

# Too Vulnerable to Participate? Challenges for Meaningful Participation in Research With Children in Alternative Care and Adoption

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## Abstract

In recent years, a significant amount of research has been conducted with children from a rights perspective, especially concerning the right to be heard and participate. However, children living in alternative care and adoption have often been excluded from participating in research because they are viewed as vulnerable children who lack agency and also due to an adult-centric perspective of protection. In this article, we challenge this idea under the view that participation is a main component of protection, children are experts in their own experiences, and their views should be considered through participative research design and methods. Particular challenges that protection contexts impose for research are analyzed and several ways in which these challenges can be faced are outlined. We provide principles and examples that can be implemented to ensure that children who live in alternative care or adoption have the right as any child to be informed, be listened to, and have their views considered regarding topics that affect them.

## Keywords

childhood, protection, voices, children's rights, out-of-home care

Date received: August 30, 2019. Received revised April 7, 2020; Accepted: April 8, 2020

## Introduction

The right of the child to be heard is derived from the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; 1989). In 2009, the Committee on the Rights of the Child published General Comment No. 12, in which the committee linked Article 12, “the right to be heard,” of the UNCRC to the concept of participation as “ongoing processes which include information sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes” (p. 5). Participation could be considered the “right of rights,” because it refers centrally to the exercise of citizenship and its effective fulfillment enables to analyze the degree of validity of other rights (Giorgi, 2010).

Scholars have had an interesting dialogue and debate regarding the so-called new paradigm for the sociology of childhood (Christensen & James, 2000; James et al., 1998; Mayall, 2000, 2001, 2002; Spyrou, 2011; Prout, 2011 among

others), increasing recognition of children as social actors whose knowledge and views are worth investigating (Christensen & James, 2000; James & James, 2008; Mayall, 2001). Children are increasingly seen and related to as democratic subjects, and the idea of children's agency is central to the growing field of childhood studies (Esser et al., 2016; Gallagher, 2019; Oswell, 2012; Spyrou, 2020; Sutterlüty & Tisdall, 2019). According to Mayall (2001), this new perspective changes from a view of children as objects of adult work to competent and contributing social actors. This new concept of

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children implies that they can be considered as agents intersecting with the structures surrounding their lives. As such, they reproduce and transform such structures and to some extent, can be effective in altering the conditions of their own childhoods. Recent literature on children's agency has addressed, among other topics, the depth of effect of agency, the perils of agency, and the relationality of agency (Morrison et al., 2019). Following this line, Oswell (2012) proposed a wider vision of agency that overcomes the duality between agency and structure and highlights children's engagement with their everyday lives. In this same vein, Esser et al. (2016) pointed out that agency is produced in relationships of interdependence. Spyrou (2020) stated that current understanding of children's participation with well-intentioned adults seeking to open spaces for children to participate may be reaching its limits. For this author, agency will have to be viewed anew in line with the emerging relational thinking in childhood studies, "not as an individual possession but rather as a highly networked and distributed potential which can be assembled and reassembled in different ways and take collective forms" (Spyrou, 2020, p. 5). In a child protection context, children may be both vulnerable and agentic. In this context, the tensions and collision between discourses regarding children's rights to protection and participation, when applying the concept of agency in practice, become visible (Collins, 2017; Morrison et al., 2019).

In the field of research with children in recent decades, the UNCRC has paved the way for what can be conceptualized broadly as a right-based approach to the study of children, in which predominantly participatory approaches should be applied (Bradbury-Jones, 2014; Raynaert et al., 2009). The interdisciplinary field of childhood studies also highlights issues related to respecting children's participation rights (Mayall, 2001). In this way, social researchers have increasingly engaged children in projects that explore their experiences, views, and understandings (Alderson, 2012; Horgan, 2016). A key concept of this field has been the "voices" of children (Elden, 2012; Spyrou, 2011, 2016). However, this notion of children's voices is vague and nonspecific, and it is necessary to develop a more complex perspective, assuming the associated ethical, political, and methodological challenges. Although more meaningful engagement of children in research has occurred, there is a debate about how we do so in both an ethical and credible way (Moore et al., 2008). One methodological challenge in this area involves the pitfall of naively supposing that it is enough to collect children's "expressions" to include those voices. This idea highlights the fact that children's voices are always constructed in inherently multidimensional and conflicting institutional contexts that shape them (Elden, 2012; Spyrou, 2011). For Spyrou (2011), the concern for finding the "authentic voice" of children must give way to developing reflective and critical research more focused on the production process of those voices. More recently, Spyrou (2016) stated the importance of analyzing children's silences and nonverbal interactions. This author emphasized that these factors must be placed in the institutional

