

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository:<https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/125535/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Diaz, Clive , Pert, Hayley and Thomas, Nigel Patrick 2019. Independent Reviewing Officers' and social workers' perceptions of children's participation in Children in Care Reviews. *Journal of Children's Services* 14 (3) , pp. 162-173. 10.1108/JCS-01-2019-0003

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JCS-01-2019-0003>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies. See <http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.



Independent Reviewing Officers' and social workers' perceptions of children's participation in Children in Care Reviews

Abstract

In 1991 the UK ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Children Act 1989 came into effect in England and Wales. Since then all children have the right to express views in matters concerning them and have them taken into account, and local authorities looking after children have a legal duty to ascertain their wishes and feelings and give them due consideration **when making decisions concerning their care**. The main vehicle for this has been the child care review, and guidance has stressed the importance of involving children **in care** meaningfully in the review process. Despite this, research has repeatedly shown that children are not fully involved and do not feel listened to.

The research reported here formed part of a study of children's participation in reviews in a single local authority in England. The **element of the study explored here** involved semi-structured interviews with 11 social workers and eight Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs), to explore their perceptions of children's participation in reviews; the barriers to young people participating meaningfully and what might assist. Barriers were found to include high caseloads and time pressures; high turnover of social workers; lack of understanding and training; children's negative experiences, and the process not being child-centred. Key enablers appeared to be the quality of the relationship between child and professional, and the young person chairing their own review. The paper concludes that as a vehicle for participation the child care review still requires improvement, and points to some of the ways in which this might be achieved.

Introduction

There were 72,670 children in care in England as of March 2017, an eight per cent increase compared to 2012, and the numbers continue to rise steadily (DfE 2018). It is well established that the life chances for children in care in England are poor in comparison to their peers, culminating in pronounced difficulties in their transition to adult life (Berridge et al 2015). It is challenging to disentangle how far this stems from care system failings, the effect of earlier abuse, multiple returns to an abusive home or the culmination of all these factors (Forrester et al, 2009). However, research suggests that pre-care adversities are particularly influential for the life chances of children in care (Wade et al, 2011).

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), ratified by the UK in 1991, and the Children Act 1989, implemented in the same year, represented a shift from viewing children as objects of concern towards seeing them as citizens with human rights (Cashmore 2002). In this paper we are principally concerned with examining young people's participation in decisions which affect their lives during the period in which they are looked after by the state. In accordance with previous studies in this area, we are interested in 'finding out what is going on: to discover how and how far children take part in decision making processes, what factors influence, enhance or impede their participation' (Thomas 2002 p.96). **Hart's (1992) ladder provides a helpful framework for assessing professionals' perception of children's participation, and we refer to this later.**¹ More recently, Lundy (2013) has reminded us that Article 12 of the CRC requires more than 'giving children a voice': that for effective participation they also require a *space*, an *audience* and *influence*. Others have challenged the 'Article 12 model' (where children express their views and then adults decide) in favour of *dialogue*, where all voices come together in a process that looks for consensus (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2010; Mannion, 2010).

The child in care (CiC) review is a key process for ensuring professionals hear and respond to children's views. The principal aim is to ensure that the state consistently meets a child's needs until they reach adulthood. **The Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) is tasked with overseeing this process since 2004, is to ensure that children play a meaningful role (Pert *et al.* 2014). The IRO decision-making powers are provided by Section 22 of the Children Act 1989 which requires that LAs consider the wishes and feelings of children in care when reviewing their care plans (Schofield and Thoburn 1996). Additional legislation to support the care and participation of children in care is provided by the Adoption and Children Act 2002, which introduced the role of the IRO.**

Amid concerns over the independence and efficacy of the IRO role, the 2008 amendment to the Children Act 1989 extended their responsibilities with regard to care planning and performance monitoring. This was strengthened further by the 2010 Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations (DCSF 2010), which came into force in England and Wales alongside statutory guidance for IROs with the introduction of the IRO Handbook (DfES 2010). These provide clear guidance of how IROs should undertake their role. Consultation and

¹ Hart's ladder, with which readers may be familiar, distinguishes levels of participation of which the highest is 'young people and adults share decision-making' and the lowest is where young people are merely informed; and also levels of non-participation (manipulation, decoration and tokenism). Also useful is Shier's (2001) typology of the steps that organisations can take to embed children's participation.

participation are highlighted as a requirement in recognition that the IRO role and the review process should encourage meaningful participation for children in care and their parents (DfES 2010).

