2020

Children’s Participation Rights in Child Welfare Systems:
Identifying Opportunities for Implementation

Anna M. Cody
Virginia Commonwealth University

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated in honor of Dr. Gary B. Melton. Dr. Melton was a psychologist and a passionate advocate for children’s rights and well-being. Dr. Melton believed that children deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. He devoted his life to building policy and practice innovations supportive of children and their families, children’s rights and their well-being.

Dr. Melton had generously shared his time and energy with me while working towards this dissertation study. He supported me as a policy mentor and later served on my dissertation committee. Well before embarking on my doctoral journey, when I first became interested in children’s rights and research about childhood, his work was some of the first that I remember reading. His insightful and straightforward call for children’s rights inspired me to imagine that the world could be different.
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Abstract

Children’s participation rights are critically important for supporting children’s well-being. Studies across the world consistently demonstrate that children and youth feel uninvolved, silenced and marginalized within the child welfare context which has a direct impact on their physical safety as well as their subjective well-being. There has been a shift in US policy and practice towards recognizing the value and importance of engaging youth, older youth in particular, in being involved with planning for their care and for their future. However, definitions of what meaningful “youth engagement” might look like within the child welfare context generally lack clarity. In addition, policies which indicate support for youth engagement often lack adequate financial, training and staff supports to realize stated goals. This study aimed to address the gap between policy and practice and identify opportunities for implementing children’s participation rights within the context of the United States child welfare system. This qualitative study centers perspectives of young people (18-25-year-old) who have lived experience of child welfare systems and child welfare professionals. Through 22 interviews and two group meetings this constructivist grounded theory study using an action research framework explored caseworkers’ and young people’s views about children’s participation.

Findings revealed that young people may view meaningful participation as including: recognition, supportive communication and involvement. The main message shared by young people in this study was that they wanted children to feel valued, that efforts are made to understand children’s perspectives and that children be given opportunities and support to be involved in planning for their care and future in ways that are meaningful for them. Caseworkers in this study generally emphasized an outcome oriented view of participation and implied a perspective that participation was more of a privilege, rather than a right. Both young people and
caseworkers revealed challenges potentially impacting children’s participation, such as systemic
disempowerment stemming from a culture of scarcity and inequity in US child welfare systems.

The main finding from this study was that despite system level constraints and even
caseworkers own beliefs about children’s participation, caseworkers in this study demonstrated
that they do use participatory and child-centered practices in working with children and youth.
And that these practices are consistent with young people’s own views about what might make
participation feel meaningful for children: including recognition, supportive communication and
involvement. The findings reveal where there are opportunities to support children’s
participation and also offer practical strategies for child welfare professionals, policy makers and
social workers to build processes and systems which are supportive of children’s participation
rights and their overall well-being.

*Keywords: children’s participation rights, child welfare, social work, children’s rights, children’s well-being*
Chapter 1: Participation in Practice Study Overview

Supporting children’s and youth’s participation, which is a fundamental human right, is the central focus of this study. Children’s participation is broadly conceptualized as making space for children to have their voice heard and taken seriously in any decision impacting their lives (UNCRC, 1989). Children’s participation rights are interrelated with children’s rights to safety and nurturance, and are critical to children’s overall well-being (Blanchet-Cohen, 2009; Lansdown, 2011; Lundy, 2007). For example, children’s participation has been identified as important for supporting children’s sense of self-efficacy, safety, emotional health and development (Arbeiter & Toros, 2017; Bell, 2002; Berrick et al., 2015; Blanchet-Cohen, 2009; Burford & Gallagher, 2015; Heimer et al., 2018; Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Križ & Skivenes, 2015; McLeod, 2006; Mildred & Plummer, 2009; Nybell, 2013; Van Bijleveld et al., 2015; Vis et al., 2012). Despite legislative mandates and practice guidance around the world for enacting children’s participation, particularly in child-serving systems, there is little evidence that participation rights are realized in children’s everyday lives (Lundy, 2007; Tisdall, 2018; Van Bijleveld et al., 2015). This is even true in countries which appear to have strong support for children’s rights, where there are national child policies focused on ensuring children’s well-being, or where requirements for children’s participation are mandated in national and local legislation (Tisdall, 2018). In addition, although racism and ableism appear infrequently in research about children’s participation rights, it is evident that Black children, Latino/a/x children and children who have a disability are more likely to be prevented from accessing their participation rights. Some research has indicated that children of color are more likely to be excluded from decision-making processes, or experience being silenced by professionals who judge them to be less competent or worthy of participation compared with their White peers or
peers who do not have a visible disability (Fylkesnes et al., 2018; Graham, 2007; McNeilly et al., 2015).

In child welfare systems, the consistent lack of support for children’s participation and subsequent impacts on children’s safety have been well documented (Fylkesnes et al., 2018; Reading et al., 2009; Van Bijleveld et al., 2015;). Having children’s voices heard in the child welfare system has particular gravity within a context where children may be increasingly marginalized and vulnerable to violence, exploitation or neglect and where their trust may have already been violated by adults (Bell, 2002; Ruck et al., 2008). Also, as Graham (2007) suggests, Black children’s right to participation is especially salient within the child welfare system where a disproportionate number of Black children are placed in foster care, spend a longer amount of time in care, and are more likely to be diagnosed with a mental health disorder, medicated and placed in a residential treatment setting than White children (Wildeman et al., 2014). Research by Erney and Weber (2018) further suggests that LGBTQ children and children of color experience implicit and overt bias when accessing services through the child welfare system, and are viewed and engaged differently that White children and/or children who are straight or cisgender.

Numerous studies involving children in child welfare systems across the world have indicated that children and youth continue to feel silenced (Bell, 2012; Cossar et al., 2013; Mildred & Plummer, 2009; Nybell, 2013; Thomas & O’Kane, 1999), their requests to adults for help and support often go unheeded (Burford & Gallagher, 2015; Cossar et al., 2013; Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Mildred & Plummer, 2009), and their suggestions and ideas for what could be changed to make their lives better are not taken seriously (Richards-Schuster & Pritzker, 2015). For children in child welfare settings, support for their participation in decision-making takes on
increased urgency as critical decisions are being made every day without the input of the young people whose lives are drastically shaped and reshaped by these decisions (Nybell, 2013; Munro, 2011; Tisdall, 2018). Although decisions are often being made by well-meaning adults who have children’s best interests at heart, consequences of excluding children from participating in decision-making processes within this critical system at best reifies children’s powerless position and at worst places children at increased risk of future harm (Bell, 2002; Berrick et al., 2015; Burford & Gallagher, 2015; Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Heimer, et al, 2018; Munro, 2011; Mildred & Plummer, 2009; Van Bijleveld et al., 2015; Winter, 2011).

Children’s participation in decision making does not just have value and critical importance for children themselves, but the intrinsic and instrumental values of children’s participation is meaningful to child welfare caseworkers as well. In terms of instrumental value, children’s participation has been found to be a key to caseworkers’ success in developing appropriate and effective interventions addressing problems faced by children and their families (Heimer et al., 2018) and to fostering trust (Bell, 2012; Burford & Gallagher, 2015; Husby et al., 2018; Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Winter, 2009). In addition, research indicates that children’s participation has intrinsic value as it promotes relational work which enhances engagement and relationship building between caseworkers and youth (Bell, 2002; Fern, 2014; Husby et al., 2018; Ruch et al., 2017; Winter, 2009). Child welfare caseworkers often report that they are driven to their work because of a desire to engage with children and families in making positive changes in their lives (Lawrence, 2017). In making deeper connections to young people that they work with, caseworkers have indicated they find joy in their practice and a sense of fulfillment both of which are critical factors in workforce retention and avoiding burnout; chronic challenges in the child welfare system.
Considerable adversity in the child welfare work environment makes it difficult for caseworkers to build relationships with youth, and to feel effective in their work with children and youth (McFadden et al., 2015). Large caseloads and increasing administrative tasks which compete with face to face time with clients adds to work stress and decreased job satisfaction (Bride et al., 2007; Johnco et al., 2014). Child welfare caseworkers report experiences of trauma and violence on the job, which contribute to compassion fatigue, making it even more difficult for caseworkers to meaningfully engage with their clients (Bride et al., 2007). These barriers and adversities have been identified as contributing factors to the lack of direct engagement with children and youth and to increased burnout in the child welfare workforce (Johnco, et al., 2014; McFadden et al., 2015). Although there are many qualitative studies exploring barriers to children’s participation in child welfare and consequences of non-participation from the perspectives of child welfare caseworkers and young people (Arbeiter, & Toros, 2017; Heimer et al., 2018; Križ, & Skivenes, 2015; McLeod, 2006; Nybell, 2013; Van Bijleveld et al., 2015; Vis et al., 2012), there has been little research examining how to make children’s participation possible within the child welfare system.

Utilizing a qualitative, interpretivist design, which centers the perspectives of child welfare professionals and young people who have lived experiences of child welfare services, this study aims to address the challenge of making children’s participation a part of standard child welfare practice.

The study will explore the following questions:

Q1: How do caseworkers and young people with lived experience perceive children’s participation in child welfare care and safety planning processes?

Q2: Where are there opportunities for enhancing and strengthening participatory approaches with children within child welfare care and safety planning processes?
Chapter Overview

This purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the study context, explain core theoretical assumptions guiding the study, and provide a view of my positionality, which informs this study. The qualitative, interpretivist approach demands transparency about study context, and researcher positionality as these factors impact study development, design and implementation. The first section explores why children’s rights matter for the US context through examining children’s well-being and disparities in child-serving systems. The next section describes the basis for children’s rights (including the historical context and theoretical assumptions) and what children’s participation rights mean in the context of child welfare. The final section describes my positionality and background, which informs this study. The chapter ends with a brief summary of the current study, a discussion about this study’s significance, and an overview of the dissertation.

Children’s Well-Being and Disparities in US Child Serving Systems

This study is situated within a political and social context where children’s rights, especially within the domestic context, are often overlooked, understudied, and met with skepticism (Hertel & Libal, 2011; Libal et al., 2011; Scherrer, 2012). The narrative of US exceptionalism promotes a view that the United States is a model for democracy, children’s rights and well-being, which could obfuscate the ways in which children’s rights are violated and ignored in United States policies and systems (Hertel & Libal, 2011; Walker et al., 1999). In addition to these narratives, there have been critical questions about the need for children’s rights within the United States and suggestions that children in the United States already have enough rights (Hertel & Libal, 2011). This section seeks to illustrate why children’s rights matter in the United States by reviewing knowledge about children’s well-being in the United States,
describing disparities and inequities children experience in child serving systems (and especially in child welfare), and critically explore child policies in the US, especially related to the child welfare system. Following this will be an introduction to the basis for children’s rights, a discussion about what children’s rights entail, and an overview of children’s participation rights.

**Indicators of Children’s Well-being.** Lacking unified and inclusive policies affirming children’s entitlements to safety, health, education and basic resources (i.e. food and housing) the United States is consistently ranked at the bottom of indicators for children’s well-being compared with other rich countries (Russ et al., 2010; Todres, 2011; UNICEF, 2013, 2017). For example, in the most recent comparison available, the US ranked 26th out of 29 rich nations in overall children’s well-being. This indicator was derived from measures including; material well-being, health and safety, education, behaviors and risk, and housing and environment (UNICEF, 2013). Also, in a 2017 UNICEF report, when compared among a group of 41 rich nations, the US was ranked 40th in reducing violence against children, such as bullying and homicide, 32nd in ensuring education is equitable and inclusive for all children, and 36th in ending hunger and food insecurity (UNICEF, 2017, p. 10).

In addition, research indicates that the US has pervasive and chronic levels of inequities in educational quality, violence experiences, child welfare entry and juvenile justice involvement (Baams et al., 2019; Lanier et al., 2014; Slopen et al., 2016). For example, Black children, especially Black girls and children who have disabilities are disproportionately physically disciplined within school settings and are more likely to be excluded from school through suspensions and expulsions than White children and children who do not have a disability (Gershoff & Font, 2016; Graham, 2007). Black pre-school children are 3.6 times more likely to receive an out of school suspension than White pre-school children (GAO, 2017). In addition, for
decades there have been reports of systematic and institutionalized violations and mistreatment of Latinx children who are detained by US immigration officials (Androff, 2016; Berthold & Libal, 2016; Linton et al., 2017; Martin, 2011).

In violation of international human rights standards, Latinx children living in the US have been forcibly separated from their families and placed into US child welfare custody (Berthold & Libal, 2016; Dreby, 2002). Recently, federally mandated policies, such as zero tolerance and family separation, have exacerbated the circumstances of Latinx youth (Matlow & Reichterter, 2019; Wood, 2018). For example, reports have surfaced of children in the United States being detained in prison like conditions, separated from family members, where they are forced to sleep on concrete floors, not provided with sufficient food or access to medical care, kept indoors without daily access to the outdoors, and even dying while in the custody of US immigration or human services (Berthold & Libal, 2016; Linton et al., 2017; Matlow & Reichterter, 2019).

Some have suggested that our current social and institutional culture constructs children who are defined by social difference as threatening and dangerous rather than worthy of engagement and support and thus provides justification for disproportionate suspension of Black children, or keeping undocumented children in prison like conditions (Finn, 2009; Todres, 2011). Overall, it seems that children’s experiences of social disparities, racism and rights violations, such as violence and detention, are pervasive in the US context and that US society and institutions continue to undervalue children as a whole and especially poor children, Black children, Latino, Latina, Latnix children, children who have a disability, children who are gender expansive, children who are LGBTQ, children who are refugees, children who are undocumented, and children who are unhoused (Todres, 2011).
Disparities in Child Welfare System Experiences in the United States. Recent estimates suggest that 37.4% of children living in the United States will experience a child protection investigation during their youth (Kim et al., 2017). At a rate almost double, compared with White youth (28.2%), 53% of Black youth will experience a CPS investigation during their childhood (Kim et al., 2017). Further, maltreatment will be confirmed for 1 in 8 children under 18 in the US, and disproportionally, 1 in 5 Black children will be confirmed as having been maltreated (Wildeman et al., 2014). Racial disparities and inequities within the US child welfare system has long been documented by researchers (Lanier et al., 2014; McRoy, 2008). In particular, there has been a strong body of literature highlighting racial disparities for Black children in child welfare system involvement, reporting of maltreatment, and entry into foster care (Kim et al., 2017; McRoy, 2008). There are two primary explanations for the overrepresentation of Black youth in the child welfare system (Lanier et al., 2014). One is racial biases in reporting and assessing reports of child maltreatment, meaning that a Black family is more likely to be heavily scrutinized than a White family and judged to be negligent, leading to more Black children being the subject of a maltreatment report (Lanier et al., 2014; McRoy, 2008). Another explanation is the strong association between poverty and child maltreatment, which indicates there are social risk factors that increase potential for maltreatment (Lanier et al., 2014). Research indicates that the cause of racial disproportionality within the child welfare system is complex and likely includes both racism and racial biases (at the policy, system and individual levels) as well as related social problems such as poverty (Lanier et al., 2014). This suggests that a potentially impactful approach to addressing racial disparities within the child welfare system would center around supporting child and family well-being; ensuring that families do not live in poverty, experience food insecurity, or unstable housing (Lanier et al.,
However, research about racial disparities within the child welfare system primarily compares groups of children only by race/ethnicity or binary gender, meaning that a child’s additional social identities are largely invisible in the literature and then invisible in the solutions offered to address disproportionality and develop responsive, inclusive systems.

There are indicators that a more complex, intersectional view of disparities in the child welfare system would be helpful in understanding what disparities exist, who they impact, and what kinds of system level and policy level interventions would help develop a responsive, inclusive system, which recognizes each child’s intersectional identities. For example, children who have disabilities are more likely to experience maltreatment, more likely to be overrepresented in the child welfare system (Lightfoot, 2014; Stalker & McArthur, 2012) and may experience more negative outcomes upon exiting the system than peers who are not disabled (Berg et al., 2015; Lightfoot, 2014; Slayter, 2016).

Children with disabilities are 3.4 times more likely to be maltreated than non-disabled children, at a prevalence rate of 31% versus 9% for non-disabled youth (Sullivan & Knutson, 2000). Also, recent research indicates that 31.8% of youth in the US foster care system have a disability, 61% of whom are children of color (Slayter, 2016). Additionally, studies have found that among youth age 18 and over who are transitioning out of foster care, 52.7% to 60% were identified as having a disability (Hill, 2012; Slayter, 2016). Children with disabilities in the child welfare system have been found to be more likely to experience clinical depression and suicidality than children without a disability (Berg et al., 2015).

In addition to considering disability status in terms of child welfare disparities, recent studies indicate that LGBTQ children are similarly overrepresented in the child welfare system and are also understudied (Baams et al., 2019; Wilson & Kastanis, 2016). Although the
prevalence rate for LGBTQ youth involvement is not known, because there currently is no national data collected about child welfare involved youth’s gender identities/expressions or sexual orientation (Scannapieco et al., 2018), estimates indicate that between 11% and 30% of youth involved in the child welfare system are LGBTQ (Baams et al., 2019). Further, evidence suggests that within the child welfare system, LGBTQ children are more likely than heterosexual and cisgender children to experience victimization and to experience depression and suicidality (Baams et al., 2019; Erney & Weber, 2018; Scannapieco et al., 2018; Wilson & Kastanis, 2016). In addition, LGBTQ children report multiple placement changes, hospitalizations, and homelessness resulting from cissexist and heteronormative biases embedded within the child welfare system (Robinson, 2017; Wilson & Kastanis, 2016). For example, findings from a qualitative study at a Texas Homeless Agency indicated that LGBTQ youths’ experiences in the child welfare system are characterized by stigmatization and isolation leading to multiple placement changes, experiences of homelessness and institutionalization (Robinson, 2017).

Taken together, evidence suggests that children have full identities (including race, ethnicity, sexuality, ability/disability) which are often obscured in research exclusively focusing on one or two social identity categories (Scannapieco et al., 2018; Slayter, 2016). In addition, children in the US child welfare system experience effects of pervasive racism, ableism, and sexism which appear to drive disparities in entering into the child welfare system (Baams et al., 2019) and impact the quality of services received within the system (Lightfoot, 2014; Robinson, 2017). Overall, these indicators suggest that the US child welfare system lacks the responsiveness, inclusivity, and equity, which would be consistent with children’s rights and an environment that is supportive of their well-being.
Connecting Children’s Well-being to Child Policies in the US Context. The United States remains the only country in the world that has not ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history, which sets international standards for treatment of children in society (Freeman, 2016; Smith, 2015). The US also lacks national child policies focused on ensuring children’s well-being (Berrick, 2011; Russ et al., 2010; US Government Accountability Office (GAO), 2017; Walker et al., 1999). Instead US child policies are characterized by patchwork legislation addressing narrow groups of children within the population (such as legislation targeted to foster youth), which makes individual states responsible for shaping and implementing child policies across locally run social systems (Berrick, 2011; Lightfoot, 2014; Scherrer, 2012). For example, although there is federal legislation providing parameters for identifying and supporting children who have experienced maltreatment and neglect (such as CAPTA, 1979) each individual state develops their own definition of maltreatment and neglect, and each state defines parameters of how children and their families receive support and assistance from their state system (Berrick, 2011). This means that access to resources and supports for children and families is not consistent across states or even within states, leading to a situation where child-serving systems in the US are defined by inequities, scarcity and inconsistent standards of care for children and families (Russ et al., 2010).

Virginia’s Child Welfare System. The Virginia Child Welfare System is a decentralized, locally run, state supervised system. There are 120 localities in the state, including independent cities and counties that each manage their own social services systems. The state central office provides guidance to localities but each locality has a great deal of flexibility regarding how they implement and interpret policies. A recent report from the Joint Legislative
and Audit Review Commission in Virginia (JLARC, 2018) outlined serious and chronic problems within Virginia’s Foster Care System. The report noted that child safety and poor outcomes for youth involved with the foster care system are directly linked to a lack of consistent adherence to basic state level safety standards and protocols (JLARC, 2018). This means that children in different localities are experiencing differences in quality and consistency in basic services. For example, JLARC (2018) found that monthly visits to children in foster care were not happening consistently across localities in the state, with some children going without a visit from their caseworker for a number of months. JLARC noted that in 2017, 19% of children in Virginia’s foster care system did not have all mandated caseworker visits and that 24 children did not receive any visit that year. Further, there were indications that children who were experiencing maltreatment in their foster home were being missed due to a lack of consistency in doing monthly visits with children in foster care (JLARC, 2018).

The report also found that, Virginia has one of the highest rates of children aging out of care before establishing permanency compared with other states. For example, the report noted that 54% of youth transitioning out of the foster care system age out before achieving permanency (JLARC, 2018). Relatedly, JLARC also reported that Virginia places children in congregate care settings at a higher rate than other states, 17% versus 12% nationwide. Further the report indicated that 60% of children in congregate care (from 2012 - 2016) did not have a clinical reason to be living in a highly restricted setting (JLARC, 2018).

Overall, JLARC (2018) identified consistent, ongoing problems in ensuring children's well-being in foster care, which have been known for over a decade, and indicated that a more intentional state level monitoring of locally administrated systems is necessary to ensure adherence to safety standards as well as federal and state guidelines. In terms of understanding
disparities in the Virginia foster care system, the report did indicate that there was an increase in youth who have a diagnosed disability entering the foster system. For example, JLARC reported that in 2016, 31% of youth had a diagnosed disability, with 76% of those youth having a mental health diagnosis. However, noticeably absent in the JLARC report was any discussion of race, gender, sexuality, language access, or immigration status and the associated disparities.

As indicated by the JLARC report, Virginia faces chronic challenges in supporting children and families. However, even prior to release of the JLARC report Virginia had taken a number of legislative, policy and administrative steps towards making the system work better for children and their families. For example, Virginia participated in a family and child services review (CFSR) with support from the Children’s Bureau Capacity Building Initiative to produce a program improvement plan. The results from the CFSR revealed that “while policy supported the necessary technical requirements and provided guidance on successful family engagement, the adaptive engagement practice efforts were not at the center in everyday practice throughout the commonwealth (VDSS, 2019, p.8).” These findings from the CFSR indicated that more effort needed to be made to ensure that engagement can happen in everyday practice.

Given the findings from the CFSR and the recommendations from the JLARC report, VDSS has made youth and family engagement a core component of their recent change efforts. For example, youth and family engagement is the central feature of the current five-year plan and a practice model centered around youth and family engagement is being promoted (VDSS, 2019). In addition, VDSS developed practice profiles to provide guidance for workers centered around youth and family engagement (VDSS, 2016). The substantial shift in state level policy towards promoting child, youth and family engagement is particularly relevant for this study. In centralizing engagement, Virginia seems to have made a commitment to equity in service quality.
for youth and families and to supporting children and youth in having their voices heard and taken seriously. Importantly, this policy shift could be viewed as a “policy window” with practice implications where there is opportunity for children’s and youth’s meaningful participation to become a part of standard child welfare practice in Virginia. It represents an opportunity for Virginia to take a lead in assessing and evaluating the impact of children’s and youth’s participation including the impact on children’s objective and subjective well-being. More about the relevancy of findings from this dissertation study to Virginia’s current change efforts will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Overview of Children’s Rights

For decades, scholars, community leaders, professional organizations and activists have urged the United States to ratify and implement the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Reading et al., 2008; Todres, 2011; UNCRC, 1989). The UNCRC is viewed as important for strengthening the US position abroad with regard to supporting other countries efforts to realize children’s rights and allowing the US to join the rest of the world in making progress for children. Also, scholars suggest that the UNCRC could provide a comprehensive framework for re-shaping children’s services to address inequities, racism and social injustices embedded within the current systems. In addition, using the UNCRC as a framework could transform child-serving systems to be proactively and inclusively supportive of children’s well-being (Reading et al., 2008; Todres, 2011).

Basis for Children’s Rights

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) is the basis for many children’s rights based initiatives around the world. The UNCRC includes 54 articles, which are broadly grouped into provisions, protections and participation rights as well as
statements regarding implementation procedures (Cohen, 2002; Sherrer, 2012; Smith, 2015).

“Provisions” refers to children’s rights to an education, to healthcare, and for parents and families to be supported by governments and society in ensuring their children’s well-being.

“Protections” refer to children’s rights to be protected from maltreatment or exploitation.

“Participation” refers to children’s rights to share their views and take part in decisions made about their lives. Children’s rights scholars suggest that each rights category is interlinked with the others, meaning that upholding the right to protection is not possible without upholding the rights to participation and vice versa (Freeman, 2016; Melton, 2005; Reading et al., 2009; Smith, 2015).

Although the US has not ratified the UNCRC, language in the convention was greatly influenced by the US during the drafting stage (Cohen, 2002; Smith, 2015). Some articles, such as the “best interest” principle, can be directly linked to US policies and practices (Cohen, 2002; Melton, 2005). In addition, due to the near unanimous ratification of the convention, the document is often viewed as setting an international baseline standard for how children should expect to be treated (Melton, 2005). Influential US professional and academic associations such as the National Association of Social Workers and the American Psychological Association have made statements indicating support for US ratification of the convention and for adoption of practices which align with the principles identified in the convention (Libal et al., 2011; Melton, 2005; Scherrer, 2012).

Social work academics have asserted that UNCRC principles are directly comparable to social work ethics and values, especially the profession’s emphasis on advocacy for social justice (Libal et al, 2011; Mildred & Plummer, 2009; Reading et al., 2009; Scherrer, 2012). However, although a children’s rights framework does appear to be consistent with social work values and
ethics, there appears to be a hesitancy among US social workers to acknowledge the value and relevance of children’s rights for the US context (Berthold & Libal, 2016; Hertel & Libal, 2011; Libal et al, 2011; Mildred & Plummer, 2009; Scherrer, 2012).

**Children’s Participation Rights.** Children’s participation has a very specific meaning in the context of the UNCRC (1989) referring to children being supported by adults (article 5) in expressing their views, having their views seriously considered, taking part in decision making (article 12), and accessing information, especially in order to formulate an informed view (article 13) (Lansdown, 2011; UNCRC, 1989). In a general comment clarifying what "rights-based participation" entails for children, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child stated that children’s participation should be voluntary, respectful, inclusive, safe, and facilitated by child friendly approaches (UNCRC, 2009, p. 26). These ethical principles structure participation in child-centered terms by emphasizing each child’s perspective and experiences as being central to what meaningful participation is. For example, “child-friendly approaches” refers to adults taking a child’s interests and capacities into consideration while shaping a context that is supportive for that child to be able to authentically participate. In the context of child welfare, a “child-friendly” approach may mean re-structuring a typically discussion-heavy planning meeting to include more activity-based moments or providing children with planning materials which are meaningful and relevant for them (such as a social story, a collaborative worksheet, crafting or play-based activities). A “child-friendly” approach would also value and support multiple ways that children may communicate their views (through play, through art, through conversation, through non-verbal cues).

**Considering Competency for Participation.** The UNCRC indicates that all children, defined as people under 18 years of age, are entitled to all of the rights stipulated in the
Convention, indicating that there is no eligibility age for access to rights (1989). However, the UNCRC does include language in article 12 (often termed the participation article) which indicates that adults take into account a child’s age and maturity when weighing their involvement in decisions made about their lives. Importantly, in the general comment offering guidance about implementation of article 12, the notions of evolving capacities and considering a child’s age and maturity appears to be used to indicate the importance of considering supports children need in order to build their capacities to participate or to be able to authentically participate (UNCRC, 2009). Meaning that the process for participation, contextual factors, as well as the individual child’s views must be considered in order to effectively enable children’s participation. This also suggests, as Tisdall (2018) and others have indicated (e.g. Lundy, 2007; Woodhead, 2006), that rather than making judgments or assumptions about children’s competencies based on their age or maturity, emphasis should be placed on building adults’ competence in working with and enabling children’s participation. For example, by developing supportive circumstances, situations and facilitators for individual children to be able to participate in a manner that is safe and meaningful for them.

Tisdall (2018) offers a philosophical and practical critique of assessing children’s capacities to participate based on antiquated notions of age and stage developmental theories. She argues that focusing on assessing a child’s capacity to participate creates a situation where children’s participation rights are precarious and dependent on a professional’s judgment. That children’s participation is often predicated on judgments of their competencies from adult professionals is concerning particularly when considering potential for disproportionate impacts on children of color within the child welfare system. Children who are Black, Brown, Latino/a/x, or who have a disability may be more likely to be judged as incompetent or less capable than
White children or children without a visible disability in similar circumstances (Finn, 2009; Graham, 2007). The silencing of children of color through racist assumptions related to competence and capacity perpetuates the well documented racial and social injustices within the child welfare system and could also increase children’s vulnerability to violence and mistreatment (Graham, 2007; Fylkesnes et al., 2018).

Leeson (2007) argues that children’s participation rights within child welfare settings should:

…be a key area of interest as it is an arena like no other, where agents of the state, rather than parents or children themselves, are deciding children’s lives. It raises fundamental issues about how we regard children and young people, as competent rights- holders, able to actively participate, or as vulnerable, less than competent beings in need of social work protection. (Leeson, 2007, p.268)

Leeson’s view is echoed by the legal professional organizations in the United States, particularly the American Bar Association and the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, who identified involving children and youth in dependency court hearings as a best practice because children want to be involved and appear to benefit from being involved in processes which deeply effect their lives (Barnes, Khoury, & Kelly, 2012).

**Adult Role in Children’s Participation.** In addition to structuring what participation might look like in terms of child-centeredness, the core ethical components described by the UNCRC general comment suggest a particular role for adults as a guide and facilitator to help children realize their rights, which is consistent with a socio-cultural developmental perspective for supporting children’s well-being. Adult support is a key component of participation for children, especially because they have limited social and political power (Smith, 2002). From a
children’s rights perspective, building a sense of mutual respect and understanding between a child and an adult while paying attention to power dynamics is necessary to enabling meaningful participation (Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Lansdown, 2011; McLeod, 2006, 2007).

Fern (2014) proposes that practitioners can support children in realizing their rights by sharing their knowledge and resources with children while also recognizing and appreciating the child's knowledge “of their own lives”. These views are also echoed by the intersectional childhood framework which suggests that children’s views are diverse and reflect the gendered and racialized society in which they are embedded (more about the intersectional childhood framework will be discussed in chapter 2). Further, the intersectional framework suggests that practitioners may need to reflect on internalized biases in order to enable them to authentically recognize and appreciate children’s knowledge “of their own lives”. The above descriptions suggest that participation is not a static momentary event, but rather an evolving, active, relational process.

**Legislative Supports for Children’s Participation in the US.** Youth in child protective services custody, according to US law, should “have a voice and be represented in formal and informal decision-making contexts” (Beal, 2019, p. 66), including in care planning, service planning, transition planning, and in dependency court hearings (Barnes et al., 2012). However, the parameters within which youth get to have a voice and who gets to determine whether they can use that voice are uneven and generally narrow within the scope of US laws. Although not unified or comprehensive, there are a few federal and state policies promoting youth participation in child welfare decision-making, especially for older youth (over the age of 14) who are transitioning out of the foster care system (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018).
For example, federal legislation such as the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014 and the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 each include some provisions related to youth participation. Specifically, state child welfare agencies must “ensure that children in foster care age 14 or older participate in the development of, or revision to, his or her case plan which must describe the foster child’s rights” (National Conference on State Legislatures, 2019). There are also federally legislated provisions that youth (again typically aged 14 and older) attend court hearings related to permanency (Barnes et al., 2012). However, what “participation” means is not explicated in the federal legislation and state legislation often includes exclusions for youth participation based on the youth’s age and capacity as well as at the discretion of the professionals involved.

**State Legislation.** As indicated by federal guidelines described above, 31 states including Virginia have some provisions in their state legislation indicating that children and youth “of appropriate age” must be involved in their care planning process, unless a professional involved with their case determines it is not in their best interest. Each state sets its own determination for what an “appropriate age” is for children’s participation. For example, the majority of states that have provisions for children’s participation in their legislation indicate that children who are 14 or older “shall” or “must” take part in developing their care plan including; California, Georgia, Wisconsin, West Virginia, New York, North Carolina, Iowa, Virginia and the District of Columbia. However, some states include provisions for younger children to participate (California, Kansas, New York, Georgia) and some do not include any exclusion criteria for children’s participation (California, Delaware, North Carolina). For example, California code (Welf. & Inst. Code § 16501.1) states that:
A child shall be given a meaningful opportunity to participate in the development of the case plan and state his or her preference for foster care placement. A child who is age 12 or older and in a permanent placement shall also be given the opportunity to review the case plan, sign the case plan, and receive a copy. For youth age 14 or older and non-minor dependents, the case plan shall be developed in consultation with the youth. At the youth's option, the consultation may include up to two members of the case-planning team who are chosen by the youth and who are not the youth's foster parents or caseworkers. (Child Welfare Information Gateway (CWIG), 2018, p. 10)

As described above, the California code for case planning indicates that children in the foster care system be given a meaningful opportunity to participate with no exclusions for age or capacity. This is also the case for states such as Colorado, Delaware and North Carolina (CWIG, 2018). Other states have legislative requirements for children’s participation that include circumstances for children’s exclusion, such as age and competency. For example, in Kansas children who are 7 or older can participate in case planning meetings provided the child is able to “understand” the procedures (CWIG, 2018). Children in New York who are 10 or older can be included in developing a service plan “wherever possible” (CWIG, 2018). Relevant to this study, in Virginia, according to the legislation on foster care case planning, children who are older than 14 “shall” be involved in the development of the plan and children younger than age 14 “may be involved in the development of the plan, if such involvement is consistent with the best interests of the child. If either the parent or child is not involved in the development of the plan, the reasons why must be documented” (CWIG, 2018, p. 62).

As indicated by this brief comparison of state laws about children’s participation in care planning, participation for youth is often contingent upon a child’s age, development and
capacity. However, there are no metrics or tools indicated for assessing development or capacity for children’s participation. Thus, assessment of a youth’s capacity to participate is left up to the discretion of the worker, the judge or the lawyer with whom they are working. Taken together, this indicates that while there is some legislation and legal support for youth participation, which is stronger in some states than others, the gateway for youth to be able to get involved is generally narrow and dependent on the professionals’ support and active encouragement of youth involvement. Again, given the impacts of racial and gender biases on how professionals view youth’s worthiness or ability to take part, this emphasis on narrowly prescribing youth participation could exacerbate racial and gender inequities, effectively silencing youth who have a disability or are deemed too dangerous or too vulnerable to take part (Finn, 2009; Fylkesnes et al., 2018; Graham, 2007).