and discursive contexts that give rise to them and in this way, ensuring these voices are heard and represented (Spyrou, 2016). Even though new approaches consider children and adolescents as social actors intensely involved in the construction of their own lives, the lives around them, and the societies in which they live, research that actively and significantly involves children remains scarce, especially in Latin America (García-Quiroga et al., 2018; Vergara et al., 2015).

Evidence suggests that when children have the opportunity to participate in matters concerning their well-being, their self-esteem, sense of empowerment, and adaptive skills are developed (Saracosti et al., 2015). However, in some contexts, such as hospitals and child protection services, children have been primarily seen as vulnerable due to their health or social conditions. This has led to the conceptualization of children's lack of agency in these contexts and an adult-centric model of decision making that has excluded children's views. Interestingly, in some countries, new developments in the last decade highlight the importance of including children in research in schools (Aguilar et al., in press; Núñez et al., 2016; Peña Ochoa & Bonhomme, 2018; Ramírez-Casas del Valle & Alfaro-Inzunza, 2018) and the relevant information they can provide regarding topics such as architecture and design (Adams et al., 2012). A change of vision from a family-centred perspective to a child rights view has enabled new developments in hospitals regarding child participation and informed consent (Sheahan et al., 2012). Likewise, research with children in contexts of political crisis and armed conflicts has provided new and relevant perspectives (Castillo-Gallardo et al., 2018; Ospina-Alvarado et al., 2018). These recent experiences, among others, provide evidence that participation of vulnerable children is possible and desirable. However, these advances have not yet reached children in all vulnerable contexts and have been particularly slower for those in protection systems.

Children are the center of child welfare and protection systems, and as such, their views are essential to understanding and evaluate system outcomes. However, for several reasons, children's participation in decision making in these contexts continues to be scarce and often merely formal or instrumental (Collins, 2017; Vis & Thomas, 2009). Several studies have been conducted in the field of child protection, in which children experience a lack of meaningful participation in decisions that are most important to them. In a recent review of 16 studies regarding participation in residential care, Ten Brummelaar et al. (2017) concluded that there are very poor opportunities for young people to participate in almost all domains in these settings. They found that older children and children with good behavior and fewer previous placements had more opportunities to participate and express their views compared to younger children or children with behavioral difficulties or more than four previous placements. Other reviews have noted that participation may be difficult, especially at younger ages and in the presence of disability (Gallagher et al., 2012), and mentioned professionals' lack of understanding of what participation implies as significant

barriers to children's participation (Van Bijleveld et al., 2013). One of the dilemmas that has arisen in this field of research is that of balancing participation with protection. Academic discourses in childhood studies have highlighted two apparently opposing points of view: one positioning children as primarily vulnerable, with an emphasis on the need to safeguard and protect, and a second that places the focus on children's agency and competence with an emphasis on their right to participation (Powell et al., 2018). However, this could be a false dilemma, given that participation can itself be protective for vulnerable children, increasing their confidence, self-efficacy, and self-worth (Cossar et al., 2016; Yorke & Swords, 2012). In this sense, some research has highlighted the relevance of child participation and the relationship between children's participation and respect for their rights and improvement of their health (Bouma et al., 2018; Cashmore, 2001; Križ & Roundtree-Swain, 2017). Additional studies highlighted that in situations in which children and young people felt they were excluded or not heard, this affected their desire to be involved in the process and honest about their experiences (Kohli, 2007; Mudaly & Goddard, 2006).