Despite successive changes to policy and practice in pursuit of this, children **in care** have continued to report a lack of opportunity to engage in decisions about their lives (Pert *et al.* 2014). There has been extensive research documenting the views of children in care in relation to involvement in decision-making (Murray and Hallett 2000), efficacy of children's advocates (Barnes 2012), the role of IROs (Pert *et al.* 2014; Dickens *et al.* 2015; Ofsted 2013), care planning and the courts (Timms and Thoburn 2006) and experiences of the care system generally (Ofsted 2011a,b). Overall, these studies show that children's voices are often not **heard by professionals** and that they experience limited involvement and power in decisions concerning their lives.

Specifically, research has shown that children have a limited role in their reviews and that their views are often not considered **by professionals** (Sinclair 1998; Thomas and O'Kane 1999; Munro 2001; Thomas 2011). A common theme is that children 'report that the purpose of the meeting is to talk about, rather than to, them' (Munro 2001, p. 9). More recently, **Munro (2011) concluded that although most young people (71%) reported that they were encouraged to express their wishes and feelings at review meeting only 53% felt they were listened to.** Pert *et al.* (2014) also found that few children were offered a genuine opportunity to influence any aspect of their meeting, and that they did not enjoy the experience:

The strength of feeling from the participants in this study confirms that children and young people do not enjoy being part of adult centric decision-making forums. Reviews were enjoyed when they were more child friendly, where they had choice in how they were run and in which they did not feel embarrassed or overwhelmed.

(Pert *et al.* 2014, p.8)

These findings are consistent with Thomas and O'Kane's (1999) earlier study, suggesting that the introduction of the IRO role since 2004 has not made the difference **in terms of improving children's participation** which might have been expected. A recent study by Jelcic *et al.* (2014) found that children's experiences of IROs varied greatly, some having a very positive experience, others more negative. In this context, it is important that research seeks to understand the process from the perspective of social workers and IROs. The present study

does just that, as part of a larger project which also studied children and managers views (Diaz et al 2018).

The Research

The data reported here derives from a qualitative cross-sectional study in one English Local Authority. The entire study involved interviewing children in care, IROs, social workers and senior managers about young people's participation in their reviews. Findings from the interviews with young people and senior managers have been reported elsewhere (Author's references); this paper focuses on the interviews with social workers and IROs. **This paper focuses solely on adult perspectives to supplement and further elucidate the organisational, professional and structural barriers to children's meaningful participation in reviews and to try to support improved practice. We interviewed eight of the nine IROs in the LA (the ninth being unavailable) and we interviewed 11 social workers in childcare teams, all of whom had worked for at least a year with children in care. The research design was cross-sectional which means the collection of data at a *single point in time* from a number of participants (Bryman 2014).** Specifically, we were interested in gaining insight into their views about the following research questions:

- 1) To what degree do children and young people meaningfully participate in reviews?
- 2) What are the barriers to participation?
- 3) What can be done to improve children and young people's participation in reviews?

Through a purposive sampling method (Babbie, 2004), professionals were recruited who currently worked with children in care, either as social workers or IROs, and who had attended at least one child in care review. Invitations were sent to professionals using the local authority employee database. All participants were provided with information about the research prior to interviews. Ethical approval was given by the Social Research Ethics Committee at the sponsoring University **and the Local Authority ethics committee.**

Data was collected through audio-recorded semi-structured interviews with eight IROs and eleven social workers practicing across multiple sites within one English local authority area. This is a large, rural authority characterised by a broad spectrum of deprivation and wealth. An inductive approach to data analysis was used to examine the interview data (Babbie, 2004). Data was thematically analysed, which involved identifying common themes and testing

against deviations considered and addressed within the context of the participant's interview (Silverman, 2005).

During this process seven themes were identified, five of which concerned barriers to effective participation and two which concerned factors that appeared to support effective participation. These are summarised below and explained further in the following sections.

- 1) Factors which act as barriers:
 - a) **Minimal available planning time due to high caseloads and management deadline pressures;**
 - b) High turnover of social workers and inexperienced staff;
 - c) Lack of understanding and training of professionals in participation;
 - d) Children and young people's negative experiences of reviews and consequent reticence in taking part;
 - e) Structure and process of the review not being child-centred.

