Citation:
Race, T and Frost, N (2022) Hearing the Voice of the Child in Safeguarding Processes: Exploring Different Voices and Competing Narratives. Child Abuse Review. ISSN 0952-9136 DOI: https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2779

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Document Version:
Article (Published Version)

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Check for updates

Received: 23 June 2021 | Revised: 16 March 2022 | Accepted: 13 June 2022

DOI: 10.1002/car.2779

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Hearing the Voice of the Child in Safeguarding Processes: Exploring Different Voices and Competing Narratives

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings of research about children's participation in child protection processes. Research was undertaken with young people who had recent involvement with safeguarding professionals. The study explored children's lived experience and perspectives and found that children feel capable of making a contribution, however, they are frustrated by experiences of exclusion and inequality and the limitations of their ability to influence process and outcomes.

The study further explored the perspectives of practitioners. Whilst professional commitment to child-centred practice and effective safeguarding is unequivocal, the discourse of participation is characterised by 'yes, but'. Insights emerged from the different voices and competing narratives of the central protagonists in the child protection process: children, social workers, chairs of case conferences and advocates. This paper examines how the child's right to involvement in safeguarding processes is understood and contributes to the evolving discourse about the importance of children's participation.

KEYWORDS

children's participation, safeguarding, voice

Key Practitioner Messages

- Children have a right to participate in safeguarding processes and practitioners should work with empathy to enable them to do so.
- Children's involvement in decision-making processes nurtures their capability and enables effective safeguarding.
- There is a need to rethink adult-centric safeguarding processes to increase the use of child-friendly meetings and access to advocacy services to enable children's participation.

INTRODUCTION

There is increasing consensus that when adults make decisions that impact on children's lives, children should participate in the decision-making process. This legal right is enshrined in the Children Act 1989 in England and Wales, which stipulates professionals should give due consideration to the opinions of children when making plans to promote their welfare. Similar legal principles are embedded in childcare law across western nations. However, participation can be

Professor Nick Frost has retired from full-time employment but remains an Associate Emeritus Professor.

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seen as a contested concept and enabling the voice of vulnerable children to be heard during safeguarding processes is far from straightforward.

Research was carried out with children in an English local authority examining how the child's right to participate in child protection processes is understood and facilitated. Acknowledging the crucial role of safeguarding professionals, particularly social workers, the study explored the perspectives of key practitioners, whilst retaining a focus on the views and experiences of children. This paper examines the way in which the perspectives of professionals dominate adult-centric safeguarding processes. The aim of the paper is to contribute to the evolving discourse about the importance of children's participation and what this means in the safeguarding context.

BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

When Arnstein (1969) developed the concept of citizen participation, she emphasised the importance of enabling influence and promoting the redistribution of power. The right to participate is not an absolute right, it is contingent on the capacity and maturity of the individual; nor is it a right to determine outcomes. However, unless impact is achieved through participation, the experience is likely to be frustrating and disempowering, reinforcing the experience of marginalisation for the least powerful. Arnstein's model was adapted by Hart and applied to examine levels of children's participation. Hart's ladder of participation (Hart, 1992) recognises that professionals at times engage with children in manipulative or tokenistic ways, whilst the aim should be effective dialogue and negotiation, shared decision-making. West (2004) developed the concept of participation by emphasising the importance of progressing from individual to collective forms of decision-making and promoting inclusive processes that challenge the status quo and create opportunities for change. From these theoretical perspectives, participation can be seen as challenging dominant professional discourses to enable service users to make an active contribution that changes the way the system works (Thomas, 2002). It has been argued that promotion of children's participatory rights should include both consideration of how children are treated (process) and what the end result means for them (outcome): 'Participation is a process where someone influences decisions about their lives and this leads to change' (Davey, 2010: 6).

Research giving voice to children has consistently highlighted that children want to participate in decision-making processes and feel they have much to contribute (Cossar et al., 2011; Kennan et al., 2018; Stabler et al., 2019; Thomas, 2002; Van Bijleveld et al., 2015). They recognise the importance of relationships with trusted professionals to enable their participation (Clifton, 2014; Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Woolfson et al., 2010). Children are most effectively safeguarded when their voice is heard by professionals (Diaz, 2020; Munro, 2011; Sidebotham et al., 2016; Warrington, 2013). The statutory guidance for safeguarding practice in the UK makes it clear that children should be treated with the expectation that they are capable of participation (HM Government, 2018: 9). Nevertheless, there remain significant barriers to children's participation in safeguarding processes (Dillon et al., 2016).

