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WHOSE VOICE?  
CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S  
PARTICIPATION IN THE CHILD  
PROTECTION CONFERENCE.

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements of the  
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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Health and Life Sciences.

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## **Abstract.**

The rights of children and young people to express their views in matters that affect them when they are subject to statutory child protection interventions are enshrined in global and domestic legal frameworks. However, the most recent review of the English child protection system commented on a number of system failures that has resulted in a loss of focus on the child or young person in child protection assessment and decision making practices (Munro,2011b).

The aim of this thesis, to explore the participation of children and young people in their child protection conference; originated from recommendations from Munro's review, which called for more child - centred approaches in child protection practice. The thesis is a qualitative, mixed methods case study, and draws on phenomenological and post- structural methodologies to explore the nature of children and young people's participation in person, as well as through the representation of others in Moor Town, a local authority in the north of England. The thesis is influenced by Foucault's concept of genealogy , and locates the evolution of participation in a microcosm of child protection practice at fixed points in child welfare law, policy and practice.

The study found that children and young people did not routinely attend child protection conferences in person. Young people who did attend did so as an exercise of their rights, and identified the importance of preparation for participating in ways that were meaningful for them. Attendance had a cathartic effect, and contributed to the development of life skills. However, the findings

suggest that social workers exercised power and autonomy to exclude children and young people on the grounds of age and maturity, and because they perceived the emotional impact of being physically present in a confrontational adult environment not to be in the best interests of the child or young person. There was limited evidence to suggest that more strength based approaches for assessing and responding to risk had promoted participatory rights in social work practice. When children and young people did not attend in person, their views, wishes and feelings were generally mediated, and subjected to professional filtering and interpretation, and there was an over - reliance on the use of direct work tools associated with strength based approaches.

The findings from this study contribute to an existing knowledge base which suggests that individual, agency and societal assumptions over childhood serve to uphold protection rights over participatory rights in child protection assessment and decision making forums.

The thesis draws on recommendations made by young people to propose a number qualifying and post qualifying practice recommendations for developing more child –directed child protection conference environments.

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## List of Abbreviations.

BASW: British Association of Social Work

CDA: Critical Discourse Analysis

DCSF: Department for Children, Families and Schools

DfE: Department for Education

DfES: Department for Education and Skills

DoH: Department of Health

EBP: Evidence Based Practice

HCPC: Health and Care Professionals Council

ICPC: Initial Child Protection Conference

ICS: Integrated Children's System

ICT: Information and Communication Technology

IFSW: International Federation of Social Work

IRO: Independent Reviewing Officer

LAC: Looked After Children

LSCB: Local Safeguarding Children's Board

NICE: National Institute of Health and Social Care Excellence

SCIE: Social Care Institute for Excellence

SEMG: Standards and Effectiveness Management Group

SoS: Signs of Safety

UN: United Nations

UNCRC: United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

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Finally I would like to thank my immediate family: Mark, Tom and Rachel for their support and belief in me.

This thesis is dedicated to Jack and Rosemary Ogle.

**Declaration.**

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas and contributions from the work of others.

Any ethical clearance for the research presented in this thesis has been approved. Approval has been sought and granted by the Faculty Ethics Committee on 15<sup>th</sup> July 2013.

I declare that the word count of this thesis is 86,088 words.

Name:

Signature:

Date:



## **Chapter One. Introduction.**

### **1.1. An overview of the thesis.**

This thesis explores how the views, wishes and feelings of children and young people are presented in person, or represented by others in the child protection conference, a decision-making forum located in the English child protection system. The conference, and its constituent processes and practices are the embodiment of child welfare legal and policy frameworks that have evolved in response to changing socio-legal conceptualisations of child abuse and neglect. The child protection conference represents a microcosm of child protection practice, and is concerned with establishing whether a child or young person has suffered, or is likely to suffer, significant harm and if so, whether an inter-agency child protection plan is required to safeguard and promote the child or young person's wellbeing (HM Government, 2015). In fulfilling its statutory function, the child protection conference is a multi - agency forum that assesses the child or young person's circumstances and makes decisions as to the interventions required to address identified risks. The wishes and feelings and views of the child or young person are central in both assessment and decision making domains of the conference process (HM Government, 2015) and as such, are representative of participatory practices that are consistent with social work professional values.

In the context of an ever changing professional landscape, the thesis explores how participation is understood and enacted by children and young people, and by professional attendees in the child protection conference, namely the child or young person's social worker and the Independent

Reviewing Officer (IRO), the professional who is responsible for chairing the child protection conference.

The study adopted an applied, qualitative case study methodology, and drew on phenomenology and critical social work theory informed by a children's rights perspective to explore perceptions of participation gained from interviews with young people, documentary analysis of reports submitted to and generated at child protection conferences, and focus groups with IRO's and social workers. The case study site, a local authority in the north of England, will be referred to throughout this thesis as Moor Town.

The original and principal aim of the study was to explore participation in practice through the lived experience of children and young people who had attended a child protection conference. The study therefore aimed to generate new knowledge into a relatively under researched area nationally and locally, but was also concerned with applying this body of knowledge to promote change in child protection policy and practice in Moor Town.

The conceptual framework of the thesis has been influenced by an understanding of genealogy, described by Foucault as:

'A form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledge, discourses, domains of objects etc.' (1980, p.117).

Such a perspective can assist in exploring what happens in participatory practices that are located in the child protection system. This focus on 'what happens' is an example of the 'little question' (Foucault, 1982 p.786), and can be understood through an analysis of the social, legal and organisational practices in which power and knowledge are produced. The linking of the

historic to the present is framed in particular periods of child welfare policy and practice which Skehill et al. (2012) refer to as transformational turns:

‘Changes in social work which are described as major shifts in thinking... that are neither the result of discursive or practice changes alone but rather the outcome of a complex interplay of organisations, regulations and discourses between various actors and at a number of levels’ (p.59).

The thesis’s conceptual framework is underpinned by four such transformational turns which have influenced how children and young people’s participation is conceptualised in child protection policy and practice: the legal recognition of children’s rights through the enactment of the Children Act 1989 and ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly, 1989); the refocusing era that represented a shift towards family support and child centred practice through the Every Child Matters: Change for Children programme (HM Treasury, 2003); the emergence of the performance management culture which represented a shift ‘from causation to counting, from explanation to audit’ (Howe, 1994 p.86) and finally to the era of post Munro practice innovation (DfE, 2011a).

The thesis has been underpinned by core social work principles and values associated with social justice, social inclusion, and promoting positive change for individuals and groups who are in receipt of social work services. In aiming to uphold principles of social justice and emancipatory practice, the thesis is located in a critical social work paradigm, which seeks to unpick the structural processes and practices; the taken for granted assumptions that shape the experience of children and young people who are the subjects of statutory social work intervention. In doing so, the thesis has sought to critically explore

the dialectical relationships between social work values, theory and practice, and the ways in which theory informs practice and practice informs theory (Thompson, 2010).

There is an established, but limited, body of knowledge concerned with children and young people's perspectives of the child protection process as a whole, but an even more limited evidence base for understanding how children and young people have experienced taking part in child protection conferences. It is difficult to envisage how the social work profession can develop its knowledge base without seeking to understand how children and young people experience this phenomena, in what is currently advanced as a child centred system (HM Government, 2015) and this thesis aims to make a contribution towards advancing the existing body of knowledge.

## **1.2. Background to the study.**

The child protection conference is intended to reflect principles of partnership working between professionals and parents, and whilst it is now customary for parents to attend a conference, the notion of a child's or young person's attendance in person has been more contested. The debate is concerned with whether protection rights as enshrined in Article 3 of the UNCRC are upheld in favour of participatory rights as enshrined in Article 12 (UN General Assembly, 1989), and whether it is ethically or conceptually advantageous for a child or young person to exercise participatory rights in a decision making forum, when they as the subject have experienced or are likely to experience significant harm.

The contemporary context for social work with children and families was given political prominence with the coalition government's commissioning of Professor

Eileen Munro's review into child protection in England (Munro, 2011b). Munro's criticism of the child protection system was concerned with two inter-related elements. Firstly, a systemic concern with bureaucratic and instrumental processes which guide the social worker through a linear sequence of risk assessment and risk management practice, and secondly the impact of this on the marginalisation of social and relational dimensions of contemporary practice. Consequently, the child or young person's perspective in child protection assessment and decision-making was absent:

'Children and young people are a key source of information about their lives and the impact any problems are having on them in the specific culture and values of their family. It is therefore puzzling that the evidence shows that children are not being adequately included in child protection work' (Munro, 2011b p.25).

A key recommendation of Munro's review was for social work practice to 'do the right thing' as opposed to 'doing things right' (Blythe and Solomon, 2011; Parton, 2011a). The former alluded to a return to the moral purpose of social work, with practice based on the quality of the human relationship between social worker and service user, as opposed to the dominance of its bureaucratic technical functions associated with risk assessment and intervention.

An exhortation towards 'doing things right' does not reflect the complexity and challenges of the practice environment, and how this may impact on the capacity of social workers to promote the best interests of the child or young person at all times, alongside upholding participatory rights (particularly in circumstances when these may be in conflict with the professional viewpoint). For example, the number of children subject to a child protection plan in England has risen year on year since 2010, the date which signifies the introduction of the

annual Child in Need census (DfE, 2010). Currently, 51,080 children and young people are the subject of a child protection plan, which represents an increase of 1.5% from the previous year (DfE, 2017). It is argued that a year on year increase; both in the number of initial child protection conferences (ICPC) held and the number of children and young people who are the subject of a child protection plan; is reflective of a child protection orientation child welfare system (Gilbert et al. 2011; Parton, 2011a). Furthermore, it is also argued that the demoralisation of the social work profession has created a child protection service environment, one where adherence to the principles of relationship based social work remains a challenge for social workers (Ferguson, 2016; Laird et al. 2017).

Munro's recommendation for a more child centred approach to child protection influenced the implementation of the single assessment process, effectively removing the requirement for separate initial and core assessments (DfE, 2011a). Recommendation 3 stated that the child or young person's perspective was intended to be at the centre of assessment and intervention, and realised through the principle of working with the child or young person, as opposed to working for them. This aimed to ensure that a child or young person's perception of their lived experience was not only ascertained, but also taken into account in decision-making and service provision. Charting 'the child's journey' (p60) was defined as 'good' quality service provision, and characterised by the following benchmark criteria for Local Safeguarding Children's Boards (LSCBs):

'Appropriate involvement of children, young people and families in the process and decision-making, including impact and evidence of their understanding' (Ofsted 2017b, p.80).

### **1.3. Research aim and research questions.**

As noted in 1.1. the post Munro era of social work practice represented the final transformational turn, and the inception of the research study coincided with a point when local authorities were responding to the recommendations from Munro's review.

The original aim of the study was concerned with how children and young people exercised participatory rights in person in a social work practice environment that is primarily concerned with upholding their protection rights. This generated the following research questions:

- What are children and young people's experiences of participating in the child protection conference?
- How are the participatory rights of children and young people upheld in English child protection legal and policy frameworks?
- What factors influence the participation of a child or young person at the child protection conference?

As will be explained in Chapter Six, the research aim was subsequently developed to also explore how the wishes, feelings and views of children and young people were represented by others when they did not attend in person. This generated the following research question:

- How are the views, wishes and feelings of children and young people represented at the child protection conference when they are not present in person?

#### 1.4. Rationale for the study.

The recommendations that emerged from Munro's review of child protection captured the essence of rights based practice, and provided a rationale for a study that aimed to explore how participatory practice that aims to uphold the rights of children and young people has evolved and continues to evolve :

'If we seriously mean to improve the life conditions of children we must, as a minimum precondition, establish reporting systems in which they are heard themselves as well as reported on by others ' (Qvortrup,1990 p.94).

The government at the time acknowledged Munro's criticism of an overly bureaucratic child protection system, and endorsed a move towards one:

' Characterised by children and young people's **wishes, feelings** and **experiences** placed at the centre... and truly valuing and acting on **feedback** from children, young people and families' (DfE,2011a p5).

The second rationale for undertaking a research study in this area was pertinent to my professional identity prior to embarking on an academic career. I have substantial professional experience as a practitioner and manager in statutory children's services child protection practice, and as a Children's Services Workforce Development Manager. In both roles, I held a professional concern with supporting the continued professional development needs of social workers and inter- agency partners in order to promote effective safeguarding practices across local authority and LSCB's. In both roles, I had also advocated for, and facilitated, the involvement of children and young people in workforce development activities. I was therefore interested in exploring the phenomenon of children's participatory



rights, in social work contexts that define children and young people as in need of protection. This was given further impetus in the later stages of the research study. From 2012 – 2015, I was somewhat removed from the day to day realities of child protection practice, and I considered myself to be an outside researcher. However, from 2015 onwards, my research position changed to one of quasi - insider researcher through membership of Moor Town's LSCB Standards and Effectiveness Management Group.

### **1.5. A note on terminology.**

Terminology associated with participation, itself a multi -faceted concept, tends to be applied interchangeably in the literature. In legal terms as defined in the Children Act 1989, reference is made to participation as a process whereby a child or young person's wishes and feelings are ascertained and then (in some circumstances) given due consideration. In some social work literature, reference may be made to participation in terms of wishes and feelings (Handley and Doyle, 2014) and elsewhere to the ambiguity of 'voice' as an expression of participation (Komulainen, 2007; La Valle et al. 2012). Distinction can also be made between listening to and hearing the child's voice (Lundy, 2007; McLeod, 2006). Conversely, a distinction between children and young people can be blurred with the homogenous term 'child' or 'children' used to denote someone under the age of eighteen. As will be demonstrated in the thesis, this is not just simply a matter of semantics. For this reason, the thesis will generally refer to either 'child', 'children', 'young person' or 'young people' (with the exception of in- text citations which refer to a specific term), to 'participation' as a general concept and to 'wishes, feelings and views' as the descriptors that

define the expression of participation in practice, whilst acknowledging that all are also linguistic short cuts.

## **1.6. Outline of the thesis.**

The thesis is presented in eleven chapters.

Chapter Two follows on from this introductory chapter and establishes relevant conceptual frameworks concerned with participatory rights, as they are conceptualised and contextualised within psychological and sociological theories of childhood. Chapter Two also includes an analysis of participatory rights within the first of the transformational turns in child protection, concerned with the enactment and ratification of legal frameworks which served to define the relationship between the state and children and young people. A key debate in participation in a child protection context concerns a social worker's duty to uphold participation rights whilst upholding protection rights by acting in the best interests of the child or young person. The inextricable link between participation, protection and power is a central tenet of this thesis, and will be explored through a Foucauldian perspective. Particular emphasis will be placed on how participation is mediated through the power relationships that exist in child protection contexts, which serve to construct situated knowledge of children and young people who are considered vulnerable by the key stakeholders in the participatory triangle: the child or young person, the social worker and the IRO.

Chapter Three introduces the remaining transformational turns which are concerned with how knowledge of participation as a legal and conceptual phenomenon has been integrated into child protection policy and practice. Critical social work theory provides the analytical framework for exploring

the dominant ideologies that have influenced the nature of the English social work profession, and how the relationship between the state, the child or young person and the family have been constructed and reconstructed in changing political, economic and social contexts. The analytical gaze then turns to existing child care practice with a micro analysis of the assessment and decision making processes in England that serve to safeguard and promote the welfare of the child or young person. The chapter will conclude with an overview of what is currently referred to as a child- centred system and will identify those practices that promote or inhibit participatory rights.

Chapter Four explores the empirical evidence base for the extent to which the child or young person's wishes, feelings and views are presented directly and indirectly in the main assessment and decision making forums, the child protection conference and the core group meeting. The individual, organisational and structural variables that facilitate or constrain opportunities for participation are also reviewed.

Chapter Five establishes the methodological rationale for the research study. Readers will note that the original research design was adapted to include the presentation of practitioner perspectives. To assist the reader, discussion of the methodological framework and of the methods for conducting the fieldwork has been separated into two chapters. This chapter established the overarching ontological and epistemological framework and specifies the methodological approaches for data collection and data analysis.

Chapter Six provides an account of the research methods that were adopted to ascertain the perspectives of children and young people when they attended a conference in person, and when their views were represented by others and

the perspectives of adult professionals. The chapter will conclude with a reflection on ethical issues associated with undertaking research with children and young people.

Chapter Seven presents the key findings arising from a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with four young people.

Chapter Eight presents the findings from the second data collection phase, a critical discourse analysis of reports submitted to, and generated in thirty two child protection conferences. These were concerned with twenty nine children and young people aged between two and a half years and sixteen years and included both initial child protection conferences (ICPC) and review child protection conferences.

Chapter Nine then presents the key findings arising from a thematic analysis of a focus group discussion with four IRO's and a further focus group discussion with four social workers. These forums were also included in the second data collection stage, and sought to explore in more depth some of the themes that had emerged from the findings generated in Chapters Seven and Eight.

In Chapter Ten, the findings are synthesised in relation to the research questions. The transformational turns that have shaped the structure of the thesis are revisited as an overarching framework for evaluating the key findings, and will highlight where the findings from this study conflate or diverge from the existing knowledge base for understanding how children and young people participate in child protection conferences.

Chapter Eleven draws the thesis to a conclusion. In doing so, it considers the limitations of the study and proposes recommendations for further research. This chapter also outlines the contribution this study has made to the existing body of knowledge and recommends areas for practice development.

## **Chapter 2. Socio –legal discourses of participation.**

### **2.1. Introduction.**

This chapter sets out the conceptual frameworks that underpin the rights of children and young people to participate in matters that concern them, and establishes a conceptual framework that is influenced by structural and relational perspectives of childhood (Alanen, 2009; Qvortrup, 1990). The central tenet of this chapter is again informed by a Foucauldian perspective, in that the focus of analysis is concerned with how participatory rights in a microcosm of child protection practice are enacted through historical, political, social and cultural processes (Foucault, 1980).

The chapter begins with an analysis of conceptualisations of childhood, and draws on psychological and sociological perspectives in order to examine the dominant discourses that have influenced the capacity for the voice of the child or young person to be heard in the child protection conference. The chapter then establishes the legal frameworks which serve as embodiments of institutional structural processes, and which define how childhood is conceptualised in socio-legal terms (James, 2010). The focus of the chapter then progresses to a critical evaluation of participation, recognising this as a multi -faceted concept and one that is inextricably linked to networks of power relations.

### **2.2. Perspectives of childhood.**

Archard (1993) differentiates between a concept of childhood, defined as a universal status that exists alongside that of adulthood, and conceptualisations of childhood, which are concerned with how childhood manifests itself in different

ways according to social, political and cultural societal structures. In establishing this differentiation, Archard brings to the fore debates concerning childhood as a universal singular phenomenon, influenced by developmentalist and sociological theories, and childhood as a pluralist, socially constructed phenomenon understood by the sociology of childhood (James and Prout, 1990, 2015; Jenks, 2005; James, 2010). Qvortrup (2009) and Alanen (2009) have contributed to the debate over what constitutes childhood, cautioning against binary (developmental versus sociological) conceptualisations, and have drawn attention to the structural similarities within childhood that are associated with generational space. Each perspective has influenced how childhood is understood at a macro level in western societies, and how it is manifested at the micro level of participation in practice.

### **2.2.1. Developmental perspectives of childhood.**

‘The wisest men concentrate on what is important for men to know without considering what children are in a condition to learn. They are always seeking the man in the child without thinking of what he is before being a man’ (Rousseau, 1979 pp. 33-34).

This quotation illustrates the point at which childhood was seen to emerge as a distinct and unique status. Rousseau is attributed with depicting childhood as a period of universalism, and of the child as a natural being (Burman, 2017; Jenks, 2005; Smidt, 2013). Universalism establishes childhood as a separate stage in the life course, all children and young people, regardless of social context, experience childhood in some shape or form, and progress from this state to one of adulthood. Childhood is a state of apprenticeship (Gabriel, 2014), characterised by inherent and unique qualities. Children and young people possess a natural state,

uncorrupted by the vagaries of adult life, but a state in which they are dependent upon adults for care, protection and guidance in preparation for the adult world. Progression towards adulthood is developmental; a state of transitioning from being a child or young person to becoming an adult is founded on characteristics of physical and intellectual development and age.

This conceptualisation of childhood as a unique developmental state forms the essence of psychological and sociological theories of childhood and has dominated western perceptions of children (Burman, 2017; Corsaro, 2015; James and Prout, 2015; Jenks, 2005; Smidt, 2013; Wyness, 2012a). Indeed as Burman (2017) notes, a significant number of developmental psychology and child development texts adopt a chronological age approach, which depicts childhood as sequential, starting at pre-birth and progressing through stages of infancy, early childhood, middle childhood and finally adolescence. Childhood and adulthood are separated through biological difference, and further bounded by degrees of rationality and autonomy. Childhood is thus distinguishable as an 'othered' state, whereby the child undergoes a process of socialization in order to progress from becoming an adult to being an adult. The universal child; regardless of historical, economic, social, political or cultural context; is understood in terms of what they will become, and is therefore not afforded a status of existing in their own right. Adulthood in contrast, is associated with attributes of cognitive ability and capacity for rational decision-making, and independence (Jenks, 2005; Wyness, 2012a).

The influence of Piaget's (1952) social constructivism theory of child development and Vygotsky's (1978) socio cultural theory of child development have been significant in establishing the developing child as a dominant paradigm in



childhood studies (Smidt,2013). Furthermore, they also reflect societal assumptions concerned with how the child, family and state are positioned in child welfare policy and practice (John, 2003). There is some degree of debate as to the similarities and differences in their respective positions, but convergence lies in claims that development is dialectical in nature, emphasising (albeit through different conceptual frameworks) its relational and interactional processes (Lourenço, 2012).

Piaget regarded children's cognitive processes as essentially different from adults, but proposed that children learnt in different ways at different ages (Piaget, 1952; 1975). There is a qualitative dimension to this, in that a child's capacity to construct learning and organise knowledge will progress according to age related stages of development and through the interaction between the child and her/ his physical world. Piaget considered that a child's cognitive development progressed through successive stages up to a point when the child is able to hypothesise, reason and relate to the world around them much in the same way as an adult does, usually occurring from the age of twelve upwards. According to Piaget (1952), a child's own level of development is the pre - determining feature for what is learned. Although Piaget (ibid) recognised that learning takes place in an environmental context and is therefore social, he considered this to be less important than the internal influences through which learning is constructed, namely how each child internalises the actions involved in learning and her/ his capacity for self-regulation. Lourenço referred to this as Piaget's 'inside – out' theory, contrasting this with Vygotsky's 'outside- in' theory of child development (2012, p.287).

Vygotsky regarded a child not as an autonomous being, but as a heteronomous being, whose development was also contingent on the social structures in which

the child was placed (Vygotsky, 1978). Learning is mediated through the contribution of others and through social processes of communication, and Vygotsky considered language and other symbolic tools such as objects and drawing to be integral to the learning process. Vygotsky further differentiated between what a child is capable of doing independently, and what a child is capable of doing with the support and guidance of others. The difference between these is referred to as the zone of proximal development (ZPD) and is actualised through the contribution of another who is in a position of authority (for example, a parent, a teacher or an advocate). When applied to approaches for participation, Vygotsky's influence can be seen in models such as Hart's ladder of participation (1992) which position the adult and child or young person along a continuum of participatory practices.

A paradigm of childhood influenced by developmental psychology suggests that attributes of maturity and capability normally develop as a child progresses from middle childhood towards adolescence and young adulthood (Aldgate et al. 2006; Beckett and Taylor, 2016; Laurenço, 2012; Oswell, 2013; Taylor, 2004). One of the main criticisms levied over Piaget's theory of development lies in his assertion that cognitive development is universal, that all children regardless of culture and social context, will progress through the four stages and these broadly correlate with biological age. Furthermore, Robinson (2007), writing from a cross cultural perspective, argued that Piaget's theory of cognitive development is a westernised white middle class construct, but has been adopted as a normative benchmark for considering 'normal' and therefore 'abnormal' development across all cultural groups.

In summary, the development-based paradigm views children and young people in deficit terms, focusing on what a child is unable to do (measured with adult

centred criteria) rather than what a child can do. Notwithstanding differences in thinking about the processes in which children learn about themselves, how they view their relationship with the external world, and how children develop across life stages, the child development paradigm emphasises difference and deficit. Furthermore, it also emphasises social relations based upon need and dependence, and regulation and control as opposed to rights and self-determination. The thesis will suggest that this conceptualisation has wielded considerable influence in the structuring of relationships between the child and the state in the English child protection system.

### **2.2.2. Sociological perspectives of childhood.**

Differences between children and adults are not only characterised in biological terms but are also socially determined, and sociological perspectives of childhood provide an alternative epistemological framework for exploring the phenomena of childhood. The emergence of the sociology of childhood, and of childhood as a worthy study in its own right developed from a critique of psychological perspectives of childhood as universal and biologically determined. As a theory, this was contested because it could not account for how children experience childhood at different times in history, and in different cultures (James and Prout, 1990, 2015; James and James, 2012; Jenks, 2005).

Traditional sociological perspectives emphasised the socially constructed and pluralist nature of childhood (Corsaro, 2015; Wyness, 2012a). Smith and Greene (2014) noted the influence of socialisation in sociological and anthropological perspectives of childhood, with Parsons (1964) being a lead exponent of structural functionalism. Here childhood was perceived to fulfil a socialisation process, whereby the child develops to assume citizen status and social equilibrium,

attributes associated with adulthood. Socialisation equips the child with the values and norms of the given social system, and in doing so the foundations of adult conformation of social norms are established (Gabriel, 2014; Parsons, *ibid*). Anthropological studies advanced understanding of differential experiences within childhood, influenced by political, economic, social and cultural forces, thus rejecting the notion of childhood as a universal state (Mead, 1961). In both perspectives, childhood could be defined as an 'othered' category in relation to adulthood, structured along three dimensions of difference in western societies which serve to marginalise children and young people in society (Qvortrup, 2009). Firstly, they are not afforded full political rights and are not viewed as citizens (Lansdown, 1996). Secondly, children and young people are regarded as physically and socially dependent and require both care and control in order to be socialised into the accepted norms of behaviour accorded to an adult status (Jenks, 2005). Children continue to be generally regarded as lacking in the attributes which define adulthood, namely capacity for rational thought, and for being socially and emotionally incompetent (Jenks, 2005). Finally, children in western societies are excluded from paid work, which in turn assures their continued dependency on adults (Mayall, 2000).

An alternative paradigm of childhood emerged as a critique to psychological and sociological perspectives of childhood in the late twentieth century and early twenty first century (James and James, 2012; James and Prout, 1990, 2015; Jenks, 2005). This proposed that biological immaturity rather than childhood is a universal feature, and childhood should be understood as socially and culturally determined. Children and young people are beings in their own right:

'Children are and must be seen as active in the construction of their own lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. Children are not just passive subjects of social structures and processes '(James and Prout, 1990 p.8).

James and Prout (2015) have since developed their defining features of this emergent paradigm from their earlier work (1990) and these are set out as an overarching framework for the thesis. Firstly, childhood is regarded as a social construction and provides a medium for placing the earlier stages of human life into context. Secondly, as childhood is not a single phenomenon, it is only one variable alongside others, including gender, ethnicity and class. Thirdly, the emergent paradigm places a value on studying childhood as a legitimate field of study and not merely through the lens of adulthood. The fourth point represents a key epistemological shift in that it emphasises the agentic nature of childhood, the capacity to be influenced by and to influence their social world through interactions with others (including adults). The fifth aspect refers to the contribution ethnographic studies that incorporate children's perspectives can make to furthering social understandings of childhood. Finally, the authors position the emergent paradigm of childhood within a hermeneutic framework for reconstructing the meaning of childhood in society.

Qvortrup (2009) has critiqued a pluralist conceptualisation of childhood for its lack of focus on the existence and impact of power relations, and argues that a focus on childhood as a universal social category has value in that it highlights the processes through which children and young people are marginalised in society. Qvortrup (ibid) has adopted a structural analysis of childhood, which seeks to explore and analyse childhood as a fixed entity in contemporary life, albeit one in

which membership is fluid (Alanen, 2009; Gabriel, 2014). A structural approach for researching the lives of children and young people considers the relationship between macro structural contexts and the micro level of children and young people's experiences (Alanen, 2001) and recognises the complexity of the lives and experiences of children and young people and how these are constructed, co-constructed, and mediated by their embodied structural and intergenerational contexts (Alanen, 2009; James, 2010; Qvortrup, 2015). Alanen (2009) refers to this as generational ordering:

'Structured network of relations between generational categories that are positioned in and act within necessary interrelations with each other' (pp. 161-162).

This effectively presents children and young people as a social order or social category and through relations with other social categories that emphasise difference and inequality (Alanen, 2009).

The emergent sociology of childhood and structural approaches recognise the child or young person as an agentic social actor, capable of making sense of their world and influencing themselves and others through their interactions (James, 2009; Van Nijnatten, 2013). Conceptualisations of child agency as a sociological and political phenomenon (James, 2010; Valentine, 2011; Wyness, 2012) have argued for a more nuanced and integrated analysis. This recognises the influence of social structures and social institutions on characteristics that define childhood, for example as a separate generational space, but which also recognise the diversities that are brought about by social and economic processes in respect of age, gender, socio economic status, ethnicity and disability. Alanen (2009) has developed this notion of agency to recognise the power dimensions that exist in

such interactions and alludes to its mediated context, whereby agency is an individual attribute expressed dialogically through human relations:

‘... the powers (or lack of) of those positioned as children to influence, organise, coordinate and control events taking place in their social worlds. Such ‘position’ powers can be ‘determined’ by the specific structures within which persons are positioned as expressly children’ (Alanen, 2009 p. 170).

Analysis at this level seeks to understand why some children and young people are able to exercise agency in matters that affect them more so than others. In this respect, agency as a vehicle for understanding the position of children and young people within their society is a complex and problematic concept; one that requires further definition if it is to advance our understanding of children’s rights and participatory practice. For example, Valentine (2011) argues that there is a tendency within children’s rights literature to regard agency as a political construct, concerned with social change; the emphasis is on process (actualisation or rights) rather than a focus on outcome. Wyness (2012) highlights a conceptual difficulty in the pairing of authentic participation with autonomous agency, claiming that this suggests that children and young people require spaces free from adult influence in which to exercise full autonomy. Drawing on Alanen’s structural analysis approach (2009), Wyness (2012) suggests that any analysis of agency must recognise the interdependence that exists in social relations between adult and child or young person.

A sociological perspective, which views the child or young person as a social actor, is also closely aligned with the emergence of children’s rights as a social movement in the late twentieth century (Fox Harding, 1991; Hodgson, 1999). Both are concerned with the child or young person as an individual subject rather than

as an object of control, with how they construct and interact with their social world, and with notions of child agency (Smith, 2002).

Alanen (2009) has suggested that applying a generational frame in research concerned with children and childhood enables the researcher to explore the generational structures that exist, how these position the groups subject to study, and the social practices through which generational order is created and maintained. Viewing the experiences of children and young people through a generational lens suggests that participation can be understood in terms of intergenerational relationships whereby children and young people, and adults construct social positions that are located in wider structural processes of child welfare.

The remainder of this chapter is concerned with an analysis of the legal frameworks that have shaped conceptualisations of childhood in English child welfare policy and to participation in general, and to the power relations that exist in participatory practices.

### **2.3. Legal provision of children and young people's rights: the UNCRC**

The enactment of key legal frameworks in the early 1990's represented the first of the transformational turns in child welfare law and policy that were introduced in Chapter One. As acts of statute, the UNCRC and the Children Act 1989 are both examples of high order texts (Skehill et al. 2012), that represent dominant socio-cultural and political ideologies, and which serve to direct and influence practices at local level. Both adopted a singular notion of childhood in that they apply to all persons up to the age of eighteen years, although as will be later noted, a degree of age related differentiation is evident in specific articles in the UNCRC.



Franklin (1995, 2002) and Wyness (2012) distinguish between welfare rights and rights to self-determination, and these broadly correspond with Article 3 and Article 12 of the UNCRC (UN General Assembly, 1989). The former is usually enacted by an adult with the child or young person's best interests as the primary consideration. In the domain of formal decision-making, protection and participation rights are inextricably linked, and for this reason, they will be considered in tandem. The UNCRC (General Assembly, 1989) confers rights to the global child under three domains: the right to participate (liberty rights); the right to protection (welfare rights) and the right to provision of services (welfare rights). Of specific relevance to the thesis are participatory rights enshrined in Article 12 and protection rights enshrined in Article 3:

Article 12 states:

'1. State Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

2. For the purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'. (UNCRC, 2009 p.3).

As a protection right, Article 3 upholds the primacy of best interests in all matters affecting the child, stating:

‘1. In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.

2. States parties undertake to ensure the child such protection and care as is necessary for his or her well-being, taking into account the rights and duties of his or her parents, legal guardians, or other individuals legally responsible for him or her, and, to this end, shall take all appropriate legislative and administrative measure’. (UNCRC, 1989).

As the UN states:

‘One establishes the objective of achieving the best interests of the child and the other provides the methodology for reaching the goal of hearing either the child or the children. In fact, there can be no correct application of Article 3 if the components of Article 12 are not respected. Likewise, Article 3 reinforces the functionality of Article 12, facilitating the essential role of children in all decisions affecting their lives’ (UNCRC, 2009, pp.15-16).

The UNCRC was heralded as instrumental in defining a new era of children’s rights, in so far as it changed the nature of the relationship between the child or young person and the parent, from a position of rights over to one of rights held independently (Lansdown, 1995) Underpinned by a moral framework encompassing universal entitlements to dignity, respect, and justice, the UNCRC was perceived to represent an ideological shift towards a recognition of children as citizens and therefore entitled to protection and support from the state (Cornock and Montgomery, 2014; Young et al. 2014). As such, the UNCRC as a legal treaty claimed some credence in supporting an ideology of childhood which recognised the child or young person as an autonomous being in their relationship with the

nation state. Ratification of the UNCRC by all but two state parties would tend to support this view.

The UNCRC positioned children as holders of rights alongside adults, and stated that they are entitled to having these rights upheld. However some caution should be exercised as to the extent to which the UNCRC has become synonymous with a neutral image of rights, since it assumes correlation between espousal and action, its existence assumes that rights will be bestowed on its recipients regardless of context and circumstance. That this is not always the case (King, 2017) suggests that a more complex analysis is required, one that considers the role of political, social and moral forces in determining how children's rights are realised in any given society.

Article 12 differentiates between capacity and non –capacity, and between the right to participation and the right to self -determination (Lansdown, 1995). The word 'assure' places an obligation on states to enable views to be expressed, but this is qualified to include some children and young people and to exclude others on the grounds of 'capacity'. In some circumstances, capacity will be determined by an adult acting in the child or young person's best interests. Although Article 12 differentiates between children and young people who have capacity and those who do not, it does not use age as the determining factor. This was later clarified in the UN General Comment Number 7, which stated that the rights of children under the age of eight years (its age criteria for 'early childhood') are not always upheld by virtue of age. To address this, the UN is categorical in its assertion that young children, that is those defined above as aged eight and under (UN, 2005), are rights bearers in accordance with Article 12, and should be supported to express a view through a range of verbal and non- verbal mechanisms (UN, 2005). Herein lies the influence of more contemporary theories of childhood which

are critical of an assumption of maturity intrinsically linked with age (James, 2010; James and Prout, 2015, Wyness, 2012)

A distinction is made in Article 12 between capacity to express a view as an unqualified right for some and 'weight' determined by an assessment of the child's 'maturity' as a qualified right. This is an important point of clarification when participation is considered in an adult decision making context and this will be explored further in Chapters Seven, Eight and Nine. The right to be 'heard' presupposes an environment that is conducive to enabling the child or young person to exercise voice. Within such a context, the child or young person has the right to assume ownership of their view, and to express their said views 'directly'. Although Article 12 makes provision for the child's views to be represented by others, it recommends direct expression. Where this is not possible the UN states:

'It is of utmost importance that the child's views are transmitted correctly to the decision maker by the representative. The method chosen should be determined by the child (or by the appropriate authority as necessary) according to her or his particular situation' (UN, 2009, p.10).

It is possible to detect the influence of the emergent sociology of childhood (John, 2003; Jenks, 2005) in this statement. 'Correct transmission' can be interpreted as being in an authentic manner, which accurately relays the child's views, an acknowledgement that a child's own sense of reality holds legal validity.

It can be argued that the UNCRC has effected positive change through its global recognition that children and young people have an equal entitlement to rights when compared with adults and underpinned by a premise of capacity as opposed to incapacity. However, the ideological foundations of the UNCRC and its implementation in general has been subject to critique from a children's rights

perspective. For example, the UNCRC is regarded as upholding idealised and westernised constructs of childhood, affording childhood a unique status that is separated from adulthood and predicated on differentials of maturity and rationality (Gadda, 2008; Horgan et al. 2017).

The paradox of Article 12 lies in a dissonance between aspiration and reality. The UNCRC is an adult construct, conceived and developed by adults and predicated by adult centred notions of what childhood should be, and how its status should be protected. Furthermore, there is no mandate for legal enforcement; implementation at state level will therefore be subject to political and ideological orientation. The UNCRC's success in advancing children's rights to participate is not only conditional on national states but also on how children and childhood is perceived in different political, ideological, economic social and cultural contexts (Alderson, 2017; UNICEF, 2017). A concern with the universal child ignores the impact of structural forces that partially determine how childhood is perceived particularly between the global north and the global south. An assumption of homogeneity ignores the fact that some children and young people are abler to participate than others. Protection rights are also subject to critique on the basis of reflecting ethnocentric westernised notions of childhood and what constitutes child abuse and harm in any given nation state (Bissell et al.2008). As there is no legal mandate for enforcement, Article 3 is subject to the same critical scrutiny as Article 12. In the absence of legal authority, state parties are not required to address the structural inequalities and disadvantage that some children and young people experience, and the contexts in which rights to freedom from abuse and neglect should be upheld (Franklin, 2002; Bissell et al. 2008; Tisdall et al. 2014). Finally, and of particular relevance to this thesis is the debate to which state parties implement protection rights, whilst at the same time upholding participatory rights,

particularly in circumstances where there is a conflict between the views of the child or young person and those of the professional (Bissell et al. 2008; Archard and Skivenes, 2009a, 2009b; Young et al. 2014; Watkins, 2016.)

#### **2.4. Legal provision of children and young people's rights under the Children Act 1989.**

As noted in the previous section, the reach and impact of the UNCRC is dependent on the legal infrastructure of individual nation states and their willingness to incorporate the UNCRC into domestic legal frameworks. There appears to be some debate in the academic literature over the legal enforceability of the UNCRC. Lundy (2007) for example, suggests that Article 12 was 'embraced unambiguously by the UK Government, which is therefore legally obliged to give effect to it in full' (p.928) Cornock and Montgomery (2014, p.160) appear to support this when they refer to the UNCRC as a 'legally enforceable treaty', but also commented on the power afforded to state parties in the extent to which these rights are implemented. However, Lyon (2007) argues that as the UNCRC had not been fully incorporated into English law, it cannot be not legally enforceable under domestic legislation. Any challenge in relation to a breach of rights would therefore need to be made under the European Convention of Human Rights.

The extent to which the UNCRC in general is effective is also subject to critique. In the United Kingdom, responsibility for reviewing the UNCRC resides with the Children's Rights Commissioners for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In England, the Office of the Children's Rights Director assumed a lead role until the role was subsumed into the Office of the Children's Commissioner in 2014. In 2015, the Joint Committee on Human Rights published 'The UK's Compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child' (House of Lords/

House of Commons, 2015). Whilst organisations working with particular groups of children and young people provided written and oral evidence there appeared to be no direct contributions made by children and young people to the Committee. The report recognised that some progress has been made in advancing children's rights in some areas of concern, for example modern slavery, and acknowledged the contribution made by the Office of the Children's Commissioner in advancing children's rights in England, but expressed concern that there was not an integrated cross departmental agenda for assessing government compatibility with the UNCRC.

Rights afforded to children and young people as individual legal entities were first specified in the 1975 Children Act (Fox Harding, 1991). This established a welfare principle and recognition of ascertaining (where possible) the child or young person's viewpoint in relation to adoption hearings and towards children and young people in the care of the local authority. The Act also made it possible in some circumstances for children and young people to have separate representation in court through a Guardian Ad Litem (Jackson, 1975).

Winter and Connolly (1996) have charted the development of the Children Act 1989, and attribute its conception in part to the emergence of a children's rights discourse, which sought to hold local authority decision making in child welfare practice to greater account. This, together with government and public perceptions of incompetent social work practice, as highlighted in cases of deaths of children known to social work departments, (ibid) influenced a legal articulation of the state's commitment to the family through a restriction of social work intervention in all but extreme occurrences of parental failure to act in the best interests of the child.

On enactment, the Children Act 1989 was considered to be a transformational framework of legal provision for supporting children and young people in need and protecting those at risk of abuse ( Allen, 2005.) The Act encapsulated the relationship between a child or young person and their parent through the definition of parental responsibility, and in doing so, legally established children and young people as individuals separate in law to their parents:

“A reconceptualization of children as persons to whom duties are owed, rather than as possessions over which power is exercised” (Lyon and Parton, 1995 p41).

The Children Act 1989 extended the welfare principle , previously established in the Children Act 1975 to a wider range of statutory provision in both public and private law (Allen, 2005; Bullock and Parker, 2017). However, although some children and young people assumed rights under the Children Act 1989, this was not at the expense of any erosion of parental rights (Allen, 2005; Parton, 2008, 2016). Only when parents were judged to inadequately fulfil their responsibilities towards their child(ren) would parental rights become secondary to those that served to secure the child’s best interests.

The Children Act 1989 also heightened the status of the welfare principle from one of first consideration (as defined in the 1975 Children Act) to one of paramount consideration:

‘When a court determines any question with respect to—

(a) the upbringing of a child; or

(b) the administration of a child’s property or the application of any income arising from it, the child’s welfare shall be the court’s paramount consideration’. (Children Act, 1989 S1).



Alongside the welfare principle of the best interests of the child, the Children Act 1989 introduced the welfare checklist as a practice checklist for care planning (Allen, 2005). The welfare checklist covers the impact of proceedings on the child or young person's overall needs in accordance with individual characteristics including age, ethnicity and disability. Underpinning the welfare checklist is the duty to:

'Ascertain the wishes and feelings of the child concerned in the light of his age and understanding' (Section 13[a]).

The welfare checklist represented a more child centred approach, a move away from the child being an object of concern to the child or young person's needs and interests being the primary concern of all parties in private and public law proceedings (Allen, 2005). The act of ascertaining a child or young person's wishes and feelings requires action on the part of the social worker, it is an expression of the work undertaken in order to uphold the rights of the child or young person (Schofield and Thoburn, 1995). Schofield and Thoburn (ibid) note the difference in wording between the aforementioned Section 13, and Article 12 of the UNCRC, suggesting that 'understanding' can be decision specific, whereas 'maturity' is 'more fixed' (ibid, p12). Consideration of the welfare checklist has since been extended through Section 53 of The Children Act 2004 to include children and young people recognised to be in need under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989, and those subject to child protection enquiries under Section 47 of the Act. The latter is applicable to children and young people who are the subject of a child protection conference.

The welfare checklist can be regarded as an active articulation of participatory practice (Holland, 2011). However, the Family Justice Review (Ministry of Justice,

2011) recommended that more could be done to ensure that children and young people had the opportunity to express their viewpoint, even though this may not influence the decisions made. In 2014, the coalition government of the time announced its intention that all children over the age of ten who were subject to private or public family law proceedings should have the opportunity to express their views directly to the judge (DfE and Ministry of Justice, 2014). In recommending a deviation from an adult led judicial environment, this recommendation more closely reflects the principle of “free expression” as articulated in Article 12.

## **2.5. Participation.**

The UNCRC does not include a definition of participation but this was later expressed in General Comment 12 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’ (UNCRC, 2009 p. 3).

As noted in Chapter One, there are multiple definitions of participation. Some are action orientated, concerned with the level and quality of information provided and exchanged in order for the child or young person to form a view, and for the child or young person to have opportunity (physical and emotional) to express a view. Other definitions focus more on the outcome of participation, for a view to be heard (that is to be taken seriously) in the decision making process (Skivenes and Strandbu 2006; Archard and Skivenes, 2009(a); Lundy, 2009).

To avoid conceptual confusion, the thesis draws upon the following definition, which has been adopted as an overarching defining statement by organisations that work to promote the participatory rights of children and young people (Davey et al. 2010; Participation Works, 2010). Although somewhat basic, it is aligned to Article 12 of the UNCRC in that it encapsulates the two key defining elements of participation: process and outcome:

‘Participation is a process where someone influences decisions about their lives and this leads to change’ (Davey et al. 2010, p.7).

Participation can be understood as a principle, a value, and a process and as an action. As an overarching concept, it is somewhat benign in nature. There are numerous texts in the domains of social policy, social work practice, social work research and social work education (Bell, 2011; Clark and Moss, 2001; Groundwater-Smith et al. 2015; HCPC, 2017; Jones and Walker, 2011) which view participation through a ‘how to’ lens. Participation has become synonymous with ‘partnership’ and ‘empowerment’ and although not defined as such in the Health and Care Profession Council Standards of Proficiency for Social Workers (HCPC, 2017), it is implicit in standards 8 and 9 which relate to communication and working appropriately with others. The British Association of Social Workers statement of values is more explicit:

‘Social workers should promote the full involvement and participation of people using their services in ways that enable them to be empowered in all aspects of decisions and actions affecting their lives’ (BASW, 2012, p8).

More recently, the Knowledge and skills statement for social work with children and families (DfE, 2014) refers to working in partnership with children, and

enabling full participation in assessment and intervention. However, it is unclear what is meant by full participation, as this is not defined in either legal or practice terms.

The body of literature that focuses on how to engage children in participation refers to models of participation that aim to portray levels and degree of participation. Hart's model was the first to contribute towards an epistemological understanding of how participation might work in practice in relation to children and young people. Hart (1992) depicts levels of participation through visual imagery, using a ladder to differentiate between practices that are non-participatory and tokenistic and those that characterise full participation. The highest rung of the ladder represents the most authentic and child-led form of participation. Shier (2001) developed Hart's model by introducing a visual image of pathways to participation, consisting of 'openings' 'opportunities' and 'obligations', which aimed to encompass both individual and organisational dimensions of participation (Alexanderson et al. 2014). Both models depict a linear sequential approach towards full participation, and both make a distinction between processes and practices that can be construed as non-participatory and tokenistic, and those that strive towards more equitable child – adult power sharing and decision making relationships. The sequential nature of both models is reflective of the role of Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, noted earlier in this chapter (Vygotsky, 1978). When applied to understandings of participation, this presupposes that the degree of adult guided support decreases as the child or young person develops in capacity and ability until such time that they assume full control of their lives.

Linear models such as Hart's Ladder of Participation (1992) and Shier's Pathways to Participation (2001) can be critiqued for their underlying assumptions of

aspiration and absence of context (Holland et al. 2008; McLaughlin, 2015; Treseder, 1997), whereby reaching the highest reach of the ladder or path is regarded to be the ultimate objective of participation. This fails to take into consideration the context in which participation occurs. In contrast to the above, Treseder (1997) recognised context, positioning the child and adult on equal terms through five levels of participation. Using a horizontal image of a circle (as opposed to Hart's vertical image) Treseder sought to emphasise levels of participation in terms of difference rather than terms of inferiority (Wyness, 2012).

Charles and Haines (2014) contributed to the debate over the usefulness of models of participation through their report of young people's perceptions of Hart's and Treseder's models. Both were critiqued for their use of adult language and images which were overly generalised, in the case of Treseder's model, or not relevant or meaningful to a young person's world as in the case of Hart's use of a ladder:

'What's a ladder got to do with anything? (Sion cited in Charles and Haines, 2014 p 646).

Notwithstanding these limitations, participatory approaches do recognise children and young people as social actors to varying degrees. The emergence of the child or young person as having capacity to be (as opposed to becoming) a social actor in empirical research studies (Lansdown, 1995; Alderson and Morrow, 2011) gave credence to the premise that children and young people were able to express a view (albeit based on adult centred criteria such as rationality) in matters that directly affected them. It is also closely aligned to the emergence of children's rights as a social movement in the late twentieth century. Both perceive the child or young person from a strength rather than a deficit perspective, and both

challenge the interpretation of childhood as a limiting state of being which is so dominant in the developmental paradigm of childhood.

Skivenes and Strandbu (2006) suggest that the primary aim of any act of participation is to achieve some synergy between the child's experience and viewpoint and the adult's understanding of this. In response, the children's rights agenda has sought to marginalise the influence of adults through the development of participatory approaches which are based on agency and autonomy (Wyness, 2012). Such approaches strive for the child's authentic, unmediated voice: the hallmarks of meaningful participation. Herein lies the essence of why participation is a complex and contested agenda with terms such as 'voice' subject to conceptual scrutiny. 'Voice' is sometimes used interchangeably with participation, and participation is sometimes used synonymously with agency and autonomy.

Conceptualisations of participation informed by process-orientated models are somewhat limited as a mechanism for developing an analysis of an outcome orientation. Furthermore, there are significant challenges in applying models of participation in a range of policy and practice contexts. These will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter Four but at this point, it is important to note that in occurrences of statutory intervention, the capacity for children and young people to exercise participatory rights is mediated by the power differentials that exist between children and adults. Models of participation that focus on process tend to view power as a fixed entity, and a transactional commodity that is handed over from adult to child or young person through empowering actions (Holland et al. 2008; John, 1996a; Thomas, 2007). In essence, in order for children and young people to gain participatory power there must be a giving away of levels of power held by the adult(s) involved in the process of participation. As Gallagher (2008)

states, any participatory activity that involves decision-making involves power in some capacity and it is to this that the thesis now turns.

## **2.6. Power.**

There are multiple definitions of power, and multiple approaches for understanding how individuals and groups in social work settings (Okitikpi et al. 2011; Smith, 2008) exercise power. In a context of participation, power can be understood through two analytical lenses; power as an exchangeable commodity that is exercised in acts of dominance and control, and power as relational and mediated through structural processes.