**Virginia Context.** As indicated above, Virginia state legislation, mirroring federal guidelines, includes narrow, age restricted, population specific guidelines for children’s participation in child welfare processes. For example, Virginia Code states that foster care children who are 14 or over “shall” be involved in planning their case and children 14 and under “may” be involved at the discretion of their worker. Again, there is no specific information about what “involvement” means and ambiguous words such as “shall” and “may”, rather than “must”, indicates that a child’s participation is dependent on a worker’s preference. In addition, the code of Virginia indicates that a child’s views should be considered in court hearings related to permanency. However, scoping language is used to suggest certain youth might not be able to have their voice heard and that the court (the judge) has discretion over whether to invite the child to share their views. For example, the code for Permanency Planning hearings states:
In each permanency planning hearing and in any hearing regarding the transition of the child from foster care to independent living, the court shall consult with the child in an age-appropriate manner regarding the proposed permanency plan or transition plan for the child, unless the court finds that such consultation is not in the best interests of the child. (Code of Virginia. § 16.1-282.1. Permanency planning hearing for children in foster care)

Further in Virginia code indicating procedures for determining custody and visitation for children involved with domestic court, “The reasonable preference of the child, if the court deems the child to be of reasonable intelligence, understanding, age, and experience to express such a preference” (§ 20-124.2. Court-ordered custody and visitation arrangements). Although the parameters for participation outlined in the code appear to suggest specificity again, there is no information about how a judge should assess a youth’s “intelligence” or “understanding” in order to enable their participation.

Although Virginia does appear to be in compliance with the minimum federal guidelines regarding youth participation in child welfare care planning and does include provisions for inclusion of younger children. The emphasis on professional’s discretion regarding opportunities for children’s participation and the codification of age and competency as exclusionary criteria in Virginia code suggest that children and even older youth’s participation may not be standardized in the state. As noted by NCJFCJ (Barnes et al., 2012), exclusionary criteria for children’s participation is inconsistent with the best practice standard for children’s participation in courts.

**Social Work Context.** NASW (2013) practice standards for child welfare practitioners include an expectation for social workers to seek, hear and support youth voices and participation in decision-making. Of the 13 standards of practice for child welfare, 3 standards
specifically mention children’s and youth’s participation including: intervention, permanency and youth engagement (NASW, 2013). For example, practice standard number 9 related to interventions states that, “The social worker shall seek the family, child, or youth’s participation, input, and feedback to ensure that service is a mutual undertaking between the social worker, the family, and the child” (NASW, 2013, p.21). Also, in the practice standard for permanency it is stated that:

Social workers shall actively work with families toward reunification. However, social workers shall also work with children and youths to identify and maintain permanent connections with family, friends, and other individuals with whom a child or youth has a significant relationship, except in situations in which there are legal constraints, such as protective orders. (NASW, 2013, p.23 emphasis added)

The practice standards cited above imply that age is not an exclusionary criterion for children’s participation. These standards also indicate a view that workers should prioritize getting input and feedback from children and youth about their preferences and consider how to make planning collaborative, where the child, family and worker work together.

However, the practice standard focusing on youth engagement does suggest a definition of participation which is contingent on age. For example, practice standard number 11, youth engagement, states that, “Social workers in child welfare shall actively engage older youths in addressing their needs while in out-of-home care and as they prepare to transition out of foster care” and “Social workers shall value youths’ voices and support older youths in developing decision-making skills, achieving goals, and celebrating successes” (NASW, 2013, p.22). The youth engagement standard seems to indicate that active engagement and development of decision-making skills are reserved for older youth. Although it is not stated what “older youth”
might mean, the implication is that youth eligible for engagement are of transition age, meaning that they are at least 14 years old.

**Youth Development.** Of particular relevance for this study are the ways in which the practice standards emphasize children’s and youth’s development. Practice standard number two, related to child welfare social worker qualifications state that workers should have “working knowledge about child and adult development, impact of trauma, parenting and family dynamics, and community systems where the child and family reside” (NASW, 2013, p. 13). Here and elsewhere in the practice standards it is indicated that NASW defines development through a staged developmental perspective rather than a sociocultural developmental perspective (more about this will be discussed later in this chapter). The standards do not explicitly mention the importance of education about or strengthening skills in working with and engaging children and youth. This implies an assumption that child welfare social workers already know how to engage with children and youth, or that these skills are gained through learning about children’s development.

Although practice standard number seven relating to culturally competent practice notes child welfare social workers should “address particular needs of children of color who are overrepresented in the foster care system” (NASW, 2013, p. 18) and children who are immigrants, there is no of specificity about social workers seeking training about implicit and explicit biases which could impact the way children of color experience their engagement with workers. Also, there is no mention of utilizing special skills or gaining training for working with children who have disabilities. Further, although working with LGBTQ youth is mentioned in the cultural competency standard, the emphasis is placed on helping foster parents and children “receive training and support to address the issue” when a child self-identifies as LGBTQ.
(NASW, 2013, p.18). This framing could feel less affirming for LGBTQ youth because it implies a view that self-identifying as LGBTQ could be an “issue” for parents to address.

**When “Family” Really Means Caregivers.** The NASW practice standards include standards that could be read to include children but are more likely to have been written with adult caregivers in mind, where use of terms like “family” appear to indicate caregivers rather than caregivers and children. For example, practice standard eight relating to assessment states:

> Social workers in child welfare should be clear with the family about the reasons for services, inform them of their rights, and facilitate legal representation. The social worker shall seek to understand the family’s perspective, identify their strengths, and convey understanding and empathy for the family’s situation and/or difficulties (NASW, p. 19).

In this case, it appears that “family” is being used to mean caregivers. Raising this distinction in no way suggests that caregivers should not participate in care and safety planning for their children. Rather it is notable, from a children’s rights perspective, that the individual child and their experiences can be subsumed within a general “family” term, making children’s individuality as members of the family and also clients themselves less visible.

**Efforts to Strengthen Participatory Practices in US Child Welfare Contexts.** There have been few interventions targeted at strengthening participatory practices with children in US child welfare contexts. However, over the past decade there have been a number of interventions targeted at front line child welfare workers, which sought to increase capacity for providing trauma informed services. Although these interventions were not focused on children’s participation, the results of these studies provide insight into barriers faced to adopting participatory practices with children in the US context.
For example, Conners-Burrows et al., (2013) evaluated the efficacy of a training intervention developed by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network targeted to front line child welfare staff. The intervention was developed in order to increase workers’ adoption and use of trauma-informed practices when working with children and families. The quantitative study used two survey tools to measure knowledge about trauma informed practices and current practices in trauma-informed care.

Current practices were divided into two subscales measuring direct support and indirect support for children. “Direct support” was defined as the "extent of engagement in trauma-informed practices designed to directly support children" and included items such as asking children about their worries and describing what children can expect from the legal process. Indirect support for children included items such as talking to parents about trauma impacts, helping parents understand the difference between "bad" behavior and trauma behavior, and making referrals for the children to see a trauma informed therapist.

Study findings suggested that caseworkers readily adopted indirect trauma informed practices, such as building support around the child by educating caregivers about trauma and providing children with referrals for services. However, caseworkers’ usage of direct trauma informed practices, which required working directly with children, was much less impacted by the training intervention. Conners-Burrow and colleagues (2013) describe a reluctance by front line workers to discuss and address children's emotions. The study authors proposed that

It may be easier to change referral patterns or adult-focused behaviors than to change ways of interacting with children...They [caseworkers] may need encouragement and support until they become more comfortable engaging in potentially difficult or emotional discussions with children (Conners-Burrow et al., 2013, p. 1835).
Conners-Burrow et al (2013) suggest that future practice interventions should include additional training to promote competence and confidence in working with children who are experiencing challenging or traumatic circumstances.

**Impacts of Trauma Informed Movement on Children’s Participation Rights.** The movement for trauma-informed practices in the US and internationally has influenced policy-making and development of interventions specifically targeting children and youth (Sweeney et al., 2018). Trauma-informed perspectives assert that adverse childhood experiences (such as child maltreatment and experiences of violence) have an impact on individuals’ brain development and well-being (Sweeney et al., 2018). Proponents of trauma-informed practices advocate for increasing intervention in children’s lives at an early age in order to lessen the potential impacts of trauma on brain development (Beddoe et al., 2019). They also advocate for spaces and interactions that are reflective of the effects of the trauma experience on an individual (Becker-Blease, 2017; Sweeney et al., 2018). For example, individual behaviors are viewed as resulting from the trauma experience rather than something that the individual can control (Sweeney et al., 2018). The trauma informed perspective suggests that if a practitioner understands how trauma impacts an individual’s brain thus influencing that individual’s behavior, then that may be more likely to relate with empathy and compassion and modify their intervention approach based on that individual’s perspective and history of trauma (Becker-Blease, 2017; Sweeney et al., 2018). The movement highlights the ubiquity of trauma experiences in childhood and has the potential to support relation-based practice with children and youth, as well as to center the perspective and experiences of the individual in developing appropriate interventions and supports (Marlowe & Adamson, 2011; Sweeney et al., 2018). In addition, it adds recognition to what has been known by social workers and therapists for
decades, namely that experiencing violence and other potentially traumatic events can have an effect on a person’s overall well-being and their psychological as well as physical health (Becker-Blease, 2017; Marlowe & Adamson, 2011).

Although the trauma-informed movement has the potential to support more relational, child-centered approaches to practice, critics suggest that the movement runs the risk of individualizing responsibility for social problems, such as family violence, by such an intense focus on behaviorist interventions without explicit acknowledgement of the social forces behind the problems (Becker-Blease, 2017; Beddoe et al., 2019; Marlowe & Adamson, 2011). Similar concerns have been raised about the uncritical use of neuroscience in social work practice and policy (Bath, 2017; Beddoe & Joy, 2017; Edwards, Gillies, & Horsely, 2015; Munro & Musholt, 2014; Wastell & White, 2012). Finn’s (2009) research about racialized constructions of “at risk” and “vulnerable” children suggests that practitioners pay attention to critiques about assumptions underlying trauma-informed and neuroscientific perspectives in order to guard against potential internalized biases which may lead to labeling children and youth as vulnerable or “at risk”, based on their racial and ethnic identity, and then to increasingly responsibilize youth, especially youth of color, for their trauma experiences as they age.

**Foundational Assumptions and Researcher Positionality**

My choice of the study topic and the assumptions foundational to this study are a direct reflection of my experiences working with children as an educator, my passion for children’s rights, and my belief that social work research can be a powerful tool for positive social change. As a pre-school teacher for children with autism, I had the opportunity to work directly with young children who were deemed “non-verbal”. I worked to develop pedagogical environments drawing from Dewey’s natural environment teaching philosophy and hands-on learning
techniques that were respectful of children and their worlds and that supported them in building their knowledge and social power. Supporting children with autism in using their own words, expressing and identifying their feelings, views and ideas was heavily influential to me in terms of the way that I view children’s capacities and adults’ roles in supporting children's capacities. The children I worked with challenged my assumptions about the skills/abilities and aptitude a pre-school child with autism “should” have. My views about the fluidity of capacity, the lifelong development of capacities, and the situational and contextual influences of capacity have all been shaped by my experiences as an educator.

My passion for supporting children’s and youth’s rights was also sparked while working as a pre-school teacher and then a museum educator. I was greatly impacted by seeing how our society continually undervalued children. For example, while working as an afterschool preschool teacher, I worked with children who experienced trauma from abusive experiences and acted out their trauma in the classroom. The institution I was working for at the time offered little support and resources to children in my classroom or their families to help them heal from their trauma and recognize their resilience. During my time as an educator, I also witnessed Black children being labeled “emotionally disturbed” and even physically restrained when experiencing trauma effects in the classroom. At the time, I was able to successfully advocate against use of physical restraint, at least for one of my students, however, I was aware that there was much more that needed to be done to support my students in recognizing their trauma and resilience, healing from their trauma experiences, and supporting their well-being and growth.

I was frustrated as an educator feeling that I could have little impact on the social and political drivers seeming to affect my young student’s lives. I wanted to do something more to support social change which could impact children’s lives, address racial and social injustices,
and advocate for youth and families by creating space in policy making structures to infuse youth and their families’ voice and action. This passion for respecting and valuing children lead me to see social work research as a tool to use for advancing social justice for children. In addition to my professional and educational experiences which have shaped my world view, my social identities as a White, cis-gendered, straight woman and mother have also impacted my perspective and requires me to be vigilant in correcting biases which may be deeply internalized.

**Foundational Assumptions.** The theoretical foundation for understanding children’s participation within the context of this study are rooted in my personal and professional experiences (as described above), the sociology of childhood, particularly an intersectional childhood framework, and in a children’s rights framework especially related to children’s well-being. Each of these foundational theories will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2. The following assumptions are foundational to this study:

- Childhood is complex, context driven, multilayered, socially constructed and varied based on individual experiences and perceptions. Racism, sexism, ageism, and heteronormative social values influence children’s experiences of their childhood and shape childhood differently for different groups (Graham, 2007).
- The way that childhood is constructed influences how adults interact with children, which has an impact on children’s overall wellbeing and their potential for exposure to violence and exploitation. Deeply held and largely unacknowledged social norms and attitudes directly influence the way that adults choose to interact with children (Lilleston et al., 2017).
- The concept of children’s participation in and of itself implies critique of often taken-for-granted assumptions about the appropriate place for children in society, children’s capacities and capabilities, and adults’ role in supporting children (Smith, 2015).
- Authentic participation for children requires adults to deeply critique their assumptions regarding children’s roles and capacities and to shift their role towards a supportive advocate who works with and for children rather than just for children.
- Children’s participation may be the key to changing deeply held beliefs and social norms about children, which may be driving factors influencing children’s potential vulnerability to violence and exploitation (Lilleston, et al., 2017).

**Current Study Overview**

As indicated at the beginning of this chapter, the current study centered perspectives of 18-25-year-old young people with childhood experiences of child welfare and child welfare professionals currently working with children and youth to build knowledge about children’s participation in a child welfare context. The study aimed to learn where there may be opportunities to strengthen children’s participation in child welfare planning, especially in the relational space between the worker and the child. A qualitative, constructivist grounded theory methodology guided by an action research framework directed the study design. Consistent with an action research philosophy, the study aimed to work in partnership with research participants to produce relevant knowledge that could be useful for practitioners, youth, policy makers and social work educators in considering how to strengthen children’s participation in child welfare systems.

In total, 22 participants including 13 child welfare professionals from both public and private agencies and 9 young people with lived experience of the child welfare system were
interviewed for the study. Of this group, 3 child welfare professionals and 3 young people participated in follow-up group meetings. Semi-structured interviews explored participants’ views of children’s participation in child welfare planning and participants’ experiences relevant to the study topic. In the interviews, young people were asked to share their retrospective reflections about and experiences working with caseworkers during their childhood or youth. Child welfare professionals were asked during their interviews to reflect on and share their experiences working with children and youth in child welfare systems.

During the child welfare professional’s group meeting, participants had an opportunity to reflect on messages shared for them from young people who participated in this study. Main findings from this study include: an introduction of a theoretical model for understanding youth views about children’s participation, a comparative analysis of child welfare professionals’ viewpoints about children’s participation, and an exploration of what child welfare professionals are currently doing in their work that appears to converge with young people’s perspectives about what makes participation meaningful for them.

**Study Significance.** The study topic and findings are timely and highly relevant for social workers, policy makers, child welfare systems and others interested in strengthening children’s participation. As described earlier in this chapter, there appear to be a number of policy windows opening which could move United States child welfare policies closer to realization of children’s participation rights. For example, although legislative support is limited, there does appear to be an increasing emphasis on youth engagement as being a core value and overarching framework for state and federal child welfare policies, which could indicate a potential shift at the system level towards a value orientation centered on engagement. Although children’s participation as currently described in most US child welfare legislation and practice guidance lacks clear
definition, lacks practical tools and supports for implementation in practice, and does not appear to be inclusive or accessible for all children and youth, it does appear that some foundational understanding that children’s engagement matters might be taking hold in both policy and practice arenas related to child welfare.

Findings from this study directly address the gap between the implied system-level value orientation toward engagement and the lack of practical and comprehensive knowledge about how to make engagement actionable and meaningful for children and youth. For example, study findings could be useful for social workers, child welfare professionals and policy makers in considering how to define children’s participation in legislative and practice initiatives, providing knowledge about how to increase accessibility and inclusivity of children’s participation so that it is supported for all children, and affirming practical strategies that child welfare workers are already using to engage children and youth. In addition, the theoretical model of youth views on children’s participation has utility for children’s rights researchers and social work researchers seeking to build a strategy for evaluating and assessing the impact from and quality of children’s participation from children’s own perspectives.

**Dissertation Overview**

Chapter 1 described the context for this study, legal and social basis for children’s rights, status of children’s well-being in the US context, US legislation related to children’s participation rights in child welfare systems, social work practice context, and my own foundational assumptions and positionality.

Chapter 2 discusses the knowledge base of children’s participation, including theoretical foundations and models of children’s participation. In addition, the chapter presents an overview of empirical studies related to children’s participation and synthesizes research about what
children’s participation looks like, how it is experienced and what challenges have been identified for supporting children’s participation specifically in the child welfare context.

Chapter 3 describes methodology, design and study procedures for this study. The chapter provides an overview of Charmaz’s constructivist grounded theory methodology and the action research framework, which inform the study design. The recruitment procedures and IRB protocol are discussed. Participant demographics are introduced and discussed in this chapter. The chapter ends with an in-depth description of the coding and analysis process leading to the study findings.

Chapter 4 examines study findings relevant to the research questions. The first section of the chapter explores findings related to research question number one - young people’s and child welfare professionals’ views about children’s participation. In this first section, a theoretical model of youth views about children’s participation is presented along with a comparison with child welfare professionals’ views. The second section of the chapter examines findings related to research question number two, exploring where there are opportunities for strengthening children’s participation. Section 2 includes strategies that child welfare professionals in this study use in their work with children that are convergent with young people’s views about what meaningful participation looks like. The third section of the chapter presents challenges young people and child welfare professionals identified as being related to children’s participation. The final section explores what was learned from facilitating an in-direct conversation between youth people and child welfare professionals.

Chapter 5 situates study findings within the literature with a focus on identifying how study findings extend and expand the knowledge base about children’s participation. The chapter also includes a description of study limitations and lessons learned. The chapter concludes by
discussing implications for social work practice and education, child welfare practice and policy, and children’s participation research.
Chapter 2: Situating Children’s Participation

This chapter will review and synthesize the theoretical and empirical knowledge base about children’s participation that informs this study. The purpose of this chapter is to summarize what is known about the value of participation for children and caseworkers, as well as to present the political, social, organizational and individual challenges to implementing participatory approaches. Additionally, the chapter will highlight what is currently known about how practitioners implement participatory practices and where there are gaps in the knowledge base in this area.

The first section of this chapter explores the theoretical framework underlying the conceptualization of children’s participation for this study, synthesizing three theoretical lenses: 1) intersectional childhood as a social construction, 2) sociocultural theories of children’s development, and 3) children’s rights perspectives. Following this, the chapter will present two practice models or tools, which were developed through rights-based and child-centered perspectives for practitioners and organizations to use in assessing facilitation of children’s participation within their own practice or organization. The final section of this chapter will present a review of research about children’s participation within the context of child welfare: structured around three main areas: 1) the value of participation for children and caseworkers, 2) what children’s participation looks like in practice from the perspective of children and caseworkers and, 3) barriers and challenges to implementation of participatory approaches within a child welfare context.
Section 1: Theoretical Framework for Children’s Participation in Child Welfare

Defining “Participation”: Moving Beyond the Binary

At first glance, “participation” may appear to be a simple concept because it is one that we encounter in our daily lives. For example, in conversation “participation” is commonly brought up when discussing whether an individual did or did not participate in a meeting, or did or did not participate at a social event. In these everyday encounters, discussions of “participation” emphasize the action of participation and describe participation in binary terms. Although this binary conceptualization can be useful for our everyday conversations to help us account for who is present at a particular event or activity, it can also blur our views of participation and hide the deeply contextual, socially derived, value-laden, multi-layered essence of the concept.

Moving beyond the binary conceptualization, “participation” may be viewed along a continuum as a process embedded within a social context wherein people join in differently. The ways in which people join in and the moments in which they enter a process are influenced by the power dynamics of the social context in which the process is embedded as well as the power dynamics between people involved in the participatory process itself. For example, to be able to meaningfully take part in a participatory process, participants need to have some knowledge about the process, including some sense of what participation might look like for them. They need to be able to determine how they want to engage and what role they want to play, and to have a sense of how other participants view their roles. In addition, participants may need to feel that they are welcomed in order to feel comfortable joining in. Power is infused throughout the process of participation as people shape, negotiate and assert their roles within the social process.
This dynamic, contextual conceptualization of participation as a process influences the way that children’s participation is defined throughout this study, which is both as a mechanism for children to access/realize their rights, and a process by which children take part in their own lives as well as their communities. The following sections will build on this definition of participation and present a social-constructionist, intersectional view of childhood, as it relates to a children’s rights framework, which proposes children are rights holders and that the realization of children’s rights is directly linked to their well-being.

**Childhood as a Social Construction**

Coinciding with the movement for children’s rights and recognition of children as agents in their own lives and their communities, scholarship in the area of childhood studies within the discipline of sociology has increasingly argued for a more nuanced, diverse perspective on the experiences of childhood (Ruck, Peterson-Badali, & Helwig, 2014; Smith, 2015). Far from being a universal experience, these scholars argue that childhood itself is a complex, varied, diverse, individualized, and heavily contextual social construction, shaped by social and cultural values and changes over time (James & Prout, 2000). For childhood scholars, the meaning of childhood as a state of being is socially constructed and children are viewed as “active agents” who shape their lives and their communities (Finn, Nybell, & Shook, 2013; Ruck, Peterson-Badali & Helwig, 2014).

This philosophy of childhood implies that there is not one correct way for a child to “be a child” and that adult assumptions about what childhood should look like are largely based on their own experiences of childhood and/or their views and beliefs about children’s roles in society (Woodhead, 1999). Scholars in this area have argued that these assumptions and social values around childhood have important implications for how adults choose to engage with
children and what they view as being in the child’s “best interest” (Woodhead, 1999; Fylkesnes et al., 2018). Within a traditional, Western, patriarchal framework, childhood is viewed as a time of innocence, a time when children should be free from adult responsibilities, such as work (Fylkesnes et al., 2018). Emphasis is also placed on childhood as a temporary state of being which is primarily valued because of its contribution to the process of an individual becoming an adult (Smith, 2015; Woodhead, 1999). Childhood scholars argue that there is value to learning from children in their present as much as there is value in learning about their experiences of adulthood later on.

Critics of childhood as a social construction have argued that childhood theories do not account for developmental changes or the changing capacities of children throughout their childhood (Ruck, Peterson-Badali, & Helwig, 2014). Critics highlight a notable absence of work in childhood studies which specifically explores developmental processes, especially work that explores how children’s capacities develop and change over time. Also, there are concerns from critics that childhood scholars have traditionally rejected assumptions made by staged developmental theories about childhood, especially regarding children’s evolving capacities. Critics suggest that these are major limitations of childhood theory because development is integral to the human experience and must be included in shaping our understanding of childhood (Ruck, Peterson-Badali, & Helwig, 2014).

In response to these criticisms, Woodhead (2006) argues that social construction of childhood theories do in fact account for children’s developing capacities and centralize the importance of developmental processes, but that they conceptualize development differently than traditional staged developmental perspectives. He suggests that rather than seeing childhood as a unique time when development occurs, childhood scholars view development as an ongoing,
lifelong, social process embedded within children’s cultural and social relationships (Woodhead, 2006). Overall, he suggests that childhood scholars do not view developmental processes as exclusively linear (as implied by staged developmental theories), but rather assume that individuals experience, develop and re-develop their capacities over the course of lifetimes (Woodhead, 2006). More information about developmental perspectives and their relationship with childhood as a social construction will be discussed later on in this chapter.

Another main criticism of childhood as a social construction is that the traditional childhood perspective, although acknowledging the importance of the cultural and social context does not explicitly address how racism and gender based biases impact and are embedded within the construction of childhood itself (Graham, 2007). As Graham (2007) argues, this lack of acknowledgement “…precludes issues of power and oppression operating in the everyday experiences of children’s lives…(p. 1307)”. For example, Graham (2007) argues that scholarship about childhood as a social construction was derived from disciplines such as psychology and sociology, which have historically marginalized Black children, their voices and their experiences. Graham (2007) suggests that recognizing the racist history embedded within the way that knowledge about children’s lives is produced is an important part of developing new ways of understanding children’s lives and being able to authentically and meaningfully value Black children’s voices in shaping the way we think about childhood.

**Intersectional Childhood Framework**

Recent scholarship by Konstantoni and Emejulu (2017) has furthered Graham’s critique and explored childhood as a social construction through a lens of racial justice. Konstantoni and Emejulu’s (2017) “intersectional childhood framework” argues that the experiences of privilege and oppression, rooted in structural and social racism and sexism, have an impact on how
childhood is experienced and constructed for each child. The framework centers difference and children’s agency in constructing childhood and illustrates how conceptualizations of a child’s race, socioeconomic status, age, gender expression and ability may influence how an adult perceives a child’s capacities and deservedness for support (Konstantoni & Emejulu, 2017). In addition, the framework suggests that whether an adult views a particular child as vulnerable, capable, or dangerous, may depend on how the child presents their identities to an adult, and what internalized biases the adult brings with them into the interaction (Konstantoni & Emejulu, 2017). Overall, their scholarship suggests that adult expectations about children’s behaviors, their perceptions of a child’s vulnerability or dangerousness, their feelings about whether a child is worthy of intervention, and their beliefs about a particular child’s “best interests” are shaped by racialized and heteronormative social values within child serving systems.

**Intersectional Childhood Framework in the Context of Child Welfare.** The intersectional childhood framework offers insight into how childhoods are constructed differently as children become defined as “the at risk child”, “the vulnerable child”, and “the dangerous child” and how these constructions of childhood impact children’s everyday lives. In the context of child welfare, an intersectional childhood framework suggests that the social construction of children as “vulnerable” or “dangerous” likely influences what kind of supports are made available to particular children and whether they may be viewed as trustworthy or capable.

For example, Fylkesnes and colleagues (2018) interviewed 17-19-year-old ethnic-minority youths in Norway about their participation in out of home placement decisions. Their study provided some evidence about how social position and identity might influence whether youth voices are included in decision-making within child welfare planning. Specifically, their
findings indicated that the ways in which youth present their story and their identities influence the ways in which caseworkers support their participation. They describe how the context of the young person’s situation, and specifically gendered constructions of vulnerability, influenced whether a child was seen as deserving of having a say. They also describe how the youth’s behavior and the way they “performed competence” influenced the ways in which the caseworkers gave weight to what they had to share. Youth who appeared to be taking on too many adult-like responsibilities (such as caring for younger siblings) were made to feel silenced by Norwegian caseworkers who had expectations about childhood which appeared to be contrasting with the youth’s own expectations and experiences of how they feel about their childhood (Fylkesnes et al., 2018).

Fylkesnes and colleague’s (2018) research describes what the intersectional childhood framework suggests, which is that social norms and values about childhood are embedded in assumptions regarding children’s competency, the way children experience their childhoods and also the way that adults engage with children. Like adults, children experience oppression as a result of implicit and explicit bias toward identities and expressions of identity which are perceived as threats to the current social order or appear to be counter to social norms. However, children have the least amount of political and social power to redress their grievances and hold individuals and systems accountable for their experiences of violence and exploitation (Federle, 2000; Graham, 2007; Konstantoni & Emejulu, 2017;).

“Childhood” as a Driver of Violence Against Children

Mirroring feminist scholars before them who identified the construction of gender as a driver for violence against women, childhood studies scholars argue that 1) childhood is a social construction, 2) that the modern, Western construction of childhood positions children as passive
and powerless, and 3) that this social positioning, maintained through harmful social norms, directly contributes to children as a group being particularly vulnerable to exploitation, violence, and abuse (Gil, 1975; James & Prout, 2000; Smith, 2015; Thorne, 1987). This framing suggests that violence against children is a social problem embedded in our institutions, structures and social fabric and expressed through individual and institutional behavior (Reading et al., 2018).

In the 1970s, a number of scholars in the area of violence against children (such as Gil, 1975 and Garbarino, 1977) posited ecological views of violence against children as a social problem rooted in the way that our social systems are shaped and the way in which our institutions have been developed and expressed through individual and institutional behavior (Gil, 1975; Garbarino, 1977). They suggested that interventions developed to address violence against children could be more effective if they targeted social and institutional drivers of violence against children as well as individual drivers of violence. Gil (1975), in particular, directly linked social norms around child/adult relationships as well as social values about children with the pervasive violence against children in our society, suggesting that addressing violence against children requires a rethinking and reimagining of social norms and social values about children.

Lilleston and colleagues’ (2017) review of literature linking social norms and violence against children supports the view that shifting social norms around children’s agency in particular is critical to addressing violence against children. Recently, intersectional childhood studies scholars argued that the racialized and gendered constructions of childhood impact whether or not a child’s experiences of violence, exploitation and abuse are considered worthy of intervention and what kind of intervention is made available or deemed appropriate (Konstantoni & Emejulu, 2017). The Intersectional childhood framework suggests that norms embedded
within racialized and heteronormative biases influence perceptions related to the acceptability of violence against children, especially Black and Latinx children.

Connecting, intersectional childhood studies and childhood violence scholarship suggests that stopping violence against and oppression of children cannot be achieved without: 1) critiquing social structures which reify children’s powerless position, 2) recognizing children as agentic, 3) radically transforming the way that adults view children and their role in society, 4) actively working towards building social supports for children to realize their human rights, 5) developing mechanisms for children to have redress 6) recognizing and valuing the different ways that children experience their childhoods and 7) addressing racist and gendered biases embedded in our social institutions and relationships which shape a child’s agency within a social context (Blanchet-Cohen, 2009; Federle, 2000; Freeman 2016; Gil, 1975; Konstantoni & Emejulu, 2017).

This philosophy is embedded within the structure and design of the current study, in that the design allows for reflective space for adults (in this case, child welfare professionals) to consider how they can support children’s participation. The very notion of supporting children’s participation in and of itself necessitates some assessment of power in adult relationships with children. This is why “participation” is intentionally positioned within the current study as a critical tool not only for enabling children to authentically and meaningfully take part in how their lives are shaped but also for opening up space to critique and discuss potentially harmful social norms, especially around the power relationship between children and adults (Blanchet-Cohen, 2009; Lilleston, 2017). The next section will explore developmental perspectives as they relate to the intersectional childhood framework and conceptions about children’s participation within this study.
Developmental Perspectives

All theories of how children develop contain assumptions, hypotheses, and implications about children’s everyday lives. All too often, implicit and explicit claims about childhood derive from untested intuitions, leaving major theoretical debates unresolved. Researchers’ or theorists’ intuitions about children’s everyday lives — likely based on their own cultural experience — are often assumed to be the ‘normal’ form of human childhood, compounding the problems of ignorance about children’s everyday lives.

(Rogoff, Dahl, & Callannan, 2019, p. 6)

Perspectives about development provide insight into how individuals develop (and re-develop) their moral, intellectual, and social selves over the course of their lives (Ruck, Peterson-Badali, Elisha, & Tenenbaum, 2017; Taylor, 2004). However, as the quotation above by Rogoff et al. (2019) suggests, different perspectives and definitions of development are embedded with cultural, social and personal assumptions which have important implications for how children’s development is understood and how this understanding impacts children’s lives. This section will explore three broad perspectives about children’s development including: staged theories, ecological perspectives, and sociocultural perspectives. Each perspective will be summarized and then critically analyzed for underlying assumptions about children’s lives.

Staged Developmental Theories

Classic staged theories of development, such those advanced by Piaget in the 1920’s and expanded by Kohlberg in the 1950’s are foundational to the field of developmental psychology and have influence for many professions serving children to this day. These theories conceptualize cognitive and moral development as a linear process with finite stages, whereby individuals acquire and develop new cognitive skills and competencies in a sequential order over
the course of their life, but with the bulk of developmental processes occurring during childhood (Rogoff et al., 2019; Ruck et al., 2019). Because stage theories of development are presented as universal, the theories make implicit assumptions about the nature of childhood itself as universal and appear to conceptualize development as a wholly internal and largely pre-determined process.

When critiqued through the lens of the intersectional childhood framework, staged theories appear to lack the flexibility to acknowledge and examine children’s racialized and gendered experiences of their development. For example, according to Rogoff and colleagues (2019), criticisms about Piaget’s developmental theories surfaced through cross-cultural studies which “indicated that Piaget’s constructs (‘having’ object permanence or concrete operational thinking, for example) appeared at quite different ages in different cultural communities, and even in the same individual, depending on the task context” (Rogoff et. al, 2019, p. 7). Rogoff and colleagues (2019) argue that these criticisms point to the importance of viewing the social and cultural context within which each child is embedded as integral to understanding children’s experiences of their development.

**Ecological and Sociocultural Theories of Children’s Development**

Positioning the social and cultural context as integral to understanding development is a key premise of ecological and sociocultural theories of development, which first blossomed in the 1970’s. Prominent theories such as Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory of Development (1978) and Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory of Development (1980) proposed that development was a linear process, but unlike stage theories, assumed that children experience differentiated developmental trajectories contingent upon the ecological, social and cultural environment in which they were embedded.
**Ecological model.** Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model of child development proposes that children’s experiences, perspectives, feelings, interests and beliefs are shaped by and shape the social context in which they live (1977). Importantly, the ecological model suggests a reciprocal process, whereby children play an active role in shaping the context in which they live and are also shaped by their experiences and interactions within different contexts and environments. This construction of children’s development emphasizes that development is a social, relational process, facilitated by interaction within a social and environmental context (Schofield, 2005).

The ecological model suggests that children are a part of many social structures and spaces that interact with and influence each other. The model illustrates how children’s experiences of and opportunities for participation differ depending on the social context and the child’s social position within that context. The ecological model is helpful in identifying where there may be barriers to children’s participation, and where children may experience competing narratives about their role and their own agency within a given context. For example, a child may feel that they have agency within a family context because they have some responsibility for younger children. However, a child welfare caseworker may view the child’s agency within the family context as a sign that the child is being neglected or forced to have too many adult-like responsibilities. Similar to Bronfenbrenner’s model, Vygotsky’s sociocultural model of development emphasizes the role of social spaces in development but focuses on the relational-space between children and adults as being of particular importance for understanding development.

**Zone of Proximal Development.** Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development suggests that children develop competencies and learning about their world through support from adults
(1980). As children become more competent in an area of knowledge or action, adults can gradually lessen their support. The theory posits that children, including young children, can learn and become competent in complex topics, with the help of supportive adults. Similar to the social ecological model, this theory describes development as a relational and social process. However, Vygotsky places emphasis on the role of adult supporters in providing structure to facilitate development.

This concept, termed “scaffolding” in Education literature, appears to suggest a particular kind of relationship between adults and children, one which recognizes the importance of support for children by adults but also recognizes the importance of adults’ consideration for and respecting of children’s capacities (Thomas, 2000). In relation to children’s participation, Vygotsky’s model implies that the quality of a relationship between an adult and child can be measured by the degree to which the child has a sense of empowered autonomy, whereby they feel confident that they are trusted and seen as capable by an adult, while not losing the security of being able to ask for and receive support when they need it. In addition, the model seems to suggest that the process of participation itself is structured through relationship and integral to healthy development for children.

**Developmental Theories and Children’s Participation**

In social work and other related fields, such as education, learning about development as it relates to practice is often a major aspect of professional training. Information about children’s development is presented as being a central tool for assessment, engagement and intervention practices. Age and stage developmental milestones are reproduced in charts and other assessment tools for social workers, educators, doctors and others to use in developing interventions for children (Smith, 2002; Willingham, 2008; Woodhead, 1999). See earlier in this chapter for more
about United States social work practice standards related to knowledge about children’s
development.