- 2) Factors which assist participation:
 - a) Quality of the relationship between the child and professionals;
 - b) The child or young person chairing their own review meeting.

Barriers to effective participation

A common theme that emerged during the interviews with the IROs and social workers concerned the fact that they were under a great deal of pressure and were struggling to carry out their role as outlined in statutory guidance such as the IRO Handbook (DfES 2010). Barriers to **IROs enabling** effective participation of children covered a range of different aspects of the working life and practices of IROs and social workers.

1. a) Minimal available planning time due to high caseloads and management deadline pressures

High caseloads were an especial challenge highlighted by all IROs and social workers:

IRO 3: We've got so many kids coming into care ... for me, any Child in Care Review, you wing it and if you don't wing it – I know that's awful to say. That's what social work is about. You know, you deal with crises don't you ...

This notion of 'winging it' described above was consistent with how other IROs and social workers described review meetings. A plethora of research has demonstrated that frontline childcare social work can be extremely challenging, not to mention that it is difficult to plan for every single eventuality (Shoesmith 2016; Bowyer and Roe 2015; Munro 2012). However, the above quote also suggests that meetings are **responded to in the context of crisis focused working** as opposed to a planned feature of the overall review process. It is reasonable to extrapolate from this that reviews held in an unplanned and ad hoc fashion are likely to present a significant challenge for how far children and young people can actively engage in the review process.

All the social workers and IROs expressed that high caseloads had a detrimental impact on their ability to ensure that the child or young person was able to participate in their review in a meaningful manner. This routinely accepted reality of having too much work relates closely to the culture of the profession as **often being** in a state of crisis (Muench *et al.* 2017; Leigh 2017; Shoesmith 2016).

Researcher: Do you think social workers have the time and resources to prepare people for the meetings?

IRO 3: No. But I think they could make time and find time to some degree. They're so busy ... they're so, so, busy, and I don't mean just on the ground but in their heads. They've got so many things they're carrying, so many pressures ... they're not able to think ahead or plan ahead because everything is on the ground.

This notion of being mentally and emotionally over-stretched is in-line with research carried out by Ruch (2012), as well as Forrester (2016) who **describes** this as 'zombie social work'. Reflecting on the challenges of modern-day child protection social work, Forrester contends:

In research we frequently observe social workers doing a visit because they are meant to do one within a certain timescale (the "stat visit"). Their computer is literally flashing at them, they do the visit, fill in the form and the computer stops flashing. But the visit itself is often characterised by a purposelessness that leaves worker and family confused about what is happening ... To me this is

symptomatic of a system which has developed an obsession with effective management, without sufficient attention to the wider values and aims of the service. It is like a zombie social work - moving and busy (very, very busy!) without any sense of being truly alive. (2016, p.12)

The IROs interviewed for this study also reported feeling subjected to this bureaucracy. A significant majority acknowledged that some reviews took place without young people even being present so as to meet agency timescales. This meant that the young people would not always attend their review simply because it did not fit with the IRO's or social worker's diary:

IRO 3: If there were more time to prepare then IROs would insist on children being present, because you'd have the time to help prepare for that and to meet those around, and social workers would have the time to prepare ... and plan for it.

Researcher: Do reviews ever take place where children just wouldn't be able to attend because of your diary and the social worker's diary?

IRO 3: Yeah. Sadly, yes ...

Within this particular local authority, some review meetings took place without children and young people even being aware that they were happening, because professionals were under such pressure to ensure that they occurred within a set timeframe. One IRO cited an example of a review meeting (to which the young person was invited) taking place on the child's birthday to meet the statutory timescale. As a time saving measure, several social workers reported that they would combine CiC reviews with Personal Educational Plan (PEP) meetings at the school:

Researcher: Did that seem to work well?

SW 1: ... they can end up being quite long meetings and a child might be more comfortable if it is in their home instead of being dragged out of class, sitting around with however many professionals looking at them and then leaving again ... I have one boy that very much just thought it was a process and he'd sit there like "great, I've just got to do this."

