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Children's participation in child protection—How do practitioners understand children's participation in practice?

Elise Woodman[1] | Steven Roche[2] | Morag McArthur[1]

[1]School of Allied Health, Australian Catholic University, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory, Australia

[2]College of Health and Human Sciences, Charles Darwin University, Darwin, North Territory, Australia

Correspondence
Elise Woodman, School of Allied Health, Australian Catholic University, Canberra, ACT, Australia.
Email: elise.woodman@acu.edu.au

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Abstract

Children's participation is essential to achieve good outcomes for children involved in child protection systems. Despite this, research has consistently found children report low levels of participation, are poorly consulted and feel inadequately involved in decisions about their lives. To explore how practitioners understand children's participation, 18 in-depth interviews were conducted with statutory child protection practitioners in Australia. The interviews explored the ways child protection practitioners understand children's participation. Our findings show practitioners conceptualize children as rights holders and believe it is essential to hear directly from children about their needs and wishes to keep them safe. Practitioners identified the importance of transparent processes and decisions. Different understanding of participation emerged, with some participants talking about children as their central focus but not discussing meaningful participation of the child. It appeared that children's participation relied largely on the views and skills of individual workers, as well as their ability to incorporate meaningful participation in limited time and in complex practice environments where children's safety is a primary concern. Systemic changes to address time barriers, training practitioners to understand and implement participatory practice, and seeking children's input into service design, will support consistent and meaningful participation.

KEYWORDS
child and family welfare, child protection, children, children's participation

1 | INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) outlines children's right to participate in decisions about their lives (Toros, 2021b; Van Bijleveld et al., 2013). In child protection services, decisions are regularly made about children's lives, assessing their welfare and how they can best be supported. Child protection workers consider the child's needs and whether they are safe with their current family or caregivers, whether families can be supported to meet these needs and provide a safe environment, and, if not, who they should live with, and how much contact they should have with their birth families (Wilson et al., 2020). These are significant decisions that impact children's safety, well-being, identity and belonging (Hultman et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2020). It is imperative that children are heard and can participate in these decisions (Toros, 2021b). Children's participation supports more accurate decision-making and responsiveness to children's needs and improved care arrangements, self-esteem and well-being (Heimer et al., 2018; Van Bijleveld et al., 2020). When

children participate in informed decision-making, and trust the process, they are more accepting of decisions even if they differ from their wishes (Alfandari, 2017). When children are not given the opportunity to participate, they may feel desperate, worried, angry and hopeless (Husby et al., 2018; Wilson et al., 2020). Disregarding children's views can increase the risk of children running away from placements or becoming oppositional to future professional intervention in their lives (Alfandari, 2017; Duncan, 2019).

Deciding when and how children should participate in child protection processes is challenging (Duncan, 2019). Balancing children's rights of protection and participation is complex, as children's views on their best living environment often do not align with practitioners' assessments of their safety (Toros, 2021a). Defining participation is also complicated (Tisdall, 2017). In this study, we understood elements of good participation to include children being provided with necessary information to participate in decisions and a safe space to voice their opinions, children's views being listened to and valued in the decision-making process and, in ideal circumstances, influencing decisions (Middel et al., 2021; Toros, 2021b; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child [CRC], 2009). In addition, decisions should be communicated and explained to children, including how their views and adult views influenced the outcome (CRC, 2009; Toros, 2021b).

In practice, children report limited participation in child protection processes, feel uninformed about the decisions adults make and can feel powerless and scared (Bessell, 2011; Husby et al., 2018; Van Bijleveld et al., 2015). Children report participation can be unsuccessful and can occur at the wrong times (Duncan, 2019; Fern, 2012), leading to cynicism and perceptions of participation as unfriendly (Cashmore, 2011; Horan & Dalrymple, 2003). To improve children's participation, recent research argues for better knowledge of how practitioners' understand children's participation (Oppenheim-Weller et al., 2017; Toros, 2021b). Child protection practitioners are key to supporting children to participate and enact their rights (Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2020a; Toros, 2021a). This paper shares the findings of qualitative interviews exploring how Australian child protection practitioners understand children's participation.