The phrase "developmentally appropriate" is often used to signal a program or practice
which has been designed specifically for children at specific stages/ages of their development
(Willingham, 2008). As Woodhead (1999) points out, the use of this term indicates how much
notions about children’s development and their capacities or lack of capacity are embedded
within a staged, age-based perspective.

Woodhead (2006) argues that competing theories of development (i.e. stage theory vs.
sociocultural theory) appear to have different impacts on the way that children’s participation
rights may be realized. For example, he suggests that a caseworker who holds a traditional stage
theory perspective regarding development may emphasize assessing children’s competency as a
prerequisite to participation (Woodhead, 2006). Measurement of competency, from this
perspective, would entail determining if the child has met developmental stages relevant for their
age. In many ways, this description reflects standard practice in regards to paying attention to
“developmental appropriateness” and emphasizing the age of the child as a factor in determining
whether they will be invited to participate.

Woodhead’s (1999) critiques of a staged developmental perspective are echoed by other
researchers (see Smith, 2002 and Winter, 2011) in the area of child welfare who suggest that a
staged perspective may obfuscate children’s capacities and make it more difficult for workers to
engage and effectively communicate with children. For example, findings from Handley &
Doyle’s (2014) survey of 70 child protection workers in England indicated that workers felt
comfortable collecting information about children’s wishes and feelings. However, many felt
they lacked training to communicate and work directly with children. Notably most of the
workers in Handley and Doyle’s 2014 study indicated they had training on children's development but it was primarily from a Piagetian (cognitive) perspective and very few had had any training in Vygotsky's work with social-cultural development.

**Child Welfare Context.** Taylor (2004) suggests that although staged theories of development may have some utility for child welfare professionals in assessment and identifying children who may benefit from additional supports, if they are used uncritically they run the risk of devaluing and underestimating children’s abilities, especially because the cultural and social context wherein development occurs is missing. More specifically, Taylor (2004) argues that the staged perspective is a simplification of children's realities which can be harmful when used as "prescriptions" or when they are used to define "normal" behavior.

In the context of child welfare, this prescriptive approach may be potentially harmful as the intervention may not correspond to what a particular child might actually want or need. In addition, Taylor (2004) suggests that if children are viewed, as staged theory suggests, as “incomplete beings”, and are not perceived as competent to understand complex and difficult situations, then "they are talked about not to…children are not trusted and consulted (p. 230)". Taylor (2004) implies that the staged perspective may lead practitioners to believe that they do not need to talk with or get to know a child, but that they can identify what the child needs based on broad understandings about childhood and taken for granted assumptions about the universality of children's development. When viewing this concern through an intersectional childhood framework, it could also be suggested that practitioners’ views of a child’s development as “normal” or “abnormal” may be impacted by internal and external racial and gender biases towards children based on their social identities. And in this way, adult
assessments of children’s capacity to participate as well as how they choose to engage with a child may be impacted by racialized and gendered biases both at the individual and social level.

**Critiquing Competency.** Smith (2002) critiques the deeply entrenched assumptions about children’s competencies being linked to their age by citing a number of studies which have indicated that even young children have the capacity of understanding their experiences and can express their points of view. For example, Winter’s (2009) study about perspectives of young children (aged 4-7) in the UK involved in child welfare found that young children in her study were capable of expressing their views. Smith (2002) asserts that the extent to which children can participate depends on their capability but also on adults’ perceptions of their capabilities and the extent to which adults support their participation. Smith (2002) describes an example from her research about children’s participation in child protection hearings. Her findings suggest that some children may need adult support to think through the different choices offered in a custody or child protection situation, in order to help a child make an informed decision about what they would like to request from the judge. However, she noted that some children had already done this on their own. In short, Smith (2002) suggests that participatory practices with children should start from where the children are and build from there.

**Shifting to a Sociocultural Developmental Model**

There are other ways to think about children’s development that may address concerns raised by using a staged perspective and broaden child welfare practitioners’ perspectives about children’s capacities. For example, modern developmental psychology, such as promoted by Rogoff (see Rogoff et al., 2019) and Ruck (see Ruck et al., 2018), advances understanding of children’s development by acknowledging the sociocultural context within which development
occurs and that developmental processes are unique for each individual. For example, Rogoff and colleagues (2018) suggest that:

Children’s development occurs within and through their everyday experiences, which, for all children everywhere, are cultural experiences [and] that we can…view child development as a process of growth in ways of participating in the endeavors of their communities, in a process of transformation of participation. (p. 5)

Importantly, these modern perspectives about children’s development conceptualize development as a continuous process, which is ongoing throughout a person’s life (Rogoff et al., 2019). They also emphasize the importance of the centering an individual’s perspective about their life and their experiences in order to understand how cognitive, moral and social development and re-development occur (Rogoff et al., 2019; Ruck et al., 2018).

Sociocultural perspectives situate childhood and children within a social and cultural context, where each child’s experience of their own childhood is not determined or universal. These modern developmental perspectives appear to be strengthened by intersectional theories of childhood, as together these perspectives may enhance understanding of how racialized and gendered social and cultural contexts are a part of children’s lives and their development. In addition, sociocultural perspectives about children’s development suggest that participation is integral to development and that, as suggested by classical developmental theorists, such as Vygotsky, adults’ roles as supporters and facilitators of children’s participation is critical for supporting healthy developmental processes and for enhancing children’s overall well-being. The intersectional childhood framework as well as the sociocultural perspective of development appear to be foundational to the children’s rights perspective, which asserts that not only is participation vital to children’s development but that it is their right the be nurtured and
supported (Ruck et al., 2018). The next section will explore a children’s rights perspective, especially as it relates to children’s participation.

**Children’s Rights Perspective**

“The value of rights for children…lies in their potential to remedy powerlessness. From an empowerment perspective, rights have value because they recognize and counter the effects of disempowerment” (Federle, 2000, p. 438). As Federle suggests, a children’s rights framework is often grounded in an empowerment perspective, which centralizes children’s views and implies a belief that children are capable of taking an active role in change making and advocacy for themselves and others. Most often seen as a social work practice theory, empowerment theory posits that individuals are capable of gaining control over their own lives and using their strengths to solve problems that they may face, with support and guidance from a caseworker, friend or family member (Payne, 2011). The support person is charged not only with strengthening an individual's sense of confidence in using power to make positive changes in their lives, but also with assisting the individual in addressing barriers they may face to exercising their power, whether these be social, cultural, institutional or structural (Payne, 2011).

This empowerment rights perspective seems to be directly linked to sociocultural developmental models and the intersectional childhood framework because of the emphasis on centralizing the viewpoint of the child, recognizing how the child, their childhood and their development is embedded within, and also a part of the cultural and social context. Taken together these perspectives suggest that children are simultaneously agents in their own lives, and are also dependent on adults for support in practicing their agency. Relatedly, children’s rights legal scholars, such as Michael Freeman, problematize children’s lack of social and political power and suggest that children not only have a right to act, advocate and work for
social change, but they are capable of doing so (Freeman, 2016). The children’s rights framework, supported by the intersectional childhood and sociocultural developmental perspectives, imply that children have agency in shaping and re-shaping their lives and communities and that it is adults’ responsibility to respect children, support them in this process, and work towards realizing children’s human rights.

**Children’s Conceptualizations of their Rights**

Studies exploring children’s own conceptualizations of their rights suggest that their experiences of and perceptions about their rights (in terms of whether they feel their rights are respected) impact their well-being and that children view protection, provision, and participation rights as interconnected. For example, in their review of the literature about children’s perceptions of their rights and their well-being, Ruck, Petersen-Badali and Helwig (2013) assert that children perceive of both the right to be involved in decision making and the right to be safe and cared for as being important for them and that these rights appear to be linked to their perceptions about their own well-being. In a study involving interviews with 100 young people (10-18) who had experienced maltreatment, Petersen-Badali, Ruck and Bone (2008) found that children who had experienced maltreatment most often identified the right to safety and the right to respect and to be listened to as important to them. Petersen-Badali et al.’s (2008) study indicated that children who had experienced maltreatment may identify rights in terms of salience and areas where they feel their rights had been violated. These findings have important implications for practice with children who may have experienced maltreatment or other potentially traumatic situations.

In addition, children’s conceptualizations of and experiences of rights, or lack thereof, appear to be directly connected to their psychological well-being (Ruck et al., 2014). For
example, in an Australian study exploring children’s own conceptions of their well-being, involving interviews with 123, 8-15 year olds, Fattore, Mason and Watson (2008) found that children identify safety and security as well agency and a positive sense of self as components of their well-being. Children described their agency as relational, emphasizing that they viewed having a sense of control over their own lives as important for them, but recognize that this agency was supported by adults in their lives who offered security and support as they navigated their agency.

Relatedly, Lloyd and Emerson’s (2016) recent study, which surveyed 3,800 10-11 year olds in Northern Ireland schools, found a positive and significant correlational relationship ($r = 0.38$, $n = 3533$, $p < 0.001$, p. 11) between children’s perceptions of their well-being and their perceptions of whether they felt their participation rights were respected. In addition, they found that the social/relational domain of well-being was most strongly positively correlated with children’s perceptions that their participation rights were respected ($r = 0.41$, $n = 3533$, $p < 0.05$, p. 13; Lloyd & Emerson, 2016). According to Lloyd and Emerson (2016) their findings suggest that children’s well-being is impacted by “…the ways in which children’s perceptions of social relations/autonomy and adult support for their participation intersect…” (p.15). In other words, their findings indicate that children’s perceptions of their own relational autonomy and adult support for children’s participation rights may be directly connected to children’s perceptions about their own well-being (Lloyd & Emerson, 2016).

**Models for Children’s Participation in Decision-Making**

Within the context of children’s rights and childhood studies, a number of models for children’s participation have been developed, such as Hart’s (1997) “ladder of participation” and Herbots and Put’s (2015) “participation disk”. Although many of these models are largely
theoretical, there are a few that have been developed for use in practice settings (either at the organizational or individual level). As suggested earlier, there is a gap between theoretical understandings of participation and the practical implementation of participation rights for children, especially within a child welfare context. Two models in particular have attempted to address this gap between theory and practice, Shier’s (2001) “pathways to participation” and Lundy’s (2007) “space, voice, audience and influence” model. Given their potential utility for implementing children’s participation rights in a real world context, these models will be explored in this section, with special attention paid to how these models might be useful in child welfare practice.

Both Shier’s (2001) and Lundy’s (2007) models are rights based and affirming; directly corresponding to children’s participation rights principles as described in the UNCRC. Both models focus on children’s rights to participate in decision-making. Both models are consistent with a socio-cultural perspective of children’s development, especially Shier’s model, which emphasizes the adult role as a supporter of children’s participation. Also, both models reflect a social construction of childhood framework, which views childhood as diverse and children as active agents in their own lives. However, neither model specifically incorporates an intersectional childhood perspective. In this section, each model will be briefly described and then explored for their utility in supporting children’s participation in child welfare care and safety planning.

**Shier’s “Pathways to Participation”**. As Figure 1 illustrates, Shier’s (2001) model of children’s participation in decision-making is structured around 5 levels of participation which build from passive activities, such as “children are listened to” to active participation, such as “children share power and responsibility for decision making” (p. 111). Each level of
participation includes reflective questions organized as “openings, opportunities and obligations”. These reflective questions relate to adult support, both at the individual and organizational levels, for children’s participation. For example, “openings” are a reflection of organizational readiness to facilitate children’s participation, “opportunities” are a reflection of organizational practices related to facilitating children’s participation, and “obligations” reflect policy standards related to facilitating children’s participation. Shier’s “Pathways” model also includes a benchmark indicating attainment of minimum standards for children’s participation, specific to article 12 of the UNCRC.
Figure 1

Shier’s Children’s Participation Model

Levels of participation

5. Children share power and responsibility for decision-making.

Are you ready to share some of your adult power with children?

Is there a procedure that enables children and adults to share power and responsibility for decisions?

Is it a policy requirement that children and adults share power and responsibility for decisions?

4. Children are involved in decision-making processes.

Are you ready to let children join in your decision-making processes?

Is there a procedure that enables children to join in decision-making processes?

Is it a policy requirement that children must be involved in decision-making processes?

3. Children’s views are taken into account.

Are you ready to take children’s views into account?

Does your decision-making process enable you to take children’s views into account?

Is it a policy requirement that children’s views must be given due weight in decision-making?

2. Children are supported in expressing their views.

Are you ready to support children in expressing their views?

Do you have a range of ideas and activities to help children express their views?

Is it a policy requirement that children must be supported in expressing their views?

1. Children are listened to.

START HERE

Are you ready to listen to children?

Do you work in a way that enables you to listen to children?

Is it a policy requirement that children must be listened to?

Shier’s (2001) model “Pathways to Participation” was developed primarily for organizations to use in assessing the degree that their programming and organization supports children’s participation rights as described by article 12. Specifically, “Pathways” was designed to be a catalyst for discussion about what children’s participation in decision-making looks like within an organization. It was also developed to be used by organizations to identify where there are opportunities for youth to have a greater degree of voice and also to make explicit where the organization may have challenges enabling children’s participation.

Shier’s (2001) model supports a perspective of children’s participation which focuses on the process of participation and having a clearly identified purpose/goal for participation. Shier’s model also appears to emphasize the relational aspects of participation and conceptualizes participation as being a process of interaction between children and adults. These aspects for Shier’s model appear to be consistent with a socio-cultural developmental perspective suggesting that adult support is necessary for children to authentically participate.

Shier’s (2001) model includes many practical and reflective questions for practitioners to consider when assessing how children’s voices are heard and taken seriously in organizational decision-making. The inclusion of these reflective questions create a model that is structured to be applied in a real world setting and it is easy to see how an organization or individuals could use the model to access how well they support children’s participation. As Sinclair (2004) notes, Shier's (2001) model may be particularly useful in helping child welfare social workers assess the purpose of participation for children and identify points for change in order to achieve participation. The model has potentially high utility for practitioners in that it illustrates a variety of ways in which children can participate, depending on the situation and context, and it provides
specific questions for providers to use in order to gain a better picture of the current participatory practices within their organization and identify points for change.

**Critique of “Pathways for Participation”**. Although the model may prove useful for assessment purposes and serve as a catalyst for organizational discussions about children’s participation, the linear design has been critiqued because it implies that some forms of participation may be more desirable than others (Herbots & Put, 2015). In addition, participation rights scholars have suggested that the model may be overly complicated and not child friendly (Kennan et al., 2018). The model appears to have been developed for adults to use when discussing children’s participation, but not necessarily for children and adults to use together in discussing children’s participation. These factors may make the model less useful for children and adults to use together in assessing participation and may impose a particular view of participation which may not be suited to the particular context or the child’s preferences. Further, Shier offered a critique of his own model, where he suggested that his model is overly narrow because it was not built from an assumption that children have their own agentic power as capable, as competent, as advocates and leaders (Shier, 2009). He suggested that future work in this area start from a position of acknowledging children’s own agency and then build a model for participation from this position (Shier, 2009).

In addition, although the pathways model is described as a model for “children’s participation” the scope is limited to defining participation as it relates to article 12 in the UNCRC in focusing on children having a voice, having their voices heard and having the voices taken seriously by adults. This is because Shier’s model was developed to support organizations in realizing their obligations under article 12 of the UNCRC. However, this means that many other elements found in the convention, which may be necessary for children’s authentic
participation such as children’s right to information (article 13) are not included in Shier’s model. The next section will explore Lundy’s (2007) model of children’s participation, which appears to address these some of these critiques in using a non-linear, non-hierarchical design and including elements of children’s participation that move beyond “voice”.

**Lundy’s “Space, Voice, Audience and Influence”**. Lundy’s (2007) model “space, voice, audience and influence”, was developed as a framework for policy makers and educators to use in considering how to implement UNCRC’s participation principles within a classroom setting in the UK (See also, Kennan et al., 2018 and McCafferty, 2017). The Lundy model (2007) appears to conceptualize children’s participation as an almost curvilinear process, involving a specific, yet iterative chronology and suggesting a process oriented approach to enacting participatory principles. The process-oriented model theorizes four stages or elements that practitioners could consider when implementing children’s participation rights in practice.

Similar to Shier’s model, Lundy’s model is centered around participation rights as defined in the UNCRC article 12. However, Lundy’s model expressly embeds this conceptualization of participation within the larger UNCRC framework incorporating other articles, such as article 2, the right to non-discrimination. In addition, Lundy structures the model around factors that she suggests are necessary for meaningful implementation of article 12. For example, Lundy centers her model around two main rights concepts found in article 12, the “right to express a view” and the “right to have views given due weight”. Each of these concepts is then linked to two factors for implementation. For example, in the model, the concept of “right to express a view” is realized through “space” and “voice”, whereas the concept of “right to have views given due weight” is realized through “audience” and “influence”. A copy of Lundy’s model, simplified by Kennan and colleagues (2018) appears below as Figure 2.
The following section will describe each factor in Lundy’s model and then explore how this model could be useful in bridging the gap between theory and practice in terms of children’s participation.

**Space.** According to Lundy (2007), “Space” is the first step towards making children’s participation possible. In the model, space is a physical, social, emotional and/or intellectual place where children have an opportunity to express a view. Lundy asserts that article 12 obligates adults to proactively consider how to make space for children to share their views. She suggests that children should be included in setting the parameters for participation, they should be asked about what issues matter to them, how they might like to participate, and what level of participation they might like to have. She also asserts that consistent with article 19 of the
UNCRC, children have a right to a safe space to participate, which means considering how to ensure children feel safe in sharing their views without fear of reprisal. Finally, Lundy describes proactively considering how to make spaces inclusive for all children, such as children who have a disability or children who are less able to express themselves verbally.

**Voice.** “Voice” refers to children being supported in expressing their views. This moves beyond considering space for expression into considering how to make space for children to express their views. Importantly, “voice” is conceptualized as not simply verbal expression but including artistic, written and physical expression as well. Voice indicates that practitioners consider practical tools and strategies for supporting children in making their voices heard, such as child-friendly forms and worksheets (Kennan et al, 2018).

**Audience.** “Audience” refers to the child’s view being listened to. Audience is a factor related to implementing children’s rights to have their voice heard and taken seriously. In order for children to be able to participate, adults have to be ready and willing to listen to what they have to say. In addition, children must have access to adults who have some decision-making authority over their lives. This means family members and practitioners but also policy makers and organizational leaders.

**Influence.** “Influence” refers to children’s views being acted upon, as appropriate. Children have to know that their voice matters and that their voice has some influence on the outcome related to their life. Lundy describes how considering influence is vital to ensuring that children feel they are meaningfully and authentically included in decision-making about their life. She states that:

The challenge is to find ways of ensuring that adults not only listen to children but that they take children’s views seriously. While this cannot be universally guaranteed, one
incentive/safeguard is to ensure that children are told how their views were taken into account. Often children are asked for their views and then not told what became of them; that is, whether they had any influence or not. (Lundy, 2007, p.938)

Lundy’s model could be used as a framework for understanding how to implement children’s participation rights in a real world setting. Lundy suggests that each element of her model builds on the other and is interrelated, meaning that a practitioner should consider the elements sequentially to develop participatory practice approaches which are aligned with the UNCRC. The model may be useful for practitioners in thinking through each element of participation in their interactions with children and to target practice change efforts towards specific elements that may encourage children’s participation.

The Lundy (2007) model was highly influential in that it was incorporated into Ireland’s national policies related to young people’s participation in decision-making in 2015 (Kennan et al., 2019). Although Lundy intended to bridge the gap between theory and practice in developing her model, as Kennan et al (2019) pointed out, the model is still largely discussed in theoretical terms, and there is a lack of examples of how to utilize the model in practice. However, of particular relevance for the current study, Kennan et al. (2018) utilized Lundy’s model in assessing child welfare practitioners’ use of participatory approaches in their work with children. Kennan et al.’s (2018) findings will be discussed in the background section of this chapter.

Considering Shier and Lundy’s Models of Children’s Participation from an Intersectional Childhood Framework

In considering Shier’s model through an intersectional childhood framework, there is a lack of direct reflection on how racialized and gendered bias may influence an individual’s or organization’s readiness to “listen to children”. Likewise, although Lundy’s model (2007) does
include a description of the importance of non-discrimination and describes inclusivity in terms of disability, there is a lack of specific mention of racialized and gendered biases that impact a child’s experience of their participation. Shier (2001) and Lundy (2007) both describe the tendency within organizations and communities seeking to engage children to tokenize children’s voices, and given that participation happens within a racialized and gendered social context, it seems necessary and appropriate to consider how some children’s voices are silenced or are consistently left out of discussions and decision-making at all social levels.

Although there are critiques of both models, they are designed to have utility for practitioners seeking to assess and expand their support for participatory approaches with children and also to deepen reflective practice. They appear to be examples of models that attempt to bridge the gap between the theory of children’s participation and the implementation of children’s participation. More specifically, the models link the “why” of children’s participation with the “what”. Both models are embedded within a strong theoretical foundation of children’s rights and socio-cultural developmental principles, which builds a case for the “why” of children’s participation. Also, they provide a roadmap for practitioners to reflect and consider the “what” of children’s participation within their practice context. As indicated above, however, although Shier’s and Lundy’s models were developed from a similar theoretical perspective, they appear to indicate a different perspective on how to enable children’s participation in practice. For example, Lundy’s model suggests that enabling participation requires starting where the child is and what they consider to be meaningful participation, whereas, Shier suggests that enabling participation starts with practitioner reflection on how they work with children.
Assessing Shier’s and Lundy’s Impact. Neither of these models have been tested for validity however they both have been strongly influential in research or policy arenas. For example, Shier’s model has been cited over 1600 times since publication in 2001, especially by researchers studying youth and children’s civic engagement and participation, which suggests that his model has considerable weight. Lundy’s model also has been highly cited, over 1000 times since publication in 2007, especially by education researchers in the UK. As indicated above, recently child welfare researchers and practitioners have sought to adopt her model for the child welfare context (see Kennan et al., 2019) and her model has been adopted by Ireland to guide their national policy on children’s participation.

The next section will synthesize research literature about what children’s participation looks like in child welfare practice and what challenges exist for children and practitioners in enabling participation with the child welfare context. Specifically, this section will outline the state of the field and describe the context of empirical studies in the area of children’s participation in child welfare. Following this, will be an exploration of findings from the literature with a focus on: 1) the value of participation for children and caseworkers, 2) what children’s participation looks like in practice from the perspective of children and caseworkers and, 3) barriers and challenges to implementation of participatory approaches within a child welfare context.

Section II: Empirical Background for Children’s Participation in Child Welfare

Children’s Participation in Child Welfare

This study draws on a robust and growing research literature about children’s participation in child welfare, as well as children’s and caseworker’s experiences and perceptions of the child welfare system and conceptualizations of children’s rights and childhood itself. Two
recent systematic literature reviews, Biljeveld et al. (2015) and Kennan et al. (2018), revealed that much of the research about children’s participation in child welfare has been undertaken to understand barriers and challenges to adopting participatory practices within child welfare systems and to evaluate formalized processes (such as family planning meetings) meant to enhance children’s participation (Biljiveld et al., 2015; Kennan et al., 2018). In addition, there has been an emerging literature attending to participatory approaches that focuses less on the formal context of participation (i.e. planning meetings) and more on the process of participation itself from the perspectives of caseworkers and youth. For example, there is a small group of researchers who have been studying how caseworkers communicate with children (especially young children) and evaluating how pedagogical approaches (such as using play, art activities, and additional child-centered techniques) may enhance efforts to increase participatory opportunities for youth as well as to connect caseworkers and youth (Husby et al., 2018; Morrison et al., 2019; Ruch, 2014; Ruch, et al., 2017; Winter, 2010).

In addition, there are a few examples of studies that attempt to put children’s participation into practice through utilizing action research methods to produce materials or create reflective spaces for caseworkers to adopt participatory approaches with children and youth. For example, Fern’s (2012a, 2012b, 2014) study which involved reflective meetings with caseworkers guided by feedback from youth in care and Van Bijleveld and colleagues’, (2020) study which collaborated with children in care to develop resources for children to use in order to enhance their participation during child protection meetings with workers and other adults. Related to the research about children’s participation, there has also been an expansion of literature about caseworker and children’s perceptions about children’s rights (Lloyd & Emerson,
Characteristics of the Field. Most of studies about children’s participation in child welfare systems have been conducted in a European context, particularly in the UK, Eastern Europe, Scandinavia and Nordic regions (i.e., Arbeiter & Toros, 2017; Bell, 2012; Buckley, 2011; Cossar et al., 2014; Dillon, 2016; Heimer, 2018; Fern, 2014; Morrison et al., 2019). There are a handful of studies conducted outside of Europe, such as in Australia, US, Canada, and Ghana (Abdullah et al., 2018; Bessell, 2011; Block et al., 2010; Damiani et al., 2018; Križ & Roundtree-Swain, 2017; Nybell, 2013; Peterson-Badali et al., 2008).

The majority of studies in this area have been undertaken by social work scholars and have utilized qualitative methods, specifically semi-structured interviewing, ethnographic observations and case studies to explore and understand children’s participation in child welfare processes (Abdullah et al., 2018; Bell, 2012; Buckley, 2011; Cossar et al., 2016; Dillon, 2016; Ferguson, 2017; Fern, 2012; Handley & Doyle, 2014; Healy & Darington, 2009; Husby et al., 2018; McLeod, 2006; Morrison et al., 2019; Pölkki et al., 2012; Roesch-Marsh et al., 2017; Ruch et al., 2017; Toros et al., 2013; Vis et al., 2012; Winter, 2010). Additionally, outside of social work, there has been relevant research from developmental psychology (Peterson-Badali, et al., 2008), education (Konstantoni, 2013; Mateos et al., 2016), applied social sciences or sociology (Heimer et al., 2018; Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Križ & Skivenes, 2015), law (Archard & Skivenes, 2009), philosophy (Rap, 2019) and translational sciences (Van Biljeveld et al., 2019).

In addition to a plethora of qualitative studies, there have also been a number of quantitative survey-based and mixed methods studies researching children’s participation that have been undertaken within the child welfare context specifically (Berrick et al., 2015; Sanders 2017; Peterson-Badali et al., 2008; Van Bijleveld, 2015) and childhood itself (Jensen et al., 2019).
& Mace, 2006; Thomas & O’Kane, 1999; Woodman et al., 2018) and with child welfare involved children and youth in related contexts such as dependency court (Block et al., 2010).

**Research Study Population Characteristics.** Much of the research on children’s participation in child welfare has samples which exclusively include children and youth who have experience with “out of home care” (including foster care, group homes, residential care, kinship care, and independent living programs) and/or child protection services (e.g. Bell, 2012; Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Thomas & O’Kane, 1999). There is also a growing body of research which includes both youth and caseworkers as participants (Arbeiter & Toros, 2017; Fern, 2014; McLeod, 2007; Roesch-Marsh, 2017; Van Bijleveld, et al., 2015; Van Bijleveld, et al., 2020; Winter, 2009). As well as a number of studies about children’s participation in child welfare practice that include caseworker participants or other adults, such as family members or administrators, but do not directly include youth (e.g. Abdullah et al., 2018; Archard, & Skivenes, 2009; Handley, & Doyle, 2014; Vis et al., 2012; Woodman et al., 2018).

**Methodological Characteristics.** Qualitative studies about children’s participation utilizing interviewing methods typically report sample sizes of between 4 and 25 youth participants (e.g., Husby et al., 2018; Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Munro, 2001) and slightly more caseworker participants, ranging from 8 to 50 (eg., Archard & Skivenes, 2009; Healy & Darlington, 2009; Rap, 2019; Van Bijleveld, et al., 2015) whereas qualitative studies utilizing other methods (such as case study and ethnography) tend to have much larger samples or youth participants ranging from 30 to 80 (Heimer, 2018; Morrison et al., 2019; Roesch-Marsh et al., 2017). In addition, there are a handful of studies utilizing action research qualitative methods which include a much smaller number of youth and caseworker participants (between 6 and 12) but collect data over a longer period of time utilizing multiple tools to generate data, such as
group discussions, workshop activities as well as interviews (Fern, 2012a, 2012b, 2014; Ruch, 2014; Van Bijleveld et al., 2019; Van Bijleveld, et al., 2020).

There are outliers which have unusually large number of participants compared with other studies in the field, such as Petersen-Badali and colleagues’ (2008) study involving semi-structured interviews with 100, 10-to-18-year-old children and youth or Križ and Skivenes’s (2015) cross-national study involving qualitative interviews with 91 caseworkers in 4 countries. In addition, there are a handful of examples of more large scale mixed methods studies, such as Thomas and O’Kane’s (1999) mixed methods study where 225 children and youth in out of home care were surveyed and 45 young people interviewed about their experiences with care planning. As well as a few examples of large scale quantitative research, primarily survey based. For example, Berrick et al. (2015) surveyed 775 child protection caseworkers across four countries, Woodman et al. (2018) surveyed 442 workers in the US, and Beal et al. (2019) conducted structured survey interviews with 151, 16 to 22-year-old youth and young adults who were receiving out of home care in the US (see also, Block et al., 2010).

**Intersectional Critique of Demographic Reporting.** Notably, many of the studies in this area report limited participant demographics. For example, a number of studies report no demographic data about the research participants (Archard, & Skivenes, 2009; Nybell, 2013; O’Reilly & Dolan, 2016, Rap, 2019; Winter, 2009). The reasons for not reporting any demographic information about participants are unclear. The studies involve both caseworker participants as well as youth and some have relatively large sample sizes (e.g. Archard and Skivenes’ 2009, qualitative study included 53 caseworker participants). In addition, there are many studies that report very limited demographic information such as only report youth participants’ ages but do not report gender, race, ethnicity, or disability (i.e., Fern, 2014; Heimer
et al., 2017; Morrison et al., 2019; Pölkki et al., 2012; Winter, 2009). Studies with exclusively caseworkers generally report more demographic information than youth centered studies, but these too typically exclude race and ethnicity (e.g., Abdullah et al., 2018; Sanders & Mace, 2006; Toros et al., 2013; van Bijleveld, et al., 2019; Vis et al., 2012).

Many of the studies that report no or very limited demographic data have large sample sizes so it is unclear why information about participants is left out; it would be hard to argue that including more demographic information could risk breaching participant anonymity. When looking at these demographic omissions from an intersectional childhood perspective, it could indicate a general lack of awareness in the field about how social identity may play a role in facilitating or hindering children’s opportunities to participate due to internalized and structural biases as well as a lack of attention to the impacts of structural racism. Unfortunately, whether intentional or not, the omissions may have the effect of devaluing the social identities of the children, youth and caseworker participants and also may obfuscate the influence of racial and other internalized biases on opportunities for children to participate. In addition, sometimes a lack of demographic information related to credentials, such as length of work experience for caseworkers or placement setting for youth makes it difficult to assess the evidence presented in the studies, because it makes it less clear what level of experience the participants may have with the topic under study.

Importantly, not all studies in this area remain silent about participant’s social identities. There are many examples of studies that describe children and youth’s gender, race and ethnicity. However, there tends to be a lack of racial diversity, with the majority of these studies having a primarily White or exclusively White sample of children and youth (Bell, 2012; Holland & O’Neill, 2006; Husby et al., 2018; Jobe & Gorin, 2013; McLeod, 2007; Muench et
al., 2017). Notably, there is only one study, Fylkesnes et al., (2018), which expressly analyzes the experiences of ethnic minority youth refugees or migrants with having their voice heard in the welfare system.

In addition to race, ethnicity and age there are other social identity categories that are less often described but seem to be highly relevant to understanding children’s participation in child welfare. For example, there are only two examples in the literature that described participants’ gender in non-binary terms. Damiani-Taraba et al. (2018) was not a traditional research study, but more of a report on a youth-led effort to increase children’s collective and individual participation in child welfare processes and the other Woodman et al. (2018) was a large scale survey of Australian child welfare workers. Both studies included some options for participants to indicate their gender beyond the binary (i.e. man/woman). However, neither highlighted how non-binary gender identity bias may impact the participatory process for children and caseworkers.

Information about disability status is only included in a few studies that focus on children’s participation in child welfare (Bell, 2012; Cossar et al., 2014; Holland & O’Neill, 2006) Disability status may have a particularly strong influence on opportunities for children to participate, especially when a child’s disability may be viewed as limiting their capacity for speech (McNeilly et al., 2015). Stryker (2013) suggests that worker’s perceptions of a child’s disability may influence their views of the capacity of the child they are working with. For example, a caseworker may be less likely to engage directly with a non-verbal child because they may not have training or experience working with children who are non-verbal or may perceive that the child is not able to share their views or understand complex situations.
McNeilly and colleagues’ (2015) study explored disabled children’s collective and individual participation in social and health care decision-making. Although not specific to child welfare, the study involved a number of young people with experience of the Irish child welfare system. McNeilly et al.’s (2015) mixed methods study involved 18 disabled children and young people, 77 parents and 90 professionals in social care and health care positions working directly with children. The findings indicated that there is a lack of professional training and institutional support for enabling participation of children who have a disability. More about McNeilly et al.’s (2015) findings will be explored later in this section.

As indicated in this overview of the context for the literature base about children’s participation, the research field is growing at an exciting rate and there appears to be international commitment to studying children’s participation. However, the apparent lack of concern for social identity factors as they relate to children’s participation is alarming and should be addressed in order to build a more rigorous, inclusive and ethically aware knowledge base about children’s participation. In addition, it is notable that only a handful of studies about children’s participation in child welfare have been conducted in the US. Three of these are cross-national comparative studies which focused on exploring differences in caseworkers’ perceptions of participation relative to their countries child welfare orientation (Berrick et al., 2015; Križ & Skivenes, 2015; Nybom, 2005). The other four include two qualitative studies each with 5 to 6 former foster youth who were university students (Križ & Roundtree-Swain, 2017; Nybell, 2013), one study which directly involved 16 to 22-year-old youth who had experience with the child welfare system (Beal et al., 2019) and one study that used structured interviewing to access the experiences of 10 to 17-year-old’s knowledge and attitudes toward dependency court hearings, which was related to their participation (Block et al., 2010). Of these studies, only one
was conducted by a social work researcher, with the others coming from sociology or psychology. The general lack of engagement with the topic of children’s participation in child welfare in the US by academics could be a result of US policies, which do not generally promote children’s participation rights. Due to this, as noted by other US social work scholars (Libal et al., 2015; Scherrer, 2012) there appears to be a lack of awareness about children’s rights in general and also about the importance and value of children’s rights for supporting well-being and promoting safety.

**Grey Literature Relevant to Children’s Participation.** Beyond formal peer-reviewed research literature, but related to the policy and practice movement towards adopting participatory approaches with children in care, there have been a number of practical guides, manuals, toolkits and handbooks which aim to increase children’s participation and bolster relationships between caseworkers and children (i.e., Keenaghan & Redmond, 2016; Papworth et al., 2018; Willow, 2010; Wright et al., 2006). For example, TUSLA (Ireland’s national child and family agency) has adopted Lundy’s framework as a model for children’s participation and developed a number of tools and training materials for workers and administrators in support of their efforts to increase children’s participation agency wide (Keenaghan & Redmond, 2016). Another example, the *Children’s Participation Toolkit for Social Workers and Early Help Practitioners*, from the local government of East Sussex in England, is structured around the case process itself (moving from engagement, to assessment, planning and review; Papworth et al., 2018). The East Sussex toolkit includes many hands-on tools (such as worksheets, games and activity ideas) for caseworkers to use in order to enhance children’s participation at different stages throughout the care process. For example, using the “Three Houses” tool to support the
child’s participation in the assessment process by having a conversation about their worries, good things in their life and their wishes (Papworth et al., 2018).

