towards empowering families to recognise their own problems, validate their own perspectives, make their own decisions and co-construct their own solutions.[147, 148] This represents a significant step forward in built-in work practices and processes to empower the case worker to include the voice of the child and their family in decision-making and problem resolution. Evaluation studies conducted in several countries have shown that, where conferences have been implemented, they have achieved positive outcomes such as feelings of greater empowerment by families, the development of mutually acceptable plans, improved support for families, and the provision of increased safety where there are concerns for family violence.[149]

While family group conferencing has become central to practice in New Zealand, it would seem that the introduction of family group conferencing has stalled in Australia.[150, 151] In Victoria, the way in which conferencing is used and the level of support that it receives in each region varies widely and is largely dependent on the commitment of a few specialist agencies. It is not part of mainstream practice, is not offered to all families and the status of the conference decision is non-binding, requiring the authority of the Department of Human Services or the courts to ratify it.[152, 153] Harris suggests that the usual list of barriers to collaborative and inclusive practices in child protection have limited the uptake of this approach in Australian practice. These include 'weak leadership, the decentralised structure of child welfare provision, limited resources, weak evaluation research, and conflicts with pre-existing structures and beliefs.'[154] On the other hand, in Victoria, the development of family decision-making programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders represent an important innovation in response to legislative requirement to include the voice of the family and child in decisions made about them. It represents a 'significant opportunity to empower, rather than disempower Aboriginal families and communities in relation to child protection'. [155]

Other limitations have been noted to this model. Power difference within families and between families and case workers remain a practical challenge to outcomes. However, research has found that the process of family group conferencing provides an opportunity for participation and family reconnections that offer positive emotional change and healing from trauma, improved communication within the family, reduced conflict and greater responsibility for decisions and solutions.[156, 157] The impact on the relationship between family and case worker and/or service agency is contentious.[158] Huntsman argues that the reason this approach is not widely used could be due to over-riding concern for professional accountability. He notes 'reluctance on the part of workers to cede control over decision-making to the family… [by maintaining] power during conferences, by controlling who will participate… and by dominating discussion.'[159] Family group conferencing may not be appropriate for complex cases, such as those involving domestic violence or where serious mental health issues are evident. However research has found that this approach can still be effective in these cases by allowing families to remain connected and involved in their own solutions.[160]

145 Harris, op. cit.
146 L Huntsman, *Family group conferencing in a child welfare context: Literature review,* Centre for Parenting and Research; NSW Department of Community Services, 2006, Retrieved July 2011, www.community.nsw.gov.au.
147 M Connolly, 'An act of empowerment: The Children, Young Persons & their Families Act (1989).' *British Journal of Social Work,* vol. 24, no. 1, 1994, p. 99-100.
148 Frederico & Davis, op. cit., p. 16.
149 Harris, op. cit.
150 M Connolly, ' Fifteen Years of Family Group Conferencing: Coordinators talk about their experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand.' *British Journal of Social Work,* vol. 36, no .4, 2006, p. 523-540.
151 Harris, op. cit.
152 Ibid.
153 Huntsman, loc. cit.
154 L Brown, *'Mainstream* or margin? The current use of family group conferences in child welfare practice in the UK.' *Child & Family Social Work*, vol. 8, 2003, p. 331-340. cited in Harris, op. cit., p. 4.
155 Harris, op. cit., p. 17.
156 P Ban (1996).' Implementing and Evaluating Family Group Conferences with Children and Families in Victoria Australia' in J. Hudson (Ed), *Family Group Conferences: Perspectives on Policy and Practice.* Criminal Justice Press, Monsey, NY, 1996, p. 140-151.
157 Harris, op. cit.
158 Ibid.
159 Huntsman, loc. cit. p. 10-11.
160 Huntsman, loc. cit.

Most critically, there are real challenges in the ability of family group conferencing to facilitate the voice of the child. The participation of children is contentious and raises concerns about the protection and best interests of the child. There is debate about the appropriate developmental level at which a child should participate and the extent of their participation, especially when faced with a perpetrator of abuse or neglect. There is also a fear that if excluded from family group conferences, the wishes of the child could be superseded by the wishes of the family.[161] In her review of the family group conferencing model Huntsman found that 'children are not satisfied with their role in family group conferencing and are not sufficiently central to the process.'[162] Without specific processes to include the voice of the child, we must question whether family group conferences are 'another adult decision-making forum in which children feel as disempowered as they do in reviews or case conferences.'[163]

Most critically, implementing a conference model of this type does not transform broader practices within child protection systems. Harris recommends the introduction of a broader 'collaborative' practice to child protection at all levels of the process and suggests that this will be necessary to ensure children's empowerment and participation in family and individual decision-making.[164]

It is fair to say that the true potential of this collaborative approach to include the child in decision-making has been minimised by research that fails to understand the nature and intent of collaboration and participation.[165, 166, 167] Further research, from a participative and collaborative perspective, is necessary to determine the potential of family case conferencing to promote the voice of the child in decisions made about him or her and in improving the long term outcomes for that child.

The child's voice in the legal system

The case for hearing the child's voice in court proceedings has been widely recognised in Victoria. There continues to be considerable discussion about the processes needed to ensure authentic voice in court proceedings and decisions. [168, 169, 170]

Child Witness Services was established in 2007 in Victoria following a Law Reform Commission recommendation.[171] This process provides an intermediary system for child witnesses so that attendance in a court is largely unnecessary. It provides education for lawyers and the judiciary about processes for validly extracting and understanding children's experiences. It recognises that a child giving evidence will need understanding of the process in which they are involved, their potential contribution to the outcomes and their ability to influence them, and could need new skills, such as the ability to say 'no' to adults.