Concepts of power as a commodity draw on modernist theoretical influences, which suggest that power is something that is possessed and which can be given or taken away through a process of control and oppression (Fook and Gardner, 2007; Smith, 2008). As was noted earlier in this chapter, childhood can be understood through developmental and sociological paradigms as an 'othered' state, separated from adulthood through differences in physical, cognitive, emotional and social development. Relationships that exist between adult and child or young person can be understood in terms of positions of power; adults assume positions of care and authority in relation to children and young people and in doing so assume responsibility for acting in their best interests through political, legal, economic, social and cultural apparatuses. Childhood is therefore essentially regulated through instruments of government including law and policy frameworks, social control mechanisms in the family through the exercise of parental rights and parental responsibilities, and in social services organisations through the positioning of the professional as the expert (Okitikpi, 2011). The legitimisation of power as it is exercised in social work practice will be explored in

greater depth in Chapter Three. It is important to note here that power, as a commodity can be perceived in terms of positional power, which is derived from professional attributes, including training and occupational role within an organisation (Preston –Shoot, 2011). Professionals such as social workers also have a legally recognised status which grants invested powers (John, 2003) when acting in the best interests of children and young people. This sense of othering thus creates an unequal relationship that becomes somewhat self - fulfilling in terms of sense of being, belonging and identity, in that a child or young person's individual identity is defined in part by membership of a generationally ordered group which lacks power in multiple aspects of westernised societies (Mayall, 2000; Wyness, 2012). The emergence of the children's rights movement (for example through organisations such as Coram Children's Legal Centre and Coram Voice, which work alongside children and young people to exercise their rights) suggests that children and young people in general, and some groups of children and young people in particular, lack capacity to exercise power in the decisions that are made for them. Children and young people in receipt of statutory social work intervention lack power by virtue of the generational ordering of childhood (Alanen, 2001), and powerlessness can be further compounded through a perceived status of vulnerability associated with high levels of complex need, which act as the threshold for statutory intervention (DfE 2017; Daniel, 2010; Keddell, 2017).

Understanding power through this lens may serve to illustrate how power is enacted in a given situation, for example in the act of ascertaining the wishes and feelings of a child or young person, but it does not advance understanding of the effect this has on the working practices which effectively shape the relationship between social worker and child or young person. Traditional views of power



suggest the existence of a dichotomy between the powerful and powerless. A social worker wields power over a child or young person by virtue of socio-economic status, age, citizenship, knowledge, and position and can exercise power to control or to empower. The power 'to' which is conveyed through an act of empowerment alters the nature of power from investment to divestment (John, 2003) as illustrated through Article 12, where the mechanism of law is used to divest power to a child or young person under certain social conditions. However, this assumes a degree of homogeneity in both groups and the absence of subjective agency to resist and alter relations. Furthermore, the notion of empowerment suggests that those in power can exercise this in order to divest elements of power onto another. To be empowered implies that the holder of power confers this status on those who do not hold power, thereby reinforcing the dominance of a discourse that suggests that power is held, and held over by dominant groups.

As has been noted, the emergent sociology of childhood does not consider the child or young person to be a passive recipient of adult care, control and guidance, with the acquisition and articulation of power being universally determined by adults (Alanen, 2009; Gallagher 2008). This would suggest that children and young people are never in a position to exercise power and the notion of agency contests this. Writing from a post - structural perspective, Fook (2002) suggests that power is perceived as something much more complex, and understood through an analysis of social relations.

Foucault is perhaps the most influential exponent of a perception of power as a process, one that is expressed in and mediated through social interactions.

However, as Gallagher (2008) notes, Foucault did not present a theory of power, and was more concerned with power as a methodological framework:

‘What is needed is a study of power in its external visage, at the point where it is in direct and immediate relationship with that which we can provisionally call its object, its target, its field of application, there –that is to say –where it installs itself and produces real effects’ (1980, p.97).

Such a framework seeks to explore how power is enacted, and its relational element is central to Foucault’s understanding of power. Instead of perceiving power as an object of force and control located in one source, Foucault’s analysis positions power as something that is actioned within social networks. Relations of power are thus the effects of divisions that exist within structurally mediated relationships (Foucault, 1978). To understand the effects of power it is therefore necessary to understand the systems, mechanisms and processes through which it is enacted through instruments or mechanisms of government (Foucault, 1980). In a later work, Foucault defined government as:

‘Any activity that undertakes to conduct individuals throughout their lives by placing them under the authority of a guide responsible for what they do and for what happens to them’ (Foucault 1997, p. 68).

The legal frameworks discussed earlier in this chapter act as instruments of government, and as such embody ways in which power is exercised to manage individuals and groups. For example, the power and authority invested in a qualified social worker are derived from the statutory duties inherent in the Children Act 1989 and are intentional in that they serve to uphold the best

interests of the child or young person. This is synonymous with Foucault's understanding of judicial power; it is a right that is conferred onto an individual (or group) and can be exercised in oppressive ways (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012). Foucault (1980) considered that power when exercised through mechanisms in social networks creates knowledge, and in turn, knowledge becomes a function of power:

'Cannot but evolve, organise, and put into circulation a knowledge, or rather apparatuses of knowledge' (1980, p.102).

A body of knowledge that frames children and young people who are involved in the child protection system as vulnerable and in need of care and protection, is legitimised as a truth and a reality, which in turn justifies the exercise of control through the mechanisms of statute and professional practice ( Gadda,2008; Penna,2005).

Gallagher's application of a Foucauldian analysis of power (2008) to participation serves as a useful summary. A focus on power as an action as opposed to a commodity facilitates an exploration of the ways in which power is enacted in social processes, and on its relational effects. Such a perspective serves to illustrate the social work practices that come within a discourse of participation in a child protection context. These contexts are influenced by macro and micro practices and a Foucauldian analysis will further highlight the interplay between the two, and by the participatory knowledge frameworks that are constructed and mediated at multiple layers between the child or young person and the adult professionals, between the adult professionals themselves and between the professional and the agency.

## **2.7. Conclusion.**

The experience of childhood in contemporary western society can be understood through developmental and sociological perspectives. The former views childhood as a singular universal phenomenon and charts the transition from childhood to adulthood in terms of a transition from being to becoming. In contrast, more contemporary sociological theories of childhood emphasise the pluralist nature of childhood and seek to understand the status of childhood in structural and intergenerational relational terms. This chapter has suggested that a developmental perspective exists within the legal frameworks that have constructed perceptions of childhood in the English welfare system. As a counter to the positioning of children and young people as adults in waiting, the emergent sociology of childhood recognises the child or young person as a social actor, one that is capable of influence and being influenced in their social world.

Participation, as a process and an outcome is a manifestation of the agentic capacity of children and young people. However, understandings of participation (often depicted in visual terms) are subject to critique for an absence of an analysis of the power relationships that exist in acts of participation. Here, a Foucauldian analysis of power is useful for understanding how power is exercised in multiple ways in the systems and networks that constitute the child protection system, and how knowledge and understanding of participation can emerge from an analysis of the generational relationships between the child or young person and the adult professionals. This interplay between power and knowledge will be explored further in the next chapter through an analysis of the structural processes that have shaped participation in a child protection context.

## **Chapter 3. Participation in child protection practices: professional, historical, and contemporary legal and policy contexts.**

### **3.1. Introduction.**

A Foucauldian perspective of genealogy is applied as a means for positioning children and young people's participation in the English contemporary child protection system and social work practice, and for locating this within a wider critical exploration of the social work profession. This provides a platform for examining the influence of key transformational turns on the promotion of the rights of children and young people in the child protection process. It will be argued that social work with children and families has evolved from being characterised by social/ human responses to human need to instrumental/ rational responses for identifying and managing risk. From a critical social work perspective, this represents a loss of the 'social' from the social work profession. (Parton, 2008; Harris, 2008), with a pursuant impact on the nature of the relationships that exist between social worker and child or young person.

The transformational turns that have shaped social work practice in working with children and families have incorporated (albeit to varying degrees), the notion of the child or young person as a service user in their own right, and arguably entitled to the same participatory rights as other service users. This is consistent with the emphasis on partnership working, in regarding the service user as an expert in their own lives, and in upholding principles of service user choice and autonomy; all congruent with the principles underpinning provision and participation rights (Fajerman et al. 2004, UNCRC 1989). As such, it can be argued that children and young people should be

afforded the status of consumer of services and thus equally entitled to express a view as to how those services are delivered (Groundwater- Smith et al. 2015). Although now outdated as a child welfare policy framework, the Every Child Matters agenda did include 'Making a Positive Contribution' as one of the five universal outcomes for every child (HM Treasury, 2003). This effectively supported a raft of participatory based initiatives, including practice guidance for including children and young people in formal meetings (Participation Works, 2010) and the emergence of advocacy based projects in child protection practice (Jelicic et al. 2013). The rights of the child or young person as collective consumers of public services have been recognised and advanced under neo-liberal child welfare policy through forums such as Youth Parliaments or Children In Care Councils. Children and young people participated directly in Munro's review of child protection practice (Ofsted, 2011a) and a young person's guide to the review was issued (DfE, 2011b) alongside a young person's guide to 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' (Office of the Children's Rights Director, 2015).

A central argument of this chapter is that the social work profession as it currently exists cannot be considered in isolation of the political, economic and social ideological frameworks that have underpinned the delivery of public services and delineated the role of the state when intervening in family life. Furthermore, the dominance of procedure in policy and practice in more recent years has shaped the role of both social work in general and in child protection practice, arguably positioning those who are the subject of concern as marginalised, disaffected and disempowered (Dominelli, 2010; Holland, 2011 Sheedy, 2013).

In reviewing the nature of children and young people's participation in the child protection conference, the influence of three inter-related domains will be

considered as they have evolved throughout the eras of transformational practice identified in Chapter One. Firstly, an analytical frame will be applied to the professional triad of role (as defined by the International Federation of Social Work), values (as defined by the British Association of Social Work) and standards (as defined by the Health and Care Professions Council). Next, the analytical lens will then turn towards the instruments of governmentality that have shaped the nature of child and young people's participation in child welfare. Finally, the analysis will focus on how legal and policy frameworks, as instruments of governmentality, have influenced social work assessment and decision making practices.

### **3.2. Approach to the appraisal of literature.**

A genealogical inter-textual approach is applied for reviewing the institutional processes that have defined and shaped the nature of participation in child protection practice. The evidence presented in this chapter draws significantly from what is referred to in social work research as evidence based practice (EBP). EBP is essentially concerned with cost effective, efficient and accountable decision - making through methodologies that demonstrate:

“rigour to gain coherence, precision to gain richness, theoretical elegance to gain local applicability and measures of outcomes to promote inquiry into processes, meaning and local context” (Shaw, 2012 p 131).

In such contexts, social work research is perceived as a technical rather than moral activity, aiming to evidence practical application, reliability and accountability of service provision (Broadhurst and Pithouse, 2015; Butler and Pugh, 2004; Hardwick and Worsley, 2011).

EBP has become synonymous with the 'what works agenda', a hallmark of the Labour government's modernising agenda and has arguably shaped the discourse of child protection in England over the past two decades (Broadhurst and Pithouse, 2015). EBP's claim for objective value-free research has assumed an orthodox status (Webber, 2015).

EBP can be critiqued for its limited application to the reality of statutory social work contexts, characterised by uncertainty and complexity (Hall et al. 2006) and for its claim to be value-free. Humphries (2004) suggests that EBP research assimilates the values of those interventions and approaches that it seeks to evaluate and therefore cannot be value-free. Furthermore, EBP can be critiqued for its lack of emphasis on experiential insights gained from service user perspectives which represent the moral political dimension of knowledge (Morris 2005, Webber, 2015).

What is essentially missing from much of the evidence presented in this chapter is the child or young person's perspective. As a counterbalance, Chapter Four seeks to address this by presenting evidence that aims to privilege multiple perspectives in a quest for a critical evaluation of the instruments of governmentality as they apply in promoting participation in the child protection conference.

### **3.3. The professional value base.**

Social work as a profession defined by a recognisable qualification pathway and embedded in an administrative and procedural framework emerged in response to The Seebohm Report (1968). Seebohm's vision was one of universal and effective family support and the profession was afforded some degree of identity and professional autonomy in working towards his vision (Parton, 2006). Rogowski



(2012) regarded this era as one of opportunity for radical social work, utilising approaches that drew on feminist anti-discriminatory practice and emancipatory social work practice, and thus upholding principles of social justice. The social work profession was perceived as a legitimate mechanism for challenging the status quo of structural inequality, poverty and homelessness, and this was reflected in the international definition of social work:

‘Social work is a profession whose purpose is to bring about social changes in society in general and in its individual forms of development’ (International Federation of Social Work, 2002).

In re-drafting this version, The International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) recognised the limitations of the original version for articulating a global definitive statement. Subsequent versions specified that the primary social work role, regardless of national context was to be one of action: to promote social change. The current version is set out in full for the purpose of comparison with national conceptualisations of children and family social work:

“Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing” (International Federation of Social Work, 2014).

The commitment to upholding rights is further enshrined by the British Association of Social Work (BASW) with reference to respect for an individual’s right to self-determination and promoting rights to participation (BASW, 2012).

However, BASW is a professional body which acts in the interests of the social work professional and has no legal basis. Whilst social workers are likely to be familiar with its statement of values through qualifying and post qualifying pathways, the HCPC standards and ethics do require regulatory compliance. Registered social workers are required to comply with the HCPC Standards of Proficiency, a framework that sets out the parameters of safe, effective social work practice. Originally published in 2012, the standards were reviewed in 2015; a process that included consultation with adult service users and carers, who noted the impact of austerity measures, and of service demand and service supply on social work roles, tasks and relationships with service users (Meakin and Matthews, 2015). There is no evidence to suggest that children and young people were included in the consultation process. The sole amendment arising from the review which is of relevance to this thesis is standard 2.1 (HCPC, 2017). This now refers to a requirement to understand the separate legal frameworks for social work with children and families, and social work with adults (as opposed to legal frameworks for the profession).

Social workers are required to 'promote the best interest of service users at all times' (2.2) alongside promoting and protecting the wellbeing of children and young people and 'so far as possible uphold the rights, dignity, values and autonomy of every service user' (2.7). There is some recognition of possible conflict between a universal requirement to act in the best interests of service users at all times alongside the more qualified duty to uphold rights. The principle of participation is alluded to in the set of standards that relate to working in a non-discriminatory manner through promoting "social justice, equality and inclusion" (6.1), and in working practices: "work with service

users to enable them to assess and make informed decisions about their needs, circumstances, risks, preferred options and resources” (9.2).

The Knowledge and skills statement for approved child and family practitioners (DfE,2014b) aims to reflect the impetus for a child centred system. The first statement of the current version refers to the relational aspect of social work, and an expectation that social workers will:

‘Work in partnership with children, enabling full participation in assessment, planning, review and decision making. Ensure that child protection is always privileged’ (p.2).

How social workers achieve this is by listening, observing and talking to the child in their environment (DfE, 2014).

A point of debate is whether the principles concerned with a child- centred system can support social workers in engaging with children and young people in more meaningful ways within complex risk averse regulatory, organisational and practice contexts. It is difficult to envisage how more innovative ways of working are reflected in the standards currently set out in the social work profession’s regulatory body.

The influence of both global and national definitions on shaping the day to day practices of the social work profession is debatable. On the one hand, and in certain time periods, the social work profession has been subject to wholesale reform designed not only to realign and strengthen the profession in the face of national and global imperatives, but also to clarify the nature and purpose of social work roles and responsibilities. For example, the era commonly epitomized as the modernising agenda (HM Government, 1998)

heralded the introduction of a legally defined professional title, a graduate led profession, a registration and regulatory framework and a national framework for knowledge development and dissemination (Jones, 2014). The characteristics of the profession emphasized a social work value base enacted through relationship and partnership working, a recognition of individual capacity for self-determination and a focus on the personal and the social.

This discourse of professionalism is comfortably aligned with notions of promoting social justice through the active promotion of service user rights. However, on the whole, rights are viewed as a homogenous entitlement for service users and carers, terminology that is often associated with adults and which by default marginalizes the child and young person. This can be illustrated by the absence of contributions from children and young people in the consultative review of the HCPC standards of proficiency (Meakin and Matthews, 2015). What this infers is that children and young people are not service users in their own right. This not only masks the inherent tensions that exist in relation to upholding the rights of different parties, namely family rights, parental rights and children's rights, but also fails to acknowledge the heterogeneity that exists within generational groups. These issues will be developed at a further point in this chapter, but at this stage it is important to consider how the social work profession in England interprets relationships between the state, parent (s) and child as defined through the instruments of the state: its legal and policy discourses.

### **3.4. Networks of power: the state, the parent (s) and the child.**

What differentiated social work in the post war years and the years leading up to the late 1970's lay in the degree of trust and autonomy invested by the

state in the profession as an agent of the state by central government. The emergence of the New Right Conservative government in 1978 heralded the emergence of neo liberalist ideology and the rise of performance management social work departments and wider public service agencies (Harris and White, 2009; Parton,2008).

Neo- liberal ideological, political, social and economic influences on child participation in child protection decision making will be explored in chronological order. This is not to suggest that developments in child welfare and social work policy and practice have followed a linear pathway. Instead, the overview highlights key episodes through a Foucauldian perspective, taking a backward step to explore how past ideas, events and processes have shaped current practice (Epstein, 1999; Foucault, 1980). By way of scene setting, the typology of child welfare perspectives developed by Fox Harding (1991) serves as a useful analytical frame for positioning a children's rights perspective within wider policy frameworks, and will be referred to throughout the discussion.

Table 1. Value perspectives in child care policy (adapted from Fox Harding, 1991 p9).

Laissez Faire and Patriarchy: Minimal state intervention	State Paternalism: The state has a legitimate role in protecting children
Parent's Rights: The role of the state is to support parents	Children's Rights: The rights of children and their views are the state's central focus.

Neo liberalism emerged from the economic crisis in the 1970's, which brought about a challenge to the social democratic welfare state and effectively redefined the role of the state in relation to its citizens. Global recession had significantly affected the economic and social fabric of England and it culminated in a restructuring of the economy, calling into question the capacity of the state's role in welfare provision in the face of increased welfare expenditure. The political rhetoric was one of economic decline associated with increasing demand on public sector provision, and moral decline associated with an over reliance on the state as opposed to individual self- help ( Ferguson,2008; Rogowski, 2012; Winter and Connolly, 1996). The dominant ideological, political and economic discourse of neo liberalism positioned the family unit as the upholder of values associated with individualism and self- help, and as the primary provider of care for its members. Under neo- liberalism, with its emphasis on individual freedom and individual responsibility, the role of the state became resonant with what Fox Harding (1991) referred to as a laissez faire and patriarchal perspective. Here, the family is understood as a stable unit of married biologically determined parents and the role of the state is reduced to a minimum level, with state intervention only occurring in extreme circumstances when parents are deemed not capable of caring for their child (ren) in accordance with prevailing social norms. As state intervention into family life is at a minimum level, the state serves the interests of a minority group of children and young people who are the subject of public care proceedings.

The decade of the 1980 has represented an era of challenge towards patriarchal notions of the family as a locus for all things normatively considered good and safe for children and young people. There emerged a developing commitment to the notion that children and young people had separate interests to their parents, and

were entitled to rights as individuals (Winter and Connolly, 1996). To coincide with the International Year of the Child, the Children's Legal Centre opened in London in 1981. Further impetus came from published Inquiry reports which were critical of social work practice which failed to focus on the child, for example the highly publicised inquiries into the deaths of Jasmine Beckford, Kimberley Carlisle, and Tyra Henry (Warner, 2015) and of the circumstances which led to the Cleveland Inquiry (Butler-Sloss, 1988).

As noted in Chapter Two, the Children Act 1989 is the dominant legal framework for defining the relationship between the state, child and family. It was developed partly in response to concerns over the over-zealous nature of the state which had resulted in a denial of parental and children's rights and also over the lack of accountability and incompetence of social work activities (Rogowski, 2013). On the one hand, the Children Act 1989 serves as a public declaration of the state's commitment to the family as the primary unit for care and protection of its most vulnerable members. On the other hand, when enacted it satisfied neo liberalist principles of state retrenchment (Rogowski, 2012; Winter and Connolly, 1996). As such, the Children Act 1989 epitomises both state paternalism and children's rights perspectives. The former regards the state's role as legitimate and necessary for upholding a child's right to protection from harm, and places a duty on local authorities to take necessary steps to remove a child from an unsuitable family environment. In such circumstances, the parent's interests are secondary to the primacy of the child's right to good quality care and the state's primary role lies in acting in the best interests of the child. Here, protection, provision and participatory rights are articulated. The child's interests are paramount and take legal precedence over parental rights, and provision is made to uphold participatory rights through the local authority's duty to ascertain

the wishes and feelings of the child and to consider these in care planning. In this respect, the Children Act 1989 does incorporate a children's rights value perspective. In addition to duties under the welfare checklist, including ascertaining wishes and feelings and considering an individual child's characteristics, the Children Act 1989 made provision for children to have the right to separate representation in care proceedings. However, the notion of the child as a separate entity and entitled to participatory rights on this basis is somewhat restricted. For example, guidance to the Act stated:

'If young people have to live apart from their family of origin... both they and their parents should be given adequate information and helped to consider alternatives and contribute to the making of an informed choice about the most appropriate form of care' ( DoH 1990, p8).

Here, a distinction based on age is made between children's rights and young people's rights and in decision making contexts where participation is predicated on notions of adult informed guidance and support. Furthermore, rights provision is confined more to protection rights and then only when a parent has failed in the exercise of their rights. The local authority's duty towards the wishes and feelings of the child is also open to some limitation, with a duty to take account of rather than a duty to act upon.

A further reconceptualization of the relationship between the state, the child and the family in child protection practice emerged from the publication of 'Messages from Research' ( DoH,1995), a series of twenty government commissioned research studies exploring the child protection system per se, and within this the experiences of parents at various stages in the child protection process. One study included the perspectives of children and young people



(Thoburn et al. 1995), and noted that effective partnership with parents tended to be predicated upon the participation of children and young people in the child protection process. However, participation was an irregular occurrence, with children and young people unprepared and 'watching from the side-lines of an adult world' (Thoburn et al. 1995, p.87). 'Messages from Research' was influential in a refocusing away from state intervention as a narrowly defined investigative process when children or young people had experienced harm, to a broader family support role consistent with a defence of the birth family/ parental rights perspective. The state assumed a paternalistic role, protecting and supporting the dominance of the family as the foci for upholding a child's protection rights. Alongside choice came responsibility within a contract between the state and the individual, the latter assuming responsibility for personal health and wellbeing within a family unit (Fawcett et al. 2009; Rogowski, 2012; Smith, 2012). The state again had a legitimate role to intervene, but here the focus was on supporting parents through the provision of services. Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 essentially extended the reach of the state to include children who were 'in need' as well as those in need of protection and through the provision of services recognised the association between levels of social deprivation and good quality parenting. Again, children's rights were circumscribed with parents or the state acting as decision makers (Fox Harding, 1991).

The Labour government from the mid 1990's onwards adopted some of the core principles of neo-liberalism, namely opportunity for all, a belief in the value of a pluralist approach to public sector service delivery, and a notion of citizenship based on rights and responsibilities (Churchill, 2011; Gilbert et al. 2011; Parton, 2006). The government also upheld the defence of the birth family, with service provision designed to support all children through universal services,

targeted provision to children and young people who were vulnerable to not having their outcomes met and specialist services for children and young people with complex needs. Under its modernising agenda, the welfare state was future orientated, concerned with future proofing society in order to respond to the demands of a global market economy, and driven through by initiatives designed to support the unemployed and the unskilled back into the labour market. Churchill (2011) characterised this as a social investment state, with social welfare, health and education services designed to ensure that parents exercised their parental responsibilities, and to ensure that children and young people gained the necessary skills in childhood and early adulthood to be equipped as a future workforce. The conceptualisation of childhood in the social investment state was one of the child or young person as human capital, a becoming child (Churchill, 2011; Fawcett et al.2009; Kj rholt,2013). Future - proofing required targeted interventions for particular groups of children, specifically those who required state intervention in the form of increased support or increased control. In 1998, Quality Protects (DoH,1998) was introduced as a five year reform programme for the management and delivery of services for children and young people, and with a particular emphasis on those in the care of the local authority, and children and young people placed on what was then known as the child protection register. The rationale for Quality Protects was a recognition that the state was an ineffective corporate parent, with evidence confirming that children and young people in care lacked placement stability, were disproportionately more likely to leave school with no or few formal qualifications, and more likely to enter the criminal justice system (Rushton and Dance, 2002). Of particular relevance was a recognition that the child or young person was a service user, and entitled to express a view about the care

they were receiving in care review and care planning forums. Quality Protects paved the way for the appointment of Children's Rights Officers in Children's Services Departments, the provision of Independent Visitors and advocacy services to support children and young people in care with limited or no contact with birth parents. Quality Protects represented the first in a series of system reforms that sought to place children and young people at its centre, culminating in Munro's review of child protection in 2011. That it was necessary for Munro to comment on the absence of the child or young person's perspective in child protection suggests that the relationship between the child and the state in this arena is not exemplified by a children's rights perspective.

The following section will examine in some detail the characteristics of the contemporary English child protection system in order to identify the networks of power relationships that exist in the policies, processes and tools that aim to promote participation.

### **3.5. Networks of power: the child protection policy context.**

The document commonly referred to as 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' is the definitive inter - agency statutory guidance that sets out the roles and responsibilities of individuals and agencies for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and young people. Here, the term statutory refers to the legal frameworks that underpin its contents and an expectation that these will be complied with other than in exceptional circumstances (HM Gov,2015). It makes explicit reference to the local authority and to the social worker as lead practitioner and serves as a practice guide for the latter in their interpretation of the legal duties and powers invested in their role. Although the

Children Act 1989 remains the principal legislative framework for defining the state's relationship with the child or young person and family, 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' has evolved in response to changing social and political conceptions of abuse and harm. A chronology of the various incarnations of statutory guidance and their commitment towards the participatory rights of children and young people in the child protection conference is provided in Appendix 1. What follows is an overview of the salient points which serves to illustrate a recurring commitment to participation in principle, if not in practice.

The first version of 'Working Together' was published in 1988 (DHSS) and coincided with the publication of the aforementioned Cleveland inquiry (Butler-Sloss, 1998). As such it aimed to balance the requirement for state intervention in some circumstances with the rights of family life (Parton, 2011b.) A revised edition, published in 1991 incorporated the legal principles of the Children Act 1989 (Home Office, Department of Health, Department of Education and Science, Welsh Office) and made specific reference to a child or young person attending the child protection conference in a tone that has some resonance with the sentiments of Munro's review (2011):

'It cannot be emphasised too strongly that involvement of children and adults in child protection conferences will not be effective unless they are fully involved from the outset in all stages of the child protection process. Decision to exclude a parent, carer or child should rest with the chair of the conference and the decision recorded on the child's file.' (p.43).

Not only did this envisage a possibility of a child or young person attending a conference in person, but the guidance also differentiated between degrees of

participation. For example, elsewhere the inclusion of 'must' (p32) conveyed a directive for the inclusion of the child's views in the child protection plan.

The notion that children and young people could attend a child protection conference was acknowledged in a further revision, entitled 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' (Department of Health, Home Office, Department for Education and Employment, 1999). This included a section entitled 'Listening to children and taking their views into account', and contained a checklist of practice considerations for when children and young people were interviewed as part of the assessment process. Good practice principles were however somewhat marred by a suggestion that social workers should provide 'evidence to support or refute the child's account' (p 44), a suggestion that a child or young person's perspective required validation in order to be deemed credible. In contrast with the 1991 version, children and young people were not identified as persons considered relevant to contribute to the case conference, and reference to participation in person was watered down to attendance being conditional on the child being of sufficient age and understanding.

'Working Together to Safeguard Children. Every Child Matters/Change for Children' (DfES, 2006) restated earlier guidance for assessment interviews to be conducted at the child's pace, and for social workers to be cognisant of some of the challenges that may prevent a focus on the child during the child protection investigation. The child also assumed some degree of primacy in respect of the child protection conference, being identified first in the list of those with a contribution to make, and the first person referred to in the stated purpose of the conference: 'brings together the child (where appropriate)...' (p123). Reference was also made for the first time to a child's participation in the core group.

The most explicit reference to participation is contained in the 2010 version of Working Together to Safeguard Children (DCSF, 2010b) which followed Lord Laming's Inquiry into the death of Peter Connelly (The Lord Laming, 2009), and an evaluation of Serious Case Reviews (Ofsted, 2008). In this version, reference was made to the importance of gaining insight into the child or young person's lived experience, and included a requirement for the social worker to justify circumstances where it was not possible to ascertain the child or young person's wishes and feelings. No changes were made to the guidance for child attendance at the child protection conference, but for the first time, reference was made to the therapeutic nature of the relationship between social worker and child.

The most recent substantial revision was published in 2013 (HM Gov, 2013) and amended slightly in 2015 (HM Gov, 2015). There are two points of significance to note in respect of these editions. The first concerns a somewhat retrograde step in making explicit the premise of participation in a child protection context. The current practitioner version of Working Together to Safeguard Children (HM Gov, 2015) lacks the depth of the 2010 version, which totalled 390 pages. The 2010 version had been criticised for its controlling and prescriptive orientation, the complexity of which was perceived to have diluted professional responsibilities across the agencies, and furthermore for a loss of focus on the child or young person (Dugmore, 2014; Munro, 2011; Parton, 2011a). However, the 2010 edition did specify the social worker's responsibility in supporting children and young people's participation. This locus of responsibility is somewhat blurred in the 2015 version, as any reference to 'social workers with their managers' (p.41) is likely to be interpreted as the social worker's immediate line manager; who may not have active direct involvement or contact with the child or young person,

whereas the IRO responsible for chairing the conference is expected to meet with the child in advance of any ICPC.

The second noteworthy comment refers to the introduction in 2015 of a young people's version of Working Together to Safeguard Children (Office of the Children's Rights Director, 2015) which echoes the sentiments of Munro (2011):

'Most importantly this guidance puts the needs of children and young people at its heart – so the system fits and responds to you and not the other way around' (Office of the Children's Rights Director, 2013).

This version discusses participation in the assessment process as involving talking, listening and a shared agreement on what actions are required to address the problems. However this latter point is contradicted in a later paragraph which attributes decision making responsibility solely to the social worker acting in the best interests of the child. The young people's version appears to differentiate between participation at the ICPC and at subsequent review conferences. In relation to the former, the guidance states that:

'They should ask your views so that you can have your say in what should and should not be included in the child protection plan. Remember, you can ask for an advocate to help you do this, if you want' (p.11).

With regard to the review conference, the guidance states:

'You can expect to be fully involved in all decisions and planning for keeping you and others you care about safe' (p.11).

Although the underpinning methodology of this version is not specified, it is reasonable to assume from an Ofsted statement that the report shared the

same characteristics of all reports commissioned by the now defunct Office of the Children's Rights Director and was based exclusively on the views of children and young people (Ofsted, 2014).

The 2015 version of Working Together to Safeguard Children( HM Gov,2015) also makes reference to a child's version. However the electronic link is inoperative and concerted attempts to locate a copy from the Office of the Children's Commissioner have yielded no results.

What is evident is the promotion of participation, in terms of physical attendance and in the social work practice processes for ascertaining wishes, feelings and views, is at least an espoused principle in successive versions of statutory guidance. However the concept of a child centred system, one that retains a primary focus on the child has been presented in more neutral terms in some time periods. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a more assertive stance is presented in versions that were reviewed following child deaths that came under political and public scrutiny, namely the deaths of Victoria Climbié and Peter Connelly. The production of a young person's version followed the government's endorsement of Munro's review, (2011) but here it is interesting to note a difference in expectation between an initial and review conference. There is no assumption of physical attendance at the initial conference, and the focus is on a passive exhortation of the social worker's legal responsibilities under Article 12 of the UNCRC and the Children Act 1989. There is a subtle difference between 'should' and 'must'; the former conveys a principle and the latter a duty. It is also unclear who may assume an advocacy role, whether this is the allocated social worker or someone acting in a more independent capacity.



Central government also responded to the recommendation that local authorities could exercise flexibility in developing new ways of working in order to provide more timely, cost efficient and effective interventions to families with complex needs (DfE,2016b; McLeish et al. 2017). Referred to as the Innovation Programme (DfE, 2016b) this sought to:

‘Inspire whole system change to achieve: better life chances for children receiving help from the social care system; stronger incentives and mechanisms for innovation, experimentation and replication of successful new approaches; and better value for money across children’s social care’

(McLeish et al.2017, p.8).

The effectiveness of the Innovation Programme, involving fifty-seven projects in England, has been recently evaluated (Sebba et al., 2017). Overall quality of service provision and outcomes for children and young people was found to have improved, attributed to the adoption of strength based systemic practice and an increase in direct contact with ‘families and young people’ (p7).The review also noted that an earlier Wave 1 evaluation had not fully sought the perspectives of young people (p9). On the one hand, Sebba et al. (2017) comment on this as a methodological limitation, but on the other hand, their own evaluation can be challenged for its failure to critique an approach which has not included the perspectives of children alongside those of young people.

In summary, there is some evidence of participation as a principle being upheld in statutory guidance, but less clarity over how this might occur in practice. As established earlier, both Article 12 of the UNCRC and the welfare checklist component of the Children Act 1989 set out the legal mandate for children and young people to have an opportunity to participate in the child protection process. The following section will outline how the child or young person’s right

to participate is constructed within key elements of the child protection process: the child protection conference; the assessment models used to ascertain wishes, feelings and views; and case recording.

### **3.6. Networks of power: the child protection conference and the IRO.**

As specified earlier, the purpose and organisation of the child protection conference is set out in statutory guidance (HM Gov, 2015) and replicated in individual LSCB practice guidance. The conference is the recognised forum for inter-agency information sharing and decision making when a Section 47 enquiry has been initiated, where the threshold criteria for significant harm have been met, and where an inter – agency plan is required to safeguard the child. When a child or young person is made the subject of a child protection plan, this status is reviewed within three months, and thereafter at six monthly intervals.

The conference is characteristic of a socially situated encounter that is defined as interactional order by Goffman (1983):

‘ a great deal of the work of organisations – decision making, the transmission of information...is done face-to face, requires being done this way, and is vulnerable to face –to face effects... there are people processing encounters, encounters in which the ‘impression’ subjects make during the interactions affects their life chances’ ( p.8)

Local authorities are required to demonstrate effectiveness through their reporting mechanisms in relation to compliance with timescales, the frequency of repeat occurrences and the length of child protection plans. However, local authorities are not required to report on the attendance of children and young people, or their representation by advocates. As noted earlier, statutory guidance can perhaps

be characterised by its ambivalence towards the attendance of children and young people at the conference. Although the child or young person is the subject of the conference, the professional gaze is more focused on parenting characteristics, such as family violence or problematic drug or alcohol use that have contributed to harmful environments.

A task for the conference is to outline the specific actions and responsibilities and then delegate monitoring and review of progress to the core group. The social worker, who acts as a Lead Professional, is required to convene and chair this forum within ten working days of the ICPC. Membership consists of parent (s) and the professionals most closely involved with the child and family. Roles, responsibilities and timescales are set out in 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' (HM Gov, 2015) and a record of each core group meeting held between conferences is presented to the review child protection conference as an ongoing assessment record. Again, there is little in the way of guidance for the child or young person's attendance in this forum. Arguably it is a less intimidating environment, compromising fewer professionals and those that attend are likely to be known to the child or young person.

Decisions over attendance are likely to be made by the social worker in conjunction with the parent (s) and with the IRO responsible for chairing the conference. 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' (HM Gov, 2015) outlines the role of the conference chair in terms of ensuring objective accountability and continuity in effective case management. Essentially, the role is concerned with clarifying the information presented and to set standards in accordance with principles of partnership and participation (Lewis 1994). Although role responsibility is not specified as such in 'Working Together to Safeguard

Children(ibid), an IRO usually undertakes this position as an addendum to their core function for the case management of children and young people who are looked after by the local authority (Jelicic et al.2014). Although employed by the local authority, the IRO has no direct case management responsibility for individual children, young people and their families, thereby ensuring a degree of objectivity in case management decision-making. However, the development of a relationship between the IRO and child or young person as a mechanism for promoting participation in care planning forums is a specific responsibility of the IRO (Jelicic et al, 2014; Dickens et al. 2015). Although statutory guidance for the IRO role (DfE, 2010) relates more to the care planning process, it is reasonable to assume that the child centred values and skills that are required for engaging children in looked after children reviews are transferable to the IRO's role in engaging children who are subject to a child protection conference (Beckett et al. 2016). The IRO is at the centre of a network of relationships that exist between the child or young person and their family, between parents, between parents and professionals, and finally between professional groups in the child protection conference. The IRO role is one of leadership and management and is hierarchically privileged in the local authority in terms of professional status. The IRO is responsible for ensuring that the conference fulfils its aims and objectives and adopts a lead role in managing any conflicts that may arise. This involves the power to include, and in what capacity, and the power to exclude. The leadership element of the IRO in a child protection context is also concerned with quality assurance; providing feedback to the social worker and operational manager on the quality of the assessments that contributed to the analysis of risk and the extent to which the perspectives of children and young people were sought and conveyed to the conference. If

children and young people do not attend the conference in person, their wishes, feelings and views should be incorporated into the assessments undertaken by the relevant agencies, and by the social worker, as lead practitioner, in particular. The discussion will now proceed to an exploration of the processes and practices that serve to construct and represent this body of knowledge to the conference forum.

### **3.7. The construction of knowledge: assessment.**

Assessment is an integral component of social work practice and is fundamental to decision making in contexts of need and harm. Assessments with a child protection orientation, as distinct from a child abuse orientation, reflected a discursive shift that emerged from highly publicised child death inquiries (Corby, 1993). The government's response was to introduce guidance for social workers undertaking comprehensive assessments to ascertain the level of dangerousness posed by high risk families, and for the purposes of long term planning (Holland, 2000; Lloyd and Taylor, 1995). Referred to as the 'Orange Book', the guidance (DoH, 1988) recognised children and young people as having separate rights to parents particularly in relation to having their basic needs met, to be protected from harm and abuse, and to have the right to be consulted and to have their views taken into account. The guidance specified how these rights might be upheld through the assessment process, commenting on the role of play and activity based approaches (where these may be applicable), and in specifying the optimal conditions for the assessment (seeing the child on their own at home and elsewhere). The 'how to' section is similar to that subsequently included in the 1991 and 1999 versions of Working Together guidance, and emphasised the importance of rapport, explanation and

honesty. However, parents were the main focus of the assessment schedule with only one section focusing on the child's perceptions of their family circumstances. Here, there was some similarity with the worries and hopes elements of strength based approaches (Turnell and Edwards,1997) with the notable absence of the child or young person's perception of family or parental protective factors.

A series of research based reports (DoH,1995) highlighted the narrow risk orientation of children and family social work, and emphasised the importance of assessing need alongside risk through a more holistic framework which positioned the child's welfare as central to assessment and decision making. , The check list approach to the assessment schedule placed more emphasis on the task of data collection than on theoretically informed professional interpretation (DoH,2000b; Holland, 2000; Garrett, 2003; Lloyd and Taylor,1995), and was considered a barrier for understanding the diverse range of child and family circumstances (Garrett, 2013). A revised standardised assessment framework was introduced in 2000 ( DoH, 2000b), and this continues to be regarded as the overarching conceptual framework for assessing need and harm in England.

### **3.7.1. The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families.**

The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (DoH, 2000b) was introduced in 2000 as one element of the Quality Protects reform programme. It was issued under Section 7 of the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970, placing an expectation on local authorities to adopt the framework for all assessments undertaken in accordance with either Section 17 (child in need) or

Section 47 (child protection enquiry) of the Children Act 1989 (DoH 200a pviii). This inference of mandate was further supported with an expectation that local authority assessment and record keeping procedures would be consistent with the principles of the Assessment Framework (Garrett, 2013). The principles underpinning the framework were developed in response to the key findings that emerged from the aforementioned 'Messages from Research' (DoH, 1995). The main conclusion concerned the likelihood that families were too often drawn into formal child protection procedures (as defined by Section 47 Children Act 1989) at an early stage through an overly narrow focus on diagnosis and treatment of the presenting problems. The Assessment Framework therefore represented an ideological and conceptual shift away from a socio/medical investigative approach towards child abuse and towards a more early interventionist approach (DoH, 2000a.)

The Assessment Framework is predicated on principles of person centred practice. Parents and children were considered to be key stakeholders in the relationship between state and family, with primacy afforded to the principle of assessments being child centred:

'The child is seen and kept in focus throughout the assessment and that account is always taken of the child's perspective' (DoH, 2000b p.10).

This represents a commitment to upholding the child's right to express a view and for this to be taken into consideration: key principles of participation in practice. The visual representation of the Assessment Framework places the child or young person at the centre, in accordance with the requirement for all professionals in contact with the child or young person to act in their best interests.

The Assessment Framework and the accompanying practice guidance (DoH,2000a) are artefacts of a professional discourse, as exemplified by the range of evidence based practice resources advocated by the Social Care Institute for Excellence ( SCIE). Whilst the Assessment Framework document established evidence based assessments as a general principle, the practice guidance (ibid) made explicit the requirement for social workers to draw upon an established body of knowledge for understanding the developmental needs of children in order to undertake effective, timely and analytical assessments and interventions. The Assessment Framework is influenced by Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979), locating child development within two other inter- related domains: parenting capacity and the influence of family and environmental factors. Considerable weight was attached to child development theories based on developmental psychology. As noted in Chapter Two, these define a child or young person's capacity to engage in their social world in age related progressive stages. The practice guidance (ibid) directs social workers towards child development charts (for example Sheridan's chart in respect of children aged 0-5 years (1973), which makes assumptions about what constitutes normal development ( Houston, 2017; Taylor, 2004). The child or young person's needs are articulated in Domain One across seven dimensions of child development. These are set out in the order commented upon by Burman (2017) in Chapter Two, with developmental privilege afforded to the health and cognitive development dimensions of child development. The knowledge base is influenced by age related developmental stages, infancy to preschool, middle childhood and adolescence. Practitioners are guided to differentiate between the importance of different aspects of development at different stages, for example social and academic



development in middle childhood and social and emotional development during adolescence.

The practice guidance acknowledged the child or young person as a legitimate source of knowledge for gaining insight in experiences of, and the meaning attached to inner and outer worlds, and emphasised the importance of communication for ascertaining wishes and feelings facilitated by the application of ‘innovative materials’ (DoH,2000a p.8). However, closer scrutiny of these materials that were promoted in the guidance itself suggests that recommended application is varied according to assumptions of age –related cognitive and emotive ability. A wider discussion of more contemporary materials to support direct work with children and young people will be aired later in this chapter. Here, it is important to note that although the principles for participatory practice were informed by research findings based on the children’s perspective ( for example reference is made to Butler and Williamson, 1994) there was a notable disconnect between principle and practice. Of the eight resources commissioned, only two were designed for completion with children and young people. Independent completion of ‘The Strengths and Difficulties’ questionnaire (Cox and Bentovim, 2000) was designed for children aged eleven upwards. The ‘Adolescent Wellbeing Scale’ (Cox and Bentovim, 2000) noted:

‘Although children as young as seven and eight have used it, older children’s thoughts and beliefs about themselves are more stable” (p.118).

The questionnaire format for both resources is adult orientated and they effectively exclude children under the age of eleven. This contradicts statements of practice principle which assert the Assessment Framework’s adoption of a strength

based as opposed to a deficit based approach when working with children , young people and their families (Whittington, 2007). Furthermore, a targeted approach to the use of materials infers that the views of some children and young people are more noteworthy than others:

‘Good tools cannot substitute for good practice but good practice and good tools together can achieve excellence’ ( DoH 2000a, p.113).

The bureaucratic nature of child and family social work in statutory contexts is not always compatible with principles of person centred and collaborative practice . As Holland (2011) noted, assessment of harm and risk is concerned with diagnosis, establishing what has happened to the child, and under what circumstances. Risk must be identified and attributed in order to be managed effectively. This is a time limited process and one that lends itself to more questioning , fact finding approaches. Under such contexts maintaining a focus on the child may be compromised, as suggested by the findings of Serious Case Reviews ( Brandon et al. 2012; Ofsted 2011b ).

There appears to be a degree of inconsistency between the Assessment Framework’s overarching emphasis on early intervention ( in terms of service provision for children in the early years and in terms of addressing needs before needs escalate), and its value base as defined by the core principles and an assumption that children under the age of eleven are incapable of providing a reliable account of their own experiences. This places the Assessment Framework within the category of rational evidence based assessment practice, an approach that has been subject to critical debate (Broadhurst et al.2009; Holland,2011;Winter,2011), paving the way for alternative approaches for engaging with families in child protection contexts.

### **3.7.2. The construction of knowledge: Signs of Safety.**

The English child protection system has periodically drawn on approaches from the global south which aimed to respond more effectively to the cultural contexts of indigenous populations. There are similarities between the principles of the Family Group Conference model, based on Maori norms associated with the role of the wider family and community in developing their own protective solutions ( McKenzie, 2009) and the Signs of Safety approach, developed in western Australia for working with Aboriginal populations ( Turnell and Edwards, 1997). Signs of Safety however is the approach that has been adopted more widely into the English child protection system (Bunn,2013; Munro et al. 2016). It emerged from an evidence base which suggested that a risk averse approach to assessment and intervention were not effective in bringing about the changes required to ensure a child's safety in the care of parents (Calder and Archer, 2016; Gilbert et al. 2011; Keddell, 2014; Parton, 2011a). As an assessment and safety planning framework, it reconceptualises the concept of risk and professional concerns over a child's wellbeing, and repositions the child and family in the social worker and family relationship and in the decision making process (Keddell, 2014).

It is important to note at this stage that with the exception of Bunn's study (2013), research into the adoption of Signs of Safety as a practice framework in England has been undertaken under the auspices of the government's Innovation Programme ( Baginsky et al. 2017; Munro et al. 2016; Sebba et al. 2017). Baginsky et al.'s evaluation study has the hallmark characteristics of EBP, with a focus on delivery, outcome and cost, claiming to be:

“The most comprehensive and rigorous independent evaluation of SoS practice conducted in England, and perhaps elsewhere” (p11).

Munro et al.’s study (2016) was also concerned with evaluation, but did aim to incorporate experiential insights through the inclusion of parent surveys. However, insights from children and young people were not included. The following analysis is therefore symptomatic of the trend in current research priorities towards evaluation of impact and outcome, and the perspectives of children and young people will not be prominent in the following discussion. Notwithstanding this limitation, the findings do provide some insight into the contemporary nature of participatory practices in strength based approaches for assessing risk and harm.

A perceived strength of Signs of Safety lies in its capacity to facilitate meaning making for family members and professionals, and as a practical tool for working in partnership with families (Barlow et al. 2012; Bunn, 2013; Munro et al. 2016). The act of working in partnership, defined as a collaborative activity, occurs through negotiating and agreeing mutually acceptable and achievable safety goals with family members. Service users are people “worth doing business with” rather than “people we do business with” (Turnell and Edwards, 1999 p32). Essentially, this repositions the social worker away from sole occupation of the expert role. However, this does not remove elements of the social worker’s power and how this is exercised. As will be noted in the next section, the social worker will decide who is included in knowledge production, and who is not included.

In the Signs of Safety model, child abuse and neglect is conceptualised as a socially constructed phenomenon, and the actions associated with child

protection as a series of complex and socially constructed interactions that take place between professionals and the family (Turnell and Edwards 1997,1999).

As a strength - based framework, Signs of Safety aims to reframe concepts of risk, harm and safety that are embodied in child protection discourse. For example, the word 'risk' is replaced by 'concern' or 'worry', placing greater emphasis on the family's perspective of what these look like in daily life. The assessment process is underpinned by three questions, firstly what are the worries / concerns, secondly what is working well in the family and finally what needs to change for the child to be safe. Statements of concern are then co- constructed alongside statements of strength and family assets and resources that can be drawn on in order to promote the child's safety. Social workers are thus directed toward viewing the presenting concerns and recommended actions through a frame that focuses on strengths, difficulties and aspirations. Social workers exercise their statutory responsibilities by being explicit about 'bottom line' concerns, the minimum actions that are required for the child to remain at home , and scaling questions are used to place concerns along a danger to safety continuum.

The Signs of Safety framework is an example of a consensus-based risk assessment tool, one that has an evidence base derived from child abuse literature and practitioner evidence, in contrast to actuarial risk assessment tools that rely on statistical analysis of risk factors (White and Walsh, 2009). A government commissioned evaluation of a range of consensus and actuarial tools (Barlow et al.2012) concluded that Signs of Safety was rated positively in respect of service user and service provider acceptability and equality but less so in terms of measurable criteria, including assessment domains and emphasis

on child development, which are found in the Assessment Framework. Herein lies a tension in the adaptation of a consensus-based model into a child protection system that is essentially risk averse in nature, and into a practice agenda that is dominated by measurable and objective frameworks for identifying and responding to risk. It is important to note that Munro (2011) was critical of overly procedural practice (doing things right), epitomised by adherence to prescribed time scales and an over reliance on actuarial technical –rational approaches to decision making. However, the review did acknowledge their contribution to effective practice in analytical assessments, and Munro advocated for a better integration of professional judgement and more relational aspects of practice alongside more instrumental processes. This resonates with the ‘firm, fair and friendly’ approach advocated by Oliver and Charles (2015, p.39), one that recognised the co – existence of state paternalism and partnership along a practice continuum, and identified the importance of relational elements for integrating a strength based approach within child protection procedures.

When applied to the child protection conference, Signs of Safety aims to promote a less adversarial encounter between family and professionals by refocusing the dialogical orientation from one of problem to one of solution (Appleton et al.2015). However, the focus is weighted much more towards the family as a homogenous unit and there is limited recognition of competing rights and interests. In an early publication Turnell and Edwards (1997) did recognise the importance of viewing the child’s interests as separate to the parent, but throughout this text and in subsequent texts (Turnell,2012), the identity of a child or young person is subsumed within references to the family as a unit. This somewhat diluted approach to actively upholding the rights of individual children and young people has not been challenged in the

few evaluation studies that have been conducted in England. The absence of an established evidence base concerned with the effectiveness of Signs of Safety for promoting good outcomes for children and young people is perhaps reflective of its piece-meal adoption across England as a comprehensive risk assessment and risk management framework (Baginsky et al. 2017; Bunn, 2013 ;Munro et al. 2016; Sebba et al.2107). Sebba et al. (ibid) identified the following criteria as a soft outcome (Dewson et al. 2000), one that cannot be measured directly:

‘Ensuring that young people are not only listened to, but their views acted upon, improves their engagement in services and helps them to address their problems’ (p.37).

Applying this to the Signs of Safety evaluation report ( Baginsky et al. 2017) which did include children aged between six and ten, Sebba et al. noted that 65% had reported that they could talk with their social worker. In general the evaluations of Signs of Safety have relied on professional perspectives at the expense of the perspectives of children and young people. For example, Baginsky et al. (2017) presented data to illustrate the adoption of the Three Houses tool ‘in families’ rather than with individual children and young people within family units ( p14), and cited increased practitioner confidence when working in general with children and young people.

### **3.7.3. The construction of knowledge: direct work tools.**

As noted earlier, direct work tools were recognised as a component of effective analytical partnership based assessment ( DoH,2000a)The adoption of Signs of Safety in some local authorities in England (including Moor Town) precipitated the emergence of word and picture based direct work tools as

communication aids when working with children and young people (Turnell and Essex, 2006) and their incorporation into assessments of need and risk has become mainstream in those agencies.