Finally, there have been a few youth-led projects aiming to raise awareness about the importance of participation for youth in care and to share youth perspectives about meaningful engagement (Damiani-Taraba et al., 2018; Willis et al., 2003). For example, in the “Listen to Me Project” (Damiani-Taraba et al., 2018) the Brant Family and Children’s Services (FACS) in Ontario, Canada facilitated a project to have an opportunity for youth to share their perspective about care with workers (to improve the child’s experience of the care process). The project was led by two former youth in care and was used by the agency to understand what meaningful participation for youth might look like and why it is important to them.

Overview of Empirical Findings about Children’s Participation. Three major themes emerge from the empirical literature about children’s participation in child welfare: 1) that participation has instrumental and intrinsic value and promotes well-being and resilience among children and caseworkers, 2) that children and professionals report support for children’s participation but appear to have different views about participation itself, where professionals are more likely to have a more limited, instrumental view of participation, and 3) even in contexts where there is national legislation mandating and supporting children’s participation in decision making (such as the England, Ireland, Australia, Scotland, Finland, Norway), and efforts at local agency levels to promote children’s participation, there remains little evidence that children experience meaningful participation as a standard of practice while engaged in child welfare services and little evidence that workers have the tools, training and support they need in order to facilitate meaningful participation of children and youth.
Despite legislative support for children’s participation, children’s experiences of their participation in child welfare systems remains elusive in practice. This phenomenon represents a gap between policy and practice, which is reported in both high resource and under-resourced communities and appears to be present indiscriminate of a country’s orientation towards child welfare, be it a child protection orientation or a child well-being orientation (e.g., Bessell, 2011; Cossar et al., 2016; Damiani et al., 2018; Fern et al., 2014; Fylknese et al., 2018; Heimer et al., 2018; Horworth et al., 2012; Husby et al., 2018; Ruch et al., 2019; Sanders and Mace, 2006; van Biljervle et al., 2014; Van Biljevled et al., 2015). As Van Biljevled and colleagues (2019) and Winter et al. (2017) indicated, this gap between policy and practice could indicate that deeply embedded assumptions about children and youth, especially about their capacities, and adult hesitancies about the value of children’s participation may be underlying drivers for countries having difficulty making children’s participation a standard practice in their child welfare systems.

To add complexity to this, it is notable, that while there appears to be a gap between policy and practice and non-trivial system level and individual level barriers to children’s participation, some research indicates that workers are still able to find ways to build meaningful relationships with youth and to support youth participation and use of creative methods to assert their voice and influence decision-making outcomes (Ruch et al., 2017). However, the research suggests that generally workers who are using participatory approaches in their standard practice with children rely on their own monetary resources, off the clock time, and even initiate their own training in order to make children’s participation a priority for their practice (Ruch et al., 2017; Winter et al., 2019). Research in this area overwhelminingly reports that child welfare workers generally lack training and supports they feel they need to adopt participatory
approaches in their everyday practice. The following section will explore 1) the value of children’s participation for children and caseworkers, 2) children and caseworkers’ perceptions of and experiences with children’s participation and 3) challenges to realizing children’s participation rights in child welfare settings.

**Instrumental and Intrinsic Value of Children’s Participation**

Archard & Skivenes (2009) and Bessell (2011) identified two value orientations for children’s participation, intrinsic and instrumental. Instrumental value refers to tangible, practical benefits gained from children’s participation, whereas intrinsic value involves more intangible benefits, which are subjectively perceived by the child or caseworker (Archard & Skivenes, 2009; Bessell, 2011). Instrumental benefits include helping children feel safe and supporting workers in implementing appropriate interventions. Intrinsic benefits include enhanced subjective well-being and self-efficacy (both for the child and the worker), promoting the dignity of a child by allowing them to feel respected, heard and valued, and empowering children to stand up for what is important to them (Archard & Skivenes, 2009; Bessell, 2011). The intrinsic value of children’s participation seems to be a view that the right to participate in one’s own life is an ethical and moral entitlement for all human beings, including children. The following section will explore benefits of children’s participation for children and caseworkers, considering both its instrumental and intrinsic values.

**Instrumental Value.** The instrumental values of children’s participation are commonly seen in research indicating that children’s participation enhances the effectiveness of an intervention, increases the child’s buy-in for an intervention, or provides the worker with a method to gather more information from a child which could be relevant to developing an intervention (Cossar et al., 2016; Damiani et al., 2018; Heimer et al., 2017; Fern, 2014; Vis &
Thomas, 2012; Willis et al., 2003; Winter, 2010). For example, Archard & Skivenes (2009) found that the Norwegian/English caseworkers in their qualitative study (N=53) tended to describe the value of children’s participation as instrumental and were motivated to use participatory approaches with children because of these instrumental benefits. Specifically, caseworkers in their study viewed participation as important because they could more easily get a child’s support for a particular intervention approach, and they could get more information from the child. Fern’s (2014) action-research study with 15 Icelandic caseworkers and 10, 13-17-year-old youth similarly found that caseworkers felt more successful at meeting the needs of the children and their family when they listened to and valued children's perspectives. Specifically, the caseworkers in Fern’s (2014) study revealed that as they interacted more with young people through the study, they began to realize that the child’s perspective was vital to their success at developing appropriate and meaningful interventions. Relatedly, Fern’s (2012, 2014) findings indicated that when workers relied on reports from previous caseworkers or other adults about children, rather than getting to know the child themselves, practitioners risked mischaracterizing children and utilizing an intervention which did not seem to address the problems the child faced.

**Linking Children’s Participation with Protection.** Fern’s finding is echoed by Heimer and colleagues’ (2018) case study analysis of 40 Swedish child protection cases, which demonstrated that over the course of a child protection case, the problems that children faced were routinely reframed from problems having to do with parental responsibility and behaviors to problems with children's behaviors. In excluding children’s perspectives over the course of the case, workers tended to focus their interventions on improving children’s behaviors rather than addressing parental abuse and mistreatment of their children. They suggested that "who is being heard at different phases of the process appears to be of critical importance for both how the
problem is…defined and the care provided" (Heimer et al., 2018, p. 319). Consequently, Heimer and colleagues (2018) found that children whose voices were heard and who were involved in "framing the problem" about their families were more likely to receive more well-matched interventions than children who were not included.

**Consequences of Exclusion.** As indicated by Heimer et al.’s (2018) findings, the consequences of exclusion for children can be serious. Relatedly, McLeod's (2006), Jobe and Gorin's (2013), and Bessell’s (2011) studies demonstrate that children's lack of agency and voice in child welfare planning processes can lead to them taking drastic actions to be heard, such as running away or increasing risk to themselves in order to get attention. This was illustrated in Nybell’s (2013) retrospective study where one young adult participant expressed his view that if caseworkers do not provide opportunities for youth to express their views and then do not take them seriously when they do express these views, then youth may feel the need to “take matters into their own hands” (p. 1230). The young adult then described how he physically resisted being separated from his birth mother by visiting her without his caseworker or foster family’s knowledge (Nybell, 2013).

Similarly, in Lesson’s (2007) qualitative study with 4, 12 to 14-year-old youth in England, a young participant shared a story of when he ran away from a foster home and “behaved badly” (p.73) because he felt unable to get his social worker to listen to his concerns about his placement. The youth reported that rather than being asked why he was running away, his caseworker chastised the youth and told him that his behavior indicated that he was "disturbed, rather than upset" (p. 73), a label which the youth felt was unfair (Leeson, 2007). Moments like the one described by Lesson (2007) above, where a youth asks for help and is unable to have their concerns seriously considered are echoed throughout the literature. Some
youth have suggested that these experiences of feeling disempowered impact whether or not they feel able to use their voice or ask for help when they need it (Jobe & Gorin, 2013).

The link between children’s participation and protection has been made more explicit in government sponsored reports and research coming from the United Kingdom following a number of preventable child fatalities where children who were receiving services from child welfare agencies fell through the cracks (Laming, 2003; Munro, 2011). The reports cited a lack of caseworker engagement with children as being a primary cause of the child not being able to get the help they needed. In not taking time to see, hear, or center the perspectives of the children, the caseworkers lost sight of their needs and the children became invisible with devastating results (Laming, 2003; Munro, 2011). These reports echo findings from Ferguson’s (2017) ethnographic study which showed how children can become invisible in child protection work, especially when workers do not have adequate support to purposefully engage with and value direct engagement with children (more about this will be discussed later in this chapter).

Collectively, research linking participation to protection indicates that perhaps one of the most salient aspects of participation for children in child welfare systems especially, is that participation is instrumental for helping them feel safe. Participation appears to have instrumental value for young people in care because participation responds to the fact that youth have often experienced being "powerless, voiceless and afraid” (Bessell, 2011, p.498) during their involvement with child welfare and have little experience with adults who have been "interested in listening or responding to their concerns” (Bessell, 2011, p.498, also see, Husby et al., 2018; Winter, 2010). As Winter (2010) noted, children’s “accounts help improve understanding about the nature and risk of harm” (p.190) and can support workers in having a better understanding of the child’s own wishes, views and abilities; therefore children’s
participation should be central to decision-making processes (Vis & Thomas, 2009; Winter 2010).

**Getting it Right.** In addition to feeling safe, studies focusing on youth perspectives about children’s participation have indicated that similar to caseworkers, youth view the instrumental value of participation as important for helping them receive appropriate and meaningful services. For example, in Willis et al.’s (2003) youth-led project, which included 120 young people with experience of out of home care in Ireland, youth shared why their participation was important by saying, "if your services are right, young people are less likely to go on the referral roundabout so 'get it right'" (p.215). These views were echoed in other studies where youth indicated that their participation was important for having a successful placement (Bessell, 2011), for receiving services which better support their well-being (Damiani et al., 2018), and for supporting them in understanding their own history and story (Damiani et al., 2018, Polkki et al., 2012; Nybell, 2013). Also, research with children suggests that participation has meaning for them when they feel that their involvement has an impact on a process (Fylkesnes et al., 2018; Križ & Roundtree-Swain, 2017; McLeod, 2006, 2007; Roesch-Marsh et al., 2017; Warming, 2006).

**Intrinsic Value.** Across studies directly within and outside of child welfare, children report that participation has intrinsic value for them and that they generally wish to have more opportunities to be involved (Bessell, 2011; Block et al., 2010; Damiani et al., 2018; Fern, 2012; Križ & Roundtree-Swain, 2017; Magalhães et al., 2015; McLeod 2006, 2007; Polkki et al., 2012; Winter, 2010). For example, in McLeod’s (2006, 2007) qualitative study with 11 child welfare workers and 11, 9 to 17-year-old English youth in care, youth shared that they felt they deserved to be heard and have a say in decisions made about their lives. Children and youth report that participating makes them feel valued and important as being able to participate indicates to
children that adults care about them and their opinions (Križ & Roundtree-Swain, 2017; Polkki et al., 2012; Winter, 2010).

As previously discussed in this chapter, children’s participation has been linked to their subjective well-being in numerous studies (Bessell 2011; Fattore et al., 2009; Lloyd & Emerson, 2015; Munro, 2001; Winter, 2010). For example, Bessell (2011) found that youth in care felt valued when workers showed them they were heard by acting on what youth had shared with them. Munro (2001) and Winter (2010) similarly found that participation appears to empower children and enhance their self-determination and self-confidence. Overall studies in this area have indicated that children's well-being is improved when they feel they are listened to and when their perspectives are valued (Fern, 2014; McLeod, 2006, 2007; Polkki et al., 2012; Warming, 2006; Winter, 2010).

**Intrinsic Value for Workers.** Research indicates that children’s participation has intrinsic value for caseworkers as well as children because in using participatory approaches with children and youth, workers find joy in their work and feel more satisfied with their jobs. For example, in their qualitative study with eight Irish workers at one local agency, O'Reilly & Dolan (2016) reported that workers who utilized play-based participatory approaches with children indicated increased satisfaction with their job and felt more confidence in their own skills as practitioners. The finding that practitioners experienced increased job satisfaction from strengthening their engagement skills is echoed by Lawrence’s (2017) findings from a large scale mixed-methods study, involving 2,519 child welfare workers in the United States. Lawrence’s (2017) findings indicated that workers often are motivated to stay in their jobs because they enjoy working with children and families. Thus it seems that children’s participation is not only important for
children themselves but also for workers as they find meaning in directly connecting and working with youth and making a positive impact on their outcomes.

**Values matter.** Exploring instrumental and intrinsic value orientations toward children’s participation is particularly useful in understanding why it seems that there is general support for the idea of participation, but it remains an elusive experience for many young people. As indicated previously, research has indicated that caseworkers tend to emphasize the instrumental values over the intrinsic values of children’s participation (Archard & Skivenes, 2009; Bessell, 2011; McLeod, 2007; Thomas, 2002). Research indicates that when workers view participation as primarily instrumental in getting their tasks completed or being successful in implementing an intervention, they may miss the importance of considering the child’s perspective of how participation feels and whether the child feels their participation is meaningful. For example, workers in Mcleod’s (2006, 2007) study shared that they felt they were involving youth and listening to youth through asking them questions or inviting them to meetings. However, youth in McLeod’s (2006, 2007) study suggested that youth may not feel they are meaningfully participating just because they are asked to attend a meeting but rather wanted to see an impact from their participation.

Overall, it appears that both the intrinsic and instrumental values of children’s participation are critical for workers to consider in order to ensure that children feel safe and also that children’s well-being is centered in the worker’s practice. Although an instrumental view of participation may fit more neatly into the current system where workers are focused on completing a task and want to get buy-in from their young clients in order to be successful, the intrinsic values of participation may be just as important for knowing whether or not children
feel that their participation is meaningful and that they are valued during their involvement with the child welfare process.

Fern’s (2012, 2014) study eloquently described what can happen when a caseworker becomes aware of the benefits and utility of children’s participation. In the excerpt below she discusses how a caseworker’s perspective shifted after taking time to consider a youth’s views.

…[the worker’s] conceptual shift towards taking the young person’s knowledge and view of her situation seriously made a practical difference to the nature of social work intervention… that this made a difference to the young person who, feeling she was no longer seen as the problem, was willing to take part in family work focused on communication difficulties at home (Fern, 2014, p.10).

This example illustrates how enabling children’s participation can shift the framing of the problem from originating with the child or their behavior to focusing on the causes underlying the child's behaviors in order to more effectively and meaningfully address children’s needs in a way that empowers and enhances well-being for all involved. Rather than viewing the child as an “object of concern” (Laming, 2003), participation has the potential to enhance children’s agency and center them as knowledgeable and valuable people with their own perspectives, ideas and opinions in order to be more effective in keeping children safe and respecting their humanity.

**Making Participation Meaningful: Children’s Views**

Research with children and youth indicates that children generally want to be invited to and prepared to take part in the child protection process, such as intake and assessment processes, in meetings and planning processes, and in placement and transitional processes (Van Bijleveld et al., 2014). Importantly, this does not mean that all children wish to participate in the same way, but rather children across studies indicated that they wanted to have options for
participating and be supported in doing so in a way that is meaningful to them (Bell, 2002; Dillon et al., 2016; McLeod, 2006, 2007; McNelily, 2015; Roesh-March et al., 2017; Van Bijlelved et al., 2020).

For example, in her qualitative study, Bell (2002) found that children she interviewed (N=27, ages 8 to 16) valued having a caseworker who listened to them, and shared that "they want information that is accessible and appropriate, and they want to be offered real choices about what services are available and the range of ways participation and representation can take place in decision-making forums” (p.10). Other studies have found that children want tangible choices and options in regards to placements and workers. For example, they want to be able to have a say in whether or not they get a new worker and where they end up living (Bessell, 2011; Damiani-Taraba et al., 2018; McLeod, 2006, 2007). Children and youth described that they want to have notice if there are going to be disruptions, such as a placement change or a change in a worker (Bessell, 2011; Križ & Skivennes, 2017; Strolin-Gotzman et al., 2010). Children shared that it is important for them to maintain a relationship with a worker and not be moved from one worker to the next without regard for their feelings about the change (Križ & Skivennes, 2017; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2010).

**Access to information.** As indicated in the quote above from Bell’s (2002) work, children suggested that having access to child-friendly materials that offer information about the process of protection, as well as information specific to their case, is an important aspect of what meaningful participation might look like for them. Children wanted to know why they were removed from their home, what concerns had been raised about their safety, what potential interventions are available, how long the process might take, and what their options are (Block et al., 2010; Dillon et al., 2016; Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Križ & Skivennes, 2017; Leeson, 2007;
Mateos et al., 2017; McNeily et al., 2015; Muench et al., 2017; Pokkli et al., 2012; Winter, 2010). Pokkli and colleagues (2012) suggested that children "need to know what has happened…and what these processes mean” (p.122) in order for a child to understand their present situation and be involved in planning for their own future. Youth shared that information about their own lives and their birth-family is vital for them to maintain their autonomy, safety and well-being right now as agentic young people and into adulthood (Damiani, et al., 2018).

**Participation in Assessment.** Youth across studies suggested that they often feel judged by workers before they even meet them (Cossar et al., 2016; Fern, 2014; Van Bijlevled et al., 2014). Youth are keenly aware of how their records follow them throughout the system and how the reports that workers write and the words they use to describe a child have a direct impact on their life, which is why their participation in assessments are important to them (Cossar et al., 2016). In meeting a worker for the first time, children suggested that they want the worker to spend time getting to know them and learning about what is important to them, rather than pressuring them to provide information (Bell, 2002; Križ & Skivenes, 2017; Munech et al., 2017). This feedback is underscored by Ruch et al.’s (2019) recent ethnographic study which observed 82 practice encounters between workers and children and found that communication between workers and children was often one-sided, benefiting only the social worker in gathering information from the child. Fern's (2014) study with workers and youth indicated that "one way of countering oppressive value judgments emerging from practitioners’ accounts of the referral stage was to hear young people's accounts directly” (p.8). Her findings illustrate how vital it is for caseworkers to hear directly from youth themselves before making judgments based on previous reports from other workers.
Participation in Meetings. As indicated above, research indicates that children and youth generally want to be included and involved in meetings about their lives. For example, Dillon et al., (2016), interviewed 5, 12-to-17 year-old children in England and found that young people interviewed saw participation in planning meetings as important for having awareness about what was happening with their case and having an opportunity to share their perspective, which they pointed out was often different from adults in their lives. Thomas and O'Kane (1999) who surveyed 225, 8-to-12 year-old English children and youth found that children wanted "to be included, to have information and to have the chance to have a say" (p.229) and expressed that attending care meetings was important to them because "it's my life" (p. 223).

Although children express a desire to be included in meetings, research indicates that when children are present for these meetings, they report feeling underprepared and unsupported in being able to play a meaningful role during the process (Dillon et al., 2016; Mcleod, 2006, 2007). Numerous studies with youth have indicated that they often feel uncomfortable and frustrated during planning meetings, which they found boring and embarrassing (Bessell, 2011; Buckley, 2011; Cossar et al., 2016; Kennen et al., 2014; Van biljeveld et al., 2014). For example, studies found that some youth were asked personal questions, sometimes about a potentially abusive parent while the parent was in the room (Cossar et al., 2016).

Children and youth indicated that they wanted to have more time to prepare with a worker before a meeting, to help set the agenda, to share their perspective about who should and shouldn’t attend, and to have the meeting feel less adult-oriented (Dillon et al., 2016; Mcleod, 2006, 2007). In other words, the children and youth suggested that meetings should be child-centered and that caseworkers should consider what the meeting feels like from the child’s perspective in order to shape the experience so the child can feel comfortable, safe, and
empowered to participate in a way that works best for them (Dillon, et al., 2016, Mcleod, 2006, 2007; McNelily, 2015; Roesh-March et al., 2017; van Biljelved and colleagues, 2020).

**What Does Meaningful Participation Look Like?**

Ferguson's (2017) ethnographic study of child protection practice revealed that, a caseworkers "...capacity to relate to children not merely through talk, but in embodied ways, through touch, play and other forms of movement (such as while walking or driving)...(p.1012)" appeared to enable workers to engage with and connect to the children they were working with. As Ferguson’s (2017) finding suggests, methods such as play-based and arts-based techniques as well as taking time to work with a child to prepare for a meeting or process information are all examples of child-centered approaches that could support children’s participation (Fern, 2014; O'Reily & Dolan, 2016, Roesh-March et al., 2017; Ruch et al., 2017, Winter, 2012).

O'Reily and Dolan (2016) trained workers on a number of play-based techniques, such as sand play and worksheets to enhance communication with children. In their discussions with caseworkers (N=8) they revealed that a "non-directive" play-based approach was important to building an "open and trusting relationship before using focused techniques to explore certain issues (p.1202)." caseworkers in their study indicated that they found in easier to engage children in difficult topics if they took time to have a fun non-welfare related interaction first (O'Reily & Dolan, 2016). Also, their findings suggested that children and youth might feel more comfortable working with a caseworker if that caseworker took time to get to know them before getting into the child welfare tasks.

Relatedly, in their ethnographic study Ruch and colleagues (2017) highlighted exemplar work of two practitioners in their study who used, child-centered, participatory approaches regularly to meaningfully engage children on their caseload. These practitioners were observed
utilizing creative materials, such as craft materials and worksheets, and toys, such as Legos, which were relevant to a child’s particular interests. In addition, these practitioners often used their bodies and non-verbal language cues to connect with children prior to beginning a more formal assessment and also to connect with pre-verbal children. Ruch and colleagues (2017) noted that these two practitioners appeared to be rare in their use of child-centered participatory methods in their everyday practice, whereas most of the practitioners in their study did not utilize these methods.

**Empowering Children.** Drawing from qualitative interviews with 10, 9-17-year old children, Husby et al., (2018) suggested a pedagogical approach to making meetings more child-centered by empowering children to collaborate in setting the agenda for a meeting. They suggested that practitioners consider supporting children in making a short presentation about their views that could be shared in a meeting so that they can have an opportunity to share what they “think is important in their everyday life” (p.449). Relatedly, in an action research study involving 10 Dutch 7-12-year-old children and 12 caseworkers, Van Bijleveld and colleagues (2020) facilitated development of a participatory toolkit for children to use in communicating with their workers. Van Bijleveld and colleagues (2020) were surprised when children developed tools to impact the process of participation in planning meetings rather than the content of meetings. For example, the toolkit included a stop sign which children could use when they did not want to discuss something or when they felt a topic was boring or not relevant to them. Van Bijleveld et al.’s (2020) findings indicate that the process of participation may be just as important to children as the discussions or outcomes of that process.
Enabling Participation in Meetings. Based on their findings from interviews with 48, 12-18-year-old Scottish youth and 52 caseworkers about child-centered protection review meetings, Roesh-March et al., (2017) suggested that

…preparation work with the young person…should include: discussing the meeting with the young person in advance; taking time to understand their views and using creative approaches to enhance communication; discussing with them how they wished to participate and if they wanted to come to some or all of the meeting or have their views represented in some other way; giving them a choice about venue and timing, where possible; discussing the invite list and, where possible, ensuring it reflected their preferences; preparing them to deal with the emotional impact of the meeting and planning strategies they might adopt if things got difficult during the meeting.” (p.5)

The suggestions by Roesh-Marsh (2017) indicate possible strategies for workers to enable children’s meaningful participation, by setting up the structure to enable and empower children to take part, even if they choose not to be physically present for a meeting.

Assessing Effectiveness of Participatory Approaches. A recent systematic review by Kennan, Brady and Forken (2018), evaluated studies which assessed formal processes for children’s participation including participation in planning meetings, such as review meetings in the UK context and family group decision making meetings in the Australian and US context, as well as utilizing advocates or other formal supports for young people to have their voice heard in formal child welfare processes (Kennan, et. al, 2018). The review found that the usage of an advocate to support children and youth in participating in formal child welfare processes was particularly effective in helping children feel that their voice was being seriously considered when decisions were being made about their lives (Kennan, et. al, 2018).
In addition, the review indicated mixed results for including youth in planning meetings as a strategy to effectively enable children’s participation (Kennan, et. al, 2018). They found that although it may be that children’s voices are more likely to be “heard” if they attend a formal planning meeting, there is little evidence that children will feel their views are taken seriously or have had an impact on the outcome of their case, due to solely being present at a meeting (Kennan, et. al, 2018). Children’s views of participation indicate that seeing action taken as a result of their participation makes participation more meaningful for them (McLeod, 2006, 2007).

This section has illustrated how children’s participation in child welfare practice is not only beneficial for children and caseworkers but that much is known about children’s views about what makes participation meaningful for children in care. There are a growing number of practical examples in the literature indicating that adopting participatory practices is possible within a child welfare context and that when prioritized it makes a difference for kids in care. The following section will describe what is know about barriers to implementing children’s participation rights within child welfare systems.

**Barriers to Children’s Participation in Child Welfare**

The research consistently indicates strong support from both caseworkers and youth for children’s participation, however, there is evidence that caseworkers and youth may have different conceptualizations of participation and that workers face immense personal and organizational barriers to adopting participatory practices with children, such as a lack of support, training and resources (McLeod, 2007; Morrison, et al., 2019; Ruch, et al., 2019; Van Bijleveld, et al., 2015). The next section will discuss caseworkers’ views of children’s
participation and challenges that caseworkers face in supporting children’s participation in their everyday practice.

**Complexities of Child Protection Work.** Heavy caseloads, limited time and lack of training for working with children have all been identified as barriers to children’s participation in child welfare (van Bijleveld et al., 2015). In addition, workers across studies report stress and fatigue from the complex, unpredictable and emotional work of child protection, which directly influences how well they can relate with and be open to building a relationship with a young person (Winter, et al., 2019). For example, in their ethnographic study, Winter, Morrison, Cree, Ruch, Hadfield, & Hallett (2019) highlighted the challenging and unpredictable work environment in child protection practice, where workers are likely to face trauma themselves on the job. A similar ethnographic study by Ferguson (2017) found likewise that workers often face formidable and sometimes frightening situations, which may make it challenging for them to emotionally engage with the child with whom they are working.

Both Winter et al., (2019) and Ferguson (2017) suggested that workers need to be better supported to reflect on and acknowledge their emotional responses to difficult situations they face on the job. The unpredictable environment of the work could itself be a barrier for children’s participation if the practitioners are unable to even talk with or see the child, let alone use more meaningful participatory approaches. Ruch et al. (2019) suggests that it is important for social workers to have reflective space and time to consider how they can build their communication skills with children, such as through developing “regular practices -- rituals and gestures -- that help the child understand what social work interventions involve” (p. 7). Ruch et al., (2019) highlighted also that practitioners need to have training about how to communicate
with children, both through verbal and non-verbal methods as well as materials and resources to support their efforts.

Relatedly, the bureaucratic timescales and other checklist tasks may prevent caseworkers from having the time to form meaningful connections to youth and build trust, which are necessary to enable children’s participation (Munro, 2001; Leeson, 2007; Van Bijleveld et al., 2014). For example, young people interviewed (N=4) in Leeson’s (2007) study indicated that they were only connecting with their caseworkers through formal review structures and "at key moments, such as placement crises" (p. 273). This made the young people feel that the caseworkers only saw them in a heightened state of anxiety and didn't really get a chance to know the young people or to be able to represent their wishes (Leeson, 2007). In addition to caseworkers’ difficult work environment, their perceptions about participation and the task of “protection” also seem to impact the caseworkers’ capacity to support children’s participation.

**Caseworkers Perceptions of Children’s Participation.** Van Bijleveld and colleagues (2015) found in their review of the literature that across studies, children and caseworkers had different perspectives on what participation means and looks like. Caseworkers perceived effective children’s participation as a passive process, where they listened to what a child had to say. Conversely, children perceived of participation as a more active, dynamic, relational process, whereby a case worker listened to what a child had to say and then decisions were made which reflected that child’s input (McLeod, 2007; Van Bijleveld, et al., 2015). For example, in her interviews with 11, 9 to 17-year-old British children and 11 caseworkers, McLeod (2006) found that the children in her study:

…judged whether someone was listening to what they said by how they acted in response, in particular whether they carried out their wishes. The adults felt they
demonstrated listening simply by being there for the child, hearing them and empathizing…(p.49)

There are also indications in the literature that caseworkers have a tendency to view children’s participation as instrumental and an outcome rather than a process (see page 83 for more about instrumental value orientation). For example, Van Bijleveld et al. (2014) found that caseworkers (N=16) in their study used participation as a method to "motivate the young person and increase cooperation” (p.257) and to inform children about decisions that the caseworkers have already made. Similarly, Križ and Skivenes (2015) found that workers perceived children's participation as gathering information or hearing the child's opinion. This finding reflects that workers may not perceive children's participation as having an impact and they may view passive participation as meaningful participation.

In addition to the belief that meaningful participation can be passive for children, in their survey of 86 Norwegian child welfare workers, Vis and colleagues (2012) found that workers described children’s participation as being synonymous with children getting what they want. Vis et al., 2012 surmised that because practitioners in their study viewed children’s participation as children getting what they want, and because they often felt the child lacked the capacity to know what they want, the caseworkers declined to offer opportunities for children to participate. Similarly to Vis et al.’s (2012) findings, Van Bijleveld et al. (2019) found that although case managers enthusiastically supported idea of children's participation "fear of unreasonable requests" (p.7) from children also “drove caseworker hesitancy" (p.7) to utilize participatory approaches with children. They suggested that this illustrates a tendency of caseworkers to combine a belief that children are incapable of making good decisions with a belief that participation means "what the child wants should happen" (p.7) resulting in caseworkers not
feeling comfortable using participatory approaches because they do not believe they can meet the child’s expectations (Van Bijleveld et al., 2019). This insight could help explain why there appears to be a belief that children’s participation is harmful to children.

**Protectionism.** Vis and colleagues (2012) define protectionism as “the action of restricting information children are given, the people they are allowed to see, and discussions they are allowed to participate in, with the intent to protect them from possible disturbing or upsetting experiences” (p.19). Vis et al. (2012) suggest that the protectionism is utilized as a way to control what children experience and what knowledge children have about the world around them. They suggest that protectionist philosophy is rooted in assumptions about children’s vulnerability which posits that children are harmed by having knowledge about upsetting things. Protectionist views could be a barrier for children’s participation as a caseworker who holds a protectionist worldview may believe that they will harm a child’s development or wellbeing by enabling children to have knowledge about or be involved with the child protection process.

For example, Arbeiter & Toros (2017) found that Estonian caseworkers in their study did not engage directly with children at any age because they feared causing harm to the child, especially when a child was viewed as having low self-esteem or when the child was involved in a custody dispute. In addition, caseworkers in their study shared that they believed younger children should not be engaged because they viewed young children as being incapable of expressing their views and wishes.

Mildred and Plummer’s (2009) comparison of child sexual abuse response policies in Kenya and the United States found that the US child protection system policies suggest a view that conceptualizes of children as passive and powerless victims who need adult protection. Further, they suggest that children are rarely included in discussion about what they need or want
and that decisions are made without asking children what they think. They note that children’s powerlessness is augmented and their abilities are negatively impacted by the view that children are incapable of participation. They suggest that these assumptions and beliefs about children could pose significant barriers for children to receive the help and support that they need.

In a compelling critique of the protectionist view about children, Epstein (1993) noted: Notions of protection, which are strongly related to those of innocence, are also inherently problematic and are often related to oppressive behaviours and institutional arrangements. Furthermore, it seems that often we wish to ‘protect’ children from the knowledge of unpleasant or harmful things, but do not successfully protect them from harm. Thus, we must not tell children about sexual abuse, and yet we know that many are victims of it. Equally, we must not inform children about racism, even though all children are affected by racism and many thousands suffer from it. This does not mean, of course, that adults do not genuinely wish to protect children from harm. What is at stake here is the way in which ‘protection’ tends to work in such a way as to disempower people (p.320).

As the excerpt from Epstein (1993) suggests, protectionism can be a barrier to children’s participation. Rather than protected them from harm, protectionist practice may actually increase their vulnerability and disempowerment.

**Conclusion.** This chapter has described the theoretical and empirical foundations for this study. The main messages in this chapter were that children and youth value their participation and that workers find children’s and youth’s participation valuable. However, there remain non-trivial barriers to implementing participation in everyday practice. For example, this chapter analyzed policies that appear to promote children’s participation but offer little practical support,
assumptions made about children and their capabilities, as well as views about what it means to keep children safe, which appear to be contrasting to views supportive of children’s participation.

As indicated previously, there is much that is known about why children’s participation is important and why it is difficult to achieve in real world practice settings, but little is known about how to actually make children’s participation a part of routine practice. This study centers perspectives of young people who have lived experience of the child welfare system and caseworkers’ views in exploring this practice gap and identifying where there are opportunities for strengthening children’s participation. The study explores the following questions:

Q1: How do caseworkers and young people with lived experience perceive children’s participation in child welfare care and safety planning processes?

Q2: Where are there opportunities for enhancing and strengthening participatory approaches with children within child welfare care and safety planning processes?
Chapter 3: Methodology and Study Procedures

Consistent with a constructivist grounded theory (CGT) and action research methodology, this study aims to build useful knowledge about children’s participation in child welfare planning alongside experienced young people and child welfare professionals, who have the most direct and practical stake in the study topic. The study intentionally focuses on the micro-relationship between caseworkers and children or youth as a site of opportunity for meaningful participation of youth, despite notable and non-trivial system level barriers (see Chapter 2).

Methodology

Dual methodological approaches were selected to guide this study (CGT and action research) because the approaches complement and support each other, and each offers unique tools and guidance, which together enable a more holistic and rigorous qualitative study design. This particular dual design is well supported in the qualitative literature where there are numerous examples of qualitative studies using the CGT approach alongside action research as the guiding methodology (e.g. Fern, 2012; McIntyre, 1999; Also see Charmaz, 2017; Creswell, 2013; Herr & Anderson, 2015). This study mainly utilizes CGT in developing qualitative data collection tools, conducting data collection and structuring the coding and analysis process. Action research methodology is utilized in this study to provide a critical framework for analyzing data and to enable opportunities for action during or resulting from participant engagement in the study. The “action” process in this study is focused on supporting young people and workers in visioning what children’s participation does or could look like and identifying supports for making children’s participation a part of everyday practice. Following an
overview of the methodology, this chapter will describe study procedures including: data collection procedures, study sample and recruitment processes, and coding/analysis procedures.

**Constructivist Grounded Theory**

Constructivist grounded theory (CGT), according to Charmaz (2006, 2017), is an interpretive research methodology which aims to shape theories about social processes through reflections, observations, and interviews. A key aspect of CGT is the position that knowledge and social processes are inherently a social construction, which implies that individual and societal understanding is shaped by experience and underlying beliefs and assumptions (Charmaz, 2006, 2017; Creswell, 2013). This emphasis on centering the perspective and lived experience of individuals who are participants in the research themselves is a feature of CGT research design which makes the methodology particularly well suited to answering research questions posed for this study, given that the current study is focused on exploring caseworkers and experienced young peoples’ perspectives about children’s participation within a child welfare context.