The Child Witness Service provides expert support and education to enable and empower the child giving evidence and to support and facilitate the child's participation in the decisions and procedures that affect them. It represents best practice in processes to include and hear the voice of the child and young person in court proceedings. However, there is much more to be achieved. In its recent study of the child protection workforce, the Department of Human Services (Victoria) quoted a child protection worker's experience of advocating for children in the Children's Court as being adversarial and destructive to outcomes for the child they are representing. They noted that 'unlike other state and other countries, workers are attacked as common part of the process.'[172] They concluded that 'more help is needed to help [the workers] within this complex [court] environment.'[173] While much has been done to attempt to increase child participation in this forum, there are still many challenges.[174]

The voice of young people in program design and service evaluation

Concepts such as partnership, participation and empowerment as individual rights demand that we include the voice of the child and family in service development. We must ensure that clients and service delivery teams

161 Huntsman, op. cit.
162 Ibid. p. 10.
163 J Dalrymple, *'Reviews of Family group conferences: Messages from UK Research and Practice and Family Group Conferences: An Introductory Pack',' Child Abuse Review,* vol 6, 1997, p. 235-236 cited in Huntsman, op. cit. p. 10.
164 Harris, op. cit.
165 Ban, op. cit.
166 Harris, op. cit.
167 Huntsman, op. cit.

168 K Hanna, E Davies, E Henderson, C Crothers & C Rotherman, *Child Witness in the New Zealand Criminal Courts: A Review of Practice and Implications for Policy.* Institute of Public Policy, AUT Univeristy and The Law Foundation New Zealand. 2010.
169 Victoria Legal Aid, *Insight Series – Representing children – giving them a genuine voice*, 2011.
170 Victorian Law Commission, *Protection Applications in the Chidlren's Court: Final Report,* 2010.
171 Ibid.
172 Department of Human Services; Victoria. *Child Protection Workforce: The case for change.* 2011, http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/about-the-department/documents-and-resources/reports-publications/child-protection-workforce-the-case-for-change.
173 Ibid.
174 Rayner, 1992, op. cit.

become allies in, and co-constructors of, service delivery. In her review of the Moore et al study, Walker suggests that the results of a study with homeless children 'emphasises the need for workers to regard and treat children as clients in their own right and to take their wishes and needs into account in their response to children and their families.'[175] Accepting that children and young people will have a 'different experience of their situations and of the process of getting their needs met than those who are planning or providing services and resources'[176] requires that we find ways to give voice to those experiences in a way that will inform and impact service delivery.

Giving voice to those to whom services are addressed is a critical element of assuring and improving the quality of the outcomes for them. Collecting data from children, carers and families for the purposes of evaluation is an audited requirement of service providers under Department of Human Services funding provisions.[177] Voice through service evaluation will underpin evidence-based approaches to determining if and how outcomes are achieved or improved through developing partnerships with the children and young people who use the service. Participation in the evaluation and quality improvement of service delivery will promote self-efficacy – self-esteem through respect and inclusion and a feeling of personal input into improvement.[178] Participation of the child's voice as part of strategic planning, policy development, service planning and delivery; that is, child participation in quality management and service development, review and evaluation, must be the ultimate focus of efforts to ensure hearing and responding to the voice of the child.[179]

In 2001 Frederico and Davis recognised the challenge of establishing the voice through feedback from children and young people in child protection services. They noted that,

'[while] there has been a great deal of rhetoric regarding the importance of paying attention to the client's perspective in human services policy and planning – and general agreement that this is a good and necessary thing to do – there is a long way to go before a true partnership of client and service provider in policy development is achieved.'[180]

175 R Walker, 'Reflection 2: Taking little steps: Research with Children – A Case study.' *Involving children and young people in research: Compendium of papers and reflections from a think tank.* Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) & NSW Commission for Children and Young People. 2008, p. 99.

176 Frederico & Davis, op. cit., p. 7.

177 M Mc Donald & K Rosier, *Collecting data from parents and children for the purpose of evaluation: Issues for child and family services in disadvantaged communities.* Retrieved from CAFCA practice sheet: Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia: 2011, http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/pubs/sheets/ps/ps8.pdf.

178 Frederico & Davis, op. cit., p. 7.

179 Ibid.

180 Ibid., p. 1.

The many challenges to including children's feedback to child protection services reflect current participatory thinking about the challenges of participation. The way forward for evaluation of service delivery with children and young users of the service will be greatly informed by the ethical, legislative and methodological challenges met in participatory methods. A review of the literature and discussions with sector leaders in evaluation has identified the following challenges and considerations as prominent among many:[181, 182, 183]

- The power imbalance between the child and the service provider can act as a barrier to the provision and respect for feedback within a service organisation and can give rise to problems with staff collecting feedback data. The challenge is to establish evaluation processes where children who receive the service feel able to be critical of the service providers who hold so much power over their lives and to develop workplace cultures that respond constructively to negative feedback
- The adversarial nature of child protection – where compliance is required and failure to comply can lead to prosecution and punitive consequences – works directly against the collection of, and acceptance of, evaluation feedback. In this situation negative feedback could be discouraged or ignored as defensive or retaliatory.
- Engaging with children in service evaluation holds all the methodological, ethical and practical challenges seen in research settings. Evaluation methodology within services must comply with all the requirements of consent, privacy and ethical processes required of research but also be accessible to, and implementable by workers at case management level. It will be essential to educate workers about the issues relating to consent, privacy and confidentiality when collecting data from children. This will be critical to promoting participation, and confidence in participation, among the families, parents and children involved in child protection and family services.[184]
- Risk assessment and concern with failure to nurture or protect dominates the child-service interaction. This tension between protection and participation will impact the way feedback is heard and assumptions about the extent to which feedback can be objective. Of particular concern is the role of gatekeepers in determining who will participate in evaluation.

181 R Miller, *Critical Reflection and Child Protection Practice,* 2009, retrieved July 2011, from www.aaswwe.asn.au/download/2009/.../RobynMillerPresentation.ppt.