2. b) High turnover of staff and inexperienced social workers

Almost all professionals interviewed raised the issue of high turnover of social workers serving as a potential barrier to children's participation in reviews. The interview extract below from IRO 3 illustrates the impact of the inexperience of many of the social workers in this Local Authority

upon how children and young people were prepared for reviews. This was presented as being due, in part, to the social workers themselves not understanding the purpose of the review:

IRO 3: I think the challenge is though, a lot of social workers don't really know what to expect from a Child in Care Review ... So, often the social worker comes to a review and they might not know what to expect so aren't really able to prepare the child, which makes it very difficult then ... and also we all practice slightly differently, so I think there's an issue about IROs being consistent because we're independent.

This quote raises two issues: firstly, inconsistencies within the IRO team pertaining to the way different IROs manage the process; secondly, less experienced social workers do not always understand the purpose of reviews themselves. This was also noted in the interview with IRO 7:

IRO 7: they [social workers] should be talking with them and asking questions ... that, in my experience, often doesn't happen and so I've been at reviews, sadly, where young people don't know what the plan's going to be, let alone think about things that we need to talk about, so that can make it really, really difficult to have an honest and open discussion.

The implication is that if the social worker has not explained to the young person the plan, and in some cases may not even be clear what the care plan is themselves, then there is automatically a significant barrier to fulfilling one of the core purposes of the CiC review, namely reviewing the care plan, as well as to ensuring that the young person can participate.

2. c) Lack of social workers understanding of *children's participation rights* and limited training of professionals in *enabling children's participation in decision making*

One interesting finding from this research was that although IROs, like social workers, recognised how important participation is, IROs had greater awareness of the barriers within current practice. This could be because the IROs were more experienced social care professionals. It may also be because a central tenet of the IRO role is to ensure that all views are heard and considered. A key finding was that despite the recognition of the importance of *children's participation in decision making*, only one professional interviewed (an IRO) had received any training on participation:

IRO 5: I went on some IRO training (name of externally commissioned provider) a few years ago in Manchester, which covered stuff like that [participation]... the training for IROs is atrocious, I have to say. We used to look as a team for training and find bits and pieces from BAAF or whoever and we'd go on it and we'd think, actually - not being arrogant - but we knew that!

This extract reflects the **IRO interviewees'** experiences of the inadequacy of current provision for IRO training, and in particular the dearth of training on **children's** participation.

All the social workers interviewed agreed that it was very important that children participate **meaningfully** in their review meetings. However, there was confusion about what **this** actually meant in practice. Social worker 8 put forward a definition of participation, which was fairly typical of those provided by other social workers in the study:

SW 8: Participation to me just means a group of people all working together for the same goal or achievement.

Arguably, this definition of participation more adequately describes inter-agency working, and bears little resemblance to the legal or theoretical definitions of children's participation outlined in the introduction. In terms of Hart's (1992) ladder of participation, children's participation in reviews was most frequently described by social workers implicitly as 'tokenistic' or 'manipulative'.

One potential reason for social workers' limited understanding of participation in practice is that none of our respondents had attended any training on participation. In addition to this, there appeared to be a disconnection between the importance social workers attributed to children's participation and how far they actively sought to ensure that children participated **in reviews and decision making**. Although all 11 social workers interviewed asserted that children's participation in review meetings was extremely important, they also reported that either they or the IRO would make all key decisions regarding the arrangements for the meeting. This may be seen as an example of what Argyris and Schön (1974) identify as a disjunction between 'espoused theory' (what professionals say they do) and 'theory in use' (what they actually do). Whilst these social workers appeared to view children's participation as important, there was little evidence that their practice ensured that this happened. The reasons for this may be outside social workers' control, in the shape of structural barriers such as heavy workloads and bureaucracy, but there remains a pronounced dissonance between what is espoused and what

actually takes place in practice: One social worker acknowledged that in practice children's participation in reviews was often tokenistic:

Social worker 6: I think that a lot of what we do can be quite tokenistic. You know, it's one thing going and getting the child's view before the review which is what I've done, but on reflection that's still quite tokenistic. That's a visit to a child with a pre-set of questions for a meeting that isn't going to change it in structure, and the actual issues can be pretty abstract and complex and they are very, very difficult to explain to a child.