2 | CONCEPTUALIZING CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION

2.1 | Child participation frameworks

Children's participation is multidimensional and includes various understandings of decision-making processes. Children's participation is often conceptualized as a continuum—from no or little participation, where the child might be informed but not consulted or actively involved in decisions, to higher levels where children initiate and share responsibility for decisions (Hart, 1995; Shier, 2001). In Shier's (2001) Pathways to Participation, for example, there are five levels of participation, where children are listened to (level 1), supported to express their views (level 2), their views are taken into account (level 3), they are involved in decision-making processes (level 4) and share power and responsibility for decision-making (level 5). Within each level, Shier (2001) considers whether adults provide 'openings' to let children participate, relevant practices and procedures enable 'opportunities' to participate and 'obligations' for children's participation exist in policy. Participation continuums reflect the extent to which children are able to participate in three key participation criteria: 'being informed', 'expressing a view' and 'influencing a decision' (Franklin & Sloper, 2005, p. 15).

Scholars have outlined a range of elements for effective participation by children. These include participation that is respectful, appropriate and transparent (Healy & Darlington, 2009) and supports social belonging, where children are integrated in and influence society (Pölkki et al., 2012). Others consider the focus of decision-making, the nature of participation, the children involved (Sinclair, 2004), their choices about participation and the support children receive, including varied ways to express their views (Thomas, 2000).

Bouma et al. (2018) identify dimensions for effective children's participation specific to child protection including 'informing', 'hearing' and 'involving'. Informing captures children knowing about their rights to safety and participation, the reasons for and processes involved in investigation, the options to participate, the focus and potential consequences of participation and the decisions made, including how the child influenced decisions. Hearing is about supporting children to express their views using individual meetings, child-friendly dialogue, genuine interest and effective listening. Involving is about children's role in decision-making, where their perspectives are considered and heard before decision-making, they understand the decision-making process and are involved throughout (Bouma et al., 2018). These frameworks informed our analysis, helping to consider the elements of participatory practice captured in participants' responses.

2.2 | The social construction of children

Common views about children, and adults' subjective interpretations of children's capacity, influence participation (Husby et al., 2018; Shemmings, 2000). Historically, children have been viewed as passive and unable to influence their development or the relationships and systems around them (Bessell, 2011; Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2020a). While there has been some shift to recognize children as social actors, the view of children as dependent, vulnerable and less capable than adults is still prevalent (Duncan, 2019; Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2020a; Toros, 2021a). Children's participation opportunities decrease when they are considered vulnerable or needing protection, meaning they are often not heard in child protection (Heimer et al., 2018; Sanders & Mace, 2006).

2.3 | Participation in child protection

Enacting children's participation in child protection is complex (Toros, 2021a), with legislation and policy yet to translate into

improved participatory practice (Diaz & Aylward, 2019; Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2020a; Middel et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2020). There is tension between the self-determination rights of children and the responsibilities of child protection practitioners to meet their best interests (Diaz et al., 2019; Heimer et al., 2018; Thomas, 2000; Vis et al., 2012). Balancing children's rights of protection and participation remains an ongoing practice dilemma, complicated by differing views of what constitutes participation, difficulties in defining maturity and assumptions about children's competencies (Thomas, 2000; Tisdall, 2017; Van Bijleveld et al., 2015).

Children report limited opportunities to participate in decisions throughout child protection processes characterized by little contact with practitioners, feeling uninformed about processes and excluded from decisions (Alfandari, 2017; Husby et al., 2018; Toros, 2021b; Van Bijleveld et al., 2015). These findings have been consistent over the last decade, with little evidence of improved participation for children (Toros, 2021b). Wilson et al.'s (2020) systematic review of qualitative evidence found children did not feel listened to and thought adult views were valued over theirs; they did not feel safe disclosing abuse and needed space, good listening and trust with their social worker to do so. In Australia, there are mixed reports on child participation (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2018; McDowall, 2018). Children do not want adults to completely hand over their power in child protection systems but want adults to recognize the legitimate knowledge and expertise they have about their lives (Duncan, 2019).

A recent systematic review found that while child welfare workers valued children's participation, children had limited involvement in decision-making, age influenced participation opportunities and workers considered the potential harm of participation (Toros, 2021a). Practitioners make different decisions about participation depending on their interpretations of children's maturity and age (Toros, 2021a). We need to find ways to engage all children rather than assessing their capacity to participate in adult-designed processes (Toros, 2021b).