Direct work is associated with a range of activities and tools utilised either for a specific purpose, for example life story work in permanency planning, or in more focused therapeutic interventions. It has gained prominence as a fundamental component of child centred social work practice (Lefevre, 2010; Winter et al. 2017). However, there does appear to be a lack of shared understanding of what constitutes direct work and how it is undertaken in practice. Munro (2011) does not clarify what she meant by direct work but cited Ferguson, a long standing exponent of social workers becoming much more in tune with the child's lived experience in their home environment through embodied practices which utilise the senses of sight, touch and smell (Ferguson, 2016).

If tools are considered to be an appropriate mechanism for facilitating a dialogue between a child and the social worker (as the Assessment Framework practice guidance suggested), then it is reasonable to assume that social workers will utilise these in practice contexts that place importance on effective communication between social worker and children and young people (DfE, 2014; DoH, 2000b; Jones, 2003; Lefevre, 2010). Furthermore, as was noted in Chapter One, referral rates overall have increased year on year, with a corresponding increase in the number of children under the age of nine subject to a child protection plan (Bilson et al. 2016; DfE, 2017). Put simply, more children and young people in general and young children in particular have an array of needs that have crossed the threshold from universal and targeted



intervention into statutory intervention resulting in a Section 17 or a Section 47 assessment.

It was also noted earlier in this chapter, that the implementation of the Assessment Framework represented a transformational turn towards what was referred to as child-centred practice, with a focus on the child or young person at the heart of any practice context( DoH,2000b). This thesis suggests that there is an important distinction to be made between child centred practice, as it is defined in the Assessment Framework and its practice guidance, and what this thesis defines as child initiated practice. The former, whilst embracing the principles of participatory practice outlined in Chapter Two, is significantly influenced by adult perspectives ,attitudes and approaches, whereas child initiated practice is more influenced and led by the child or young person. This can be illustrated by approaches towards undertaking direct work. A child centred approach recognises the importance of using tools or methods that are appropriate to the child's individual circumstances, but which effectively limit choice through the adult's ownership of which tools or methods are made available, or through conveying the child's meaning through adult language. However, by virtue of engaging the child in some capacity, practice is construed as child centred. In contrast, a child initiated approach is more likely to use tools or methods selected by the child, at a pace led by the child, and where meaning is conveyed to others in the child's own words or images (Lefevre,2010).

Participation in a Signs of Safety assessment has become synonymous with direct work tools, in particular the Three Houses. The Three Houses originated in New Zealand in 2003, originally for use across the developmental life span (Weld and

Greening, 2003), and was subsequently adapted for use with children in child protection contexts. Weld and Greening did not claim to have been influenced by a particular child developmental approach, but did state:

‘The worker needs to take into account developmental aspects, most children around six years and up can draw a simple house however checking should occur that the concept of a house is one they can grasp’ (Weld and Greening 2003, p.7).

The Three Houses tool aims to facilitate the voice of the child in the assessment and to serve as a visual method for communicating wishes, feeling and views to the child’s parent. The model is based on a metaphor of a house which has good solid foundations, and the use of imagery and symbols is intended to support the child to be a partner in the conversation, thus recognising her/ his own reality.

The House of Worries draws upon solution focused theories (Turnell and Edwards, 1997) to explore and identify characteristics of internal and external resilience; that is a child’s capacity to withstand and recover from adverse experiences; and the inter relationship between sources of vulnerability in the child’s life. The House of Good Things draws on sources of internal and external strengths, and The House of Dreams identifies what needs to be taken from the House of Good Things and left behind from the House of Worries for the child’s hopes and wishes to be realised in the future. Here there is a link to the safety mapping process within Signs of Safety which infers a degree of power to the child in conveying what she/ he believes to be the foci for change.

Use of the Three Houses tool in the assessment process is intended to be a child led, activity and to be used with a degree of flexibility. As a resource for working

directly with children, it is simple in design and requires few resources.

Furthermore, it draws upon a level of communication skills that all social work practitioners are required to demonstrate capacity of at the point of qualification (HCPC, 2017).

Whereas the Three Houses and similar tools such as Wizards and Fairies are used as an aid for ascertaining wishes, feelings and views other tools consider the safety planning element of Signs of Safety. For example, Parker (2009) developed the Three Houses into a Safety House. Here, the path leading up to the house represents a scaling device, where closest proximity to the house represents the child's highest level of expressed safety in their immediate environment. Whereas the Three Houses is a medium for bringing the child's views to an adult audience, the Safety House is intended to bring adult explanations of concern to the child. Furthermore, it aims to move the focus of accountability away from professional expectations to the child's expectations (Turnell, 2012).

In contrast with the resources that were developed for the Assessment Framework, the Three Houses tool and those similar in design are intended to be used by children and young people in the assessment process, albeit facilitated by the social worker. In this respect, the Three Houses is an example of a participatory process that seeks to avoid tokenism, and espouses some degree of child informed practice (Hart 1992, Shier, 2001). The potential strength of the Three Houses in contrast to the questionnaire format of other tools (Cox and Bentovim, 1997) lies in its recognition that younger children are capable of articulating their experiences and have a right to do so. However to date, the existing evidence base concerned with direct work tools have been

constructed through an adult lens and have focused on practitioner skill and confidence. This may be a valid area for study but it does little to advance a knowledge base that is directly informed by children and young people. Furthermore, the quality of an assessment depends on how knowledge is sought, processed and reproduced as a case record. The role and purpose of case recording as an instrument of participation is the final area of scrutiny.

#### **3.7.4. The construction of knowledge: the case record.**

In accordance with the BASW Code of Ethics (2012) and the Health and Care Professionals Council (2016) social workers are required to:

‘Maintain clear, impartial and accurate records and provision of evidence to support professional judgements’ (BASW, 2012, p.14).

Smith (2005) defines the case record as a record of an individual that is organised in text form, created and reconstituted through a sequence of organisational steps and serving two organisational functions:

‘Textually coordinated work processes that produce institutional realities that make the actual actionable and the distinctively hierarchical forms of intertextuality in which texts at one level establish frames, concepts, operating on and in the production of institutional realities’ (p.186).

The first function, the production of the institution or organisation’s frame of reality, is founded on the organisational discourses that serve to define and regulate the day to day local practices that are created through social relations. Local, individual practice is therefore transformed into general practice in a recognizable and accountable form (Smith, 2005). The individual perspective, gained for example during an assessment process, is then subsumed within a

representation of organisational reality in the form of the standardised assessment report. In this process, a case record is a “document in action” (Prior, 2003,p.67), a textual mechanism of power which serves to confer and confirm understandings of organisational and professional bodies of knowledge (De Montigny,1995; Foucault, 1980; Smith, 2001). The second function concerns the ontology of the social ; the manner in which texts as instruments of governmentality and control intersect with those associated with local practices through a hierarchical framing of texts (Skehill et al. 2012; Smith, 2005). Chapter Two considered the processes through which high order texts, in the form of acts of statute, were influenced by and influenced conceptualisation of childhood, and earlier in this chapter attention was drawn to institutional texts, namely the varying guises of ‘Working Together to Safeguard Children’ and assessment frameworks. A hierarchical ordering suggests that regulatory and institutional texts have framed lower order texts, those local case recording practices. The organisational discourses and the regulatory frames that are produced create subject positions and subject roles in specific contexts. The subject position of the social worker who produces and presents an assessment report for a child protection conference is delineated by discourses of professional practice articulated in legal and policy frameworks. Through the acts of creating and representing the assessment in a textual format, the social worker effectively frames the child or young person as a subject and effectively reframes their narrative.

From a Foucauldian perspective (Foucault,1980;Garritty,2016) the social work assessment report can be classified as genealogical in that it represents:

‘A form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledge, discourses, domains of objects’ (Foucault 1980 p.117).

The remainder of this chapter adopts a genealogical approach (Foucault, 1980; Skehill et al. 2012) for analysing the relationship between higher (state) and lower (organisational) recording practices, and the positioning of the child or young person as a participatory subject.

This chapter has already commented upon the transformational nature of performance management principles on child welfare policy and social work practice (Harris, 2008), particularly in respect of a discourse of risk assessment and risk management. Distrust of the social work profession (Ferguson, 2008; Ferguson, 2011) was reflected in the adoption of a top down centralist approach to child welfare policy, with the introduction of systems designed to standardise and regulate both practice and the professional knowledge base. The Integrated Children’s System (ICS), was designed to contribute towards national and local strategies for improving outcomes for children as well as improving quality assurance and financial management processes (Fish, 2009; Hall et al. 2010, Ince and Griffiths, 2011, Laird, 2017). Predicated on good quality social work assessment and decision making practice, the ICS was characteristic of a standardised process for ordering texts in a linear sequence (Smith, 2005) that depicted core social work functions associated with assessment, planning, intervention and review activities. ICS also served as a mechanism for presenting a particular view of organisational reality, through for example, annual data returns which evidenced compliance (or non-compliance) of regulated core activities. Here, ICS served as an instrument of power for

developing knowledge of the organisation as effective and efficient or conversely non - effective and non - efficient in its exercise of core functions.

The electronic case record, as a documentary account of social work activity, assumed a high profile in the ICS. Gee (1999) maintained that a text has meaning and relevance only where it communicates single or multiple socially structured activities, which delineate the who, the what, the where and the how. ICS was developed in accordance with the Assessment Framework (DoH,2000b), and it can thus be suggested that a focus on the child along these delineations would be integral to practice activities associated with the core social work roles of assessment, planning, intervention and review(DoH,2002). However, the ICS replaced a narrative case record structure, which captured those more qualitative elements of the social worker and child relationship, with a bite sized “atomised” structure (Hall et al. 2010, p 394) which was not designed to capture the essence of the child or young person’s circumstances and experiences. Practitioners reported ICS to be overly bureaucratic and process driven, reducing their capacity to evidence the more relational aspects of social worker and service user interactions ( Parton, 2008; Hall et al.2010; Ince and Griffiths,2011; Munro, 2011; Huuskonen and Vakkari,2015). Furthermore, as Pithouse (2011) and Horwath and Tarr (2015) noted, recording to prescribed formats lends itself to heuristics, practice shortcuts (*Taylor, 2017*) that enable the social worker to manage the volume of recording by for example, cutting and pasting sections of the assessment domains across sibling group records and subsuming a child’s identity into a sibling group identity.

However, as Gillingham (2015) noted, the quality of any report will be determined by its author. As Hall et al. (2006) and Nordegraff et al. (2009) note, a case record is closely related to the communicative exchanges upon which it is based. It is a transcript based upon the social worker's interpretation and analysis of spoken language and observation of the child's presentation in her/ his environmental domains, including home and school. The case record is thus a social construction, influenced by political, social and cultural factors and which in turn influences professional identity and beliefs (Marston,2013).

### **3.8. Conclusion.**

Taking a backwards step in the spirit of Foucault to review the development of social work practice serves to illustrate how social work policy and practice, and the social work profession have adapted in order to respond to changing political, economic and social ideologies. As such, contemporary child protection practice is a social construction, influenced by prevailing social, political and economic norms. The relationship between social work as an agent of the state and children in receipt of statutory intervention is one of ambiguity, clouded by a lack of societal consensus over children's legal and ideological status. In order to make sense of the participation of children and young people in the child protection conference, attention must also be paid to the dominant ideologies that have influenced societal concepts and conceptions of childhood and children's rights.

Legal frameworks reflect the prevailing norms of society at a given point in history, and policy and guidance serve to interpret these into professional discourse and practice. The child protection system in England has been characterised in terms of safeguarding and promoting welfare through a family support orientation to a more narrow focus of a risk orientated child protection



system. The dominance of the social work business approach, epitomised by a performance management culture, has shifted the focus towards the technical / functional elements of the role. Munro (2011) claims that contemporary practice lacks an emotional dimension serves to remind us that this is a result of years of social work reform and transformation of a system that has adapted in response to public and private pressures.

The review of participation in a context of evolving policy and practice has suggested that at each transformational turn there has been a degree of dissonance between policy and practice. Practice guidance, in the various guises of 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' have espoused a commitment towards the child or young person having the opportunity to express wishes and feelings, but the general tone throughout suggests that this is more likely to be conveyed through representation as opposed to attendance in person. However all placed some emphasis on the child or young person's involvement in the child protection plan, having the relevant information in order to make a contribution to this element of the process

The most recent transformational turn, epitomised in the Innovations Programme seeks to reshape the discourse away from 'risk avoidance and compliance' (Sebba et al. 2017 p.5) and towards more 'family focused and strength based practices' (p.6). This promises much in terms of redefining the relationship between social worker and social worker and child or young person through systemic practices such as Signs of Safety. The adoption of practice tools such as the Three Houses, in contrast to those promoted under the Assessment Framework suggests a conceptual alignment with more contemporary sociological understandings of childhood. The extent to which this

occurs in practice in Moor Town will be explored further in Chapters Seven, Eight and Nine.

Chapter Four sets the scene by reviewing the evidence from a range of national and international sources relating to the participation of children and young people in the child protection conference. The upholding of rights under Article 12 of the UNCRC in terms of attendance in the child protection conference in England is an example of a soft outcome. It is not measured in quantitative terms as there is no requirement for local authorities to produce this as a data set in their annual children in need return. Instead, soft outcome evidence is derived from a knowledge base drawn from the perspectives of children and young people and it is to this the thesis now turns.

## **Chapter 4. Participation in child protection practice: a review of the evidence.**

### **4.1. Introduction.**

This chapter explores the empirical evidence base for the participation of children and young people either directly or indirectly in the child protection conference. In contrast to the evidence presented in Chapter Three, this review aims to epistemologically privilege the perspective of children and young people, whilst acknowledging the limited field of research that draws on emancipatory as opposed to technically gained knowledge (Hardwick and Worsley, 2011; Humphries, 2008). The scope of the review extended to include practitioner perspectives; which reflects the limited evidence base that is derived solely from children and young people.

A review of the evidence drawn from empirical research studies will highlight a number of factors that may facilitate opportunities for the child or young person's views to be heard and taken into account in the decision making process, and identify those factors that appear to limit those opportunities for participation.

At the outset, it is important to acknowledge some limitations in the evidence presented in this chapter. Firstly, empirical evidence of child or young person centred or initiated participatory practice drawn from their sole perspective is somewhat limited when compared to research studies that focus on social worker's perceptions of participation, or studies that report the perspectives of parents. Secondly, the focus of the research study is a microanalysis of child protection practice, namely the child protection conference and core group

meeting as the foci for participation. Arguably, it is conceptually difficult to separate out each element of the child protection process and to draw conclusions from these. For example, research findings have highlighted the importance of the relationship between child or young person and social worker at the referral stage or early stages of the child protection process and this may influence the extent to which the child or young person feels sufficiently supported to directly participate in the conference or core group meeting (Cossar and Long, 2008; Cossar et al. 2011, 2016). However, this research study is concerned with the meanings attributed by the child or young person at a given point in time in the child protection process, and in a microcosm of practice. This narrow gaze on the child protection conference as explored from the child or young person's perspective (in contrast for example, with a focus on the child protection system and processes in general), is relatively under explored in the literature. As the principle decision-making forum in the child protection process, the child protection conference is a practice context where Article 12 rights should be expressed.

The focus of the thesis is on the voice of the child or young person in child protection decision-making forums. In the main, this refers to the child protection conference but children and young people may also participate in the smaller core group meetings. A further line of enquiry in the thesis has explored the extent to which voice is indirectly represented by practitioners in attendance at the conference, and social worker and IRO perspectives of participation.

As noted in Chapter Three, there is no requirement for local authorities to report on numbers of children or young people attending a child protection conference, and it has not been possible to establish a national baseline. Individual LSCB's may have local data capture mechanisms, but these are not in the public domain.

To ensure sufficient depth of analysis, this chapter draws on evidence gained from perceptions of child participation in the wider child protection process, and where relevant in other statutory child welfare decision-making forums. Finally, the scope of the literature review is global, drawing on evidence from countries and states whose legal and policy frameworks for child protection practice are similar to the English context, in that there is an espoused commitment to upholding child centred practice in child protection assessment and decision-making.

Literature was sourced from the Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA), Science Direct, Scopus, Social Care Online and the University library search engine. The following inclusion criteria were applied:

1. Papers reporting empirical studies conducted after 1994 (this coincides with the publication date of Butler and Williamson's empirical study which explored participation from the child or young person's perspective and within a child welfare context and the new sociology of childhood).
2. Empirical studies written in English and conducted in Europe, the USA, Canada, Australia New Zealand and Israel.
3. Papers that reported on studies conducted with children (as defined in legal terms as under the age of 18) or where state welfare legal duties extended to young adults over the age of 18.
4. Papers that reported the perspectives of children and young people who had participated in a child protection conference or core group meeting (or equivalent statutory decision-making forums).
5. Papers that included the above as part of a wider report of a child or young person's participation in the child protection process.

6. Papers that reported the perspectives of children and young people who had participated in other statutory review and decision-making forums.
7. Papers that reported the perspectives of social workers and other child welfare practitioners on child participation in statutory decision-making processes.
8. Papers that reported the representation of children's views, wishes and feelings through an analysis of child protection conference documents.

The following exclusion criteria were applied:

1. Papers that were published before 1994.
2. Papers that reported on child participation in Family Group Conferences.
3. Papers that reported on child participation in private law proceedings.

Appendix 2 provides a summary of the evidence reviewed under the above criteria. Forty-eight studies were included in the review. Of these, children and young people were the sole source of data in thirteen studies ( 27%) and were involved as research participants together with parents and / or practitioners in a further twelve studies (25%). In total the perspective of children and young people were obtained in twenty five studies (52%).

Four of the twenty five studies that involved children and young people as research participants met inclusion criterion four, in that their focus was on exploring the views of children and young people who had participated in an inter-professional child protection or equivalent decision making forum. Two studies (Dillon et al. 2016 and Muench et al.2017) explored practice in a single local authority in England, and the remaining two studies were located in municipal areas in Sweden (Bolin, 2016) and Norway (Saebjornsen and Willumsen, 2017).

A further twelve studies met inclusion criterion five, in that they included children and young people's experiences of child protection decision making forums as one element of the wider child protection system. Of these, six studies referred to practice in England (Bell, 2002; Cossar and Long, 2008; Cossar et al. 2011; Jobe and Gorin, 2013; Ofsted, 2011; and Office of the Director of Children's Rights, 2012), one referred to practice in Scotland (Woolfson et al. 2010), one to practice in Eire and Northern Ireland (Buckley et al. 2011) one to practice in Estonia (Arbeiter and Toros, 2017), one to practice in Finland (Polkki et al. 2012), one to practice in the Netherlands (van Bijleveld et al. 2014), and finally one to practice in Norway (Ulvik and Gulbrandsen 2014).

In total, the sixteen studies that met criterion four or five explored the perspectives of children and young people either in relation to child protection decision-making forums or the wider child protection process. These were reviewed according to elements of participatory practice concerned with process and outcome. However at this point it is important not to reduce generalised findings from these studies into a simple dichotomy of positive or negative experiences. The majority of children and young people who were interviewed reported varying degrees of participation, and commented on some positive outcomes as a result of attending the meeting.

#### **4.2. Attendance: who decides?**

Participation in the child protection conference and other statutory assessment, planning and decision making forums was an outcome of an informed decision making process and had the aim of fulfilling a number of expectations. Firstly, attendance was an expression and enactment of rights in accordance with domestic and global legal frameworks. For example, in addition to the Children Act

1989, the child or young person's right to express their views was mandated through the Norwegian Child Welfare Act 1992 (Saebjornsen and Willumsen, 2017), the Estonian Child Protection Act (2014) (Arbeiter and Toros, 2017) and the 1995 Children (Scotland) Act (Woolfson et al. 2010). Secondly, some children and young people who decided to attend recognised the significance of the event, and believed it necessary to be present in person (Cossar and Long, 2008; Thornblad and Holtan, 2011). Attendance was also considered important as a mechanism for being informed of decisions affecting the child or young person's life (Bell, 2002; Thomas and O' Kane, 1999), as an opportunity to express their views and needs (Saebjornsen and Willumsen, 2017) and for more pragmatic reasons including attending to ensure the accuracy of information provided to the conference (Thornblad and Holtan, 2011). Some children chose to attend to support their parent (s) (Bell, 2002; Cossar and Long, 2008.) Finally, familiarisation with the process appeared to be a factor in one English local authority where rates of attendance for ICPC's through to the third review conference increased in each of the age bands (5-7, 8-10, 11-12, and 13 years upwards (Bailey and Ward 2009).

#### **4.3. Participation in the child protection conference: children's views.**

Factors that made the experience more manageable existed at both interpersonal and structural levels. The importance of a trusting relationship between the child or young person and social worker was a significant determining factor (Dillon et al. 2016; Cossar et al. 2011; Saebjornsen and Willumsen, 2017). The existence of an established relationship with their social worker or child welfare workers enabled those who attended to feel more able to contribute and more assured that their views would be taken into consideration. Where this occurred, children and young



people were able to reflect on positive change as a result of taking part in the meeting (Saebjornsen and Willumsen, 2017).

Participation was also closely associated with feelings of positive regard, self-worth and confidence building (Muench et al. 2016; Saebjornsen and Willumsen, 2017). Intrinsic perceptions of value and of worth, of being listened to and a sense that weight was given to their views were identified as common themes in two studies (Bolin, 2016; Dillon et al. 2015).

Children and young people valued the opportunity to be listened to and of being in an environment where they did not feel judged. Mason, a research participant who attended his conference, summarised his experience:

'It's kind of, like, I can go there and if I've got something that I need to say to the then I can say it in a meeting where I feel people are going to listen, and take into action what I have said . . . you didn't have to just sit there all formal and straight and everything . . . you were allowed to slouch and act like you were at home.'

(Dillon et al. 2015, p.10)

Children also valued the contribution of their social worker and the IRO in providing support during the referral, assessment and decision-making stages of the child protection process. This included preparation to attend the conference and an opportunity for debriefing afterwards (Cossar and Long, 2008; Cossar et al. 2016). However, some children and young people across the age spectrum recognised their own parameters of autonomy, and recognised circumstances when adult led support and guidance was appropriate (MacLeod, 2006).

Many of the studies also identified more negative perceptions of participation in child protection decision-making. There appeared to be some correlation between positive and negative perceptions of the experience of attending the child

protection conference or core group meeting, and positive and negative perceptions of relationships with key practitioners. This appeared to impact on the extent to which children and young people felt sufficiently informed and able to contribute in a meaningful way and for their views to be acted upon.

For some participants in the study undertaken by Dillon et al. (2016), the involuntary nature of their involvement with child protection services generated feelings of distrust, lack of control, and powerlessness. Limited understanding of the child protection process and purpose of the meeting appeared to be a significant variable in degrees of participation. The more limited the information provided the less likely any expressed view would influence the decisions being made (Saebjornsen and Willumsen, 2017). The absence of a trusting relationship between the child or young person and their social worker was associated with knowing the social worker in relational terms and knowing how to access the social worker (Cossar et al. 2013; Dillon et al. 2016; Jobe and Gorin, 2013).

Although some children and young people had experienced some degree of participation in that they had physically attended the conference, attendance did not necessarily correlate with taking part in a meaningful way. For example, Bolin's study (2016) was primarily concerned with how children and young people exercised agency and influenced outcomes in inter-professional meetings. Of the studies reviewed, this was the only one that included children aged five, although direct reports presented as findings in the study were only obtained from children aged eight and above. Notwithstanding this limitation, Bolin's study did provide insight into the understanding younger children had of their role in meetings:

'They talk. And maybe you can play in meetings. There are a lot of toys because you should play' (Sara aged 8 p.5)

Not all attendees had sight of the social worker's report beforehand, and not all felt able to speak in the meeting (Cossar et al. 2013; Saebjornsen and Willumsen, 2017). Those who did feel able to contribute to the meeting did not always feel listened to (Bijleveld et al. 2014; Cossar et al. 2011). Some were not informed about the outcome of the conference and the detail of the child protection plan (Cossar et al. 2011; Muench et al. 2017; Woolfson et al 2010). This did not extend to believing they had been listened to and their views taken into account, or understanding the implications of the decisions made (van Bijleveld et al. 2014; Cossar et al. 2013; Woolfson et al.2010). A number of studies reported children and young people's emotional response to attending the conference. The experience was described as intimidating (Bell, 2002), harrowing and with overly negative statements made concerning the child or young person's own behaviour and that of their parents (Cossar and Long 2008). Some children and young people also felt let down when expectations were raised and not realised (Bell, 2000; Cossar and Long, 2008; Dillon et al. 2015).

Perhaps unsurprisingly children and young people's views of one aspect of the child protection process tended to be representative of views of the process as a whole. The importance of an enduring relationship with a social worker was a key finding in the majority of studies that have commented on factors most likely to promote participation as a mechanism for expressing views, and for these to be taken into account. The significance of an established relationship between social worker and child or young person (and conversely its absence) transcended historical, political and organisational child protection policy and practice contexts (Arbeiter and Toros, 2017; Bell, 2002; Dillon et al. 2016; Woolfson et al. 2010). Seven studies explored the experience of participation in looked after / children in care review and planning meetings (Leeson, 2007; MacLeod, 2006; Pert et.al.

2017; Polkki et al. 2012; Roesch- Marsh et al. 2016; Thomas and O’Kane, 1999; Tregeagle and Mason, 2008). A common theme in Leeson’s study (2007) which involved four adolescent boys aged between twelve and fourteen was a sense of alienation from a system perceived to be impersonal and overly procedural. A lack of involvement, or occasions when expressed feelings were misconstrued, generated feelings of helplessness. The importance of the decisions being made were recognised, but a lack of support and a lack of confidence in ability to make the right decision resulted in the young people deferring decision making to the professionals. This perception of not being heard was also reported in MacLeod’s study (2006). Of the eleven children and young people interviewed, ‘hardly any (p.45) believed they had been heard. Similar views on the overly procedural nature of the Looked After Review (LAC) process and limited influence on decisions made were also expressed by the children and young people interviewed in Pert et al.’s study (2017). All twenty-five had attended their review because most believed that opting out was not an option. The experience of being in foster care appeared to be a trigger for enhanced participation for the children and young people interviewed by Polkki et al. (2012). Perceptions similar to those reported in the previous two studies were expressed during the earlier phases of the child protection process, leading up to a decision to place away from home. However, more positive experiences were reported with increased involvement in care planning meetings and ability to express their own opinions. The opportunity to do so also enabled some children to opt out of contributing directly, instead preferring to attend as a listener. The findings of this study resonate with those reported by Tregeagle and Mason’s Australian study (2008). Both studies were informed by Shier’s model of participation (referred to in Chapter Two) although the mechanisms for reviewing looked after children in Australia appear to

have greater similarity with the English Looked After Child process. Tregeagle and Mason (ibid) also reported on positive experiences based on children and young people feeling comfortable and confident in expressing views and concerns, and in exercising some degree of control in their lives (for example by defining the nature of their relationship with their social worker). The study undertaken by Roesch -Marsh et al. (2016) is primarily concerned with the role of the IRO in facilitating participation in LAC reviews but their findings do have some resonance with Thomas and O’Kane’s earlier study (1999). Both studies suggested a correlation between levels of participation, the specific needs and circumstances of the child or young person and the significance of the decisions to be made.

#### **4.4. Practitioner perspectives of child participation in child protection / child welfare decision making forums.**

Nineteen studies explored participation from a practitioner perspective, including perspectives of participation in child protection practice, perspectives of the skills required to promote participation and perspectives on obstacles to participation. A number of studies focused on exploring practitioners’ perceptions of participation in child protection decision making. Vis and Thomas (2009) undertook a study involving sixteen Norwegian case managers. The study drew upon records of children and young people known to the service and used a definition of participation based on three characteristics: evidence of understanding, expression of wishes and feelings and the extent to which the child’s views influenced decision-making. Of the forty-three cases, twenty fulfilled all three characteristics of participation. Factors associated with three variables: child

characteristics, the family's circumstances and the practice process were cited in the remaining cases.

Characteristics of the child were also noted in a study undertaken by Kriz and Skivenes (2013) involving ninety-one social workers across England, Norway and the USA. Responses were analysed using Hart's Ladder of Participation (1992). Ten of the English workers (40%) cited a definition of participation that was consistent with Hart's descriptor of non-participation, citing variables such as age and the need to safeguard the child or young person against further harm as significant factors.

Vis and Fossum (2015) used quantitative methods to determine whether perceptions of social workers in residential and locality services in Norway varied according to practice context. The study concluded that social workers in the former were more likely to view participation as more difficult to achieve, possibly owing to the higher level of complex needs in the children and young people placed in residential units. Organisational context was therefore more likely to influence perceptions of participation than individual attitudes and values.

#### **4.5. Practice variables**

##### **4.5.1. Acting in the best interests of the child.**

As noted in Chapter Two, social workers in England have a legal duty under the Children Act 1989 to act in the best interests of the child or young person, and this principle also applies to the legal frameworks underpinning social work practice in Australia (Tregeagle and Mason, 2008), Norway (Ulvik and Gulbrandsen, 2015), Sweden (Leviner, 2018) and The Netherlands (van Bijleveld et al. 2014). Acting in the best interests of the child by privileging protection rights over participation

rights as a rationale for non- participation appears to be a recurring theme in the literature, although relatively few studies have explored this concept in any depth. This thesis therefore aims to advance the field of knowledge in this area.

Decisions made by individual opinion as to whether participation at conference was appropriate or not also appeared to be contingent on the nature of child protection concern and corresponding level of risk (Vis and Thomas, 2009). Toros et al. (2013) suggested that social workers appeared to work more for the child or young person, as opposed to working with, drawing on professional knowledge frameworks to make decisions on what they believed to be the best course of action. A tendency to rely upon confirmation bias, that is, a pre - determined view of the child or young person's circumstances and needs was also noted by Healey and Darlington (2009). Here, the value of establishing views was overridden by a pre formed professional viewpoint.

Acting in the best interests of the child may also contribute to how social workers interpret a child or young person's wishes and feelings. Lundy (2007) pointed to a number of barriers concerned with adult commitment to Article 12, not only to the underlying principle but also to the espoused practice of supporting children and young people to access their rights. An element of her critique lay in how 'matters affecting them' was interpreted, and by whom. Not only was there evidence of differing perceptions between the social worker and the child in establishing wishes and interests but a dissonance with how the child or young person's views were interpreted. As previously noted, in assessment practice there is quite rightly a strong emphasis on the adherence to traditional social work values including self-determinism, and more emancipatory values such as partnership. Adherence to these suggest that social workers have regard for listening to the child or young person's voice, and for ensuring their interpretation of that voice is accurately

represented in any decision making forum. However, Lundy's research concurs with McLeod's findings (2007); that children or young people and their social workers appeared to attribute different meaning to the act of listening. In McLeod's study, children and young people interpreted meaning as listening that involved action. Here, communication and consultation had defined outcomes: opportunity to be involved and opportunity to complain. For social workers, listening was an attribute, a process and a principle that conformed to social work values of respect and mutual regard.

#### **4.5.2. Child or young person characteristics.**

As noted in Chapter Three, child development discourse holds a prominent place in child protection policy and practice, particularly in respect of normative and correlative assumptions of age and capacity. A review of the evidence suggested practitioner bias towards western, socio- cultural assumptions of childhood, characterised by notions of vulnerability and dependence. Two studies in particular (Collings and Davies, 2008; Fern, 2012) sought to explore practitioner's views on childhood. Applying a critical incident interview method with fifteen social workers to explore perceptions of adult and child directed practice, Collings and Davies concluded that a discourse of vulnerability was more prevalent than a discourse of rights. A similar conclusion was drawn from Fern's action research study conducted with fifteen social workers in Iceland. Here practice was more likely to be adult directed, with the social worker defining the problem and the solution.

Annually produced statistical data identifies the demographic profile of children and young people who are subject to a child protection plan in England, and provides some support for age and associated vulnerability being attendance



variables. For example, data for the year ending March 2017 confirm that children under the age of nine were more likely to be the subject of a child protection plan compared to children and young people over the age of ten. In that year, 49,950 children and young people (this figure excludes unborn children) were made the subject of an ICPC and of this cohort, 33,640 (67%) were under the age of nine (DfE, 2017).

As children and young people themselves have noted (Bell, 2000; Cossar and Long, 2008) the conference environment is not child friendly, and social workers make decisions based on whether the child is of sufficient age and maturity to cope with this. As has been noted in Chapter Three, there is not a universally applied age criteria in child protection practice in England to guide social workers in this matter. This is in contrast to the Family Justice Review, which suggests that children aged ten, and over in private and public law proceedings should attend any hearing to which they are subject. Given the lack of specific guidance, studies informed by practitioner perspectives provide some insight into the 'at what age?' question.

A study conducted by Shemmings (2000) provided a useful benchmark for assessing the impact of legal and policy development on social worker's perspectives of child and young people's participation. The study aimed to support the development of the Assessment Framework (DoH 2000a) and used both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the views of forty-two social workers and forty-six family support workers. Twelve social workers, half of whom worked in child advocacy, believed that children at 'quite a young age' could make decisions. Although a majority, totalling thirty social workers did not share this view; forty out of the forty-two did believe that children and young people at a

certain age should be able to attend the child protection conference, suggesting that social workers were acknowledging rights in principle. On the one hand, attendance represents only one facet of participation and conclusions should not be drawn from an espoused commitment to attendance in person. The study did not seek to explore whether children or young people attended in practice, or how they perceived the experience. On the other hand, the study did provide some insight into how social workers at the time considered both protection and participation rights, a recurrent theme in future studies.

In a comparative study involving over seven hundred child protection workers in England (x102), Finland (x208), Norway (x367) and California (84), Berrick et al. (2015, 2016) asked respondents to consider the participation of a child aged five and then aged eleven in a care proceedings case. Participation was defined at three levels: information provided to the child, information obtained from the child and scope for the child's views to be considered in the decision making process. Across the research respondent range, almost all child protection workers stated that they would ascertain the wishes and feeling of the eleven-year-old child, and considered it more important to do so at this age than for the younger child.

Practitioners in England stated that they were more likely to speak with a child aged 11 than with a child aged 5 (91% compared with 80%), a similar finding to the views of practitioners in Norway and the USA. In comparison with the other countries, practitioners in England attached a higher importance to children of both ages acting as participants in decision making. However, English practitioners were less likely to attach importance to establishing the child's wishes and feelings and needs and seeking the 11 year's old perspective on the reasons for care proceedings. This variation is not qualified by the respondents in the online survey, although the researchers propose two interpretations : the

more favourable being that wishes and feelings may have been established at an earlier stage, and the less favourable associated with practitioner skills and organisational constraints. Handley and Doyle's study (2014) was primarily concerned with establishing practitioners' views on ascertaining the wishes and feelings of young children (defined as under the age of eight years but with a particular emphasis on children under the age of five) and the extent to which qualifying and post qualifying training had supported skill development. This study involved a smaller cohort, seventy practitioners working in CAFCASS, voluntary service providers or local authorities, with views sought via a questionnaire designed to elicit quantitative and qualitative data. Respondents reported attempting to ascertain the wishes and feelings of children under the age of three, but were only successful in this in respect of children aged four and over. Experienced practitioners appeared to be more prepared to engage younger children although differences were not significant. Age was not cited as an obstacle to participation but 53% of practitioners cited their knowledge of child development as the main determining factor. Age and level of child development was also cited as a factor in ascertaining the wishes and feelings of children subject to assessment in a study involving twenty child protection workers in Estonia (Toros et al. 2013). The age of ten is specified in Estonian legislation relating to adoption, but there is no age specification in the legislation guiding assessment practice. Toros et al (2013) suggest that in the absence of such guidance, child protection workers applied this age criterion when involving children in the assessment process.

In Ferguson's (2014) ethnographic study of twenty-four social workers undertaking home visits, fifteen (24%) children were seen alone. Of the forty seven children who were not seen alone, twenty nine (62%) were considered too

young to be communicated with, and no alternative methods of communication (such as observation or play) were used to ascertain their wishes and feelings. This level of practice is incongruent with statutory guidance:

‘Every assessment must be informed by the views of the child as well as the family. Children should, wherever possible, be seen alone and local authority children’s social care has a duty to ascertain the child’s wishes and feelings regarding the provision of services to be delivered’ (HM Gov, 2013 p. 21; HM Gov, 2015 p.23).

A review of the literature has suggested a prevalence of psychological perspectives of childhood within child protection policy and practice, and these have influenced the exercising of professional judgement when assessing a child’s level of competence. Assumptions based on age determined the extent to which participation was perceived by social workers as a principle and a right. Evidence suggests that there are lower levels of participation where children and young people have been consulted and their views represented by adults, but, as has also been established, there is limited evidence of meaningful participation as defined by children themselves. However, age is not the only constraint. The impact of organisational practices was the second significant theme to emerge in the literature review.

In contrast to the above studies which all identified factors that mitigate against participation in child protection practice, Healey and Darlington (2009) identified more positive indicators in their study of practice in Queensland, Australia. The focus of the study was on participatory practice with families with children under the age of eight and involved twenty-eight practitioners in a range of children and family services. Statutory child protection workers recognised the importance of

including the child's voice in an assessment of risk as a counter balance to the parental voice and provided evidence of how this was realised in practice.

However, practitioners working in this service area commented on the need to safeguard against raising expectations of participation affecting outcomes and twenty-one of the twenty-eight respondents (75%) considered it inappropriate to involve children under the age of five in decision making.

#### **4.5.3. The social work practice context.**

The interplay between child characteristics and organisational context is illustrated in Alfandari's study (2017) which sought to evaluate progress following a national reform agenda aimed at promoting participation in planning, intervention and evaluation. Children and young people over the age of twelve were legally afforded the right to attend the meeting, to have an adequate level of information in order to participate, and to be advised of decisions and outcomes. Those under the age of twelve were entitled to have their views represented in the social worker's report. A mixed method approach was applied, including interviews with twenty-two social workers, observation of meetings and document analysis. The researchers obtained data relating to forty five children and young people, twenty three of whom were aged twelve and over. In total, seven children and young people (ages were not specified) attended the meeting but only three participated in both pre and post meeting stage. These findings resonate with those from Kriz and Skivenes (2017); Toros et.al (2013); Vis, Holtan and Thomas (2012) and Vis and Thomas (2009), in that obstacles to participation appear to relate to an interplay between child characteristics, social worker characteristics and process characteristics, and appear to have limited the impact of the reform agenda. However, the lack of methodological detail over

timelines for data collection precluded the inclusion of the impact of organisational change on elements of the system as a possible variable.

As established in Chapter Three, the English child protection system is dominated by a concern with procedural compliance, and intervention based on evidence based practice solutions to complex needs. A consequence is a failure to keep a focus on the child:

‘Possibly the most significant practice failing throughout the majority of the serious case reviews- the failure of all professionals to see the situation from the child’s perspective and experience: to see and speak to the children; to listen to what they said, to observe how they were and to take serious account of their views in supporting their needs’ (Ofsted, 2008 p.18).

Research findings suggest that the principles of child centred assessment practice are not always adhered to in practice. One factor is the context in which assessments are undertaken. Ferguson (2017) commented that children were not always seen on their own during home visits, with the likelihood reducing where children were of a younger age. Where children were seen, these episodes were brief, between five and sixteen minutes, which is likely to restrict the worker’s capacity to develop rapport and to engage in meaningful communication. Practice constraints associated with workloads, and compliance with assessment timescales were mooted as contributory factors to assessment practice and the extent to which a child was visible or invisible:

‘Situations in which children are lost sight of and unheld are best understood in terms of a process of invisibility that arises from the interaction of organisational influences, the absence of containment and workers’ qualities and lived experience’ (Ferguson, 2017 p.1017).

Ferguson's findings have some resonance with other contemporary studies concerned with the detail of child protection assessment practice. Ruch (2014) conducted a study based on reflective case discussions held monthly over a six month period with 6 qualified social workers. The study aimed to add to the knowledge base of how social workers communicate with children and young people. Practitioners commented on the challenges of parental behaviour and organisational pressures that were associated with an evidence orientated approach to assessment procedure and agency requirements:

'If you don't do it on the computer it's not work. It's not there you know' (Ruch, 2014 p.2154).

A limiting of the child or young person's voice in assessment practice was also highlighted in studies undertaken by Horwath (2011), Horwath, and Tarr (2015). Although the more recent study focused on practice contexts where child neglect was the primary safeguarding concern, there were similarities in each study's findings. Both studies reported on practice issues associated with retaining a focus on the child or young person in a way that elicited views, wishes and feelings and balancing meaningful engagement with children and young people, and practice time constraints for completion of assessments.

The relationship between organisational context and communicative practices were explored by Winter et al. (2017) in a two-year project involving social work teams in each UK nation. Eighty-six social work encounters with one hundred and twenty six children and young people under the age of seventeen were observed. In contrast to Ferguson's findings, in this study 50% of children were seen alone and some social workers were observed to rely on traditional methods, for example crayons, alongside more creative approaches to facilitate

communication. However, some social workers were observed to rely more on verbal communication, indicating a lack of confidence in using creative, play-based approaches with younger children.

Research undertaken by Thomas and Holland (2010); Munro (2011); Ruch (2014); Horwath and Tarr (2015) and Winter et al. (2017) all commented on standardised and narrow descriptors of the child or young person's stated experiences, informed by limited theoretical perspectives which lacked understanding of psychodynamic approaches which facilitate an exploration of a child or young person's internal and external worlds (Ruch,2014), a tendency towards heuristics. practice short cuts (Taylor,2017) such as a tendency to cut and paste information across child records in sibling groups, and finally an over emphasis on the parental context (Horwath and Tarr,2015). In some occurrences, the child or young person's views were not recorded at all, and where they were recorded, it was unclear which aspect of the child's life was referred to (Thomas and Holland, 2010). However, it should be noted that the assessment record might not accurately reflect the nature of the work undertaken. Case recording systems are not designed to capture a detailed narrative account of work undertaken, they do however require the social worker to document that the work has taken place and in accordance with any specified timescale.

In contrast to the above studies, which have highlighted practice constraints, a thematic survey involving ten local authorities noted improvement in assessment practice (Ofsted, 2015). Each local authority had adopted wholesale or elements of theoretical models for assessing need and harm (including Signs of Safety) and the survey aimed to establish whether the quality of assessments had improved from those reported in previous inspections. One hundred and twenty three cases



were audited by case file analysis and from interviews with practitioners, children, young people and parents. The survey noted the following as a key finding:

‘In the large majority of cases workers were using the child’s voice and views to inform their analysis in assessment’ (p.6)

At an earlier stage this was qualified as:

‘In 63% of cases reviewed, inspectors found that children’s views on their families’ difficulties had been taken into account in the assessment’. (p4).

In a pilot study conducted into the effectiveness of the Single Assessment Framework, Ofsted (2015) stated that directly stated evidence of the individual child’s experience and journey was an integral feature of a good quality assessment. The study reported that in 63% of one hundred and twenty three tracked cases (a statistic that is interpreted as the majority of cases) there was evidence that the child or young person’s view had been reflected in the assessment and subsequent analysis. However, it also noted that practice was inconsistent in respect of social workers sharing assessments with children and young people, and in ensuring that the decision making process was transparent. An important point to note here is an assumption in this study that voice and view were synonymous. Participation focused more on the process of gaining wishes, feelings and views, with more limited evidence of outcome orientated participation concerned with safety planning.

Bunn (2013) explored the impact of Signs of Safety on levels of child participation. Responses were provided by twelve practitioners from local authorities that had implemented Signs of Safety. Although the focus of the survey is weighted towards the parental perspective, practitioners did believe that the use of the

Three Houses had improved levels of communication with children and younger children in particular. The survey does not explore this in any depth but age was identified as a possible variant for deciding on the appropriateness of tools for children under the age of four.

Two further interrelated evaluation reports of the implementation of Signs of Safety in local authorities in England have been recently published (Munro et al, 2016; Baginski et.al 2017). The earlier report set out the practice rationale for a transformational government funded Innovations Programme involving ten local authorities, which aimed to improve outcomes for children and young people through a systemic transformation of organisational culture, leadership and practice (DfE, 2016b). In the pilot programme, the Signs of Safety framework was adapted to an assessment and action cycle where the Three Houses tool served as an assessment mapping tool, and action orientated safety planning involved 'listening, informing and involving children through the whole action cycle' (Munro et al, p16). This report noted extensive use of the Three Houses, and high levels of social worker confidence in its application; concluding that previous practice was more likely to have been affected by organisational factors than by individual social worker attitudes and attributes. The evaluation report undertaken by Baginski et al. (2017) provided greater insight into social workers' perspectives, but failed to incorporate the perspectives of children and young people in the report's key findings. Although one hundred and eleven children (participant age range was not specified) were interviewed (with sixty one interviewed again at stage 2), this focused on children and young people's perceptions of contact with their social worker, which is somewhat broader than an exploration of their perspectives on the Three Houses tool. In contrast with Munro et al. (2016), there were no reported findings on the usefulness of Three Houses as a mapping tool or

of Words and Pictures as a safety-planning tool. However, findings associated with social worker perspectives supported those of the previous report, with evidence suggesting extensive use of the Three Houses, with more experienced social workers more likely to incorporate the tool within an existing resource bank for communicating with children and young people, there was some acknowledgement about resistance to change on the part of more experienced workers:

‘This is about moving to collaborative practice and co-production and about doing your practice with people, not to them. It's a whole mind-set shift and we're not there on that, because some people still like the comfort in a nice form and a tick-box, so it's a heart and minds thing, that bit, and that's your organisational culture bit, which you do not get from training’ (p.44)

Although Munro et al. (2016) noted that training should not be a panacea for poor practice, there was an underlying assumption that the five-day training programme provided to support the implementation of Signs of Safety in each local authority would equip or consolidate skills associated with communicating effectively with children and young people. Neither report considered social worker attitudes about children nor childhood as an enabling or limiting factor.

#### **4.5.4. Social worker attributes.**

The extent to which social workers considered themselves adequately skilled to communicate effectively with children in order to ascertain their wishes and feelings was the primary focus of two studies. Handley and Doyle's study (2014) focused on qualified social workers of whom 70% (twenty) had been qualified for at least five years. It was noted earlier that respondents in this study considered knowledge of child development to be the most significant factor in attempting to

ascertain the wishes and feelings of children. However, only 33% considered themselves to be highly skilled and a further 62% believed themselves to be moderately skilled and attributed this to the level of skills and theoretical based training at qualifying and post qualifying levels. The impact of specialist training in practitioner confidence in communicating with children was noted in a study undertaken in Ireland by O'Reilly and Dolan (2016). The respondents took part in a 6-month play skills training programme and self- evaluated an increase in confidence, which in turn had facilitated a more child centred approach to their practice.

#### **4.6. Representation through others.**

The final area of review concerns evidences of the child's indirect contribution to assessment and decision-making forums as presented in case records and reports. There is a limited range of empirical research and not all focused on the child protection conference process. Notwithstanding this limitation, it is possible to elicit some relevant insights. Of the five studies, two explored practice in a single site local authority in England (Bailey and Ward, 2009;Laird et al. 2017), one in multiple sites in Scotland (Bruce, 2014), one in multiple sites in Wales (Sanders and Mace, 2006) and one in multiple sites in Belgium (Roose et al. 2009)

The earliest study (Sanders and Mace) reviewed the social worker and conference reports for eighty-nine initial and review child protection conferences. There was no indication in any of the child views being presented in their own words using written or audio methods, and in only thirteen (14.6%) conference reports were there a specific section for the child's views. Although the child's views were more likely to be reflected in the social worker's report, the authors concluded:

‘Overall, there was a remarkable lack of clarity as to whether the views, wishes and feelings mentioned were actually those of the child or whether they were an adult’s assumption or judgement of what they thought the young person’s view was’ (pp.100-101)

Similar findings were reported by Bruce (2014) and Roose et.al (2009). Although the studies have different practice contexts: respectively child protection and children in care, both comment on an orientation towards professional filtering of the child’s voice. Good practice was defined by Bruce as:

‘This meeting had the view that the child has wished to convey to *this* particular meeting, on *this* particular day’ (p.522).

In these studies practice that met this criterion appeared to be the exception. For example, Roose et.al. (2009) noted that the service user, as child or parent, was not always defined in the case records and on occasion the purpose of the entry was not clear: to express a child perspective or to provide a professional perspective.

Research undertaken into the representation of views in statutory child care environments highlight common themes, most notably a tendency towards a professional filtering of the child’s voice through the use of professional adult language and use of the third person to convey an objective interpretation.

#### **4.7. Conclusion.**

The review of the literature suggests some significant limitations of the evidence presented. These are outlined in Appendix 2 but what follows is a brief overview with the intention of highlighting gaps in the existing body of knowledge. Firstly, there is a limited body of evidence drawn from the child or young person’s

perspective and where this does exist, a range of practice contexts have been explored. It was therefore necessary to widen the inclusion criteria to consider key findings from children and young people who were looked after or who provided perspectives on the wider child protection process. Evidence exploring the microcosm of the key decision making forums is limited. Secondly, there is very limited evidence of the impact of particular assessment approaches on levels of participation. Thirdly, the perspectives of children under the age of seven are significantly under reported and in view of the vulnerability of young children to abuse and neglect this appears to be a significant gap in developing a general understanding of the meaning and weight given to the wishes and feelings of younger children.

The practitioner perspective was more dominant than the child or young person's perspective in the empirical studies that focused specifically on the child protection conference / core group, and more widely on the child protection process. This is attributed not only to the number of studies focusing on each perspective, but also to the size of the participant sample frame within each context.

Overall, the review suggests an absence of participatory practice, either through the direct attendance of the child at the child protection conference, or through the representation of the child's voice in the documents presented to, and produced at the conference.

Social workers are required to adhere to core social work values that promote social justice and uphold rights, and to practice in an anti-oppressive and empowering manner towards service users. The expression and enactment of values and ethics in practice are interwoven with legal interpretation. Herein lies the tension between participation and protection in English child welfare policy and

practice, where there is a legal requirement for the child's best interests to be upheld in all matters concerning them. This is the fundamental principle of the Children Act 1989, and must be considered alongside the right for the child to express her/ his wishes and feelings. As previously noted, the UNCRC does not privilege protection over participation rights. However, as Archard and Skivenes suggest, there is a tension in maintaining a commitment to both:

'Promotion of a child's welfare is essentially paternalistic since it asks us to do what we, but not necessarily the child, think is best for the child; whereas, listening to the child's own views asks us to consider doing what the child, but not necessarily we, think is best for the child' ( 2009b p2).