In a qualitative study by Archard and Skivenes (2009) with social workers in Norway and the United Kingdom, the authors stated "that children's views may be heard but they don't really count" (p. 379). This lack of true participation has important implications for their sense of dignity and self-worth (Bessell, 2011). The mere physical presence of children does not ensure effective participation, and often these instances can be uncomfortable or frightening (Pölki et al., 2012).

Difficulties in the process of listening to and considering children's voices in out-of-home care is still a challenge for researchers and can be overcome through a process of developing appropriate techniques to gain access to children in these contexts and involve them in the research process (Berrick et al., 2000). Emphasizing the concept of authentic or true participation, Bessell (2011), in a study with 28 young people who had left care in Australia, stated the value of participation (both an intrinsic and instrumental value) and that the participation of children involves three essential components: (a) the child or young person has sufficient and appropriate information to participate; (b) the child or young person has the opportunity to express their point of view freely; and (c) the views of the child or young person affect the decision. More recently, these three components, which are based on Article 12 of the UNCRC, have been organized in a model of child participation called "meaningful participation" (Bouma et al., 2018). In their research, these authors critically analyzed Dutch policy documents in child protection and stated this model can be applied to research with children in child protection systems in each of its three levels: (a) informing, i.e., children should be informed regarding their right to participate, ways of participation, etc.; (b) hearing, i.e., children should be heard, meaning they should have the option and be encouraged to express their opinions and views, space and time need to be provided to listen to all children's queries, and researchers should be aware of verbal

questions but also body and face expressions and silences to clarify any doubts or anxieties regarding the process; and (c) involving, i.e., children's views should be considered when making decisions, including their opinions and proposals regarding the design of the research project (additional research questions, possible preferred techniques and methodologies to gather data).

The importance to children of being seen, heard, informed, and involved is evident, particularly as related to experiences directly affecting their families and futures (Merkel-Holguin et al., 2019). Strong evidence suggests that adults making decisions about children in care do not always make the best decisions, and the consequences may last a lifetime (Atwool, 2006). This is especially true for research with children in alternative care and adoption contexts. Participation in this field continues to be complex (Cossar et al., 2016; Woodman et al., 2018). Children and young people's roles in child welfare and protection systems' decision-making processes have been understudied (Merkel-Holguin et al., 2019), even though those decisions directly affect their lives. Many studies conducted with children in alternative care and adoption do not consider them as active subjects, and emphasis given to their participation is scarce. Children and young people in care want to be involved in research and consulted regarding other aspects of their lives (Merkel-Holguin et al., 2019; Woolfson et al., 2009). Usually, they wish to be more involved in how decisions are made about them, especially where they live and how often they see family members, and they want to be informed and involved in the process (Cashmore, 2001). Fortunately, a growing body of interesting studies has developed an interdisciplinary and critical way to address the challenges of child participation in research, including their experience of being in care and adoption (Atwool, 2006; Berrick et al., 2000; Cashmore, 2001; Clark, 2005; Cossar et al., 2016; Mason, 2008; Neil, 2012; Soares et al., 2019; Watson et al., 2018; Zeijlmans et al., 2019, among others) and about their participation in child welfare system decision-making processes (Merkel-Holguin et al., 2019; Vis et al., 2012). However, most of these studies have been conducted in developed countries, and this research is still underdeveloped in Latin America.

Considering the need to strengthen the meaningful participation of children in research on these topics, in this article we develop some key points that should be considered when conducting research with children in alternative care and adoption contexts, wherein the challenge of constructions of children's voices is traversed by multiple dimensions. This paper reflects critically and makes an effort to systematize the various challenges involved in meaningful participation in research of children in systems of care (both residential and foster) and adoption by attempting to outline practical implications that can help researchers studying children's perspectives in these settings reflect on the tensions and dilemmas involved and direct their research toward greater degrees of child participation. Along with this, we highlight several international studies that, in the opinion of the authors, exemplify good practices and may be useful to other researchers.