182 J McDowell, *Transitioning from Care in Australia: An Evaluation of CREATE's What's the Plan? Campaign [CREATE Report Card 2011].* Sydney: CREATE Foundation. 2011.

183 Frederico & Davis, op. cit.

184 McDonald & Rosier, loc. cit.

To what extent and, at what point, can the desire to protect a child become an infringement of their right to participate and be heard?

- Supporting and catching children's voice is complex, challenging and multilayered, and involves a profound shift in the values, actions and thinking of practitioners. Implementation of service evaluation and quality processes will require considerable up-skilling of workers in children's services. Handling conflict, supporting open dialogue and developing active listening and data collection processes are challenging for many experienced qualitative researchers and pose considerable challenges to practitioners and to the children and families they work with.
- Service provision in child protection is multi-stakeholder – many have competing or conflicting interests and varying levels of power and influence on the process of child protection programs. The rights of the child and parents will often conflict and their perspectives will differ, as will those of the many agencies attempting to meet the family's needs and adjudicate the outcomes. This will require the acquisition of increasingly complex skill sets by case workers and suggests a need for increased professionalisation of the workforce and enhanced co-production of response between agencies.
- Children and young people and their families will be asked to evaluate services at a time when they are most vulnerable, and perhaps least able to do so. The development and validation of data collection methodologies – for children and young people in particular – is an identified challenge in child protection services. Culturally competent evaluation methodologies where English is not the first language is also required.[185]
- A rights-based approach to participation requires that children are assisted in not only expressing their views but also in forming them and, therefore, also requires that children are enabled to form a view on all matters affecting them.[186] There is a need to develop methods to empower children and youth to take part in evaluation processes.
- Evaluation requires awareness of potential negative effects of evaluation. Negative aspects can include the time required from stressed and vulnerable children, fear of exposure and feeling vulnerable if their views are not respected. Evaluation processes must provide a range of channels whereby feedback can be provided. Moreover, effective evaluation processes will require collaboration in order to minimise potential negative impacts and this will require that children are involved in the design, implementation and evaluation of the evaluation process itself.
- The use of child and young person friendly interfaces must be explored – including the use of web-based technology and social media. Interesting developments in young person-friendly software and open source data collection methodologies deserve further attention in terms of their opportunity for collecting the voice of vulnerable children and young people.
- Implementation of effective voice through evaluation processes will require cultural change and work practices within an organisation and radical review of assumptions of power and responsibility. Translating these into professionally focused change programs to ensure impact takes time and involves intense collaboration, innovation, documentation and development within real world settings. Essentially this impetus must come from top down and be included in organisational planning and governance processes.
- Effective service quality and evaluation processes in the child protection and family services arena will require staff consistency and stability, increased capability, clear definition of roles and time to ensure relationship development between worker and child. Workers will require skills for engaging children and for the development of participation capability in the child. For many service organisations, this will require a centralised and specific quality improvement function. This will require a systems reform in workforce strategy and funding within the sector.

Effective voice through service evaluation must be built on a participatory feedback model which emphasises a commitment to the voice of the child through the child's lens, quality assessment of and changes to services against that feedback, and empowerment of the individual child through participation and through feedback.

185 McDonald & Rosier, op. cit.
186 Lundy & McEvoy, op. cit.

Young people's voice in policy, planning and governance

Quadrants three and four of the Frederico and Davis typology in figure one (page 12) represent the promotion of voice through participation at the community level. Quadrant four represents attempts to include the child's perspective where there is low participation and group representative involvement. This is the realm of public education and programs that educate or respond to ineffective interventions using, at best objective data about the child and research with the child as the object of consultation. It is the realm of a more paternalistic orientation toward child welfare.[187]

From the Frederico and Davis typology it is clear that this level of consultation with children and young people is not enough. Initiatives to provide avenues for the voice of children and young people as a group must also look to promote optimal participation. The challenge is for the voice of children and young people at the group and community level, to be active, not passive, inclusive and not selective and for participation to be more than consultation. Participation in program and policy planning must promote the empowerment of children and young people through active contribution to the policies and programs that impact their lives.

Quadrant three shows the highest level of participation to influence policy through advocacy bodies.[188] Programs that promote the voice of child representatives and advocates and provide opportunities for the voice of child and young person through group participation in debate and agenda are critically important.

Social participation of children and young people's voice – international initiatives

In the United States (US), organisations specifically aimed at accessing and representing the voice of young people have developed across most states. Voice for America's Children (Voices) (US), for example, is a nonprofit organisation that coordinates a nationwide network of state and local child advisory organisations in the US. It pursues its mission and vision by directly advocating, supporting member organisations advocating for children on local, state and federal public policy issues and through leading national campaigns to improve public policies affecting children. It is distinct in its advocacy, however, in that children's views are actively sought to define policy issues, response and needs.

The UK has led the way in the inclusion of children as active social participants. In the last 10 years, there has been a considerable policy effort directed towards children launched to fulfill Tony Blair's pledge to abolish child poverty in 20 years. This has meant that children have moved to the centre of the policy agenda, increased interest in children's well-being and a major redistribution of resources towards them. The UK Government's strategy to improve the outcomes for children and young people in care is based on the concept of corporate parenting and the recognition that children and young people have a right to influence the quality of the parenting they receive. They launched the 'Care Matters' consultation to strengthen the voice of the child and to improve corporate parenting.

'A good corporate parent must offer everything that a good parent would… equally it is important that children have a chance to shape and influence the parenting they receive. To improve the role of the corporate parent we are… expecting every local authority to put in place arrangements for a 'Children in Care Council', with direct links to the Director of Children's Service and Lead Member. This will give children in care a forum to express their views and influence over the services and support…'[189].