The social worker here is articulating a view that many of the participants had in this study, namely they had a paternalistic approach which means that they think that the concepts are too complex for children to understand, and that even if they see the child ahead of the review it will not impact on the agenda, structure or focus of the review. This ties in with a notion that all professionals had which was that 'keeping children safe' was more important than upholding their rights to participate meaningfully in decisions made about their lives.

1.d) Children and young people's negative experiences in reviews and ensuing reticence about attending

The IRO Handbook states that the review meeting should be child-centred, *ie that it is the child's meeting and they should be given the opportunity to give their opinions and whenever possible for those opinions to be acted upon* . Notably, all the IROs interviewed for this study reported instances of professionals, in particular school staff and foster carers, using review meetings to chastise, rebuke or shame the young person. The research by Pert et al. (2014) and Dickens et al. (2015) did not highlight this as an issue, although it is mentioned briefly in Thomas' (2002)² research. The following interview extracts testify to this problematic practice.

IRO 1: Foster carers and teachers will use the review as an opportunity to shame the child by bringing up their bad behaviour. I did a review at a secondary school the other day. The boy is in Year 7³ with quite a few additional needs and his care plan is complex, but he was on that day facing permanent exclusion and the head had made a decision that he couldn't enter the school that day for his

² 'Children fiercely resented occasions when the review was used to focus on negative aspects of their own behaviour, sometimes including episodes which they thought were over and done with.' (p. 149)

³ Age group 11-12

review. That got turned around but then there were about four education representatives and ... the big male teacher, head of year, he wanted to take us through the whatever, 28 incidents, and he was a tiny little boy, very small for his age with some physical disability, and I could just see him shrivelling up. So, how on earth can that child have a voice in that meeting? And foster carers sometimes will talk about behaviour incidents, I think sometimes to justify or to defend their own position.

Overall, the IROs in this study reported that such practices of blaming, shaming or being placed under the spotlight served as a significant barrier to children and young people attending, engaging and participating in reviews.

Researcher: What do you think the main things are that lead to good participation from young people in children's care reviews?

IRO2: Well, I suppose they've got to feel safe ... [They] feel like they're under the spotlight. They're being kind of criticised, everyone's talking about them, everyone's looking at them, they're worried about bad things that will be said and so that's the kind of thing which deters young people.

Both of these extracts from IRO 1 and 2 outline how these meetings can lead to young people feeling blamed. The organisation Voice for the Child in Care (2005) has outlined how stressful, difficult and oppressive a review meeting can be for young people, whilst more recent research (Mannay *et al.* 2017) found that some teachers were negative about children in care in reviews.

Factors which assist participation in review meetings

Social workers and IROs also identified two factors in particular which they felt helped young people to participate in their reviews. These are considered below.

a) Quality of the relationship between the child and professionals

All the social workers and IROs interviewed agreed that participation in the review process was very important for young people and that a trusting relationship with the social worker and IRO was integral to this:

SW 1: It's that child and it's that child's life, so they need to know what's going on and have a say, because it's them that's got to live with it every day. It

shouldn't just be a tick-box exercise ... it's normally done with an IRO, isn't it? So, in the hope that they have the same IRO every year that they can build a relationship with and speak honestly with, because they may have had several changes of social workers. But it's ... whether that relationship is built with them or it's just another meeting that the child's got to sit in and whether they feel they can speak honestly about it ... it can only be meaningful if that relationship [with the IRO] is actually there.

All participants concurred that the concept of a positive relationship (between the IRO, social worker and child/young person) should be at the heart of meaningful participation **but for the reasons explained below it was very difficult for them to build this relationship in practice**. As a result of having high caseloads **none of** the IROs in this study visited children either prior to or between reviews as suggested by the IRO Handbook (DfES 2010) **unless they were in formal dispute with the Local Authority which was extremely rare**. Moreover, they all acknowledged that this had a detrimental impact upon their ability to build and maintain meaningful relationships with young people.

Studies of children's participation **in decision making** suggest that 'developing an effective procedure for eliciting children's perspectives and establishing a trusting relationship takes time' (Anderson et al. 2003, p. 212). Each IRO reported a caseload in the region of 85 children, which is considerably higher than the IRO Handbook recommends (50-70 cases). **Six of the eight** IROs reported that they did not need long to build rapport with a young person and, in fact, that they were able to do so in just a few minutes prior to a meeting. This appears contrary to research (Ruch *et al* 2012) which suggests that it takes a considerable amount of time to build up a trusting relationship with a young person. With respect to this issue, and the fact that they only meet young people twice a year, social workers raised concerns about the ability of IROs to build relationships with young people.