## Challenges for Child Participation in Research in Alternative Care and Adoption Contexts

There are several challenges in research with children in foster care or adoption in different areas. First, the relationship between vulnerability and participation is especially relevant for research with children who are subject to some kind of protection measure (such as separation from their families and placement in some form of alternative care or adoption). Children have been defined as a vulnerable group, and these children can be conceptualized as having a double vulnerability (being children and in need of special protection). As Aldrige (2015) mentioned, these groups defined as vulnerable “are often overlooked or denied full participation in research . . . [and] may be left out of studies altogether, and thus our knowledge and insights about their experiences and needs remains scarce” (p. 1). In this way, they become even more excluded and vulnerable. For example, Kelley et al. (2016) explored ethical challenges in research with children defined as orphans and vulnerable in their study with 12 pediatric researchers. Their study showed that researchers visualized vulnerability more easily than agency and expressed concern about introducing added harm or psychological stress in research; for this reason, they tended to sometimes exclude these children from research. Among the challenges researchers have identified in working with this population is the difficulty of identifying vulnerability, because children living in these contexts vary greatly. However, this variation is not always considered, and children tend to be classified as vulnerable and therefore, excluded from participation in research based on their placement in out-of-home care. The authors call for a more flexible and creative approach with child-centred participatory methods of research, which can better recognize the complex social reality of children living without parents, acknowledging both their vulnerability and their agency.

Conducting significant participatory research with children in alternative care (residential or foster placements) or who have been adopted entails specific challenges. At the individual level, previous experiences of violence and neglect can affect the child’s sense of power and freedom to decide and the consideration of the value of their voice and the fear of negative consequences or retaliation. Adverse early experiences can hinder their ability to verbalize and process their experiences, such that some proposed stimuli can trigger automatic reactions linked to early childhood trauma (Amores-Villalba & Mateos-Mateos, 2017; Ford, 2005; Heleniak et al., 2016). Additionally, Healy (1998) highlighted that children in these contexts have histories of “personal economic and social deprivation” (p. 902) that can hinder their ability to establish mutual personal relationships and a sense of worth with researchers and professionals. In this sense, it is especially important in these contexts to consider these issues and not take participation for granted. It is crucial to create safe environments when working with children (Kennan et al., 2019; Lundy, 2007) and enable diverse

methods (beyond verbal ones) to allow children to express themselves.

At the contextual level, institutions or programmes impose certain difficulties, mainly involving the authentic freedom to decide whether to participate in an investigation. Gatekeepers, such as managers or social workers—due to case load work, the need for statutory power in protective systems, the specialization of services that hinders continuity in the relationship with children (Seim & Slettebø, 2017), and other factors—can exclude some children from research or result in participants being selected without clear criteria. Regarding recruitment, Berrick et al. (2000) mentioned that “administrative, political, legal, and pragmatic barriers all conspire to limit researchers’ access to and contact with foster children” (p. 119). Additionally, and for confidentiality reasons, information about foster parents and children is not usually available to researchers. This entails an additional challenge of building a close, collaborative, and trustful relationship with social services agencies and courts. In a study by Gilbertson and Barber (2002), non-response rates as high as 82% were mentioned; however, only 13% of these children actively declined to participate, whereas all other cases were excluded by gatekeepers for different reasons. From a methodological perspective, this can result in extremely small samples and sample bias. From an ethical perspective, children can be excluded or not receive the opportunity to participate even though they have the right to do so. From a different perspective, children may be chosen to participate by gatekeepers and may feel obligated to assent. Therefore, beyond authorizations and consent from those who are in charge or have legal guardianship, special emphasis must be placed on the process of informing children about the study and their full freedom without conditions to participate or to leave the study at any time without negative consequences. These conditions should not be taken for granted in contexts in which children may not be accustomed to deciding for themselves.