In an earlier stage of our research into child protection practitioners' views on children's participation, we surveyed over 450 Australian child protection practitioners, who responded to case studies about children's safety. Our results showed that all participants would interview children as young as 5, and almost all practitioners felt confident in ascertaining children's views and supporting their participation (Woodman et al., 2018). This finding was unexpected given children's mixed experiences of participation in Australia and other research which showed practitioners see significant participation barriers for children under 5 (Berrick et al., 2015; Healy & Darlington, 2009; McDowall, 2018). Our results may reflect an experienced self-selected sample who were particularly supportive of children's participation. In addition, responses to case studies may not accurately capture how practitioners would deal with real cases (Van de Mortel, 2008).

A range of factors affect participation, including time pressures, staff turnover, limited understanding of participatory practice, practitioners' skills in engaging with children and a lack of child-centred processes (Alfandari, 2017; Diaz et al., 2019; Hultman et al., 2020; Whittaker, 2018). Further, a small English study recently found that senior managers were disconnected from the challenges social workers faced regarding children's participation and had limited understanding of meaningful participation (Diaz & Aylward, 2019). Children's participation can be supported by effective relationships between professionals and children and allowing children to chair their care review meetings (Diaz et al., 2019).

Legal responsibilities to report safety concerns can inadvertently position protection as the primary focus (Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2020a; Middel et al., 2021). Child protective services often adopt a protectionist approach, which positions practitioners as experts and leads to decisions being made *for* rather than *with* children (Alfandari, 2017; Middel et al., 2021; Toros, 2021b; Vis et al., 2012). In Kosher and Ben-Arieh's (2020a) study with 151 Israeli social workers, practitioners favoured a protective position and only partly supported children's participation in their practice.

Practitioners can also see participation itself as a risk for children and want to prevent burdens of responsibility and guilt being placed on children (Alfandari, 2017; Križ & Skivenes, 2017; Toros, 2021a; Vis et al., 2011). Children do not, however, need protection from participating (Toros, 2021b). Participation and protection should not be seen as competing rights (Diaz et al., 2019; Duncan, 2019); participation can promote children's well-being alongside their protection (Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2020b).

2.4 | The Australian context

In Australia, child protection services, policies and legislation are state- and territory-based with eight different systems. The overarching process for responding to child safety concerns is similar across all jurisdictions. Child protection processes begin following reports of concern relating to children's welfare and risk of physical, sexual or emotional abuse, or neglect. These reports are assessed by intake services who decide whether child protection involvement is warranted and may conduct initial interviews with the child and their family. If the child is considered unsafe, care and protection orders are undertaken and may include family support, ongoing review of child safety or out-of-home care arrangements, where the child is placed with extended family or foster carers (AIHW, 2018). Following the initial report of concern, any follow-up investigation, decision-making about the extent of child protection involvement and any changes to the child's caring and living arrangements present opportunities for children to be consulted and participate in decisions about their lives.

Participatory approaches have been adopted in child protection in Australia since the 1990s, and all state- and territory-based child protection legislation recognizes the role of children in decision-making (Bessell, 2011; Healy, 1998). The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children guides child protection work nationally and supports children's rights to participate in decisions that impact them (Council of Australian Governments, 2009). Despite this, children continue to have mixed experiences of participation in Australian

child protection systems. Given the important role of practitioners in enacting children's participation and the impact of how they conceptualize participation in their practice (Križ & Skivenes, 2017), we conducted qualitative interviews to explore Australian child protection practitioners' views about children's participation.

3 | METHOD

This study followed an online quantitative survey of 467 Australian child protection practitioners (Woodman et al., 2018). At the completion of the survey, participants could express their interest in a follow-up qualitative interview exploring children's participation in more detail. These interviews, reported in this paper, aimed to explore the nuance within child protection practitioners' understandings of participation. The study addressed the research question: How do child protection practitioners understand children's participation?