SW 1: I wonder whether he would have actually spoken truthfully to his IRO about this, because he took a long time to build a relationship with (me) and a lot of intense direct work.

b) The child or young person chairing their own review meeting

Most IROs and social workers spoke positively about their experiences of young people chairing their own reviews, although they also raised some reservations:

SW 5: It can go either way, can't it. It can become extremely productive with a really engaged young person. I can think of one or two over the years that would, I think, be really switched on and really actually would have made a lot of professionals maybe buck their ideas up and maybe become a bit more child-focused. I can obviously think of one or two where they might feel it is an opportunity to rub a few people's noses in it and maybe have a bit of fun at everyone else's expense.

This view was shared by other social workers and IROs, who also voiced concerns around how far the procedural functions of the review could be carried out in such circumstances. Most social workers spoke positively about young people chairing their own reviews and, indeed, saw it as an effective way through which to increase meaningful participation by young people in the review process:

SW 4: I did a Child in Care review about six-months ago where it was chaired by the young person ... and he decided how he wanted to do it, and we started off by playing 'hangman' to work out what his favourite things were ... so it was completely different to how a normal Child in Care review would be. My experience would be that when things are calm and settled and straightforward then participation is thought of more. When things are falling apart or in crisis, or we feel like adults need to step in and make those decisions.

Although here the social worker acknowledges the importance of participation, it is still deemed to only be realistic if the placement is settled and things are going well. The implication, then, is that participation is a choice (for professionals), rather than being essential to the functioning and ethos of the process.

There have been a range of studies exploring social workers' views of children's participation, which have considered care vs control within statutory social work practice. For example, Shemmings (2009) found that social workers had a desire to 'protect children', including protecting them from 'adult decisions and discussions', and viewed this as more important than upholding children's rights to participate in decisions made about their lives, whilst Vis et al. (2010) observed that professionals often consciously sought to prevent participation by children

within the child protection system as they did not think young people were mature enough to be involved in decision making and they needed to be protected from such decisions.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted multiple barriers to children's effective participation in their reviews, including organisational culture, inadequate workforce training and resources, and a lack of understanding or strong commitment to meaningful participation. Although these findings reflect practice in one local authority, their consistency with other research in this area suggests that they are applicable more widely.

It is lamentable that after decades of policy commitments, guidance, research and initiatives to promote children's right to be heard in decisions taken about their lives (Grimshaw and Sinclair, 1997; Thomas and O'Kane, 1999; Voice for the Child in Care, 2005), and despite the introduction of the role of the IRO, so little progress has been made in this area. This study has found that this problem is multifaceted and requires structural, as well as individual levels of change. Whilst many professionals in this and other studies clearly wish to include and involve children, there appears to be a disconnect between what this means to practitioners and how this can be realised in practice. Workplace stress, agency bureaucracy, inadequate resources and limited training were all found to be contributing factors, in conjunction with a limited understanding about what 'participation' is and its implications for individual practice. Furthermore all the professionals interviewed for this study saw their primary role as 'keeping the children safe' and this always had to be the priority over ensuring they participated meaningfully in decisions about their lives. This was evidence of adults having a paternalistic approach which is in line with previous research carried out on children's participation in decisions about their lives. We would argue, rather, that children's views on their safety should always be considered, that children's rights to participation and protection should go together rather than be set in opposition to each other, and that empowering children is in important ways crucial to their safety and wellbeing.

It is frustrating to see that, while there is ongoing work in the theory and practice of children's participation that challenges the Article 12 model of adults listening to children and then deciding whether to take any notice of what they say, this research confirms that routine social work practice has not yet reached that basic level, and shows in many respects very limited real progress since 1991. Some questions that this research prompts are: is the IRO part of

this problem or part of the solution; how do we strengthen relationships between children and practitioners (Munro 2011); and does the phenomenon of children chairing reviews have the potential to take us into a new place in terms of participation as collaboration?