This chapter concludes a review of core concepts associated with the rights of children and young people to express their views, wishes and feelings in the child protection conference. The findings of the literature review highlighted the potential for further research into how the views of children and young people are presented and represented at a key decision making forum. This study aimed to address this and contribute to this body of knowledge. The focus of the thesis now turns to the research conducted in Moor Town, which set out to explore how the views of children and young people were presented or represented in this forum and to identify variables that influenced their capacity to exercise participatory rights under Article 12.

## **Chapter 5. Research methodology.**

### **5.1. Introduction.**

The thesis is underpinned by a mixed paradigm approach and a mixed methods framework for data collection and data analysis. In order to present a coherent structured discussion over the methodological position and of the methods applied in the fieldwork stage, these elements of the thesis will be presented in two chapters.

This chapter establishes the methodological framework adopted by the researcher and in doing so will provide a rationale for the choices made in the research design. The chapter begins with establishing the author's ontological and epistemological position, and then proceeds to locate this study within the broader domain of social work research. The chapter then sets out the methodological framework for the study. The thesis is concerned with a critical exploration of practice theory (Fook,2002); a consideration of how theory informs practice and the application of theory to practice; and has therefore been framed within an interpretive post - structural paradigm, and informed by a critical social work research perspective . A rationale for selecting an interpretive and critical social work research approach will be provided, alongside a comment on the positioning of the study's original aim within a children's rights informed research orientation. As noted in Chapter One, the thesis initially aimed to focus solely on the perspectives of children and young people and aspired to uphold the principles and characteristics of participatory research. However, Chapter One also noted the inclusion of adult perspectives at a later stage in the research design. This compromised the thesis's claim to be



participatory and the research design was subsequently accommodated more within an interpretive critical social work framework, whilst aiming to uphold the principles of rights based research. The chapter then concludes with an overview of the analytical frameworks that were applied to the data sets.

## **5.2. Ontological positioning.**

### **5.2.1. Ontological influences.**

Throughout my career as a social worker, social work manager and workforce development manager I have sought to uphold principles of social justice and rights for all individuals who were in receipt of social work intervention. I began my professional social work career in 1989 working in a local authority in the south east of England. Social work practice was 'patch based' and influenced by community development principles, that is a commitment to working alongside recipients of social work services and a recognition of the value of community based approaches to meeting local needs (Barclay, 1982). As a team, we developed close working relationships with local schools, nurseries, primary health care services and voluntary sector organisations. In that respect, I believe that as a team, we were uniquely positioned to understand the needs of the local population, and we were able to exercise a degree of autonomy in how those needs were responded to, individually and collectively. I lived and worked in the 'patch' area and frequently encountered service users in non- working hours. This, I believe, introduced a humane element to the relationships I had established with service users. In 1991, I was fortunate in being able to develop my interest in rights based social work practice through post - qualifying professional development opportunities. I developed an information guide for children who were the subject of a child protection conference in the local authority. Additionally, as an interviewer (and subsequently a trainer of police and social worker

interviewers ) of children under Memorandum of Good Practice guidelines (Home Office, 1992), I sought to uphold the rights of children who had experienced abuse to be heard through the criminal justice system. Finally, in my role as a Children's Services Workforce Development Manager I worked with groups of young people who had experience of social work involvement and facilitated their role as visiting lecturers on social work post qualifying programmes and in house inter- agency child protection training events.

### **5.2.2. Ontological stance.**

The above experiences have influenced how I essentially perceive childhood and the status of children and young people in western societies. I believe that children's experiences of their social world provide unique and invaluable insights into what it is like to experience life as a child, and are worthy of study in their own right. My research interest did not primarily lie in exploring social worker's perceptions of how children and young people experienced child protection conferences. As someone with extensive experiences of working with children and young people who were subject to child protection procedures, I could hypothesise what it might be like to attend a child protection conference, but only through an adult and a professional lens. I could lay no claim to how the reality of attending a child protection conference may be perceived by a child or young person at a given time in their life. My ontological position further influenced the decision to include the voices of children and young people when they were not present in person. As Parton and Kirk (2010) note, the primary concern for social work knowledge is to enable those whose voices tend to be silent a platform for that voice. A focus on parental perspectives would have upheld the thesis's commitment to principles of social justice, but would compromise the ontological claim for including a children's rights perspective as an element

of post structural theory alongside those that are more established such as anti - racist or feminist perspectives ( Healey 2000).

### **5.3. Epistemological positioning.**

In undertaking a qualitative research study, the primary concern lies in understanding the lived experiences within an individual's life world. The following section will provide a rationale for a pluralist paradigm framework based on phenomenology and post - structural theories. I refer to Padgett (2008) when noting that the nature of social sciences research lends itself to debate over how best to understand the social world, and what can count as truth and reality. Within the trajectory of social sciences research there is a developing argument against the one size fits all approach to qualitative research, and an acknowledgement that research can adopt a more flexible approach towards the acquisition of new knowledge (Clarke et al. 2014). Qualitative research need not rely on a singular methodology; its inherent characteristics lend themselves to pluralist paradigms and methodologies. The aim here is to demonstrate rationale and relevance of the methodological frameworks, rather than a sole concern with adherence to a proven framework for conducting social science research.

The philosophical assumptions that frame the thesis are embedded in my personal and professional sense of being. I acknowledge the existence of multiple realities in the social world, and was therefore guided towards a research methodology that accommodated multiple perspectives. This is set out in Table 2. I also acknowledge the subjective nature of knowledge and view this as unfixed, contextual and subject to change. I believe knowledge is acquired through the subjective experiences of individuals and the researcher must therefore become familiar with the participant's world: the more you know, the better you will understand (Sullivan, 2012).

Table 2.The ontological and epistemological framework (adapted from Lincoln et al.2011, p.195)

Element of the research design	Interpretivist	Critical/ Children's Rights
Aim	To understand the lived experiences of children and young who take part in their child protection conference.	To locate the involvement of children/ young people as a marginalised group within discourses of rights and power in child protection practice.
Ontology	Recognises the existence of multiple realities	Realities are constructed and mediated through the micro practices of social relationships.
Epistemology	Knowledge is pluralist, subjective, constructed, and subject to change. Requires interpretation	Knowledge is socially constructed and influenced by relational power
Theoretical framework	Phenomenology	Post - structuralism
Methodology	Phenomenological	Critical Discourse Analysis
Method	Interviews/ focus groups	Documentary analysis

#### 5.4. Phenomenology.

The original aim of the study sought to explore how children and young people experienced being part of the child protection conference. A phenomenological methodology is compatible with the research theme which is concerned with exploration and understanding of experience and perspective (Alderson and Morrow, 2011; Hardwick and Worsley, 2011; Smith, 2009). Essentially, I was concerned with how individual children and young people perceived their reality at a fixed point in time across two axioms: what did attending and taking part in the child protection conference involve, and how did it feel to attend and take part?

The focus of a phenomenological approach is on sense making viewing the world of the child protection conference through the perspective of the child or young person. It acknowledges a social construction of reality and the life world. (Hood, 2016). The formal decision making forum (which is a sub system of the child protection process) is a social construction based on ideologies of childhood, of state welfare systems and discourses of harm and risk and care and control within statutory children's services. How the child or young person perceives their experience will shape and be shaped by perceptions of self in relation to others: family and professionals; by physical environmental factors associated with place and time and by organisational processes that have influenced the practices which take place within the conference forum.

Given that the study adopted a mixed paradigm approach, it is important to acknowledge that it did not aim to merely describe the participants views of their experiences. This would place myself as the researcher in a position of neutrality and would have required me to set aside existing assumptions I held about the phenomena under study and the importance of context in how we seek to understand our meaning in the social world (King and Horrocks, 2010; Smith et al. 2009). It was important to recognise the influence of my practice based knowledge and skills to the relationships between myself as the researcher and the subject matter, and to the research participants in every element of the study.

Phenomenology is suited to the ontological and epistemological frameworks underpinning the study. However, I did not consider this to be an appropriate methodology for exploring the social and political structural processes that exist within contemporary social work policy and practice, and which shape and

mediate the relationship between social worker and service user. For this reason, a critical methodology underpinned by post-structural theory and critical social work theory (Fook, 2016; Healy, 2000, 2001, 2005; Healy and Mulholland, 2015; Humphries, 2008; Thompson, 2010) was applied, and critical discourse analysis adopted for the case record analysis. Critical social work practice and research approaches claim to be emancipatory and this will be developed further in the next section. However, the inclusion of children's rights as a form of critical social work is less evident in the literature cited above and this is considered separately.

### **5.5. Post structuralism and critical social work theory.**

As noted in Chapter Four, research findings suggest that the voice of the child or young person is under represented in both practice and research contexts. In a generationally ordered relationship, the social worker's expert knowledge is upheld as the legitimate source of knowledge.

Post -structuralism provides a framework for understanding how discourse constitutes and legitimises knowledge. As noted in Chapter Two, discourse in this thesis is understood as an examination of how language and practice are constructed and reconstructed in everyday contexts (Foucault, 1977). When applied to social work contexts, discourse is defined as:

'Structures of knowledge, claims and practices through which we understand, explain and decide things... They are frameworks or grids of social organisation that make some social actions possible while precluding others.'(Parton, 1994 p13).

An epistemological concern with the influence of post- structuralism in a child protection context therefore recognises the partiality of existing knowledge, namely how this is created and legitimised in practice discourses. Here, the loci of scrutiny is:

‘On the symbolic, such as language, identity, the subjective, and sites and forms of power’ (Noble, 2012 p.174).

Healey (2000) suggests that a post structural approach invites a critical exploration of the social and political issues that define the social worker’s relationship with the state and towards service users. Such scrutiny, for example, positions empowerment as a truth claim, an illusion of equality, and a ‘feel good’ factor in the social control role occupied by social workers as agents of the state (Lupton and Nixon, 1999).

Critical social work theory is influenced by post –structural theory and encompasses a range of perspectives including anti oppressive social work, anti-racist social work and feminist social work ( Healey,2000;2005). There are however, shared orientations including emancipatory approaches, an emphasis on power relations between service user and practitioner, a concern with the role of systems and processes in shaping said relationships and finally a commitment to effecting practice change ( D’Cruz and Jones, 2014; Fook, 2016; Hood, 2012; Tisdall et al.2014). As a broad framework, critical social work theory challenges modernist assumptions which suggest that an individual’s experiences can be improved by professional knowledge that is bounded and derived from reason and science ( Becker,1967; Fook, 2016; Fook and Gardner, 2007; Noble, 2012; Webb, 2001). As a theoretical framework, critical social work theory acknowledges the importance of understanding the relationship between an

individual and her/ his social world, and how relationships are made sense of in the context for sense and meaning making. This broadens the scope of understanding beyond the individual lived experience to the broader political and social processes, which constitute and shape these experiences.

### **5.6. The nature of social work research.**

The relationship between social work practice, research and theory is recognised in international and national contexts by the International Federation of Social Work's definition of social work (2014). The association between knowledge generation and the fundamental aims of social work is generally accepted in the social work research literature, and it is possible to elicit some common characteristics ( D'Cruz and Jones, 2014; Webber, 2015). These include the advancement of knowledge of the individual within society, seeking an understanding of the meaning of the social work experience and identifying which forms of intervention are effective and why (Smith, 2009). Padgett (2008) acknowledged the debates held within social sciences research over approach and method, between positivism and interpretivism, between singular and mixed methodologies and between the quest for realism as opposed to practical application, but claims that a general characteristic of social work research, regardless of methodology, is a concern with change. Social work research is therefore an act of social responsibility aiming to improve lives. It aims to enhance the theoretical rigour of the discipline by knowledge development; to provide an evidence base for policy development and thus to improve practice and to give credence to the voices of those who receive services on a voluntary or non-voluntary basis ( Webber, 2015).The latter objective reflects the emergence of service user participation in the development of social work policy and practice



(Matthews and Crawford, 2011), and resonates with an emerging critical approach to contemporary social work practice in statutory children's services. (Fook, 2016; Parton, 2011a; Rogowski, 2012).

What is more contestable is the debate over what counts as legitimate knowledge, who produces this, why and how. As noted in Chapter Three, a trend towards a technical positivist approach in social work research has been well-documented (White, 1997; Webb, 2001; Shaw, 2010). Here, knowledge acquisition is primarily concerned with identification of social problems (such as child poverty or social exclusion) and application of positivist methods in order to establish a 'does it work?' and 'is it cost effective?' evidence base for service intervention. The trend towards EBP was also epitomised to some extent by the creation of the government sponsored knowledge repository: The Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), which mirrored its established counterpart within the domain of health research (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence). Although SCIE was intended to be a repository for practice based research, and inclusive of service user research (Fisher, 2016), it was critiqued for the lack of privilege afforded to service user knowledge in comparison with professional and organisational knowledge (Pawson et al. 2003).

This trend towards organisational and professional evidence based practice was adopted by the New Labour government through its modernising agenda, and illustrated by the evaluation of nationwide initiatives such as Sure Start Children's Centres (Eisenstadt, 2011) and specific interventions including parenting programmes such as Triple P and Webster Stratton (Bell, 2007; DCSF, 2008). Critics of the dominance of evidence based practice contend that the centralisation of the research agenda upholds traditional notions of social work

practice whereby the practitioner is the expert, drawing on an established knowledge base of what constitutes effective practice in order to fulfil the agency's functions of care and control (Lovelock et al. 2004; McLaughlin, 2007). Under the Health and Social Care Act 2012, NICE has assumed the lead responsibility for developing social care guidance, receiving its commissions from the Department of Health and Department for Education. Although service users are involved in research, the agenda remains politically driven.

Schön's (1987) metaphor of the high hard ground and swampy lowland of professional practice serves to illustrate the limitation of a technical approach to advancing practice knowledge:

"In the varied topography of professional practice, there is the high, hard ground overlooking the swamp. On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the application of research based theory and technique. In the swampy lowland messy confusing problems defy technical solution" (p.3).

#### 5.6.1. Critical social work research.

The emergence of a critique of neo liberal and modernist influences on professional social work practice (Ferguson, 2011; Fook, 2016; Parton and Kirk, 2010; Rogowski, 2012,2013) has influenced the development of a counter trend in social work research; one which seeks to locate knowledge within subjective and contextual frameworks of professional social work practice. This is not to deny a place for evidence based research, but to accept its limitations for the complexities of contemporary social work practice. Informed by post-structural concerns with social justice and anti-oppressive practice, and underpinned by a range of theoretical perspectives including feminist theory and participatory theory (Healy,

2001;Healy and Mulholland,2015); this aims to advance emancipatory and transformative practice. Within this tradition, knowledge is not fixed and objective, but is generated from multiple sources of what serves as reality, and which are located within dominant political, economic, social and cultural structures. It recognises the complexity of the lives of those who receive services and the need to draw on multiple sources of knowledge to advance the core principles of social work. Knowledge is sought not only to provide insight but also to promote practice change.

Post structural theory, as it applies to social work research, seeks to challenge taken for granted assumptions over the nature of social problems, and the failure of social and political based discourses to address how these effectively shape and influence language, and its effect on power relations, subjective identity and knowledge creation (Healy, 2005; Noble, 2012). Healey (2000) suggests that a post structural approach invites a critical exploration of the social and political issues that define the social worker's relationship with the state and towards service users. In making visible the political, economic and social structures which serve to legitimise and maintain dominant sources of power, social work research that is informed by critical theory strives for knowledge as a vehicle for action.

Researchers who draw on critical social work theory informed by post structuralism can expose the limitations of organisational systems and practices that appear to privilege the technical over the relational and emotional elements in social work practice (Healy, 2001).

Research that is informed by a critical social work research perspective is orientated towards emancipatory approaches, an emphasis on power relations

between service user and practitioner, a concern with the role of systems and processes in shaping said relationships and finally a commitment to effecting practice change. Although children's rights is not identified as a separate entity in critical social work research frameworks ( for example Healey, 2005) it has been incorporated into the thesis's methodological approach

### **5.6.2. Children' rights.**

The thesis is influenced by the body of literature associated with a critical and social justice orientation in social work research (Fook, 2002; Fook, 2016; Healey, 2001). These approaches are aligned to the children's rights philosophy, values and principles as embodied in Article 12 of the UNCRC ( as discussed in Chapter Two); namely that children and young people have the right to be involved in all matters (including research) of relevance and interest to them. The research study aimed to provide an opportunity for children to not only articulate their experience of being involved in adult centric forums, but also to contribute to the development of safeguarding practices in their local area.

In order to understand how children and young people's views, wishes and feelings are presented and taken account of in child protection decision-making forums, it is necessary to consider how children and the status of childhood are understood in society. The children's rights paradigm is somewhat aligned to a sociology of childhood in that both reject a discourse of protectionism, viewing the child or young person as a social actor (James and Prout,2015; Pinkey,2011). Franklin ( 1995,2002) partially attributes the development of the children's rights agenda to the influence of the ' new paradigm of childhood' and this is the rationale of its inclusion in the epistemological framework for the thesis. The children's rights movement has influenced the social work research agenda,

particularly from the end of the last century onwards when children's perspectives assumed a legitimate status in the creation of service user informed knowledge (Clark and Moss, 2001; Groundwater-Smith et al. 2015). However, the potential influence of a child development paradigm on some elements of the research methodology could not be ignored. As noted in Chapter Two, developmental theories of childhood have permeated into child welfare law, policy and practice and into how children and young people are perceived to be capable of contributing to knowledge creation. The UNCRC recognises that children and young people are a group with particular needs by age and their dependency on adults (United Nations, 2009). In addition, children and young people who are in need of protection are homogenously grouped as vulnerable (Children's Commissioner, 2017; Daniel, 2010).

#### 5.7. The research framework.

As a form of practical enquiry, the thesis is positioned within a critical social work research framework and aims to examine two practice assumptions. The first concerns the capacity for children and young people to exercise their participatory rights within a policy and practice discourse that espouses to uphold these rights. The second concerns the role of the social workers in promoting participatory and protection rights when assessing harm and risk. As the literature review in Chapter Four illustrated, the knowledge base for from a child or young person's perspective is limited. As such the thesis is:

'Geared directly to providing information that is needed to deal with some practical problem, so that here the immediate audience for research reports is people with a practical interest in the issue: notably, but not exclusively, policy makers and

occupational practitioners of the relevant kind' (Hammersley cited in Lovelock et al. 2004 p.59).

In summary, the research study has sought to contribute to the more contemporary turn in social work research that seeks to generate new knowledge from those who have direct experience of statutory intervention. In this respect, the study positions children as “epistemologically privileged”, recognising their status as individuals who are better placed than their parent or social worker to describe what it is like to experience a child protection conference (Balen et al. 2006,p.31). This research study is concerned less with an evaluative “what works” agenda (Shaw and Holland, 2014) and more with adding to a knowledge base of the lived experience of children and how these experiences may inform practice development. I will now proceed to consider how this critical, transformative approach towards social work research is reflected in the research methodology and research methods.

## **5.8. Analytical approaches.**

### **5.7.1. Phenomenological thematic analysis.**

Qualitative research analysis can be defined as a quest for identifying and interpreting the general from the particular through flexible and naturalistic, iterative processes, and for the purpose of generating meaning (Gibson and Brown, 2009; Silverman, 2014). As Gibson and Brown (ibid) note, qualitative social research will usually draw on deductive and inductive reasoning approaches.

Phenomenological analysis is underpinned by hermeneutics: the interpretation of the other by the researcher (Armour et al. 2009, Smith et al.2009). The analytical and interpretive lens through which the data is explored is selected by the

researcher and is therefore unique to the given context at that particular time; the interpretation and meaning attributed to the data is therefore influenced by the researcher self. The researcher becomes the analytical tool, understanding and giving meaning through the hermeneutic circle. Armour et al. (ibid) described this as a process that requires the researcher to scrutinise the part in order to understand the whole and to scrutinise the whole in order to understand the part. As a framework this applies to the relationship between elements of the study, for example the selected data collection method to the overall research design and one extract from a transcript in relation to the whole transcript.

Thematic analysis is concerned with providing detail rich description, interpretation and analysis through a sequential process, with the aim of generating sense making and meaning (Rapley, 2014). Thematic analysis draws on a standard iterative coding process of description, interpretation and conceptualisation (Harding 2013; Hardwick and Worsley, 2011; King and Horricks, 2010; Roulston, 2010).

The above process was applied to the data generated from each individual interview and from both focus groups, with Nvivo used to develop descriptive and interpretive codes. Data analysis began with transcription; an activity that in itself is not value free (Gibson and Brown, 2009; Vigouroux, 2007), as the researcher essentially re-presents and re-shapes data in a different way to the original source. Text familiarisation served to select, separate and classify what was important, and to identify areas of similarity and difference. The benefit of a full text transcription, including verbal and non-verbal communication patterns (including for example intonations or episodes of laughter) enabled me to explore the data in depth in accordance with the principles of phenomenological

analysis. Descriptive coding was followed by interpretive coding which evolved through grouping the descriptive coding into common themes. These were then further refined into overarching themes.

Qualitative research analysis, as with quantitative data analysis, may also include more deductive elements in that the process followed is systematic and should be capable of demonstrating an inter-relationship with all other research elements (Blaikie, 2007; Carey, 2002). There were elements of deductive reasoning in thematic analysis, in that the research question and the research design were informed by a review of existing literature, and the focus group discussion schedule was informed by the data obtained through the other data collection methods. Harding (2013) notes that it is not always possible to make a clear distinction between inductive and deductive reasoning in practice and a more helpful approach is to locate data analysis along an inductive - deductive continuum.

Thematic analysis can be critiqued from two perspectives (Gibson and Brown, 2009). Firstly, the iterative process of moving between data and separating this out; referred to as bracketing in phenomenological terminology; may result in some data remaining hidden. It was therefore necessary to remain attuned to this, and to ensure that there were multiple opportunities to immerse myself in the data order in order to reveal multiple meanings. The second critical perspective refers to the limitations of phenomenological thematic analysis for the analysis of case records. Chapter Six will explore in some depth the challenges associated with identifying and recruiting children and young people as research participants and this was partially attributable to relatively low prevalence rates. Here, it is important to note that children and young people who did not



attend in person relied upon others to represent their views, wishes and feelings. In all likelihood, their identities would be constructed and mediated in the conference through text talk as opposed to a visible presentation at the conference which presupposes an identity based on capacity and capability.

### **5.8.2. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).**

Whereas phenomenological analysis positions the subjective experience as self-evident articulations of truth (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012) discourse analysis provides a mechanism for exploring the subjective experience in the system that generate thought and knowledge:

‘The social structures that shape our subjectivities are situated within discursive fields where language, social institutions, subjectivity and power exist, intersect and produce conflicting ways of giving meaning to and constructing reality’ (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012 p.50).

CDA is a genre of discourse analysis which aims to highlight the relevance of discursive practices in the construction of meaning in social contexts. Garrity (2016) noted a methodological pluralism in how discourse is defined by exponents of post-structural critical social work. Taylor (2013) for example, defines discourse analysis as:

‘A research approach in which language material... is examined as evidence of phenomena *beyond the individual person*’ (p.2).

Here, discourse is reduced to an examination of language practice when this is established as an intricate feature of social life and one that connects all other elements, including identity, relationships and social practices (Fairclough, 2003; Healy and Mulholland, 2015). As noted earlier in 5.2.2, discourse is concerned

with the intersection of both language and practice in the construction of knowledge and subjectivity (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012). It influences how a phenomenon is understood and conceptualised in order to regulate conduct and activities. In this respect, it serves to 'rule in' and to rule 'out' (Hall, 2012 p.73). Discourse analysis is constructionist in that it explores how meaning is constructed through language and, in common with thematic analysis, it is inductive in nature and relies upon detailed analysis of text. The "critical" dimension of discourse analysis lies in a concern with how language and discourse are used to maintain or change social objectives. As such, CDA is associated with discourses of power and control and how these are manifested in day-to-day practices through an examination of the role of the speaker/ author (Bloor and Bloor 2007; Fairclough 2003; Hall et.al. 2006; Harding 2013; Van Dijk, 1995).

Atkinson and Coffey (2011) maintain that the key analytical question in documentary analysis is:

'What kind of reality is this document creating and how does it do it?' (p. 81).

Although thematic analysis assisted with the 'what' dimension, I considered it to be limited in answering the 'how' dimension. When the child or young person is not present in person in the child protection conference their subjective knowledge is produced by others and through this act a form of truth is created. CDA assists in exploring these processes.

There is an underlying assumption that the range of activities associated with the child protection system as a whole will be organised and co-ordinated by discourse, texts and language practices (Skehill et al. 2012; Hennum, 2011)).

These were explored in some depth in Chapter Three, where it was noted

that an exploration of the relationship between both child protection practice and child protection discourses is useful for illustrating some key transformational turns in child welfare. Examination of text and language also serves to illustrate what Smith (2005, p.54) describes as the 'ontology of the social', a 'mapping of the social into its institutional forms' (p.52). This is predicated on two notions of reality; the organisational and the individual and it is possible to detect the power relations that exist between the two in texts and documents which mediate between the two:

'We assume people's daily activities in child protection organizations are coordinated by practices of language, texts and discourses – all essential and connected in the daily production of institutional knowledge in all organizations. This is also the point where one digs beneath discourses to examine everyday practice' (Skehill et al. 2012 p. 60).

Van Dijk (2010) refers to this as the act of 'managing the minds of others' (2012, p.302), a key function of language in its verbal and written manifestations.

Managing the minds of others through case records incorporates acts of showing and telling (Taylor, 2008) In a social worker's assessment report, the former is concerned with conveying activities and actions in a credible manner (for example the undertaking of a home visit) and as factual representations, and as such the voice of the narrator is not particularly visible. In contrast, telling involves the narrator's voice, which serves to construct and categorise events activities and identities.

A narrative transcript was taken of each case record that was attached to a conference event. Any references to the child's wishes and feelings were reproduced as a verbatim record. A number of analytical frameworks exist in social sciences to assist the researcher in organising and analysing data, and

relevance of application will be predicated on affinity to a particular discourse. For the purpose of this study, critical discourse analysis is concerned with the mediation of social relations within social structures and processes. This has been advanced by Fairclough (2003) and Van Dijk 1995;2001) and Fairclough's framework (2003) was adopted for its relevance to an examination of language in social practices. Appendix 7 provides an example of how the framework was applied in the conference held in respect of Corrine, aged thirteen and this will be referenced here to illustrate the analytical framework.

#### **5.8.2.1. Genre.**

Genre is concerned with the type of report and its intended purpose. For each document that was made available, I anticipated that there would be a relationship with other records that are invisible to the child protection conference. For example, the social work report is a summary assessment report, which was based on previously recorded assessment data. This would include a record of each social work activity, including home visits, telephone discussions with family and professionals and records of direct work undertaken with a child. Reference is made to the social worker speaking with Corrine on unspecified occasions and the relevant section of the assessment report serves as an account of this interaction. The range of documents presented, and or developed, at the conference served either an input or strategic function. The purpose of the former is to contribute to communication streams, and in social work practice any document designed for assessment and information sharing purposes, including examples of direct work, are incorporated into this category. Documents that serve a strategic function are those that illustrate decision making and planning processes, namely the record of the child protection conference and the child protection plan (referred to as the safety plan in Signs of Safety conferences).

The transcript itself can also be considered as an example of a strategic genre, intended to generate new knowledge and learning through the group process (Wieck et.al, 2007).

#### **5.8.2.2. Inter-textuality.**

Inter-textuality refers to the audit trail within and between documents in order to establish relationships of hierarchy and structure between multiple voices (Atkinson and Coffey, 2011; Bloor and Bloor, 2007; Fairclough, 2003; Gee, 1999; Skehill et al. 2012).

Figure 1 depicts how Smith's typology of high order and low order texts (2005) illustrated the hierarchical inter- textual relationships in Moor Town

Smith applied the term higher order text to denote those that are regulatory in function and purpose. These establish the socio –legal discourse of child protection which is then applied to the set of overarching professional and organisational policy based texts and lower levels texts that are enacted through localised agency practices. For the purpose of the study's analytical framework, I have introduced a further dimension of lower level texts that correspond to documents that were generated from direct work practices associated with the Signs of Safety framework.



Figure 1. Textual Hierarchies.

Analysis of inter-textuality enabled me to explore whose voice was the more dominant in any given text, the extent to which other voices and perspectives were included and through which medium. For example, I was provided with some insight into Corrine's views, but these and her presentation were reported indirectly through the social worker's own interpretation.

#### **5.8.2.3. Assumption.**

Whereas intertextuality is concerned with the language acts as they are reported in the text, assumption is concerned with implicit meaning in the act of telling (Taylor, 2013), what is knowable and in existence, what is possible and ought to be and what is desirable from a value perspective (Fairclough, 2003). For example the use of 'positively' to qualify the extent to which Corrine engaged with

the social worker conveys an assumption by the latter as to what constitutes good engagement. Assumptions may also be made about social work practices, what is effective and what is not effective.

#### **5.8.2.4. Representation.**

Representation refers to the social events that are referred to (Fairclough, 2003), namely episodes of assessment and intervention that are drawn on in the reports. In the example provided, Corrine is represented as a unique individual through the inclusion of her first name on multiple occasions. Representation can also refer to how social work practice is depicted. For example, the social worker comments that she/he had attempted to engage Corrine through a number of 1:1 sessions. This is consistent with good practice as defined through statutory guidance (DfE 2013,2015) and thus serves to inform the reader that the social worker had complied with the statutory responsibilities embedded in her/his role.

#### **5.8.2.5. Style and Identities.**

There is potential for multiple identities to come to life in a text (Fairclough, 2003; Hennum, 2011; Taylor, 2013). The inclusion of 'we' can serve to denote collective membership, for example, the adult members of the child protection conference. Elsewhere a subject can be ascribed a number of personal characteristics Corrine is presented as a young person at risk of harm through sexual exploitation, a young person with agency and someone who can present as non- engaged.

#### **5.8.2.6. Interdiscursivity**

Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999, p16) define interdiscursivity as "the social structuring of semiotic hybridity", the forms in which discourses which are associated with social and organisational meanings are identified, presented and

interlayered in the text. The school report submitted for Corrine's ICPC is an example of a multi-agency collaborative practice discourse which recognises the school as key stakeholder in a holistic assessment and decision making forum. The production of a report serves to confirm that status. However the report also represents an example of participatory discourse; in this example the views of Corrine were not established which suggests a minimal or non-existent level of participation. An alternative participatory discourse is presented in the child protection plan and this serves to place Corrine as a young person with capability, capacity and the right to have a role in the review conference.

## **5.8. Conclusion.**

This chapter has established the overarching methodological framework for the thesis. In applying a mixed methodological framework the thesis has sought to move beyond an evaluative 'what works' research agenda to one that seeks to generate new understandings from children and young people who were 'epistemologically privileged' (Balen et al. 2006,p31) and from those whose voices were less visible. A rationale for adopting a mixed paradigm approach is provided and justified as appropriate for positioning the perspectives of children and young people within a critical evaluation of social work practice. The researcher standpoint is influenced by an ontological and epistemological commitment to upholding the rights of children and young people to participate in ways that are meaningful for them. However, the researcher standpoint is also influenced by critical social work theory; that a dissonance between espoused and day –to – day practice emerged from an inductive enquiry into high and low order texts.



The purpose and nature of government led social work research in England is ideologically and politically determined and concerned with service evaluation (Hall et al.2006). The most recent evaluation relevant for the purpose of this thesis concerns the Innovation Programme (Sebba et al. 2017) which aimed to bring about systems change for improving the quality and services and achieving best value (McNeish et al. 2017).The methodological approach adopted in both aforementioned evaluations does reflect the positionality of service users as holders of legitimate forms of knowledge. However, in both the term service user equates heavily with ‘family’, constituting this as a homogenous unit. Where reference was made to those under the age of eighteen, young people were epistemologically privileged. The argument put forward in this chapter concerns the partiality of what counts as knowledge of what works in child protection practice. In an echo of Munro (2011), it is puzzling to privilege some perspectives more than others are and to include some more readily in research than others. That this does appear to be the case, as outlined in Chapter Four, influenced a methodological enquiry into how knowledge of a child or young person’s wishes, feelings and views are generationally ordered prior to and in the child protection conference.

## **Chapter Six. Research methods.**

### **6.1. Introduction.**

Chapter Six will provide an overview of the research study design, the methods used for data collection and approaches to data analysis. At this point, readers will note that the original research aims and objectives and subsequent design were amended over the course of the study. To present this in a coherent manner, the discussion of the fieldwork stage will be structured in two parts, with each outlining and reflecting on the components of the research design. Phase One outlines issues relevant to the study's original aim of collecting data only from children and young people who had attended a child protection conference. Phase Two presents the revised strategy which involved data collection based on agency records and from insights provided by key professionals in focus group discussion. The chapter will then present the ethical considerations, which shaped the research, and will conclude with a reflexive commentary on issues associated with engaging children and young people as research participants. In addressing the above, I aim to demonstrate that the research study conforms to principles of credible qualitative research.

### **6.2. The research design.**

Campling's definition of research mindedness introduces the research design within a framework of qualitative social work research:

'Problem definition, data collection, data analysis and evaluation are not treated as discrete stages in the supposedly linear process of research. Instead, each of these is addressed using the same framework: values, purposes, ethics,

communication, roles and skills. Anti- oppressive practices and developmental principles also anchor the process from beginning to end' (Campling, cited in Humphries 2008, p.4)

The research study was qualitative in design, concerned with seeking understanding and meaning. The original research questions set out in Chapter One were concerned with understanding as opposed to testing out a hypothesis and were thus geared towards description and interpretation of participants' accounts. The purpose of data collection was to produce detailed rich accounts, and methods were selected accordingly.

My foray into research mindedness raised unanticipated challenges into previously held beliefs about participatory methods, and the extent to which child "friendly" research methods could and should be adopted wholesale into the research design. My initial position adopted a flexible approach towards choice of data collection methods. In doing so, I wished to uphold the right of each participant to opt for a method most suited to the individual. This could include methods commonly placed within the traditional realms of data collection, including the semi- structured interview, or those specific to participatory research with children and young people (Barker and Weller, 2003; Cook and Hess, 2007; Eldén,2012). The philosophy underpinning this emergent knowledge base is consistent with a rights based agenda, which in turn informs and is informed by the new sociology of childhood. Here, the child or young person is considered not only as a research subject (as opposed to a research object) but also as a social actor whereby an assumption of competence and capacity to exercise agency in their social world is assumed (Christensen and Prout,2002; Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008.) In social research, the child or young person therefore becomes an equal participant as

opposed to a passive object of the research question, and participatory methods are designed to give agency and 'voice' in the co- construction of knowledge. A key concern of this approach is to remove any differentiation between a child or young person as a research subject and an adult as a research subject, a differential that has given prominence to a body of child- centred research methods (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008). Exponents of perspectives which privilege the child or young person as social actor aim for 'ethical symmetry' (Christensen and Prout 2002; Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008) whereby a rationale for research methodology and method is based on what is most relevant for the purpose of the study, what is most appropriate for the given participant and researcher and most aligned to the research context. The challenge I encountered, and did not fully resolve was how to promote a rights based approach towards data collection without falling into the 'participation trap' of positioning children and young people within an 'othered' state in comparison to adult research participants by virtue of age and development. In doing so, I was mindful of imposing my adult professional views as to what constitutes a good and appropriate method of data collection from the participant's perspective regardless of individual characteristics.

### **6.3. The fieldwork stage: Phase 1 (June 2013 - November 2015)**

#### **6.3.1. Identifying the sample frame.**

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, the study originally aimed to collect data from one source: children and young people who had attended a child protection conference. At the outset, I was aware of the challenges associated with conducting research with children and young people. I addressed

this initially by approaching three geographically co-terminus Local Safeguarding Children's Boards (LSCB) in the north east of England. The rationale for this was threefold. Firstly, there was an established tradition of regional LSCB collaborative practice development. I had accessed each LSCB Business Plan and had noted the inclusion of improving children's participation in child protection as a priority action. I therefore anticipated that the research study would be of interest; all had something to gain by hearing the perspectives of children and young people involved in child protection practices. The second rationale was more pragmatic and was informed by knowledge of child protection data at national and local levels; particularly in relation to numbers of child protection, plans per LSCB and the ages of children subject to a child protection plan (HM Gov, 2015; DfE, 2016a; Moor Town LSCB). As noted in Chapter Four, incidence rates of initial and review child protection plans and those relating to numbers of children and young people who are subject to a child protection plan have risen in each successive year since 2009 (DfE, 2017). To ensure a sufficiently sizeable cohort, I proposed to recruit a small sample frame of between three to five participants within each local authority over a two-year period. The timescale was established to accommodate at least one, and in some circumstances, two child protection conference events (an ICPC is followed by a review within three months and thereafter six monthly). Finally, I recognised the value of the relationship that already existed between the agencies and the University. All were established stakeholders in the Department's qualifying and post qualifying social work programmes, and as a member of the academic team, my credentials as an academic were already established.

I drew upon an already established relationship to initiate expression of interest in the three original sites. I had previously acted as project manager for a regional project concerned with developing middle leaders in integrated children's services.

Olivia, the Children's Standards Safeguarding Manager in Moor Town LSCB had taken part in the project, and sporadic contact had been maintained with her. This provided me with an opportunity to gauge interest in the study. From this, information about the research study was circulated across the region and named contacts provided for each of the proposed fieldwork sites.

### **6.3.2. Data collection.**

In keeping with the principles of a children's rights perspective, I did not want to impose a fixed method for data collection. Nor did I want to assume that child specific methods would necessarily be the preferred choice for all participants. In some respects, research that involves children and young people who are recipients of social work interventions shares similar characteristics to those involving adult service users. Both should consider the impact of broader social and cultural influences, both should address power differentials and adhere to core social work values and both should privilege voice without imposition of the researcher's standpoint (Schelbe et al. 2015). However, this is not to dismiss the intrinsic differences that have been documented in Chapter Four, namely differences in legal status and assumptions over capacity.

Qualitative phenomenological research studies that are concerned with an in depth understanding of the lived experiences of research participants lend themselves to data collection methods that rely on conversation, usually but not confined to an interview (structured, unstructured or semi structured) type of interaction (King and Horrocks, 2010; Smith et al. 2009). The rationale for selecting one form of interview over the other may be contestable. For example, an unstructured free narrative approach or an informal conversation style is highly compatible with the principles of participatory research (Groundwater-

Smith et al.2016). However, Silverman (2014) has suggested that these can be critiqued as a form of social control, in that the onus of responsibility for the interview experience is placed on the participant. A semi – structured interview style attempts to integrate the strengths of informal and more structured approaches and is one that children and young people are likely to be familiar with in the course of their encounters with social workers.

Notwithstanding the choice of data collection method ( as this would be determined by each research participant) I considered a framework would be a useful platform for guiding any interaction. This was developed as a provisional thematic framework based on the ‘what’ and ‘how’ axioms:

- Deciding to attend the conference. This intended to open up an account of the reasons why the child decided that they wished to attend, who supported them in this, what they expected to happen, and what they wanted to happen.
- Attending the conference. This aimed to address practical considerations such as the timing of the conference, getting to and from the conference venue and the physical environment.
- The experience of attending the conference. This aimed to explore who else attended, the conduct of the conference (rules, sequence), the information shared and not shared, relationships between professionals and the participant’s role in the process.
- After the event. This aimed to explore meaning making and emotional responses associated with perceptions of self and others.
- Key messages. What worked and what did not work from the child’s perspective?

The documentation associated with providing information and gaining consent ( Appendices 3 - 6) were piloted through informal contacts with two young people aged thirteen and fourteen and decisions over the choice of method were made in preliminary discussions. Ultimately, all four participants who participated in the study selected a semi -structured interview approach.

### **6.3.3. Negotiating access to research participants.**

Negotiation for the recruitment of prospective research participants began prior to the granting of ethical approval. The decision to initiate contact in advance was influenced by the researcher's working knowledge of anticipated time constraints for arranging meetings with multiple gatekeepers. The importance of the relationship between researcher and organisational gatekeepers has been documented (Reeves 2010; Clark, 2011; Mirick, 2014). Within each LSCB site I anticipated three possible levels of gatekeeping: The LSCB strategic manager (referred to either as a Business Manager, Service Manager or Children's Safeguarding Standards Manager), the IRO responsible for chairing the child protection conference and the child or young person's social worker. The Service Manager holds an important position in the Local Authority, acting as a mediator between organisational leadership and operational practice. Their role was pivotal in endorsing the research study and for agreeing the arrangements for fieldwork and research dissemination. The IRO, although employed by the local authority, is independent of the operational management of individual child protection cases. Their role is to chair the child protection conference and to perform a quality assurance role in relation to policy and practice. The IRO's were therefore well positioned to provide an overview of each LSCB's incidence and prevalence rates of children's participation in their child protection conference, and



to identify any child who had recently attended their child protection conference. Finally, the individual social worker was the agency practitioner with the most knowledge of the child. I anticipated their role would be to facilitate the more practical tasks associated with participant recruitment.

The endorsement stage began with a presentation of my study to each LSCB Business Planning Groups. All three endorsed the research and we agreed reporting mechanisms, and arrangements for research dissemination.

Subsequent meetings were then arranged with each IRO Service Manager. This provided an opportunity to gather contextual data specific to their area local authority, including identifying prevailing cultures of participation, and any local practices and criteria for determining who attended and in what capacity. I was able to establish that in all three areas there were no formal mechanisms for quantifying attendance levels, primarily because there is no statutory requirement for the agency to formally report these figures to central government. The number of children or young people attending conference was based on 'guesstimates', but this confirmed that the sample frame in each LSCB would be very small and consistent with recently published research findings (Cossar,2011). I was also able to establish that there appeared to be no criteria or guidelines for deciding whether a child or young person would attend conference or not. I was advised that resource led factors were a key factor in decision-making. For example, the time constraints surrounding the timing of the ICPC were considered a barrier to participation in that the social worker had limited time (15 working days) to develop a meaningful relationship with the child or young person, to incorporate their views in the assessment process and to have the time to prepare them for attendance at the conference. As a result, I was advised that attendance was therefore more likely at review and core group forums; in both there was a

likelihood of a more enduring relationship between the child or young person and social worker and more time for preparation. In addition to organisational factors, cultural determinants also appeared to influence decision-making and thus the likely participant sample frame. During these preliminary meetings, some IRO's expressed reservations about children attending their conference and based this on age-related perceptions of maturity and vulnerability. Upholding participatory rights was couched more in terms of strengthening procedures for advocacy and representation of the child's views by their social worker as opposed to physical attendance. It was interesting to note that those who expressed commitment to challenging prevailing assumptions and practices were those IRO's involved in promoting strengths based practice using Signs of Safety.

The initial negotiation and endorsement stage also served to clarify expectations about the research design, I made no definitive statements about how data would be collected and instead emphasised a collaborative approach that sought to accommodate individual participant preference and choice. I alerted the LSCB strategic managers to the possibility of the study generating findings that could be critical of social work practice. A baseline expectation was for key messages to be heard and consideration given for taking forward practice recommendations.

The study proposed a purposive sample strategy (Shaw and Holland, 2014; Silverman, 2014) thus enabling me to select research participants who were able to talk about their experience of having attended a child protection conference. There were also elements characteristic of intensity sampling (Suri, 2011) in that each individual participant shared a unique experience; that of sitting alongside professionals in a formal decision making forum where they are the

subject of concern, and a degree of homogeneity by definition of their ascribed status as a vulnerable person.

In keeping with a children's rights perspective, age was not specified as inclusion criteria for participating in the study. The sole criteria were that a child or young person should have attended, or had planned to attend a conference or core group meeting in the past three months; a timeline devised to incorporate the first review conference following an ICPC.

The period set aside for identifying children and young people as research participants from the three original LSCB sites can be characterised by prolonged periods of engagement and commitment to the study but with minimal progress in identifying individual research participants. From this experience, two tentative conclusions were formed. Firstly, the number of children attending their conference in each site appeared to be lower than initially indicated in each LSCB site. To resolve this, I would need to significantly extend the geographical remit, which placed unrealistic constraints on my resources and provided no guaranteed return on the research investment. Secondly, any barriers to identifying potential research participants were internal to each organisation and as an outside researcher I had negligible power, authority and control to effect those dynamics.

This precipitated the addition of two further LSCB sites to the sample frame from mid – 2014 onwards. Again, there was a high level of interest and engagement at strategic level but with no tangible outcome.

A summary overview of the Phase One recruitment process is provided in Table 3. In view of the time constraints and an ongoing engagement with Moor Town, the decision was made to adopt this as a case study site and to vary the strategy for data collection. This is henceforth referred to as Phase Two.

Table 3. Summary of progress in Phase One (June 2013 –November 2015).

Site 1 (Moor Town)	1 young person (aged 14) identified and contact made with the birth parent. Initial and rescheduled meetings were cancelled owing to family circumstances. The social worker advised that participation was not in the child's best interest at that time. 4 interviews conducted. NB. Attempts to recruit participants continued through to Phase 2.
Site 2	Monthly telephone contact maintained with the SCB strategic manager. Two potential participants, (male siblings aged 11) were identified. A change in care plan resulted in a move away from the area.
Site 3	Contact was delegated to the agency's Participation Officer. Monthly contact was maintained. No participants were identified.
Site 4	Contact initiated in June 2014. Monthly contact was maintained with the IRO Service Manager. No participants were identified.
Site 5	Contact initiated in June 2014 .Progress stalled at the agency's research governance stage. No participants were identified.

#### **6.4. The research design: Phase Two (November 2015 – June 2016)**

##### **6.4.1. The case study and the case study site.**

Simons (2009) defines a case study as:

“An in- depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, program or system in a ‘real life’ context” (p21).

Thomas and Myers (2015) expand on Simons' definition to include units of analysis, including periods in time, people, events and decisions. There are variations as to what constitutes a case study. Yin (2009) for example, defined a case study as an investigative empirical enquiry to a contemporary phenomenon within its situated context, and where the boundary between is unclear. Drawing

on his typology for case design, the critical case (one which explores in order to confirm, challenge or extend a theory) was considered the most applicable to the research study. Elsewhere Simons (2009) has emphasised the educative contribution case studies can make through knowledge generation for policy and practice development. Both characteristics are relevant to this study.

As a research focus the case study provided a holistic lens using multiple methods to explore, understand and explain how and why the phenomena of the child's voice occurred in the child protection conference. It allowed for exploration in depth through data rich social enquiry and lent itself to the here and now of social work practice. It held both intrinsic value, in terms of a method for focusing in on children's rights, and instrumental value in terms of contribution to practice.

Moor Town is a unitary local authority in the north east of England. It underwent a reorganisation of its children's services structure during the course of fieldwork but the teams most relevant to the study were the initial referral and assessment team and the two area teams. The former is a centralised service that undertakes child protection assessment to the point of the ICPC. Two area based teams then assume longer term case responsibility for children and young people who are made the subject of a child protection plan following the ICPC.

During the course of fieldwork, Moor Town adopted Signs of Safety as its framework for child protection conferences over the course of one year and it became the standard approach for child protection conferences from September 2015 onwards. Of particular relevance is the emphasis placed on the child and family perspective in the assessment and management of risk, with a range of tools available to facilitate direct work with children of all ages. The most

common tool is the Three Houses and it is customary for a copy of this work to be attached to the social worker's report for the Initial or Review Child Protection Conference.

Tables 4 to 8 illustrate the characteristics of Moor Town's child protection plan profile for the two years in which fieldwork data were obtained.

Table 4. Comparative national and local child protection plan rates. The population rate per 10,000 is the benchmarking method used to compare local authority data against each other (Moor Town, LSCB Annual Report 2014-2015)

<b>Source</b>	<b>2014 -2015</b>	<b>2015 -2016</b>
Moor Town	76.2	75.8
England	46.9	43.1

Table 4 confirms that Moor Town had higher than average rates (per 10,000) of children subject to a child protection plan compared to the national average.

Table 5: Conference activity.

<b>Conference activity</b>	<b>2014 -2105</b>	<b>2015- 2016</b>
Initial	542 (31%)	525 (28%)
Review	1228 (69%)	1328 (72%)
Total	1770	1853

Table 5 illustrates the number of initial and review conferences held each year. It depicts an overall increase in conference activity of 4.7% from 1770 in the

previous year. However, the number of children who were the subject of an Initial Child Protection Conference reduced slightly by 3.1% in 2015 -2016 while those subject to a Child Protection Review Conference increased by 8.1%.

Table 6: Gender profile.

<b>Gender</b>	<b>2014-2015</b>	<b>2015-2016</b>
Female	825 (47%)	949 (51%)
Male	945(53%)	904 (48.9%)
Total	1770	1853

Table 6 illustrates a reversal in a trend established since 2011 whereby males accounted for the larger proportion of children and young people subject to a child protection plan.

Table 7: Age profile.

<b>Age</b>	<b>2014 -2015</b>	<b>2015 -2016</b>
Under 1	322 (18%)	347(19%)
1-4	483 (27%)	524(28%)
5-9	499 (28%)	524(28%)
10-15	450 (25%)	417 (23%)
16 and over	16 (1%)	39 (2%)
Total	1770	1853

Table 7 confirms that children under the age of nine account for the larger proportion of those subject to a child protection plan but also an increase in the number of young people over the age of sixteen.

Table 8: Ethnicity.

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>2014 -2015 ( N= 1770)</b>	<b>2015 -2016 (N= 1853)</b>
White British	1540 (87%)	1538 (83%)
Other Ethnic Background	89 (5%)	148 (8%)
Asian or Asian British	89 (5%)	111 (6%)
Mixed Ethnicity	35 (2%)	37 (2%)
Black or Black British	18 (1%)	18 (1%)
Total	1770	1853

Table 8 illustrates the ethnic background of children and young people subject to a child protection plan. The 2011 census data for Moor Town identified 22% of the population were from a Black Minority Ethnic (BME) background. The statistics below highlight an increase in children and young people from other ethnic backgrounds and Asian /Asian British backgrounds but that overall BME figures suggest an under-representation (Moor Town, 2015-2016).

Table 9: Conference outcome.

<b>Conference outcome</b>	<b>2014 – 2015 ( N= 1770)</b>	<b>2015 - 2016 (N= 1853)</b>
Not made subject	433 (25%)	502 (27%)
Made subject to a plan	483 (27%)	462 (25%)
Continued plan at year end	427 (24%)	428 (23%)
Plan discontinued	429 (24%)	461 (25%)
Total	1770	1853



As illustrated in Table 9, 923 child protection plans were either started or discontinued in 2015-2016, and this represented a slight increase in overall numbers compared with the previous year. In line with the reduction in children who were the subject of an ICPC, the number of children who became subject to a child protection plan reduced from 483 to 462, while the number ceasing to be the subject of a child protection plan increased from 429 to 461.