With the help of existing participation frameworks, the study aimed to understand the elements of participation captured in participants' understandings and areas where participation might be further supported. This qualitative component added deeper understandings of the meanings practitioners attached to the phenomena of children's participation and depicted complexities of participation beyond the quantitative survey data we had collected (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

3.1 | Sample

In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with 18 child protection practitioners in Australia. Participants came from five jurisdictions, and while various state- and territory-specific policy was mentioned, the overarching themes were similar, with later interviews revealing few new ideas. Most participants worked in case-management roles directly with children, either in the initial investigation phase or supporting long-term care arrangements. These participants had contact with children several times a week. Two participants were in senior roles supporting others in their practice but had previous direct practice experience with children. This was an experienced sample with most participants having worked between 4 and 12 years in child protection. All but one of the participants were women.

3.2 | Ethics approval

The research was approved by the *Australian Catholic University's Human Research Ethics Committee*. Participants were provided with a detailed information letter to ensure informed consent and emphasize the choice to cease participation at any time. To ensure anonymity, identifying information was removed from transcripts.

3.3 | Data collection

Interviews were conducted in 2017–2018. A semistructured interview schedule guided interviews and covered relevant areas relating to children's participation. The interview questions were informed by existing participation literature and explored practitioner's understanding of children's participation, whether children know their rights and barriers to participation. Researchers encouraged detailed descriptions to avoid assumptions about participation elements referred to by participants. Interviews were primarily conducted over the phone, went for approximately 1 h and were audio-recorded with the consent of participants.

3.4 | Data analysis

Recordings of the interviews were transcribed and then analysed using NVivo data analysis software. Thematic analysis was used to inductively develop themes, paying close attention to the language and perspectives of participants (Thomas, 2006). Through coding, common themes across interviews were identified, based on the meanings found in the transcripts (Punch, 2013). The initial codes, which aimed to reflect participant language, were developed by one researcher and then grouped with similar data to form themes from the interviews. These codes and themes were then reviewed by the research team. During this process, there was agreement about the initial data coding but the language of some overarching themes was changed to better reflect participants' views and capture the essence of the data. The data were then positioned alongside existing participation frameworks to consider the extent children's participation is understood by practitioners and ways it might be furthered.

4 | FINDINGS

Five themes were identified, including the varied understandings practitioners have of children's participation, the ways participation supports better outcomes for children and children's right to participate and be heard. Participants also identified the need for transparent processes and decision-making and the barriers to effective participation.

4.1 | Varied understandings of participation

Most participants conceptualized children at the centre of their practice; however, the ways they related child-centred practice to participation varied. For some, children's participation was a critical element of child-centred practice.

> It's having the child at the centre of everything that you do, so from an initial response, you know, talking to the child about their safety, you know, how safe

> they feel, when do not they feel safe, when do they feel safe (Interview 4)

Some acknowledged the discourse of child-centred practice, and children's participation does not always translate into practice.

> I think that the concept of child-centred practice are words that get said a lot, but [have] not always been the practice. So, I think that they should be the same thing [child-centred and participation], but whether they are, in practicality I do not think they are … (Interview 1).

When asked to explain their understanding of children's participation, some participants talked about being child-centred or 'focusing on the needs of the child as much as possible' (Interview 8) but did not refer to children's involvement in decision-making or seeking children's perspectives. To help clarify their understandings, in later interviews, we asked participants to differentiate their understanding of child-centred practice and children's participation.

A minority of participants felt children's participation was essential to child-centred practice. Most, however, felt child-centred practice was a broader concept that reflected the way child protection as an organization approached and worked with families, focusing on the safety and well-being of the child. They reported that this focus on the child could lead to the child's participation, depending on the approach of individual workers, the age of the child and other practice barriers addressed in Section 4.5. Interviewee 12 noted that while it might not be ideal, it was possible to be child-centred and act in the best interests of the child without hearing their voice.

> There should not be [a difference between child-centred practice and children's participation], but I think there very much is, because child-centred practice, you can still do without necessarily hearing their voice … like you can be acting with the best interests of the child and keeping the child very much in the room. And I think there's some caseworkers that do that very well, but also do not necessarily hear the child's voice, and I think sometimes you can hear the child's voice very well, but you can lose sight of the bigger picture for them … (Interview 12)

4.2 | Better outcomes when children are heard

Most participants felt they needed to hear directly from children to understand their views and individual needs, keep children safe and improve their life outcomes.