## Considerations for Participatory Research With Children in Alternative Care and Adoption

### *“Starting to Know Each Other”: The Role of the Researcher and Relationships With Children in Alternative Care and Adoption Contexts*

Researchers in this field should be especially attentive to the aforementioned elements. They should be politically, ethically, and methodologically sensitive and coherent regarding the participation of children in their studies, avoiding reproducing the passive position they have historically taken in systems of protection, care, and adoption. In this sense, Healy (1998) brought attention to the fact that power will always exist in relational contexts, especially in child protection services. She highlighted the importance of an ongoing assessment of these power dynamics rather than a negation of their existence. In particular, the child’s relationship with the researcher is central to achieving meaningful participation. The research team must

have adequate skills and knowledge. Researchers should have the attitude of positioning themselves as adults who are interested in and want to learn from children (Mayall, 2000). The researchers must commit to respecting their part of the deal and attend regularly and on time any meetings throughout the process (Kennan et al., 2019; Laws & Mann, 2004). Consistency, perseverance, and continuity are key attitudes and practices in this relationship. Researchers should have the ability to provide meaningful information and build dialogues with children to encourage them to imagine possible ways of participation. The methods should correspond to their purpose and be sensitive and flexible enough to include all voices that should be heard (Laws & Mann, 2004; Matthews, 1998). In these cases, it is especially relevant to be trained in working with children, have knowledge of early childhood trauma and adverse experiences in childhood, and have interdisciplinary knowledge regarding the alternative care system and adoption. This is true for both the main researcher and other research team members, especially interviewers, who also need training in interviewing children and other methods and techniques. For example, Berrick et al. (2000) developed a selection method for interviewers that includes assessing several important characteristics (i.e., previous experience working with children, ability and motivation to work in vulnerable contexts and with problematic families, among others). The method includes a 2-week training stage and supervision throughout the data collection process. On the other hand, for Ponizovsky-Bergelson et al. (2019), “it is important that researchers interviewing children stress how interested they are to hear what the children have to say, how important this information is to them and that the child is appreciated for his or her original contribution” (p. 7). This is especially important for children in these contexts, considering that they have usually experienced neglect, discontinuity, and separation throughout their lives.

### ***“Freedom to Participate”: Ethical Issues for Strengthening Significant Participation***

Ethical considerations in research with children are crucial from the beginning to the final steps of the research (Alderson & Morrow, 2011; Morrow, 2008; Morrow & Richards, 1996; Raffety, 2014). The process involves much more than formal procedures and ethical informed consent. In every research project involving children, especially in contexts of alternative care and adoption, voluntary participation is critical. This implies the protection of children’s rights throughout the process, with the guarantee of informed assent, confidentiality of the information, and voluntary participation.

A first consideration is that participation is closely linked to the right to information (Article 17), which implies providing information adapted to children to support them in claiming their rights and participation. Information is the basis for their free decision to get involved in the research (Laws & Mann, 2004). In other words, without information, there is no participation. But researchers need to go beyond just making information available. Special attention needs to be paid to both the

timing and how information is presented, considering the child’s age and development, what they can understand, and what they may already know (Cashmore, 2001). Accordingly, it is imperative to provide plenty of time to inform children about the research team and the research itself.

Foundations for child participation in research start from the process of recruitment (Berrick et al., 2000). It is crucial to examine in detail how children will be recruited to participate and how different methods of selection have different implications for participatory work (Laws & Mann, 2004). All children have the right to know why they have been selected, and the researcher should attempt to answer all of the children’s questions about the project in terms appropriate to their level of comprehension (Matthews, 1998). The purpose for the study can be described in child-friendly terms (Berrick et al., 2000), and it is very important to explain in detail every activity and make the process predictable (questions might include: Who are the researchers? Why are they here? Why are they talking to the child? What activities are proposed?). In the same direction, child-friendly ethical consent should be constructed to ensure every child understands the characteristics of the research and the implications of their participation. Additionally, researchers should ensure that each child understands that the research will have no direct benefits or harms for them, neither individually or as a group (i.e., it will not affect any help they are receiving from the institution or family home where they are living). In this sense, it may be useful to have an additional information sheet explaining participants’ rights (Alderson, 1995). If the children for any reason (age, disabilities, etc.) cannot understand or express this information, researchers should offer some ideas regarding possible ways to participate.

Additionally, researchers should strive to ensure that child participation does not become an intrusive experience of over-intervention. This is especially important if we consider that children involved in these contexts often experience several intervention processes in protective services. Researchers should understand participation as a dynamic experience, in which children should calibrate their motivation to participate and how they want to express such participation. For this reason, children should be empowered to understand their right to not participate at all, terminate the interview at any time, or skip any questions they wish (Berrick et al., 2000). Furthermore, it is vital to respect each child’s limits, including the moment children choose to participate or end their participation. If a child chooses not to participate, this should always be respected, because this decision is conceptualized as a type of participation itself (Laws & Mann, 2004).