The practice of children chairing their own reviews was pioneered by The Children's Society in North West England in the 1990s (Welsby, 1996), and has more recently been implemented with some success by IROs in Gloucestershire (see Thomas, 2015: 47). A key recommendation from this study would be to research how best this practice could be embedded and developed more widely. Previous research has noted the tension between the review being viewed as an administrative process and as a vehicle of participation (Pert et al, 2014). Indeed, in 2001 Munro suggested that the idea of the review meeting itself needed to be entirely reconsidered for this precise reason. This study highlighted practitioner reservations about this issue, alongside highlighting how the personal motivation of professionals is integral to the success, or otherwise, of children chairing their own reviews. Evidently, there are manifold complicating factors that require consideration and, of course, chairing reviews will not be right for every child; however, it is one way through which to ensure that the child, as a person, is more authentically involved at the centre of decisions about their life. At the very least, it is essential that young people play a role in deciding where the review is going to take place, when it will take place, who is going to be invited and what will be included on the agenda.

References

- Anderson, J. Funk, J., Elliott, R. and Hull Smith, P. 2003. Parental support and pressure and children's extracurricular activities: relationships with amount of involvement and affective experience of participation. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 24(2), pp. 241 – 257.
- Archard, D. and Skivenes, M. 2009. Hearing the child. *Child & Family Social Work* 14 (4) pp.391 – 399.
- Argyris, C., and Schön, D. 1974. *Theory in practice: increasing professional effectiveness*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Barnes, V. 2012. Social work and advocacy with young people: rights and care in practice. *The British Journal of Social Work* 42 (7), pp. 1275 - 1292.
- Berridge, D., Bell, K., Sebba, J. and Luke, N. 2015. *The educational progress of looked after children in England: technical report 3: perspectives of young people, social workers, carers and teachers*. Bristol: Nuffield Foundation.
- Bowyer, S. and Roe, A. 2015. *Social work recruitment and retention*. Dartington: Research in Practice.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2), pp. 77 - 101.
- Cashmore, J. 2002. Promoting the participation of children and young people in care. *Child Abuse and Neglect* 26, pp. 837 - 847.
- Cossar, J., Brandon, M. and Jordan, P. 2011. *'Don't make assumptions': children's and young people's views of the child protection system and messages for change*. Norwich: Office of the Children's Commissioner, CRCF.
- Department for Education. 2017. *National statistics: children looked after in England including adoption: 2016 to 2017*. Available online from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2016-to-20167> [Accessed on 12 January 2018].
- Diaz, C. and Drewery, S. 2016. A critical assessment of evidence-based policy and practice in social work. *Journal of Evidence-Informed Social Work* 13 (4), pp. 425 -431.
- Diaz, C., Pert, H. and Thomas, N. 2018 'Just another person in the room': young people's views on their participation in Child in Care Reviews. *Adoption and Fostering* 42 (4)
- Dickens, J., Schofield, G., Beckett, C., Philip, G. and Young, J. 2015. *Care planning and the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer report*. Centre for Research on Children and Families: University of East Anglia.
- Fitzgerald, R., Graham, A., Smith, A. and Taylor, N. 2010. 'Children's participation as a struggle over recognition: Exploring the promise of dialogue' in Percy-Smith, B. and Thomas, N. (eds) *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation: perspectives from theory and practice*, Abingdon: Routledge.

Forrester, D. 2016. What, when, why and how: zombie social work and the need for a new narrative. In: Solomon, E. ed. *Rethinking children's services: fit for the future?* London: Catch 22 and National Children's Bureau, pp. 8 - 14.

Forrester, D. 2008 Is the care system failing children? *The Political Quarterly* 79 (2) pp. 206 – 211.

Grimshaw, R. and Sinclair, R. 1997. *Planning to Care: Regulation, procedure and practice under the Children Act 1989*. London: National Children's Bureau.

Hale, B. 2006. Understanding children's rights: theory and practice. *Family Court Review* 44 (3), pp. 350 - 360.

Hart, R. 1992. *Children's participation from tokenism to citizenship*. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

Jelicic, H., Hart, D., La Valle, R., Fauth, R., Gill, C. and Straw, C. 2013. *The Role of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in England: Findings from a National Survey*. London: NCB.

Leigh, J. 2017. *Blame, culture and child protection*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lundy, L. (2013) 'Voice' is not enough: Conceptualizing article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(6): 927-942.