#### **6.4.2. Documents as data sources.**

Within the social research literature, documentary analysis or secondary data analysis can be regarded as the 'poor relation' of qualitative research; and is often viewed as being more useful as a mixed methods mechanism for triangulation than as an approach with unique methodological merit and rigour (Prior, 2003; May, 2011). However, in social work practice, documents, as constituent elements of a case record, occupy a central position, providing insight not only into the child's world but also to the interpretation of that world to others in social work practice. In this respect, a social work record has meaning in its own right, and acts as the mediator between the service user, the practitioner and the organisation (Hayes and Devaney, 2004). As noted in Chapter Three, case records are an integral feature of an information system that epitomises the bureaucratic, technical and rational aspect of contemporary social work practice (Hall et al. 2006). As a textual account, they serve three organisational objectives: to recount an event or series of events, to provide justification and accountability and to regulate social work practice through formalised and standardised recording systems (O'Rourke, 2010). Within child protection, practice documents are a practical requirement, a record of social work activity and are therefore representative of the organisation's expectations and demands. At a micro level,

they provide insight into the social reality of the child and family environment, and at a macro level, they provide insight into the political and organisational context of social work practice (Satka and Skehill, 2011; Shaw and Holland, 2014). The requirement to maintain accurate and up to date records in accordance with agency procedure is a core social work skill and one which is aligned to the standardised electronic recording framework known as the ICS. As discussed in Chapter Three, Munro's review of child protection (2011) sought to achieve a balance between child centred practice and prescriptive practice and recommended that the government:

'Remove constraints to local innovation and professional judgement that are created by prescribing or endorsing particular approaches' (p.10).

Adoption of the above through the revision of practice guidance and the adoption of new ways of working, including Signs of Safety, arguably created the opportunity for a more child centred approach in recording practice.

Notwithstanding the characteristics of case recording, documents can be somewhat limited as a reliable source of data in social work research (Hall et al. 2010; Hayes and Devaney, 2004). As noted above, the information included in a case record serves specific organisational purposes and is produced accordingly. It may therefore not contain a level and depth of information most useful to the research purpose. Also unknown to the researcher is the specific context in which any case record document is produced and any subsequent impact on subjective bias. For example, the use of heuristics as a mechanism for dealing with the complexity of front line child protection practice is an area of contemporary research interest (Broadhurst et.al 2010; Platt and Turney 2014). Such practices may result in the 'cut and paste' of information across sibling

group files and across individual child events, the inclusion of standardised language and weighting towards evidence in specific categories ( e.g. those concerned with parental engagement in the social work assessment)

When an internal case file audit is undertaken by the LSCB in Moor Town a minimum of twenty child protection conferences are selected for analysis. It was therefore agreed that this would also serve as the minimal sample frame for this research study. Two sets of anonymised data were made available : an annual data set covering the period 1st April 2014 – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2015 and a quarterly data set covering the period 1<sup>st</sup> April - 30th June 2015. Both data sets provided characteristic information of gender, age and ethnicity for each child and information pertaining to the child protection conference ( as summarised in the tables presented in Section 6.4.1). From this, a sample frame was identified based on the following criteria:

- A selection from defined age ranges (0-4, 5-9, 10-15, and 16 and above).
- A representative profile for ethnicity.
- A representative profile for gender.
- A representative conference type (Initial or Review).
- Inclusion of pre- Signs of Safety and post- Signs of Safety conferences.

Ethical approval for access to the electronic records was granted from the University and from the research governance unit in Moor Town on the proviso that access to documentary data sources would be confined to the agency site. Appendix 8 sets out the range of records that were electronically attached to each of the thirty two conference events, and serves to illustrate the degree of variation and absence of standardisation. For example, the electronic folder for

all conference events included a record of the child protection conference, but not all included a separate report from the social worker, or in its place, a copy of the Child and Family Assessment. Other events included a copy of direct work undertaken with the child, an external agency report (usually school or nursery) and records of core group meetings.

In response to Munro's systems wide recommendations (2011), local authorities were afforded some degree of flexibility in assessment practice and local systems therefore adapted according to the process that was adopted. The move towards a single assessment process involved a redesign of the report format, with the assessment report replacing the social worker's report (which included a summary of the assessment) at the conference.

#### **6.4.3. Focus groups.**

Analysis of the data obtained from interviews and documents revealed a number of insights associated with how children experienced the child protection conference and how children's' views, wishes and feelings were presented when not in attendance. At this point in the research study I had gained insight into both children's and adult's worlds and I was interested in further exploration of some of the themes that had emerged from the data.

The rationale for incorporating the focus group method into the research design was twofold. Firstly, there were methodological benefits in qualitative research methodology, a focus group is similar to an interview, in that both provide an opportunity for exploring both homogeneity and diversity of perspectives and attitudes through the medium of social interaction (Liamputtong, 2011; Webber, 2015). In an organisational setting, a focus group can utilise existing networks (Padgett, 2007) based on professional identity. In addition to the possibility of

insights stimulated from the dynamics in the group, a focus group also recognises the individual contribution of each group member:

‘Focus groups may be regarded as socially situated interactions, with this aspect being the defining feature of focus group research. Interactions between the participants form both a means of generating data as well as a focus of analysis. They allow the researcher to examine dynamic interactions that take place during communication as well as the formation, maintenance and change of socially shared knowledge’ ( Markova et.al 2007 p.45)

In bringing together both, a focus group can provide insight into how group members construct not only their own meaning, but also how they influence and co - construct the meaning of other group members and through this generate new learning (Linhorst 2002; Onwuegbuzie et al.2009; Wilkinson 2008). From a methodological standpoint, this provides alignment between the transformational element of the critical theory / critical social work paradigm. Liamputtong (2011) differentiates between two types of interaction that are likely to occur in a focus group: complementary and argumentative. The former enables the researcher to gain insight into the group’s social world, their shared understanding of their role in facilitating participation in the child protection conference. This common ground also provides the framework for engaging in the research process, each are experts in their domain. However, disagreement may also occur alongside consensus and a focus group can facilitate opportunity for a counter perspective to emerge which effectively challenges the group “think “. From the analysis of documents there did appear to be similarities in methods used to ascertain the child or young person’s views, wishes and feelings and also some divergence in how these views were

presented and responded to. A further methodological benefit was the contribution a focus group would make to the triangulation of data in a mixed method approach (Webber, 2015). Finally, the gaze on social work practice provides another layer to analytical rigour. The second rationale was more pragmatic in that it recognised the constraints on practitioner to engage in research (Matthews and Crawford, 2011), and it was therefore logistically more expedient at this stage in the study to bring together groups of individuals than to arrange a series of individual interviews.

The focus groups took place in June 2016 and at this stage in the fieldwork process, I had become a member of the LSCB's Standard and Effectiveness Management Group (SEMG). Access to research participants was negotiated through the Service Manager for the IRO team and the Service Manager for Children's Safeguarding, both of whom were very cognisant of the research study. Invitation to participate in the focus groups generated six responses for each, focus group, with four attending on each day.

The IRO focus group consisted of four participants with a range of specialist experience including working with disabled children and young people, experience as an operational manager and facilitating Signs of Safety training to LSCB conference members.

This social worker focus group consisted of four participants all of whom had been qualified for over seven years. Two participants worked in recently created specialist teams with a focus on undertaking parenting assessments. One participant worked in a Children's Disability Team and one in a long-term team, working with children and young people subject to child protection plans or who were living away from home as Looked after Children.

The thematic structures (Appendix 9 and 10) were informed by the key findings that had emerged from the interviews conducted with children and young people and from case record analysis, and incorporated introductory, focussed, probing, follow up, structuring, summary and concluding questions (Liamputtong,2011).

### **6.5. Quality Assurance.**

As Padgett (2017) notes, quality is integral to qualitative research. However, there is a lack of consensus over the constituent elements of quality research and how these should be measured. Silverman (2014) provides an example of a generalised set of criteria which builds on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework of credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and trustworthiness. Silverman draws on this to specify measurement criteria for the above, including the existence of relevant situated knowledge as the framework for new knowledge, an articulated relationship between theory and emerging data, a clear rationale for and account of approach and method, evidence of significance and limitation. In contrast, Armour et al. (2009) note the challenges in referring to general frameworks for standardising quality in individual research studies and propose reliability and authenticity as overarching criteria which can then be built upon according to the paradigm context. For example, quality in a critical social work research study could be measured by the focus on social justice and social change, and how power dynamics were addressed.

In an attempt to demonstrate quality a framework that is broadly consistent with standard criteria for qualitative research has been used but adapted to accommodate characteristics relevant to the uniqueness of the study.

Table 10: Quality assurance framework (developed from Tracy, 2010 p.840)

Criteria	Measurement
Worthy topic	The research aim is relevant to contemporary social work practice.
Rich rigour	Depth and appropriateness of construct and context in establishing existing knowledge and in emergent data.
Sincerity	Transparency and reflexivity in the researcher standpoint and approach.
Credibility	Thick description, mixed methods and triangulation.
Resonance	Authentic generalisation and transferability of findings.
Contribution	Praxis: alignment of theory, research and practice.
Ethical	Procedural and relational ethics are addressed.
Coherence	Realises the research aim through integration of parts to the whole.

## 6.6. Ethical considerations.

Ethics in qualitative research is inherently challenging:

‘We might like to secure consent that is informed, but we know we can’t always inform because we don’t always know. We do not like to think of ourselves as using others as a means to our own ends, but if we embark upon a research study that we conceptualize, direct and write, we virtually assure that we will use others for our purpose’ (Eisner, 1991 pp 225- 226)

Eisner captures the complexities associated with procedural ethics and ethics in day to day research experiences; and the extent to which ethical issues and challenges associated with rights, social justice, choice and autonomy can be identified and addressed within a hegemony of ethical qualitative research. In this section, I will discuss significant issues, which have arisen in securing ethical



approval, and will locate the research study within contemporary debates over an ethics of care approach (Collins, 2017) when undertaking research with children and young people.

In developing my ethical stance, I was guided by the range of literature concerned with addressing harm and benefits of involvement in research (Alderson and Morrow, 2011; Davey et al. 2010) and have drawn on these to address issues concerned with informed consent, ensuring confidentiality (and addressing those safeguarding circumstances where this may need to be breached) and reimbursement.

I adopted a commitment to situational ethics (also referred to as situated ethics) within the research practice context (Banks, 2016; Hardwick and Hardwick, 2007). This recognizes that ethical decisions permeate the life cycle of the research, and cannot always be addressed through research governance frameworks that are primarily concerned with procedural and anticipated ethical issues (Hardwick and Worsley 2011; Edwards and Mauthner 2012). Situated ethics acknowledges the contribution deontological ethics makes to research governance, but also recognises the researcher's own skills and values in reaching ethical decisions which may prioritise potential benefit over possible harm (Edwards and Mauthner, 2012). A situated ethics stance is informed by an ethics of care (Banks, 2016; Bozalek, 2016; Collins, 2017) and concerned not only with outcome, how to do good and how to avoid harm, but also with the here and now of the research; those ethical issues and challenges that cannot be identified in the predictive frameworks of research governance and regulation. Here, reflexivity is a significant mechanism for checking the researcher's thoughts, feelings, values and biases and for drawing on practice wisdom and intuition to do what feels right at the time when ethical decisions need to be made. Research underpinned

by an ethics of care will adopt a political as well as a moral stance by addressing issues relating to power throughout the research design, and also acknowledges the impact of emotion on the ethical relationship between researcher and research participant ( Edwards and Mauthner,2011).

My ethical stance also sought to undertake 'good' research (Bogolub, 2010; Peled, 2010). Bogolub notes that the ethical imperative for good research in the social work arena is not only to generate new knowledge but also to highlight gaps in service provision. An ethics of care approach is therefore consistent with research praxis: knowledge for change in the policy and practice context.

Within the 'right to be properly researched' paradigm ( Abebe and Bessell, 2014; Beazley et al. 2009) attention is given to participatory ethics and to ensuring that the child or young person's human rights are respected in every aspect of the research process. Such an approach avoids Hammersley's criticism of the regulatory approach undertaken in social sciences research by "ethical enthusiasts" (2009, p.211); the ethical regulators, usually located in university ethics committees, who make decisions over what is ethically acceptable or ethically unacceptable. Hammersley (2009) argues that the current context of ethics regulation is based on 'ethical enthusiasm' (p.213), a claim for ethical authority which is contestable on the grounds of lack of consensus over ethical positions and the absence of understanding of the research context under consideration.

The research context for contemporary research involving children and young people is generally considered to include a high degree of risk (Farrell, 2005). In part, this can be attributed to the fact that westernised societies are generally more risk averse and there are now systems in place in the form of Higher

Education and organisational research governance arrangements to monitor, regulate and hold the researcher to account when undertaking social sciences research (Hammersley,2009; Munro et al. 2005, Parsons et al. 2016).Associated with this is the dominance of a child development ideology of childhood (Taylor, 2004) and the emergence of the child as a more active research participant, a research subject as opposed to a research object who assumes a passive role (Balén et al, 2006; Christenson and Prout,2002; Powell and Smith, 2009). A characteristic of ethics committees is the protectionist stance that is adopted when considering any research involving children and young people (Balén et al. 2006; Christensen and Prout,2002; Cousins and Milner, 2007; Renold et al. 2008).

A children's rights research approach challenges the reach of ethical enthusiasm and furthermore suggests that an emphasis on vulnerability serves to reinforce existing structural inequalities and limits rather than promotes opportunities to exercise choice in deciding to take part, or not to take part in research (McCarry,2012; Powell and Smith,2009).

Furthermore, a rights based approach requires the researcher to be pro-active in asserting the child or young person's moral rights and to explore any potential for violation of rights (Farrell, 2005). To some extent, this may appear to be at odds with the underlying principles of an ethics of care approach, particularly when this applies to research with children and young people who are in receipt of statutory services. Here, the concept of care holds both positive and negative connotations. On the one hand, care can be associated with a concern for, and a commitment towards a person. When applied to the research context, this interpretation of an ethics of care approach would be proactive, upholding rights but also recognising the need

to balance conflicting rights. On the other hand, care in a statutory context can be associated with a more reactive and paternalistic approach, assuming care and responsibility for and also with care as a regulation. When applied to a research context, this interpretation of ethics of care may prioritise avoiding harm over doing good (Abebe and Bessell, 2014; Collins, 2017; Farrell, 2005).

Northumbria University's Ethical Guidelines defines anyone under the age of eighteen as vulnerable (Northumbria University 2011 p.64). The research study was therefore submitted for ethical approval in accordance with the University's enhanced research governance procedures. This homogenous 'othering' of all children and young people as vulnerable was at odds with my own value position, and also that of the Economic and Social Research Council (2017), which cautions against an assumption of vulnerability based solely on age. Ethical approval was also granted by Moor Town's Research Governance Unit. As alluded to earlier, the above frameworks are essentially concerned with the researcher demonstrating a moral accountable stance to ensure a good outcome. For example, the principle of utilitarianism is upheld by the research study being considered as valuable, and of merit for practice development; a good ethical study is one that has the capacity to enhance the rights of children. Deontological and virtue ethical principles are also outcome focused (Alderson and Morrow, 2011; Farrimond, 2013; Miller et al. 2012). The research governance processes required me to demonstrate how I would uphold rights, abide by principles of fairness and respect and avoid harm. The process also served to validate the knowledge and skills I would deploy as a researcher to uphold these principles in the research process and in the particular research context; thereby upholding principles associated with situated ethics.

Within the literature, there is evidence of debates concerned with balancing the child's participation and protection rights (for example Mudalay and Goddard, 2009). To promote protection rights the researcher must act in a way that does not further diminish the child or young person as a subject of adult concern and with limited capacity for self-determination. Consideration is thus given to assessing the possible physical and psychological impact of taking part and to ensure that levels of support are in place to counteract effects and that research methods are respectful of each child or young person's position. Promoting participation rights has to date been more challenging and is perhaps best exemplified by the issue of seeking informed consent (Balén et al, 2006; Coyne, 2010; Parsons et al. 2016). An ethical challenge to my epistemological approach arose at an early stage in the research process, and reflected the inherent tension between protectionist and participatory perspectives and the resultant impact for striving for authentic participatory research. In accordance with a child-directed ethical framework the researcher intended to seek active consent from the child as research participant and a more passive process of parental consent via the opt out process. This is congruent with the emergent children's rights literature, which suggests a more assertive challenge to protectionist approaches (Coyne, 2010; Lind et al. 2006). I also considered this to be congruent with the decision making practices that led to the child or young person's attendance at the child protection conference in that the criteria for participation (being of sufficient age and maturity) had already been met. I therefore believed that any ethical concerns that underpinned the concept of informed consent for a vulnerable person had been addressed through other rigorous processes and my primary duty as an ethical researcher was to have the interactions and mechanisms in place via information giving processes for securing informed consent. The requirement

from the ethics committee to actively seek parental consent via an opt in method challenged my claim for a child directed ethical stance, is unrepresentative of the more contemporary trends in research involving children and young people ( Coyne, 2010; Groundwater - Smith et al, 2106; Parsons et al, 2016) and is illustrative of “ethical enthusiasm” ( Hammersley 2009, p213).

Additional ethical issues arose subsequent to the research redesign. Ownership of the case record is a moot point and one where the boundaries of rights can become blurred. A case file is an agency record and produced within the legal parameters of information governance. However, the case record is also a narrative of a child’s life and elements of the lives of other family members. Arguably, informed consent should be sought if the record is not to be redacted. Hayes and Devaney (2004) posit a utilitarian as opposed to a deontological rationale. Although access to a case record without explicit consent can be considered a moral wrong, this may be counteracted by the moral benefits to research in general in accessing records without this consent. This dilemma was partially addressed by an amendment to both University and agency ethical approvals. However, there was no capacity within Moor Town to resource a redactment of the agency records, an ethical challenge which has been recognised elsewhere ( Huffhines et al. 2016). Through membership of the LSCB sub –group, I had access to sensitive information that was not in the public domain, and this was through this insider status that non redacted records were accessed.

## **6.7. Conclusion**

The research study was not unique in the challenges associated with negotiating with agency gatekeepers to facilitate data collection and in

recruiting children and young people as research participants. Notwithstanding early engagement with the three original sites, maintaining a research profile proved to be difficult here and in the subsequent local authorities who expressed interest in the study. The impact of this on the research design was significant. The original aim of the study was predicated on a sole focus on children and young people as sources of data and this became unachievable. Discussions with IROs in each of the sites had confirmed that in day –to day practice the numbers of children and young people attending a child protection conference were low. The arrangements in place to establish contact with those who did attend their child protection conference relied on multiple gatekeepers. At times there was a balance to be maintained in progressing the study in accordance with doctoral study requirements and recognising and being responsive to the many competing demands and priorities in statutory social work environments. The impetus for a revised research design significantly challenged the researcher's ontological positioning, with a reluctant acceptance that a sole focus on privileging the child and young person's perspective could not be achieved within the time frame of the study. However the adoption of Moor Town as the case study site provided an opportunity to explore a relatively under researched area; an analysis of the case records that are submitted to and generated in the child protection conference and to engage practitioners in the key themes that had emerged. The challenges associated with engaging children and young people who are considered to be vulnerable are well documented and have been explored in this chapter. Children and young people who are the subject of a child protection conference will usually be living at home, and most likely to at risk of significant harm ( or likely significant harm) as a result of parental neglect or emotional abuse ( DfES,

2017). Social workers, in responding to these concerns, are tasked with a duty to act in the best interests of a child or young person and for this to be their primary consideration. In doing so a balance between upholding protection rights under best interests must be balanced against participatory rights.



## **Chapter Seven. The presentation of the views of children at a child protection conference and/ or core group meeting.**

### **7.1. Introduction.**

Chapters Seven and Eight have been organised to introduce key findings from the study's multiple method approach to data collection. In the spirit of privileging the young persons' voice in the research study, the findings of the interviews undertaken with young people are presented first in Chapter Seven. This body of data represented stage one of the overall data collection process, with the themes generated from thematic analysis informing the subsequent revised strategy; namely the analysis of documents presented to child protection conferences and focus groups undertaken with IRO's and social workers. The discussion will then progress to a presentation of key findings from the analysis of child protection conference case records presented in Chapter Eight.

### **7.2. Introducing the interview participants.**

In total four interviews were undertaken with young people aged between twelve and fourteen. A pen picture of each young person and their circumstances at the point of data collection is outlined below. Each chose a pseudonym for the purposes of the study.

Arden was aged fourteen, and living away from home under S20 of the Children Act 1989 at the time of the interview. Arden's status was somewhat unusual in that she was concurrently subject to the child protection process and the LAC process. It is possible that this reflected the fluidity of her care arrangement; section 20 is a voluntary arrangement whereby Arden's mother retained full and sole

parental responsibility, and had provided parental consent for Arden to be placed with foster carers. At any point, Arden's mother had a legal right to request a return to her care. When we first met to discuss the study, Arden was about to move to new foster placement and opted for the interview to take place there. When we first met Arden talked openly about her personal circumstances (these had not been divulged to me by her social worker). Arden wanted to live apart from her mother who had issues with alcohol, and was pleased to be placed in foster care. At the point of the interview, an ICPC and a review conference had taken place. Arden had attended both and her mother had attended neither. Dual status meant that Arden participated in both LAC review meetings and child protection conferences with the same IRO chairing both forums. There was therefore an existing relationship with the IRO (this was later commented upon by the IRO who participated in the focus group) which may have influenced any decision making over conference attendance.

Georgia was aged fourteen and living in a women's refuge in a neighbouring local authority with her mother and two of her siblings, Alicia and George. Georgia had discussed her home life with a member of her school's pastoral support team and this had triggered a s47 enquiry under the Children Act 1989, requiring the local authority to make enquiries to investigate whether Georgia was suffering or likely to suffer significant harm. An ICPC was held when the family were still living with the mother's male partner and all three were made the subject of a child protection plan over concerns of domestic violence. At the point of the interview, Georgia was receiving counselling via her school. The living arrangement was temporary and the family were planning to return to their area of origin in the south of England. Alicia was aged twelve; she

was the sister of Georgia and the twin sibling of George. Alicia attended the same school as her siblings, but was not receiving counselling.

Georgia and Alicia had attended the ICPC, but not the three month review conference and they did not attend core group meetings.

George, also aged twelve, was in hospital when the ICPC was held and was therefore unable to attend. George had a long-term mobility issue which entailed frequent hospital admissions. His mother advised me that the social worker did not want George to be worried or placed under too much stress, and had decided to keep some information from him in order to minimise stress prior to a planned three week hospital admission. However, he had been involved in the family assessment and would have attended along with his siblings had the opportunity arose. Concerns over family violence and the importance of a planned exit from the family home to the women's refuge is the most likely factor for not delaying the ICPC .

I had initially been provided with contact details for Georgia and Alicia. When I met with the family, George expressed an interest in taking part in the research and I considered it important to uphold this request. Georgia and Alicia opted to talk with me together and asked their mother to be present. George opted to talk with me on his own. Their interviews took place in the women's refuge.

### **7.3. Themes and sub themes.**

Table 11 sets out the key themes that emerged through thematic analysis. All participants offered unique insights into what had worked well for them and what had worked less well, and from this emerged an additional theme entitled "A different table". The actual conference table and the table layout resonated

strongly with Arden, Georgia and Alicia and I have chosen to reflect this as a thematic heading in this chapter.

Table 11. Key themes from interviews with young people.

<b>Overarching theme</b>	<b>Sub themes</b>
<b>Getting to the table</b>	Exercising rights
	Making decisions
	Getting ready to attend
<b>Being around the table</b>	An adult world
	Being supported
	Living up to expectations
<b>A different table?</b>	What worked?
	What could be done differently?

#### **7.4 .Getting to the table.**

The themes in this section are concerned with the research participants' perceptions of the pre- conference process: their rationale for wanting to attend, their involvement in the decision making process and the work that had been undertaken with them in preparation for attending.

##### **7.4.1. Exercising rights.**

For Arden, the opportunity to exercise choice in deciding to attend or not to attend, and to contribute to the long-term plans for her future was extremely important. As a fourteen-year-old young woman, Arden considered herself capable of making this decision:

*'Because I'm the type of person that likes to know what's happening... I like to make my own decision and if something's said that I don't want to happen I'd have a voice in that.'*

For Arden the exercise of choice was more nuanced than a binary decision: to attend or not to attend. It also applied to choosing to opt out of some aspects of the meeting. For example, Arden chose not to involve herself in the Signs of Safety scoring exercise (where conference attendees score the likelihood of risk on a scale of 0-10):

*'I didn't want to scale because I felt bad about my mum. I didn't feel I could say I don't want to go home because it's not safe because my mam's a danger. I didn't want to say that. I didn't want to say let's go home and everyone else be like no she can't.'*

Alicia also perceived attendance to be an opportunity to put across her viewpoint:

*'Yeah it's good that children can go if they're allowed to so that they can understand a bit more and have their say'*

Alicia and Georgia had a clear shared understanding of their circumstances and the nature of professional concern and both highlighted the relevance of their experience of family violence as an essential feature of their safety plan. This was the main rationale for their decision to attend. More generally, Georgia believed that it was important for children to understand what was happening to them and to have a say in what should happen. George also shared this viewpoint. Had he not been in hospital George would also have attended the ICPC:

*'If I had a choice and if I was able to go to it I would'.*

Earlier, George's mother had advised me why it was not considered appropriate for George to attend or to be involved in some of the meetings that Georgia and Alicia had attended with their social worker:

*'The social worker didn't want George to worry or put him under too much stress. That why he wasn't told about the meeting beforehand, only afterwards. That was when you [directs to conversation to George] kept asking questions; because he wasn't at the meeting he had all these questions. When you're in the meeting you're hearing it all for the first time. He was getting it from me and Georgia and Alicia, from what we could remember'.*

Although George accepted that his hospital admission prevented him from attending in person, he felt excluded, and he expressed this in terms of a sense of differential treatment in comparison with his siblings:

*'I did feel kind of left out because honestly like when your siblings have something you don't or go somewhere you don't you... and you think that's unfair and all that.'*

#### **7.4.2. Making decisions.**

All participants expressed an opinion on whether age matters in the decision making process. Arden correlated age with an expectation of opting in:

*'They should always see the scripture (the social worker's report) the what's going to happen plan. They should be able to talk to somebody to say that's not right whatever the age they are even if the social have to sit down and describe it to them, listen to the child whatever age.'*

However, Arden did state that had she would not have coped with the experience had she attended at a younger age, aged eight or nine. Georgia concurred with

this, and questioned if younger children would *'get scared and confused'*. Georgia set the threshold for attendance at age 10. Alicia was less prescriptive, and considered the capacity to maintain confidentiality to be the most important criterion. George equated age with responsibility and ability to process and manage information:

*'I think there is because if they're really young they're not going to know what's really happening and like they won't understand. And if they're like 6 or 7 or 8 or something like that they wouldn't know it's such a big danger and they might just go saying to everyone and all that... like how much you get told and more... responsibility. That's it. And how much you get told'.*

This does appear to reflect the air of secrecy that permeates safety planning where there are concerns over domestic violence. All three children needed to maintain secrecy over social work involvement in the time leading up to the ICPC when still living with the alleged perpetrator. Georgia and Alicia both spoke about how they needed to ensure that their behaviour and attitude towards him did not raise suspicion:

Georgia: *'Coz then you could get like a bit juddy around the person.'*

Alicia: *'Like we had to act normal.'*

Georgia: *'But we did act normal so we'd go down, just go down so he didn't think why they are all in their rooms. Act like nothing was going on so like you just eat dinner normally come home from school, and just act as you would. So he or she didn't know what was going on, so that when you was at home he didn't think what was going on and he or she wouldn't be suspicious about what was going on so.'*

The decision to attend was made in consultation with others. Georgia and Alicia were encouraged to attend the conference by their mother. Arden believed she was provided with a choice, but ultimately believed that the final decision rested with the professionals, namely her social worker and her case worker ( Arden was receiving support from a voluntary organisation who work with children and young people affected by problematic parental substance use). Arden also believed the onus was on her to discount any concerns that may have been held by professionals:

*'I guess I'd have to prove myself, like I can handle the situation. But if they told me that they really thought I wasn't I would be okay, then you decide my life if I'm not the responsible person you think I am'.*

Arden chose to attend the core group meetings and attended both ICPC and review conferences. The review conference for Georgia, Alicia and George was held during school hours and neither attended, as they did not want their friends to know:

Georgia: *'Yeah I didn't want like them to find out'.*

Alicia: *'And when you come back in they say where did you go? You get like questions piled on you like so it would have been better if we didn't so people wouldn't have asked questions.'*

Georgia: *'They would have let us there but because it was at school they thought we would have got a lot of questions of what it was about'.*

The decision was taken for Georgia and Alicia to attend the first half of the conference, to listen to the social worker's report and to make their own contribution. Both understood the reason why they weren't present to hear reports



from other agencies, and viewed this as a decision made in their best interests to safeguard against hearing things that they *'didn't think were appropriate for us'*.

On reflection, Alicia felt that she would have preferred to remain for the whole meeting, Georgia however was clear that she wouldn't want to:

*'They thought because we only did half so then we didn't find out more, if we'd found out more we would have been scared of him, stuff about him we didn't know we wouldn't have wanted to know and so? I think it was a good thing we went out because they didn't want us to get pressured with adult stuff. They just had us in the meeting for half of it and then they had the adult talk'*.

#### **7.4.3. Getting ready to attend.**

Preparation took place regardless of whether any of the participants attended the conference in person. All spent time with their social worker at home and/or at school and used the Signs of Safety Three Houses tool as a medium of representing their views. Georgia and Alicia opted to complete this together as one document. All thought this was a useful tool for helping them to think about what they wanted to say and had a good understanding of how it was intended to contribute to the discussions at the conference. The use of an image served as a prompt for Arden and meant that she: *'didn't need to think off the top of my head'*.

Arden felt:

*'...quite prepared because I had the Three Houses and I knew people were there to support me, my choices. I felt prepared myself because I'm quite organised and that and I knew that was going to happen and now I know that was going to happen and yeah!'*

Here, Arden placed an expectation upon herself to take responsibility for being organised, an additional factor in her own preparation process.

Preparation also involved having an explanation of the conference function and process. Arden recognised that this can be time consuming but it was important to have this factored in prior to the conference taking place. Arden was supported to attend by her social worker, her voluntary organisation case worker and by the IRO and this experience influenced Arden's decision to attend the review child protection conference.

Georgia commented that their social worker had discussed confidentiality as part of the preparation process:

*'She was like it was quite important that it was confidential, so what's in the meeting stays in the meeting, doesn't come out so she was explaining that to us and what it was about.'*

Georgia commented upon the importance of the social worker using words that helped her to make sense of the report content, using age appropriate language and checking back on their understanding of the information being conveyed.

George also recalled spending time with a social worker at school to complete the Three Houses:

*'She spoke to me like once or twice. Once was in school when she was speaking with me how I'm doing, stuff I want to change, stuff I want to stay the same and then she met me, no she met my mum in hospital because she needed to like to speak to her and all that and I haven't seen her since'.*

## **7.5. Being around the table**

### **7.5.1. An adult world.**

The timing of the conference appeared to have had some bearing on attendance. Arden's initial conference took place during term time and in school hours. Arden was therefore excused from lessons and taken to the conference venue by her

social worker. Missing particular lessons was not an issue for Arden. Arden differentiated between lessons that she considered *'weren't going to help'* in her choice of career, such as Physical Education, French and History. Arden was also unconcerned by other pupils commenting upon her absence and explained that they had become used to this. Georgia and Alicia's conference took place in the school holiday period but Georgia was clear that they would have attended in term time:

*'Yeah coz the teacher who was there she knew all about it so she would have let us, coz she knew what it was about she would have let us like go to it'.*

All research participants who had attended the conference acknowledged that this was an environment outside their normative experience. Arden commented:

*'It's not normal to be in a room full of adults deciding your life at the age of fourteen. It's just like you have to feel so grown up, you have to be adult like, to do it. Like you've got to be sensible and what's the word? Responsible. Responsible enough to do it'.*

Despite being prepared in advance, the act of attending generated new understandings of the conference environment and membership. All participants were aware that the conference would take place in a Local Authority office and were able to use a break out room to talk with the IRO before the meeting.

Although Arden knew the IRO this was the first opportunity to meet with her to talk through the conference process. Georgia and Alicia travelled to and from the conference with their mother. They had not previously met the IRO responsible for chairing their conference and the pre- meeting took place in a waiting room:

*'So she came in and told us about it and she said what was going to happen, what could happen, what might happen and em if it went well then it could possibly happen'.*

The act of entering the conference room left a strong impression. For example, Arden likened it to: *'Like the Knights of the Round Table'* and Georgia commented: *'People. Like when you go in you don't think you're going into a big meeting and then you go into one oh god loads of people staring at you, oh no!'*

Having some choice over seating arrangements was important to Georgia and Alicia, and this had been discussed with the IRO alongside who would be present. The opportunity to sit beside the IRO and with each other helped both to be more relaxed. Georgia described being *'nervous'* and Alicia of being *'shy'* and qualified this:

*'Like worried. Like if mum was, if mum was going to worry. That she was going to be scared'.*

Arden was worried that her mother would attend:

*'When I first heard about it I heard that my mam would be going as well and so it was like what am I going to do.... and then the day it happened I was getting a bit nervous and scared and then it happened and it was fine. My mam wasn't there. I thought she would be but she wasn't'.*

Arden, Georgia and Alicia all commented on the benefit of name badges to help identify unfamiliar attendees. Although Arden recalled being told in advance there would be police representation at the ICPC it was still a surprise to see one there. With the exception of the police officer and the social worker's line manager all attendees were familiar to Arden. However, the use of a round table did make it difficult for Arden to see all the name badges, and owing to a hearing impairment Arden was prevented from hearing what some attendees said. Arden believed that this information had been noted on her medical form and would therefore be known to the other attendees, and should have been taken into account:

*'Such a weird thought but I think it would make it easier for me if I could choose where people sat.'*

Arden also commented on her perception of different expectations over appropriate conduct:

*'Well I saw people in the meeting looked bored coz it wasn't about them. School was an example. Just because it wasn't about school they just sat there and looked just so bored.... This is like fully grown women, like teachers sat there like what am I doing here? Not about me anymore like. I thought you could at least get your view across and you could at least pay attention if you're going to be here... I'll always remember that'.*

Georgia estimated that there were twelve professionals present at their conference, with only their respective class teachers and health professionals recognisable to them. They were also unable to see all name badges and were unclear as to who was who until introductions were made.

The use of technology in the conference was considered useful in enabling the participants to keep track of the conference process. All information was recorded onto what Georgia described as the '*boardy thing*' (a Whiteboard) which was used to record the conference discussions into the Signs of Safety template in real-time. Assurances over confidentiality were particularly important to Georgia and Alicia owing to the nature of professional concern. As previously noted this had been discussed by their social worker and they and Arden all recalled this being re-stated at the conference, the shared terminology being: "*What's said in the room stays in the room*".

Arden however expressed a lower degree of confidence in the arrangements for safe recording of core group meeting records.

### 7.5.2. Being supported

There were different perspectives over sources of support and these are perhaps a reflection of the conference context. Georgia, Alicia and George commented positively on the support provided by their school. It was the school who had made the initial referral, which had then triggered the s47 enquiry. The school's understanding of what they had experienced was significant as noted by George:

*'Because at school they would know if I was sad in class, or angry. They would know what was going on. It kind of helped me in school and it didn't bother me at all'.*

The family had experienced a change of social worker following the ICPC and it is possible that a relationship with the second social worker was yet not fully developed. Additionally, by the time of the review conference, the family were living in a women's refuge and plans were underway for the family to relocate to their original area of origin. The perceived level of risk of physical harm was therefore reduced. Furthermore, Georgia was receiving counselling from the pastoral team in school. This may explain their more meaningful relationship with school staff.

In contrast, Arden had known her social worker and her support worker for approximately a year and a half and considered both trusting relationships. Arden spoke of knowing she could contact her social worker if she felt anxious and emphasised the importance of going beyond the motions and really getting to know the child:

*'Yeah, on a personal level, not just right, I'm looking after you. They've got to know what your favourite colour is'...*

Arden identified the importance of having people familiar to her and her circumstances to her at the meeting:

*'Yes, well of course it is. Well, if there are people you don't know you have two adults that you've been working with at the bottom of the table and you're surrounded by people you're not that close to, can't trust. It's hard, it's really hard to speak'.*

The IRO was also identified as a source of support through ensuring that the conference was managed smoothly and providing opportunities to check the information being provided. This included setting the ground rules for confidentiality, ensuring that attendees used age appropriate language and checking on their wellbeing.

Being supported also involved understanding what would happen after the conference. Georgia and Alicia were notified afterwards of the conference decision by the IRO and George was informed by his mother and sisters during a hospital visit. To avoid compromising the family's safety none were provided with a copy of the conference report until they had been rehoused. Arden was provided with copies of all reports.

### **7.5.3. Being listened to and being heard.**

Arden had clear expectations of what she wanted the conference to achieve and measured the benefit of attendance against these. Arden's aim was for the professionals involved to provide care, ensure her safety and provide her with a sense of stability. This included both significant and less significant aspects of daily life:

*'Some things did happen that I wasn't expecting but it was good. I knew it had to be sorted and I wasn't thinking about sorting it and they sorted it. Bits that I wasn't*

*thinking about, like you must brush your teeth for example. They were reminding us, stuff I would have forgot'.*

Arden was also clear about elements of the decision making process she wanted to have some influence over and those that she did not, opting not to take part in the scoring exercise in the conference out of loyalty to her mother.

Georgia referred back to the Three Houses work and her stated wish to get away from her mother's partner. Both Arden and Georgia were clear that their wishes had come true. There was a clear correlation between expressing a wish and for this to be actioned upon in the decision making process. Georgia explained this as:

*'Because we're here and like coz we knew what he was like and now they know what he was like and so they thought we need to help them and get them away from him'.*

## **7.6. A different table?**

### **7.6.1. What worked?**

At the time of the interviews, Arden was the more experienced in attending formal decision-making meetings, having attended both initial and review conferences, core group meetings and LAC reviews. Arden felt relatively well prepared, had support networks available to her and in the core group meetings felt sufficiently confident to leave the meeting if necessary. Generally, Arden felt involved and included.

Notwithstanding worries and anxieties, all who attended saw clear benefits for attending. Georgia expressed this in terms of emotional benefits:

*'Yeah I was happy we went because we got everything out that we wanted to say and we weren't holding it anymore'.*



Arden articulated benefits in terms of personal growth, developing confidence in speaking to people, and opening herself up to future options and opportunities: *'You're not just stuck on one possibility, you've got loads. Like there'll always be other ways of getting around an object'.*

Arden also identified developing skills in priority setting and in being organised, including bringing her copy of the social worker's report with her:

*'Like this meeting's important and you've got to go and make time for it. And being organised, bringing the right stuff'.*

### **7.6.2. What could be different?**

Arden was the most vocal participant in identifying areas for improvement and this may reflect her level of experience in attending child protection conferences and core groups. Georgia and Alicia wanted the family to be in a place of safety and this was a goal shared by the family and the professionals. That this was achieved was very important to them. Although George felt left out by not attending he appeared to accept the reason for this and preferred to be told of the outcome by his mother and sisters.

There were four aspects of the conference process that Arden believed could have been managed differently. Firstly, Arden spent time with her social worker immediately before the initial conference, but only had a brief introduction to the Independent Reviewing Officer:

*'It would have been nice if I could have had a proper conversation with her before the meeting before she was at the top of the table saying this was going to happen. It would have been better to say 'hi, how are you and all that' and to have a proper conversation.'*

Secondly, despite knowing who was in attendance (with the exception of the police officer) Arden would have liked some control over where she sat in relation to other attendees. On entry to the room, most attendees were already present and this made it difficult for Arden to see and hear their contribution. Having an opportunity to sit at the top of the “round table” would have alleviated this. Thirdly and as already noted, Arden felt uncomfortable taking part in the scoring exercise, and would have welcomed an opportunity to have this discussion with the IRO, social worker or support worker outside and for her score to be conveyed to the conference. Finally, although Arden saw the value of the conference discussion being recorded in real time she wanted an opportunity to go over this immediately after the conference:

*‘So to make sure everything was on point or made to plan that it’s going to go really well, my opinion of it all. I think that would have been a bit better’.*

### **7.7. Conclusion.**

All who attended the conference believed that they had been involved in the decision making process and had been supported in preparing to attend. The context for the conference taking place varied and this is likely to have influenced professional assessment of capacity to attend. Georgia, Alicia and George understood the Local Authority’s concerns and wanted their mother to be supported in leaving an abusive relationship. There was agreement between parent and social worker about the nature of concern and what needed to happen to remove the risks associated with family violence. Their mother had fully supported their attendance at conference, believing that the success of the safety plan rested on all family members having knowledge of what was planned. Arden

was assessed by her social worker and the IRO to possess a sufficiently high level of maturity; however she felt that the onus was on her to demonstrate this.

Preparation was important for the participants to have knowledge of the conference function and process and for their wishes, feelings and views to be presented in a meaningful way. However, some of this information became lost in translation. Both Arden and Georgia had forgotten that the police would be in attendance at their respective ICPC's and their presence did have an initial impact. Additionally, the capacity to participate in ways meaningful to Arden and George was affected by responses to disability. Arden's hearing impairment prevented her from hearing some aspects of the conversation and George's hospitalisation effectively rendered him voiceless in comparison to his siblings. Participation also involved having some control over the more practical elements of the conference process, the seating arrangements, positioning of name badges and turn taking in the information sharing part of the conference.

Involvement in safety planning was also an important facet of participation. Arden had the opportunity to remain involved through her inclusion as a core group member, and Georgia, Alicia and George through their mother's relationship with the social worker.

## **Chapter Eight. The representation of children and young people's views at the child protection conference.**

### **8.1 Introduction.**

The findings presented in this chapter are based on a critical discourse analysis of thirty-two conference events that took place between September 2014 and June 2015. In total, twenty-eight children and young people were the subject of these events. As noted in Chapter Six, the data provided by Moor Town was anonymised and it was not possible to identify the conference events in respect of Arden, Georgia, Alicia and George.

Table 12 provides information on each child or young person's status to assist readers as the chapter progresses.

Table 12. Child protection conference profile.

Name	Age	Siblings	Conference status	
Barry	2	1	Initial	Child in Need plan
Colin	3	0	Review	Child protection plan
Darren	3	1	Initial	Child protection plan
Eleanor	4	4	Initial	Child protection plan
Martha	4	0	Review	Continued child protection plan
Daisy	4	0	Review	Continued child protection plan
Belle	5	2	Review	Continued child protection plan
Louise	5	2	ICPC	Child in Need plan
Daniel	5	2	Review	Discontinued child protection plan
Ryan	6	1	Review	Discontinued child protection plan
Nadia	8	2	Initial	Child protection plan
Nadia	8	2	Review	Continued child protection plan
Nadia	9	2	Review	Discontinued child protection plan

Dyab	10	1	Initial	Child protection plan
Kasey	11	1	Initial	Child protection plan
Dimitri	12	6	Review	Continued child protection plan
Callum	12	1	Initial	Child protection plan
Marcus	12	4	Initial	Child protection plan
Marcus	12	4	Review	Discontinued child protection plan
Emily	13	1	Review	Continued child protection plan
Esme	13	3	Initial	Child protection plan
Corrine	13	3	Initial	Child protection plan
Elizabeth	14	0	Initial	Child protection plan
Elizabeth	14	0	Review	Discontinued child protection plan
Tommie	14	8	Initial	Child protection plan
Tony	14	2	Review	Continued child protection plan
Rhiannon	15	0	Review	Discontinued child protection plan
Janneka	15	3	Initial	Child protection plan
Charlie	16	2	Initial	Child protection plan
Sean	16	6	Review	Continued child protection plan
Sophie	16	4	Initial	Child protection plan
Taylor	16	3	Review	Continued child protection plan

(Please note that the case records for Nadia, Marcus and Elizabeth included initial and review conference events)

## 8.2. Genre.

Appendix 8 outlines the range of reports that were included in each of the thirty-two conference bundles. Not all conference events included a separate social work report, which served as a summary of the social worker's assessment. Child protection conferences that were conducted under the Signs of Safety framework accepted the assessment form itself in lieu of a separate report. All social worker reports included a separate section in the first section of the report structure for incorporating the views of the child or young person.

Although assessment reports provided by the social worker and other agencies shared a genre of providing input into the child protection conference information sharing and analysis stages, there was no evidence of a standardised format across agencies and across time. For example, some primary schools appeared to use a format that included a tick box section specifying if the report had been shared with the child. Other primary schools and some secondary schools provided their report in a letter format and on headed notepaper. Reports provided by voluntary sector organisations were more standardised in that there was a section for reporting the child or young person's views, and for establishing if the contents of the report had been shared with the child or young person.

Variation also occurred in the inclusion of examples of direct work, which, in the majority of conferences, adopted the form of the Three Houses. It was not surprising that this was more likely to be included for children under the age of ten, as it was originally designed for children aged six or seven (although as outlined in Chapter Four, it was also considered by its authors as applicable for children aged four upwards). In two examples where the conference concerned a sibling group, the examples of direct work produced in respect of Esme and Toby were actually undertaken with a sibling rather than themselves. Reference is made to direct work in Rhiannon's social work report although there is no rationale provided for why The Three Houses tool would be undertaken with a fifteen-year-old. There were no examples of direct work tools designed for young people over the age of ten and it is more likely that views would be ascertained through a direct report of a conversation.

In keeping with its strategic function, the child protection plan was the most action orientated of the documents. In setting out roles and responsibilities there was some evidence of a commitment to participation in the child protection process. For example, the plan produced at the ICPC for Nadia (then aged eight) and her brothers placed a clear expectation on current and future social workers:

*'IRT (Initial Response Team) and transfer social worker to meet with the children and explain the outcome of the conference to ensure the children are aware of concerns in an age appropriate way'.*

Based on the reports that were made available there appears to be little consistency other than reports serving the two main genre functions as defined within the analytical framework. Social worker and other agency reports served to provide the conference with assessment material and thus had an input function. The record of the conference and the child protection plan/ safety plan served as a strategic document which would be subject to review at the next conference. Agency reports differed in structure and content and there was no evidence of the contents of school reports having been shared with the child or young person before the conference. Reports compiled by voluntary sector organisations were specific in stating that contents had been shared.

### **8.3. Intertextuality.**

To facilitate a coherent narrative of the data, key findings will be presented according to the format in which the child or young person's views, wishes and feelings was represented (or not represented).

### 8.3.1. The social worker assessment report.

The most significant finding in this dimension of the CDA framework was the dominance of the social worker's voice, and the status afforded to this in the child protection conference or core group documents. Across the age ranges, there was no evidence of the social worker's assessment in general, or representation of the child or young person's views being clarified or challenged by the conference chair (the IRO) or conference or core group members. There was also no evidence of any explanation or rationale for why the child or young person did not attend in person.

There was considerable variation in the quantitative and qualitative elements of the child/ young person's view section in the social worker report. The following extracts contain clear statements, albeit through a professional lens, of the young person's views and some degree of professional judgement is particularly evident in the first:

*'Elizabeth does not consider her current behaviour to be a risk. Elizabeth has previously communicated that she wishes to have a consistent person to speak with and with this person; she felt she could explore the triggers to her emotional wellbeing. Elizabeth has made it clear that she does not want to return to... although it is unclear as to the true reasoning for this'.*

*'Nadia doesn't understand why her mother was upset as her father hurts her all the time. Nadia wants her father to come home but wants him to change his anger'.*



In contrast, other statements made in the child/ young person's views section are brief but do serve to convey powerful statements about the child/ young person's lived experience and emotive state:

*'Dyab reported to be "confused"'*.

*'E (Esme) identifies home as a miserable and lonely place and feels she wants to spend as little time as possible at home'.*

*'Brief conversation with Callum due to lack of privacy at school. Very open about concerns. Describes home environment as chaotic, unpredictable, overcrowded, an unhappy place to live'.*

In the absence of quotation marks, it is not clear if the adjectives used are those directly reported by Esme and Callum or the social worker's own interpretation.

In the entries for Martha, aged four, there was some variation in the language used by the social worker. In the conference report the social worker uses both relatively child orientated and more adult language when discussing the adults in Martha's life:

*'Martha wants to live with her maternal grandmother and for mum to live there. Martha worries about mum'.*

In the core group minutes under the "Child's views" section, the above is rephrased into the social worker's interpretation:

*'Martha has nothing negative to say about living arrangements'.*

The child/ young person's views section was also used to convey professional opinion, to provide a rationale for perceived non – engagement in the assessment process or to exercise a professional judgement on the validity of the child or

young person's views. Professional opinion was included on the reported views of Dyab and Elizabeth:

*'I do not feel he (brother) or his sibling need a social worker to feel safe'.*

*'Whilst I recognise Elizabeth's logic around this...' (a wish to move schools).*

Evidence of attempts to ascertain the wishes and feelings of the young person and to have this formally noted were included in the following sections for Corrine aged thirteen and Tony aged fourteen:

*Corrine 'presented as a very guarded young person during the assessment period and has not engaged positively with one to one sessions that have been undertaken. Corrine's body language changed markedly when this area (worries) was explored and she was observed to turn away from me and stare at the wall'.*

*'Tony is not interested in speaking with me and was more interested in playing outside'.*

Questioning of the accuracy / validity of reported views was provided in the following "Views of the child/ young person" section:

*'Elizabeth has described feelings of wanting to be away from her family but is unable to provide a clear or justifiable reasoning for this'.*

The following extract is an example of how the social worker used professional filtering to convey Esme's views and of the inter-relationship between the texts. The views expressed by Esme, aged thirteen, in the relevant section of the social worker report are combined with those included in core group meetings resulting in the following statement in the conference report:

*'Esme repeatedly said she didn't like partner being in the family home and she doesn't get on with her mother. Feels she gets the blame for everything. Feels she has middle child syndrome. Home is not happy place for her'.*

Of note, here is the insertion of the adjective '*not happy*' in place of Esme's reported and more powerful description of home as a "*miserable and lonely*" place as stated in the social worker's report. Although it is not clear if these words were used by Esme herself, there is a distinct variation in meaning.

### **8.3.2. Direct work tools.**

Individual social workers also made decisions whether to use any specific direct work tools to facilitate the child's views. Where these were considered inappropriate by virtue of age, for example with Darren and with Louise, there was no record of any alternative method being considered and instead the social worker's observation of the child and / or an indirect report was used to convey the child's views.

In contrast, in a direct work activity undertaken with Eleanor, who was aged four, the social worker referred to '*the level of age inappropriate information that Eleanor is aware of*'. Here, the social worker conveyed to the conference a unique insight into Eleanor's understanding of her father's violent behaviour and details of his arrest. In making a judgement over what constituted '*inappropriate*' information, the social worker also conveyed to the conference an assessment of Eleanor's agency, being influenced by and influencing (through the medium of the direct work activity) her social world at a relatively young age. Similarly, Belle's social worker used the word '*adamant*' to describe Belle's confirmation of information that effectively contradicted the social worker's own understanding of

an important element of the safety plan. This served as an invitation for the conference to give weight to Belle's account of events.