Parallel to the informed consent of children, the dilemma around adults’ informed consent arises. Bogolub and Thomas (2005) highlighted the complexities of obtaining consent from adults in protection contexts and described different approaches in different countries. For example, the United States has a more family-based approach and tends to ask for parental or foster caregivers’ consent. In contrast, the United Kingdom has a more child-centered approach and prioritizes children’s assent. Accordingly, in the study by Berrick et al.

(2000) in the United States, the authors proposed that in some cases, researchers may also need to gain informed consent from children's lawyers, biological parents, and caregivers. Therefore, any consideration of children's participation in child protection must bear in mind the difficult context in which children's views are sought and children's participation enabled or thwarted (Cossar et al., 2016; Healy, 1998).

Another sensitive issue for research with this population is confidentiality. This is a complex issue due to the different actors involved in gaining authorization and consent in child protection contexts. Additionally, regarding ethics committees, researchers usually must obtain authorization at different levels to conduct the study (e.g., administrative bodies, professionals and practitioners, and caregivers). This implies that different negotiation processes must be considered and confidentially can be challenged (Turner & Almack, 2016). Children tend to be very sensitive to ethical issues such as confidentiality and consent, and discussions with them about these topics can help clarify the best way to proceed. Children should be assured that they can express their views and opinions in confidence, without prejudice, and without fear of revelation of their thoughts to parents, guardians, or significant professionals (Matthews, 1998).

Finally, when considering financial or other incentives for their participation (such as toys), children can be consulted at an early stage of the research to consider their views when deciding the best option (Laws & Mann, 2004). This should be analyzed carefully to avoid the possibility of children agreeing to participate in research without wanting to but being tempted by the promise of a reward. A study with Australian children by Taplin et al. (2019) reported that children were more likely to participate in the study when payment was offered. A different option was proposed by Berrick et al. (2000), who offered a "certificate of achievement" as recognition for children's participation. Another option would be a "surprise reward" not previously known by the child or not established from the beginning.

### **"From the Beginning to the End": Participation in all Stages of Research**

According Moore et al. (2008), children should not only be the "subjects" of research but should also be encouraged to play an active part throughout the life of the project, from the early planning stages through to the sharing of findings. We outline three areas and ways in which we can strengthen children's participation in the process of research: design, coproduction of results, and dissemination of findings.

#### ***Participation in the Design of the Research: Participants, Coresearchers, or Both?***

As Kellet (2010) stated, it has been common practice to exclude children from the design phase and only enlist them to collect data. This excludes them from receiving training in research design and methods, which hinders their possibilities

for participation (Pole et al., 1999). However, several researchers raised the need to include children from the foundational moments of research projects. A way to facilitate children's participation is to involve them in the formulation of research questions, objectives, and methodology to visualize them as subjects of the research. In this way, children can contribute to the elaboration of questions and researchers can give guidance on how to write nonbiased or inductive questions (Mason, 2008).

Providing information regarding ways to construct a research project in a child-friendly way can enable children to express their views about how the research should be formulated from the early stages of the study. Clarification of children's and adult's roles is essential in this process, with transparency and honesty regarding which stages and areas should be directed and conducted exclusively by adults and which can be shared or conducted by children. In some cases, a research contract can be signed to clearly establish and describe each role (Berrick et al., 2000; Laws & Mann, 2004). Also, children who are part of the research team can provide advice on appropriate ways of accessing and inviting participants who are difficult to reach.