Relevant to the current study, Charmaz (2017) argues that the CGT approach can be used as a critical methodology which doesn’t only explore “what is happening here” but can be useful in revealing implications of “what is happening” for the individuals and groups most directly impacted by the process under study. In revealing implications or consequences of assumptions, meanings and processes, Charmaz suggests that the researcher can become engaged in conversations about “injustices, inequities and human rights” (2017, p. 41). The critical CGT approach is highly relevant to this study, where the study topic is heavily influenced by unstated assumptions (especially about children’s capacities and the value of involving children in care and safety planning, see chapter 2) and policies which appear to promote children’s participation,
but offer little actual or practical support for realization (see chapter 2 for more about these topics).

**Action Research**

Action research aims to “produce practical knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives” (Barbera, 2008, p. 4). It emphasizes a collaborative research process which involves those directly impacted by a social problem in a critical examination of those problems and in development of practical solutions relevant for those individuals (Berg, 2009; Bradbury & Reason, 2013; Herr & Anderson, 2015). While the research methodology often involves introducing some type of intervention or action meant to address a problem it is distinct from intervention research (Herr & Anderson, 2015). For example, action research expressly positions individuals with lived experience as collaborators and generators of knowledge about a problem and solution (Baldwin, 2012; Berg, 2009; Bradbury & Reason, 2003; Fern, 2012), while intervention research generally positions the researcher as the generator of knowledge and the research participants as being case subjects to test effectiveness of an intervention (Barbera, 2008).

Also, intervention research is focused on testing effectiveness, meaning testing whether a program, process or treatment is getting the desired outcomes within a real world setting (Fraser, 2009). Whereas, action research methodology is focused on “generation of potentially useable knowledge” or practical knowledge which could be useful for research participants but is not necessarily generalizable knowledge (Berg, 2009; Bradbury and Reason, 2003). The action research approach provides a researcher an opportunity to explore and critically examine social problems alongside individuals who may be most directly impacted by the framing of the problem or the solutions developed to address the problem.
**Harmonizing CGT and Action.** The constructivist grounded theory approach is useful in generating knowledge about a process or construct (in this case children’s participation) from the perspectives of individuals who are most directly involved in the process of interest (Charmaz, 2006). Whereas, action research is a much broader methodology, utilizing either qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods approaches in order to define a social problem and develop solutions to address the problem alongside individuals who are most directly impacted (Creswell, 2013; Herr & Anderson, 2017). Action research is particularly useful for identifying how to work alongside oppressed groups towards positive social change through addressing social injustices and oppression (Herr & Anderson, 2017).

Both methods structure the research process around the participants as the experts and view the researcher as a facilitator for knowledge building. Importantly, centering participants as experts does not mean that participants’ views are uncritically explored and examined. Each method suggests that just as it is important to critically examine the researcher’s own assumptions and worldview, which may influence their perspective, it is also important to recognize that each participant has unique perspectives, beliefs and worldviews, which have implications for understanding the study topic. Although both methodologies suggest a critical stance, both methodologies also assert the importance of collaborating with people who are directly impacted by social injustice and includes techniques for revealing and disrupting power dynamics between the researcher and research participants (Barbera, 2008; Berg, 2009). Thus while the methodologies emphasize a critical stance, which is useful in questioning assumptions, identifying paradoxes and revealing implications, the methodologies also acknowledge and critique the researcher’s own position of power as well as the power structures surrounding the participants themselves.
Action research extends a critical CGT exploration by aiming to identify leverage points for making changes which address the social injustices revealed through the CGT lens. The action research approach in some ways parallels the critical CGT approach by suggesting that the people most directly affected by a social problem should be involved in defining the problem and solutions. However, action research goes beyond critical CGT, focusing on identifying implications of processes or meanings, and suggests that researchers work alongside their participants to take some action toward addressing problems and consequences revealed in the research process (Barbera, 2008; Berg, 2009).

**Core Methodological Principles**

Derived from the harmonious critical CGT and action research approach there are three core methodological principles foundational to this study: the importance of context, research for transformation, and embracing emergence. The following section will describe these principles, especially in identifying the ways in which these principles impacted the study design.

**Attention to Context.** Acknowledging the social, political and geographic context of research participants, the researcher and the research topic is important for developing a study which is grounded in real life experiences in order to better understand the way the participants may view the study topic. This particular study is embedded in a very challenging context as half way through data completion, the coronavirus pandemic began. This was an unanticipated challenge, which impacted the study itself and surrounding context in ways which are still unfolding.

The coronavirus pandemic has undoubtedly had an impact on participants, myself, as well as the study topic. For example, it may be difficult for caseworkers to consider how to support children’s and youth’s participation when caseworkers are now doing virtual check-ins
with families and may not be seeing children and youth in their homes. Caseworkers are having to learn new ways in interact with and maintain connections to families which may make it more difficult for them to intervene in support of children’s well-being. Also, there is evidence that children may have difficulty accessing protective services during the pandemic. For example, UNICEF reported that there have been worldwide disruptions in child protection services, which could directly impact children’s safety (UNICEF, 2020).

In addition to impacts on the child welfare system itself, impacts from the pandemic on the broader social context has other implications for this study. For example, there are reports that there have been increases in family violence, in particular domestic violence (Evans, Lindauer, Farrell, 2020; Gosangi et al., 2020) and violence against children (Kuehn, 2020). Although, press reports have indicated a decrease in calls reporting child abuse, there has been an increase in children admitted to hospitals with serious injuries from caregiver maltreatment (USA today, 2020; Washington post, 2020). Experts point to unprecedented stress caused by living through the pandemic, as well as the limited resources for financial and emotional support for families and youth as influencing this rise in violence.

During this pandemic, in addition to many hundreds of thousands of deaths in a short timeframe in the United States, the number of families who are experiencing housing instability (Green & McCargo, 2020) and hunger (Schwarz, 2020) have risen drastically. There is high risk of a looming eviction crisis as families may be increasingly unable to pay their mortgage or rent due to permanent job loss and lack of financial support to ensure stability (Benfer et al., 2020). Rates of suicidality among young people and unpaid caregivers has seen an alarming increase (Czeisler et al., 2020). Results from a recent survey have indicated that 1 in 4 young adults (18-24) and 1 in 3 unpaid caregivers have contemplated suicide who had not previously considered
suicide before the pandemic (Czeisler et al., 2020). In addition, mental health crises and substance use are increasing among unpaid caregivers and young adults at an alarming rate (Czeisler et al., 2020).

The findings regarding unpaid caregivers experiencing increased mental health needs is particularly relevant for this study, as previous research has shown a correlation between child maltreatment and neglect when caregivers do not have support for financial and mental health challenges (Paxson & Waldfogel, 2002). As chapter 1 indicates, even before the pandemic, the United States lacked comprehensive and equitable social supports, such as healthcare and food access, resulting in more US families experiencing chronic poverty and hunger compared with other rich nations. Also, as noted in chapter 1, the lack of national children’s policies means that supports for children in the US are uneven and defined by scarcity, and that children experience inadequate support for their well-being compared with other rich nations. As chapter 1 indicates, in the United States children were already experiencing significantly higher levels of violence and poverty compared with children in other rich nations before the pandemic. The United States’ lack of supportive infrastructure in policy and services needed to ensure children’s well-being, could exacerbate the impacts from the pandemic as children and families struggle with increasingly limited resources, unprecedented stress and a political attitude which does not appear to support holistic services and supports for ensuring children and their families’ well-being.

The full impact from this pandemic and lack of social supports, which appear to be driving inequities and increases in violence towards children is yet unknown. The current situation, especially for children, is devastating as not only are they facing an unprecedented loss of their social communities by school closures and virtual interactions, but they also are
increasingly facing poverty and violence with potentially even less support staying safe than prior to the pandemic (UNICEF, 2020). The current situation has implications for this study as it reveals how critically important it is to consider how to implement children’s rights within our social support systems and throughout our society in general. As policy makers, community leaders and academics are making decisions that directly impact children’s lives and well-being, children should be included in conversations about how to re-shape our political and social context as the pandemic continues and all of our futures remain uncertain. More about these implications will be discussed in chapter 5.

**Research for Transformation.** As suggested by the description of the study context, this study is firmly rooted in action research philosophy, which indicates that research should be useful for making positive social changes that could benefit groups who are central to the research process. The study design has purposefully considered transformation as a study goal. For example, in asking workers about children’s roles in the child welfare process and sharing feedback from young people with workers, the study aimed to offer caseworkers reflective opportunities and spark transformational change in their perspectives about working with children and youth. Also, in sharing with young people all the ways that caseworkers work to show youth they are valued, it was intended that they too would experience a transformation about the way that they view caseworkers and that they might have hope that children and youth currently involved with the system will have a better experience than they did.

**Emergence.** Emergence was a critical principle that threaded this study together. The value of emergence for this CGT study was that it allowed participants’ narratives and experiences to shape the study as it unfolded. This meant that experiences and feelings that participants shared during the interviews impacted the way that decisions were made regarding
changes to study design or data collection instruments. Also, as discussed previously the study changed in response to the social context. More will be discussed about how emergence impacted the study design in the section about modifications from the original study design.

**Study Procedures Overview**

Semi-structured in depth interviews were conducted with 13 child welfare professionals and 9 young people with child welfare experience. In addition, separate group follow-up meetings were conducted for young people (N=3) and caseworker (N=3) participants. These meetings offered participants an opportunity to reflect on some initial findings from the interviews, share messages between young people and caseworkers’, vision about children’s participation in child welfare systems, and to conduct member checking. The meeting scope and format was modified from the original design, as there were unanticipated challenges to convening the groups (see limitations section for more details).

This study was approved as exempt by the VCU IRB (IRB # HM20015914). The original IRB approved protocol was amended twice. The first amendment was requested in order to modify the recruitment strategy in order to have more flexibility in recruiting young people for the study (recruitment challenges will be discussed in the recruitment section). The second amendment was submitted to modify study procedures due to restrictions and safety concerns related to COVID–19. Specifically, the in-person group meetings originally planned with child welfare professionals and young people were shifted to a virtual format.

Child welfare professionals were eligible to participate if, at the time of data collection, they were employed as a child welfare caseworker in Virginia (including in child protective services, foster care, and/or adoption services), they lived/worked within an hour of Richmond, VA (the city where the study was conducted), and they directly engaged with children and youth
either as a case worker or case manager. The child welfare professional population for this study included case workers or case managers employed in public or private child welfare agencies who provide child protective services, foster care services (including pre and post services), and adoption services, (including pre and post services). Intentional efforts were made to recruit caseworkers who have varied racial and ethnic identities for interviews, using a snowball approach. In addition, efforts were made to interview caseworkers who had a range of years of experience and differing educational backgrounds. Specifically, caseworkers who have less than 5 years of experience or more than 5 years of experience in child welfare and caseworkers who have a BSW, an MSW or a degree other than social work. A recruitment matrix was used during the recruitment period to assist in these efforts.

Young people were eligible if they lived/worked in the vicinity of the study location, if they were 18 – 25 years old, and if they had received child welfare services as a minor (under 18) in Virginia. Specifically, the study population included young people who had received some kind of child welfare intervention when they were minors (under 18 years of age) including: ongoing family assessment, CPS investigation, foster care or adoption services. As with the caseworker group, intentional efforts were made to recruit a sample of young people who have varied racial and ethnic identities, for example by reaching out to youth supportive organizations who work primarily with Black youth and also through snowballing. In addition, efforts were made to recruit participants who had varied experiences with care type and length of care. See page 120 for participant demographic table.

Recruitment Procedures and Sampling

Participants were recruited through a multi-pronged strategy, which including cold calling relevant organizations, meeting with interested organizations to share study information,
using personal and professional networks, sharing information through university networks, distributing flyers throughout the community-at-large, and making presentations to student and community groups. An initial recruitment flyer provided basic information about the study (see Appendix A) and directed potential participants to the study website (https://rampages.us/participationinpractice/), which included more information about the study, information about my background, and a study interest form for eligibility screening. Potential participants were screened for eligibility either via phone or email, depending on their preferred method of contact. There was also an option for participants to self-screen using the “study interest form” on the study website.

The recruitment process lasted for 9 months. During the first 4 months of the recruitment process the majority of the child welfare professionals were recruited, however, during this initial recruitment phase no young people expressed interest about the study or were recruited. The decision was made to modify the recruitment strategy and tools in order to be more successful in reaching young people (see “recruitment challenges” for more details). Specifically, the IRB was amended in order to make it possible for to more directly reach out to young people, through redesigning a youth focused flyer (see appendix B) and make presentations to young people (see script, appendix C) directly. Following approval of the amended IRB protocol, 6 months into the recruitment process, young people began show interest, make contact about the study and participate in interviews.

**Recruitment Scope.** In total, 41 local organizations either directly providing child welfare services or non-child welfare Community Based Organizations (CBOs) which work with young people were directly contacted. These included: 9 public child welfare agencies, 17 private child welfare organizations, and 15 community based organizations which were not
child-welfare focused but either worked directly with young people or had contact with professionals working in the child welfare field.

Child welfare agencies and organizations were contacted if they were within an hour radius from Richmond, VA (the city where the study was conducted) and provided direct child welfare specific services to children and families (such as child protection, foster care, and adoption). In addition to child welfare specific organizations, non-child welfare community based organizations were intentionally contacted in an effort to reach out to a broad and diverse group of young people, especially those who may have exited the system prior to aging out or who may have had limited contact with the child welfare system as minors. For example, local, youth-supportive community-based organizations (non-child welfare specific) who have direct contact with young people and older youth were contacted. These CBOs included LGBTQ youth support organizations as well as organizations supportive of youth who have experienced housing insecurity. In addition, community based charitable organizations operating outside of the formal system, who provided material or social support for foster youth (such as birthday gifts) were contacted. Organizations were approached and requested to share information about the study opportunity with their clients and staff. If there was interest, permission was requested to make a brief presentation for staff and/or clients. No organizations agreed to me making a direct presentation to young people. However, there were a few opportunities to present information about the study in staff meetings at a handful of organizations.

In addition to efforts reaching out to specific CBOs, study information was distributed widely through the university, local businesses and community centers. For example, presentations were made during school of social work undergraduate research courses. During the presentations, study information was shared with the intention to reach young people who
may either work in the child welfare field or have had experience receiving child welfare services as a minor. I also distributed flyers about the study widely to local community based organizations where youth may congregate or receive services (such as health centers, youth centers, neighborhood centers, and through local Trauma Informed Care Networks (TICNs)) as well as libraries and local businesses. Following permission from an organization, physical flyers were dropped off for posting or distribution on site, depending on how the organization usually shared flyers with their clients. In addition, electronic advertisements were posted on the School of Social Work’s internal television network, as well as shared via the School’s social media networks. In addition to traditional recruitment strategies, I designed and hosted an event to mark the 30th anniversary of the UNCRC at the School of Social Work which was intended to spark conversation about the relevance of the UNCRC for social workers in the US. The event was intended to also be a recruitment event, and study flyers were available for attendees. The event was timed to coincide with international celebrations of the UNCRC, which, unfortunately, happened to be right before fall break at the University. As this was the case, there were significantly less students on campus and unfortunately, no students attended the event.

Recruitment Outcomes. The original strategy to recruit young people was to connect with eligible young people mainly through child welfare professionals. The intention was that child welfare professionals would receive study information and that they would share study information with their contacts, especially young people and former clients. However, although caseworkers indicated they shared study information with their clients, no young people were recruited directly from referrals by caseworkers. Of the 9 young people who participated in the study, 5 learned about the study through SSW networks (including student and faculty connections) and 4 learned about the study through researcher contacted non-child welfare
specific community-based organizations. Of the 13 caseworkers who participated 5 learned about the study through SSW networks (including faculty and student connections), 6 learned about the study through researcher contact with child welfare organizations, and 2 learned about the study through another caseworker participant. Two young people and two caseworkers expressed interest in the study but did not participate. Both young people who did not participate made initial contact and were screened for eligibility but stopped responding prior to scheduling an interview. Of the two caseworkers who did not participate after expressing initial interest, one did not want to have an in-person interview and the other left their position prior to scheduling an interview.

**Challenges with Young People’s Recruitment.** As indicated previously, reaching young people was more challenging than anticipated. Specifically, there were challenges gaining access to a few youth serving organizations which were key local gatekeepers for reaching the target group of young people eligible for this study. In addition, the initial recruitment messaging did not appear adequate to reach young people.

Prior to conducting this study, I had gathered feedback in a different capacity about service quality from youth, service providers and caregivers around the state for the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS). In my capacity as a VDSS employee, I was able to connect to many private and public child welfare agencies from across the state and did not anticipate that connecting to young people through these agencies as a doctoral student would be markedly different. However, two organizations who I had previously been successful in working with as a VDSS employee and who happened to be important gatekeepers to connecting with young people formerly involved with child welfare, were unable to work with me this time around. One of these organizations expressed concerns about previous researchers conduct at
their organization and were therefore extremely hesitant to become involved in research initiated outside of their own organization. The other organization was going through a major staff transition, which meant that they did not feel they had staff available to participate in the study or to send information to their clients. Not being able to connect to young people through these large organizations was an unanticipated challenge that impacted recruitment for the study. However, because my recruitment scope was broad and included smaller, more localized community based non-child welfare specific organizations and networks within the School of Social Work I was still able to reach young people.

In addition to challenges gaining access at particular organizations, initial recruitment for young people may have been impacted by the study recruitment materials, which were not exclusively youth focused. As caseworkers work directly with young people who are either former or current clients, the intention was to use the same flyer to reach both groups. However, this strategy did not appear to speak to young people. A youth-specific flyer was developed which aimed to speak more directly to young people, and highlight the value or/ potential importance of the study for youth. The phrase “nothing about us without us”, often used in programing targeted to transition age young people, was highlighted in the redesigned flyer along with the phrase “more than just words”. After sending the updated flyer to a number of community-based organizations, young people began to make contact. It seems that the re-designed flyer was much more successful in relaying the study purpose and connecting with young people than the initial flyer.

**Study Procedures**

The research process included two primary phases of data collection. In the first phase, caseworkers and young people were interviewed about their perceptions of and experiences with
children’s participation. In the second phase of the research process group meetings, one for caseworkers and one for young people, were facilitated. Participants in these groups were invited to engage more deeply in a group exploration of children’s participation in child welfare planning processes. Qualitative data was collected through audio recording and transcription of the interviews and group meetings.

Consistent with an action research philosophy which values mutuality (Herr & Anderson, 2015), the interviews and group meetings were not only sources of data, but were intentionally designed in order to centralize the experiences and knowledge of individuals with lived experiences and to increase the potential that participation in this study could be meaningful and useful for the individuals involved. For example, it was intended that child welfare professionals would find participating in the group meeting valuable in having an opportunity to build community with their colleagues, to have space to reflect on their practice, and also to hear feedback from experienced young people.

Likewise, it was hoped that participating young people would find it valuable to be a part of a process where their voice, perspectives and experiences are valued, where their ideas and questions could potentially have a direct impact on a caseworker’s practice with children, and where they could contribute to the generation of knowledge about how to support children who are still receiving child welfare services. In addition, facilitating group discussions allowed for assessment of the potential utility of the findings and usefulness for caseworkers’ everyday practice (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Also, consistent with a CGT approach, engaging participants in a discussion about emergent themes increases trustworthiness of the findings, and again re-centers the expertise and experience of the participants in shaping the findings (Charmaz, 2008).
**Modifications from the Original Study Design.** Consistent with a CGT approach which values emergence, parts of the study design and tools used during the study were slightly altered from the original. For example, modifications to the group discussion guides were made based on reviewing and analyzing data collected during interviews. Discussion guides for Young People and caseworker groups were modified in order to include more specific themes and reflective time during the meeting (See appendix I for original guide and appendix J for the modified guide). The caseworker group discussion guide was also modified to include time for reflection about messages from the young people participants.

In addition, after reflecting on findings from interviews with caseworkers, the decision was made to slightly reframe the action planning activity for the caseworker meeting. The caseworker guide was modified from a focus on workers developing personal action plans for children’s participation to a focus on visioning supports and structures that might need to be in place to enable children’s participation in child welfare. This modification was made from an action research standpoint, when it became clear that workers are often asked to change and revise their practice and their work without their input. I reflected that group meetings centered around developing personal action plans for practice could be viewed by caseworkers as yet another example of an outsider trying to force a change in or critique their practice. Also, the interviews revealed that many caseworkers were utilizing some child-centered or participatory approaches in their work with children, and that reflecting on how to support or enhance the work they are already doing and make it a part of standard practice may be more useful to workers and may also uplift and recognize the work that caseworkers are already putting into meaningfully engaging with youth (more about this will be discussed in chapter 4). Given these considerations, the “action planning activity” was re-framed as a visioning activity where
Caseworkers were asked to identify supports that could make children’s participation in care and safety planning possible for them. This slight re-framing of the caseworker group discussion was meant to recognize the work that caseworkers are already doing and more directly address the practice/policy context, which may constrain or impact caseworkers efforts to engage with youth.

In addition to modifications to the group discussion guides, the second phase of the study was shortened. This study intended to include a more robust action research phase, where caseworkers would be asked to join in a collaborative group learning process focused on developing action plans for children’s participation in child welfare practice. The original intent was to invite caseworkers and young people to participate in multiple meetings with a possible joint meeting. Although phase two was shortened, where each group, caseworkers and young people, had only one meeting. The structure and spirit of facilitating a conversation between caseworkers and young people was still maintained. In a group meeting, young people were asked to offer feedback on study themes and shared messages they wanted to relay to workers. Following this, the young people’s feedback and messages were incorporated into the caseworker group discussion guide and handout. During the caseworker meeting, workers reflected as a group about messages shared with them from young people. Following this meeting, reflections from workers with young people were shared back with them.

Although all of the components of phase two were not realized, the substance and spirit of collaboration and conversation were maintained. In addition, there are signs that the action for this study will continue after completion of the research as some young people who participated expressed interest in continuing to work with the researcher following study completion in sharing findings with VDSS or other child welfare organizations, or in building a related research study.
Data Collection

Interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather data on individual perspectives about and experiences with children’s participation in child welfare care and safety planning processes. The locations for the interviews were selected based on each interviewee’s preference, such as at a public library or other public space with a private meeting room. The interviews lasted between 25 minutes and one hour for young people participants, or 45 minutes to 1 hour and 30 minutes for child welfare professional participants. As a thank you and in recognition of their time, participants received a $20.00 cash incentive for their interview. Not all caseworkers accepted the incentive, due to restrictions at their workplace against receipt of gifts.

Semi-structured interviews with caseworkers explored the following domains of interest: 1) motivations for entering into child welfare work, 2) perspectives about working with children in a child welfare setting, 3) perspectives about what meaningful participation looks like and 4) perceptions about what could help caseworkers and young people work together better. Similarly, interviews with young people explored the following domains of interest: 1) perceptions of what meaningful participation looks like for young people, especially in child welfare care and safety planning processes 2) perceptions about what it looks like when young people feel that they are heard/not heard and 3) perceptions about what could help caseworkers and young people work together better. See appendix G for semi-structured interview guides used for the interviews.

Divergence from Individual Interview Format. Although the majority of these interviews took place individually, three young people made an unanticipated request to be interviewed together. The young people knew each other prior to getting involved in the study. The young people had been scheduled to have their interviews at separate times/days but arrived
together at the interview site. At the time, given that participants had requested to be interviewed together and that I had approval for conducting group meetings as part of the study, I honored the young people’s request and conducted the interview as if it were a group interview rather than a focus group. While conducting the interview, I asked each individual to share their perspective about the interview topics on the semi-structured interview guide and group discussion was de-emphasized. The information gathered during the group interview was analogous to information gathered during individual interviews conducted with young people. However, upon reflection about the group interview with my dissertation chair, potential unanticipated consequences of interviewing as a group rather than individually were revealed to me. All additional study interviews were completed individually. Potential impacts, limitations and lessons learned from the divergence in interview format will be discussed further in the limitations section (chapter 5).

**Transitioning from Interviews to Group Meetings.** Following the interviews and in preparation for the group meetings, I completed initial coding and theme development using CGT techniques, such as line-by-line coding. A targeted theme summary sheet which shared what caseworkers said they do to support children in participating and what young people said they would like workers to do to support children in participating, was developed from the initially coded and analyzed interviews. This targeted theme summary sheet was developed to share initial findings back with participants which were most relevant for the study purpose. The coding, analysis and theme development process will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter. Themes selected for sharing with participant groups were ones which most closely related to the research questions, were action-oriented, and were reflective of both caseworker and young people’s input. In this initial stage, there were 9 themes which emerged and were labeled “Strategies for Youth Participation in Child Welfare Planning. Used by Child Welfare
Professionals. Advocated for by Experienced Young People.” A visual was developed to offer a quick summary of these themes (see appendix K). In addition, a supplemental informational sheet was developed to offer more information about each theme, including a definition, statement of challenges related to the theme, and a statement about why the particular strategy may be important or useful (See appendix L). When appropriate, quotations from participants were used to explain or describe a theme on the supplemental sheet. These documents were emailed or texted directly to all participants and also posted on the study website to increase accessibility. In addition, group discussion guides were modified to focus on member checking these particular themes and assessing them for relevancy and utility.

**Group Meetings.** A group meeting was held with each group (caseworkers and young people) separately, in order to provide space to reflect on some study findings, conduct member checking, and discuss feedback passed along between groups. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, group meetings were conducted virtually rather than in person as originally intended. Group meetings were audio recorded and transcribed.

All participants who had been interviewed for the study were contacted and invited to participate in a follow-up meeting. Although attempts were made to reach all participants, many young people were no longer reachable (as they no longer had the same contact information) and a few caseworkers had left their positions and were no longer reachable (see limitations for more details). In total, 3 young people and 3 caseworkers participated in the group meetings. Two additional caseworkers had expressed interest in joining the meeting, but did not attend. Due to COVID-19 study modifications, all meeting participants were offered a $25.00 e-gift card, rather than a cash incentive. Again, not all caseworkers accepted the incentive, due to restrictions at their workplace against receipt of gifts.
As noted above, consistent with a CGT approach and reflective of the emergent design, the group discussion guides and materials were modified based on initial findings from the interviews to focus on summary themes directly related to youth participation in child welfare planning. Each meeting was formatted similarly, where following a consent discussion and verbal consent affirmation (see consent information sheet, appendix E), there was a discussion about the study themes (see discussion guides, appendix J). The role of the researcher within the meeting was to facilitate and create space for discussion/reflection about children’s participation in child welfare planning processes.

A young people’s group meeting was held (N=3) where young people discussed the summary of initial themes and crafted messages they wanted the research to convey to caseworkers. Following the Young People’s meeting, a meeting for caseworker was held (N=3). At this meeting, caseworkers reflected on initial findings, discussed the messages prepared from them by young people, and reflected on visions for supporting children’s meaningful participation in practice.

**Participant Summary**

Demographic characteristics for both young people and caseworkers were collected via a demographic survey prior to the interview (see appendices F & G). The demographic reporting was intentionally developed to be inclusive and affirming of participants’ identities. The survey included questions about each participant’s age range, racial/ethnic identity, and gender identity. The survey used fill in the blank format for social identity questions, rather than asking participants to select from a list. For example, for race/ethnicity and gender identity participants were asked to fill in the blank. Sexual orientation and disability status were not included in the survey, which will be discussed in the limitations section (chapter 5).
**Young People Characteristics.** The demographic table below (table 1) shows the majority of youth who participated in this study identified as female. A majority of participants identified as White or Black/African American, although there were also participants who identified as Hispanic/Mexican, Asian or Native American. All of the participants indicated that they had experience in the foster care system, some reported having experiences with residential treatment facilities, many reported experiences with child protective services and a few reported experiences with adoption. Eight out of 9 young people who participated in this study had been in care as minors for at least 5 years, 4 young people reported having been in care for more than 10 years of their childhood.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age Range</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 - 20</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 - 25</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 25</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender Identity</strong>*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Racial/Ethnic Identity</strong>*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Mexican</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child Welfare Service Experiences</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Protective Services</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster Care</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential Treatment</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adoption</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Length of time in Care</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 to 5 years</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 to 10 years</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 10 years</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of Young People Participants (N=9)
Child Welfare Professional Characteristics. Child welfare professional participants were employed at 5 different public child welfare agencies (local departments of social services) and 3 different private child welfare agencies. The majority of caseworkers who participated in this study were between 26-40 years old and identified as female. A majority of caseworkers identified as White/Caucasian, with only two caseworkers participants who identified as Black/African American and only one who identified as Hispanic. Caseworker participants reported varied work experiences, which included a combination of child welfare areas. For example, although a majority of participants indicated they had experience working in foster care, most participants also had experience in child protection and/or prevention/family preservation. About half of caseworker participants had a master’s degree in Social Work, and a few had a master’s degree in a related area such as counseling. The caseworkers who reported having an undergraduate degree only were either more senior caseworkers or caseworkers who had the least amount of time in the field. The majority of caseworkers who participated in this study were experienced professionals, with 8 caseworkers who reported working in the field for 6 or more years. 4 caseworkers reported working in the field for 1 to 5 years, and one caseworker reported being on the job less than 1 year. Although, many caseworkers reported having experience in both private and public agencies, at the time of data collection, 7 caseworkers were working in public agencies and 6 were working in private agencies.
Table 2 Demographic Characteristics of Child Welfare Professional Participants (N=13)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age Range</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 – 25</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 – 40</td>
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<tr>
<td>41 – 50</td>
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<td>Over 50</td>
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<td><strong>Gender Identity</strong>*</td>
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<td>Female</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Racial/Ethnic Identity</strong>*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White/Caucasian</td>
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<td>Hispanic</td>
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<td><strong>Educational Background</strong></td>
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<td>BSW</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSW</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bachelors (BA or BS)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters (MA or MA)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate degree only</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Child Welfare Area Experience</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Protective Services</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevention/ Family Preservation</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster Care</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adoption</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Living</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Length of time in field</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Less than 1 year</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 to 5 years</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 to 10 years</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>More than 10 years</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Current position</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Gender identity and racial/ethnic identity was a fill in the blank question. No participants reported a non-binary gender identity. Some participants reported multiple racial/ethnic identities.

** Child welfare area experience was a select all that apply format. All participants reported multiple areas of experience. In addition, there was a fill in the blank box to enable
participants to note experience that was not captured in the options, such as family preservation or independent living. See appendix F for the caseworker demographic survey.

**Coding and Analysis Process**

Consistent with a CGT approach coding and analysis took place simultaneously (Charmaz, 2006, 2017; Creswell, 2013). There were four phases for the coding/analysis process. Phase one involved initial, line-by-line coding of all interview transcripts, phase two involved development of initial themes, and phase 3 involved focused coding, in which initial codes were reviewed and modified to be more concise and analytic. Finally, themes were deepened and modified to support the final analysis. Coding was completed using Atlas.ti (Version 8.4.4; 2019) as an organizational tool. The coding process described by Charmaz (2006) was used as a guide for this stage.

**Initial Coding Process.** Line-by-line coding is a technique where data are coded in very small segments (Charmaz, 2006). For example, rather than coding an entire sentence or paragraph of a transcript, each line of the transcript is coded individually. Sometimes the codes may overlap or there may be segments of data which share a code. These initial codes can be thought of as labels used to define or describe what is happening in each segment of data (Charmaz, 2006). This process is completely inductive where there is no pre-developed coding structure or code book. Rather the researcher develops codes for each segment of data, in effect labeling or summarizing each element within a transcript. The intention of this intensive coding process is to understand what is going on in the data and become grounded in the participant’s perspectives of the research topic (Charmaz, 2006). As Charmaz (2006) suggests, the line-by-line coding approach is useful to fully embed the researcher in the data and in being able to view the data with a focus on trying to understand what the participant is sharing or what their views are rather than allowing the researcher’s views to take precedence. While coding, I used a
slightly modified version of line-by-line coding as working with the Altas.ti software it was not possible to maintain consistent lines of data. However, I did code very small segments of data and utilized Charmaz’s (2006) descriptions to guide what I was looking for in the data and how I labeled data segments. For example, I was focused on coding action and processes happening in the data. I would ask myself as I was coding what is happening in this data segment, what is the participant sharing here, what is the purpose of this moment. While coding, I considered how the participant used language and what they were expressing, whether it be their personal viewpoint, to provide an explanation or justify a viewpoint, to describe events or happenings, or to share contextual information (Charmaz, 2006). In vivo coding was utilized to capture participant’s language choices, which may reveal their underlying assumptions or beliefs. As an example, in the excerpt below, see figure 1, highlighted in blue, a caseworker describes her relationship with a youth as it evolves along with her role change. The codes that I initially applied to capture the meaning behind this section appear next to the text.

**Figure 3. Example of Initial Coding**

So, I’m thinking there was one like, there’s one, um, young lady that I’m thinking that I worked with. So I actually worked with her when I was at my previous agency. And I was her case manager, and now I work with her, well, I’m not the families post adoption worker here. But I do see her at our kids club and things like that. And like our relationship has actually been very different since I’ve been in this role. Because when I was her case manager it was really, like, she had been in care for like several years, and she was like, so done with having different case managers. And she like, she was always like nice enough. But she would like barely talk to me. And I didn’t take it personally. Cuz I understood like, she was just tired of having different, she had so much turnover with case managers.

In the two sentence segment, highlighted in blue, the caseworker describes their perceptions about youth’s feelings having multiple workers as well as her view that the relationship changed because the caseworker was no longer in the role of case manager for that youth. The codes capture descriptions of what is happening in the data and illustrate the
“purpose” of the moment. In this case, the caseworker is sharing contextual information about
their previous role in working with a young person as well as that young person’s experiences of
workers in order to provide an explanation for their viewpoint that having a new role in working
with the young person impacted their relationship with that young person. Note that these initial
codes were applied, as Charmaz (2006) suggests, at a quick pace. As I had more practice with
this coding technique the codes became more direct and succinct.

Initial Theme Development. While completing initial coding, as described above, I kept
a reflection journal, where I captured my ideas and thoughts about the data throughout the coding
process. I also commented on codes within Atlas.ti and developed some memos within the
software. My reflection journal included my thoughts about what was happening in the data and
what key concepts or experiences seemed to be emerging from the data. Charmaz (2006)
describes this process of reflecting on coding as memoing. Memoing provides the reflective
space for the researcher to consider where the data is leading, and to consider the stories the data
are telling about the study topic. Memos that I developed in the reflective journal or within the
Atlas.ti project were used in the theme development process as they provided a starting place for
developing themes from the initially coded data.

Grouping Line-by-Line Codes. Following initial line-by-line coding of all interview
transcripts, I sorted and organized the codes within Atlas.ti in order to support theme
development. This sorting process helped me to get a “handle” on the data and to begin to be
able to have a more comprehensive view of “what was happening”. I found this process valuable
because following line-by-line coding there were over 7100 unique codes and grouping the codes
enabled me to see where there was overlap in codes, where codes were contradictory, and to
have a better sense of the “big picture” or major messages that participants shared in the data. I
chose to do this at this stage as it was prior to the group meetings and I wanted to be able to develop more targeted shareable themes for use in the group meetings.