As illustrated above, a social worker's comments were usually included along with direct work activity and together both documents served to evidence the social work assessment.

For example, Ryan aged 6, used the Three Houses to draw a picture of a house which included his '*nana, grandad and other family members*'. The social worker noted in the "views of the child section" that Ryan had:

*'Consistently stated that he wishes to live with his mum and the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. He diligently drew and named each turtle, himself and his mum in his dream house'.*

The "All is Me" booklet, a format that incorporated pre-populated (for example, family and school dimensions of the Life Wheel) and free narrative sections (for example, like/don't like...; what's important statements), was used with Nadia, aged 8, in preparation for the ICPC. A family support worker undertook this work over three sessions and this was presented to the conference as a separate document. Here, it was stated:

*"Nadia doesn't like arguing and shouting in the home"*

The "All About Me" booklet was also used with Kasey, aged nine, by a Community Nurse Practitioner in order to establish a:

*'therapeutic relationship and to see if I could get a better understanding of her overall needs'.*

The value of this activity was not apparent as the conference record noted:

*'Children's views are to be obtained via assessment' and 'Social worker to complete 1:1 work with the children to assess their individual needs'.*

### **8.3.3. Record of the child protection conference.**

It was not clear in any of the child protection conference records whether the child's own words had been directly transposed or whether they had been subject to professional filtering. For example, it is unlikely that that a child aged five would be conversant with terminology such as Children's Social Care, but in the following sentence, the social worker does suggest that Belle had some understanding of her circumstances:

*'Belle is very aware in general and understands that Children's Social Care is involved in the family'.*

Transparency was not always evident in the transfer between information contained in one report and what was then incorporated into the conference report, which then had potential to minimise meaning and significance. Again, with reference to Belle, the social worker stated: *'Belle openly told me... Belle was adamant about this'*. This referred to a description of an incident that occurred at the family home and which contravened an agreement made with Belle's parents. The use of the word 'adamant' suggests that the social worker clarified and confirmed Belle's understanding of the event. However, this is not conveyed in the child/ young person's views section of the conference record, which stated: *'Belle is talking less... has better stranger awareness'*.

In a further extract from the core group meetings for Emily, aged thirteen, provided considerable insight into the social worker's interpretation of Emily's physical, behavioural and social presentation, but this was summarised as follows in the "Child/ young person's views section of the conference report:

*'Positive with move. School report was fine. Emily saying, she likes new boyfriend. Not wearing makeup and she looks pretty without. New boyfriend does not like Emily to wear makeup. Both girls are happier in their environment. They are not choosing to see (mum) and they are very clear about this'.*

On other occasions, there was no correlation between information contained in the social worker reports and the strategic report. For example, the social worker report in respect of Callum aged twelve noted:

*'Brief conversation with Callum due to lack of privacy at school. 'Very open" about concerns'.*

*'Describes home environment: 'chaotic, unpredictable, overcrowded, an unhappy place to live'.*

However, the "child/ young person's views" section in the conference minutes was left blank.

No mention was made of Daisy, aged four, by name in the core group meeting minutes:

*'The children have been visited both at home and in school... The children have not presented with any issues which would give cause for concern' and 'Social worker attempted 1:1 work with children'.*

It is unclear what was meant by 'attempted' but this does suggest that Daisy was not communicated with. However, in the child's views section of the conference minutes, an update by the social worker suggested otherwise:

*'Daisy is very vocal during home visits and likes to gain my attention. Daisy talks openly about things the family have done'.*

In respect of Marcus, there was some degree of divergence in the meaning of reported views. A statement reported in the core group minutes was rephrased from *'The eldest two don't believe they need a social worker'* to *'Marcus is unsure if he needs a social worker'*. Whilst it was appropriate to privilege Marcus's views as his alone, the social worker had altered the weight given by Marcus in his expression, from *'believe'* to *'unsure'*. In the second review, conference report there was some confusion over the ascertaining of Marcus's views: *'The children's views have not been gained formally'* whereas the following comment is also noted: *"Direct work shows that there are no concerns regarding the children's home life"*.

#### **8.3.4. Other agency reports.**

None of the primary or secondary school reports appeared to have consulted with or shared their agency's report for conference with the child or young person. This section was either left blank or the "No" box ticked. Elsewhere, an Occupational Therapy/ Care Co-ordinator report presented to Esme's conference referred to a male sibling instead of Esme. There were two exceptions to this pattern. A report completed by a Community Nurse Practitioner for Elizabeth's final review conference confirmed that the report had been discussed with Elizabeth who had given agreement for its presentation at the conference and a report completed by a voluntary sector organisation included a clear statement that Rhiannon, aged fifteen had contributed to its compilation.

The extent to which other agencies were drawn upon to support the social worker's articulation of wishes and views was not always clear. For example, in the social worker's reports for Barry (aged two and a half) he was described as meeting his developmental milestones. However, the Nursery Manager's report is

less equivocal over Barry's developmental progress, stating that a referral has been made for Speech and Language Therapy, and commenting upon his limited interest in toys and need for adult interaction. These are characteristics of a child with additional needs, an attribute that did not appear to have been noted in the social worker's report.

#### **8.3.5. Core group minutes.**

The pro forma core group minutes record also included a "Views of the child/ young person" section. Although the social worker made reference to Nadia, aged eight, wanting to visit her dad and being worried that her mother would not be able to afford a school trip, her views were not separately conveyed in the core group minutes, which stated:

*'The older children have some understanding of why their dad is not living at home at the moment. They state they miss him and want him to come home but want things to be better'.*

Elsewhere the "Views of the child/ young person" section in the core group minutes appeared to serve a function for demonstrating professional accountability and compliance with the child protection plan. For example, there was no direct / indirect report by Belle but the social worker commented that Belle was *'regularly seen at home by the social worker at home and school'*. There was no qualifying statement to define what regular meant in terms of frequency.

The most detailed series of sequential statements in a core group record referred to Emily aged thirteen. Here the social worker included indirect reports, and statements of professional judgement concerning the validity of Emily's reported statements and in relation Emily's physical presentation and behaviour. These



statements were the most detailed of all reports and contained significant evidence of value based assessment:

*'Emily said she hangs around with boys of her own age. I am unsure if this is true and a real reflection of what is happening. However, Emily told me that she never has sex with boys, just likes to brag. Again, I am unsure if this is true.'*

*'I asked Emily why she was so horrible to her little sister. She said she did not know and would try harder to be nicer to her. I am not convinced that this was said with any sincerity whatsoever from Emily.'*

*'Emily told me her boyfriend doesn't like her wearing makeup. Emily does look refreshingly prettier without makeup.'*

In comparison to the statement made in the social work report (p.215) the social worker here has introduced a value statement by including the adverb 'refreshingly'.

*'I asked Emily why she acts the way she does in relation to running up and down and acting silly, shouting and screaming in school, Emily said she didn't know why. I told her it had to stop.'*

#### **8.3.6. Child protection plan/ safety plan.**

There was further evidence of intertextuality between assessment reports and the conference record, particularly with children aged twelve and over.

Corrine's social worker noted:

*'During this assessment didn't disclose what she's doing when missing. Has advised why she understands why adults are concerned but feels she's safe.'*

Corrine was aged thirteen at the time of her ICPC, and there is a notable recognition of the importance of engaging Corrine in the safety plan in order to minimise risks associated with sexual exploitation:

*‘For Corrine not to go missing: further attempts at 1:1 work with Corrine to ascertain her views and her understanding of risk. SW to meet with Corrine to ask if she would like to attend her review to share information/ meet her IRO ahead of the conference. Core group to further develop the plan and ensure that Corrine is aware of this plan and her views are included’.*

In contrast, the reports presented to Taylor’s review conference commented on a perceived lack of engagement with the safety plan:

*‘Taylor offered outreach: didn’t engage’.*

*‘Taylor to engage with bereavement counselling: refused to engage’.*

*‘Family Support Worker to undertake work with Taylor: Taylor lost his temper and hasn’t engaged since’.*

At the time, Taylor was aged sixteen. It is somewhat surprising that in the face of evidence that suggested that the interventions had little meaning or value for Taylor, a prescriptive and directional approach was again adopted in the revised safety plan:

*‘Taylor will engage with education and training. Taylor to be spoken to re careers advice’.*

#### **8.4. Assumption.**

Across the age bands assumptions were made in each category over professional beliefs about childhood and the capacity of children to be involved in the

assessment process. Assumptions concerning age and capacity were particularly prevalent in the under five-year age range, and a shared feature of social worker and conference reports was the absence of the child's direct voice in the "Views of the Child / Young Person" sections. Where direct work was not undertaken, the reason provided related to assumptions made about an individual child's age related capabilities. The dominant assumption appeared to be that children under the age of five were not able to communicate their wishes and feelings. For example, Barry, aged two and a half was considered '*too young to provide his views formally*'. It was unclear how Barry's social worker interpreted a formal articulation of views or whether any particular approaches, including child observation, were attempted. The social worker's report noted Barry was talking, making good progress and meeting his development milestones; characteristics which suggest that Barry was capable of expressing himself through verbal and non-verbal means.

Darren's social worker noted:

*'I did not complete direct work with Darren due to his age and understanding.'*

*'Tried to carry out the Three Houses work but believe the children found this difficult to comprehend'.*

*'No work was undertaken with Darren'.*

Here, an assumption that the Three Houses tool was the optimal resource for ascertaining a child's views served as a barrier to exploring other communication methods. This is noteworthy given that the social worker commented on talking with Darren, and provided an example of how Darren described happy as "*playing with friends*".

Assumptions over increased capacity as a child moved from infancy towards middle childhood were illustrated in the work undertaken with Ryan aged six, and Nadia aged eight. Greater use was made of closed and facilitative questioning styles and the views of both children were incorporated into the assessment reports. Although reported in an indirect manner, Nadia, aged eight, described life at home within a context of family violence, and there appeared to be a degree of sensitivity on behalf of the family support worker as to the reasons why Nadia might find it difficult to talk about life at home. In Nadia's child protection plan, there was a clear commitment to her right to be informed and to provide her views.

Progression towards young adulthood correlated with greater weight afforded to the young person's views through explicit inclusion into the safety plan. Young people in this age group were also assumed more capable and of sufficient maturity to attend a child protection conference or a core group in person. For example, there was a clear statement made about Corrine's capacity at the age of thirteen to co-construct a safe and effective child protection plan.

The second significant assumption made concerned social work practice, in particular over the value afforded to social work practice referred to as 'direct work' which appeared to be different to a general conversation between a child and their social worker. For example, the social worker for Eleanor, aged four, commented:

*'Due to her young age her direct wishes and feelings have not been undertaken as part of this assessment, however the 1:1 work undertaken highlighted Eleanor's feelings in terms of her family relationships and who she saw as important in her life'.*

Assumptions over direct work activity as the optimal medium for ascertaining the child's views appear to have been routinely accepted in the conference forum. Direct work activity and the core social work role of communicating and engaging with children appear to have merged into one.

On occasion, assumptions were also made over the social worker being the most appropriate person to take forward any future direct work, despite indications to the contrary. It was noted that Dimitri, aged twelve, did not want to talk with his social worker but the child protection plan stated :

*'To allow the children to share their wishes and feelings: social worker to complete 1:1 work with children using Signs of Safety Tool'.*

In contrast, however a statement made in Corrine's child protection plan did take into account Corrine's wishes, with an expectation placed on the professionals and family to:

*'Identify an individual who can develop a positive relationship with Corrine to try to understand things from her perspective. Corrine will be confident that her views are heard and she can assist in the development of a plan to keep her safe'.*

Value based assumptions were also made about what was considered to be age appropriate behaviour, most notably in the various statements made by Emily and Taylor.

For some young people, there was an assumption of capacity, an upholding of rights, and an expectation that their views should be sought to inform future safety planning. However, there was also evidence of unchallenged assumptions around which individual or agency was best placed to act in the best interests of the young

person. The onus appeared to be on the young person to engage in service interventions, rather than services engaging with the young person.

### **8.5. Representation.**

It is reasonable to assume that a social worker will wish to demonstrate that practice was undertaken in accordance with national and agency requirements. The social worker would also aim to present an evidence based assessment, drawn from direct face to face interventions with the child or young person, and further informed by the perspectives of other professionals directly involved. It is also reasonable to assume that in doing so there would be some evidence about the quality of relationship held with the child or young person. To achieve the above a social worker is likely to draw upon and re- contextualise occurrences of single events in order to provide the conference with a holistic “picture” of the child.

A review of the case records suggested that this practice was varied. Some social workers provided detailed rich accounts of time spent with a child, and in doing so conveyed a picture to the conference of the nature of the relationship, the child’s physical, cognitive, social and emotional presentation. For example, the social worker for Eleanor, aged four, described a particular intervention in some depth, providing context of the setting for the individual work, outlining activities that were undertaken ( *‘playing with the colours and drawing a picture’*), Eleanor’s presentation ( *‘happy, cheeky and playful’* ) and her capabilities ( *‘managed to stay on task’*). In contrast, other reports appeared to be a reconstitution of multiple events. For example, it was noted by the social worker that Colin, aged three *‘engages during home visits’*. Although this suggests that Colin was an active participant on more than one occasion, he was presented to

the conference in a much more passive way. The conference learnt very little about Colin other than he had new toys on one occasion.

Representation of the child in the texts was also varied. Reference to the child by use of first name was most evident in the “Child’s/ young person’s views” section of the social workers’ reports and conference report. However, there was also evidence of more collective representation when the conference involved a sibling group, thus inviting more generalised statements. Daisy’s social worker stated:

*‘The children have not presented with any issues which would give cause for concern’.*

Children in the 0-4 age range and those aged five, with the exception of Darren and Martha, were presented in terms of positive wellbeing. For example, Louise was described as a *‘happy and confident little girl, not worried or frightened about anything’* and Daisy as *‘a very happy child’*.

Children aged five and above were more likely to be referred to by first name, and through a professional interpretation of the child’s views through the use of indirect quotations. Variation in child or young person representation arose from variation in authorship. For example, in the social worker report for Nadia’s ICPC, the reader gained an insight into Nadia as a person in her own right and the difficulties she was experiencing at home. Alongside use of Nadia’s first name in the narrative sections, use was also made of “*she*” and “*her*”. In both ICPC and review conference reports, and child protection plans, there was no reference to Nadia through the inclusion of her first name, and instead, Nadia is subsumed under the umbrella term of “children”. It is unclear why Nadia’s brother should be referred to in the documents relating to Nadia as a subject of the conference, as there is a clear expectation that each child in a sibling group should have a separate report. There were multiple examples of an individual child referred to as part of the

sibling group across all age ranges. There were two examples, Taylor and Charlie both aged sixteen where no reference was made to them by name, although reference was made to younger siblings in the social worker's report.

There was some correlation between how a young person was represented and the degree of risk. For example, the most detailed narratives were found in the social work reports for Corrine, Emily, both aged thirteen, and both identified as being at risk of sexual exploitation. This is perhaps reflective of the high-risk profile accorded to sexual exploitation in general, and an acknowledgement of the practice challenges associated with working alongside young people, who may not consider themselves to be at risk. It is therefore possible that attention to detail is an example of accountability in managing the risks for both practitioner and agency.

#### **8.6. Styles and identities.**

Social workers drew upon their expert knowledge to make declarative positive or negative statements about a child's identity and well-being. Positive attributes associated with normative assumptions about the developing child were noted for Eleanor and Colin; both were presented as possessing attributes commensurate with normative developmental milestones, and the use of 'really *positively*' served to emphasise Eleanor's capacity to engage in individual work with her social worker. Conversely, Emily's social worker alluded to more negative attributes, which were contrary to normative assumptions about what was considered to be acceptable behaviour for a thirteen-year-old:

*'I asked Emily why she acts the way she does in relation to running up and down and acting silly, shouting and screaming in school'.*



In respect of children and young people over the age of thirteen, portrayals tended to focus on negative rather than positive identity, with references to the “non-engaged” child (Corrine, Dimitri, Tony and Marcus), the “at risk child” (Callum, Emily and Corrine), the “problem” child (Emily), the “non- included” child (Marcus, Toby) and the “disbelieved child” (Emily). The exception to this was Tommie, aged fourteen. The “child’s view” section noted: *‘Tommie says he feels happy at home. He said he is never sad and life is always good... he says he feels looked after and cared for by his parents’*.

Taylor was represented in a wholly negative light: as a young person who was difficult to engage with, despite the best intentions of multiple service providers and who required firm direction in order to ‘*get back on track*’. There were no indicators of strengths in any aspect of Taylor’s life, and no evidence of a counter identity being sought during the conference. In contrast, Sean was represented in a much more sympathetic manner and in multiple forms: as a young person with resilience who was coping at school despite experiencing multiple adversities at home, and as a young carer. The school report in particular provided a powerful image of Sean as a known and cared for pupil:

*“Sean seems to lurch from one family/ personal crisis and the pressure he is under is incredible. The fact that he has been able to get to school every day and engage in his education is nothing short of a miracle and he should be commended for this’.*

Rhiannon was also presented in a more positive light, as a young woman with aspirations, as a young woman with capacity to express a viewpoint and to be heard but as a young woman with additional needs and who aspired towards a career in journalism.

Loss of unique identity across the age ranges occurred for children and young people who were subsumed into sibling groups. For example, Barry (aged two and a half) was referred to by: *'The children are both happy and well cared for'*, and Dyab, aged ten by:

*'The boys are reluctant to engage'* and Sophie, aged sixteen, by *'They speak highly of their mother'*.

Identity was also lost through the child or young person's presentation as invisible. For example, there was no reference to Colin, aged three, by name in the child protection plan and the core group minutes noted that *'Colin's views not sought'*. In contrast, there were two children, Eleanor and Martha; both aged four who come to life in the assessment reports. Both has been involved in some direct work activity with their social worker and here there appeared to be some correlation between the range of social work activity and the visibility of the child. Those children who undertook activities such as the Three Houses were much more likely to come to life in the conference documents.

The invisible person was Janneka, aged fifteen. There was no record of Janneka having been seen by the social worker and the conference record noted: *'child's views expressed by mother'*. Out of five paragraphs in a previous local authority report, only one sentence referred specifically to Janneka: *'Janneka has experienced bullying'*.

### **8.7. Interdiscursivity.**

Across the reports, there were three dominant and interlayering discourses: a discourse of childhood, a discourse of participation and a discourse of professional social work practice.

A dominant conception of childhood was premised on theories of childhood that were influenced by developmental psychology and this served to legitimise the absence of the child's voice, the absence of unique identity. From this, a 'best interest' professional practice discourse was evident. Out of twenty-eight children, only one young person attended their review child protection conference. The majority therefore were reliant on their social worker to represent their views, wishes and feelings. Children under the age of five were most likely not to have their views sought, and for this to be justified on the grounds of age. A conception of childhood based on the adult being the more knowing, rationale and capable person was evident in respect of young adults, particularly where the stated views were contrary to the social worker's assessment. Perhaps the most striking example concerned Taylor who, for reasons unknown to the professionals, had not engaged in the interventions previously identified in the child protection plan. However, there appeared to be no professional acknowledgement of the limitations of the plan, and the need to engage Taylor in the child protection plan through other means. A further aspect of the dominant discourse of childhood concerned normative assumptions over how children should behave. A striking example concerned Emily whose behaviour in school and towards her sister was not, according to her social worker in keeping with age related behavioural norms.

A dominant discourse of participation focused on participation as an activity, predominately undertaken by the social worker with the child alone or with siblings at home or in a school or nursery setting. The activity may have directly involved the child through the use of The Three Houses or through drawing or dialogue. The latter appeared to be an unsuccessful approach with older aged children who exercised their right to non- participation through non- engagement. Participation was predominately concerned with representation of views through

professional interpretation. Some reports were detailed and it was possible to gain significant insight into the child or young person's world and in others there is very little sense of this. This can be illustrated by the records for Sean aged sixteen and Tony aged fourteen; both were the subject of a review conference:

*'Sean sees himself as a protective force for his family and the target for his anger is his father. Sean has stated and talked about using violence to protect his family. Sean is very concerned that he does not become like his father'.*

*'Tony is wary about adults. He is not interested in speaking with me and was more interested in playing outside. During my visits Tony presents as a happy child who is loved by his family members'.*

The dominant discourse of social work practice was concerned with what Munro described as "doing things right" (2011, p.6). For example, there were multiple references to social workers using the child's views section of their report to confirm to the conference that the child had been 'seen', and in the case of the child protection review conference that this had occurred on a 'regular' basis. Doing things right (ibid) also applied to a compliance with the Signs of Safety approach, with social workers and other practitioners using the Three Houses with children and young people aged from three to fifteen. All children and young people were the subject of a child protection conference as a result of having experienced significant harm or the high likelihood of significant harm occurring. However there were few direct references to the child or young person's perception of their circumstances, and this was more likely to occur with young people aged thirteen onwards, and with young women where there were stated concerns over sexual exploitation.

## **8.8. Conclusion.**

Critical Discourse Analysis provided a lens through which to examine and explore the meaning within and across a range of texts. This provided depth of clarity over the type and purpose of the range of documents presented to the child protection conference, and illumination of the voices contained in these. The use of language served to privilege and not to privilege voice, to present the child in a particular way and illustrated the range of assumptions, which practitioners drew upon to validate their presentation and re-presentation of the child's voice.

A number of findings emerged. There was variation in the extent to which a child's or a young person's views were included in both input and strategic genres. Some children and young people come to life, and some were invisible. Some appeared to enjoy a positive relationship with their social worker, others less so. Views were marginalised in some agency reports, and privileged in others, namely the voluntary sector. Some children were afforded a unique identity, others less so. The report formats were not always used as originally designed, with professional filtering and interpretation of the child or young person's views replacing the inclusion of a direct report.

## **Chapter Nine. Professional perspectives.**

### **9.1. Introduction**

The focus group discussions were based on an interview schedule developed by the researcher, and drawn from the themes that had emerged from interviews conducted with Arden, Georgia, Alicia and George and from documentary analysis. The themes that emerged related to personal and professional principles underpinning participation, and the organisational and structural determinants that influenced individual practice with children and young people.

In their focus group, social work participants also made reference to the processes and practices within the child protection arena, the most commented upon being direct work texts that are brought into the conference arena for information sharing and decision making purposes. The dominance of the Signs of Safety framework was again evident, with multiple references made to specific tools such as the Three Houses and the Wizard and Fairies. Reference was also made to the standardised mechanisms for reporting the social work home visit as a key social work activity as a genre for demonstrating professional accountability in accordance with statutory guidance and to the use of an online recording tool (Viewpoint) for ascertaining the wishes and feelings of children and young people. As with the IRO focus group there was an assumption of a shared understanding of child protection practice between participants and between the group and the researcher.

The themes that were generated through thematic analysis are represented below.

Table 13. Focus group themes.

Overarching theme	Sub theme
<b>Entering an adult world</b>	Perceptions of participation
	The decision making process
	Barriers to attendance in person
	Benefits of attendance
	Ascertaining views, wishes and feelings through the assessment process
<b>Representation of the child or young person's voice</b>	Frameworks and tools
	Variations on practice

## 9.2. Entering an adult world.

Child attendance at a child protection conference is not routinely entered into the agency's data recording system. In Chapter Six, I referred to anecdotal data, obtained through preliminary discussions with IROs, which suggested that it was more likely for a child or young person not to attend than to attend their child protection conference. The experiences of the social workers appeared to corroborate this, each had been qualified for seven or eight years and collectively identified only four young people who had attended conference; aged between twelve and sixteen.

### 9.2.1 Perceptions of participation.

Of the two groups the IRO's were able to draw more upon experiences of children and young people attending conference, whether planned or unplanned, whereas practitioners in the social workers' focus group drew more upon their own

observations of the conference environment and process. Perceptions of participation were multi- faceted. Participation was defined in terms of a process of engagement for seeking views and helping adults understand their perspective:

*'Engagement with the plan, engagement with their views about the circumstances'. (Karin: IRO)*

*'I guess it's important to understand what the child's living in, what their perspective of family life is'. (William: SW)*

*"We have some sense of the child and their views". (Sarah: IRO)*

For Jen (SW), participation entailed expression of voice.

*'I think it's about how they have voice in a conference, and when we're all talking about concerns about them how they get to have a voice in that. ... How do we make sure the voices that are heard when talking about children are not just the voices of lots of adults but they have, the kids have something to share'.*

Jen also referred to participation as context specific:

*'It's not necessarily a dialogue, in some cases it can be, but in other times it's more you know us having to feed that back, or someone else feeding that back'.*

*(Jen:SW)*

Participation was also expressed as a right:

*'And their voice is really important. It's about them, it's about their life' and "But if I thought people were talking about me at the age of 15 I'd really want to hear about it. (Diane: IRO)*

*'I do feel quite passionate that older children should attend conferences, maybe not all of it but some of it'. (Natalie: SW)*



Participants in both groups recognised that in principle children and young people should have the right to attend and to present their views, a recognition of the inherent value of participation as a principle. Jen for example referred to participation as a collective responsibility. She felt the onus was on the social worker to '*make sure*' voices are heard. The right to participate was not articulated as a legal right through explicit reference to Article 12 of the UNCRC or the Children Act 1989, although Natalie (SW) did refer to rights associated with mental capacity as defined by the Mental Capacity Act 2005, suggesting that young people over the age of sixteen could make an unwise decision if assessed to have capacity for making that decision.

### **9.2.2. Who decides?**

Social workers considered themselves to be best placed to decide whether it was appropriate or not for a child or young person to attend the child protection conference, and based their decision on their knowledge of the child or young person and family circumstances. In the absence of any agency guidelines or decision-making criteria, decisions were based on individual professional judgement and therefore possibly subject to the influence of personally held beliefs, and prior experience. For example, William (SW) and Jen (SW) both cited occasions where, in their opinion, attendance had been beneficial, and were likely to consider these in future decision-making. Both considered that it had been within the remit of their role to assess the potential for attendance, and to then consult with the IRO.

All four IROs agreed that they would be guided by the social worker and would discuss possible attendance with them. Where this had occurred, the young person's expectations of attendance and how this could be best managed was a

key area for decision-making. There was an assumption of consensus but also recognition that in the event of differing perspectives someone would have to make the final decision. In Jen's opinion, the social worker was best placed to do this:

*'I would expect an IRO to go with what our judgement on it is, given that we know the families and we know the dynamics better, so I think it's a bit of a shame if we get overruled in that way'. (Jen:SW)*

Sarah's view was somewhat different:

*'If it's decisions, it tends to come to the IRO to make that decision, so in some way it's your call but it should be in participation with the social worker and yourself'. (Sarah: IRO)*

The decision making process was predicated on the social worker having a conversation with the child or young person. Jen (SW) was open about her own practice:

*'In terms of whether they should attend, we should put their views across; we do work with them beforehand. I think we're a lot better with that than we used to be erm, that we present their views a lot more coherently than we used to and we're a lot clearer about, but I don't think we have a conversation about whether that child should be there or not and I can't think of any time I've had a conversation, maybe one time with this older child I was working with where I had a conversation with the IRO about whether it's right for a child to be there or not and maybe we should be having those conversations more often'.*

Amy (SW) was quite emphatic in her view. Never having experienced a child or young person attending conference, Amy stated:

*'Would I consider taking a child to conference? Probablies not. I just think there are other ways of getting their views over'.*

Decision-making did not appear to be an issue for Natalie (SW), who stated that there were very few child protection cases in the Children's Disability Team.

Jen (SW) was the only person in either group to comment upon the role of the parent in this decision making process, expecting that this should take place and alluding to the complexity of decision making if any of the three parties (social worker, parent and IRO) were to disagree.

Diane (IRO) and Karin (IRO) thought it was important for conference members to understand that a decision making process had been applied and both stated that they would seek an explanation for non-attendance from the social worker. This was not mentioned in the social worker focus group.

As an IRO, Diane assumed an active role in promoting attendance at core group meetings:

*'In the plan, in the child protection plan I do put it as an action\_for the social worker to consider inviting the young person along to core group meetings and any future child protection reviews. I have put it as a requirement for any social worker to follow though'.*

This was picked up by Sarah (IRO), who recognised the value of this approach and one that she could take forward. The social work participants were more qualified in their consideration of core group attendance. Natalie did not consider it to be a regular occurrence but Jen was able to consider the appropriateness of this when the issues were specific to the child or young person (for example, risk of sexual exploitation) as opposed to concerns over parental behaviour. The

core group environment was considered more relaxed with a tighter membership group of practitioners who had an existing relationship with the child or young person.

### **9.2.3. Barriers to attendance.**

The right of the social worker or the IRO to make a decision about attendance was clearly established in both focus groups, and a number of significant factors emerged in these discussions. Although these will be discussed in turn, it is important to note the inter-relationship that exists between individual and organisational characteristics.

#### **9.2.3.1. Child or young person's characteristics.**

None of the IROs had experience of children of primary school age attending a conference. Karin had a lead IRO role in providing training to conference members on the Signs of Safety conference process and explained that the guidance provided to LSCB professionals was to consider direct participation for secondary school age children, with the proviso that:

*'If you've got a particularly articulate or determined younger child who is at primary and really wants to be involved then we can look at that but as a general rule, at secondary school ages, we should definitely be talking about whether they should directly participate'.*

Diane (IRO) identified the age of twelve as a key variable but with an additional proviso of demonstrable ability and maturity. Children of this age were considered to have a good understanding of what was occurring at home. However, all acknowledged that a prescriptive decision could not be based solely on age, and made reference to the importance of considering each child's unique

circumstances, and the level of support available to the child in preparation for attending in person.

Age was the first criterion to be identified in the social worker focus group. As previously stated in section 8.2.2, Amy (SW) was the most emphatic in her opinion that regardless of age, attendance at conference was not, in her opinion, appropriate. Jen (SW) and William (SW) both made a general threshold distinction between a child of primary school age and secondary school age. Neither believed that it should be an automatic entitlement, rather that they were more likely to explore attendance with an older child. What is noteworthy is that in the social work focus group, Jen recounted an example from her own practice, which involved a ten-year-old boy who had participated in developing the child protection safety plan. From Jen's account, it was evident that the boy had a sophisticated understanding of the pattern of his mother's alcohol use in the home:

*'And he said it was like 'I know what goes on, I know when she disappears upstairs for ten minutes. I know what she's doing, I know she's drinking but she doesn't tell me'. He didn't like secrets and that was one of the things we put in the safety plan ... he would rather people were talking to him about what was going on, talking to him about how he can keep himself safe'.*

A correlation between age and the upholding of rights was identified in both focus groups. As an IRO, Diane made explicit her view that older children have the right to hear directly the concerns held by professionals and on that basis should attend by choice. Natalie (SW) commented on a local practice development, which appears to require social workers to consider capacity for young people over the age of fourteen. Conversely, younger children were considered too young to cope with what William (SW) described as a '*daunting*' environment. However, both

groups were open to the importance of considering each child individually and were resistant to the idea of a one size fits all age related criteria. There was acknowledgement that some younger age children would benefit from attendance and some older children would not benefit from attendance.

The child protection conference reports made no reference to any child or young person being defined as disabled. George had a recognised disability and a hospital admission had prevented his attendance at the child protection conference, and Arden mentioned the impact of her hearing impairment on her capacity to participate fully in the conference. In both focus groups the most frequent references to disabled children and young people came from Wanda (IRO) and Natalie (SW), both of whom had experience of working in this area. Disabled children and young people did not appear to be represented in the numbers of children and young people who were the subject of the child protection process. Disability per se appeared to be perceived as a barrier to participation on the grounds of disabled children as a homogenous group being vulnerable, and with limited capacity to communicate. Reference was also made to practical constraints such as feeding issues that might prevent a disabled child from attending a child protection conference. There was also an assumption that adults would be required to represent the child or young person's views in the conference or tools would need to be adapted, as reported by Natalie (SW):

*'They're not, some are not able to give their views but where they can we do use some of the way that's meaningful for them cos even if a child with disabilities is sixteen they often present as a lot younger so you've got to do that piece of work with them at a much lower level than what you maybes would with a peer who is the same age'.*

However, there was a degree of dissonance in that Wanda (IRO) and Natalie (SW) both referred to contributions made by disabled children and young people in other forums for example their Health, Education and Care meeting or LAC meeting, and the resources available in both mainstream and specialist school settings to facilitate communication

#### **9.2.3.2. Best interests.**

The right to participate was clearly balanced against a professional responsibility to act in the best interests of the child, and protection rights did appear to overrule participation rights. In debating this, the IROs were able to draw more upon experiences of children and young people attending conference, whether planned or unplanned, whereas social workers drew more upon their own observations of the conference environment and process. Doing more harm than good was a concern expressed in both groups. Both professional groups were of the view that it was their role, rather than a parent's, to act in a child or young person's best interests to safeguard against the possibility of distress that may occur through attendance. Both groups compared the conference environment with other statutory information sharing and decision making forums to support their perspective. A distinction was made between child-centred forums such as a LAC review, a care planning meeting or an Education Health and Care Meeting, and the adult focus of a child protection conference. In the former, the focus is on the child or young person and was perceived by social work practitioners as more positive in its general outlook. There was also recognition that there was an embedded culture of attendance and participation in the LAC process.

The conference environment itself was described as *'traumatic'* by Sarah (IRO) and *'daunting'* by William (SW). For Amy (SW), the very nature of the conference militated against it being in the best interests of the child or young person:

*'Not there for the fun of it. You're not having a chat. You're not going for a chat; you're going cos there are significant concerns'.*

The potential size of the ICPC in particular contributed to this sense of a daunting atmosphere. Review child protection conferences were more likely to have a smaller group membership, and the IRO would be more familiar with the family dynamics and circumstances. Any perceived risks associated with the child or young person attending in person could be more accurately assessed in advance.

Doing more harm than good and making matters worse were overriding concerns in both groups. Diane (IRO) stated:

*'What I don't want to do is to make a young person, or the situation, make that young person feel any worse than they already do so I don't want them to leave that room distressed, upset and angry with their parents which can often happen'.*

To minimise these risks required careful management on the part of the IRO and Sarah likened this to the role of a stage manager, with the IRO in a directing role:

*'I would, before the child came in, I would be telling the professionals how I would expect them to respond to the child. At no time did I want any negative comments and I wanted to keep them in and I wanted a good experience for the child and that those negative comments could be worked with the child after the conference if it was necessary. But it's stage managed, isn't it? It's stage managing'.*



Protecting children and young people from hearing sensitive information about parental behaviour was a cross cutting theme, and this touched at the heart of the difference between the child protection conference and for example a Looked After Review. The child or young person is the subject of both but the former is most often concerned with concerns and risks associated with parental behaviour, whereas the latter is concerned with the child or young person's developmental needs and outcomes. As outlined in Chapter Seven, Georgia and Alicia discussed not wanting to be present when information about their mother's partner was discussed and agreed with the decision to leave the conference when information was shared by the police.

Protecting children and young people from seeing and hearing their parent (s) in an angry and upset state and from the impact of this after the conference was a key rationale for non - attendance. The unpredictability of an ICPC and to a lesser extent review conference was a further consideration for the IRO's as expressed by Wanda:

*'You know you've got no control over how parents are going to react over information being shared about them and you know if parents kick off in the meeting and if children are witnessing that, you know what I mean, there's lots of things aren't there really that could.'*

Jen (SW) also considered the impact on the child or young person's view of the social worker:

*'If the parents are sitting upset, how have they then experienced that meeting? Because, if the meeting is something that upsets their parent... that can have a big impact on how they feel about those meetings, how they feel about the social worker who they might feel is dragging their parents to that meeting'.*

Participants in both focus groups perceived children and young people to have the capacity and agency to disrupt the conference process, either by demonstrating loyalty to and allegiance with their parents through retraction of earlier statements, or by sabotaging the child protection plan. For example, Jen (SW) used the word ‘*ammunition*’ to denote the potential power of information being made available to the child or young person, and for this being used by the child or young person to react against an adult determined course of action:

*‘There’s an automatic rejection because ‘that’s what everyone is planning for me to do’. So I think you have to be kinda careful about what’s talked about when’.*

However Jen also referred to a tension in promoting participation but then judging the child or young person when this falls outside of the norms of acceptable behaviour :

*‘ Because you’re asking them for their participation, but when they’re giving their participation in a way that makes sense to them, you tell them you don’t want it’.*

Wanda (IRO) described an occasion when a child, who had a mild learning disability, had disrupted the smooth running of the conference through her behaviour:

*‘This was a child who elected mutism at times and she didn’t want to say anything. She wanted to be part of the meeting but she really just disrupted the whole meeting. She couldn’t sit. She was up and down, had her phone going... I don’t think she got anything out of it. She disagreed with the outcome of the plan. She changed all her views what she’s provided for conference and said ‘no I’d just made it up, that wasn’t right’ so it wasn’t really helpful to make the decision really’.*

Disruption through a display of anger was noted by Natalie (IRO):

*'They waltz in, they're full of fury and full of hell that they're actually going down this path and 'Whos do you lot think you are?' I suppose it could end up quite volatile that meeting, the child expressing that anger'.*

The role of the IRO and social worker in acting in the best interests of the child or young person was at time conveyed strongly by the use of language. A proprietorial manner was adopted in respect of both children and parents. When Natalie (SW) referred to *'my kids'* this may be a reference to the children and young people for whom she is the allocated social worker. However, this can also be interpreted in terms of ownership, or a sense of *'being in this together'*, a perception which may or may not be shared by the child or young person in circumstances of statutory intervention into family life. This sentiment is also extended to parents, Natalie and Jen both referred to *'my parents'* and *'our families'*.

#### **9.2.3.3. Professional attitudes.**

Sarah's reference to managing the behaviour of other professionals was also alluded to by Karin (IRO) who noted that some reports were *'professionally driven and jargon based'*, and that some professionals struggled to re-interpret and share their information with the child or young person. A lack of professional confidence in effective communication could result in the child or young person receiving *'more negative messages than they need to... feeling disempowered by having been involved'*. A counter concern raised by Diane (IRO) was the possibility that professionals might minimise their concerns to avoid upsetting the child. Specific reference was made to the professional discussion involved in the Signs of Safety scoring process:

*'And for professionals to sit there and say 'okay I think it's a 2' 'Why do you think it's a 2?' For a child to sit and listen to that. Is it right?'*

This appeared to apply particularly to the police and some school staff. On the one hand, there was an inference that school staff were an asset, their knowledge and relationships with individual children offering an alternative and sometimes a more appropriate resource for seeking the child's views. On the other hand, schools were criticised for their perceived narrow focus on child concerns, for example a focus on school attendance levels, and lack of analysis of risk. From an IRO perspective, Karin identified report sharing across agencies as a practice issue:

*'But I do think there are issues definitely about reports being shared with children and I think there are anxieties from professionals about 'should I share the whole report, how do I share this particular bit of difficult information with this child' and I think people sometimes do dodge it because it's easier to let somebody else do that bit'.*

These perspectives have some resonance with the findings from the analysis of case records which were outlined in Chapter Eight. Although schools present a report to the conference the format and quality of the assessment was varied and there was no evidence of the child or young person having sight of the report.

In contrast, representatives from voluntary sector organisations were viewed more positively and usually adopted a more child centred approach to sharing information in the conference:

*'I think probably one of the young people you interviewed was supported by [name of voluntary organisation] and what they bring in terms of a child's views to conference is fantastic. It's absolutely excellent, is very child focused, very, very friendly, very much about the child's specific position and doesn't involve any kind of professional filtering'. (Karin: IRO).*

### **9.3. Benefits of the child or young person attending in person.**

Providing an opportunity for the child or young person to give voice to their views and wishes was regarded as an act of empowerment, an exercise of right and a developmental opportunity. Sarah's (IRO) comment on this reflects Arden's belief that attendance in person has equipped her with skills she believed necessary for the adult world and feeling cared for :

*'Because you can actually see when they walk in, you know they're all tense and nervous and difficult and when they go out you can sometimes see a difference but I think they feel part of what's going on and I think sometimes it helps them to understand because it doesn't matter how much anybody explains, to see the dynamics and to see that professionals are really there for them, it does help them. I don't know, I think it does.'*

Although the social work participants had fewer experiences to draw on, there were examples of beneficial attendance. Jen (SW) recalled a twelve-year-old boy attending his conference. He had stated that everyone spoke for him and he wanted to speak for himself:

*'He's very articulate and he's very strong in his viewpoint of things and I think for him, it was really important because he feels quite powerless at times'.*

Preparation was key to attendance at conference being of benefit:

*'Getting children in requires time. Having children participate in a conference requires good preparation time and good quality time'.*

All IRO participants discussed the work they undertake with the child or young person in advance, usually immediately before the start of the conference. However, this generated a practice tension, balancing the IRO's responsibility for the effective management of the conference including a prompt start with ensuring that all family members understood the process. Diane described how she had adapted her communication style in order to explain the Signs of Safety process in a non- jargonised manner, beginning with exploring the child's understanding and progressing towards familiarisation with the framework's templates and on overview of the conference schedule. Planning considerations took account of practical arrangements such as confirming who would bring the child or young person and time of arrival, and the more emotive dimensions of participation, including opportunities to opt in and out of the conference, clarifying the child's preferred outcome for the purpose of information and safety planning.

All IRO participants drew upon experiences where, for a range of reasons, planning had not occurred in an anticipated manner. Lapses in communication between professionals over for example an initial consultation over attendance or practical arrangements over responsibilities for bringing and staying with the child, resulted in the IRO making plans that were more ad hoc immediately prior to the conference.

Social work participants were more reticent on the subject of planning, but perhaps this was indicative of their lack of experience in supporting a child or young people to attend a conference. Jen and Natalie were both of the view that preparation for conference as a discrete social work activity was not so far

removed from preparation for other statutory planning and decision making forums e.g. a LAC review, and was achievable within existing workloads.

There was some discussion in both groups concerning the merits of split conferences with the child or young person attending to present their views, but absent from hearing sensitive information about their parents, seeing their parents angry or distressed or receiving a negative reaction from their parents afterwards. All participants in the IRO group commented upon their willingness to consider child attendance subject to careful professional assessment of risk.

Notwithstanding the unpredictability of the conference environment and process, the IRO group considered the possibility of managing a split conference to be in the best interests of the child, parents and professionals. The social work group however were less equivocal. Amy considered this from the lens of a child who may be suspicious over what information is shared and not shared:

*'Kids aren't stupid. If you take them to part meetings, they know then what it's about. What you discussing now? What are you discussing at that bit of the meeting that I can't be privy to? So actually that would be annoying for them as well I would have thought.'*

Natalie appeared to be more conflicted in her view. On the one hand, Natalie discussed the potential damage which could arise from being present for the duration of the conference, but then commented on the importance of understanding the child's lived experience:

*'Are you going to just take them to all the positive meetings in their life? Are you going to continue to protect them from all rubbish that's going on when it's them'*

*that's having to live with it? It's them that's seeing it on a day to day basis and it might be very different for them'.*

Participation in core groups was also discussed and this was viewed by social workers and IROs as a potentially more child focused environment by virtue of purpose, membership and location. Review child protection conferences were also considered more child- centred than initial child protection conferences although the potential for disruption and distress was emphasised. Discussions within both focus groups identified more challenges than benefits for attendance at the conference, with a best interest criteria influencing decision-making. In view of this, the second theme for both focus group discussions concerned the representation of the child or young person's views by indirect means, usually through work undertaken with the social worker and incorporated into the reports presented to the conference. There was a convergence of themes across both focus groups with an additional theme: the problematising of direct work emerging in the social work focus group.

#### **9.4. Representation of voice.**

##### **9.4.1. Ascertaining the wishes and feelings of the child or young person through the assessment process.**

IRO focus group participants had a shared understanding of what they considered to be high and low quality practice. High quality practice demonstrated a child centred approach; evidence that the social worker had used multiple methods and resources most suited to the individual child needs and preferences, and providing context and analysis in their representation of the child's views. Poor quality practice was described by Karin (IRO):



*'I get very annoyed at reading 'the child is too young to tell us what they think' because actually we can read a lot into what is a child's wishes and views even if they're pre verbal and it's really important to use observations, and to use 'what does mam think' when he crawls across like that'.*

Low quality practice was also defined by the IRO participants through the extent of professional filtering of the child or young person's views. On one side of the continuum, the conference can be provided with a real sense of the child or young person in question through a direct report and professional analysis, and it is as if they were physically there. The reports for Corrine and Sean would fall into this category. On the other side of the continuum, the conference was left wondering whether the social worker had spent any time with the child or young person:

*'There are some cases where I think children are very much in the room with us even if they're not in the room, and there are other cases where I feel like I'm not even sure if anyone has met this kid'. (Karin: IRO)*

Ascertaining the wishes and feelings of the child or young person began with forming a relationship and to explore who was best placed to elicit this information. The social worker may not be the most appropriate person, and those in the focus group recognised the contribution of other professionals, particularly schools based staff, in undertaking this work. There was some debate in the social worker focus group on the most appropriate context for seeing the child or young person. The home environment may be limited in terms of physical space or it may not represent a safe environment. As was noted in the analysis of conference reports, some social workers saw the child or young person at school and there were benefits to this. Jen's view was that in a primary school, children were used to doing pieces of work with different staff, and with

secondary age pupils it was possible to negotiate an appropriate time to come into school. Natalie (SW) and Amy (SW) believed that going into the school setting disrupted the child or young person's routine and could impact on their emotional wellbeing.

There was a shared understanding of the importance of ascertaining wishes and feelings, either by the social worker or by a person with whom the child or young person had an existing and established relationship. Participants in both groups commented on the contribution that observation of young children could make to fulfil this role.

A sense of ambiguity over what constituted the 'child's view' emerged in the social worker focus group. As noted in Section 7, there is a specific section in some of the report formats entitled "views of the child/ young person". In the Children Act 1989, reference is made to the ascertainable wishes and feelings of the child. In practice, wishes, feelings, and views appeared to be interchangeable. William (SW) was unclear about the scope of the views being sought, whether the view should be explored in general terms or in relation to the particular circumstances leading to the child protection conference. Tension arose when the child or young person expressed one view and the professionals another and whose view should prevail:

*'View on what? You know, do you want them to go into conference and say 'I give my view, it's a lovely place to be, and that's my view'. Do they need to be burdened when they're living an experience? Yes, we need to understand what that experience is and how we can make it better.... We don't need that specific child's view because we're working on the premise that things ain't right here ,*

*then we as professionals have to do something about it regardless of what the view are'. (Amy: SW).*

#### **9.4.2. Frameworks and tools.**

Participants in both focus groups believed that the Signs of Safety framework had resulted in positive practice development by creating a stronger practice culture for ascertaining views of children and young people. Karin (IRO) talked about Signs of Safety having helped the agency to '*tackle*' practice issues associated with talking to a child and Jen (SW) believed that the practice of representing a child's views was more coherent .

Although the principles underpinning the Signs of Safety Framework had been endorsed in both groups, there was some acknowledgement of its limitations and this generated considerable discussion. The tools that support the framework namely The Three Houses and Wizards and Fairies were considered to have age related application; some children would be too young to understand their purpose and some older children and young people would be able to present their views in the form of a direct report. It was also acknowledged that the tools were only as effective as the social worker's application of them and here, practice was considered variable. Sarah (IRO) expressed overall confidence in Moor Town's processes and practices, and believed that a high quality expression of the child's views could be presented to the conference if the social worker had taken a thorough assessment and presented the child's or young person's world through their eyes.

In the following statement made by Jen (SW) she appears to express a reservation about the capacity of a three year old child to provide a view.

However, what Jen actually refers to is the relational context in which this occurred:

*'But he's three, so why it says in the child protection plan that I should be going in [laughs] and doing direct work with him I've got no idea. Cos he's just too little to be able to give views. He's not too little to be able to say, you know, that he likes or he likes that or on occasion he might say things to teachers at school but to go away with somebody he doesn't know as well'.*

Identifying the person best placed to undertake direct work was a significant theme in the social worker focus group.

Low quality practice was described by Diane (IRO) as 'doing *the bare bones*', and using the tools in an indiscriminate and instrumental manner. This presented a challenge to the IRO and conference members, in that important information might be distorted or misinterpreted. Wanda (IRO) provided the following example to illustrate her point:

*'I had one, it was like under worries: letterbox. And I was like what about the letterbox? And mam was able to say,' actually we've had problems with people putting stuff through and it's bolted up' but [child's name]...s worried that she's missing her health appointments coming through the letterbox', but there was nothing around that'.*

To some extent, some of the practice characteristics raised in the IRO focus group were reflected in the social worker group. Jen for example acknowledged a tendency towards professional filtering and recognised how this limits levels of engagement. Criticism was also levelled against social work practice that defined 'colouring in' as an acceptable example of direct work in the following exchange:

Jen : *' I did have to laugh though at some direct work that was on file and which was some colouring in, which had then been uploaded to Total View, direct work with the child, you've done direct work with the child and the child has done some colouring in. Well that's a lovely picture but actually there's no feelings on there, there's nothing about how they feel about things, nothing...'*

Amy: *'And that social worker has spent time with that child ...'*

Jen: *'Yeah'*

Amy: *'And that's direct work. It's the need to have to evidence we've actually seen that child and we've actually bothered our backsides to sit down with them and speak to them ...'*

Jen: *'And actually the sad thing about it was, is that during that colouring in, there'd been a really useful conversation which she had evidenced by writing it in the observation. It was the need to say look (laughs) I've done a bit of work'.*

William: *'Because that's what we're supposed to do...'*

This theme of direct work as proof, and an instrumental way to demonstrate that the child had been spoken with, was a significant practice issue for the social workers. All considered this an erosion of their practice expertise in communicating with children and ability to present this with a degree of flexibility. Criticism was levelled against the agency's perceived obsession with the Three Houses tool at the expense of individual creativity and the development of a practice culture that privileged the contribution of direct work as something beyond communication with a child as routine social work practice. Jen (SW) summarised this with some degree of irony:

*'But I just think that if a practitioner is feeling that writing down that we've had a conversation about this, this and this wouldn't be good enough to say I've done direct work, then something is going wrong in the system because it is – This is what social work is about, fundamentally. It should be about conversations. The other stuff that we bring in is stuff to enable communication. If communication is happening without that stuff, you shouldn't need that stuff. It doesn't make sense but I'll upload me colouring in [laughter].'*

#### **9.4.3. Variations on practice.**

A number of factors were identified in order to rationalise practice variation. There was some convergence across both groups and some issues were explored in greater depth in the social worker focus group.

On reflection, Karin (IRO) recognised that there was likely to be variation in decision making practice by IROs and social workers and believed there was scope to develop guidance for social workers to help think through factors that should be considered over attendance in person.