The child protection system is bureaucratic and adult-centric, developed for and by professionals, and reinforces their power. Even where competence is assumed, the right to participate for children is contingent upon their interactions with adults and impacted by unequal power relationships (Archard & Skivenes, 2009; Goh & Baruch, 2018; Thomas, 2002). Professionals whose core business is child protection find challenges around enabling children's participation where the first priority is the child's immediate safety. Protectionism defines how powerful adults restrict the lives and choices of children during safeguarding interventions: 'When what is done in the name of protection goes at the expense of children's participatory rights… protection turns to protectionism' (Vis et al., 2012: 19). Adult-centric processes and unequal power relationships, reinforced by protectionism, make the effective dialogue and negotiation promoted by Hart's model (Hart, 1992) challenging.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The objective of the research discussed in this paper was to provide an opportunity for the voices of children to be heard who are the subject of a child protection plan: all the children interviewed had experience of child protection meetings and some had attended family group conferences (FGCs). Recognising the particular vulnerability of children who have experienced abuse or family adversity to participate in research, the ethical approval process was rigorous: ensuring the anonymity of respondents, that informed consent was given and that appropriate action was taken if safeguarding concerns arose during the research process. The researcher addressed ethical issues in the design and delivery of the study, which was independently reviewed and approved by the University Research Ethics Committee.

The aim of the study was to be inclusive and the only criteria for exclusion was involvement of the child in court proceedings due to the demands of the evidential process. Gaining access to vulnerable children for the purpose of

research is dependent on a range of gatekeepers, including professionals, parents and carers (Cree et al., 2002; Dixon et al., 2014). In some cases, conflict between parents and professionals negated the opportunity for children's participation, deterring agency referral and family consent. The heavy demands on social workers' time meant they did not prioritise conversations with families about research. Meeting the Safeguarding Team who managed the case conference process enabled progress despite these challenges. Conference chairs promoted the research, gaining consent from families to pass on minimal contact information to the researcher in line with data protection principles. Access to children remained dependent on the willingness of parents and carers to facilitate the research visit in the family home and on occasions preliminary consent was withdrawn. When research visits were undertaken, the researcher provided age-appropriate information and ensured written consent was gained from children and parents or carers. Throughout the research process, consent was reviewed and children could choose to pause or terminate the interview, or to withdraw data at a later stage.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 21 children, aged from six to 16 years, all were or had recently been subject to child protection plans and none were subject to court proceedings or were in care. Creative approaches were employed during home visits to enable children to share their views. Recognising that children's participation occurs within the context of interactions with professionals, the research also involved safeguarding practitioners from the same local authority. Interviews were carried out with 22 professionals: 10 were frontline social workers based in neighbourhood child protection teams, eight were members of the safeguarding team (senior social workers) who chair case conferences and four were advocacy workers employed by a local independent service.

A reflexive-constructivist approach was adopted by the researcher, seeking to understand the meanings ascribed by participants to their experiences. Employing reflexivity and systematic analysis of data, the researcher sought to 'make sense of others' sense-making' (Attride-Stirling, 2001: 402). The researcher transcribed and analysed recorded interviews using thematic analysis methods (Braun & Clarke, 2006), identifying themes related to participation, power and influence, and recognising differences in the perspectives of children and professionals. Insights emerged from examining the different voices and competing narratives of these central protagonists in the safeguarding process: children and key professionals.

PROFESSIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Whilst the focus of this paper is the importance of the voice of the child, it is useful to provide context by firstly noting the main themes emerging from the professionals' interviews.

The research found that there was a strong commitment expressed by professionals to the importance of children's participation. The following quote is characteristic of the professional perspective: 'It's the child's life and they're the most important voice that we should be hearing in everything that we do' (social worker – sw5). There was recognition that children often bring a different and unique perspective and that understanding their 'wishes and feelings' (in line with s17 of the Children Act 1989) is an integral part of the safeguarding process. Interviewees emphasised the central importance of children's participation in processes that impact upon their lives, though only one professional (an advocacy worker) referred to the child's right to participate.