Such recent initiatives have been ground-breaking in recognising and achieving participation of children and young people in policy. However, this approach has also revealed the challenges for the future. The UK experience has shown that consultation and intention was not enough. The consultation process itself found that children and young people highlighted a critical need for stability and continuity of care and a need to establish formal processes to ensure their voice in day-to-day decision-making – not just as a consultative process.

Recognition of the need to involve children and young people in the decisions that affect them was mandated in the 1975 Children Act (UK) with the requirement for child welfare services to ascertain the wishes and feelings of the child when making decision about them.[190] However, some 30 years later, the children and young people participating in consultations 'emphasized that they wanted a greater say when decisions which affect them are taken and that they want[ed] social workers to listen more and have more time for them.'[191]

187 Frederico & Davis, op. cit.
188 Ibid.

189 Department for Education and Skills; U.K. op. cit.
190 Sinclair, op. cit.
191 Department for Education and Skills; UK. *Children and Young Persons Bill Policy Paper: Improving corporate parenting and strengthening the voice of the child,* 2011, retrieved September 2011, http://www.actiononaccess.org/resources/files/resources_Care_matters_PDF.pdf

Wales has also introduced an innovative approach to including the views of children and young people in government and policy decision-making through introducing processes to increase their voice at all levels of the child-service and government interaction. At the national level, the 'Funky Dragon', Children and Young People's Assembly for Wales attempted to represent the views of all children and young people. Young people are nominated to the assembly, which includes 'special interest seats' for including the views of young people experiencing disadvantage, such as those in the criminal justice system and social service system.[192]

At the local level, the Welsh model involves a Children and Young People's Partnership Participation Strategy aimed at including young people's views into local knowledge. Young people are consulted for their views in local and non-local organisations and authority bodies, are involved in training in participation, safeguarding children in participation and supporting organisations to involve young people. Local participative mechanisms have been introduced to include young people of different ages and from all special interest and minority groups.[193]

This is to be commended as world best practice in a process for children and young people to be involved in debate and policy. Even so, Wales has recognised that voice must also be facilitated at the individual level and that more was required than listening and responding. They recognised a need for 'every child's wishes and feelings to be ascertained and include[d] in core assessment and reports submitted to child protection conferences'[194] and for the results of collaboration by both individuals and groups to be reported back and acknowledged.

Recent Scottish experience highlights the challenges of ensuring that voice is meaningful and participation of children accurately represents them. The principle of participation is entrenched in both the philosophy and legislation that govern the operation of the system. However, research to determine what children and young people think about advocacy arrangements in the system showed that the principle of participation was 'difficult to put into practice'.[195] It was found that the advocacy process, while designed to provide a participative experience for children and young people, was 'a complex situation where children often [felt] left out of discussion and [were] confronted with a range of barriers which makes it difficult for them to participate and effectively express their views.[196] The researchers argue 'while there is an implicit commitment to providing advocacy for children and young people in Children's Hearings Systems, the extent to which this commitment is made explicit varies considerably. While some children and young people have extensive experience of advocacy support and an appreciation of how it can aid their participation, the experiences of others are more limited.[197]

Social participation of children and young people's voice – the Australian perspective

Commissioners for children

The role and influence of Commissioners and Guardians in providing an avenue for the voice of children and young people is recognised internationally and in Australia. The Office of the Children's Commissioner can make representations on behalf of children and young people where their rights may not have been respected. It is the duty of the Commissioner to meet with children and young people and be accessible to them, enabling children and young people to influence his work.[198, 199, 200]

The establishment of Child Ombudsmen or Commissioners for Children and Young People is a significant move across Australian States and Territories to recognise and promote the voice, perspective and participation of children and young people in community debate, policy and in the child protection system.[201] A Commission that is independent, properly funded at arm's length from government and takes the rights of the child as its frame of reference offers a central coordination point for the voice and perspective of children and can play a primary advocacy role in communicating the lens of the child to government and policy makers.[202]

'A truly independent and influential voice for children and young people, an advocacy body with a formal mandate to galvanise attention to their situation and the power to take action to improve it.'[203]

In 2006, the Commissioner and Child Guardian in Queensland noted her 'responsibility… to listen to, and seriously consider the concerns, views and wishes of

192 Young People's Participation Consortium for Wales: The Participation Unit, op. cit.
193 Ibid.
194 Young People's Participation Consortium for Wales: The Participation Unit, op. cit., p. 3.
195 Creegan, Henderson, & King, op. cit., p. 84.
196 Ibid. p. 84.
197 Ibid. p. 4.
198 Young People's Participation Consortium for Wales:The Participation Unit, op. cit.
199 H J Nicholson, 'Promoting the Best Interests of the Child: The Case for a Young People's Commission in Victoria.' *Law Institute Victoria / Pitcher Partners: President's Luncheon.* RACV Club Melbourne, 2002.
200 A H Lamont, *Children's Commissioners and Guardian.* 2011.
201 Ibid.
202 Nicholson, loc. cit. p. 1-2.
203 Ibid., p. 1.

children and young people'.[204] Conducting a survey of children and young people in out-of-home care, she recognised that they 'have valid views which can (and should) (sic) be used by decision-makers'.[205] The survey aimed to understand recent child safety reforms from the point of view of children and young people living in out-of-home care. Using a methodology sensitive to the needs, language, age, developmental capabilities and sample heterogeneity of children in out-of-home care, the survey measured satisfaction with the out-of -home care system and with the process of collecting the data itself among children nine to-18 years, five to eight years and less than five years of age and committed to feedback of results to ensure children were aware they had been listened too.[206]

In Victoria, the Office of the Child Safety Commissioner (OCSC) provides a conduit for the views of children through research and other processes designed to access children and young people's perspectives. In particular, the OCSC represents the needs of the vulnerable child and those in the child protection services.[207]