Mannay, D., Evans, R., Staples, E., Hallett, S., Roberts, L. Rees, A. and Andrews, D. 2017. The consequences of being labelled 'looked-after': exploring the educational experiences of looked-after children and young people in Wales. *British Educational Research Journal* 43 (4), pp. 683 - 699.

Mannion, G. 2010. 'After participation: The socio-spatial performance of intergenerational becoming' in Percy-Smith, B. and Thomas, N. (eds) *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation: perspectives from theory and practice*, Abingdon: Routledge.

Muench, K., Diaz, C. and Wright, R. 2017. Children and parent participation in child protection conferences: a study in one English local authority. *Child Care in Practice* 23 (1), pp. 49 – 63.

Munro, E. 2001. Empowering looked-after children. *Child and Family Social Work* 6, pp. 129 - 137.

Munro, E.R., Ward, H., Lushey, C. and National Care Advisory Service 2011. Evaluation of the Right2BCared4 pilots: Final report. London: Department for Education

Munro, E. 2012. *Munro review of child protection: progress report*. Available online at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/progress-report-moving-towards-a-child-centred-system> [Accessed 13 November 2017].

Ofsted. 2013. *Independent Reviewing Officers: taking up the challenge?* London: Ofsted. Available online at: <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/independent-reviewing-officers-taking-up-the-challenge> [Accessed 01 November 2017].

- Ofsted. 2011. *Children on Independent Reviewing Officers. A report of children's views by the Children's Rights Director for England*. London: Ofsted. Available online at: <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/childrens-views-independent-reviewing-officers> [Accessed 01 November 2018].
- Pert, H., Diaz, C. and Thomas, N. 2014. Children's participation in LAC reviews: a study in one English local authority. *Child and Family Social Work* 22, pp. 1 – 10
- Roberts, L., Shelton, K., Meakings, S. and Smith, A. 2017. Care-leavers and their children placed for adoption. *Children and Youth Services Review* 79
- Ruch, G. 2012. Where have all the feelings gone? Developing reflective and relationship-based management in child-care social work. *The British Journal of Social Work* 42 (7), pp. 1315 – 1332.
- Schön, D. 1983. *The reflective practitioner: how professionals think in action*. New York: Basic Books.
- Shemmings, D. 2000. Professionals' attitudes to children's participation in decision-making: dichotomous accounts and doctrinal contents. *Child and Family Social Work* 5, pp. 235 - 244.
- Shier, H. (2001) 'Pathways to Participation: openings, opportunities and obligations'. *Children & Society* 15(2), 107-117.
- Shoesmith, S. 2016. *Learning from Baby P: The politics of blame, fear and denial*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- The College of Social Work. 2013. *Code of ethics*. Available online at: http://www.tcsww.org.uk/uploadedFiles/TheCollege/Members_area/CodeofEthicsAug2013.pdf [Accessed 01 November 2017].
- Thoburn, J. 2010. Looked after children: care planning, placement choice and review. *Community Care Inform*. Available online at: <http://www.ccinform.co.uk/articles/article.aspx?liArticleID=1548> [Accessed on 17 September 2017].
- Thomas, N. (2002) *Children, Family and the State: Decision-making and Child Participation*, Bristol: Policy Press).
- Thomas, N. (2011) 'Care planning and review for looked after children: fifteen years of slow progress?', *British Journal of Social Work* 41(2), 387-398.
- Thomas, N. (2015) 'The Voice of the Child in Statutory Work' in Ivory, M. (ed.) *Voice of the Child: Meaningful engagement with children and young people*, Dartington: Research in Practice.
- Thomas, N. and O'Kane, C. 1999. Children's participation in reviews and planning meetings when they are 'looked after' in middle childhood. *Child and Family Social Work* 4, pp. 221 - 230.
- Timms, J. and Thoburn, J. 2006. Your shout! Looked after children's perspectives on the Children Act 1989. *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law* 28 (2), pp. 153 -170.
- United Nations. 1989. *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. New York: United Nations.

Voice for the Child in Care (2005) *Start with the Child, Stay with the Child: a blueprint for a child-centred approach to children and young people in public care*. London: VCC.

Welsby, J. (1996a) 'The Children's Planning Initiative', *Plans and Reviews: getting it right for young people* Conference, National Children's Bureau.