Both groups highlighted the quality of the relationship between the child or young person and the practitioner. Although the social worker assumes responsibility for the coordination and completion of the assessment report it is not necessarily a given that the social worker is best placed to undertake direct work. Both groups recognised the contribution of school based staff in this, by virtue of the length and depth of their knowledge and understanding of the child or young person. School staff working on a daily basis with disabled children and young people were more likely to have specialist knowledge of and skill in using augmented communication systems.

There was also recognition of the impact of individual social worker attributes:

*Amy: 'I'm not good at teenagers unless they're really chatty or mature ones and I would openly admit that I would struggle sometimes with some teenager's cos it's just not my forte at all'.*

*Jen: 'You see, I like young kids'.*

*Amy: 'I would hope that, that within our care team, core group or whatever our remit is, there is someone there who's got that communication and can'.*

Diane (IRO) commented that in her experience, some social workers did not appear to value the importance of ascertaining the child or young person's views, and others appeared more comfortable engaging with parents.

Reference was also made to the relational element within the child protection process: the relationship between the child or young person and significant others, the relationship between the IRO and the child or young person and relationships that existed within the operational and strategic contexts.

In the following statements, Sarah and then Diane reflect on the variation in the way views are represented by the social worker:

*'It's about priorities isn't it? Where you want to spend your time, you can tell there are workers who enjoy being with the child and get the best from the child but you can also speak to social workers who relate better to the parents and it's about priority really'.*

*'They don't always see the importance I think of getting the views of the young person, the young person's views in my experience. Some are fantastic. Of course they are. There's a couple of good workers in [team name], they bring some*

*brilliant work to initial conferences. But there are some that I just don't think they value the importance. Just as Karin said they're overworked, they all work at home at weekend we know, trying to do their court reports'.*

Both drew upon their experience (Diane more explicitly) to proffer an explanation for practice variation but attributed this to different factors. Sarah considered individual practitioner attributes, suggesting that some practitioners are more at ease communicating with parents, and furthermore are able to exercise a degree of autonomy in prioritising this working alongside the child or young person. Sarah presented this in a somewhat uncritical light, and did not offer a personal or role perspective on whether the ability to communicate effectively is a core attribute and requirement for working in this practice context. Elsewhere, she did make more explicit reference to her previous role related experience and offered a more critical standpoint about the social worker's role in promoting attendance:

*'I do think and I'm speaking as a team manager who didn't do this so I'm giving you a suggestion.... supervision. It should be discussed because you do talk about the cases and then it should be asked by the team manager. Have you considered having the child and what preparation could you make to allow the child to attend, and it's come from that direction'.*

Here Sarah offered a perspective more aligned to that proffered by Diane: that the duty to monitor and be accountable for individual social worker practice lies with the line manager and any lack of interpersonal skill can be compensated for through the medium of supervision.

The IRO focus group participants made some distinction between experienced and less experienced practitioners. The more experienced held higher numbers of allocated case work and were therefore under pressure to complete multiple



assessments within required timescales. In spite of this some experienced workers were considered to be highly skilled in adopting creative and imaginative approaches which tapped into the individual interests of a child or young person. Others were credited for recognising the time constraints placed on them and delegating work accordingly and attributing this in their report. Students on placement and newly qualified social workers had more protected caseloads and were perceived as more able to spend quality time with a child or young person.

Pressure associated with workloads was not raised as a significant factor by the social workers in the focus group. A more contemporary concern was the impact of a recent departmental restructure whereby the focus of some teams was on court related parenting assessment which detracted from working directly with children or young people. This applied particularly to Jen and William. William for example, noted that he had spent less 'meaningful' time with children and young people, and recalled an intervention with a thirteen year old boy that was significant for its rarity:

*'I was in visiting him for an hour and a half and when I came out there was something totally different about that visit and the difference was, I was having a conversation with the child'.*

A key factor was a perceived erosion of practitioner autonomy that appeared to result in episodes of resistant practice such as opting not to fill out sections in a particular form. Amy (SW) was the most vocal in her criticism of national and local policy agendas, manifested through an Ofsted requirement to demonstrate direct work as evidence of effective and safe social work practice:

*'But it's just evidence though isn't it? It's just a ticky box exercise, with the intent of making them up there happy in terms of Ofsted'.*

*'So you put a pointless box on the stat [statutory] visit form where nobody, well me and you [referring to Natalie] at least, don't fill it in '.* (Jen)

*' Well I don't fill them bits in either'.* (Amy)

*'Since that form's been introduced I write much less, because I can't be bothered to fill forms in and tick boxes'.* (William)

Criticism was levelled towards the perceived reliance on standardised forms which aimed to capture wishes and feelings and again this was considered an erosion of confidence that this would be routinely undertaken, and an unnecessary and pointless duplication of information. Furthermore, the limited opportunity for narrative limited the scope for context and possible distortion and misinterpretation of the child or young person's views. This appeared to result in practice resistance; all social workers described exercising some degree of autonomy in not filling in the view box because this information was captured elsewhere in the assessment. However, the document analysis outlined in Chapter Eight suggests that this may not always occur.

## **9.5. Conclusion.**

The frameworks for the focus group discussions were built on themes that emerged from the perspectives of Arden, Georgia, Alicia and George and from the analysis of case records as outlined in Chapters Seven and Eight. Focus group discussions provided honest and illuminating insights into how childhood is conceptualised in contemporary child protection practice. All participants acknowledged the principle of participation but overwhelmingly believed that the

purpose and function of the child protection conference in its current guise militated against meaningful participation in person. A further significant finding emerged from discussions concerning establishing the wishes, feelings and views of the child or young person. Some themes that emerged were similar to those identified from the literature review which were outlined in Chapter Four. Others, particularly professional ambiguity over direct work and a generic applied understanding of the concept of 'view' were more dominant in this study. Finally of interest was the nature of the power relations that existed in the local authority and how these were manifest in decision making process before, during and after the child protection conference.

## **Chapter Ten. Discussion**

### **10.1. Introduction.**

This chapter will review the key themes that emerged from an analysis of the data and apply these to the existing knowledge base as outlined in Chapters Two, Three and Four and to the research questions as outlined in Chapter One:

- What are children and young people's experiences of participating in the child protection conference?
- How are the participatory rights of children and young people upheld in the English child protection legal and policy frameworks?
- What factors influence the participation of a child or young person at the child protection conference?
- How are the views, wishes and feelings of children and young people represented at the child protection conference when they are not present in person?

The discussion will begin with an analysis of the perspectives of Arden, Georgia, Alicia and George. Some findings, particularly those concerned with factors that facilitated participation in person, resonated with other research findings, whereas others provided new insights into how attendance at a child protection conference is perceived. The chapter then progresses to an analysis of participatory practice within the post- Munro era of child protection, a transformational turn which heralded opportunities for more relationship based ways of working with children and families. Social work practices associated with surveillance and emancipation roles (Moriarty et al. 2015) will be used to illustrate the ways in which state mandated professional power and authority serve to construct and reinforce

discourses of children and young people which may render their voices unheard and unspoken.

## **10.2. Experiences of participation.**

The following section is relatively brief in comparison to other sections in this chapter and this is perhaps reflective of the number of children and young people who attend conferences in person in Moor Town, and also of challenges in identifying children and young people as research participants. The small sample frame is consistent with other studies (Dillon et al. 2016; Leeson, 2007; Saebjornsen and Willumsen, 2017) and although claims for generalisation and transferability cannot be made, the findings did generate some areas of similarity and some of divergence with previous studies (Bolin, 2016; Cossar et al. 2011; Dillon et al. 2016; Muench et al. 2017; Roesch-Marsh et al. 2016, Saebjornsen and Willumsen, 2017).

In contrast with other studies (Bolin et al. 2016; Cossar et al. 2011; Muench et al. 2017), the experiences of Arden, Georgia and Alicia were overall, more positive than negative. All reported that they were glad to have attended their conference, and the experience had met their expectations, particularly in respect of the belief that their views had been taken into account in the development of the child protection plan. Participation in person was also perceived to have been of intrinsic value, generating feelings of worth and value from having being listened to. Their experiences were indicative of the definition of participation as defined by Davey et al. (2010) which emphasised participation as a mechanism for change, and resonated with findings from both Dillon et al. (2016) and Saebjornsen and Willumsen (2017) in that some respondents reported that attendance had been useful for achieving positive changes in their lives.

Thomas (2012) drew on Honneth's theory of recognition to illustrate how general social theories may contribute to an understanding of participation in adult-orientated sites of participation. Honneth's theory of recognition drew on three modes which Thomas (2012) considered significant for conceptualising meaningful participation, namely love, solidarity and respect or rights. As applied to Arden's experience, love can be equated with the care provided by her social worker and voluntary organisation support worker in ensuring that Arden felt prepared to attend the conferences (the ICPC in particular). Arden believed that attendance had fulfilled her right to participate in person and in doing so this engendered a sense of belonging and inclusion. Participation in the conference and core group forums had supported Arden in developing the interpersonal and organisational skills she believed were important for the adult world, and in essence, this supported her developing identity as a young adult.

Arden, Alicia and Georgia spoke of the support they had received in preparing to attend the conference and this appeared to be a significant factor in how they perceived the experience. Participants in studies conducted by Muench et al. (2017) and Dillon et al. (2016) also emphasised the importance of understanding the purpose of the conference; of being provided with information, including the social worker's report, and of understanding the outcome of the conference.

All four participants considered the use of the Three Houses tool to be useful for articulating their wishes and feelings and additionally, Arden described the completed activity as an aide memoir for organising her thoughts in the conference. None of the studies outlined in Chapter Four which explored the perceptions of children and young people who had participated in person, referred to the use of specific direct work approaches. As yet, there is not an established

knowledge base in England for understanding how children perceive the use of particular tools, including the Three House and the Moor Town findings therefore contribute (albeit in a limited way) to this understanding.

A further area of convergence with other studies concerned the emotional impact of attendance, which had not been fully alleviated by having received information in advance of attendance (Muench et al.2017). For Arden and Georgia, the environmental context appeared to be significant, as both commented on their immediate reaction to the size and layout of the conference table, the number of attendees and their positioning around the table. In one respect, the environmental context of the conference will be influenced by location and suitability for purpose. ICPC's tend to have a higher number of attendees than review child protection conferences and core group meetings and, as noted by the IROs, tend to adopt a more formal tone. For logistical purposes, and perhaps to convey a sense of formality, conferences in Moor Town take place in one of the local authority's central or area offices. However, some degree of choice may be exercised in regard of seating arrangements. From the accounts provided by Arden, Georgia and Alicia, they were the last persons to enter the room, and therefore occupied vacant seats. Although consideration had been given to the importance of sitting alongside a known adult (parent or social worker), no choice was exercised in their seating in relation to other professionals. This, compounded by the table layout, made it difficult to see and hear, arguably barriers to participation (Shemmings, 1999). The immediacy of Arden's and Georgia's reaction to the physical environment suggests that the level of information provided in advance, and thought to be significant for preparing for attendance, may not always respond to the level of detail most helpful and relevant to a child or young person.

The IRO had a key role in making attendance a manageable experience and this is consistent with Cossar (2011). As noted in Chapter Three, the IROs primary legal responsibility is concerned with care planning and the review of children and young people who are looked after by the local authority. In this role, they assume a lead role to ensure that the review process incorporated the child or young person's wishes and feelings. The responsibility for chairing a child protection conference is an additional function of the IRO role, but is one that has increased in scope as a result of an increase in the number of child protection conferences held (Dickens et al. 2015; DfE, 2017). As noted by the IROs, their own workload demands, further compounded by an awareness of time constraints for other attendees, placed some constraints on their capacity for engaging with children and young people before and immediately after the conference. The lack of opportunity for debriefing after the conference was noted by Dillon et al. (2016) and commented upon by Arden. Arguably, the task of de-briefing is a shared responsibility between the IRO and the social worker, who is likely to have a higher degree of post-conference contact with the child or young person. However, having the opportunity to speak with the IRO immediately afterwards can be regarded as an act of validation of the child or young person's status as a member of the conference, thereby generating a sense of worth and agency (Bolin, 2016; Muench et al. 2017).

The importance of relationship was a further theme shared with other studies referred to above which focused on participation in person, and also those that explored participation in the wider child protection process (Arbeiter and Toros, 2017; Cossar and Long, 2008, Cossar et al. 2011, Jobe and Gorin, 2013). The capacity of children and young to trust the professionals involved in their lives appears to be inextricably linked with the quality of the relationship.



Arden's experience in particular was one of an established and enduring relationship with her social worker and this placed her in the unique position of being known in a way that was meaningful for her. Organisational constraints associated with the timing of an ICPC may present a challenge for developing trusting relationships, but as the experience of Georgia, Alicia and George confirm, it is possible to achieve this under such constraints. The relationship between social worker and parent may also be a mediating factor. Muench et al. (2017) noted that where negative views were expressed, these were shared by children, young people, and their parents. This did not apply to Georgia, Alicia and George, as their mother supported the local authority's intervention, and Arden was no longer living with her mother. However, as noted previously, their experiences may be atypical of the majority of children and young people who are the subject of a child protection plan arising from concerns over neglect or emotional abuse as a result of parenting behaviours.

Shemmings (1999) proposed a framework of participation that is based on four elements: having the opportunity to see what's happening, and to be seen, to have the opportunity to hear what is being said and decided and the opportunity to be heard, and this is further reflected in conceptualisations of voice ( Archard and Skivenes, 2009b; Lundy, 2011). In considering the experiences of Arden, Georgia and Alicia, it would appear that their experiences conformed to understandings of meaningful participation. George's experience was somewhat different as circumstances prevented him from attending the initial conference on the day. Although the lack of flexibility (arising from an imperative to implement a planned move from the family home to a women's refuge) may have been justified, George did feel excluded from the process. He had an opportunity to express his views, wishes and feelings, but this was in a more limited way than

Georgia and Alicia and full participation was not an option for him. His status as a disabled young person was one of difference.

The experiences of Arden, Georgia and Alicia suggest that attendance in person corresponded with the characteristics of participation as outlined in Article 12.

Each was able to make an informed decision whether to attend or not, each had an opportunity to present their wishes, feelings and views in person, and finally to contribute to the decision making and safety planning processes. Anxieties associated with the unfamiliarity of the environment were mediated by support from significant adults.

In summary, positive experiences were predicated on having rights upheld in decisions made over whether to attend in person or not, recognition that for participation to be meaningful and of value, planning and preparation were key requisites, and finally participation was perceived to have an impact on decision-making.

The findings generated from fieldwork undertaken in Moor Town support other studies which suggest that participation in person at a child protection conference is not characteristic of routine social work practice (Alfandari,2015; Dillon et al. 2016; Kriz and Skivenes,2013; Woolfson et al. 2010). The evidence that some children and young people (albeit possibly a minority) do attend, does question the circumstances whereby individual social workers exercise autonomy in deciding how participation will be enacted within legal, policy and practice contexts that espouse commitment to participation in child protection processes. A thematic analysis of the findings suggests evidence of a complex interplay between assumptions over intrinsic characteristics of the child or young person, namely age and development, disability and agency; professional values and belief systems and variables associated with the organisational context.

### **10.3. The influence of the post - Munro transformational turn.**

Social work with children and families has become increasingly concerned with a child protection (as opposed to a family support) practice orientation, with a focus on risk identification and risk management (Gilbert et al. 2011; Higgins 2017; Parton 2011).

A common theme in the evidence base pertaining to participatory rights in child protection is the belief that this is difficult to achieve in practice although established legal, policy and professional frameworks are in place to support social workers in this area. At the time that fieldwork was conducted in Moor Town the English child protection system was in the throes of another transformational turn under the guise of the Innovation Programme (DfE, 2011a). This constituted the government's response to the recommendation made by Munro's review of child protection and made possible greater levels of flexibility at local level, intended to re-balance the bureaucratic and relational dimensions of statutory social work. Emerging from this in Moor Town, were two practice initiatives which aimed to reconfigure assessment and decision making practices and in doing so, to change the focus from one of deficit to one of strength. Statutory guidance was revised in order to reduce the amount of time spent on technical administrative tasks, thereby creating more professional space for spending time with children and young people in order to better understand their circumstances and needs. The adoption of the single assessment process was integrated into a new way of working with children and families using the Signs of Safety framework.

There was limited evidence of practice innovation filtering down the organisation and generating cultural change in participatory practices. During the data capture phase it was not always possible to directly determine whether some social worker assessments had been undertaken within the more relaxed arrangements.

However, references made in the social work focus group to the cessation of a separate social work report being submitted for conference suggests that by June 2016, social workers had adopted the single assessment format. In place of the social work report that was based on an analysis of the core assessment, the new Child and Family Assessment form was submitted to the conference in its entirety, a practice consistent with the regional adoption of the single assessment process (Moor Town LSCB, 2016). The practice guidance supporting the framework referred to good assessment practice being underpinned by an understanding of the child's circumstances, building on the child's strengths, holding the child in "sharp focus" (p4) and knowledge of the child's experiences forming the basis of any plan developed to improve outcomes. This suggests a commitment to upholding participatory principles in assessments of need and risk, a theme also dominant in the Signs of Safety approach, where parents are 'people worth doing business with' (Turnell and Edwards, 1999, p.42).

Along with practice initiatives acting as a driver for promoting the participation of children and young people in the child protection process, a further impetus came in the form of Ofsted's Single Assessment Framework (Ofsted, 2017b). This revised inspection tool is predicated on the local authority being able to illustrate the child's journey through the statutory social work system, assessing the quality of child or young person informed assessment and recording practices (Godar, 2015). It seeks evidence of child centred practice where "the child's lived experience is put at the centre" (Ofsted, 2017a p78), where there is evidence of "direct work leading to sustained change", and the child has "appropriate involvement in meetings about them" (ibid, p78).

On the one hand the post - Munro era of child protection practice provided a systems framework for ensuring that social work practice could be better focused on the interests of the child or young person, with provisions in place to ensure that children and young people could be involved in assessment and decision making processes. On the other hand, and as noted in Chapter Three, this commitment is singularly understated in the current version of 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' (HM Gov,2015).The evolution of 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' as the overarching practice framework for social workers and other professionals has illustrated the influence of successive government policy agendas. This has highlighted a somewhat contradictory commitment towards upholding participatory rights. For example, the 2013 and 2015 versions both included a section entitled: 'Children have said what they need' (2013, p10; 2015, p11). The inclusion of this portrays the child or young person as a social actor, assuming an active rather than a passive role in articulating their needs and expectations (Dugmore, 2014).However, in a later section which outlines the social worker's responsibilities, a different tone has been adopted. In relation to assessment, and the child protection conference, the word 'should' was used to define the social worker's role in seeing the child in order to ascertain wishes and feelings, and to help prepare the child if they were attending the conference. This conveys a moral rather than a legal imperative.

Working practices that aimed to promote more participatory approaches in assessment and decision making practice did not appear to have been adopted wholesale in Moor Town. Assessment practice, as illustrated in the social worker's report or the single Child and Family assessment report, on the whole continued to include the standardised child development, parenting capacity and family and environmental domains. Despite an espoused commitment to a child

focus orientation (Gilbert et al. 2011) in assessment discourse, there was little evidence of this filtering down into routine participatory practice. The assessment report therefore remained an artefact of evidence-based practice which reinforced the professional knowledge base with the social worker as expert (Gilbert and Powell, 2010; Holland, 2011; Winter et al. 2017).

#### **10.4. Discourses of childhood.**

The research findings suggest that a particular discourse of childhood based on perceptions of vulnerability, dependency and immaturity existed in some social work practices in Moor Town, and this appeared to significantly influence decision making in respect of participation in person. This correlated with the findings of Collings and Davies (2008) and Fern (2012). There was some recognition in the social work focus group that assumptions over capacity to attend had been made solely by the child or young person's social worker and without any exploration with the child or young person. This contravened legal rights under Article 12 and also appears to contradict assumptions of practice identified in the IRO focus group. Individual social workers may have lacked hierarchical power when compared to an IRO, but their relational power provided them with the capacity to make decisions that were not held to account. In acting as sole decision maker, the social workers involved in the focus group identified age and developmental capacity as a rationale and justification for non - participation in person. A threshold for consideration appeared to be arbitrarily set at secondary school age, therefore potentially excluding children under the age of eleven or twelve from any deliberation pertaining to attendance. As noted in Chapter Nine, this concurred with guidance provided in the Signs of Safety training for LSCB members. It is unclear whether a similar benchmark existed prior to the implementation of Signs of Safety. However, statements made in both focus groups over perceived

improvements in practice resulting from its implementation suggests otherwise. Working Together to Safeguard Children (HM Gov, 2015) does not refer to age, which suggests that decisions are to be locally determined. An additional chapter entitled 'Good Practice in Supporting the Voice of the Child' was added to Moor Town's LSCB procedures in August 2017. However, there is no reference to participation in person at a conference other than a general statement about being involved in decision-making forums.

Ascribing capacity to attend a conference according to biological age suggests the influence of cognitive based child developmental theory in social work assessment and decision-making. Social workers have a legal imperative under the Children Act 1989 to take into account developmental needs (physical, social, emotional, educational and behavioural) and consider these in comparison with what is reasonably expected of a similar child or young person. This presupposes that social workers will be conversant with norms of physical, educational, emotional and social development in order to establish the needs of individual children and young people, and how best to meet these (Brandon et al. 2011; Lefevre, 2010; Taylor, 2004).

Child development theory is well established as a core component of social work knowledge at qualifying and post qualifying stages (Aldgate et al. 2006; GSCC, 2005; BASW, 2012; DfE, 2014b) and has come to the fore in each transformational turn in child and family social work. Amongst the range of child development texts and resources designed for a social work audience, three have supported government led child welfare or social work policy agendas, and are therefore worthy of note in terms of their positioning in the knowledge hierarchy. Cleaver et al.'s text entitled 'Children's Needs, Parenting Capacity' (1999) supported the implementation of "The Framework for the Assessment of Children

in Need and their Families” (DoH, 2000b); and Aldgate et al.’s ‘The Developing World of the Child’ (2006) corresponded with the Every Child Matters framework (HM Treasury, 2003). Most recently, Research in Practice’s child development resources (Donnellen, 2011) have supported the ‘Knowledge and skills statement for child and family social work’ (DfE, 2014). A shared characteristic of each is the inclusion of age bands in which to consider and assess developmental progress, although there is some variation in how these are presented. For example, Aldgate et al. (2006) draw on a number of existing developmental grids including Sheridan (1993) which is included in the guidance that accompanied the Assessment Framework, and Fahlberg (1982) which has been influential in permanency planning. The premise that children and young people develop through successive stages was accepted as a useful framework for practitioners (Aldgate et al, 2006; Brandon et al. 2011) although Robinson (2007) cautions against claims over universalism. It is important however to acknowledge the existence of other child development theories. As noted in Chapter Three, the Assessment Framework (DoH, 2000b) is based on ecological theories of child development. This encouraged social workers to consider development needs beyond the intrinsic characteristics of the child or young person, emphasising the relationship between the personal and the social. However, theories of child development that are based on developmental psychology have gained prominence in social work practice with children and families. Houston (2017) attributes this to its association with evidence-based practice and the quest for securing rational explanations for complex circumstances. Practice artefacts, in the form of models, flow charts and charts can provide linear solutions and practice certainty, but can also result in reductionist approaches to decision making.



An over reliance on a narrow application and interpretation of theory in social work assessment has been noted ( Holland, 2011;Thomas and Holland, 2010) and the social workers interviewed in Moor Town did appear to rely on child development psychological theory to justify reasons for non –inclusion. Child development theory based on incremental age related stage may explain a tendency to disregard children under the age of twelve, but do not advance understanding of why young people appeared to be equally excluded.

As noted in Chapter Six, children and young people over the age of ten and over in Moor Town accounted for 26% of all conferences held in 2014 /2015 (n= 304) and 23% of those held in 2015/ 2016 (n = 426). These are not insignificant numbers.

It is important to acknowledge that some children and young people may have made a conscious decision to opt out of attendance in person. This was not raised in either focus group discussion, nor did there appear to be a mechanism for recording this as a decision on the social worker report or the conference record. Notwithstanding this as a possible variable for non – attendance, the findings of this study suggest that individual social workers exercised autonomy in making decisions with limited consultation and accountability, and based their decisions on variables other than age.

Assumptions based on perceptions of age and capacity also extended to circumstances where the wishes, feelings and views of the child or young person were represented by others. Some children under the age of five were considered too young to express a view, or the social worker had stated that it had not been possible to ascertain their wishes and feelings. This correlates with findings from other studies (Berrick et al. 2015; Ferguson 2014; Toros et al.2013). Where this occurred, the views, wishes and feelings of the child had been replaced with the

social worker's own assessment of the child's circumstances and needs. However, there were some inconsistencies in practice in Moor Town. For example, some children under the age of five were represented as being capable of symbolic representation, and drew on language acquisition to represent themselves and their experiences (Jones, 2003). As outlined in Chapter Eight, an interesting point of comparison related to Darren aged three years and eleven months, for whom it was not possible to seek his views for reason of age, and Martha aged four who completed the Three Houses and Three Wishes activities with her social worker and engaged in conversation about life at home. This suggests the influence of subjective assumptions of age and capacity. This also appeared to apply to older children, For example, in the exchange between Jen, William and Amy (p.228), Jen described the capacity of a ten-year-old boy to engage in the safety plan but couched this in terms of exception rather than the norm. The arbitrary nature of age related capacity in English law is perhaps best exemplified in the setting of the age of ten as the threshold in the criminal justice system, whereby children under the age of ten are considered *doli incapax*, incapable of telling right from wrong and therefore not to be held responsible for their actions, and children over the age of ten who can be held responsible. Such a low age determined threshold is considered unacceptable by the UNCRC (2007), who advocates for a minimum age of twelve. In contrast and as noted in section 2.4., the government consider ten to be an appropriate age whereby children should be supported to present their views to a judge in family proceedings child welfare considerations. This perhaps reflects two assumptions of children: the child as vulnerable and in need of protection and the child as a threat to social order and in need of control (Thomas, 2002).

Brandon et al. (2011) suggest that social workers who do not ascertain the child's perspective are not in a position to understand the child's developmental needs and this applied to disabled children and young people in addition to those considered too young or emotionally immature to participate in person.

Professional perceptions concerning the absence of disabled children and young people in the child protection system in Moor Town is striking in that an established evidence base suggests that disabled children and young people are more at risk of abuse and harm (Miller and Brown 2014, Ofsted 2012, Stalker and McArthur 2012). Again, it is difficult to draw conclusions from Moor Town as the data capture process for recording the characteristics of conference events did not include disability as a category (in contrast with gender, date of birth and ethnicity) and there was no reference to disability in any of the conference records.

However, views expressed in both focus groups suggested that disabled children and young people assumed an 'othered' status and this justified reasons for non-attendance.

Disabled children and young people were disadvantaged by a bio- medical discourse of disability that focused on what disabled children and young people could not do as opposed to what they could do (Flynn and McGregor, 2017; Stalker and McArthur, 2012; Taylor et al.2016). Moor Town LSCB has recognised that in light of an established evidence base, disabled children and young people are more likely to be under- represented in its child protection system and they are developing an action plan to address this (2017).

The final intrinsic characteristic that appeared to influence decision-making concerning participation in person related to assumptions about behaviour. Expectations of how a child or young person should conduct himself or herself in the child protection conference were high and almost akin to professional

standards of behaviour and conduct in formal environments. Participants in both focus groups commented on the capacity of some children and young people to present in ways that were perceived to be negative, for example, when statements made previously were then contradicted in the conference, when behaviour was perceived to undermine or disrupt the management of the conference or when the young person failed to engage. Here, there was some correlation with findings reported by Bolin (2016), who established that children and young people exercised agency by developing strategies to end the meeting prematurely, or to emotionally disconnect in a manner that was interpreted as disengaging with the process. Knezevic (2017) drew on the concept of epistemic injustice to illustrate how adults make judgements about children and young people as moral, amoral and im/moral subjects resulting in:

‘A systematic deficit in trustworthiness and denial of someone’s capacity as a knower due to structural relations of power’ (p.471).

When agency was enacted in ways described by focus group participants, the low moral status afforded to children and young people contributed to constructions of behaviours as negative, problematic and non – conformist. An alternative construct would recognise the impact of a child or young person’s experiences on how they may relate in social worlds. A key requirement for practitioners working with children and young people in a child protection context is not only to understand the world from their perspective but also to have a genuine concern and regard for the impact of harm on the child or young person’s emotional and psychological wellbeing. To do so is to understand why children and young people may behave in ways that may not conform to normative assumptions, and to recognise a range of emotions associated with anger, frustration and sadness. As noted in Chapter Seven, Arden commented that professional

expectations concerning how she should present were not always mirrored by the professionals themselves.

### **10.5. Discourses of professionalism.**

Professional perceptions of participation and the extent to which personal and professional belief systems influenced decision-making were key determinants in the decisions that were made. As noted in Chapter Nine, participation was considered in various forms and this perhaps reflects the multiplicity of perspectives that exist in both academic fields and practice domains. Participation from a children's rights perspective emphasises both process and outcome (Davey et al. 2010) and there is a clear synergy with core social work values associated with self –determination and social justice. In practice, the perspectives aired in both focus groups were more nuanced and veered towards the protection end of the participation – protection continuum (Kriz and Skivenes,2015; Shemmings, 2000; Vis et al. 2012).

Children and young people who are the subject of a child protection plan will be assessed as having unmet needs in some or all areas of their development. This effectively renders the child or young person vulnerable in terms of impaired development, and in need of support in order to safeguard and promote their welfare. A social worker may conclude that a child or young person's degree of vulnerability is such that participation in person constitutes an additional layer of vulnerability and one to be safeguarded against. To make such a decision may fulfil a social worker's legal duty to act in the best interests of the child. As previously noted, an interplay of factors associated with assumptions of capacity and maturity appeared to inform the social worker's decision not to explore the possibility of attendance. Alongside intrinsic characteristics associated with an individual child or young person, the purpose and nature of the conference

mitigated against attendance. All professionals described the conference environment in stark terms, and believed that this was unlikely to result in a positive experience for the child or young person. ICPC's in particular were viewed as hostile and conflictual environments which were more likely to generate high levels of negative emotions. Professionals regarded it as their role to act in the best interests of the child or young person by protecting them from the levels of anger, distress and upset likely to be aired by their parent(s) during and after the conference. In this respect, professionals are acting in an ethical manner, to avoid harm to the child or young person by not promoting their attendance. However, the underlying philosophy of the Signs of Safety framework represents a move away from adversarial, deficit based approaches for assessing risk, and towards a more egalitarian, and strength based approach. Although not all conference events in the data sample had adopted the Signs of Safety framework, sufficient numbers had taken place at the point of the focus groups. It was interesting therefore to note that an image of the initial conference in particular as being adversarial continued to prevail. However, this may not fulfil a social worker's moral duty to explore the possibility of participation in a way that can be meaningful for the child or young person. Such an approach would recognise the importance of drawing on child development theory to optimise developmental outcomes, particularly in terms of positive identity and self-worth (Aldgate, 2006).

To deny the right to attend and take part in decision-making can be interpreted as a denial of the child's unique experience; compounding existing feelings associated with powerlessness. Butler and Williamson (1994) established this in the early days of the rights discourse:

“When working with children who have experienced abuse, it is vitally necessary to establish what children themselves see as the primary causes of pain, distress and fear” (p116).

To enact the above principle requires social workers to recognise that child and young people are capable of degrees of self -determination. However, the extent to which these are held or not upheld are context specific. Children and young people who are looked after by the local authority are placed away from home usually based on having suffered or likely to suffer significant harm. Children and young people who are the subject of a child protection plan fall within the same category, the exception being that they are living at home. There is an assumption that Looked After Children and young people will actively contribute to the review and planning process, and a raft of resources have been developed for this purpose. Here there is an agency held belief that this group of vulnerable children and young people have a right to participate and are capable of expressing a view. This is not to suggest that this is a power free - zone, as it could be argued that power and authority are exercised to ensure inclusion, with non - attendance perceived as an undesirable deviation from the norm. The inherent contradiction lies in the reality of the lived experience. Exclusion from the child protection conference protects against hearing about this, but does not protect against experiencing it as a lived reality on a daily basis. The non (sense) of this standpoint is eloquently articulated in the following statement made by a thirteen-year boy who had attended a child protection conference:

‘Why can’t you lot understand that I was there when he abused me, so why shouldn’t I be there when you talk about it?’ (Shemmings, 1999, p iv.)

In summary, social workers exercised power and control in decision-making and in doing so framed children and young people within a discourse of vulnerability and incapacity. Professionals in both focus groups considered acting in the best interests of the child to be a primary legal and a moral obligation. In general, the social worker's decision appeared to go unchallenged. Although Karin, in Chapter Nine, referred to the importance of conference members understanding why a child or young person had not attended in person, this requirement for defensible decision-making was not reflected in any of the records of the child protection conference, nor was it referred to in the social worker focus group.

#### **10.6. Participation in practice: 'seeing' the child or young person as a mediating factor.**

As noted earlier, statutory guidance states that social workers should "see" children and young people as part of the assessment process but does not specify where and how the child or young person should be seen. The context and act of seeing will be individually determined and will be influenced by logistical and attitudinal factors. In Moor Town, this activity took place either in a school or nursery setting or in the home environment. The appropriateness of a school setting generated some debate amongst the social workers in the focus group. Some believed that seeing a child or young person away from the home environment afforded some degree of privacy, and as Jones (2003) argued, a school setting can create a more emotionally secure environment for talking about home experiences. Schools also have resources that can be utilised for engaging children and young people in direct work activities and some children and young people may feel more comfortable talking about home experiences away from the family home (Jones, 2003). On the other hand, there was a counter argument



concerned with disruption to the child or young person's routine. Participants argued that doing direct work in school could encroach on teaching time, and there might be a subsequent impact on educational attainment. This is a concern extending beyond local practice, and was raised in a recent Ofsted monitoring report of another local authority (2017c). The focus group discussion provided examples of circumnavigated practice, particularly in the timing of visits to coincide with what might be considered less important aspects of the curriculum. This appeared to be appropriate for Arden who exercised some choice in prioritising core group meetings over aspects of the curriculum that she considered less important for her educational attainment. However, it was not possible to determine in the reports submitted to the conferences, whether a decision to see the child or young person at school was made solely by the child or young person, by the social worker or whether it was a shared decision.

There were multiple references in the social work reports of children and young people being seen at home or in school or nursery settings, and evidence of work being undertaken for the purpose of assessment. As has been previously emphasised, the importance of hearing the child or young person's account of their lived experience is firmly established in the knowledge domain of social work practice. It positions the child's perspective alongside that of the social worker's and other professionals, and equal weight should be given to its contribution to an overall understanding of the child's needs (Munro et al. 2016; Ofsted, 2011b). However, in some occurrences, practice in Moor Town appeared to fall short of that outlined by Ofsted:

'To see the situation from the child's perspective and experiences, to see and speak to the children, to listen to what is said, to observe how they were and to take serious account of their views in supporting their needs' (2008 p18).

Practice as outlined above is underpinned by the relational dimension of the assessment process whereby an exchange of information, facilitated by the social worker results in an informed understanding of the child or young person's circumstances. This resonates with the philosophy underpinning the Signs of Safety approach to assessing risk, a process where knowledge is co -constructed before, during and after the conference.

Viewing the information gathering stage of the assessment process through strengths based, relational lens belies an understanding of the assessment process as an exercise of social control and is symptomatic of the power relations inherent in the governmentality function of the local authority. As such, social workers act as the conduit of power invested in the local authority which is produced through the artefacts associated with the child protection system, namely its procedures and processes. As noted in Chapter Three, there is a statutory requirement for social workers to complete an assessment under Section 47 of the Children Act 1989 within a specified timescale. There are further expectations associated with ensuring the child or young person's safety during this process and ensuring that a robust analysis of risk will be available to conference members in order for a decision to be reached concerning the threshold of significant harm. The activity of 'seeing' the child or young person thus fulfils at a minimum three legitimate social work roles, emancipation, risk management and social control (Moriarty et al.2015) which incorporate relational

and surveillance (this can also be referred to as monitoring) functions (Winter and Cree, 2015).

The home visit is an integral aspect of the social worker's role and task and as such, is a taken for granted yet invisible activity (Ferguson, 2016; Winter and Cree, 2016), usually undertaken by a lone social worker. The interpretation of seeing the child as a visible sighting concurs with practice observed by Ferguson (2016), who noted that social workers did not always spend time with a child on a one to one basis, but could claim the child had been visibly sighted in the home environment, thereby fulfilling the monitoring or surveillance role (Winter, 2011).

In Moor Town, the act of seeing the child or young person for the purposes of ascertaining wishes and feelings varied considerably. Figure 2 depicts the act of seeing the along a continuum of activity which broadly corresponds with two social work roles: maintenance and emancipatory (Dominelli, 2009). The maintenance role is concerned with effecting change in a family's circumstances through providing criteria driven support (the child protection plan) whereas an emancipatory role is concerned with addressing power imbalances.

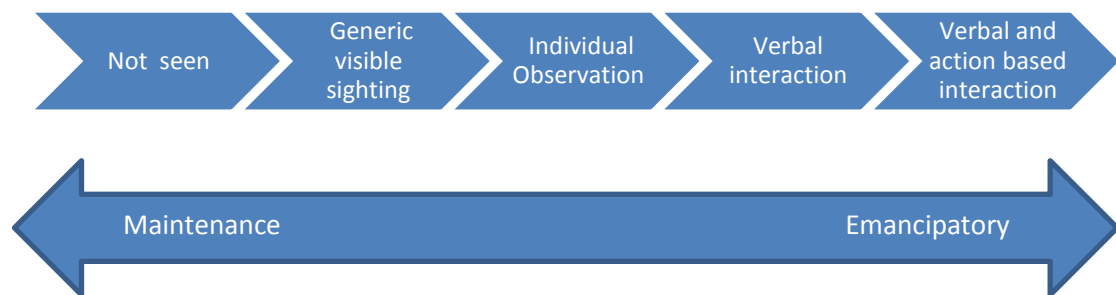


Figure 2. A continuum of 'seeing'.

Activities that corresponded more to the maintenance role applied to practices where a child or young person had not been seen (Dimitri aged twelve, Tony aged fourteen, Janneka aged fifteen and Charlie aged sixteen), or occasions where the inclusion of the generic term 'the children' rendered it difficult to establish whether this had occurred for the child or young person who was the subject of the child protection documentation (Marcus aged twelve and Sophie and Taylor both aged sixteen). In respect of Dimitri and Tony, this low level of engagement was recorded as self- actioned. In other reports, a sighting concluded that the child appeared 'happy' or 'well'. Here, the social worker could evidence that the child or young person had been sighted as alive and appropriately cared for during a statutory visit ; an act which demonstrated compliance with the local authority's monitoring requirements However, and as noted by Holland (2011) and Horwath and Tarr (2015) generalised statements about children effectively subsumed the child's identity into a shared collective identity and rendered it difficult for conference members to gain any insight into the child or young person's unique subjective reality.

Further along the continuum, reports demonstrated some interaction with the child or young person, either on an individual basis or with a sibling. Although there is an expectation that children are seen on their own during a home visit (HM Gov, 2015) this refers to seeing the child or young person without a parent being present. Some children and young people may feel more comfortable spending time with the social worker together with a sibling, and giving credence to this as an informed choice is indicative of child directed practice. However, there was no evidence in any of the reports in this category to suggest that this was the child or young person has expressed choice. Furthermore, a collective conversation may not provide opportunity for privileging an individual perspective. Siblings are likely to experience challenging and difficult circumstances in different ways and may have both shared and individual concerns and worries. For example, it was reasonable to suggest that Nadia (aged eight) and her two younger brothers held a shared wish for the family violence to stop, and for their father to return home. Nadia, though had additional concerns over the financial consequences of her father living away from home, and how this affected her opportunity to take part in a school trip. Nadia's concern over family resources concurred with the statement made by her social worker which suggested that Nadia had assumed a degree of age inappropriate responsibility in the family. Finally, reports that detailed evidence of dialogue and activity shared characteristics consistent with the findings of Ferguson (2016), Horwath and Tarr (2015), and Holland (2011). Verbal interactions based on communication initiated by the social workers were more evident with older children and young people, and communication tools were more likely to be used with children under the age of eight.

### **10.7. Participation in practice: direct work as a mediating factor.**

Comments made in both focus groups suggest that the use of direct work tools are most effective when used as part of a wider repertoire of communication aides, and should not replace the activity of having a conversation with a child or young person as part of the assessment process. It has already been noted that conversations can be bounded, with those concerned with exploring participation in person somewhat uncharacteristic of routine practice. As noted in Chapter Three, the term “direct work” is an umbrella term which encapsulates a range of activities (Lefevre, 2010; Whincup, 2016). Graham (2011) for example distinguished between approaches that are psychodynamic and therapeutic in nature, and those that are more interventionist. The former aim to understand the child or young person’s internal world, their thoughts and feelings, thus enabling the practitioner to make sense of the meaning the child or young person has attached to these. The latter focus more on enabling the child or young person to express how they perceive their external world. This is the context for applying direct work methods in statutory assessment processes, and was reflected in multiple references in the conference records and child protection plans to the practice of undertaking direct work as a mechanism for informing assessment and decision making. Engaging in direct work requires levels of knowledge, skills and values that are consistent with the Professional Capabilities Framework (BASW, 2012) and a practice context that upholds the principles of relational social work. However, when direct work is subsumed within the confines of a structured time limited assessment, there is a risk that opportunities for children and young people to express thoughts and feelings through a range of direct and indirect media will be curtailed. What is then lost is the social worker’s capacity to tap into the hundred languages of children, the hundred ways that children think, play

and speak in order to communicate their own interpretation of their world (Edwards et al. 2012).

The direct work tools that support the Signs of Safety framework attempt to integrate perceptions of the lived experience and the meaning attached to these. However, the findings of this study suggest that practice in Moor Town was varied. Documentary analysis provided some evidence of the kind of detailed work referred to by Munro et al. (2016) as mapping. These included the use of tools such as the Three Houses or the All about Me booklet for younger children, and Signs of Safety mapping for young people. Practitioners in both focus groups also recollected examples of creative and individualised approaches that accommodated the child or young person's interests. On other occasions, direct work was edified by a piece of colouring-in, or a Three Houses drawing that lacked context and analysis.

Social workers in Moor Town appeared to privilege the use of the Three Houses worksheet for presenting the child or young person's wishes, feelings and views to the conference. A degree of ambivalence over the meaning and purpose of direct work as a communication tool was also expressed in the focus groups, and this is reflective of a wider debate over the purpose of the social work assessment and direct work as an assessment tool (Handley and Doyle 2014; Whincup, 2016; Winter, 2011). On the one hand, IROs and social workers commented that the tool provided a medium for providing a child or young person's viewpoint in a clear way, particularly in the context of knowing the child and working at the child's pace. On the other hand, there was a degree of frustration in the perceived status of tools such as the Three Houses as the primary evidence base for demonstrating the inclusion of a child or young person in the assessment.

There is to date, a limited evidence base for proposing that Signs of Safety has significantly altered the culture of ascertaining the wishes and feeling of children through direct tools such as the Three Houses in child protection working practices. Walsh and Canavan (2014) for example questioned whether the philosophy and ethos of Signs of Safety were more easily embraced as guiding principles for working with children and families than the practical application of its associated tools. As noted in Chapter Four, recently published evaluation studies have focused more on the perceptions of practitioners and parents than children and young people (Baginsky et al. 2017; Munro et al. 2016). Munro et.al (2016) noted evidence of improved practice in communicating with children and young people, and concluded that previously identified poor practice was more likely to be associated with organisational factors as opposed to individual practitioner attributes.

Views expressed by IROs and social workers in Moor Town appeared to support this. Practitioners in both believed that variations in the quality of direct work undertaken could be attributed in part to organisational factors, including variations in workload responsibilities between newly qualified social workers and those who were more experienced. Service reconfiguration was considered to be a further constraint. An unintended consequence of new approaches for organising some frontline services (introduced in Moor Town in 2016 under the Innovations Programme) was a perceived reduction in opportunities for engaging with children and young people.

In contrast with other studies (Buckley et al.2008; Handley and Doyle 2014; O'Reilly and Dolan 2016) practitioners in both focus groups did not consider skill based confidence in communicating with children and young people to be a



practice barrier. In the absence of a wider knowledge base derived from children and young people, it is not possible to draw firm conclusions from the findings generated by Arden, Georgia, Alicia and George. Their experiences suggest that there is some value to tools such as Three Houses when used as a socio cultural artefact to facilitate the child or young person's status in the child protection conference from one of epistemic injustice (Knezevic,2017) to epistemic justice and thereby perhaps contributing to a status of recognition (Thomas, 2002; Thomas 2012).

Practice in Moor Town suggests that strength based approaches such as Signs of Safety have created opportunities for social workers to utilise a range of tools and to reconceptualise these as evidential communicative encounters. There was limited evidence of practice that can be defined as child -directed, influenced by principles of social pedagogy (Ruch et al. 2016) and in accordance with Ferguson's notion of hearing the child (2016) through their hundred languages (Edwards et al.2012).

#### **10.8. Participation in practice: case recording as a mediating factor.**

In the absence of attending a child protection conference or core group meeting in person, the views, wishes and feelings of children and young people will be represented by professionals, in particular social workers and school based staff. The analysis of documentary representation of the wishes, feelings and views of children and young people in the child protection conference is a relatively under-researched area in England. A recent thematic analysis of the theoretical model of assessment practice (including Signs of Safety) undertaken by Ofsted concluded that:

'In 63% of the assessments viewed, the views of the child were recorded, and used to inform the analysis in assessment' (2015, p12).

There is some dissonance between these findings and those elicited from the findings of the studies referred to in Chapter Four, and those from the documentary analysis undertaken in Moor Town. It could be argued that in Moor Town, the views of children or young people were recorded in some assessment reports, but in other reports, relevant sections privileged the social worker's own assessment. There also appeared to be some conceptual confusion over which views should be ascertained; those pertaining to the child or young person's life in general, or those that focused more narrowly on the circumstances of professional concern. There was also limited evidence of the inclusion of views into analysis and safety planning. This was more likely to occur when a child or young person had attended the conference or where the cause for concern lay in their risk taking behaviour.

If the views of the child or young person are not established or represented in sufficient depth, then these cannot be incorporated into a child protection or safety plan. Ofsted's review (2015) attributed strong leadership within a performance management framework as a key driver for the improved quality of assessments. Arguably, this applied in Moor Town, in that there was a strategic commitment to improving service provision to children and families and training made available to staff to embrace new ways of working. Furthermore, Moor Town had a higher than average proportion of children and young people subject to a child protection plan, so it is reasonable to assume that would provide more evidence of reporting mechanisms that were fit for purpose.

The application of critical discourse analysis enhanced the contribution made by thematic analysis. Thematic analysis of the case record data and professional

perspectives facilitated insight into the processes and practices for ascertaining child or young person's views. From this, it was possible to conclude that certain direct work tools associated with the Signs of Safety framework had assumed some prominence in assessment practice. Thematic analysis also suggested that social workers engaged children and young people in a range of environments, and upheld principles of participation, albeit to varying degrees in assessment and decision-making.

Critical discourse analysis provided a lens which revealed the power relations that existed between social work and individual children and young people, and exposed the voices that were dominant and those that were silent. As Fairclough (2001) notes:

'CDA is not just concerned with analysis. It is critical, first in the sense that it seeks to discern connections between language and other elements in social life... how language figures within relations of social power...the negotiation of personal and social identities ... Second, it is critical in the sense that it is committed to progressive social change; it has an emancipatory knowledge interest'. (p230)

The technical function of the case record did appear to serve the interests of the organisation and of individual practitioners and this correlated with previous research findings (Bradt et al. 2011; Roets et al. 2015). For example, Jen, Amy and William (p.249) commented on the value of completing the statutory visit form; in that it focused their thinking and improved the quality of their analysis. This is characteristic of truth telling in report writing (Roets et al.2015) whereby the content of the report represented an objective reality as defined by the social worker as an expert, and in a diagnostic and structured format. Roets et al. (ibid) compared this with the act of storytelling in report writing, characterised as an

unstructured and reflexive narrative which acknowledged the complexities and ambiguities in the relationship. There was significant evidence of the former and very limited evidence of the latter in the reports that were submitted to and developed in the Moor Town child protection conferences.

### **10.9. Participation in practice: power as a mediating factor.**

The following quotation from Archard (1993) summarises a key finding that emerged from the analysis of case records and focus group discussion: namely how social workers constructed and legitimised knowledge of the child or young person to conference members:

‘ Adults had different opinions about childhood and act differently in interactions – rational/ resourceful or irrational/incapable It is pertinent that how we think of children will affect how we act towards them and how we act tend to confirm our thinking’ (p.68)

The absence of the child or young person’s expression of views, wishes and feelings in their own words in the reports submitted to and generated in the conference rendered it difficult to determine whose voice was heard, and this has been noted elsewhere (Bruce, 2014; Pinkey,2013; Sanders and Mace,2006).

Organisational constraints, including time pressures, high workload or the demands of ICT systems may have impeded professional practice in some circumstances, but this does not account for the variations in practice over how the views of children and young people were represented at the conference.

As noted in Chapter Three, documents produced in social work practice are not value - free. They serve to legitimise social work activity in accordance with organisational priorities and requirements (Bradt et al. 2011; Hennum, 2011;

Holland, 2011; Huuskonen and Vakkari, 2015). As also noted in Chapter Three, the case record in children and family social work evolved from a discursive narrative model to a standardised model which represented a discourse of knowledge that was essentially evidence based. In Moor Town this was illustrated where a social worker specified what was actually done, for example a child was seen at school or a child or young person was involved in direct work, and this fulfilled the agency's requirements for undertaking assessments and/ or complying with the child protection plan. These can be described in Foucauldian terms as examples of technological methods of control (Foucault, 1980), a means of organising information as a form of knowledge. What the documents did not always do was impart knowledge about the social and value contexts of the relationship between the child or young person and the social worker (De Witte et.al. 2016; Bradt et.al. 2011; Parton, 2008).

The act of construction and knowledge formation are significantly influenced by their author. As Huuskonen and Vakkari (2015) note, there will be evidence of professional filtering and interpretation in every record of a practice encounter. A social worker will rely on memory and possibly a written record made during or after an encounter to construct an account, the structure and content of which will be influenced by what is considered noteworthy according to context, purpose and intended audience. In practice encounters, social workers exercise power in setting the parameters for purpose approach and outcome, namely to see the child and to ascertain wishes and feelings in order to inform an assessment of risk. Knowledge construction may also be determined by what information the child or young person is willing and able to share. In some circumstances, this power was mediated by the child or young person and the desired outcome was not achieved.

In such circumstances, the child or young person also deviated from the rules of engagement that defined the professional relationship.