To maximize children's involvement in the research project, it's possible to invite children to participate in a reference group or advisory board throughout the project. Lundy et al. (2011) described the idea of a children's research advisory group. This group is formed by children who are considered experts in their own experiences and engages in activities to build capacities and familiarize the children with the idea of the project, helping them develop their own perspectives. The aim of this group is to provide a better idea of how the children want to be asked about their experiences, provide feedback on proposed research tools, and assist in the development and understanding children's views (Moore et al., 2008). In this direction, some studies have emphasized children's role as coresearchers, planning the study alongside adults and having an important research assistant role. In a qualitative study by Cossar et al. (2016), young people were involved in the research commissioning process and a research advisory group, contributing to recruitment leaflets, advising on ethical aspects of the research, contributing to the design of activity-based interviews, cofacilitating a workshop held with children and young people, and helping produce a children and young people's version of the final report. However, in many cases, projects are commissioned studies or funded after their design, making it difficult for children to be involved in the initial planning stage, development of the project plan, and internal ethics approval processes. Nevertheless, children can play different roles during the research; therefore, researchers should be open minded in relation to different participation styles.

To have access to children's perspectives it is fundamental to construct nondirective, flexible, participatory, and creative research styles. These styles should restrict children's expressions as little as possible and enable the comprehension of children's meanings. Regarding participatory methodologies, it is crucial to have a multiplicity of possible methods and

techniques to offer to children, according to their age and personal characteristics. Children can be involved in the choice of methods and as experts, advise researchers regarding the best ways to gather information (Lundy et al., 2011). Several methods and techniques should be available, and special attention should be paid to enabling different ways of expression. As previously mentioned, children with difficult early experiences can have difficulty verbalizing but would benefit from other possibilities based in multiple interactive techniques, such as puppets, stories, drawings, collages, and photographs, among others (Elden, 2012; Horgan, 2016; Spyrou, 2011). Even though every technique has limitations, these methods enable children to feel more comfortable, express their views, and explore new meanings beyond their verbal ability (Spyrou, 2011). According to Elden (2012), these techniques invite children to “mess around” and reveal ambiguous or contradictory meanings, considering them to be competent social actors with agency but also vulnerable and dependent.

In addition, many researchers working with children in different contexts have argued that group interviews are preferable to individual interviews based on the need to balance the power between an adult and a child (Hunleth, 2011; Kutrovátz, 2017; Lewis, 1992), because having many children and one adult can decrease the sense of powerlessness in children. This can be an adequate view in most contexts; however, when conducting research with children in residential care, this can become problematic. These children often live in residential environments that are very structured and less personalized than family environments and they may have scarce moments for a one-to-one conversation. They may benefit from an individual interview in which they feel they are listened to, have all the time they need to feel confident in expressing their feelings and views, are not restricted to the usual role they have in the residence, and are the center of their experience at their own pace. Power issues are still important but may be addressed in different ways as an alternative to group interviews; for example, researchers can sit on the floor or in a little chair with children, play alongside the child, share some personal information and offer the child the chance to ask questions as well, or highlight the expert role of the child in their own experiences and the value they bring to the research. Additionally, encouragement, open-ended questions, and question requests have been mentioned as facilitators of child participation (Ponizovsky-Bergelson et al., 2019) to understand children's experiences more thoroughly, because this provides an opportunity for children to express their concrete and emotional experiences in their own words.

### *“I Know What this Means”: Participation in the Coproduction of Results*

Researchers should work with children and rely on them to reflect idiosyncratic meanings as much as possible to avoid overinterpretation based on previously established adult-centric categories (Lundy et al., 2011). To obtain adequate interpretation of the results, children should be involved in

clarifying meanings embedded in their output (e.g., drawings, pictures, puppetry dialogues). This is especially true in the case of children in alternative care who, due to early adverse experiences, may present characteristics or content susceptible to being visualized from more clinical perspectives as indicators of emotional problems. In these cases, adults may be tempted, from an adult-centric perspective, to analyse children's responses and actions as having a meaning that can be understood or revealed by the adult researcher alone. However, content revealed by participants in these contexts should always be interpreted from their own perspectives and idiosyncratic meanings, without preestablished categories. For this to be possible, this aspect should be considered in the design of the information analysis method. As an example of the importance of including children in the interpretation and analysis of results, Manson (2008) investigated the needs of children in care and found significant differences in the meaning of “stability” given by children and adults. For both groups, this was stated as an important need. However, for children, this meant continuity of connections with significant figures (no matter the placement), whereas for adults, it meant stability of placement. To ensure that results reflect children's perspectives and not adults' interpretations, it is crucial to involve children in the process (Dockett et al., 2009; Gomes Pessoa et al., 2018). Children can begin the analysis process by reflecting together on what they produced and why, then thinking about what they are learning from the participants. An adult collaborator can gather key issues emerging from the field data and lead a child-friendly method of analysis accessible to the group of children. Lundy et al. (2011) provided a good example of different techniques that can be used in the process of analyzing data with children; they provided pictures, cards and bags to classify answers according to the age and characteristics of children. During the process, researchers can collect children's comments as the basis for writing the results of analyses.