'As Eye See It', coordinated by the Victorian Child Safety Commissioner, is an exhibition of photographs taken by young people in out of home care. Originating in Victoria in 2009, the exhibition arose from the recognition of the need to provide young people living in out-of-home care with an opportunity to express what is important to them and what it is like being in care. It is now undertaken nationally. Young people receive and use a digital camera to record six photographs to represent their out-of-home experiences. Promoting the safety and well-being of children, the Victorian Child Safety Commissioner has a recognized role and responsibility to enable and promote the participation of children in the community.[208]

From the perspective of the voice of the child in the family services and child protection systems, the role of community advocates cannot be over emphasised. Frederico and Davis point out that

'the characteristics of child protection interventions, which are almost always begun in crisis situations and which engage strong emotions of all concerned, highlight the importance of client representative groups. Such groups can advocate for clients from a position of knowledge of the system yet are one step removed from direct involvement in an intervention …consumer-led and professional advocacy groups can support the participation of parents, extended family and other carer [groups such as foster and kinship carer, [for example] in policy and programs and ensure that the perspective of family and carers is presented and heard.'[209]

Commissioners and Guardians, charged with specifically representing the child have extended and promoted the voice of the child through asking children for their views, providing a conduit for those views and representing those views to policy makers and service delivery systems. However, the extent to which these agents act as a voice for children depends on how well they engage, listen and accurately reflect those voices. At the heart of ensuring participation and voice is the recognition that the experiences the child has cannot be inferred by others. This means practitioners, policy makers and advocates must include children's voices as they speak and not as they infer or interpret. This is the challenge for forums and bodies that represent the child as a group using information collected from individuals within the group – assuring participation through ongoing consultation, feedback and active participation.

Advocacy bodies

CREATE and the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic) have both recognised a need to assure the participation of children and young people's voice. Both organisations have explicitly recognised that participation involves being active in decision-making on issues that affect each individual and their communities, that young people and children make invaluable contributions to communities and that by facilitating participation they can empower children and young people in the community. They have recognised that participation of children and young people requires acknowledging their value. True participation requires children and young people must not be consulted for the sake of it, after the policy is formed or the decision made.[210, 211] 'Truly respecting children and young people's views will require listening to them and taking them seriously – and this will be a hallmark of a truly democratic society.'[212] These efforts sit at the top of quadrant three in the Frederico and Davis typology (see figure one, page 12) enabling the highest participation levels.[213]

204 Child Guardian: Queensland. *Views of Children and Young People in Care.* Queensland Commission for children and young people and Child Guardian, 2006, p. i.
205 Ibid.
206 Ibid.
207 Child Safety Commissioner. *As Eye See It: Project Report.* retrieved 2011, http://www.ocsc.vic.gov.au/downloads/as-eye-see-it-project-report.pdf. (n.d.)
208 Ibid.
209 Frederico & Davis op. cit. , p. 38.
210 Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc., *Taking Young People Seriously: Consulting Young People about their Ideas and Opinions.* Melbourne: Victoria: Department for Vicotrian Communities: Office for Youth. 2004.
211 Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc., *Taking Young People Seriously: Creating Change in Your Community.* Melbourne: Victoria: Department for Victorian Communities: Office for Youth. 2004
212 Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc , *Taking Young People Seriously: Young People on Boards and Committees.* Melbourne: Victoria: Department for Victorian Communities: Office f or Youth. 2004
213 Frederico & Davis op. cit., p. 45.

YACVic's attention to the child's voice and the paper, Are you listening to Us? – The Case for A Victorian Children and Young People's Commission prompted the establishment of the Commissioner function so integral to social participation of children and young people.[214] Recently, YACVic developed guidelines for young people's participation in the community, on boards and governance committees and towards policy and decisions that affect them.[215, 216, 217]

Founded in 1993, CREATE is a national not-for-profit organisation that provides connecting, resourcing and consulting services for children and young people in care, as well as young people who have been in care. The CREATE foundation aims to listen and respond to the voices of children and young people, particularly those in the child protection system, and to ensure that 'all children and young people in care are respected, listened to and [are] active participants in decisions which affect their lives'.[218] It is the 'peak body charged with communicating the views of children and young people about the care system to decision makers'[219] and which recognises that participation is the cornerstone of best practice.[220]

CREATE collects data from, and represents cared-for youth, as a group yet it has also recognised that the challenge is to ensure they 'maximise participation' by involving children and young people in 'concept, design, delivery, monitoring and evaluation'[221] of research and voice processes. CREATE involve young people in a participative feedback process where the issues and understanding provided are used to further communicate and educate them. CREATE has facilitated participation through young person friendly media channels and processes including, the 'Be.Heard' website[222] the CREATE magazine and CREATE youth forums and young consultants program, the National Youth Advisory Council (NYAC) and Report Cards.[223]

An example is the recent project to understand the experiences of 678 young people leaving out-of-home care using Australia-wide consultation processes, forums and surveys.[224] Based on the responses of young people, CREATE determined the need for minimum national standards to ensure improvement, consistency and national parity in the experience of leavers from out-of-home Care.[225] CREATE then launched the national awareness campaign 'What's the Plan?'. This campaign aimed to increase the practice of leaving care plans in transitional planning and recommending 'governments must ensure that the plans developed for and with care leavers must address the life issues they are likely to confront.'[226] In addition, the campaign directly responds to the voice of young people and their experiences through informing them about their rights and the value of a leaving care plan.

CREATE is unique in its determination to keep young people informed and their voices heard – even while recognising the challenges that promoting and understanding voice can present. They found that the 'What's the Plan?' campaign in its first year, had little impact on increasing the number of young people with a leaving care plan, however, the resources produced were considered valuable by the young people and those concepts and the reason for their value to young people will be carried forward to inform future campaigns'.[227]

They have a long-term commitment to ensuring children and young people's voice is heard. 'A continued and sustained promotion and advocacy campaign with accompanying resources is needed to ensure all young people have a leaving plan – a plan for their future'[228]. Their recommendations include continuing the elements of the social marketing campaign 'What's the Plan?' that young people identified as being effective with particular emphasis on empowering young people to become involved in the process.[229]

CREATE's commitment to the development of ongoing high level participation by involving youth, communicating with youth, measuring the effectiveness of proposed outcomes and re-involving youth in the evaluation and improvement of procedures is a highly participatory approach to ensuring the voice of young people as a group is understood, represented and heard. In this way, young people are being engaged in a productive, collaborative and empowered way in policy and practice that affects them.