The practices of recording and reporting are also embedded in professional discourse and serve to demonstrate to the reader that the author understands the rules of engagement; able to demonstrate professional knowledge, competence and authority through the use of language (De Montigny, 1995; Smith, 2001; Smith, 2005). Language served as a medium for constructing a child or young person's identity in the reports submitted to the conference. On some occasions, knowledge of the child was constructed through invisibility and silence, and this served to privilege dominant discourses of the child or young person being too young to participate in the assessment process, or in the case of some young people, as being disengaged from the process. For some children and young people, this resulted in an absorption of individual identity into sibling identity, a theme noted by Horwath and Tarr (2015).

Hennum (2011) stated that documents serve to mirror the professional expertise and authority of the author. When a child or young person is not in attendance and if a direct report is not available, the conference will then validate the author's interpretation of knowledge as truth. In the majority of reports, the constructions of knowledge were positioned within a discourse of incapability, and furthermore not subject to challenge by the chairperson, a concern raised by Ofsted (2015). The absence of challenge from a person holding a position of leadership and management suggests an acceptance of the lead practitioner status of the social worker as defined in statutory guidance (HM Gov, 2015). There were some exceptions to this, where an IRO exercised professional influence more commensurate with their role of championing voice in the agency (Beckett et.al. 2016).

Social workers in the focus group engaged in conscious acts of professional non-compliance as a mechanism for resisting what were perceived to be top down (that is Ofsted driven) imperatives for form filling. All made decisions not to complete particular sections in the assessment report on the grounds that multiple opportunities to record a viewpoint already existed in the report format. Resistance to some bureaucratic elements of the statutory role effectively interrupted the workflow approach that Wastell and White (2014) stated exists in Children's Services Departments. Acts of non-compliance as a form of individual resistance, autonomy and discretion are characteristic of the street level bureaucrat (Lipsky, 1980; Wastell et al. 2010) and the deviant social worker (Carey and Foster, 2012), and considered essential for meeting organisational demands in organisational contexts that are complex and fluid (Lipsky, 1980). The practice environment as described by the social workers in the focus group reflected the conditions considered by Lipsky (ibid) to be endemic to street level bureaucracy, namely a capacity for professional discretion, regular interaction with service users which are usually involuntary, resource constraints in the face of high service demand, and expectations that can be perceived by practitioners as general and vague (Horwath and Tarr, 2015). Deviant social work practices are:

'the minor, hidden, subtle, practical, shrewd or moderate acts of resistance, subterfuge, deception or even sabotage that are embroiled in parts of the social work process' (Lipsky, 1980 p.578).

Here, the social workers had capacity to exercise some discretion and autonomy in practicing in a way that were counter to the organisation's expectations. The promotion of participation in the child protection process is, in reality, an act of

legal power as opposed to an act of legal duty (although defined as such in statute) in that there is no statutory accountability for non-compliance. The legal and practice framework might exist but an individual social worker can in effect resist the demands of performance management.

#### **10.10. Participation in practice: relationship as a mediating factor.**

Subjective interpretation will also be mediated by the interactional nature of communication. There is an established evidence base as to what children and young people value in their social worker (Clifton, 2011; Cosssar et.al. 2011; McCleod, 2006; Munro 2011) with trust, recognition, respect and value given prominence as essential requirements. Furthermore, Handley and Doyle (2014) noted that a child or young person's ability to communicate wishes and feelings may be circumscribed by the attitude and skill of the social worker. As Arden pointed out in Chapter Seven, children and young people are capable of picking up on adult behaviours and forming their own view of the sense of worth (positive and negative) that is being conveyed in the child protection conference. It is possible that social work assumptions over young people who are perceived to be troublesome or difficult, such as Emily and Taylor in Chapter Eight, will likely impact on how safe they will experience the practice encounter and how they construct and reconstruct the parameters of the relationship. If children and young people do not feel emotionally safe in the practice encounters that form the assessment, it is unlikely they will feel safe to attend the child protection conference. What appeared to be lost in some of the stated assumptions that were made about individual children and young people, was an understanding of the impact of their lived experience on how they viewed the world, and how they viewed the social work relationship. A recommendation for one to one work to



ascertain wishes, feelings and views is unlikely to be successful if the child or young person feels powerless in the relationship.

#### **10.11. Conclusion.**

The research study coincided with another transformational turn in child protection policy and practice, one that aimed to address systemic failures associated with keeping the child in focus in assessment and decision making practices. This appeared to herald opportunities for participatory rights to be considered alongside protection rights. However, the research findings suggest practice in Moor Town is yet to realise this consistently in mainstream practice. Practitioners appeared to be preoccupied with the practical and psychological challenges associated with children and young people attending conference in person, and relied on more traditional theories of childhood to legitimise why protection rights were prioritised over participation rights. However, there was also evidence of a counter discourse, whereby some individual children and young people were regarded as social actors and capable of exercising participatory rights.

There was limited evidence of the child or young person being positioned at centre stage in the assessment process and even more limited evidence of this in the child protection plan. The reliance on direct work tools associated with Signs of Safety as a communication aide appeared to stifle creativity, flexibility and the opportunity to tap into the multiple communicative forms that children and young people use in their social worlds. There were exceptions to this which demonstrate that it was possible for social workers to engage with child directed practice, using methods in tune with the individual child or young person, rather than those pre-determined by the social worker. There was also conceptual confusion over what constituted direct work, and the ascertaining of view.

Factors associated with system and organisational demands did contribute in some part to an absence of voice but the most significant findings were the degree of autonomy social workers have in how participatory rights can be exercised in the child protection conference. Relational power served to construct identities associated with emotional vulnerability and risk. Where children and young people were recognised as exercising agency, this was sometimes interpreted in negative terms. Practice veered towards construction and representation of views, wishes and feelings through professional interpretation, which went unchallenged in the conference arena:

‘Power, when it is exercised through these subtle mechanisms, cannot but evolve, organise and put into circulation a knowledge, or rather an application of knowledge’ (Foucault, 1980 p102).

In the conference arena the subjective identity of the child or young person when not present in person remains hidden from conference members, rendering it possible for a generational reordering of identity to constitute the ‘known’ individual.

## **Chapter Eleven. Conclusion and recommendations.**

### **11.1. Introduction.**

This thesis set out to explore how children and young people participate in the child protection conference, a decision making forum that serves two functions: to establish if a child or young person is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm and if so, whether an inter-agency child protection plan is required in order to safeguard and promote their well-being (HM Gov,2015). The philosophies, policies and practices that underpin participation in the English child protection arena have been conceptually framed within three significant transformational turns: the enactment of the Children Act 1989, the implementation of the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families ( DoH,2000b) and the post- Munro era of child protection reform. This suggested that an established legal and policy framework exists to uphold the rights of a child or young person in accordance with Article 12 of the UNCRC. It was therefore reasonable to expect that social work practice had evolved through the life courses of the above mentioned eras to ensure that practice mechanisms were in place to facilitate opportunities to express views, wishes and feelings and for these to be taken into account in the child protection conference decision making process. Typologies of participation serve to conceptualise how participation takes place (Hart,1992; Shier, 2001; Thomas, 2002; Treseder,1997) and recognise that in some circumstances participation may be facilitated by an adult. In the child protection arena, this may include the parent, and will include the social worker with responsibility for undertaking the assessment of need and harm,

and the person responsible for chairing the child protection conference, namely the IRO.

The thesis adopted a post-structural social work approach in order to understand how the rights of children and young people have been promoted through social work practices that are essentially bureaucratic whilst seeking to uphold core principles associated with relational social work. The original aim of the thesis sought to explore the experiences of children and young people who had participated in person at a child protection conference across a number of local authorities in a geographically bounded region. In privileging the voice of children and young people, the thesis aimed to contribute to a critical social work research agenda, and also towards a recognition of the contribution made by service user perspectives to social work knowledge.

The thesis was only partially successful in privileging the voice of children and young people as research participants and the original methodological approach, as outlined in Chapter Five had to be revised to include an exploration of how participation occurred when the child or young person did not attend in person. Findings from an analysis of reports submitted to and generated in child protection conferences constituted an inductive enquiry into how social workers and IROs perceived participation in practice. The circumstances that led to the inclusion of professional perspectives presented a significant challenge to the epistemological and ontological foundations of the thesis, and will be reflected upon in the following section. The chapter will then progress to a consideration of the implications of the key findings for social work related policy social work education and social work practice. The limitations of the study will be aired before consideration of its contribution to

the advancement of social work knowledge and recommendations for further research will also be made.

## **11.2. Reflections on the research process.**

### **11.2.1. Evolving priorities.**

Although it became necessary to revise the methods of data collection, the original philosophy of the study remained a constant thread as the study progressed, and the child or young person's perspective was privileged wherever possible. The following discussion offers a reflection of some of the challenges associated with advancing the rights of children and young people as research participants under Article 12 of the UNCRC.

The study adopted a multiple approach towards data collection that was developed at two pivotal points. The first point emerged through a process of engagement and negotiation with strategic influencers in local authorities, and followed a process of recruiting and involving children and young people as research participants:

'Research creates knowledge by setting questions that explore issues through actively engaging with the participants of research and other stakeholders in the research process.' (Fraser et al. 2004, p.15)

The above quotation succinctly summarises the constituent practical and ethical elements associated with undertaking research with children and young people. However, it infers that a well-thought through research strategy will generate opportunities for new knowledge. This is consistent with a body of knowledge which suggests that if the rules for conducting social research are followed in the design, planning and fieldwork stages, then it is possible to

conduct effective and ethical research with children and young people (Alderson and Morrow, 2011; Fraser et al.2004; Spencer,2004). Divergence however occurs when a linear approach is applied to what is essentially a non - linear context. Contemporary social work practice in England is predominately concerned with safeguarding and promoting the well- being of individuals and families with multiple needs. This is complex social work practice as it is understood and undertaken in contemporary statutory settings. However, the statutory setting is itself a complex organisation, and it is required to adapt to changing external political, economic and social forces (Higgins and Goodyear, 2014; Jones, 2014,2015).Strategic priorities will emerge, be refined and occasionally replaced according to changing perceptions of national and local need. Correspondingly, organisational roles and responsibilities may be adapted to accommodate new priorities. In the early life span of the study, local authorities in the region were absorbing the implications of incidence and prevalence rates of child sexual exploitation which required a realignment of policy and practice alongside identifying areas for practice reform in the wake of Munro's review of child protection. This effectively diverted the strategic gaze away from the research proposal with resultant implications for participant recruitment.

#### **11.2.2. Gatekeeping roles.**

Challenges associated with recruitment were anticipated at an early stage, primarily because children and young people who are the subject of statutory intervention represent a small proportion of the overall number of children and young people in the 0-18 age group who are classified as being in need in England ( DfE, 2017).However, additional challenges emerged that were

associated more with the role of gatekeepers in undertaking social research. This has been previously explored (Hepstinall, 2000; Clark, 2011; Crowhurst, 2013) and an argument has been developed for this aspect of research to be recognised as holding methodological merit in its own right. Crowhurst (2013) described the process of negotiating access via gatekeepers as socially and culturally constructed and one which is embedded in the power relations of the research context. This has significant implications for advancing social research with children and young people, particularly those who are considered vulnerable through their involvement with statutory services.

In negotiating access with the local authorities three levels of organisational gatekeeper (Figure 3 ) emerged, each with differential capacities for controlling access to potential participants. These are depicted according to their role within the local authorities.



Figure 3. Relational gatekeeping.

Negotiations with strategic leads were relatively straightforward. Each of the local authorities had an established relationship with the University. Strategic leads were unlikely to have regular direct involvement with children and young people and any duty of care was upheld in the research aim and objectives and the existence of a research governance framework that met organisational requirements. Responsibility for taking the study forward was then delegated to the IRO service and this emerged as a barrier. In the initial scoping discussions that were held with IRO teams, divergent views were expressed. The dominant perspective was one of enablement; a commitment to the study whilst acknowledging a lack of progress in advancing the participation agenda in the child protection arena. Notwithstanding this, and with the exception of one IRO who expressed doubt on a child's capacity to provide a truthful account of their experience, there was a commitment to facilitate an initial expression of interest via the child or young person's social worker. It was at this stage that fault lines in the research strategy began to surface.

Firstly, there was no requirement for any of the local authorities to formally report on the numbers of children attending child protection conferences. As such, there was no established ICT process for collecting and collating this data and addressing this placed an additional resource demand on the IRO service. As noted in Chapter Six the process for identifying potential research participants required individual IRO's to retain a focus on the research study, and from this to action an alert to the social worker. Secondly, the IRO role in Moor Town is primarily concerned with care planning in the Looked after Child process and their influence as change agents was similar to that noted in recent research (Beckett et al. 2017; Dickens et al. 2014; Jellicic, 2014). As such, the IRO's had no line management responsibility for social workers. The capacity to comment on



effective and less effective practice is incumbent in the quality assurance role but it is the line manager who will take forward any practice recommendations. This did not extend to commenting on an individual social worker's role in identifying research participants, and this led into the third fault line which is concerned with the technical/ instrumental nature of social work practice in statutory children's services settings. There are two issues to note here. Social work assessments which lead to an initial child protection conference are undertaken within tightly prescribed timescales, and this has the potential to negatively impact on the social worker's physical and psychological capacity to retain a focus on the research study whilst responding to multiple organisational demands. Secondly, some social workers appeared to exercise a gatekeeping role in response to their legal requirement to act in the best interests of the child or young person. For example, on more than one occasion I was advised that a social worker had decided that although the child had attended their conference, it was not in their best interest to take part in the research study because their circumstances were unsettled. On two occasions, the allocated social worker commented on the unlikelihood that the young person would want to be involved in the research before any discussion between them had taken place.

### **11.3. Summary of key findings.**

The key findings of the research undertaken in Moor Town support findings from other studies conducted in the England and further afield. The epistemological framework of the thesis was informed by studies undertaken in countries with variant ideologies of child welfare, including those characterised by a family support orientation (The Netherlands and Belgium)

and by a child protection orientation (England) but where the emergence of a third orientation has been noted:

‘The child -focused orientation often involves arrangements adjusted to meet children’s needs, competencies and maturity by viewing situations from the child’s perspective’ (Gilbert et al. 2011, p. 252).

Notwithstanding ideological difference and a more recent trend away from a family support to a child protection orientation ( Verhallen et al. 2017), there were similarities between the findings of this study and those referred to in Chapter Four.

Legal and policy frameworks have evolved in England and these purport to uphold children and young people’s participatory rights in statutory social work decision making forums. However, there is an established body of evidence to suggest these have not significantly impacted on practice in child protection contexts. As discussed in Chapter Four, research studies have consistently reported on low levels of physical attendance at child protection conferences in England. This study demonstrated that the primary reason for low levels of attendance in comparison with for example a Looked After Child Review lies in the allocated social worker believing that protection rights should be upheld over participation rights. Social workers in Moor Town drew upon a discourse of child development that was dominated by developmental psychology and from this concluded that a child protection conference environment was not conducive to participation in person on the grounds of age and vulnerabilities pertaining to parental behaviours. Notwithstanding the implementation of a strength based approach for risk orientated decision making, there existed a prevailing belief that children and young people needed to be protected from exposure to information about their family and

home circumstances in what was perceived to be a highly charged and emotive environment. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a professional perception was that the experiences of children and young people who had attended, had not always been positive, and this had served to reinforce the dominance of a protectionist discourse. A counter position suggested that when young people had felt supported to attend, there were tangible intrinsic and resource benefits towards personal growth and development.

Participation is not simply a matter of having opportunity to present a view in person and for this to subsequently inform decision-making. The principle of child-directed practice lies in an absolute commitment to the inclusion of the lived experience; an articulation of what life is like for a child or young person in any medium that has resonance, and from this to gain insight into what needs to happen for the child or young person's wellbeing to be safeguarded.

Child welfare systems that are characterised by a child protection orientation have adopted standardised assessment frameworks that purport to be child centred. Critical discourse analysis of some assessment data provided an opportunity to critically explore claims for participatory practice by focusing on the 'how' as well as the 'what', bringing the social dimension of the relationship to the fore. From this, it was possible to conclude that social workers in a significant number of occurrences constructed a particular knowledge of a child or young person through professional filtering and interpretation. When presented to the conference, this record then assumed status as a validated, accurate representation of the child or young person's views.

It is reasonable to infer from this that regardless of whether a child or young person attends a child protection conference in person an assessment of harm should include a first person written or visual report of the child or young person's wishes, feelings and views. The most recent transformational turn in Moor Town in response to Munro's review of child protection( 2011) placed considerable emphasis on the use of direct work tools to facilitate communication and engagement with children and young people.

This thesis takes issue with claims that direct work in the form of specific tools demonstrate an adherence to practice that retains a focus on the child or young person. The application of a critical discourse analytical frame influenced by a Foucauldian understanding of power and knowledge provided insight into the power relations that existed between the child or young person and the social worker, and between the social worker and the IRO. These served to debunk claims for inclusive practice. There was substantial evidence of the ways in which social workers constructed and reconstructed power relationships when deciding whether a child or young person should attend the child protection conference, and also when determining the subjective representation of the child or young person in the written report. Power relations were also evident in the interaction between the social work role and other elements of the child protection system. Although hierarchically privileged in the local authority and in the child protection conference, the IRO role lacked authoritative capacity to drive practice improvement through challenge and influence. The allocated social worker acted as gatekeeper in respect of participation in the research study and in the child protection conference. The study also generated findings which suggest that more experienced social workers develop strategies to challenge and resist

organisational practices that conflict with their knowledge and understanding of effective practice.

Children and young people did not always present as passive subjects of social work intervention. Some effectively exercised power through controlling what aspects of their life would be shared with the social worker during the assessment process and in doing so challenged adult held normative assumptions over behaviour and conduct.

#### **11.4. Limitations of the study.**

The study focused on a microcosm of child protection practice, and the rationale for this was underpinned by the potential for making an impact on practice development, in that Moor Town ( along with the other LSCB's ) had identified promoting the participation of children and young people in the child protection conference as a priority area. However, there were limitations in pursuing such a narrow focus. There was a risk that in doing so, the child protection process became segmented and atomised, a claim that has been levied against overly bureaucratic child protection systems (Featherstone et al. 2014;Parton, 2008). Furthermore, it can be argued that the quality of practice in one element of the system will influence, and be influenced by other elements of the system. For example, if a child or young person has not attended an initial child protection conference then consideration for attending a review conference may not be prioritised.

Further limitations concerned the participant sample frame. This was relatively small; in terms of human participants and documentary data; and access to both was determined by agency gatekeepers, and vulnerable to the technical characteristics of the agency's ICT system. The challenges associated with

recruiting children and young people as research participants have already been noted. Gaining access to social workers and IRO's was a more straightforward process, but the decision to include focus group discussions at a late stage in the data collection process affected the sampling process. On reflection, it would have been beneficial to have included recently qualified social workers, along with those with more substantial post qualifying experience, as some differentiation in the quality of assessment work undertaken had been noted in the IRO focus group. It was also not possible to view every case record item held on the children and young people who were the subject of the thirty two child protection conference events. What was available constituted the final product in the form of a social work report or a single assessment record that had been prepared as a summary of multiple episodic interactions and interventions, such as statutory home visits or records of communicative events.

It was unfortunate that there was a time lapse of eight months from when the interviews were conducted and case records were accessed. It was not until the latter point that the dominance of the Three Houses as a direct work tool was established, and discussion of alternative methods was not included in the interviews. On reflection, the study would have benefited from an exploration of whether choice was exercised, particularly as to date, there are no published insights into how children and young people experience the use of the Three Houses. This is openly acknowledged in one study (Bunn, 2011) and side stepped in others (Munro et.al. 2016; Baginsky et.al. 2017; Sebba, et al, 2017).

The circumstances that led to Arden, Georgia and Alicia attending their conference may not have been representative of all children and young

people. Their contexts were relatively consensual and appeared to proceed without disruption. However, what was shared were experiences of daily life characterised by adversities associated with domestic violence, parental substance use or parental mental health.

In common with other small-scale qualitative studies, the findings cannot lay claim to generalisation, however some findings do support those from other studies. In addition, the study's mixed method approach makes a small contribution to the existing body of knowledge through the inclusion of the direct voice of young people along with the mediation of voice through case records and the voice of others.

#### **11.5. Recommendations for practice development in Moor Town.**

The research findings identified areas where quick wins in practice development in Moor Town were considered possible and achievable. These were discussed with Olivia, the Children's Safeguarding Standards Manager in February 2017, and it was agreed that a summary report be presented to the Children's Services Senior Management Team and to the Local Safeguarding Board Standards and Effectiveness Management Group. These included the following recommendations :

1. Social workers will explore the opportunity for a child/ young person to attend the conference (completely or in part) and clearly record the outcome of this discussion and justification for decision made for the conference.
2. Written information about child protection conferences to be made available to children and young people.
3. IROs to recommend participation as a core group member for secondary school age children (consistent with LSCB Signs of Safety conference training)

4. A seating plan to be made available for children and young people attending conference.
5. Opportunity for the child/ young person to debrief with the IRO after the conference in person or in writing.
6. The child/ young person's view section to present the child's or young person's views in their own words or an explanation as to why this was not possible.
7. An expectation that agency reports where age appropriate will be shared with children and young people.
8. The child or young person to be referred to by first name in all reports.
9. Children and young people to be portrayed through strengths based language in all reports.
10. Social workers to be encouraged to exercise creativity in the use of direct work tools.
11. Clarification as to the purpose and status of tools such as The Three Houses in the assessment process.

The summary report was included in the Standards and Effectiveness Management Group's Learning from Practice report for the period 1<sup>st</sup> April 2016 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017 with the following statement:

'The research study has provided a solid foundation on which to build on. All of the issues outlined above have been shared with CSC Senior Management Team, the SCB and the IRO's together with the Social Work Forum led by the Principal Social Worker, who have been given responsibility for taking forward the areas identified. At the point of writing this report the SW Forum has developed a robust action plan taking on board all the recommendations, the implementation



of which will be monitored monthly through CSC SMT and as part of the IRO monthly report shared with the AD for Children's Social Care' (pp29-30).

#### **11.6. Wider recommendations for social work policy, practice and education.**

The practice recommendations from Moor Town that are outlined above are characteristic of 'small wins', and are not unrealistic in aspiration. They correlate with the government's current espoused position on social work with children and families and therefore demonstrate relevance to practice development in other local authorities. For example, the 'Knowledge and skills statement for approved children and family workers' (DfE,2014), requires 'enabling full participation in assessment, planning, review and decision making' (p.3), 'listen to the views, wishes and feelings of children' (p.3) and produce reports that 'are well argued, focused and jargon free' (p.3).

Chapter Three charted the pendulum swing in child welfare policy between one influenced by a discourse of family support and one influenced by a discourse of risk averse child protection. Gilbert et al. (2011) introduced a third approach, one informed by a child-focus orientation. The Innovation Programme's aim for striving towards good quality service provision that is predicated on a understanding of the child or young person's experience and need is consistent with a child-focus orientation. The findings from Moor Town provide an opportunity for policy makers to engage in a re-ordering of generational ordering and to position and privilege the child or young person as the primary service user (as opposed to the parent or family) in child protection assessment and planning forums. This would signify a conceptual shift in relations between children or young people, parents and the state.

The findings also present social workers with an opportunity to position the child or young person as primary service user, with an opportunity to reframe relationships, and to have the conversations Jen referred to ( page 225) based on an assumption of capacity rather than incapacity. Meaningful participation involves having the opportunity to take part in a service intervention or not to take part. The findings also present opportunities for social workers and IRO's to engage in child –directed processes that tap into the hundred languages of each individual child.

The recommendations submitted to Moor Town represent practical responses for promoting the participation of children and young people through direct and indirect means, and have wider practice implications for social work education. Social work programmes at both qualifying and post qualifying levels support the development of practices that adhere to professional values associated with promoting rights and social justice. Students should be able to engage in critical reflection of what constitutes knowledge in practice contexts and to develop skills in child and young person directed practice in assessment and recording. At one level, good practice in case recording is incumbent on good practice in assessment but it is also a skill and one that has not always recognised as a priority in social work education ( McDonald et al. 2015; O'Rourke, 2010;Roose et al. 2009).

### **11.7. Suggestions for further research.**

The nature of the factors that mitigate against attendance in person require attitudinal and systemic change and will take time to embed. Practice may evolve to more actively engage children and young people's attendance at a

conference or a core group and it will be possible to review progress in Moor Town through the researcher's membership of the Standards and Effectiveness Management Group. In addition, valuable contributions to child directed social work practice can be gained from seeking the perspectives of children and young people who have not attended a conference on how they experienced the process of ascertaining views, wishes and feelings. The research undertaken in Moor Town focused specifically on social work practice but also recognised practices that were conducted in other agencies, including schools and voluntary sector organisations. The recommendations presented to the LSCB are not intended to apply solely to social work practice but it is unclear how an impetus for change can emerge within a system that tends to focus on the social worker as lead professional. A priority for further research would be to explore the role of other agencies in promoting the participation of children and young people in the child protection conference.

#### **11.8. Conclusion.**

The thesis was concerned with how children and young people participate in child protection conferences. Whilst there may be a shared intergenerational belief that participation, as defined in Article 12, is an ideological right, the thesis reinforces and builds upon existing evidence to suggest that in the field of social work research and social work practice, some voices are heard and privileged more than others:

“Until the lion has his or her own storyteller, the hunter will always have the best part of the history” (South African proverb).

Appendix 1. Reference to child or young person's participation in versions of 'Working Together to Safeguard Children'

Date /title of publication	Assessment	Attendance	Child protection plan
1991. <i>Working Together Under the Children Act 1989.</i>	Reference to Section 1 (3) (ascertainable wishes and feelings) in court hearings. Reference to minimising the number of investigative interviews in investigations. Includes a section on keeping the focus on the child, minimising trauma, and making the child comfortable.	Participation to be encouraged. Effective attendance is predicated on full involvement from the beginning of the process. Decision to exclude a child should rest with the conference chair and decision to be recorded.	To include consideration of wishes. Child should have a copy of the plan and information as to its purpose.
1999 <i>Working together to safeguard children: a guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.</i>	Refers to UNCRC and research: 'Pitfalls and how to avoid them'. Child as a key, source of information about what has happened to them and should be seen separately. NB: this section then repeats the guidance in 1991.	Child not included in the list of persons with a relevant contribution. Attendance subject to Article 12. Child not referred to in reference to decision to exclude. Reference to core group membership.	To include consideration of wishes. Child should have a clear understanding of the plan.
2006 <i>Working Together to Safeguard Children. Every Child Matters/Change for Children</i>	Refers to the child's voice being listened to and heard and account taken of their wishes and feelings. Refers to developmental perspectives (Piaget influence) Consent of should be obtained when sharing information (unless to do so would place the child at risk of significant harm). Reference to separate <i>interviews</i> with the child and alternative methods (including observation) for very young children or those with have communication	The child (where appropriate) or representation of wishes by person working most closely with her/him. Again referred to as having a relevant contribution. NB the child is positioned first in the list. Core group: attendance subject to best interests.	Take into consideration wishes and feelings. Guidance similar to 1991 version and includes in an age appropriate format.

	<p>impairments.</p> <p>Reference to the importance of trust and pace where there are communication difficulties, children are very young or are experiencing mental health problems.</p>		
<p><i>2010 Working Together to Safeguard Children. A guide to inter-agency to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.</i></p>	<p>Draws on CA 89, Laming Inquiry, and Ofsted's evaluation of 50 Serious Case Reviews (2007 -2008) March 2008.Detailed practice guidance for the assessment process.</p>	<p>The child, subject to consideration about age and understanding, should be invited to attend or representation of wishes by person working most closely with her/him .Core group: the child if appropriate.</p>	<p>The lead social worker should see the child, alone, should develop a therapeutic relationship, regularly ascertain wishes and feelings and keep the child up to date with the plan. Age appropriate copy of the plan. Assumption that child will be seen alone.</p>
<p><i>2013 Working Together to Safeguard Children. A guide to inter-agency to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.</i></p>	<p>Reference to systems that are child centred. Incorporates research on what children want from their social worker. Legal frameworks including the Equality Act 2010 and UNCRC. Duty under CA89 to ascertain wishes and feelings. Children should be seen alone wherever possible.</p>	<p>Social workers should ensure that the child understands the purpose of the and help prepare the child if he or she is attending. No reference to the core group.</p>	<p>'Therapeutic relationship' replaced by 'direct work' with the child. No reference to child having a copy of the plan. Explain in age appropriate manner and agree the plan with the child.</p>
<p><i>2015 Young person's Guide to Working Together to</i></p>	<p>Expectation that there will be clarity of the assessment process. Views must be taken into account. Opportunity to speak</p>	<p>Involvement where appropriate in the review conference.</p>	<p>Expectation of full involvement in all decisions and planning.</p>

<i>Safeguard Children</i>	with the social worker in private based on Three Houses model		
<i>2015 Working Together to Safeguard Children. A guide to inter-agency to safeguard and promote the welfare of children</i>	Reference to best interests as paramount and child-centred approach: effective services are based on an understanding of needs and views.	Where appropriate at the ICPC.	Reference to direct work

## Appendix 2. Summary evaluation of studies referred to in Chapter 4.

Author	Date of publication	Location	Context	Data sources	Limitation of study
Alfandari	2017	Israel	Child protection meeting.	Social workers, field observations of committees and document review of data of 45 children/ young people.	CYP were not included as participants. Evaluation of post reform practice but study doesn't clarify the time frame.
Arbeiter and Toros	2017	Estonia	Child protection assessment.	11 child protection workers, parents and children with a current child protection plan.	CYP perspectives subsumed by adult voices in the findings. Practitioners approached families which may suggest sample bias.
Bailey and Ward	2009	England	Child protection conference	Data analysis of conferences held involving 299 children and young people	Single site study and an absence of data triangulation.
Bell	2002	England	Child protection investigation	27 children aged between 8-16 years	Data collected prior to the implementation of the Assessment Framework which may influence practice related findings.
Berrick et.al	2015	England, Finland, Norway and USA (California).	Involuntary removal of the child	772 workers	CYP were not included as participants Differences in state welfare systems and processes and in participant recruitment may impact on generalisation. Use of case vignette may not be reflective of practice in each county/ state.
Bijleveld et al	2014	Netherlands	Child protection	16 young people aged 13-19 and 16 care managers	Case managers were instrumental in participant recruitment which

					may result in recruitment bias.
Bolin	2016	Sweden	Child protection decision making	28 children aged 5-20	Some limit on representation as parents were present in all interviews involving participants aged 5-10.
Bruce	2014	Scotland	Child protection conference	Analysis of records of 22	Sample range excluded children under the age of 7.
Buckley et al.	2011	Republic of Ireland and N Ireland	Child protection services	67 service users including 13 young people aged 13-23	Views of children under the age of 13 were not obtained. Findings presented under a general heading which suggests adult and child perspectives are homogenous.
Bunn	2012	England	Child protection: SoS	12 practitioners	CYP were not included as participants
Collings and Davies	2008	Canada	Discourses of childhood	14 child welfare workers	CYP were not included as participants. Data collection took place 8 years before publication of the study. Case material selected by practitioners which may influenced subjectivity.
Cossar and Long	2008	England	Child protection process	25 young people	Focus is on general child protection process and practice in a single site study,
Cossar, Brandon and Jordan	2011	England	Child protection process	26 CYP aged 6-17	Focus is on general child protection process and practice



Dillon et.al.	2016	England	Child protection/ child in need meeting.	5 CYP aged 12-17	No rationale provided for age inclusion criteria (8-18). Some children were known to the Principal Investigator (sample bias?) Single site study.
Ferguson	2014	England	Child protection assessment	24 social workers	CYP not included as participants
Fern	2012	Iceland	Child protection.	10 young people aged 13-16 years involved as research consultants and 15 social workers	CYP were not included in data collection. Participants drawn from a range of service contexts which may influence practitioner perspectives.
Handley and Doyle	2014	England	Child care practice	25 practitioners from CAFCASS, 30 from voluntary agencies and 15 from local authorities	CYP were not included as research participants. Different agency priorities from a cross sector sample frame may influence responses .Use of questionnaires may limit depth of response.
Healy and Darlington	2009	Australia	Child protection	28 practitioners	CYP were not included as research participants.
Horwath	2011	England	Assessment practice	62 social workers	CYP were not included as participants.Multi-disciplinary sample frame.
Horwath and Tarr	2015	England	Child protection	Social workers and IRO's (180 across two phases ) and case file analysis( x 21	CYP were not included as participants. Focus was on a narrow dimension of practice (child neglect)

Humphreys and Kertesz	2012	Australia	CYP in care	Multiple stakeholders	Broad range of stakeholders dilutes the CYP perspective. Number of children involved in the project was not specified.
Huuskonen	2013	Finland	Child protection	Practitioners (x23) and managers (x7)	CYP were not included as participants
Jobe and Gorin	2013	England	Child protection	24 CYP aged 11-17	Views of children under the age of 11 are not represented
Kriz and Skivenes	2013	England, Norway and USA	Child protection	91 practitioners	CYP were not included as participants. Differences in state welfare systems and processes and in participant recruitment may impact on generalisation. Study draws on Shier's model of participation which is subject to critique from a children's rights perspective.
Leeson	2007	England	LAC	4 CYP	Views of children under the age of 12 are not represented.
Lucas	2017	England	Common Assessment process	7 children aged 10-17 and parents	Views of children under the age of 10 are not represented.
McLeod	2006	England	LAC	11 young people aged 9-17 and 11 social workers	Agers relating to direct reports aren't always included.
Muench et al.	2017	England	Child protection conference	22 CYP aged 8-12 and 26 parents were interviewed	Views of children under the age of 9 are not directly reported in the study's findings

Munford and Sanders	2016	New Zealand	Young people assessed as vulnerable	593 young people between 12-17	Study's scope is broad and views of children under the age of 12 are not represented.
O' Reilly and Dolan	2016	Republic of Ireland	Child and family social work	8 practitioners	CYP were not included as research participants .Principal Investigator was known to the participants.
Office of the Children's Rights Director	2012	England	Munro review progress report	11 CYP aged 9-17	Views of children under the age of 9 are not represented
Ofsted	2011a	England	Munro review of child protection	179 CYP	Data collection method captured "messages" and did not aim for in depth exploration
Ofsted	2015	England	Children in receipt of statutory intervention	Thematic survey involving 123 cases in 10 local authorities	Methodology does not specify the number of CYP interviewed. Some inconsistency in language which may distort findings.
Pert et al	2017	England	LAC	25 children aged 8-17 and 16 foster carers	Views of children under the age of 8 are not represented.
Polkki et al.	2012	Finland	Child protection	8 CYP aged 7-17 and 4 child welfare workers	Views of children under the age of 7 are not represented.
Roesch Marsh et al.	2016	Scotland	LAC	Surveys collected from social workers, IRO's and young people after 69 reviews, interviews with 10 young people and a focus group with 5 IRO's	Views of children under the age of 10 are not represented
Roose et al.	2009	Belgium	Children in care	Case file analysis	CYP and parental perspectives are not presented separately in the findings and discussion

Saebjornsen & Willumsen	2017	Norway	Young people assessed as vulnerable	5 young people aged 13-16	Views of children under the age of 13 are not represented.
Sanders and Mace	2006	England	Child protection conferences	Documentary analysis and interviews with 10 social workers and 9 conference chairs	
Shemmings	2000	England	Family support/ child protection	88 practitioners (social workers and non-social workers).	Unclear whether research sites are coterminous with those cited in an earlier study
Thomas and O' Kane	1999	Wales	LAC	47 children aged 8-12	Children under the age of 8 are not represented.
Thornblad and Holtan	2011	Norway	CYP in care	10 young adults aged 18-22	Age range exceeds legal definition of childhood ( but does reflect age related range of statutory
Toros et al.	2013	Estonia	Child protection	20 practitioners	CYP were not included as research participants. Practitioners self-selected cases which may result in content bias
Tregeagle and Mason	2008	Australia	Children in care and children subject to a statutory assessment	32 service users including 14 children	Age range of CYP participants is not specified. CYP and adult perspectives are not presented separately in the findings and discussion.
Ulvik and Gulbrandsen	2014	Norway	Child protection	55 CYP and 55 child welfare workers	Methodology is not discussed
Vis and Fossum	2015	Norway	Children in care	87 social workers	Children under the age of 7 aren't considered.
Vis and Thomas	2009	Norway	Child protection	16 case managers	CYP not included as participants
Vis, Holtan and Thomas	2012	Norway	Child protection	53 manager and 33 students	CYP were not included as participants. Case vignettes refer to children over the age of 7

### Appendix 3. Letter of Introduction

Dear ...

I am writing to tell you about a research study that is taking place in Moor Town, and to invite you to have a think about whether you would like to take part.

The research study is called “Exploring young people’s views about their role in child protection conferences” and aims to find out what young people think about attending child protection conference: the good bits and the not so good bits! If you don’t attend your child protection conference, but do attend core group meetings you can still take part.

The study will be carried out by Justine Ogle who is a lecturer at Northumbria University. Justine will interview other young people in Moor Town and in other areas in the north east.

We have agreed to contact young people in our area as we are keen to look at how we can involve children and young people more in meetings that affect their lives.

The study will involve you meeting with Justine a week or two after your conference or core group meeting to talk about your experiences. The meeting will be approximately 45 minutes and you would decide with Justine where to meet and how best to record this information. The information you give will be treated as confidential, and your name or any other identifying details will not appear in any documents relating to the study.

It’s up to you to decide whether you want to take part in the study. If you are interested in finding out more please return the reply slip to me, and I will arrange for Justine to send you an information sheet which will give you much more information about the study.

Best wishes

Reply slip

**“Young people’s experience of decision making in child protection conferences”**

I am interested in finding out more about this research study. Please send me an information sheet.

Signed .....

Name.....

Please either email this form back to me at this email address:

or use the stamp addressed envelope to return the reply slip to:

## Appendix 4

Please note that the final version was in a different format, colour and in brochure style

### **“Exploring young people’s views about being involved in child protection conferences”**

#### **Your information sheet**

##### **Who am I?**

My name is Justine Ogle. I work as a lecturer at Northumbria University and I’m also a student. This leaflet will tell you about a study that I’m I am doing, and how you might take part. You can choose whether you would like to take part. I have discussed this with your mum and she knows that I’m going to ask you if you would like to get involved. Your mum will need to agree too but this doesn’t mean that you have to.

##### **What’s the study about?**

I am interested in finding out about how young people see their role in child protection conferences .I think that it’s important that young people who are involved in these meetings have a chance to say what they think about this. I am writing to tell you about the study because you have decided that you want to attend your conference.

##### **What do I have to do?**

If you decide you want to take part, I will arrange to meet with you to talk about the research study in more detail, and to begin to get to know more about you. We will then meet up shortly after you attend each child protection conference for about 45 minutes. Your child protection conference will be next held in three months’ time and then every six months, so I suggest we meet within two weeks after each meeting. I will have some ideas about what I’d like to find out but we can agree how we go about this together. Some young people are fine with just talking; others like to write their thoughts down. We can decide together how best to make a note of what you want to say, and I would like to record our conversation if you’re okay with this. Your own name won’t be used in any written recording.

##### **Who will find out about what I tell you?**

What you choose to say in the meetings is confidential But , if you tell me something that makes me worried for your safety I will need to tell..... who works for Children’s Services. During the study I will talk to a number of children and young people. Your views will be shared with the senior managers in order

to help them improve their services to other children and young people who attend their child protection conference.

### **What happens if I agree and then change my mind about taking part?**

That's not a problem. It's okay to change your mind at any point. You can decide you don't want to take part any more, or you can decide you want to stop a session. You don't need to give me a reason for your decision.

### **What happens to what I tell you?**

All records of what you tell me will be kept in a locked drawer and no one other than me will see these. I will make sure that your thoughts and ideas are included in the written account of the study but you won't be identified. The senior staff in the Children's Services' Department are interested in what you have to say, and I will share my findings with them. If you would like a record of what you have told me over the time we spend together, I will put this together for you. I will also give you a summary of the overall findings from the research study

### **What happens if I'm not happy about the research study, or want to make a complaint?**

If you're not happy with any aspect of the research study and want to talk about this with someone else then there are two people you can contact.

Sharon Vincent is my research supervisor and you can email her at this address: [sharon.vincent@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:sharon.vincent@northumbria.ac.uk) or phone him on 0191.....

( Insert name) is the Business Manager for Moor Town Local Safeguarding Board and you can email her at this address: or by phone on 0191.....

### **What happens next?**

If you want to take part I will ask you to sign a consent form. Your parents will be asked to agree to you taking part in the research study. I will then arrange to meet with you to talk about what happens next. Taking part, or not taking part will not change the nature of your involvement with your social worker and it won't influence any decisions that are made at your child protection conference.

If you want to find out more, then do get in touch. My email address [justine.ogle@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:justine.ogle@northumbria.ac.uk) and my phone number is 0191 2156104

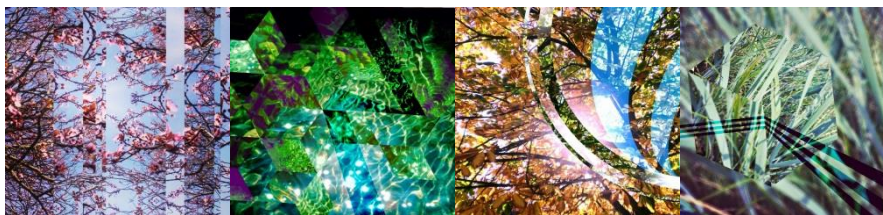
Thank you for reading this.

Best wishes

Justine

Appendix 5: Consent Form.

**Exploring young people's views about being involved in child protection conferences**



Consent form for

Please tick the green box if you agree to take part in the study. Please tick any of the red boxes if you don't agree to take part in the study or have any concerns about what I am asking you to agree to.

I have read and understood the information provided

☐☐

I have had a chance to ask any questions about the study

☐☐

I understand the interviews will be recorded and agree to this

☐☐

I understand that what I say in the interview will be kept private, unless Justine becomes worried about my safety. I agree to this.

☐☐

I understand that I can decide not to take part in the study after it starts, and I don't have to say why. I agree to this

☐☐



I understand that I can decide to stop the interview at any point  
and I don't have to say why.

☐☐

I have decided that I want to take part in the study

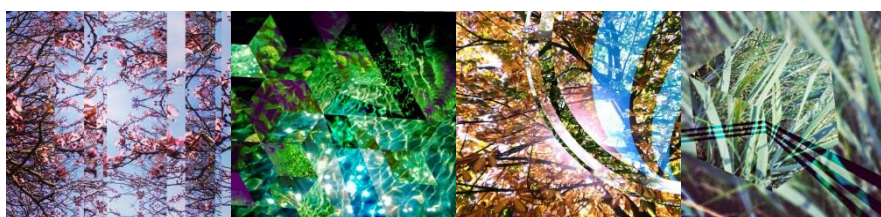
☐☐

Signed .....

Your full name in print .....

Date .....

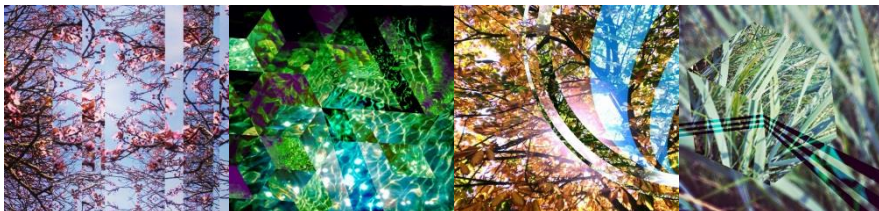
Please email the form back to me: [justine.ogle@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:justine.ogle@northumbria.ac.uk)



## Appendix 6. Debriefing sheet

### **Exploring young people's views about being involved in child protection conferences**

#### Debriefing sheet



Thank you very much for taking part in the research study. It seems such a long time ago since we started!

In the research study I wanted to find out exactly what young people think about their role when taking part in a child protection conference, and you have provided me with lots of information about your experiences. I'm leaving you with your own copy of your account and this is for you to keep or do what you want with!!

I have now collected information from each participant, and the next step is for me to write this up. The finished study will be ready in January 2017, and I will provide you with a summary of the main findings from the study together with suggestions for how the Children's Services Department might make it possible for more children to get involved if they wish to do so.

I am happy to meet with you if you want to talk about the findings and recommendations in person.

The Children's Services Department are very interested in what young people have to say and I will therefore prepare a report for the senior managers. I will use the name you chose at the beginning of the study so you won't be identified in this report. I will also prepare a summary report for the parents of each young person who took part. Both versions will be anonymised, so no one will know what you said unless you choose to tell them

When the study is finished any information you have provided will be destroyed ; again this is important in making sure that aren't identified.

If at any point in the future you want to talk about the study then please get in touch with (name) who is the Service Manager for Moor Town Safeguarding Board.

It has been a pleasure knowing you, and I wish you the best of everything for the future. I have enclosed a small thank you for being part of the study.

Justine

## Appendix 7 Extract from a CDA file analysis

Corrine: aged 13 Social worker report:

Communication methods: SoS mapping

Views of the child: presented as a very guarded young person during assessment period and has not engaged positively with one to one sessions that have been undertaken.

SoS mapping: things going well: freedom to go out, friends, music, school. Did not want to discuss her worries and left this section blank, C's body language changed markedly when this area was explored and she was observed to turn away from me and stare at the wall. Hopes and dreams: discussed family relationships

During this assessment: didn't disclose what she's doing when missing. Has advised why she understands why adults are concerned but feels she's safe.

When asked ... has denied, has not discussed.

Genre	Inter-textuality	Assumption	Representation	Style	Inter discursivity
Input: assessment	<p>SW voice. Authority residing in the social worker: purpose is to seek information</p> <p>Corrine's different perspective is conveyed: Voice is conveyed indirectly, perspectives are included and body language referred to.</p> <p>Other authors ( non-specified other than than of adult status) are included</p>	Corrine would engage in the assessment process (rather than any acknowledgement that the approaches used may not appropriate)	<p>Personal and interpersonal are interchangeable.</p> <p>Use of "very" and "markedly" to highlight concerns.</p> <p>Use of "positively" suggests a pre - determined outcome to the session: social work had expectations that Corrine would engage but in a specific manner.</p>	<p>A non-engaged young person</p> <p>An at risk young person.</p> <p>A young person (not a child)</p> <p>A young person with aspirations</p>	Risk Responsibility Participation

## Appendix 8. Overview of documents submitted for the conference events

Name	Age	Conference	
Barry	2.5	Initial	Social work report/ nursery report/ conference report
Colin	3	Review	Conference report/ child protection plan/ core group minutes
Darren	3.11	Initial (SoS)	Social work ( assessment) report/ conference report/ child protection plan
Eleanor	4	Review	Social work ( assessment) report/ direct work/ conference report/ child protection plan
Martha	4	Review	Conference report/ core group minutes/ child protection plan
Daisy	4	Review	Conference report/ core group minutes
Belle	5	Review (SoS)	Social worker report / core group minutes/ school report/ direct work/ conference report/ child protection plan
Louise	5	Initial (SoS)	Social work report/ Signs of Safety plan
Daniel	5	Review (SoS)	Social work report/ core group minutes/conference report
Ryan	6	Initial (SoS)	Social work report/ direct work ( Viewpoint)/ conference report
Nadia	8	Initial (SoS)	Social work report/ direct work/ conference report/ child protection plan
Nadia	8	Review (SoS)	Social work report/ core group minutes/ school report/ conference report
Nadia	9	Review (SoS)	School report/ conference report
Dyab	10	Initial	Social work report/ conference report/ direct work/ child protection plan
Kasey	11	Initial	Community nurse practitioner/ direct work/ conference report/ child protection plan
Dimitri	12	Review	Core group minutes/ conference report/ child protection plan

Marcus	12	Review (SoS)	Core group minutes/ conference report/ school report/ child protection plan
Marcus	12	Review (SoS)	Conference report/ school report/ core group minutes
Callum	12	Initial	Social work report/ school nurse report/ direct work/ conference report/ child protection plan
Corrine	13	Initial	Social work ( assessment) report/ eco map/ school report/ conference report/ child protection plan
Esme	13	Initial	Social work ( assessment) report/ direct work/ conference report/ care – co-ordinator report/ child protection plan
Emily	13	Review	Core group minutes/ conference report/ school nurse report/ school report/ child protection plan
Elizabeth	14	Initial (SoS)	Social work report/ conference report/ child protection plan
Elizabeth	14	Review (SoS)	Core group minutes/ community nurse report/ conference report
Tommie	14	Review (SoS)	Core group minutes/Conference report/ Child and Family Assessment/ School report/Direct work (no name)
Tony	14	Review	Social work report/ school report/ conference report/ child protection plan
Rhiannon	15	Review	Social work report/ school report/ voluntary agency report/conference report/ CIN plan
Janneka	15	Initial	Conference report/ previous LA report
Charlie	16	Initial	Conference report/ school nurse report/ child protection plan.
Sean	16	Review	Conference report/ core group minutes/ school report/ child protection plan/ FIP report
Sophie	16	Initial	Social work ( assessment) report/ conference report/ child protection report
Taylor	16	Review (SoS)	Conference report/ child protection plan

Appendix 9. IRO focus group topic guide.

General Theme	Issues for discussion
“ Participation”	Definition and meaning in child protection practice
Attendance at conference	<p>Who decides?</p> <p>What criteria is used? Planning for attendance</p> <p>What facilitates the child’s attendance and participation?</p> <p>What limits the child’s attendance and participation?</p> <p>Benefits to the child’s attendance and participation</p>
Representation at conference	<p>Factors that contribute to the child’s wishes and feelings being conveyed to the conference and informing safety planning.</p> <p>Factors that limit the child’s wishes and feelings being conveyed to the conference and informing safety planning.</p>
Changing practice	<p>What does good practice look like?</p> <p>The role of the IRO in supporting / challenging practice</p>

## Appendix 10. Social Worker focus group topic guide

<b>General theme</b>	<b>Issues for discussion</b>
Participation	<p>Definition and meaning in child protection practice</p> <p>Experience of child participation ( presentation)</p>
Attendance at conference	<p>Who decides?</p> <p>What criteria is used?</p> <p>Planning for attendance</p> <p>What facilitates the child's attendance and participation?</p> <p>What limits the child's attendance and participation?</p> <p>Benefits to the child's attendance and participation.</p>
Representation at conference	<p>The child's viewpoint in practice: What is conveyed in the reports/ Where in the documents/How are the issues conveyed?</p> <p>Factors that contribute to the child's wishes and feelings being conveyed to the conference and informing safety planning.</p> <p>Factors that limit the child's wishes and feelings being conveyed to the conference and informing safety planning.</p>
Changing practice	<p>What does good practice look like?</p> <p>What would support social workers in developing practice</p>

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