**Grouping Process.** Using Atlas.ti’s code searching tools, I searched the codes for keywords which were either prominent in the data, included in my memoing, or were directly relevant to the research questions. For example, I searched for “acknowledge” in order to locate codes which captured moments when youth felt acknowledged or caseworkers described acknowledging youth. While grouping and organizing codes into code groups, I would memo or write reflections about what I was seeing emerge from this process. This information was captured in a theme development document (appendix N) which included sections for youth and caseworker perspectives. The theme development document is where I organized what I was seeing in the data, specifically related to the research questions. Meaning that I focused on emergent themes of code groups which were directly relevant to youth and caseworkers’ perspectives of children’s participation or that captured opportunities for strengthening children’s participation. The initial version of the theme development document categorized themes by topic, for example, “what participation means for youth”.

**Sharing Themes with Participants.** Following peer review of initial themes and consultation with my dissertation chair, a targeted themes summary document was developed to be used for sharing in the group meetings. I decided to focus on themes which were directly related to research question two, identifying opportunities for strengthening children’s participation. In developing this targeted themes document, I focused on what caseworkers shared about how they engage with children and youth and then compared those with youth’s perspectives about what they want caseworkers to do or consider in working with children. What emerged from this process were nine strategies which caseworkers used in their practice which
are child-centered and participatory and which young people shared were important to them. As described above, this summary sheet was shared with all participants and discussed during group meetings.

**Final Coding.** Prior to beginning the final coding process, I used diagraming which is a typical part of the CGT process (Charmaz, 2006), to consider how themes were connected, to make comparisons between caseworker and young people perspectives, and to identify any emergent theoretical concepts or ideas that I wanted to further explore in the final coding process. For example, in diagraming initial themes “hurdles to youth’s participation” and “foster care experience”, the relationships between these themes revealed young people’s sense of disempowerment through system involvement and how disempowerment was experienced in myriad ways throughout the youth’s time in care. This became a theoretical concept “chronic disempowerment”. Later, when reviewing caseworker themes “worker challenges” and “emotional work of CW” it was revealed that caseworkers reported similar feelings and experiences of disempowerment in their role as workers. This comparison indicated that the process of chronic, system disempowerment might influence or be influenced by children’s participation for both caseworkers and youth. Diagraming resulted in including the theoretical code “chronic disempowerment” as well as a few additional concepts, such as “responsibilizing youth” which were included in the final coding process.

Focused coding and some theoretical coding, as described above, was used for the final coding process. During focused coding, I reviewed the initial line-by-line coding of all interviews and coded group meetings. Focused coding highlights particular codes which appear to be important (due to frequency of use, or relevancy to the research questions) and explores these data in more depth (Charmaz, 2006). In addition, focused coding is useful in making the
data more manageable and the codes more analytical. Focused coding labels “what is happening” in the data in much larger text segments than initial line-by-line coding thus condensing the data (Charmaz, 2006). As an example, going back to the same excerpt used to describe the line-by-line coding process (page 25), in the example below, a larger section of data was coded together, resulting in removal of codes which were less meaningful analytically and condensing/modification of previous codes which seemed to capture the essence of this moment. In this case, the codes highlighted how the caseworker viewed their shifting role as impacting their relationship with a young person and how they witnessed the young person putting up an emotional wall during her time in care, based on being fatigued by connecting to new workers.

**Figure 4 Example of Focused Coding**

So, I'm thinking there was one like, there's one, um, young lady that I'm thinking that I worked with. So I actually worked with her when I was at my previous agency. And I was her case manager, and now I work with her, well, I'm not the families post adoption worker here. But I do see her at our kids clubs and things like that. And like our relationship has actually been very different since I've been in this role. Because when I was her case manager it was really, like, she had been in care for like several years, and she was like, so done with having different case managers. And she like, she was always like nice enough. But she would like barely talk to me. And I didn't take it personally. Cuz I understood like, she was just tired of having different, she had so much turnover with case managers.

**Final Analysis.** Following focused coding of all transcripts, I went back to my initial themes and made modifications and adjustments based on what was revealed in the focused coding process. I also revised and developed new diagrams to better understand how themes were linked together and to identify ones that were particularly relevant to answering the research questions. During this stage, I shared some of the most diagrams directly related to the research questions as well as the revised theme development document with a peer reviewer as
well as the dissertation chair. The peer review feedback was focused on assessing credibility, as Charmaz describes in terms of the logic behind the analysis. More about assessing study quality will be discussed in the next section. The peer reviewer provided feedback on the logic of the analysis indicated by the diagrams and in finalizing the themes.

**Assessing Quality and Validity**

Charmaz (2006) suggests researchers consider the following criteria when evaluating a CGT study: credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness (p. 337-338). Broadly, credibility refers to the extent that the data is sufficient and logically linked to the analysis and findings. Originality refers to whether or not the study and the research questions posed generate new knowledge or critique. Resonance, refers to the extent to which the findings are relevant for the study target population and whether or not the findings make sense to individuals who have lived experience of the study topic. Usefulness, refers to how the findings may be used either to deepen and expand knowledge about a particular topic or to make a difference in society.

In addition to these criteria, which can offer guidance for evaluating this CGT study, it is important to consider criteria for evaluating the action research components as well. Herr and Anderson (2015) developed validity criteria for action research studies which emphasize the direct linkage between the stated action goals of a study to the “indicators of quality” for that study. Of the criteria outlined by Herr and Anderson “catalytic validity” seems to be most directly relevant to evaluating the action oriented aspects of this research study (2015, p. 55). Catalytic validity refers to the extent that a research study shifts the perspectives of all individuals involved in the research process (including the research participants and the researcher; Herr & Anderson, 2015).
With these criteria in mind, three strategies were built into this study to allow for a reflective evaluation of this study’s value and trustworthiness. First, I maintained an “audit trail” which included journaling and notes from reflective memos produced during the data collection, coding and analysis process. In addition, I used a color coding scheme to keep an audit trail of coding changes made between initial coding and focused coding. This allowed me to easily track where coding changes were made and trace the structure of the analysis. Secondly, a peer reviewer offered feedback at two key points during the study, prior to the group meetings and after the focused coding process. The peer reviewer provided critical feedback on initial themes as well as the credibility of the analytical logic. Finally, member checking during the group meeting was used to determine whether the study findings are resonant, useful for participants who were involved in the study.

**Quality Assessment.** In terms of credibility, which relates to how well the data is linked to the study’s findings, I believe the study was credible, in that I utilized CGT approaches, which required a deep dive into the data and regularly returning to the data. All findings were derived directly from and reflective of the data itself. Also, the logic of the analysis and coding process was assessed through peer review and reflective meetings with the dissertation chair. I believe the study did meet Charmaz’s criteria for originality, because new knowledge was generated especially about the way that youth may view children’s participation, practical strategies that workers are already using to meaningfully engage with youth, and the way that systemic disempowerment may impede children’s participation.

Resonance was assessed through group discussion with young people and caseworkers. Initial study findings, especially related to practical strategies workers use in their practice, were shared directly with participants. During the group meetings, participants gave feedback about
whether they feel the findings were relevant. Participants suggested that the findings felt important to them and were consistent with their experiences. Usefulness was reflected also by study participants who suggested that they wished the research to be widely read, especially by policy makers. In addition, some participants requested a copy of the dissertation to use for their own advocacy purposes in talking with funders or policy makers. Also, some participants indicated that they might be interested in collaborating with the researcher in sharing findings with policy makers or child welfare administrators.

In addition to assessing the study from a CGT perspective, this study should also be assessed from an action research standpoint. As described earlier, Herr and Anderson (2015) suggest assessing an action research study in terms of catalytic validity, which they describe as whether participants’ and the researcher’s views are shifted during the research process. There are some indications that workers and young people may have experienced shifts in their perspectives about children and children’s participation. For example, during the group meetings, young people expressed surprise and hope to learn that workers were considering how to meaningfully engage with youth. Caseworkers, likewise, shared that they were moved by young people’s affirmations of their work to engage with youth. However, considering that there were only a few young people and caseworkers involved in the follow-up meeting and there was only one meeting rather than a series of meetings, the catalytic validity of the study is difficult to assess, especially for research participants. This represents a weakness of this study, in terms of its action research aims.

The catalytic validity for myself as the researcher, however, is easier to assess. During the course of this study my own tacit assumptions about children’s participation rights and the capacity for workers to support children’s participation were critiqued and transformed. In
recognizing and affirming caseworker’s struggles, knowledge and experiences in doing engaging work with children and youth, I was able to develop a more compassionate view of competing interests and perspectives of both workers and youth. In doing this work, I was surprised by finding caseworkers were already doing many potentially child-centered engaging approaches, which could make participation meaningful for youth. In this way, I too was transformed and developed a more compassionate attitude towards caseworkers and the challenges they face in their work.

**Conclusion.** This chapter has described the study design and procedures, including an overview of the study methodology, procedures and analytic process. The following chapter will discuss study findings. Focusing on answering the two primary research questions and identifying additional findings that are relevant for contextualizing the study findings.
Chapter 4: Findings

Study findings highlight perspectives of young people and caseworkers about children and youth’s participation in child welfare care and safety planning. The intention of this chapter is to present participants’ perspectives related to the research questions and share my analysis and interpretation. This chapter will begin by addressing research question number one, participants’ views about children’s and youth’s participation in child welfare care and safety planning, and will explore convergence and divergence between young people’s and caseworkers’ perspectives. The second section will address research question number two relating to opportunities for strengthening children and youth’s participation in child welfare care and safety planning. This section will reveal what workers are already doing to support child-centered and/or participatory practices as well as the context for participation. The final section will discuss challenges young people and caseworkers view as hurdles to youth participation.

Conceptualizations of Children’s Participation

Young people and caseworkers expressed different viewpoints about what children’s participation looks like and what the process might involve. Generally, young people’s perspectives included more specific examples of what participation means for youth, including what it looks like from their perspective. Although many young people in this study shared that they rarely if ever felt involved or engaged as clients within the child welfare system, they had very clear ideas about what they would have liked to see happen to have their perspective heard, and what they felt workers could have done to make it possible for them to be involved as collaborators in their care planning or to feel valued by caseworkers. Caseworkers in this study expressed views about children’s participation which were generally more passive and less specific compared with young people. Also, caseworkers emphasized youth readiness to
participate or the appropriateness of participation for children and youth. This section will begin by exploring young people’s views about children’s participation in child welfare, followed by exploring caseworkers’ views. The section will end with a more detailed comparison of the two perspectives, focusing on where there is convergence and divergence between groups.

**Experienced Young People’s Views of Children’s Participation**

Young people who were interviewed (N=9) indicated that they viewed participation as important for safety, social and emotional well-being, and having a sense that they were involved in their own lives. For example, they described wanting to be seen, to be heard, to be understood, and to be treated with care and compassion. They also shared that they valued having access to supports to be able to meaningfully participate and to empower them to do self-advocacy. Young people’s perspectives about participation were captured most often in moments during the interview when they were discussing what they would have liked to have had happened with their workers, or when they were reflecting on what caseworkers could do to build relationships with and collaborate with children and youth.

A theoretical model (Figure 1) of youth views of participation was developed through analyzing young people’s views about what meaningful participation might look like for them. The model is composed of three interrelated themes: recognition, supportive communication, and involvement. Recognition emerged from young people sharing their desire to be seen as a whole person and have their strengths, feelings and history recognized and valued. Supportive communication reveals young people’s viewpoints about informational and process supports, which may be helpful in making participation possible for youth. Involvement includes more active elements of the participation process such as being supported in sharing views, having options, and seeing some impact from their input. The diagram below illustrates the model and
shows the relationship between each theme and its components. Borders between the three main themes are porous, indicating that there is flow and overlap between each theme as they build on and impact each other.

Figure 5. Youth Views of Participation
Recognition.

“...just going back to the caseworker, right? When you’re presenting that question...are you getting that consent from a verbal, ‘yes’? Is it from a signature? Or is it from a feeling (*emphasis)? Do you leave that conversation, that connection with okay, we got a ...great feeling about this? ... if you’re a caseworker and...you’re asking this question. The kid might want to say no, but, you know for a fact, the kid has to say yes. And then...you asked, you got the consent, ‘yes’, you got the signed (*paper), but you know in your heart when you drive away, you didn't really get that “yes”, you know?

... I think I refer back to that a lot, because all that I can remember of this thing. I can’t remember all the details, (but) it’s coming off for me because of how I felt during that period of time...” -- Young person 5

Recognition is emotional and subjective, having to do with how youth feel about themselves while interacting with workers throughout their time in care. In the excerpt above, a young person shared their experience of a worker informing them that they were going to have a new worker, and then asking them if they are okay with the change. The young person describes what it felt like to have no real option for saying “no” and how they were made to feel devalued and unimportant. Recognition is about workers being aware of children’s feelings and views and showing value and understanding towards their young clients.

Recognition is at once an enabling element for children’s participation as much as it is a part of participation itself. For example, young people indicated that recognition enables relational participation in the sense that it lays a foundation of trust where a young person feels that they are being heard and understood by someone who cares about them. For young people in this study, feeling valued as individuals was linked to feeling that their perspective was valued as well. Young people expressed feeling silenced, devalued and unimportant especially when workers did not seem to take time to get to know them as individuals or when workers seemed “too busy” to show that they took care with decisions made about the young person’s life.

This theme emerged from young people describing moments when they felt seen and valued by a worker, and also when they reflected on moments where they weren’t heard. In
addition, many young people spoke about recognition when asked about challenges they see for workers and youth to work together. In these moments, as the participant above shared, young people may not remember all of the details of what was said but they remember the way that they felt. They remembered if they felt valued, understood, seen for their strengths, passions, history and interests as well as for the complex and difficult situations that brought them into care. Each of these overlapping and related elements of recognition as described by young people will be explored below.

**Being seen, valued and encouraged.** Young people shared that they wanted workers to take an interest in them and what they are passionate about. Rather than feeling only seen through their foster care identity, they wanted to be seen as people who have passions, interests and goals. Young people described feeling seen when a worker remembered something that was important to them or showed up to a meaningful event to offer support. Young people wanted their worker to “root” for them showing them they are valuable and important. Young people shared that they wanted workers to believe in them and to show youth they believe in them. Supporting them in feeling they can do big or little things that matter to them in their lives. They expressed wanting workers to “present(*) the caring” by taking time to show that they carefully considered the young person’s needs, wishes and feelings before making a decision.

In the following excerpt, a young person describes what it felt like to be in a planning meeting as an older teen and to be asked about preferences. This young person had been in care for more than 10 years of their childhood, and this was the first worker that they remember asking about what the youth wanted to see happen in their own life.

“I was in the process of getting a new one (*worker). So like, the big, big, big, lady from social services is sitting at the table with my treatment team doctor, my therapist, me, and this new lady who’s gonna be my social worker. ...And I told them... ‘go ahead and do what you all want. It don’t matter what I tell you cuz you all are going to do what you all
want anyways.’ And I remember... she would always ask me ‘... what do you want to see happen’. And I will be overwhelmed like, I don't know. Cause it’s never been an option. I’m not used to that. And she’s like, ‘well, I’m telling you now’. And it makes me emotional now, because like thinking about it, it’s fucked up, because like, ‘I’m asking you because this is your life. I want your opinion.’ Like, don't nobody do that. Don't nobody care. Just like I said, their job is to provide housing so you're not homeless, at a young age.’” – Young person 2

In the excerpt, the young person expressed being overwhelmed by emotions when this new worker asked their preferences and told the young person that their opinion mattered. Although the young person later learned that this worker was leaving the job and they would be transferred to another worker, having an experience where a worker asked their opinion seemed to be meaningful as it indicated to the young person that some workers “genuinely care”.

**Being Heard and Understood.** For young people in this study being heard and understood was about being listened to and having their perspectives considered. Youth shared feeling undervalued and powerless when they did not feel heard. Also, beyond just being heard, youth expressed wanting to be understood by workers. Youth viewed wanting to be understood as related to being seen as described above, in that they described wanting workers to see them as whole people, and also recognize their struggles, challenges and resilience. They wanted workers to imagine themselves in the youth’s situation and to develop a sense of what it would feel like so that they could develop an understanding. They also wanted workers to trust children’s voices more, in a sense that young people recall often feeling that adults in their lives overpowered their voice. As one young person shared:

“*But I just feel like when it's your word against... your foster parents... you don't really get heard. Or...you know, people always listen to adults instead of kids.*” – Young person 6

In the excerpt below, a young person describes their experience of a worker chiding them for getting excluded from school:
“…a kid got suspended from school you don't go there to tell him, ‘oh man, you’re going to get this consequence, and this consequence from the Department.’ When you could...or, you know, vice versa, going in there and saying, ‘hey man...you got kicked out. Like what was the issue? What led this to happen?’ You know. When they say it is their fault they got kicked out. Don't... dwell on the fact that they got kicked out of this school. ... yeah...it's bad, don't let them think that it's cool but, you can't come at somebody expecting...a negative to become positive...create that negative to become another positive, you know what I'm saying.” – Young person 9

In the quote, the young person describes how they would have liked their worker to begin by trying to understand where the youth was coming from and the youth’s perspective about why they had been suspended. Also, the youth expresses wanting to be heard, having the worker take time to listen to their viewpoints and consider how to make the situation better for that youth rather than dwelling on their mistakes.

**Self-view recognized.** Young people also shared frustrations about feeling prejudged by workers based on what was written about them in their file. This too was connected with being understood, in that young people expressed often feeling misunderstood or misjudged and suggested workers take time to get to know their young client before making assumptions based on the youth’s file. Youth felt the weight of their case history following them and saw how it impacted professional’s reactions to them. In the excerpt below, a young person described feeling prejudged by workers based on behavioral and trauma history and expressing frustrations from feeling boxed in by this identity, which didn’t reflect the youth’s view of themselves.

“...they read your file and...they’ll see all these horrible things about you as a person. But you don't even get to know me. You already had the lump sum of a conclusion that I'm a messed up youth who's been sexually traumatized. I like to run away. I like to fight. I'm aggressive. Like that’s not me. Like, yes those are things about me, but that’s not all there is to me. Like, I’m a loving human, when I want to be, when I get the right attention and the affection that I need...But I can't do that if you’re just going to offer to categorize me as everybody else do.” – Young person 2
To counter this feeling of misrecognition, some young people suggested that workers include youth in narrating information about their own life and to include youth’s perspectives and views in reports about them.

“having just like a part, where on the report, not just what they think, but what you think as well. And like, on how you’re feeling and what’s going on in your life, that they don’t know about.” – Young person 4

As described in this section, recognition has to do with youth’s subjective feelings about being valued as people and feeling like they matter. The theme suggests that emotional recognition and child-centeredness are critical aspects of what meaningful participation might look like for youth. Emotional recognition means that the youth has an emotional sense that they are valued and child-centeredness means that their perspective and view of what is happening in their lives is centered in developing an understanding of the youth’s needs and challenges they may be facing.

**Supportive communication.**

“And I also feel like even though kids are young... majority of the kids know what's going on already, you know. So I feel like, they should be involved more...I mean, I get not telling them to some things. But you should definitely tell them stuff. Because they probably already know. And like, include them. Not lying to them or like sugarcoat stuff. That's one thing I hated. Like I would want to know like what was up like...Before I was adopted... when I was in the foster care, I would want to know like, stuff about my parents, or like if we could do visits and stuff like that. And I would never really just get an answer. Just like, be more straightforward, cause kids already know what's going on, so it’s not like you can hurt them. I mean you can, but I think like, it like sucks more when you like... Basically, just being more straightforward...and not sugarcoating.”

– Young person 6

Supportive communication emerged from young people reflecting on wanting to have relevant, accessible information about their case and education about the system. As the excerpt above suggests, young people expressed wanting to know about what was happening with their case and their life, even if it is difficult information for them to hear. In addition to having
information, young people suggested workers give youth a chance to process information, support them in processing information, and support them in forming an opinion. Young people wanted time to consider options and reflect about what is important to them. They suggested that asking youth about their preferences right before a meeting, during a meeting, or at a home visit in front of their family doesn’t give them enough time or space to process information or form a view.

Wanting to Know. Young people described wanting workers to share information about their life with them, even if it is difficult to hear. Youth want to know about their family, know about their case, know why they are in care, know about their options, and have a sense of what’s next for them. Young people had a drive to know about their own family and history, which sometimes led to them taking potentially risky steps in order to find out information on their own, such as secretly reading their case file, or connecting to their biological family. Young people described being alone while reading their case file, and not having anyone to process information with, which may have been emotionally difficult. Some young people shared that they had to wait until they were much older before finding out any information about their biological family. As one young person shared:

“... I didn’t know nobody. I didn’t know nobody. I only found out who my people was when I got out of foster care. They didn’t help me...” – Young person 8

Some young people described having memory loss from their early childhood and not knowing anything about their family, their history or their case history. Young people described feeling let down by not knowing about their personal history and then when reconnecting with their biological family finally understanding why they were placed in care. Sometimes young people put themselves at risk in trying to reconnect with family members without knowledge about why they were separated in the first place.
**Accessible Information.** Youth also wanted accessible information that was formatted in a way that is understandable and meaningful to them, in their preferred language and considerate of the youth’s reading comprehension level. In the following excerpt, a young person shares what they would have liked to have happened prior to a meeting.

“They should have said... 'do you know what's going on today? Do you know why we are here today?'...then I would have said 'no, please explain it to me’. Or...Just give me a draft, broken down into the language, you know, that I can speak. Or, to the narrative you know that I can read. Cause sometimes it's a whole bunch of mumbo-jumbo the kids would never understand. So just breaking it down to them. 'Hey, we're trying to... This is a FAPT meeting.' Explain what a FAPT meeting is. Explain, or we're doing three to six month's goals. 'And do you have any goals that you wish to work on?' It should have been what goals do you wish to work on and then it should have been what goals do your parent feel like you need to work on? So we can get aspects to see where the child is and where the adult is.”

– Young person 7

In the excerpt, the young person describes clearly what it would look like for a worker to make communication inclusive and support the youth in feeling that they are involved in the process. A key part of what the young person shared is asking workers to take time to consider what their particular young client might need and how they can be supportive in making sure that the young person at a basic level understands what is happening and then is supported in being able to participate.

**Education about System.** Young people expressed wanting to have an education about the system, including wanting to know the basics about the child welfare process, as well as supports that are available to them, grievance procedures, their rights in the system, and how to advocate for themselves and their families. Young people also described wanting to have information and education as tools for participation and self-advocacy. As one young person shared:

“...Communication is key so help them learn that...help them learn that ling[oj], those abbreviations that are on the piece of paper. Help them learn what those are so that they can better assist themselves.” – Young person 7
Supportive communication reflects young people’s views about wanting to have information and support in order to develop an understanding about what was happening during their case, have a clearer picture of why it was happening, and have some idea about what might happen next. For young people in this study, not having relevant accessible information and time to process information was experienced as a barrier to being able to authentically and meaningfully participate. Young people described being asked to share their views before they had time to process what was happening or without having enough information to form a view. The lack of information and support to understand information was experienced as frustrating by many young people in this study and some young people indicated that it made them feel devalued and unintelligent. From young people’s perspectives, it appears that supportive communication is important for youth to feel that they are able to participate and that they have the tools necessary to take a meaningful role in the process.

Involvement.

“Yeah, and just respecting. Some people have a voice, they don’t know how to use it. So you have to, I feel like, you have to help the youth grow. And by helping them grow, it’s asking them those hard questions and saying, ‘hey if you…had the opportunity to come in this room and…to advocate for yourself. Or to hear about the things.’ Even if it’s just me sitting here being quiet, but just knowing everything that’s involved in my life. That’s important also…I should know what you’re doing… What if you’re doing something that is not what I want? Like, you know, so. Yeah, I think that the youth should be involved.”

— Young person 7

Young people expressed that as children and youth they wanted to be involved in making plans for their safety and their future, and in determining what supports they might need to heal. Young people did not feel that they had to physically attend every meeting or be made aware of all of the details of their case, however, they wanted to be involved and wanted to have options for how they can be involved. In the excerpt above, a young person shared their views about wanting to have options for being involved. Meaning that they wanted to be involved, to know
what was happening and then to be able to share their views, but wanted to have more control over how they were involved and have more support for feeling that their involvement was meaningful. For young people in this study, being involved was important because it was linked to feeling valued and heard. One young person shared a view that even little kids can express how they are feeling and having opportunities to do this means that they may feel valued and that their “side of the story” is heard.

“I mean like with little kids it's like, they can still explain how they're feeling to the caseworker, as well as with the foster mom or the foster parent or the foster case whatever, you know, situation they’re in. Can explain to them as well. So there’s two sides to every story.” – Young person 4

Young people in this study shared that they wanted to have support in sharing their viewpoints. For example, one young person, quoted below, expressed the importance of involving children in a supportive way and suggests that involvement is linked to recognition, meaning that in involving the child, the worker is recognizing the child’s history and the tough situations they have had to deal with and helping them navigate their feelings and perspectives about the situation.

“Communication... transparency... not deciding what's hard for them, or what they're too young to understand, cause nine times out of ten they’re with you, because they went through some hard shit. So, why not give them that right to figure out what’s hard for them. Or what's easy for them. Or what they can take or what they can't take. If they cry about it, they cry about it. But it's being honest. Like being, I'm trusting you with my life.” – Young person 7

**Real Options.** Young people shared that they wished they had been offered real options for treatment and interventions, as well as options for communicating their views. Young people in this study described real options as options that were not predetermined by a worker or where they felt that they had tangible role in being involved with a decision, such as for their treatment or safety plan. Young people expressed being frustrated by feeling like they had no options or that saying “yes” was their only option. They wanted to have options for any major and minor
decisions impacting their lives, for example for placement decisions, worker changes, and also treatment options. For example, some young people shared that they were frustrated by talk therapy and wanted to be offered more options such as art therapy, music therapy and other interventions that might feel more comfortable for them.

In informing youth about a decision without presenting options or explaining why there were limited options, young people expressed that this made them feel devalued and unimportant. As one young person shared,

“Without communicating like…this is obvious that’s where you’re gonna move. You know, there’s no option for you. I think that’s how it was presented to me. And...I felt that they did what was best for me. What was good for me. I was still at the same school, that made the same friends. I[had]… a great awesome, mom, but, I mean, I feel like they just want to get the process done easy, they didn’t care. That was the point...the kids might not understand everything that you do, but they can feel... if, when you do it, if you care. If you do it with care, they can feel it.” – Young person 5

In this excerpt the young person expressed remembering feeling devalued by the placement process that they experienced as an older teen. Their previous foster family decided they no longer wanted to be foster parents and the young person was then placed with a new foster family. Although, as the young person indicated in the excerpt, it “worked out” and they had a good experience in their foster home, they still remembered feeling devalued and unimportant because they felt the placement was rushed and the worker did not take time to talk to the young person about their own preferences for placement. Later in the interview, the young person expressed concern for other youth who may be placed in a similar situation and have a more negative outcome, where they may be uncomfortable or unsafe in their placement because workers did not take the time to talk with them about options or preferences.

*Safe and Supportive Environment.* Young people shared that they wished they had been asked about their preferences and were more often able to talk with their workers one-on-one in
an environment that felt safe. For example, in the excerpt below the young person shared what they think workers could do to support youth in feeling listened to and cared about.

“...I feel like they don't like, do as much cuz they're too busy. Like maybe, like make certain times to like come and visit. And like do it separately. Like talk to the kids and see if there's anything that they want to tell you, like while they're alone. So they can tell you. And... stuff like that and just being involved would be helpful. And letting them know that you're there to help them. And that you're rooting for them, for them to support them. Cause it’s really supposed to be. It’s all about the kids.” – Young person 6

As expressed in the excerpt above, young people in this study found visits with workers very important for helping them feel safe and supported. Also, young people in this study stressed the importance of meeting one-on-one with workers. Some young people shared that they felt embarrassed or silenced when workers tried to meet with them or ask them questions in front of family members. In the following excerpt, a young person was reflecting on their worker coming to their foster home for a visit. The young person imagines themselves as the caseworker in that situation and reflects on how they as the child felt. The meeting that the young person was describing happened while they were in their early teen years.

“... I think that...the caseworker came out every time... just sitting with them to talk. That's important... As a caseworker walking into the house...we are sitting in the living room on the couch...I mean, I’m comfortable (*imagining themselves as the caseworker), you know, my mom, it’s her house, she's comfortable, you know. I don't know about that kid, you know, you know? I’m sitting down here in the living room, with my mom, with my caseworker it’s just, it’s just an awkward... I don't know what we talked about but I remember again, you know, the feeling, I don't like that... – Young person 5

The young person shared their feelings of discomfort by having a visit with their worker while their family was present. However, the impact from not having one-on-one time could be more serious. For example, one young person, shared that they had felt unable to disclose abuse as a child because they did not have an opportunity to talk with their worker one-on-one and felt unsafe in talking about abusive behavior in front of their foster family. They suggested workers do more one-on-one visits with youth and that they do more pop-in visits with foster families,
rather than scheduling an appointment. Young people suggested that doing pop-in visits would have helped them feel safer, especially in cases where the young people experienced abuse or mistreatment in their foster placement.

**Supported in Sharing Views.** Young people suggested workers should support youth in sharing their views beyond just having an opportunity to voice their opinion or being asked about preferences. They suggested that workers support them in processing their options. This is related to having supportive communication with workers. They also suggested that workers consider how to enable children to creatively express their views, such as through play or an activity, and be supported in writing their views or even having a verbal conversation.

**Meetings.** Young people remembered wanting to be invited to planning meetings but then experienced meetings as boring, isolating, confusing or sometimes feeling objectified. Young people suggested that considering how to make meetings feel better for youth is important as well as having other ways that youth could participate in a meeting without necessarily being physically present. Generally young people suggested that youth perspectives should be shared in meetings or through paperwork, and suggested that youth be kept informed about planning for and outcomes of meetings about them. This young person described what they would have liked to see happen in a meeting:

> “Like nobody ever said, ‘hey, how are you doing?’, you know. Everything was always, in a meeting with an adult, it’s just, well, with a foster parent. It should have been, child meeting, foster parent meeting, then a together meeting. Cause sometimes the kid will say things without a foster parent. And sometimes a kid will say things with the foster parent. So It should have been. Here’s the...literature here. And then, I’m gonna take 30 minutes to talk to you. While they are in the meeting. And then I’m gonna take back what you said to the meeting. And let them know how you feel. Even if it’s not, in directly involving me in that...circle table... It would still [be] involving me, in running back and being my translator. So I think that's something that they should have done.” – Young person 7

Young people also viewed being supported in sharing their views as advocacy by their
worker. In a rare instance, one young person shared their experience of their worker advocating for them and supporting them in sharing their views.

“my caseworker...she pretty much was always...open to what I wanted to do, you know. She was never, kind of, pushing me to do something I don't want to do... So pretty much we can use this for an instance, whenever I went to like a FAPT meeting or something...she would...hear me out.” – Young person 9

**Supported in Asking Questions and Getting a Response.** Related to wanting support for views to be heard, young people also remembered what it felt like to ask questions and get no response from workers, or feel that workers were holding back in responding to their questions as a child. Young people suggested that workers take time to listen to children’s questions and then consider how to respond in a meaningful way for that youth. In the excerpt below, a young person recalled having difficulty getting responses to questions as a teen and then suggested how it could have been different for them.

“Learn to reply and actually communicate. Like you would when you were a teenager to another teenager. And not like communicate but like actually, try to understand them. So that way they could explain to you...” – Young person 4

One young person shared their view that kids might feel vulnerable in asking questions of an adult. In the excerpt, the young person suggests that children might need support to know how to ask questions and to feel comfortable with asking adults questions which could seem critical of the adult’s perspective.

“...kids feel very vulnerable, you know. Kids feel vulnerable. They're not sure about (*how) to ask questions, you know? ...questioning adult authority it’s not a, it’s not a thing, you know.” – Young person 5

**“Something's supposed to change”.** In the interviews, young people shared many stories of feeling that using their voice had no impact and having to resort to using aggression or behaviors in order to “get heard”. Young people also shared that they wanted to see impact from workers
considering their perspective. Rather than having to share the same story multiple times before being heard or using aggression to “get heard”, youth wanted to be listened to, and then have something happen that would show them they were heard.

The overwhelming message from young people was that they wanted something to happen based on using their voice. In the excerpt below, a young person shared their frustrations as a youth with workers not acting on what they had shared. In this case, the young person was talking about disclosing abuse in a foster home and having to disclose multiple times and use other means to finally be heard by their worker. As the young person suggests, they didn’t want to just be “heard” they wanted to be understood and this understanding for them was linked to seeing an impact as a result of them using their voice.

“I need to be understood not heard, not heard… It’s as simple as it sounds for real. I mean it’s one thing to just like saying something...because, this...is on my mind. I’m like nah. Like if something is really on your mind, you’re gonna make sure you take action to it. It’s not, when you say something to somebody it’s not, good to be like, okay and go to the same, back to the same thing. Something’s supposed to change. Something’s supposed to find a common ground, you know what I’m saying, so we won’t have these types of issues no more. But if we don’t find common ground then we’re not gonna work. And that’s why you see kids going from worker to worker.” – Young person 8

Connecting Recognition, Supportive Communication and Involvement. The theoretical model linking recognition, supportive communication and involvement suggest that young people’s views about children’s participation center around young people feeling valued and included. The model could be useful for workers in reflecting on how to show children and youth that they are valued and how to include children and youth in a safe, friendly and supportive way. As suggested above, although young people interviewed for this study had little to share about moments when they felt valued and included, they did have strong views about how things could have been different for them and what workers could do to help young people feel involved in a way that is meaningful to them. Young people also shared their view of the
challenges youth face in being able to participate or even feeling like participating would be useful for them.

“I mean maybe for the youth, it would be difficult just because of everything they’ve been through already. So they might, you know, not want to participate. And might just be pissed off all the time. I feel like that’s kind of how I was. Just like pissed off at the world. So like, I might not want to participate or talk and I feel like I wouldn’t be heard anyways so. But definitely, for the youth it would be, probably difficult for that, just with everything they’ve been through already. They probably don’t trust people or think that they would get help if they talked about it. Or...stuff like that.” – Young person 6

In the excerpt above, the young person shared their feelings of frustration, anger and unfairness of being in care. They suggested that feeling disempowered and feeling that their voice has no impact could make it more difficult for youth to feel safe enough and valued enough to participate. More about hurdles to youth participation will be discussed later in this chapter. Overall the findings from young people’s perspectives about what meaningful participation can look like for them, highlight how important worker support for enabling youth participation can be for making youth feel valued and involved and to see that their participation matters.