Concerted effort to ascertain, include and present the voice of children and young people through group based voice and advocacy bodies is an important element of

214 Nicholson, op. cit.
215 Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc., *Taking Young People Seriously: Consulting Young People about their Ideas and Opinions.* op. cit.
216 Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc, *Taking Young People Seriously: Young People on Boards and Committees.* op. cit
217 Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc, *Taking Young People Seriously: Creating Change in Your Community.* op. cit.
218 McDowell, op. cit.
219 Ibid.
220 CREATE, *What's the Answer?*, 2010, Retrieved July 2011, from http://www.create.org.au/whats-the-answer.
221 Frederico & Davis, op. cit.
222 http://www.create.org.au/
223 CREATE, loc. cit.
224 Ibid.
225 Ibid.
226 McDowell, op. cit.
227 Ibid.
228 Ibid.
229 Ibid.

providing their voice in policy and planning. However, the critical issue is the lens by which information is gathered, interpreted and fed back. The extent to which the lens is child, and youth-focused will depend on the extent to which the child is truly able to participate and review the perspective and the outcomes presented. The challenge for representative groups and advocacy bodies will be to ensure ongoing participation through doing more than occasionally consulting them, but through constantly re-consulting and including them.

The voice of children in research

Participatory action research methodology has contributed much to our understanding of the processes involved in providing an accurate, empowering and child focused lens for voice.

Child-centered research – participatory research approaches to voice

The shift in the concept of childhood has heralded a significant shift in research paradigms, the assumptions and the methodologies by which children are included in research. Children's right to have a voice and to have their opinions heard has inspired research practitioners to find methodologies and principles that can involve children's perspectives in the design, evaluation and development of research practice. 'This new emphasis on the voice of children as integral to the research process has resulted in researchers thinking much more critically about how to access, facilitate and report children's own understanding of their experiences.'[230]

Gallacher and Gallagher suggest that 'participation through research has become both an aim (sic) and a tool (sic) in an ethical quest towards empowering children.'[231] Thus, developments in recent childhood research both internationally and in Australia have presented the following research concepts:

- Inclusive research is required that repositions children from the objects of research to the subjects. Children should be studied for and in themselves and not simply as a means of understanding the adult world.[232, 233, 234, 235] This recognises that early childhood research and policy was adult generated with little, if any, attention given to the children's own views of their experiences.[236]
- Children should be recognised and included as active participants in the research process and recognised as having strengths and competencies which transform them from invisible objects into subjects with a voice and perspective of their own.[237] This requires a recognition that research that includes and reveals the voice of children and young people must be more that just consultative.[238] If their voice is to be heard, it is not sufficient to carry out research on or

230 Graham & Fitzgerald, op. cit., p. 65.
231 Gallacher & Gallagher, op. cit., p. 501.
232 Alderson, op. cit.
233 Cashmore, op. cit.
234 Gallacher & Gallagher, op. cit.
235 Mason & Steadman, op. cit.
236 Harcourt, op. cit.
237 Fitzgerald & Graham, 2008, p. 65, op. cit.
238 Ibid., p. 83.

about childhood, researchers must research for and with children. Ideally, children should be engaged as researchers enabling their voice to inform the aims, method, data collection, data analysis, reporting and presentation of the research.[239]

- This requires recognition that attempts to discern the voice of children will require understanding that

'the actual experiences perceived by the child cannot be inferred by others and so practitioners and researchers must include their voices as they speak and not as we infer or interpret. As such, it is the researchers' task to 'open our eyes and ears and minds to these voices; to become expert and active listeners and to recognise the many ways in which children skillfully communicate their realities to us.'[240]

- Research should be based on democratic processes that assure equitable participation, respect for children's views and evidence of inclusion of those views in action and policy. Democratic research processes will recognise the importance of continually monitoring and attempting to redress, the power imbalance between researchers and researched. Respect for children's views, recognising children's rights and the importance of a relationship approach requires recognition of the need for emotional democracy in all human relationships.[241, 242] Thus the new approach to childhood research methodologies must ensure a 'democratic encounter', an 'equalizing research ethic, which distributes power among all participants.'[243]
- Reflexivity is the concept of allowing research to be self-informing and self-critical. Research methods must be flexible, allowing and facilitating reflective insight from the child's perspective on the process of research itself. This includes listening with intentionality and creating sustained opportunities for children's thinking to become apparent. The research process should be constantly reviewed, ensuring its role in providing children with a respectful and legitimate opportunity for hearing their ideas, view and opinions.[244]

'Listening can challenge assumptions and raise expectations. Seeing and hearing children express their interests and priorities can provide unexpected insights into their capabilities.'[245]

Participatory research practices that 'gives status' to the voice of the child takes as its most basic tenet not just including the voice of the child but hearing it through active participation. Participatory research aims to actively involve children's perspectives in both the development and evaluation of policy and research and has 'at its heart an active involvement in promoting the rights of children as citizens with voice and power'.[246] In the typology of figure one it sits at the top of quadrant three (page 12).