> The whole basis of child protection is about seeing the child's views through their eyes, seeing their worldview through their own lens. So, case workers need to form a positive relationship with every child in order to understand what their needs are. (Interview 9)

Some participants highlighted how children and adults see the world differently and children can have different worries and needs to adults. While reports to child protection authorities came from adults, the child might have different worries.

> They're the ones that are going to be able to tell you how they are feeling, what they want, what their dreams are, what their fears are, what their hopes are … A parent or a carer, a friend cannot tell you that, so you need to keep the child at the centre of all conversations, all your paperwork. (Interview 4).

Ensuring children felt listened to by child protection workers was considered essential to encouraging them to talk about what they wanted and how they were feeling. Good listening showed respect for the child's perspective and a commitment to making decisions informed by their views. Participants felt this helped ensure children did not feel powerless within the process, lessening the impact of the child protection intervention and the trauma of removal from their birth families.

> Well, it's extremely important … If they have a feeling of being completely powerless and not heard and imposed upon, they will carry that with them [and] … the outcome will not be as good for the family and their welfare … but even in terms of their long-term development, psychological and emotional development of the child. That will impact on … what kind of feeling they develop about themselves, as being that victim, being powerless, being that they are angry, do they carry that with them or if we can spend the time, build the relationship, involve them then they can get a different experience, they can feel that they are heard and they are worth something. (Interviewee 15)

Children's views influenced participants' decision-making, and they described times when children's views had encouraged them to pursue changes to care arrangements.

> [A] 13-year-old where we applied to change the order because of her wishes. She has expressed a wish to not be in the parental responsibility of the minister… Now, we are just in the process of finalising all the applications [for guardianship to be with the carers]. So, she's really excited about that. She feels a real stigma of being a foster child and does not want people to know, does not want us contacting the school and getting updates on her, does not want us getting reports from dentists or other professionals because she does not want people to know she's a foster child.

> She just wants people to see her as herself. (Interview 11)

Consulting children was also valued because their input helped collaborate about the plans being made, maintain some relationship between child protection and the child, reduce feelings of anger or frustration and create more positive outcomes.

> … it's hugely important … as they are older, the more involved they are in the planning around where they want to be, what goals they want to achieve, the more likely they are to work with you to get them. If you are putting things in place for kids that you think they need but they do not understand, there's no incentive or reason for them to want to participate, they have got to want to own it. (Interview 12)

4.3 | Children's right to participate and be heard

Participants noted that child protection legislation was clear about children's right to participate and be heard. Participants described children as rights holders, including the right to participate in decisions that affect them. One practitioner explained her understanding of participation as an inherent right for children to be involved in decision about them:

> My understanding of their participation is that if they are able to participate and have a say in a safe, secure environment that they have that right. That's their right to be able to participate in decisions made about them and their future …. (Interview 2)

Participants talked about the heightened need for children to be heard in the child protection system where adults were making decisions about their welfare and best interests, and they often had limited control. They highlighted the importance of giving children opportunities and varied means to express their views.

> It's about allowing them to have a voice … giving them opportunities to express their views directly … so whether that be via therapeutic tools, whether it be in writing, whether it be face-to-face, whether it be with me, the social worker, their parent. (Interviewee 7).

Consultation with children was considered important at every stage of the child protection process, and their preferences needed to be revisited over time, rather than asking once and using this as the point of reference for the child's preference at a later stage.

> … what a child thinks one day may be recorded. The next day that child may have different information, they'll be in a different emotional state, and what they want that day could be quite different, but one lot will be recorded and the other probably will not, and then what's recorded becomes what's lived by, so you know, they are human beings, and they are human beings without the potential often to understand how today's decision could affect them even two months down the track. (Interviewee 18)

This quote highlighted potential issues caused by limited consultation with children and raised questions about children's capacity as long-term decision-makers. Ensuring regular opportunities to listen to children helped capture children's views over time and build children's confidence to safely discuss bigger concerns with practitioners. It was important to let children know they had been heard through reflection of their feelings and checking the worker had accurately understood. Part of being heard was the ability to be involved in and influence decisions about their lives.

Despite the importance of children's involvement in decision-making, participants noted that most, if not all, children want to stay with their birth families and that this is often overridden by safety concerns. In these cases, children were involved as far as possible in decisions about where and who they were going to live with and asked how they felt about the decisions that were made.