**Child Welfare Professionals Views of Children’s Participation**

“... I don't think a lot of people necessarily give kids an opportunity to have a voice. I know that I hear a lot of kids say...you’re the first adult to really listen to me. And that is sad, but I’m also not surprised. Like I mean, really listened to what they wanted and what their perspective was on a situation vs kind of, in, out, saw them as a child who couldn't possibly have a voice or something important to say. And our young people, they have a voice and they have important things to say. And it's important for me to listen, to let them share.” – Public Caseworker 1

This section will explore caseworker’s views about children’s participation and compare their views with young people’s views. Also, this section will describe caseworker’s perspectives about the central barriers to youth participation. During their interviews caseworkers (N=13) were asked to describe what it looks like when they work with children in their current role, or
how they involved children and youth in care planning and their view of the child’s role in the process. As the quote above indicates, there were many overlaps between what caseworkers shared about how they work with and engage youth and what young people shared as being important to them for being able to meaningfully participate. For example, caseworkers in this study generally felt that listening to children and youth was important for success in their work and for helping youth to feel that they matter. Caseworkers views of participation was diverse and complex and appeared to be interlinked to their views of their role, their views of the system goal, and their views about and comfort in working with children and youth.

There was some significant divergence between perspectives from caseworkers and young people, especially about the context and contingencies for children’s participation. This section will begin by exploring caseworker’s viewpoints about children’s participation, noting where their views appeared to differ from young people. Following this will be an exploration of where there was convergence between caseworkers and young people’s views, especially around opportunities for or strategies caseworkers used for collaborating with, engaging, involving and enabling youth to participate.

Two main themes emerged from conversations with caseworkers about children’s participation: (1) worker directed participation and (2) contingencies of youth participation. Worker directed participation emerged as a theme from caseworkers’ descriptions about how they thought about children’s participation, in terms of being worker led and focused on outcomes and tasking. Contingencies of youth participation was a theme that emerged from caseworkers sharing their views about what requirements or criteria a child or youth should exhibit in order to participate.
Worker Directed Participation. Generally, caseworkers described participation as worker directed, meaning that youth were viewed as having a more passive role, where they were asked questions and informed about decisions that were made but had less of an active role in the process as compared with young people’s views about what meaningful participation looks like for them. For example, when asked how they involve youth in care and safety planning, caseworkers described asking youth questions to gather information, asking about youth’s preferences, asking youth to share their feelings, informing youth about decisions that had been made, conducting behavioral and psychological assessments, and allowing youth to attend a meeting. Similar to young people’s views, caseworkers suggested that asking young people about their preferences and feelings was a key aspect of youth participation. However, unlike young people in the study, caseworkers generally emphasized verbal communication and appeared to view youth participation as primarily about the youth sharing information with the worker rather than a more conversational process where the caseworker and youth exchanged information and ideas with each other.

“We’re there to ask questions”. Gathering information from youth appeared to be the central purpose of youth participation from caseworkers’ perspectives. Caseworkers seemed to view youth participation as being structured around tasks that needed to be completed or paperwork that needed to be filled out. For example, caseworkers described involving youth in planning through asking questions of youth about their feelings related to services, about what they want (i.e. family type for adoption), about their social supports, about their needs, and asking about their family life. Caseworkers indicated that they viewed gathering information as being one of their main roles, in helping them build a case or write a service plan on behalf of a youth. Although, there was a strong focus on asking questions as the primary way to gather
information from youth some caseworkers suggested that youth did not seem to view asking questions as particularly effective in making them feel engaged and involved. For example, one caseworker described a typical monthly visit with a youth while they were working as a public foster care worker:

“I used to go to... home visits with her when she was still in her foster home and she would literally, like, come into the kitchen, say a couple words to me, put her head down, and, like, roll her eyes. And be like, ‘*Sigh*, [caseworker], you always ask me these questions.’ And I’m like, ‘well, you know, I have to’ (*chuckles).” – Private Caseworker

Asking questions also showed up when caseworkers described involving older youth in planning. Caseworkers working with older teens, especially in foster care and independent living programs, described youth involvement in writing transitional living plans or service plans. The interactions described by caseworkers mostly had to do with goal setting for youth around their future plans. For example, the excerpt below is from an interview with a caseworker who had a caseload and worked directly with youth but also supervised other workers. In the excerpt the caseworker describes the process of doing a transitional living plan with a youth and then sharing the plan with the youth’s worker for them to review with the youth.

“...sometimes it's just me and the youth that are doing the transitional living plan together. And so I’ll just go down each heading. Like, you know, ‘what do you want to do educationally?’ You know, and they’re like, ‘Oh, I want to go to Harvard’. ‘What do you want to do vocationally?’ ‘I want to be an astronaut.’ ‘Ok, and then we’ll develop goals around whatever it is that they want to do...that's usually how that meeting occurs. And then I’ll come back to the office and then type it up. And...give it to the worker and so then at the workers next meeting, it's their responsibility to sit back down with the youth and go over it. So this is another time for the worker to have a review...who's supposed to be working on what. And so they will go over it with the youth...hopefully the caregiver...everybody signs it. And they put a signed copy in the youth’s record and the youth gets to keep a copy also.” – Public Caseworker

In the excerpt above, the caseworker described a typical transitional living planning (TLP) process with a youth. The caseworker would ask the youth questions based on what
information was required on the TLP form. The caseworker would take notes on what was decided about the youth’s goals, type it up and then the youth’s worker was responsible for talking through the TLP with the youth. This was shared by a caseworker as an example of how youth are involved in planning. Although, again, there is some overlap with youth’s perspectives in terms of wanting to be asked about their preferences, the process does not appear to be generally youth friendly as it is structured around an adult developed form, is heavily reliant on verbal communication, and does not include other options for youth to communicate or form their own views about how they want to shape their future. It appears to be a very formal and heavily administrative process which does not seem to include elements of support for youth in processing information, or aspects of supportive communication shared as important for meaningful participation by young people.

**Child’s Role.** Generally, caseworkers across agencies, with a few exceptions, had a difficult time articulating the child’s role in the child welfare process and expressed frustrations with not being able to connect to children who had disabilities impacting their verbal communication, or teenagers, especially teen boys, who workers felt were sometimes impossible to reach. In the excerpt below, one caseworker shared their perspective about how in child welfare processes “the kid plays a central role” but that children are not actively involved in planning.

“...it is almost always driven by relationship to the child...you’ll have family members around a table who don’t know each other from Adam but the thing that they have in common is the kid...in that regard, the kid plays a central role. But in terms of like actively speaking to the child along the way of while you’re prepping the FPM (*family partnership meeting*) and things like that. That doesn't really happen. Unless they’re teenagers.” – Public Caseworker 4

This perspective implies a view of the child as an object of concern, where the child is centered but only as the connection point between adults who are involved in determining what
the problems are and what interventions might be most helpful. This perspective differs from young peoples’ views where they shared experiences of feeling talked about but not talked with. Although most young people did not suggest that they wanted to be involved in every meeting or every part of the decision making process, most young people did share that they wanted to feel that their perspective was valued, that adults took time to understand their perspective and that they were able to see some impact from sharing their views. In centering the child as the object of concern rather than someone who has views and feelings, workers may be missing youth perspectives that could be critical in identifying where the problems are and what interventions youth feel would be most supportive of them and their family.

**Outcome Oriented View of Participation.** Most caseworkers indicated that they viewed participation as about the outcome of decision making rather than the process of decision making. For example, in the quote below a caseworker describes their perspective about involving children in decision making:

“I guess when they're younger that's a different scenario of you know. Decisions I guess are really made for them... ‘hey here's my friend such and such’ [They] are going to come to your house every week and hang out with you. How do you feel, is that cool?’ Like things like that but it's a conversation...with the person.” – Public Caseworker 4

In the excerpt above the caseworker shares an example of how they might inform a child about a professional coming to their house. The decision has been made, but the worker asks the child how they feel about the decision. However, it is notable, in this instance that the child is not positioned as being able to say ‘no, I’m not cool with this.’ This seems to contrast with young people’s views of recognition especially in wanting to feel that they have real options and are able to share a different view than their workers.

**Linking Worker Directed Participation to Contingencies.** Some caseworkers appeared to link developmental appropriateness of participation with an outcome oriented view of
participation. For example, in the excerpt below a caseworker discussed their views on how workers could better engage children.

“...not expecting kids to be able to...make adult decisions...they're not adults...they're also children who have not gotten what they needed developmentally...I think we expect them to just do things that they can't do. And then get frustrated with them when they don't meet that expectation.” – Private Caseworker 13

In the excerpt above the caseworker suggested that children should not be expected to be involved in decision making, implying that being involved in decision making would frustrate children and youth who, in the view of this caseworker, might not have the capacity for involvement. The caseworker appears to emphasize the child’s capacity as a contingency of participation and suggests that involvement may be traumatizing or inappropriate especially when the involvement is viewed as making decisions. Other caseworkers echoed the view that involving children in decision making was potentially harmful and could place too much responsibility on children.

Many caseworkers indicated that they wanted to let kids be kids and feel free from adult like responsibilities. However, many caseworkers also suggested that as a child gets older they should have more responsibility for their own life and be more involved in decision making about their lives. Sometimes this viewpoint emphasized youth having responsibilities over being involved in their life. For example, when asked about the child’s role in the process of receiving child welfare services one caseworker shared their views about older youth:

“But especially with older children in foster care there's also the whole, you get some of your own agency over your own life...you've got to work to be healthy and to be happy and to make the placement work, so it depends cause, you never want to tell a kid that...a failed placement or something is their fault...its not their fault that they're in the situation they’re in. But...they’re gonna get to a certain age where they have to put in the work too, because they're gonna hit 18...and then all that responsibility is going to be on themselves and they can't... blame others. They've got to own up to their own responsibilities. So it’s a balance of letting them be a kid and then at the appropriate
As a follow-up, I asked the caseworker how they know when it is the “right time” to have youth take responsibility for their actions. The caseworker said that it depended on the youth’s age and their time in care. They suggested that youth who had been in care longer and had more placement “failures” resulting from behavioral problems need to be held responsible for their actions at an earlier age. This implies a view that youth who experience multiple placement changes should be held accountable for these changes. Few caseworkers appeared to share this viewpoint, but there was a general tension that workers expressed about letting a ‘kid be a kid’, which implied freeing the child from responsibility and how to begin to enforce responsibility when they viewed youth as “old enough” to do so.

**Contingencies of Youth Participation.** The most direct contrast between caseworkers and young people’s views was around contingencies for youth participation. A few young people mentioned that they felt a child’s age might impact the way they can participate, especially in terms of receiving information about their case, or for non-verbal infants. However, young people in this study generally expressed views that all children no matter their age or ability should be involved, supported in being involved in a way that is meaningful for them, and have access to relevant, inclusive information. In stark contrast to young people’s views, caseworkers generally expressed strong views about when a child should be able to participate, and what criteria they have to meet in order to have the opportunity.

For example, when asked about how caseworkers involve children in care and safety planning, caseworkers typically described prerequisites for youth to participate, such as a child’s age, their capacity, and their emotional competence prior to discussing how children are involved. Caseworkers responses implied that they tended to view participation as a privilege.
For example, one public caseworker asked rhetorically during the interview “are they (*youth) earning their right to have their opinion be a part of it?”. In figure 6 below, caseworkers views about what youth participation looks like is surrounded by their views on the contingencies for youth participation. As indicated by the figure, caseworkers perceptions of youth appear to be linked to their feelings about when a child or youth can or should be invited to participate.

Figure 6. Caseworker Views of Children’s Participation

All caseworkers who were interviewed described some contingencies for children’s participation. For example, caseworkers suggested that children need to have certain strengths or competencies in order to be able to participate, emphasized age appropriateness of participation,
the youth’s capacity for participation and the youth’s emotional competence. Youth who caseworkers viewed as unstable, unable to “maintain composure”, who were not able to verbally express themselves, or who were not “trustworthy” were described as not being able to participate. Relatedly, some caseworkers shared that they were unable to involve youth who were “brick walls” or appeared to be manipulative. In the excerpt below, a caseworker suggests that youth who behave in these ways demotivate the worker to try to engage with them.

“But what is kind of true is, so if you got a kid who doesn't want to spend time with you. You have limited time. You don't spend as much time with them. And, yeah, so I can think of a couple times where it was like, you know, certainly you still kind of do what you're supposed to do. But that like extra, that above and beyond… it can be harder. Because you don't necessarily work as hard to keep coming at what feels like a brick wall.” – Private Caseworker 10

Some caseworkers shared similar views, and suggested that since they had such limited time to spend with youth that they tended to focus their time and efforts on youth who appeared more motivated and open to their support. Caseworkers described “great kids” as vocal, “on top of things” and making “reasonable requests”. These “great kids” were noted by caseworkers for maintaining composure during meetings and maintaining their placements. For caseworkers, youth who initiated participation and made “reasonable requests” motivated workers to engage with them and involve them in planning. For example, in the excerpt below a caseworker responded to my question about how youth are engaged in service planning activities.

“So…we’ve had some great kiddos who’ve been really on top of it and vocalizing that and so that makes it really easy cause if they request something that’s reasonable or makes sense that we definitely try to get that done.”—Public Caseworker 2

When asked how they assessed a youth’s capacity for participation or their emotional competence, caseworkers replied that they asked the youth’s parents or caregivers or they used their judgment based on the child’s age and behaviors. For example, in the excerpt below a
caseworker describes their perspective about how youth’s behaviors impact their right to have a say:

“And so like, if a kid is making..., illegal mistake after illegal mistake... at some point we just have to say, ‘sorry you don't get a say, this is how it has to be, cause you’re a kid and you’re not making the right decisions for yourself’, so if they've earned your trust and they're not doing that, I think they get a lot more say in how things go.”

– Public Caseworker 2

In the quote above, the caseworker suggests a view that participation is a privilege and that youth who misbehave lose their privilege of participating. The majority of caseworkers in this study did not share such views of youth or their participation. For example, in the excerpt below a caseworker describes their view about challenges that workers face in engaging with children.

“...I've heard a lot of people talk about... ‘oh those kids, feel so entitled. They think they should just have all these things.’ And it's like, but, shouldn't they though? Shouldn’t they have those things...?

I think it's really easy to... fall into the... trap of looking at the kids like they’re the problem, when really they had nothing to do with coming into foster care. It's because of things that happened with adults. And even, and a lot of times they do display really manipulative behaviors, but that's actually a survival strategy for them...

I think it’s really easy to look at kids like, they're doing things wrong, when they're just doing the best that they can to survive. And kind of lose compassion for them. And when you do that...and you're in a position where you have a lot of say in what happens to kids. I mean these are huge, this is a huge, like deciding whether or not a child can go back to their family is a huge decision, and I don't think it's made...with, like, compassion...

But I think that we have to be careful not to become really burnt out and negative about the children in the families that we're working with. Cuz then we're not making good decisions. And then like, no wonder they're acting like we're out to get them. Because they're not really considering them as people.” – Private Caseworker 13

In the excerpt above, the caseworker describes workers falling into a “trap” where they view youth and youth’s behaviors as the main problem rather than the family and social problem that the youth and their families face. The caseworker implies that a youth’s negative behaviors are not a sign that they cannot engage but rather that they may be responding to a difficult
situation using the tools that they have available to them. The caseworker suggests a view that children should be treated with dignity and valued as human beings, no matter what their behaviors might be.

“It’s all about age and development.” Most caseworkers indicated that they viewed the child’s age as being very important in determining whether they can be involved and what that involvement looks like. For example, while many caseworkers suggested they more readily involve older youth in attending meetings or planning processes, they suggested that they were more likely to involve younger children by asking them about their needs and feelings rather than including them in a more active process. In the excerpt below, a caseworker responded to my question asking how they involve children in care and safety planning.

“Oh right, so when a kid is older, so, you know, in their teenage years, we... try to involve them in whatever we think they can handle or what would be good for them. So sometimes having the child in court, it would not be a good idea because...maybe the parents are arguing about the child or whatever the thing is. But when we do FPM if the kid’s old enough we try to...have them involved so that they get some say over their own lives...

When it comes to younger children it is harder to do that. But you just, I try to always ask kids like, ‘is there anything you need from me?’... so I think that's the best way to just make sure I’m checking in with them and giving them the opportunity to...know what they need...” – Public Caseworker 2

In the excerpt above, the caseworker shares their view that age matters for youth participation. What is notable here is how age is described as a gateway for participation, but how even older youth, in the view of this caseworker, may not be involved based on the caseworker’s own views about an older youth’s capabilities. This view was shared widely among caseworkers, who expressed the importance of developmental and age appropriate involvement for children. In a surprising moment, a caseworker shared a view that indicated that the tendency to focus on assessing a youth’s developmental capacity for participation could extended to
interactions with a child’s parents as well. In the excerpt below, the caseworker describes their perspective about how they involve the child, just like anyone else:

“I guess I don't see in the way that I involve a child as much different than anybody else really. I mean just it's all depending on age and developmental level but that's the same with parents who maybe have, um, unique developmental challenges or something like that. I guess the kids just a member of the family too, so whatever makes sense for that individual child to involve them in, in their care.

And like, if you've gotten services in place, you know, making sure that when you go over you’re having, you’re talking with the kid about, “How do you feel about (*service) ... you know things like that. Just maintaining knowledge about what's going on, what goals are being worked on., things like that, so that you can address that with the kiddo in an age-appropriate way.” – Public caseworker 4

The caseworker described their view about developmental appropriateness of participation in response to my question asking how children are involved with getting information about their case. In the excerpt, the caseworker suggests a hesitation to view the child as a client themselves and also as a member of a client family. In stating that even an adult parent’s involvement may be predicated by their capacities, this caseworker suggests that their views about development and capacities impacts not only the way they work with children and youth but also could have implications for the way they approach their work with adults who they view as less capable.

Although, the view that adult parents must also be developmentally capable of participating was not expressed by other caseworkers in this study, caseworkers did generally express an idea that the same basic skills used for rapport building and building relationships with adult clients could be used with children. However, some caseworkers described this in terms of social work ethics and values, and suggested that they consider how to work with children with the same respect and consideration as they would with an adult. For example, in an interview with a caseworker who uniquely had shared a lot of examples about how they engaged youth said:
"I think that... specific to engaging with children and youth. My experience of at least the state provided training on that is that it's very lacking and very minimal... so I think that the way that I have been able to... get support or training or kind of build my skills in that, is... seeing it as part of a kind of a parallel process with how we would engage the parents or the adults that we work with. That, you know those same, kind of basic social work principles of being genuine, authentic and attending to the environment... I think just kind of using supervision to think about how to kind of naturally apply those to situations with kids." – Public Caseworker 5

In the excerpt above, the caseworker expressed how they viewed engaging with children as utilizing the same basic social work principles as they use when working with adults. Prior to this statement in the interview the caseworker was describing how to build a “strong, trust-based relationship” with children. The caseworker implied that they viewed children as being valuable people who have the same entitlements as adults when it comes to relationships. The caseworker also pointed to a lack of training and support for learning how to engage with children and shared a view that supervision is one way they feel supported in doing engaging work with children.

**Worker Role and System Goals.**

“...I was expecting that a lot of my work would be done with children directly...since starting, or doing the work for a little bit, in prevention especially, we don't do a ton of our work with kids. It's a lot done with the caregivers of the children...because we're at the point in the child welfare continuum that a decision has been made that even if these children are high-risk they can likely remain in their home. So these caregivers are going to be, are going to continue to stay their primary caregivers. So that was surprising for me that I wasn’t doing a ton of hands-on work with children themselves.”

– Public Caseworker 4

Caseworkers’ views of their own role as well as system goals appeared to be influential in terms of their views about children’s participation. Although all caseworkers indicated that they viewed their primary responsibility as keeping children safe, caseworkers appeared to have different views about who their primary client was which seemed to be linked to their child welfare area and the age of the children that they worked with. Caseworkers tended to view their
role as either primarily supporting parents or as being responsible for children. Caseworkers in CPS, family preservation, prevention, and adoption generally viewed the parent as their primary client, whereas, foster care and independent living caseworkers more often indicated that the child was their primary client. The exception here was when foster care caseworkers had younger child clients, who were not transition age youth. In this case, foster care caseworkers suggested they viewed their primary client as the foster parents rather than the child.

**Parent as Primary Client.** Caseworkers who indicated they viewed the parent as their primary client suggested that they often work with youth through their parent. Supporting parents was described by caseworkers as educating parents about trauma, discussing parenting techniques, and linking parents to resources. There was an emphasis in particular on supporting parents in changing their response to their child’s behaviors.

Caseworkers in this group indicated that they wanted parents to feel comfortable with them, wanted to be helpful for parents, and sometimes felt that reaching out to or making a connection with a youth would negatively impact the relationship between themselves and the parent or the parent and the youth. For example, some caseworkers described asking parent’s preferences for how they wanted the caseworker to interact with the family and the children. If parents were not comfortable with a caseworker meeting with the child one-on-one then the caseworker would meet with everyone together. Caseworkers in this group appeared to view parental support as the main strategy for keeping children safe and indicated they believed a safe and stable family would mean that the child is safe and stable themselves.

“Because people also say, you know, family engagement should never come before child safety and I agree but I think that family engagement, in a lot of cases can dictate child safety...because, if you have these important, or not important, if you have these consistent meaningful relationships with families, with youth, you’re going to be able to have harder conversations with them, in a way that they’re actually going to receive it.”

— Public Caseworker 4
Some caseworkers in this group further suggested that they do not feel they need to work directly with children and youth because they viewed working with the family unit, i.e. the caregivers, as sufficient for maintaining safety for a child.

**Youth as Primary Client.** Caseworkers who suggested their primary client was the child or youth, indicated that they were concerned with either having responsibility for keeping youth safe, or supporting youth in taking responsibility for themselves. Caseworkers in this group indicated that they were working on behalf of youth towards achieving permanency, finding placements and working towards independence. Similar to the parent as primary client group, caseworkers in this group also indicated that they provide support for parents, especially through teaching foster parents about trauma and parenting skills. In addition, caseworkers in this group expressed wanting parents to feel comfortable with their involvement.

Young people generally shared a view that parents, family members and caregivers should be involved in child welfare processes, asked about their views and taking an active role in planning. However, young people’s views seemed to differ greatly from caseworkers in that they viewed caseworkers as primarily responsible for supporting children. In addition, young people shared that being seen and being included was necessary for them to feel safe. Young people suggested for example, that one-on-one meetings with caseworkers, especially while in foster care were critical for youth to have opportunities to ask for help or advice. However, caseworkers often described visits as largely administrative, where a youth was “seen”, tasks were completed and then the visit was documented. For example, in the quotation below a caseworker described a typical visit with a youth.

“Cause usually when I go to visit her, you know, you're just getting something done. Like ‘oh, I kinda need this, do this, this... How’re you doing?, You doing ok?, You need anything? Ok, alright bye,’” — Public Caseworker 3
**Caseworkers’ Personal History.** Caseworkers’ personal backgrounds and histories appeared to shape how they thought about children’s participation and why they thought it might or might not matter. For example, there were a few caseworkers who disclosed experiencing violence and trauma in their childhood or having been in foster care as a youth, which made them feel an affinity with youth in care. These caseworkers especially seemed to be attuned to thinking about the child’s perspective and to thinking about how to involve youth in a way that is meaningful and safe for them. For example, caseworkers in this group described always seeing their child clients one-on-one at every visit, because they remembered what it felt like to not be able to speak up as children themselves and wanted children to feel safe and comfortable getting help when they need it.

In addition to personal background, some caseworkers described how their experiences working with children informed their practice. For example, one caseworker described being in the process of making a placement decision for a child. Prior to finalizing the placement, they asked the child how they would feel about living with the relative whom the worker had identified as the “safety plan”. At this point, the child disclosed that the relative had abused them and the caseworker immediately began to work on a different placement option for the child. The caseworker shared that this experience helped them see the importance of asking a child about their preferences and making sure the child knows where they are going to be placed before making the decision. This caseworker emphasized asking about a child’s preferences throughout the interview as it was something that the caseworker could see as being particularly powerful to help keep kids safe.

Overall, young people and caseworkers appeared to have different views about what children’s participation is. Young people’s interviews reflected a comprehensive view about how
to make children’s participation meaningful for them. Namely, young people described a model for children’s participation, which includes: recognition, supportive communication and involvement. These elements include subjective aspects of participation, relating to how children feel about themselves and their participation. They also include objective elements of participation relating to access to child-friendly materials, and to outcomes in terms of seeing an impact from their participation.

Caseworkers in this study appeared to have a more instrumental view of children’s participation when compared with young people’s views. In addition, caseworkers emphasized contingencies for youth participation, indicating that they may be gatekeepers for children’s participation. The following section will explore opportunities that caseworkers shared about how they engage with children and youth which converge with what young people shared about what meaningful participation looks like for them.

**Opportunities for Children’s Participation**

“... most of the young people that I’ve talked to... don't feel like they have a right to be a part of the process anyway... personally, I’ve tried to work hard on letting them know. Because they have to sign a... the 14 and overs, sign a 'youth rights agreement'. Letting them know, A) ‘you have the right to participate in court, you have a right to be involved in your service plan’, or whatever. But... I don’t know, there's still a disconnect there. Where oftentimes they, as minors, don't feel like they still have that voice or that right. Or sometimes I've heard that it has been a fear of, they’re afraid of what they might say, how it might affect them. Sometimes that comes from the fact of, you know, they were with their parents and then they said something and now they're in foster care.

Cause I’ve had youth that have been in situations in foster homes or residential and they told me things that after the fact. And I’m like, ‘why didn't you tell me that when it was going on’. But it was because they didn't know what would happen. And something bad probably would have happened. You know, they probably would have moved. They don't know where they're gonna go to and that fear alone was just like, ‘no, I'll just deal with the evil that I know’. So oftentimes, I just have youth that just don't completely understand that they do have the right to have a voice.”

— Public caseworker 3
In the excerpt above, a caseworker describes how youth might not feel that they have the right to participate and how fear of using their voice can be a barrier for youth to get involved. The caseworker also identified a disconnect between what is written in the policy regarding foster youth’s participation rights and what youth experience during their time in care. The caseworker suggested that perhaps the problem lies in youth not understanding that they have a voice. However, this contrasts with views of young people who suggested that they know they have a voice but did not feel supported in using their voice and seeing that it have a positive impact on their situation.

**Strategies for Youth Participation**

This section presents findings related to the second research question: *where are there opportunities for strengthening children’s participation in child welfare care and safety planning?* The main findings related to this research question came about through a process of identifying convergence between what caseworkers said they were doing to involve and engage youth and what young people shared was important to them to make participation meaningful. As described in the methods section, the themes in this section were shared with caseworkers and young people who participated in group discussions. Data from both the original interviews and from the group meetings will be drawn on in this section. In figure 3 below, the nine strategies have been organized under the three themes from young people’s views of participation; (1) supportive communication, (2) recognition, and (3) involvement.
Figure 7. Strategies for Youth Participation

STRATEGIES FOR YOUTH PARTICIPATION in CHILD WELFARE PLANNING

**Recognition**

"BOOKENDING"  
Starting and ending interactions with positivity and connection. Using each interaction with youth to show them they are valued.

**Supportive Communication**

MAXIMIZING Visits  
Making visits fun (walk in the park, go for a drive, playing games). Making visits personal and comfortable for youth.

**Involvement**

Being BOLDLY VULNERABLE  
Sharing personal stories and emotions to build trust with youth. Leveling the playing field.

Taking an INTEREST  
Learning what is important to each youth. Taking an interest in them, their passions, and their viewpoints.

MAKING paperwork meaningful  
Including youth's voices in their story and plans for their own life.

ADVOCATING for and with Youth  
Showing youth that workers have their back. Supporting youth in self-advocacy.

SHOWING UP  
Continuing to showing up, again and again, and again. Breaking through brick walls and building trust.

"LISTENING EAR"  
Hearing youth's words spoken and unspoken. Supporting youth in communicating their views.

SHARING power  
Giving youth real options. Being transparent and honest. Providing youth with information to empower and build understanding.

Recognition.

"... so it is hard, you know. And I mean are there, are there ways around it? Absolutely...it doesn't matter what age kid I'm working with, like, I do a ton of over-emoting at all ages. Because that's what I've got. I've got X amount of time with you and so how do I communicate, in the shortest amount of time possible that, like, you have value just because you exist. Full stop. It's like, there's no more to it. Your existence is enough for me. That is the thing that I love more than anything else in the whole entire
world…because that may be the only greeting that kid got that week, that communicated them in any way, shape or form, that somebody was happy to see them. That somebody loved the fact that they existed on this planet. And so even if the rest of my session is, like, terrible, and awful, and we’re talking about really hard stuff. They at least got that much.”

– Private Caseworker 10

Recognition was a theme that emerged from interviews with young people, which represented views about wanting to feel cared for, valued, and recognized as whole people. As the excerpt above indicates, some caseworkers described considering how to show youth that they were valuable and cared about, using whatever time they have available. The caseworker quoted above was responding to a question about what they think about the challenges that exist in building relationships with youth. They shared that although there were many barriers to doing relational work in child welfare; specifically, the focus on tasking, too many cases, and not enough administrative support; that there are moments of opportunity for workers to do little things that show youth they are cared about. Three youth participation strategies that caseworkers described seemed to be linked to the theme of recognition: bookending, taking an interest, and showing up. Each of these has to do with “presenting the caring” and showing youth that they are valued and cared about.

**Bookending.** One approach that caseworkers described for supporting youth involvement was taking time to make youth’s interactions with them positive and doing small things to show youth compassion. For example, one caseworker described “bookending” visits with some positive conversation or activity that was not related to completing a task. Young people recalled that workers who took even a few moments to relate and not be all about business helped them feel more valued and cared for. For caseworkers, doing the small things helped them feel a stronger bond to the youth they were working with and to feel good about the interaction. For
young people this was important to them because it helped them to feel valued and not like they were just another task for workers to check off.

**Taking an Interest.** Caseworkers suggested that taking an interest in what was important to youth and learning about their passions and interests helped them relate to youth. For example, caseworkers took time to learn about a youth’s passions for writing, painting, singing, playing sports, as well as a youth’s favorite TV shows, video games they like to play or music they like to listen to. In the excerpt below, a caseworker describes showing interest in youth culture and children’s interests:

“…[kids] might have mentioned to me they really love, paw patrol. And then I'll go to their home and they've got paw patrol stuff everywhere. And I'm like, 'Yes, you said in your interview...you liked paw patrol’. ‘Look at how much paw patrol you have’. Like you have all the characters, and like, letting them teach you what their names are if you don't already know. Like kids will be really impressed with me that 'I'll be like, I know that, that's sky, that's chase’...So like, I try to know those kinda things... Like, to act like I have no interest or know nothing about something that's that important to them. Like how are they supposed to trust or respect me, when I wasn't interested enough in the thing that they find interesting. So, I find that kids remember that kinda stuff that they remember, that you remember that about them.” — Public Caseworker 1

The caseworker quoted above links taking an interest in what is important to children to building trust. This view was echoed by other caseworkers who found that taking an interest in youth helped them build a more meaningful relationship and made them feel more successful in their work. For example, in the quote below a caseworker illustrates how connecting to a child through their interests is helpful in making tasks feel better for kids.

“...I think it’s just...trying to connect with the kid. That's what... they look for... 'you like...Hannah Montana. Oh my God I used to watch it!' That’s a whole different then just kind of saying, ‘you have to do this Casey life skills [assessment], I have to document it.’”

— Public Caseworker 12

Young people shared that it was important to them that caseworkers saw their whole selves and not just focused on their identity as a foster youth or youth in care.
expressed that even if they seem to have a “hard” personality, they still want to be shown that they are cared for and cared about. Many young people in this study described at least one caseworker in their life that had done just that by encouraging them and believing in them.

**Showing Up.** Caseworkers described being present for youth by continuing to show up again and again, despite the difficulties that youth might be experiencing or the multitude of tasks on the caseworker’s plate. Caseworkers showed up at times of crisis to comfort and support youth. Caseworkers also described giving youth space to reflect and observe, in order to build trust. Caseworkers also attended events that were important to the youth, to show their support and encouragement. For example, in the excerpt below a caseworker described showing up for youth and suggests they felt this helped form a bond.

> “But I spent time with them, I took them... off site, things they didn’t get to do very often...just got to know them. Sometimes would, you know, pick them up at school. Or I would be the only one to go to like their school play or... you know, drop them off at work. Things like that...so finding out that I was the only one who knew about this school thing or that, you know, dance thing, or whatever. I was able to be that support...I think that just naturally, that creates a... quicker level of trust. Even if they pretend they didn’t care that you came. They really care. And even if they, you know, want to pretend that, you know, they don’t want you there...I think they do.”

— Private Caseworker 11

Some caseworkers indicated that they felt that being the one who always shows up for potentially traumatic events in the youth’s life makes it more difficult for them to connect to and build relationships with a youth. For example, as one caseworker shared:

> “...maybe you’re the person who showed up when they were removed from their home or...if something goes wrong in a foster home, like you’re the one who’s going to show up and so after they see you over and over again in that role, I think that that can be difficult -- but ultimately its just about building trust and if you can prove to them that...you are there for their best interest and they can believe that then I think that’s the best way to make the relationship work...”

— Public Caseworker 2

Generally, caseworkers found that being present and showing up for youth again and again helped them build trust with youth. Young people expressed how they felt valued and
cared for when caseworkers stuck with them through good times and bad. In showing up and being present in the youth’s life, not only during times of crisis, caseworkers suggested that they youth can see that they were important and that they mattered.

**Supportive Communication.** Supportive communication was a theme that emerged from young people’s views about wanting to have accessible and relevant information about their case, education about the system, and processing time to support them in understanding what was happening. Caseworkers in this study shared three ways that they engage youth that seemed most directly linked to this theme: maximizing visits, making paperwork meaningful, and having a listening ear.

**Maximizing Visits.**

“So it’s more of a, being a person to a child and not much of a worker working....because when you come with that mentality of, ‘...I'm going to get all this information from you.’ That's not gonna work...And I know that information is what we need, but a lot of times when I see my kids, I might do it like once every other month that I see them. I take them to get ice cream or a drink and we just... I don’t like to do visits that much in the home, when I talk to my kids”

– Public Caseworker 12

Caseworkers described maximizing monthly visits to make visits fun, comfortable and useful for them and for youth. For example, caseworkers go on walks with youth, go to the park or playground, take youth to the mall or a cafe, or drive around town with youth listening to music. Even little moments of one-on-one time with youth were valued by caseworkers and young people alike. Visits were seen as valuable for both caseworkers and young people, however, there were many challenges caseworkers faced in completing monthly visits. Caseworkers described that visits require a lot of planning, coordination and often involve lengthy travel times to get to a youth’s placement. Some caseworkers described visits being more difficult when they experience physical violence or feel threatened during a visit.
Young people wanted caseworkers, especially foster care workers, to do more pop-in visits, to check on each youth’s health and safety. Young people recalled sometimes feeling unsafe in a foster home, not getting the help they needed and feeling trapped when they did not have an opportunity to discreetly speak with their caseworker. Young people felt one-on-one time was important not only to make sure their perspective was heard but also to help them feel comfortable talking to caseworkers about stuff they might not want to share in front of their family.

Young people and caseworkers shared that putting away the paperwork and just taking a few minutes to talk, play, or take a walk helps build connection and helps youth feel safer. When caseworkers took time, even little amounts, to spend one-on-one with youth, it made youth feel valued and cared about. caseworker shared that one-to-one time helped them feel like they were keeping youth safer and making a stronger connection with youth.