Participatory research outcomes

The Children Crossing Borders project in the UK, aimed to explore the practices, values and expectations of pre-school practitioners and parents from immigrant communities in multi-ethnic cities in five European countries. It focused on the children who were newly arrived and vulnerable and who faced cultural, linguistic, racial and religious differences between their home and host cultures. The aim was to give voice to those who are usually silent including the voices of the children. Using a participative action research approach, the study gathered film footage of 'days in the lives' of three and four-year-olds in different setting and countries. This was then used as stimuli for focus groups with young children to gain their interpretation of the film footage and to encourage more research and program development. The result of this approach to understanding the perspective of the child resulted in the development of training materials and activities that aimed to change practice through encouraging more open 'interaction and equitable dialogues between children, parents, practitioners and researchers across diverse communities and…to encourage the voices, dialogues and narratives from children to be listened to, given status and acted upon.'[247]

Using a participatory research design aimed at understanding experience from the homeless child's perspective, Moore, McArthur and Noble-Carr, researching in Australia, found homeless children's perceptions, understanding and expressed needs were different to those identified by adults.[248] Children perceive homelessness as being more about not feeling safe, supported, informed and connected to family, friends and community than about not having a house. Understood from this perspective, children contested the approaches that services take to supporting families experiencing homelessness. They felt that providing families with housing should not be seen as the only goal of homelessness services but, instead, should attempt to provide children with all the things that they need to feel as though they are at home (this includes space of their own, control over their environments, pets, predictability,

239 Gallacher & Gallagher, op. cit., p. 500.
240 Pascal & Bertram op. cit., p. 253.
241 Cashmore, op. cit., p. 26.
242 Mason, 2010, op. cit.
243 Pascall & Bertram, op. cit.
244 Harcourt, op. cit., p. 83.
245 Pascal & Bertram op. cit., p. 255.
246 Ibid., p. 249.
247 Ibid., p. 257-8.
248 Moore, McArthur & Noble-Carr, op. cit.

safety and the knowledge that things were going to get better. Rather than excluding them… 'children asked that they be supported to understand their family's situation and to talk about the things that they had experienced and needed.'[249]

The authors note that unanticipated outcomes were the impact on feelings of self-determination for both the child and family.

'Even though engaged in the service system for a long time the children shared that this was the first time they had been asked about their experiences… an unanticipated by-product... seemed to be that some families felt that [they] could now talk about their experiences openly and resolve any challenges that had been highlighted… [and children felt] proud about their involvement.'[250]

Other research undertaken with young people transitioning from care, found that using participative techniques enabled young people to express their concern for the way they were currently being framed by policy and research conducted 'on them' rather than 'with them'. This highlighted the need to provide a collective voice to care leavers regarding their experiences.'[251] While earlier research, framed from an adult policy-led perspective, had intended to explain the young person's plight and needs as they move from foster care to independence, the young care leaver believed this had not been achieved and had only added to their difficulty. The young people's views suggested that 'across the political, social and policy contexts… young care leaver's sense[d] that they [were] problematised… and that this perspective underscored all policy and program aimed at them thereby effectively proscribing them an undeniable and unalterably inferior position in society.'[252] The research identified the challenge of understanding and comparing policy frameworks from young peoples' perspectives and noted that there seems to be 'a missing link between the policy framework as they exist as documents and understanding of the living experience of young people. It's a complex analytical process to understand and unravel where the policies implicate lives over time.'[253]

The aim – active, participatory, reflective collaboration

Participatory methods have reshaped research with children. Participatory research techniques have heralded several new approaches and the search for methods of data collection that challenge traditional methodologies. While some ethical and methodological aspects are contentious, their value to insight into children's lives is increasingly recognised.[254, 255, 256, 257, 258] Qualitative, ethnographic and anthropological methodologies have gained new respect for their capacity to provide in-depth insight into the reality of experience and capacity to access a greater understanding of complex social phenomena. There has been a growing commitment to these methods, an increased recognition of their relevance to even young children and a growing body of suggested practices for listening to and consulting with children across all ages, including children under the age of five.[259] There is potential for such processes to add to the work of experimental methods, randomised controlled trials and longitudinal research methodology to provide a depth of insight with the potential to transform evidence informed practice in child protection and family services.

It is essential we take the time to continue the research conversation about methods and processes to include and listen to the voice of children and to be deliberately reflexive as we ask how some strategies could promote the engagement of some children, but not others.[260] There is much to be learned about process, methodology and reflective practice in achieving authentic and powerful voice for children from these endeavours.[261]

However, it is also important to recognise that approaches to including voice, such as participatory methods, still do not guarantee the child's voice will be heard. Gallacher and Gallagher suggest participatory methods should not be used naively or seen as an 'epistemological and ethical panacea (sic) to assure voice.'[262] They recommend a change in attitude – a methodological immaturity – and suggest that this approach will rescue participatory research processes from the assumption that the methodology itself will ensure voice is heard. They suggest it is

'[this] immature attitude of creative experimentation that is the very strength of participatory methodologies and is consistent with the general tone, if not the letter, of current interest in participatory methods within childhood studies as it encourages an attitude that good practice research will remain open-ended.'[263]

249 Moore, McArthur & Noble-Carr, op. cit., p. 101.
250 Ibid., p. 102-3.
251 C Cresswell, Methodological challenges in exploring the biographical 'voice' in comparative social policy research. *Paper submitted to University of Melbourne.* 2011.
252 Ibid.
253 Ibid.
254 Bessel, op. cit.
255 Bishop, op. cit.
256 Dockett, op. cit.
257 Fitzgerald & Graham, op. cit.
258 Wise, op. cit.
259 Pascall & Bertram, op. cit.
260 Dockett, op. cit., p. 60.
261 M Hill, 'Children's voices on ways of having a voice: Children's and young people's perspectives on methods used in research and consultation.' *Childhood, vol.13*, 2006, p. 69-88.
262 Gallacher & Gallagher, op. cit. p. 513.
263 Ibid.