> Really … children do not have that much decision-making power about the big things that are happening in life. That's why it's important for case workers and carers to be able to encourage and enable them to have a say about things that they can have control over. What they eat, what they wear, what they do after school, what they do before school, these sorts of things. (Interviewee 9)

4.4 | Transparent processes and decisions

When children's wishes could not be met, it was important they had been heard, validated, their views documented and the reasoning behind a different decision explained. Participants felt this could help children see the process as fair and reduce frustrations compared with an unexplained 'no' to their requests. Being clear about the worker's role in supporting the child's safety and ensuring children were informed and understood, the implications of decisions could help them understand the final decision. Several participants noted how understanding the 'why' behind what children wanted provided information about their lives and helped them to achieve shared goals.

One participant noted that when decision-making was transparent, it was rare for children to fight the outcome. Similarly, Interviewee 7 noted the importance of being clear with children about what is happening and why:

> For me, participation is very much about making sure that they understand the processes that are happening

> for them and being clear about when we have not been able to meet their wishes and why. Because quite often what children want and what we can actually achieve for them are very different and they need to understand the limitations of the system but also our obligations to keep them safe.

Interviewee 15 explained the impact of children not knowing why certain decisions had been made.

> I mean certainly there has been a lot of research in the last 10–15 years around children that are in the care system, and not really understanding why. That has really negative outcomes for children because they are never fully cognisant of what has happened or their own life story.

For Interviewee 13, working with teenagers had changed the way they wrote case notes to be like a letter to the child. They wrote in the first person and addressed the child throughout the case notes with the assumption they might read the notes at some point. In their notes, they explained the decision-making process to ensure if the child came back to read their file, they would know what happened and why and understand the case worker cared about them and their outcomes:

> … having teenagers on my case work, [I] always think when they come back and look at their files … how to explain [why] what they said back then did not happen …. And I've actually changed the way I write my home visit reports … in the first-person to the child or young person. So, then I [write] whatever they are playing on the Xbox. We talked about this and that, so … the hope is to bring them back to that kind of—you know, meeting. And they jog their memory [on] what we talked about, and even with one-year-olds, you know, your auntie or uncle 'They were greeting me, you were on the high chair, we talked about this, Mummy's not seeing you because of this and you do not need to worry about' …

4.5 | Barriers to participation

Participants identified barriers to effective participation, including the varying skills of practitioners in talking to children, and limited time. This lack of time made it difficult to build rapport, support participation and work out what children want. Participants felt that high staff turnover could make children more reluctant to share important information with new people. Participants felt that good participation required time that was not often available.

> … how long it takes to actually gain the trust and get to the point where you really have established communication, the child really can talk to you. That time is not there often … by the time you move on the child will feel I did not matter, I wasn't heard… I mean sure I guess some workers do not have the skills but most people really want to… listen to the child, be with the child, help the child in whatever way. I think often it's a matter of time and ability and not being able to go out there. (Interview 10)

Limited time with children could also impact the extent children could understand and enact their rights. There was a sense that despite efforts to involve children, they often did not have enough information to make informed decisions and rarely understood their rights and the complaints process well enough to enact those rights. The child's ability to exercise their rights often relied on individual workers to value the child's voice, listen well and then advocate on their behalf. Participants felt that children's views should be evident in all case notes, discussions about the child's situation, and court proceedings. This documentation was a way to advocate for the child's views in decisions at higher levels and, with the child's permission, conversations with parents about the child's needs, hopes and feelings.

Participants talked about diverse ways to ascertain children's views through what they said, how they presented and acted and the weight given to the child's perspective regardless of age. Some noted, however, that an emphasis on voice meant that older children who could articulate what they wanted, or those more confident in vocalizing their needs, tended to have more control over outcomes.

Together, the results highlight a complex picture of children's participation.

5 | DISCUSSION

For the child protection practitioners in our study, supporting children's participation involved listening to children to understand what they wanted, transparent decision-making and, where possible, having children's views influence decisions. Limited time was a key barrier to children's participation. Children's ability to have a say appeared reliant on their age and verbal capacity or the skills of individual workers to engage children, understand their needs, and advocate on their behalf. The tension with children's right to safety emerged as children's wishes could be overridden by safety concerns.