Concerns of Professionals about Children's Participation

Professionals expressed many concerns around children's participation, as highlighted by the following quote: 'Yes, but their level of involvement should be dependent on their level of understanding or it can be a negative experience' (conference chair – cc2). Whilst it is important to acknowledge that participation rights are contingent upon the maturity and level of understanding of the child, professionals are exhorted to assume the capability of the child to participate and to enable them to fulfil their participation rights as far as possible (HM Government, 2018). One interviewee expressed the fear that the child 'may not be able to cognitively understand what's going on and appreciate it and process it as well' (sw6). For this practitioner, it was not a matter of enabling children to make sense of and manage a difficult process, they were adamant that children should not be included if they could not 'deal with it'. Another professional noted that children had to be able to demonstrate understanding and the ability to 'express their views in the right way' (sw1). Practitioners emphasised the need for children to be able to cope with, adapt to and make their contribution within existing adult-centric processes, rather than the professional responsibility to adapt procedures in response to the developmental needs of the child.

In their commitment to safeguard children, many practitioners placed emphasis on the vulnerability of the child, rather than their capability, and sought to shield them from stressful experiences. Protecting children included seeking to preserve a notion of childhood innocence that separated them from the problems and complexities of the adult

world. The motivation to protect was consistently expressed: 'Obviously if there's very difficult information they are hearing it can be quite upsetting for the child. We obviously don't want to traumatise them any further by having them present' (cc8).

Professionals noted that the challenges of a highly pressurised role and tight timescales related to safeguarding processes hindered children's participation. One professional shared insightfully the following concern around working directly with children: 'The child should be the priority, but that gets missed, you see it all the time… I know the bigwigs say we are but I don't think we are all the time' (sw10).

One of the key priorities that was noted to consume the time and energy of professionals and at times to hamper children's participation was the involvement of parents and carers. It is a crucial aspect of safeguarding practice to engage with those with parental responsibility and ensure that they understand and contribute to the child protection plan. Social workers seek to promote parental responsibility and participation in decision-making at a time when parents may feel challenged due to professional intervention in their family life (Ghaffar et al., 2012). Some professionals expressed frustration about parents who deliberately prevent children from sharing information and contributing to the safeguarding process. Others spoke with empathy about the pressures upon parents and the importance of protecting their dignity and privacy. The following quote highlights the way in which parental involvement takes precedence over the child's participation: 'The biggest barrier I have found to the child's participation is the parents… a lot of the time they are probably worried about what their child might think or what their child might hear. We need to respect the parents' decisions; it is ultimately a parental choice' (cc2).

Whilst the commitment to child-centredness and child safeguarding was unequivocal, the discourse of participation was characterised by 'yes, but'. Concerns about children's immaturity and vulnerability tempered the focus on participation. At times the goal of promoting parental responsibility and retaining parental privacy takes precedence over children's involvement. As professionals see their core business as the protection of children and the whole machinery of the safeguarding system has evolved for this purpose, commitments related to children's inclusion are subjugated to that dominant aim so that protectionism trumps participation (Vis et al., 2012).

THE VOICE OF THE CHILD

In presenting the findings of the research interviews, all names and identifying characteristics of children have been changed to protect their confidentiality. The key themes emerging from interviews with children will now be explored.

Entitlement and Confidence

The young people who participated in this research shared a similar viewpoint to professionals about the importance of their involvement in child protection processes. They expressed a strong sense of their entitlement to be included because the discussions were about them and the decisions directly impacted their lives. This quote is characteristic of the views expressed:

> 'Cos it's about us, so we want to know what's going to happen… that's why we go to meetings so we know and in case something happens or someone says something and we do not know what they are on about. Some of it is just business and I understand that, but if things involve around us, the children, then the children should know. If it affects us, it should be explained to us' (Jade, aged 14).

Jade and her siblings dismissed some aspects of the child protection process as 'just business' and therefore not of interest; but where matters impacted upon them, they were adamant that they should be informed and involved. There was a sense of moral entitlement to be included in decisions about their lives.

Another striking similarity with the professional cohort was that only one young person (like that one professional) discussed participation as a right. Matthew (aged 16) was the only young person who couched the sense of having a valid contribution to make explicitly in terms of human rights. It may be that his age and experience made him more accustomed to the language of rights: 'If I'm being punished for something or being kept safe or something like that, then I have a right to know, as a human being that's my right'. Matthew strongly expressed his right to be fully informed about and to contribute to processes impacting upon his life.

Professionals expressed many concerns about the capacity of children to participate and to cope with the stress of involvement. The children in this study expressed a sense of feeling compelled to be involved and that inclusion promoted their capacity to participate:

> 'I wasn't really confident to say anything, but now my confidence is rising… We feel we should go along and we normally just listen to everyone's views, then when somebody says something that I disagree with I try not to say, but I have something that makes me feel like I want to say' (Jade, aged 14).