### *“Let's Share Our Thoughts”: Participation in the Process of Dissemination of Findings*

Researchers agree that all children who take part in any project deserve to be informed about the research findings in an appropriate and understandable way (Matthews, 1998). At the same time, their participation in the process of dissemination and transfer of the results to various audiences can be promoted through what has been called “deep participation” (Ansell et al., 2012; Horgan, 2016). For children, choosing to participate may be related to the hope that certain changes will occur, so the dissemination of research findings is crucial (Laws & Mann, 2004). This way, children can be called to coproduce sections of partial or final research reports; for example, the chapter on recommendations or implications for practices (Lundy et al., 2011; Mason, 2008). They can read and comment on the drafts of these reports, discuss them with others, and design a child-friendly version of the final study report. Again, different methods can be used to ensure their participation at



this stage; for example, they can develop main findings that could be included in the report. Additionally, participating in the dissemination of their results to policy makers is a very interesting option, contributing to their empowerment because they can raise, with the support of adult researchers, their opinions, positions, and suggestions regarding various subjects that affect them. However, as Mason (2008) mentioned, sometimes children in care are not willing to participate in forums with professionals because they perceive themselves as powerless in front of adults and have no confidence that their views will be considered. This can be linked to previous experiences of not being listened to or considered in their relationships with adults. In fact, many children are reluctant to participate and mention tokenism as a main reason (Woolfson et al., 2009). If safe environments are achieved and more horizontal relationships are built, children's participation in conferences with diverse audiences has enormous potential to increase awareness, because children can illuminate and reveal key aspects to consider in political, legislative, sociocultural, or institutional transformations (Woolfson et al., 2009). Finally, they can coproduce other materials in addition to reports, such as games, videos, or posters that express issues explored in the research and disseminate them to a wider audience.

## Conclusions

The signatory states of the UNCRC have committed themselves to ensuring child participation in decisions in all matters that affect them in various fields, especially child protection. However, great debate and controversy continues around the world regarding the situation of children temporarily living in alternative care systems due to measures of temporary or definitive separation from their birth families. Children living in alternative care and adoption contexts are part of a specially marginalized, often stigmatized population and for several reasons under considered in participatory research and decision making. Research in this area can constitute a valuable tool to enable the exploration of their feelings, views, wishes and needs, and the consideration of these in decision making process guarantying the consecution of their rights. However, this involves overcoming the adult-centric perspective which stills dominates childhood protection field and research about these issues in many countries and disciplines.

Thinking and implementing careful and respectful ways to promote child participation in alternative care and adoption systems involves the fact that researchers will be faced to dilemmas and challenges which arise from the political, ethical, theoretical and methodological positioning of their investigative work. The consideration and promotion of children's agency and participation as well as their need of protection can be achieved by the creation of safe environments which enable different ways and methods to participate from the very early stages of the research and throughout the process. Especial attention needs to be given to the contextual and individual characteristics in these settings to overcome the idea that

children's safety and protection can be planned and decided without consulting their perspectives.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This article is part of the research projects "FONDECYT INICIACION N°11190298: Participation of children and adolescents in decision making in alternative care protection systems: Incorporating the voices of different actors in the process" (2019-2022, PI: Manuela García-Quiroga) and FONDECYT No. 3170338 "Adoptions in Chile: Construction of narratives about origins and identity" (2017-2020, PI: Irene Salvo Agoglia) both funded by the Chilean Consejo Nacional de Innovación, Ciencia y Tecnología (CONICYT/ANID).

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