While participants understood that children had the right to participate, they spoke about participation in different ways. For some, participation was key to child-centred practice, whereas others described children as their central focus but did not refer to the active participation of the child. Other studies have found that social workers lack understanding or training in participation (Diaz et al., 2019), and express different understandings, with some seeing

consultation as participation while not considering children's views in decisions (Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2020a). These varying interpretations highlight the need to clarify what participation entails for child protection staff and that participation is a core element of child-centred practice. Child-centred perspectives emphasize that children experience the world differently to adults, and better outcomes are achieved when children express their needs and wishes (Moore et al., 2011).

Despite these varied understandings, participant responses underlined important elements of participatory practice and complexities specific to the child protection setting. We drew on existing participation frameworks to consider the ways our results captured participatory practice and areas for development.

Principles of children's participation were evident in the participants' responses, including children being informed, able to express their views and influence decisions and transparent decision-making (Bouma et al., 2018; Healy & Darlington, 2009; Pölkki et al., 2012). Participants' focus on ongoing consultation with children, clarity about the role and purpose of child protection engagement and informing outcomes with children's points of view shows their view of participation is not tokenistic (Hart, 1995). One participant cautioned, however, that children can be consulted once and their views on that day may be enshrined as their perspective going forward. While the participant was critiquing this practice and argued for regular consultation with children to capture any changes in their perspective, it highlights how participatory practice may be tokenistic in some instances.

The participation described by our sample aligns with the middle levels of participation continuums, similar to Hart's (1995) level 5 (of eight levels), being consulted and informed—'Adult-led activities, in which youth are consulted and informed about how their input will be used and the outcomes of adult decisions' (p.25). While the participants highlighted the importance of children's views influencing outcomes and the key information that could only come from the child, it did not reach the higher levels of participation in which decisions are shared with, and activities are initiated by, children.

Hart's (1992) ladder was developed in the context of community projects. Initiating decisions in child protection offers a very different context for children, where initial welfare concerns are primarily raised by adults. Indeed, it was participants' core responsibility of children's safety which meant that children's views could not always be acted upon and made higher levels of participation difficult. This highlighted the tension between participation and protection that makes children's participation in child protection complex. One of Sinclair's (2004) dimensions of participation—the need to consider the focus of decision-making in which children are involved—helps contextualize the challenges faced by child protection workers.

Shier's (2001) Pathways to Participation reveals further complexity regarding opportunities for children's participation. While participant responses showed a commitment from them and supporting legislation to listen to children (level 1), support them to express their views (level 2) and take their views into account (level 3), children did not appear to consistently get these opportunities. At level 1, the ability for children to participate seemed reliant on the skills of the individual worker both in terms of their commitment to hearing, and their skills in engaging, children.

At level 2, participants talked about the range of strategies used to enable children to express their views but noted that these were worker-dependent and that children who could voice their opinions had a greater chance of influencing outcomes.

In level 3, 'does your decision-making process enable you to take children's views into account', the participants were committed to having children's views influence decisions but noted that safety concerns could override children's wishes. Some participants questioned children's ability to grasp the impact of their decisions, particularly in the long term, which indicated some doubts about children's capacity to participate in decisions. In other research, this ability for children to change their minds has seen them conceptualized as unreliable in decision-making (Toros, 2021a). It appears that there may be more to do in ensuring children are fully informed to participate in decisions, as well as challenging underlying assumptions about children's capacity.

Level 4—where children are involved in decision-making—is harder to ascertain from our data. Participants highlighted the importance of children's views influencing decisions and the need for transparent decisions, but children did not appear to be actively involved in decision processes. Instead, child protection workers advocated for children's views within the system. This is important to evaluate further, as Shier (2001) notes that level 4 is a minimum for meeting children's rights as outlined in the UNCRC.

Participant responses highlighted the need to ensure children's participation is not reliant on the skills or commitments of individual workers. Skills training is important, but there is also a need to create environments in which children are less reliant on adults or their own verbal confidence to participate effectively. This could include use of various media and accessible communication and information strategies to ensure children understand the child protection process, their rights and ways they can share their perspectives. Seeking input from children to create a child-friendly organization and the conditions needed to better support their participation offers a way for children to exert more power without overshadowing safety in individual cases. Research with children has highlighted the need for more accessible systems and organizational language, child-centre processes and the need for children to understand their right to dispute decisions (Bouma et al., 2018; Diaz et al., 2019; Duncan, 2019; Pölkki et al., 2012; Wilson et al., 2020). Children need to be seen as partners who can and should influence policy and service development (Husby et al., 2018; Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2020a). Diaz et al. (2019) highlight the value of children chairing their care review meetings or at least deciding on the location and timing of the review, those involved and the meeting agenda.