Jade expressed reticence, a preference to be present in the background at times. Given the relative powerlessness of children, it is understandable that they may feel obligated to 'just listen', in deference to more dominant adults. Nevertheless, in this quote Jade articulates a sense of selfhood that will not be overridden. Her 'rising confidence' enables her to use her agency to disagree, even with a 'somebody' who is likely to be an adult with power over her. She demonstrates awareness of knowledge and expertise about herself and her family that entitles and compels her to give voice to her opinions.

The ability to have a say in decision-making processes contributes to the development of confidence and resilience (Dickens et al., 2015; Rutter, 2007; Stabler et al., 2020). The experience described by Jade indicates the possibility of the child protection process to provide opportunities for children to grow in their ability to exert influence. Jade and her siblings attended many meetings and noted that, over time, 'a lot more people listened to what we had to say' (Jade). However, the picture is not unambiguously positive. Jade also noted: 'some people didn't really listen as much… it was still like when we went [to meetings] it was like, they're just children'. Her younger brother, Brandon (aged seven) added: 'and what they say doesn't really matter'. These children had made an active choice to participate and had been able to have a say, growing in confidence as they made their contribution, although they continued to be dismissed as 'just children' by some adults.

For some children the FGC was a positive experience, as expressed by Zane and Ada, for whom the meeting seemed to provide a turning point in gaining ongoing support and security: 'because like the entire family, cousins, friends, uncles, aunties and we all sat together and we all planned what was better for the family' (Zane, aged 15). However, for others the FGC remained a stressful process, with children retaining a sense of their unequal status in relation to more powerful adult family members. Jade summed this up when she commented about the first FGC: 'yeh it was nervous wasn't it… you don't know what to say and what's gonna happen and whether your opinion's valid.'

Stress, Vulnerability and Capability

Although professionals expressed concern about the vulnerability of children and their ability to cope with stressful processes, the children who participated in the research felt able to contribute and have a say. One young person highlighted that involvement was difficult, but she shared the sense of feeling compelled to contribute:

> 'I do not act big and hard, like I just got over it, like it never happened … I completely agreed to go to the meeting, and they only talked about it once or twice, but in one second all the memories came back in a whoosh and I had to cry; it wasn't a nice feeling. I literally cried - apart from that I liked the meetings, everyone had the chance to talk… It's all about me, kind of, so I want to go.' (Lena, aged 13).

Lena gained support by sitting near the chairperson and did not regret attending the child protection conferences. She was able to participate, despite distress, and this promoted her belief in the value of involvement. It has been highlighted that professionals tend to preserve the dichotomy that children are either vulnerable or capable, harmed or supported by processes of participation (Diaz, 2020; Montserrat, 2014; Shemmings, 2000). Lena demonstrated insight and self-awareness, acknowledging being both upset by participation and encouraged by the opportunity to have her say. It may be that the agency of children is hampered at times by factors such as lack of confidence, feelings that are no doubt exacerbated within the context of formal meetings with professionals, but this does not mean that children lack capability. Lena, like other children in this study, was able to demonstrate agency, despite feeling distressed at times.

Another young person gave voice to this sense of the importance of participating even when the process is stressful:

> 'Even if it's something really bad, I want to know, cos it's going to come out anyway, you cannot hide stuff from me forever, even if it's a year down the line, I'm still gonna know, so you might as well tell me so I can get my head round it, instead of worrying about why you kept it from me, which would make me more frustrated. So I like to know everything, even if it's like bad, so that I can get over it.' (Helena, aged 14).

Children highlighted that they knew much of what was occurring in their family already or were confident of finding out eventually. They lived with the confusion caused by having some understanding but being excluded from the full picture. Helena was adamant in her wish to be informed and confident in her ability to cope.

It is important to acknowledge the impact on young people of knowing only part of a complicated story, when considering what information should be shared. Whilst there are issues of confidentiality, in most cases it is possible to explore with children their understanding of their situation and respond to questions. The challenge for adults is how to share information in a way that makes sense to children, protecting privacy where this is necessary. This study confirms the findings of similar research (Diaz, 2020; Ruggeri et al., 2014; Van Bijleveld et al., 2015) highlighting that children want to be involved in making decisions that impact on their lives, even where the decision-making process is difficult. Whilst inclusion in safeguarding processes may be stressful for children, participants in this research emphasised that exclusion is perplexing and disempowering. The answer lies not in excluding children but working with sensitivity and empathy to enable children's involvement (Stabler et al., 2020), as suggested in the following extremely helpful advice from Lena for professionals:

> 'Be nice and gentle, do not just jump in with lots of questions that might hurt them, think carefully how you might feel in that situation. You do not know what happened to them and now basically just put yourself in their shoes and then try to answer your questions that you ask of them'.