Recognising the need to be constantly reflexive could be the most important lesson for including the voice of children across program, policy, services and in their own lives. As Pascal et al note, 'the deeper changes in values and attitudes required to realize this commitment for all children… are much harder to make a reality.'[264] Ultimately, 'the question is about the status we accord the child through the methodologies we adopt and the conclusions we draw; and about whether we allow the space to alter our agenda of presuppositions.'[265] It is the responsibility of us engaged in working with, or researching with, young children to strive to ensure that children's right to active participation maintains a high profile in practice as well as theory.[266]

Whether an attitude of immaturity will save participatory processes from the mistakes that it has sought to overcome requires more discussion. However, we must recognise the contribution of thinking in this research methodology to our overall understanding of participation and what is required to include the voice of children in a way that ensures that they are authentically heard and have power in the decisions that affect their lives. Research and processes that claim to be participative must be open to review by exactly their own objective – to provide constant and ongoing processes whereby the voice of children and young people can provide insight into their lived experiences and constantly critique our understanding of it.

The learning of research initiatives into understanding the voice of the child demands we ask more of policy, program, advocacy, reference groups and service delivery than consultation. While each endeavour to hear the child's perspectives has merit, if we are to truly respect the child's view then the processes we build into our communities, policy, governments and services must aim to reflectively offer active participation for all children. This must be more than a process where children's involvement is 'tokenistic, unrepresentative in membership, adult-led in process and ineffective in acting upon what children want.'[267] We must do more than consult with children and then provide feedback or action in response to their concerns.[268] Including children and young people in research and practice will require processes that ensure that children themselves learn that their issues and concerns are important, will be listened to, respected and acted on.

264 Pascal & Bertram, op. cit., p. 253.
265 M Woodhead, 'Towards a global paradigm for research into early childhood education'. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal.* vol. 7. no. 1, 1999, p. 5-22 cited in Pascal & Bertram, op. cit., p. 260.
266 Pascal & Bertram, op. cit., p. 261.
267 J Davis & and M Hill, 2006, *Introduction.* in E Tisdall, M Kay, J M David, A Prout, & M Hill. (Eds) *Children, Young People and Social Inclusion: Participation for what?,* Policy Press, Bristol, 2006, p. 9 cited in Fitzgerald and Graham, op. cit., p. 65.
268 Wise, op. cit.

Conclusion

Giving status to children's voices has been the struggle of the last 20 years.[269] It remains the challenge of policy and programs in child protection. It will be the objective of child based research that aims to uncover the real perspectives and lived experiences of children and young people. It is the ultimate objective of services that aim to include the child in the decisions and processes that directly affect them. Achieving it will require actively challenging entrenched, inequitable practices and relationships and supporting the 'silenced' to 'name their world' and so 'shape their world.'[270]

Acknowledging children's rights to be listened to and for their views and experiences to be taken seriously will make a difference to our understanding of their priorities, interests and concerns and how children feel about themselves and their lives. Listening is a vital part of establishing respectful relationships with the children we work with. Listening can challenge assumptions and raise expectations. Seeing and hearing children express their interests and priorities can provide unexpected insights into their capabilities and into the services and programs that will best serve them.[271]

Ultimately, children's voices will guide outcomes frameworks that will mark achievements and progress for children and young people in the child and family service sector framed by the aspirations of children and young people and will identify policy and programs aimed at individual outcomes.

Supporting and catching the voice of children and young people is complex, challenging and multilayered, involving a profound shift in the values, actions and thinking of researchers and practitioners. The UN Convention of the Rights of the Child is now part of our thinking and discourse, but is far from being realised in our actions.[272]

It is the responsibility of all of us working with children and young people to ensure that children's rights to active participation maintains a high profile in practice, as well as in theory. We must actively review all processes to ensure that we hear the child, using the child's lens and ensuring active and respectful collaboration and participation in the co-construction of meaning.

Janusz Korczak, one of the world's leading pioneers for the rights of the child and most original thinkers about children, famously refused Nazi offers of mercy if he abandoned

269 Pascal & Bertram, op. cit.
270 P Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London:Penguin Books. 1972 cited in Pascal & Bertram, op. cit., p. 255.
271 Pascal & Bertram, op. cit.
272 Ibid.

the Jewish orphans under his care into the Treblinka concentration camp and encouraged us to honour children as independent beings worthy of the utmost respect. His timeless words of compassion encourage us to include the voice of the child in our efforts to protect and provide for them as a case of morality.[273] Korczak had an envious capacity to hear and see the world through a child's eyes and learn from it. His words have a timeless truth never more relevant than today:

'Children are not the people of tomorrow, but people today. They are entitled to be taken seriously. They have a right to be treated by adults with tenderness and respect, as equals. They should be allowed to grow into whoever they were meant to be – the unknown person inside each of them is the hope for the future.'[274]

Including the voice of the child must be more than rhetoric, it must be supported by real conviction and action.

It requires commitment by government and policy makers to increased understanding of the means to facilitate, attain and understand the voice of the child through research and participation. Most critically, it requires the child in the family welfare system to be understood to be not only the person to whom something is done but the one for whom the outcomes are the reason for doing – and whose perspective and needs about those outcomes must be recognised, validated and sustained.

273 J Korczak, *A Voice for the Child: The Inspirational Words of Janusz Korczak*. (S. Joseph, Ed.) Thorsons. 1999.
274 Korczak loc. cit.

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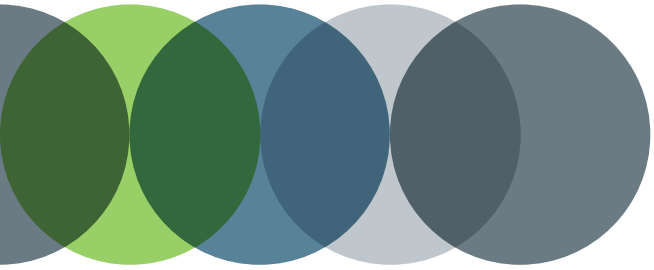
Notes



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