Respect for children was implied in the high value placed on children knowing their own lives best and the ways their input improved outcomes (Healy & Darlington, 2009). Some comments around capacity for long-term decisions, the question of *if* children are able to participate and the high value placed on voicing opinions suggested

underlying systemic or personal views about age can influence how appropriate participation is considered. This is reflected in other research with child welfare workers where age plays a role in whether children are considered active participants and given opportunities to do so (Toros, 2021a). To further children's participation, we need to understand how to support their participation regardless of age, rather than relying on their ability to fit into adult decision-making processes (Toros, 2021b). The UNCRC applies to children regardless of age and ability—all should be afforded opportunities for and enabled to participate (Bouma et al., 2018).

Some responses showed genuine interest in the child as identified by Bouma et al. (2018) and recognized children's need for belonging (Pölkki et al., 2012). Participants considered how their interactions with children could help children see they were involved, rather than having decisions made for them, and build relationships that helped children share important things. Participants considered the immediate and long-term benefits of children understanding that the people involved in decisions about their lives cared about them. Participants identified time as the key barrier to supporting children's participation. This finding is reflected in other research and highlights the need for review of caseload expectations (Diaz et al., 2019; Hultman et al., 2020; Whittaker, 2018). For participants, limited time interfered with children being able to know and enact their rights and be informed enough to make decisions.

Overall, participants could see the benefits of children's participation, the need for children to be informed and for processes and decisions to be transparent. Their responses suggest that children's participation might be further supported by ensuring participation is clearly defined and well understood by practitioners. Children also need accessible ways to understand their rights and share their views to ensure effective participation is not reliant on their own confidence or the worker they are assigned. Workers need support to navigate children's dual rights of participation and protection through training, supervision and a review of organizational pressures.

While we focused on individual worker understandings of participation, the results suggest that systemic changes are needed to ensure good participatory practice is available to all children and workers are supported in meeting children's rights. Others have similarly found that children's participation is arbitrary rather than systematic and reflects organizational challenges such as high workloads and not all workers having the skills to communicate with children of all ages (Alfandari, 2017; Diaz et al., 2019; Toros, 2021b; Wilson et al., 2020). Children's participation needs to be more than a procedural requirement, workers need to understand the 'how to' of participation and be given time to build trusting relationships with children and support their participation (Cossar et al., 2016; Diaz et al., 2019; Husby et al., 2018). Our participants have shown knowledge of, and commitment to, participatory practice exist within child protection, but this must be harnessed, trained for and supported across child protection services in Australia.

6 | LIMITATIONS

This research is specific to Australia and draws on a self-selected sample, which may have attracted workers particularly committed to children's participation. Further research is needed to see whether these results reflect broader understandings about children's participation in Australian and international child protection contexts. The overlap of findings with Diaz et al.'s (2019) English study suggest that similar challenges exist across varying child protection systems. Recognizing that adults and children see the world differently means ongoing consultation with children about their experiences of participation is essential (Roesch-Marsh et al., 2017).

7 | CONCLUSION

This study presented Australian child protection practitioners' understanding of children's participation. The results capture important elements of participation, with participants recognizing participation as children's right, a means to improve outcomes for children and outlining the importance of transparent processes and decisions. The findings show that children's participation may be overly reliant on the skills of individual practitioners, which can be further constrained in complex practice settings where children's safety is the primary concern and time to work with children is limited. Training all staff to develop understanding of, and confidence in, participatory practice, as well as supporting staff to negotiate and uphold rights of participation and safety, is needed. Sharing power with children, especially in creating child-accessible organizations and processes, while also developing environments where children can participate at the times and in the ways they want to, may allow children to further influence decisions about their lives and maximize children's rights to both participate and achieve personal safety.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interests to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ORCID

Elise Woodman https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5467-3484
Steven Roche https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5648-0953

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