Influencing Outcomes

Most of the children in this study expressed confidence in the value of their contribution to safeguarding processes about their lives. However, they commonly experienced disappointment and frustration about their inability to be heard and affect outcomes:

> 'When I went [to the meeting], I got to say two or three lines and then I had to stay in another room for an hour. I fell asleep cos there was nothing to do – just a table – it had comics for me, but I'd already read one and it does not take an hour to read them' (Christopher, aged 15).

Many children, like Christopher, expressed a sense of unfairness that they were not consulted or had little say in important decisions about their family. Some children demonstrated a sense of resignation, the kind of thwarted ambition and self-exclusion that has been termed 'learned helplessness' (Seligman, 1972) when considered in relation to disadvantaged groups.

Matthew articulated a sense of the inequity of a process that enabled professionals and their managers to be given higher status and greater credibility than those directly affected by decisions: 'I should have the same amount of say as much as the highest member of staff in there. I should have just as much right as him… as the boss' (Matthew).

Most children in child protection processes are involuntary service users. For some of the children involved in this research the sense of not being heard and not being able to influence outcomes led to them withdrawing from processes that had been imposed on them and over which they had no control. It is a concern that some children experienced an increasing sense of disempowerment through the safeguarding process, reinforcing their marginalisation and vulnerability, rather than building their resilience and protective capability (Rutter, 2007; Warrington, 2013).

There are clearly limitations around the extent of the child's ability to determine outcomes in issues related to their safety and complex family situations; nevertheless, many children in this study found ways to make their voices heard. Some children, supported by the chair, gained confidence in speaking in safeguarding conferences or were able to have their say in small, child-friendly meetings. For many children the support provided by advocacy workers was crucial, as noted by Christopher: 'I felt better about the meeting when I got the advocacy worker, cos I thought they wouldn't say my words exactly, but they did – they got my words across'. Despite the stress of the process and awareness of their unequal status, many children expressed modest hopes and reasonable expectations as exemplified in the following quotes:

> 'I wanted more of a say and it was a bit disappointing to know I could not… The social workers were more: the adults make the decisions not the children. Obviously keep the adults in charge but try to keep children's opinions involved in that' (Christopher).

> 'Make their opinions valid; make sure they actually listen to what children have to say. And do some things that they want to do, so they will take part' (Daisy, aged 7).

DISCUSSION

The safeguarding process is a professionally orchestrated, state-mandated system, within which power is not equally distributed. There is tension between the role and interests of the primary stakeholders – children, parents/carers and the different professionals – making safeguarding processes complex and demanding. Professionals emphasise a commitment to promoting children's participation. Nevertheless, as many professionals see their core business as the protection of children, and the whole machinery of the safeguarding system has evolved for this purpose, commitments related to children's inclusion are subjugated to other dominant concerns.

This study found that the professional commitment to child-centredness and safeguarding is unequivocal; however, the discourse of participation is characterised by 'yes, but'. Some professionals have high standards about the level of maturity they see as the precondition for children to cope with and participate in safeguarding processes. Practitioners express an obligation to shield children, who have already experienced trauma, from the bureaucratic demands and stress of the child protection process. The professional commitment to promoting parental responsibility can act as a barrier to maximising children's involvement. A 'yes, but' perspective means that the child's right to protection (article 19) and to a private family life (article 16) takes precedence over the equally important right to participate (article 12) (United Nations, 1989). This is a complex challenge to which there is no simple solution. Recognising the contribution of advocacy workers in enabling children's involvement may enable practitioners to balance some of the competing demands. Systemic change is needed to rethink bureaucratic processes and forefront the rights of the child to participate in a way that is meaningful for them.

Many of the children engaged in this study shared the normative assumptions of professional interviewees. Most children grow up surrounded by, and absorbing, traditional notions that emphasise the developmental immaturity of children and their emotional vulnerability; norms that justify and reinforce their segregation from the adult world, perceived to be rational and efficient (Diaz, 2020; James et al., 1998; Thomas, 2002). Despite these shared values about the nature of childhood and the role of adults, their life experiences led the children in this study to reach different conclusions about the importance of participation for them. Children saw themselves as already involved in complex family situations and impacted by professional interventions. They felt able to cope and frustrated when excluded from decision-making processes. They did not seek protection from the stress of involvement but sought support and empathy to enable their participation. Many were painfully aware of the cost of exclusion, feeling de-valued when they were not included. They felt a moral entitlement to participate, whilst observing a process dominated by adults. Children felt able to have a say and make a valuable contribution but were frustrated by the limitations of their ability to be heard and influence outcomes.

The differences in the views of professionals and children about the costs and benefits of participation increased the power imbalance, as children experienced their perspective being overlooked or overruled. The adult-dominated narrative of safeguarding allows the legitimate input of children to be dismissed because they are 'just children'. Research by Yamamoto et al. (1998) is enlightening in its emphasis that children and adults move in very different worlds and often fail to understand and appreciate the differences in perspectives and sense-making. Whilst acknowledging divergent and competing discourses, it is important to recognise that dichotomous thinking can hamper understanding of the complexity of the safeguarding process and children's lived experience (Diaz, 2020; Shemmings, 2000; Wyness, 2013). The safeguarding process is both stressful and difficult whilst also enabling relief and support for young people. Children are both vulnerable and capable, victims and social actors within the family context.

Whilst acknowledging the gap that exists in the perceptions and power relations of children and professionals, it may be that a starting point is emerging from this and other studies that highlight the capability and agency of children. The responsibility lies with practitioners to bring empathy to their work with children and recognise differences of experience and perspective in order to bridge the gap and value children's contributions. Professionals need to identify when the commitment to protect children slips into protectionism that not only overrides the rights of the child but perpetuates their marginalisation, thereby increasing their vulnerability and running counter to effective safeguarding.

The protective potential of services is maximised by the degree to which young people are involved in decisions about their care and wellbeing (Warrington, 2013). This relates to immediate safety planning, in that children need to be able to share their experiences to ensure an accurate assessment and safety plan is developed (Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Sidebotham et al., 2016). Participation is also central to a broader definition of safeguarding that includes the long-term wellbeing of the child and the promotion of children's welfare in society. If participation promotes self-efficacy and resilience (Rutter, 2007), a lack of ability to be heard or exert influence leads to disengagement and negation of agency. Recognising the importance of children's engagement as citizens and social actors needs to be part of the calculation when professionals weigh the risks and benefits of their involvement.

There is increasing recognition among researchers and professionals that children can make a powerful contribution to safeguarding processes (Balsells et al., 2017; Katz, 2015; Montserrat, 2014). Children bring specialist knowledge about what it means to be a child within their family situation and their contribution is integral to professional

assessments. Facilitating children's participation as part of decision-making processes should be an intrinsic part of safeguarding practice. In this way the voice of the child would be valued as highly as that of adults, children would be supported to contribute on an equal footing with 'the boss', as argued by 16-year-old Matthew.

There are implications for practice arising from this study, including the ongoing need for training for professionals about the importance of children's participation. Systemic change is needed to enable children to fulfil their participatory rights which will involve re-thinking adult-centric, bureaucratic processes, increasing use of child-friendly meetings and FGCs and ensuring access to advocacy.

CONCLUSION

This paper has recognised the perspectives of professionals that dominate safeguarding processes. Despite commitment to child-centred values, professionals express concerns about children's participation that lead to the contribution of children being undermined or marginalised. Exploring the narratives of children and professionals involved in safeguarding processes sheds light on the power dynamics that underpin current systems. Acknowledging the different perspectives and competing narratives of children and professionals enables engagement in a reflective examination of ways to advance participatory practice (Dillon et al., 2016). Exploring the lived experience of children caught up in child protection processes increases understanding of their perspectives and insights. Supporting the participation of vulnerable children recognises their rights and capability. Listening to the voices of children promotes their empowerment and enables their contribution to be valued so that children can be acknowledged as social actors and co-creators of a more effective and child-centred safeguarding system.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical approval for the study that is the focus of this article was awarded by Leeds Beckett University Research Ethics Committee, June 2016. This approval process was accepted by the local authority who acted as a partner in undertaking the research project.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest pertaining to either of the authors of this paper.

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How to cite this article: Race, T. & Frost, N. (2022) Hearing the Voice of the Child in Safeguarding Processes: Exploring Different Voices and Competing Narratives. *Child Abuse Review*, e2779. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2779