Making paperwork meaningful.

“...I use their language, you know, too... and when they see that, like, if they use kind of like, their terminology or, you know, slang or words that I never heard of because I’m not cool anymore. Like I’ll put that in there, and when they see that... it’s always fun to see their reaction. They’re like, ‘oh my God! You really put that in there!?’ I’m like, ‘that was your goal right, that what you said you wanted to do, so why wouldn’t I put it in there?’ ...you know and really make it a like youth-led thing. Cuz, they hear that a lot. I think a lot of people say like, youth-led, strengths-based, blah, blah blah, blah. But like, are you really doing that? You know, is that really, is that the purpose of what you’re doing? You know, or is this another thing that's more helpful to grown-ups than it is to the kids, kinda thing.” – Private Caseworker 6

In the excerpt above, a caseworker described using the youth’s own words in their planning and goal setting paperwork. Some caseworkers developed planning documents themselves where they could include youth views and present information in a more youth friendly manner. However, this meant that sometimes they were doing double the paperwork, one version for their own use and another to meet requirements. Young people described
wanting more accessible documentation that was in their preferred language, disability inclusive, and youth friendly and to have their perspective included in the paperwork. Young people’s views about the importance of youth friendly documentation mirrored that of the caseworker in the excerpt above. For example, a young person shared their frustration with receiving paperwork that was not accessible:

“…because of what I know now, you know, in understanding the profession, you got to do a lot of paperwork. You know, like visits and stuff. But I mean, I don’t know, like especially, if a kid is still in high school...You get a bunch of paper, you know, black and white, black and white, a bunch of words. I don’t know. I mean, this is not, this is not for me. It’s not communication…”

– Young person 5

As the excerpt indicates, accessible, relevant paperwork was important for young people to feel that they have the tools they need to understand what is happening and then take part in the process. Also, young people wanted to be seen, heard, and understood and having their perspective included in paperwork is one way to show youth that this is happening and that their perspective matters.

**Listening Ear.** Some caseworkers described listening deeply and with empathy to what youth had to say. They wanted to hear what youth had to say as well as what was unspoken; listening between words, listening for hesitations and silences. One caseworker described it like this:

“...I'll ask them a question, and yes they may say ‘no’, but there's a ‘but’ behind it. And it's just having that listening ear, to listen beyond.”

– Public Caseworker 3

The quote above suggests that having a listening ear is all about paying attention to youth and listening to what they have to express, even if it is not communicated verbally. Some caseworkers indicated challenges communicating with non-verbal youth, especially young children or youth who have a disability, due to a lack of training, resources and support. Also,
some caseworkers described having concerns about a youth’s safety when the youth were unable, due to a disability, to verbally communicate their needs, experiences and preferences.

Young people described experiencing challenges in communicating their views with caseworkers who did not speak their preferred language. Young people shared that they wanted youth to have support in communicating their feelings and perspectives. For example, they suggested caseworkers talk through options and information with youth and proactively ask questions. Young people suggested that caseworkers slow down and allow youth to have time to process what is happening and what is important to them instead of asking them questions about their preferences right before a meeting, during a meeting or at a home visit in front of their family. Caseworkers felt they could more effectively communicate with youth and more successfully understand the youth’s perspective when they used their “listening ear”.

Involvement. Involvement emerged as a theme from young people sharing their views about what active youth involvement might look like, including seeing actions resulting from sharing their views and having real options. Three strategies for youth participation shared by caseworkers appeared to be most directly related to this theme: being boldly vulnerable, advocating for and with youth, and sharing power.

Being Boldly Vulnerable. Caseworkers described sharing stories about their personal life and experiences in order to relate and connect with youth. Young people suggested that this type of sharing helps them feel connected, find common ground and learn to trust caseworkers. One caseworker described having a difficult time connecting to a youth and then offering information about themselves, which made an impact for that youth.

“I am somebody that believes in when it’s appropriate, self-disclosure can be... really helpful. And can be something... that only helps... Not only to connect you to the client but to make them feel like it's not a one-way street. And that they’re not the only ones who have experienced something like that. So, it just worked really well in that moment.
“And I just, her face was just so like, “Oh my god!” You know, “thanks for telling me that.”” – Private Caseworker 6

A few caseworkers described self-disclosure as a way to connect, relate and help youth feel more comfortable with them. However, caseworkers expressed feeling conflicted about being able to get personal with youth while also maintaining an emotional and professional distance. Some caseworkers described feeling that it was important to avoid emotional attachment or emotional responses, but at the same time described feeling an emotional connection to youth. As one caseworker noted, “you might be the only person in that person's life that they have any sort of trusting relationship with”.

Young people described how self-sharing may help youth feel more comfortable sharing their own stories with caseworkers. Young people shared that youth may more deeply relate and trust caseworkers when they feel like they have common ground. Caseworkers feel that self-sharing is important to level the playing field and disrupt the power imbalance between caseworkers and youth. In being boldly vulnerable, caseworkers are sending a message to youth that they are not alone and that they can trust their caseworker to have empathy and compassion for them.

**Advocating for and with Youth.** Advocating for youth helped caseworkers build trust with youth. For example, in speaking up for youth in meetings with school officials, caseworkers showed youth support and compassion. A few caseworkers also described advocating to keep a youth on their caseload or advocating for a youth to remain at a school or community during a placement change. In the excerpt below, one caseworker describes speaking up for a youth in a school meeting.

“*But, again, there’s a situation that occurred at school. Where his school’s trying to put him out. And so I came to that meeting and defended him... because I felt like the school was picking on him. He’d been in this school, this was his senior year. It was the last*
semester. He's really close to graduating...And all the same behaviors that he's been doing, he's been doing all three years, it was fine but now that SPORTS seasons over with now, you all are picking with him? I was like there's more to this than that....and from that moment I feel like he, you know, heard me advocating for him....and so our relationship kind of changed that moment cause now if I ask him to do something, he'll do it...like if I... need to see him. You know, he'll be amenable to that. He'll make the time for us to sit down and talk or whatever.” – Public Caseworker 3

The caseworker suggested that when the youth heard the caseworker advocating for him he was much more willing to work with the caseworker. Young people shared that they wanted workers to continue to fight for them, represent their interests and support them in advocating for themselves as well. For example, young people recalled wanting workers to advocate for keeping them on their caseloads. Young people also suggested that caseworkers could advocate by standing up for youth in foster care and residential settings and advocating for youth voices to be heard by other professionals and family members.

For young people and caseworkers, worker advocacy appeared to be a path towards building a meaningful connection. Young people felt that they wanted support in building their own advocacy skills, not just to impact their future but also their present. Caseworkers found that advocacy was a way to connect with youth who may have been “brick walls” and build trust with youth.

Sharing Power.

“And a lot of it to you is about offering, instead of ... when you have to tell a child no, the idea is to try to find a way...So it's, kind of, trying to find ways to work with them, to share power with them, to offer them choices, to offer them compromises ... and then, kind of, saving the “no’s” for like they're really big things. Cuz sometimes you do have to tell a child no. But instead of it being them hearing no all day long because they're so impulsive and they're always getting into trouble... trying to find ways to like, yeah, give them a chance to redo things. Or give them options, like, both choices that you're okay with, that they get to pick. So that they feel more control...and kind of doing that. So you're building a pattern of them having safe and empowered experiences. Then over time they do it more naturally.” – Private Caseworker 13
Keeping promises, being honest, and giving youth real options were ways that caseworkers balanced power in working with youth. As the excerpt above indicates, for caseworkers sharing power was about presenting youth with real options and supporting them in being involved in decision making, even as a younger child. Many caseworkers indicated that they were challenged by empowering youth while also being an authority figure in the youth’s life. Young people wanted their own vulnerabilities to be recognized, but did not want to be defined by their vulnerabilities. Young people wanted to have real choices and to be involved in decisions made about their own lives, to be informed about what was going on and to have a powerful presence at any meeting about them even if they did not attend in person. Young people wanted support to express their true feelings, views and opinions, even if they are young and even if the conversations are difficult.

For young people, having real options gave them some control over their own life. Whereas, if they were only asked about their feelings after a decision had been made, it made them feel like they were not important enough, smart enough or good enough to have a say. As one young person shared: “I’m trusting you with my life.” In taking steps to empower youth, caseworkers send a message that they also trust and value youth.

This section shared caseworkers’ strategies for engaging with children and youth which appeared to be consistent with what young people shared makes participation meaningful for them. As indicated above, caseworkers described considering how to show youth they were valued and important, how to do deep and reflective listening in order to better understand a youth’s perspective, and how to share power with children and youth so that they can be meaningfully involved. The findings from this section indicate that not only is it possible for caseworkers to implement children’s participation rights in practice, but some workers are
already taking steps in that direction. Young people who participated in the follow-up meeting generally shared that they were appreciative and glad to hear about the ways caseworkers in this study were striving to do relational, participatory work with children and youth. When asked which strategy they felt was most important for caseworkers to consider using in their everyday practice with youth, one participant responded this way:

“...honestly, I couldn't choose just one. I think all of them [participation strategies] are amazing things and that it would help a lot of kids if social workers could be more like that. I mean, I feel like kids in foster care are more broken as is. So someone keeping their promises, and having someone to trust, and then... like [caseworkers] telling [children] like [about the caseworker’s] past and things that [the caseworker has] been through. And letting [children] trust [caseworkers]. I think that would be very helpful. And...like going to like events and stuff, and like supporting, instead of like... just feeling like another kid on their caseload...” -- Young person 6

As indicated in the excerpt above, young people viewed these participation strategies as potentially making a big difference in helping youth to feel valued and supported by caseworkers. See appendix M for additional messages that young people passed along to caseworkers in this study. Although these strategies seem to resonate for both caseworkers and young people, it was evident that not all caseworkers were utilizing these or similar approaches. Also, some caseworkers indicated that they chose to do child-centered or participatory practices because they personally felt it was important and that moments where they were able to do this relational work were rare and on the margins, rather than an integral part of their standard work.

The following section could offer some insight into why participatory practices appear to be taking place inconsistently and on the margins, why caseworkers may experience difficulty in building relationships with and meaningfully engaging with children and young people in their everyday practice and also why, as some young people suggested, youth may find it difficult to work with caseworkers as well.
Challenges to Children’s Participation

This section presents findings related to challenges faced in making children’s participation a part of standard practice. During the interviews with caseworkers and young people, a consistent theme emerged across groups that reflected systemic disempowerment. For example, systemic disempowerment emerged when caseworkers described feeling frustrated by inequitable resources or inadequate supports to be able to take time to spend with young people. For young people, systemic disempowerment showed up when they described how worker stress could make them feel like they are a burden to workers, and sometimes this feeling of being a burden would keep them from disclosing problems they were facing. In comparing young people’s and caseworkers’ perspectives, it became clear that both groups experience systemic disempowerment and that this could be the main driver for workers not feeling able or supported enough to do the relational, participatory practice that young people shared was important to them. Systemic disempowerment could also impact how children and youth feel about working and collaborating with adults especially those who are viewed as part of the system that may feel oppressive.

Systemic Disempowerment

Figure 3 below illustrates the theme of systemic disempowerment. The figure includes caseworkers’ views on the left and young people’s views on the right. The middle column includes categories of disempowerment that emerged from the interviews. Categories in green were reflected in interviews with both caseworkers and young people. Categories in yellow were only reflected in interviews with young people. Examples of what the categories look like for caseworkers and young people flank the disempowerment column. The following section will
briefly explore each category of systemic disempowerment from perspectives of caseworkers and young people.

**Figure 8. Systemic Disempowerment**

"[The system] doesn't follow what is biologically, physiologically and emotionally known to us from generation, to generation, to generation across cultures about what relationships are and how they work. They don't work well under shame, they don't work well under stress, and pressure, and anxiety... They work well when people feel seen and heard. And that isn’t about having an audience. That, that is about an internal feeling that I have. That isn’t about whether or not 15 people sat across the table and I got to say what I’ve needed to say. That’s really just about me being able to communicate what I need to communicate at any given moment and having somebody across from me reflect back that they really actually got what I said. And that doesn’t mean a 2 p.m. time slot on a Tuesday."

—Private Caseworker 10
As the excerpt suggests, caseworkers in this study overwhelmingly viewed the system itself as a main barrier to using relational practice and enabling children’s meaningful participation. The excerpt above was from a moment in the interview when a worker was discussing their views about processes for involving youth, such as attending planning meetings. In the excerpt, the caseworker described their views about how the system itself produces conditions of disempowerment, which could impact the ways in which a youth may be able to participate and the ways in which a worker may be able to support youth’s participation.

**Feeling Powerless.** The feeling of powerlessness showed up when caseworkers discussed feeling constricted by policies and paperwork, which they felt impacted their ability to be successful in their jobs. Caseworkers described experiencing stress and anxiety especially related to meeting timelines for care and service planning and face to face visits with children and families. They also expressed concern that often policies did not feel like they were focused on meeting youth, family or worker needs but rather were serving auditing or administrative purposes.

“... like we have to find absent parents and we’re required to notify them [about prevention involvement]. And you've got a mom or a dad begging like, ‘I did everything I could to get this person out of my life. They were dangerous. They scared me. Please don't like get all this stirred up again.’ And you, you have to because it's a mandate. And I’m like how, how is that engaging and how do I strike this balance between my, what’s mandated, what policy mandates me to do and doing what I think is the most important, which is engaging this family in order to keep the child safe.” -- Public Caseworker 4

In the excerpt above, a caseworker shared how some policy mandates, even if well intended, may not feel like they are keeping children safe or that they are supportive in engaging with caregivers or children. Other workers in this study shared similar frustrations with policies that seemed not to match with their experiences in practice. They felt that policies were often developed without caseworkers involved and that this could contribute to the mismatch they
experience in their work. Generally, caseworkers described feeling that policies typically have unintended impacts on workers, youth and families and that although a policy may seem to be useful on paper, in practice it may actually impact the caseworker’s capacity to do their job.

Related to this, many caseworkers in this study expressed that documentation felt stressful and ineffective. For example, caseworkers discussed service plans and mandatory paperwork as primarily useful for auditing purposes but not useful for youth or workers themselves. One caseworker described initial service plans as “bogus” because due to the timeliness policies workers find they often do not have enough time to meet with a family or youth prior to developing a service plan. Due to this, they rely on previous documentation from other workers as well as a generic template in order to present a plan to the court in a timely manner. Caseworkers expressed frustration that meeting the timeliness mandates was prioritized in the system over making sure that the service plans were actually appropriate for the child and family involved.

Young People’s Views. Many young people in this study indicated that they experienced the system as being characterized by crisis and constant, unpredictable change. They described often feeling silenced and powerlessness within the system. For example, in the quote below a young person described what it felt like to feel silenced:

“I’m the type of person who kind of like stays back and like keep to myself. So like, when it comes to things, like things I should be telling people, it’s kinda like, you know, like my voice needs to be heard but at the same time it’s kind of like, you know, regardless of what I say you’re not going to follow. So...”

– Young person 4

In the excerpt above, the young person describes what it feels like to have important things to say but feel like using your voice is futile. Young people in this study consistently shared a feeling that their voice had no impact while describing their experiences in care. Young people
also described feeling objectified when they were being talked about but not talked to. As an example, one young person described their experience of being present during a planning meeting.

“I remember being a part of like FAPT meeting and like my foster parents sitting on one side of my social worker, maybe therapist, case manager whatever all at the table. And having a conversation back and forth. Am I’m just like, looking, you know, at them as they speak, whoever’s speaking. And I’m just like looking at them like, ‘what?’ So, you know, I didn’t ever felt like, I had that opportunity to speak up or I was always scared to speak up.”

– Young Person 1

In the excerpt above, the young person shares what it feels like to watch adults have a conversation about them but not feel included in the conversation or feel safe enough to share their own views. The excerpt also implies that the young person feared using their voice. Other young people in this study expressed fearing what would happen if they shared information or expressed their opinions with their workers. In this way, youth’s fears of unknown consequences of them using their voice seem to be a mechanism for their disempowerment because it could make youth feel unsafe in sharing their views. As one young person eloquently expresses in the excerpt below, the effects of feeling silenced while in care may not only impact the young person while they are in care, but may also have lasting impact on their life and impact their well-being.

“... Stop, you know, sending them into the kiddie room. Stop, you know, hushing them up with candy and food. Because, you know, they’re going to regret, regret not being there in those spaces where they could speak up for themselves. And sometimes once you silence that person one time. They will be silenced forever. Some people are not strong enough to after you silence them the first time to speak. Even if it's with you or a different person. This person told me to shut up this time. So, maybe this person is thinking, to tell me to shut up. So I don't want to speak this time.”

– Young Person 7

Feeling Unsupported.

“This is what they did. ‘This is your caseload, here you go.’ I had no training...Like, we have custody of these kids. So they are our kids. So we make legal decisions for these kids. And it's very hard because you think to yourself, ‘am I really making the right decision for these kids?’ especially when it comes to termination of parental rights, that there’s no way
they’re going back…they just gave me seven cases right off the bat as soon as I started. And I was falling apart. And nobody showed me how to do anything. I wasn’t really trained to do it… But now they changed it and like 60 days workers can’t carry any cases… They learned from me. This is horrible.”

– Public Caseworker 12

The excerpt above was from a moment in an interview when a worker was responding to my question about training to engage with children and youth. What is clear in the excerpt is that the worker generally felt unsupported in being successful in their job. Although, the worker notes that the policy has since been changed so that workers have more time to learn how to do their jobs before being responsible for a caseload, the excerpt highlights how system processes may be disempowering for workers and may also directly impact the way they work with children and youth.

Feeling unsupported was a general theme among workers, especially in public agencies. Workers described having a long list of tasks and responsibilities and limited supports and resources, which meant that they tended to prioritize mandatory tasks. In the crunch to get things done workers generally expressed they had little time for the type of emotional and relational work that youth expressed wanting to have and that workers expressed impacts outcomes and their job satisfaction.

Another way that feeling unsupported emerged was when workers described a constant stream of unanticipated events and challenges in their work. Some workers implied that they were working in continual crisis mode and regularly were reacting to situations rather than having time to take a proactive approach. Some workers also described feeling unprepared for the erratic work environment prior to entering their job. Relatedly, many workers in both public and private settings expressed that they had very little training opportunities related to engaging with children and youth directly.
Workers, especially in public agencies also suggested that they wanted more administrative support to be able to spend more time doing relational, engaging work with their clients. For example, they suggested administrative tasks related to getting identification documentation for youth, getting credit bureau reports for youth in foster care, driving youth and families to appointments, and coordinating meetings with other providers, family members and youth could be tasks delegated to an administrator.

**Young People’s Views.** Young people described feeling unsupported especially in being able to communicate their views and in having access to supports that were meaningful for them, such as accessible information, processing time, and well-matched interventions.

**Experiencing Inequity.**

“And when you go to some of these state trainings…just kind of hearing the differences…in philosophy that I think workers have…I think that there could be a lot more focus on a shared philosophy of engagement…because I do think that, unfortunately…there are a lot of social workers, whether it's the culture of the DSS that you come from…who do still take some of that more like, ‘I'm the CPS worker. I'm going to tell you how it is. I'm the foster care worker, I'm gonna tell you how it is.’ So really just shifting…the philosophy and, and making that [engagement]…as integral to child welfare as safety, permanency and well-being.”

– Public Caseworker 5

In the above excerpt, the caseworker describes their perspective that engagement should be central to child welfare practice. The caseworker reflects on their observation about the geographic variability in worker attitudes towards engagement. Caseworkers in this study described inequities in the system when discussing frustrations with limited access to resources for youth they serve, such as a lack of foster homes within a youth’s home community, or a lack of therapeutic treatment options. There was a general feeling that there was a culture of scarcity within child welfare organizations, especially in the public sector. Caseworkers reported that they were doing the best they can with whatever resources they have available, but feeling that generally there was a lack of adequate resources.
Young People’s Views. Young people indicated that they experienced inequity in services and often felt used or misled during their time in care. Many young people suggested that they were upset by lacking the same opportunities as children who were not in foster care, such as having family support. Also, young people generally felt that pre-judgments and assumptions about their behavior impacted whether or not they would be heard by workers. They described feeling that “good” kids don’t get heard because workers don’t feel they need as much support and “bad” kids don’t get heard because workers focus on “bad” behaviors rather than coming from understanding. This is an issue of equity for young people as they described feeling unfairly judged or treated in the system.

Experiencing Violence and Abuse. A few caseworkers described experiencing violence, abuse and racism on the job or feeling emotionally impacted by hearing about youth’s experiences of violence. For example, some caseworkers described being physically or verbally assaulted by family members of youth while doing home visits or even in their office while having a meeting. One caseworker described feeling afraid to be alone during some home visits because of their experiences of violence. In addition, some caseworkers described personally experiencing racism while on the job, either from co-workers or from clients. For example, in the excerpt below a worker shared an experience where a family was openly expressing an anti-Black bias.

“This kid came into care…the family said, ‘I don’t want to have a Black worker.’ And, I’m like?! …They wanted a White worker. And I’m like. You ain’t getting anything. You’re getting me and that’s all. So I’ve been working with them for a year and a half now… They don’t like me at all…” – Public Caseworker 7

Young People’s Views. A number of young people in the study described experiencing violence in their foster placement, especially in a foster home. Many young people also described feeling unable to get help that they needed when they felt unsafe in a foster placement.
For example, in the excerpt below a young person shared their experience of not feeling safe enough to ask for help when needed:

“... I wanted to talk in private but I was forced to talk in front of them. And I didn't want to, like, cuz, I was scared. So, I was still in a foster home where it was like there were multiple kids in the home. I was in a foster home where if I said this, I would get threatened, get beat up and stuff like that. So I couldn't say things I wanted to say, or admit to what I wanted to admit to. In front of everybody else. So, but once I actually, finally moved, cause yeah, I was destroying property and stuff to jeopardize the home I was in...because I didn’t like being there. So I could, So I could actually express to them what was going on.” —Young person 3

In the excerpt the young person described feeling that they had to get “heard” using their behaviors to force a change in placement because they were not supported in sharing their concerns about the placement with their worker in a safe environment. This section has explored categories of systemic disempowerment that emerged from discussions with both caseworkers and young people. The final two categories of systemic disempowerment, feeling responsible and feeling like a task, only emerged in interviews with young people.

**Feeling Responsible.**

“When I would talk to the case managers, you know, I didn't feel like none of them would believe me...it's crazy because when you're in that position, as the foster child or as the client you feel like, oh well, they don't have time. They probably get off at 5. They don't have time to hear my story. Or you're actually being thoughtful of the things they are doing. And the things that they have...So at points, I was just like, oh okay, you know, I don't want to get her [caseworker] in trouble from placing me in this home. Or...I don't want them [foster parents] to... be mad at me or to lose the kids that they have. Because when I was in that home. I wasn't the only foster child in that home. So it’s like, okay, what if this is a good place for them, but not a good place for me. And then when I tell on these people they'll lose their happiness too. So, It’s like, you're thinking about a lot of people's feelings and emotions besides yourself.” — Young person 7

Young people described being made to feel responsible for workers, for their foster families, and even for their biological families. As the excerpt above describes, some young people felt that they did not want to bother or worry their caseworkers by sharing with them difficulties they are experiencing. The excerpt was from a moment in an interview where a
young person was describing why they did not disclose abuse occurring in their foster placement. They suggested that their feelings of not wanting to burden workers and not wanting to get a foster family in trouble led to them not getting help when they needed it.

Young people in this study often noted how busy workers were, how workers were burdened with too many cases, and how workers just did not seem to have time for them. Some young people also shared feeling that their problems weren’t serious enough for workers to pay attention to them. This feeling is echoed in the final category, feeling like a “task”.

**Feeling Like a “Task” Objectified.** Some young people shared that they often felt like a task for workers to complete. Young people in this study noted that workers often seemed rushed and implied that this made them feel unimportant and overlooked. In the excerpt below a young person reflected on challenges workers face in having large caseloads, but then noticing how it felt to think about themselves as a “case”.

“… now going back to paperwork side where a certain caseworker gotta have a certain amount of kids on their caseload, right? So… now because I say that, now I become a datapoint. I’m not a child anymore, I’m just another case, I’m another case. So, you know, I, that’s sad. (*long pause) Yeah.” — Young person 5

As the excerpt indicated, young people in this study did not want to feel like just another case, but wanted to be valued and shown care by workers. When talking about high caseloads for workers a young person reflected that:

“…you need to limit that stuff, take some loads off or something because like. It should not be that. That shouldn’t be the excuse either though. Like, that shouldn’t be like the ‘oh, I got 5 other cases.’ Every time I get another case, ‘oh my god.’ (sarcastic) No that’s not right. Cause what if that was like, …[I] go deliver everybody else’s mail. And just say it was 5 o’clock and just then I had to get off, so I couldn’t get to your house and deliver your mail. Now that’s, you don’t want to hear that. What are you talking about? What the hell, man?! Like, you’re my social worker. You’re the one I’m supposed to tell everything, everything that I’m going through, everything that I gotta issue with or want to do. I’m supposed to tell it to you. You’re supposed to be my voice.” — Young person 8
This section described the theme of systemic disempowerment which emerged as a overarching theme linking together caseworkers and young people’s narratives of challenges faced for making participation meaningful for youth. Although caseworkers and young people have different degrees of social power, both groups appear to be impacted by systemic disempowerment in different ways. Youth’s feelings about experiences in the system and growing up in care seemed to mirror caseworkers’ feelings about trying to help youth with limited resources, time and supports. Both youth and caseworkers appeared to struggle trying to find “a way out of no way”. These findings indicate that systemic disempowerment may be a primary barrier to enabling children’s participation in everyday child welfare practice.

**Conclusion.** This chapter described study findings in three key areas: young people’s and caseworkers’ views of children’s participation, opportunities for children’s participation, and systemic disempowerment as a challenge to implementing children’s participation. Overall, the findings suggest that recognition, supportive communication and involvement are important elements of what meaningful participation looks like for children and youth. In addition, it is indicated that caseworkers may have a more outcome oriented and worker directed view of participation than youth. Some caseworkers are doing participatory approaches with youth that are consistent with what youth value about their own participation. There remain systemic challenges, which could disrupt caseworker efforts to make meaningful youth participation a part of their standard practice. The next chapter will contextualize these findings, discuss study limitations, assess study quality, and describe implications from this study for researchers, educators and policy makers.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications

The perspectives shared by young people and caseworkers in this study extend and add complexity to understandings about what children’s participation looks like and where there are opportunities for implementing children’s participation rights within child welfare systems. The findings concur with previous studies, which have indicated that generally children and youth feel they are not heard or involved in child welfare planning or decision-making processes (Bell, 2012; Cossar et al., 2013; Mcleod, 2006, 2007; Mildred & Plummer, 2009; Nybell, 2013; Thomas & O’Kane, 1999; Van Bijleveld et al., 2015). The findings also extend studies, which have identified that a staged developmental perspective and worker views of children and childhood may impact the way they approach or work with children (Arbeiter & Toros, 2017; Fern, 2014; Vis et al., 2012). In addition, the findings are consistent with other studies that have revealed major system and worker level barriers to using participatory approaches with children and youth in care (Van Bijleveld et al., 2015; Vis et al., 2012). Findings from this study reinforce previous studies that have indicated there is a link between children’s subjective views of their well-being and their feelings about their participation rights (Lloyd & Emerson, 2015; Ruck et al., 2017).

This chapter will describe ways in which findings from this study expand knowledge in the field, discuss study limitations, and explore implications for child welfare systems and child welfare policy, social work education and practice, and research in the area of children’s participation rights. The chapter will end with visioning a system supportive of children’s participation.
**Expanding the Knowledge Base**

Findings from this study extend the knowledge base in four critical areas: 1) developing a theoretical model for understanding how youth view meaningful participation, 2) revealing a complex picture of how worker views of childhood, children’s development and system goals could influence children’s participation, 3) suggesting that both caseworkers and young people may experience systemic disempowerment which may be a primary barrier to making children’s participation standard practice 4) indicating that while deeply held views of children may impact a worker’s view of children’s participation, workers still work to engage children and show them they are valued.

**Theorizing Children’s Participation**

The theoretical model of children’s participation that emerged from this study extends the theoretical understanding about what children’s participation is and how it might feel from a young person’s perspective. Recognition, a subjective element, is identified alongside supportive communication and involvement, more objective elements, as core aspects of what meaningful participation might look and feel like for children. Young people’s views of participation in this study appear to be consistent with UNCRC principles which centralize children’s perspectives and experiences as central to conceptualizing meaningful participation (UNCRC, 2013). Also, consistent with other studies in this area (Bell, 2002; Dillon et al., 2016; McLeod, 2006, 2007; Van Bijleved et al., 2020), the narratives shared by young people in this study challenge the view of participation as outcome based and suggest that participation involves both objective, action based elements, and subjective relational elements. Generally, the theoretical model emergent from this study, concurs with Roesch-Marsh and colleagues (2016), Winter’s (2009), & Winter et al.’s (2017) findings in suggesting that meaningful participation is relational and that child
welfare practice should be reframed to focus on relationships and center child and youth engagement in practice.

Comparing youth views model of children’s participation to Lundy’s (2007) and Shier’s (2001) models. The theoretical model of youth’s perceptions of children’s participation in this study was developed differently from the theoretical models for children’s participation described in chapter 2. Both Shier’s (2001) and Lundy’s (2007) models were designed to translate the participatory principles in the UNCRC for implementation in practice and were informed by research suggesting that children lack meaningful opportunities to participate. However, both models lacked direct input from children and youth themselves. Shier later critiqued his own model for lacking an explicit acknowledgement of children’s own agency (2009). In a different approach, the theoretical model developed within this study began with a focus on understanding what makes participation meaningful for young people.

Although the model in this study was more closely linked to youth’s perspectives than previous models, it was built from young adult’s retrospective accounts of their childhood views. Findings from this study suggest that modeling children’s participation, and understanding what meaningful participation looks like and feels like must include children and youth themselves. Future studies should involve children and youth in assessing UNCRC principles of participation in order to deepen theory about what meaningful participation is for children and youth. Also, children and youth should be involved in research identifying how the UNCRC might be convergent with what youth suggest makes participation meaningful for them. In addition, children should be involved in identifying where they may be gaps between the language in the UNCRC and children’s experiences of meaningful participation. Generally, future studies should involve children and youth, especially younger children and children who have disabilities in
further defining and shaping a model of children’s participation that is reflective of children’s own experiences and perspectives.

**Views of Childhood, Developmental Perspectives and System Goals: Influences on Children’s Participation**

Caseworkers’ views of children and childhood, perspectives about children’s development and understanding of system goals appear to relate to how caseworkers think about children’s participation. Consistent with other studies, such as McLeod (2007), Van Bijleveld et al. (2015), and Vis & colleagues (2012), findings from this study indicate that workers are heavily influenced by a staged developmental perspective, which appears to influence their views about what children’s participation looks like and which children are able to participate. In addition, worker views about system goals and how to achieve safety and support for children and youth imply a model of practice that focuses on working with caregivers directly and children and youth themselves more indirectly.

Echoing previous studies in this area (i.e., Arbiter & Toros, 2017) caseworkers in this study generally held a more passive, worker led perspective about children’s participation, where giving children options is valued, but only when those options are vetted by workers first, where there is a desire to hear children’s perspectives but no sense of obligation to act based on what children share. Caseworkers also indicated a strong sense of an outcome orientation towards participation, which as other studies have indicated seems to be related to a hesitancy to enable children’s participation (Bijleveld, 2020). The outcome orientation, coupled with views of system goals as “family” or “caregiver” focused, and a staged view of children’s development all seem to influence how caseworkers in this study viewed the parameters for children’s participation and suggested that children’s participation is often centered around what adults
need from children rather than how a child might view their needs or how they might like to participate. As the study indicates, in centering adult’s views and adult sensibilities regarding how things get done, i.e. through meetings, paperwork, signing contracts, children’s views may be hidden or obscured.

In addition, findings from this study indicate that caseworkers tended to view children either as individuals who should be free from responsibility, or as individuals who must learn to take responsibility. Caseworkers in this study indicated views of childhood which emphasized responsibility and the evolution of responsibility, where children and youth would gradually gain responsibility as they aged. However, some caseworkers indicated that the point at which a child would be considered responsible is subjective, and that children who are viewed by the caseworker as badly behaved should take responsibility at an earlier age. Caseworker’s emphasis on the continuum of responsibility was consistently linked to their views regarding contingencies of participation for children, in that workers appeared to view children who were young to be too young for the responsibility of participation and workers viewed children who were older as needing to take on responsibility as long as they behaved well enough to have the privilege.

When considering caseworkers’ views regarding contingencies for children’s participation from an intersectional childhood perspective, issues of equity emerge. For example, the findings in this study suggest that workers’ implicit and explicit biases may influence how or whether a child is viewed as “capable”, “trustworthy” or “well-behaved”. This reveals how using a child’s capacity, development and behavior as criteria for participation within a context of racism and sexism may produce or exacerbate inequities for children’s participation within child welfare. Other studies (Finn, 2009; Fylkesnes et al., 2018; Graham, 2007) have indicated that professionals’ judgments of capacity, maturity and responsibility are impacted by implicit and
explicit racial bias. Black children may face increased scrutiny about their behaviors compared with White children of the same age (Finn, 2009). Young people in this study expressed an awareness that how they “present” to workers and their behavior impacts their opportunities for inclusion. For example, young people shared they felt they were either “too bad” or “too good” to participate. They often felt forced to act out in order to get “heard” or remained silent because they felt their voice had no impact. These findings echo Fylkesnes and colleagues’ (2018) research which found that youth’s behaviors and “performing competency” appeared to influence opportunities to participate.

Findings from this study about how caseworkers tend to emphasize contingencies for children’s participation and linked participation to beliefs about development and childhood underline the importance of a rights-based framework for conceptualizing children’s participation. As Lundy (2007) states:

The fact that adults can find compelling reasons for not giving children's views due weight strengthens the case for the discourse on pupil voice to be firmly located within the framework of children's rights. The practice of actively involving pupils in decision making should not be portrayed as an option which is in the gift of adults but a legal imperative which is the right of the child. (p. 931)

As suggested by Lundy (2007) above, and also by findings from this study, children’s rights to participation should not be viewed as an option for workers to use when they feel it is helpful for them, or when they feel a child has “earned” their right to be involved. Rather, as Lundy (2007) suggests, a rights based framework for practice would suggest that it is the caseworkers’ duty to ensure that children have opportunities to participate which are meaningful for them and have an influence on their life.
Workers Value Children

Findings from this study indicated that workers can and do consider how to engage children and youth, and they can and do use some participatory approaches in working with children in their practice. Despite the high stress work environment and the overwhelming caseload, workers indicated that they have power and use it to make meaningful connections with children and youth and build relational elements into their practice. Caseworkers in this study shared that they are already using many practice approaches that seem to map with what young people viewed as essential for them to feel that they are a meaningful participant. For example, caseworkers described techniques for building rapport and trust by not making everything about paperwork, meeting children one-on-one, and presenting options in an effort to “share power” with children. Caseworkers also described considering how to relate to a child or youth in sharing information about themselves or in taking an interest in what is important to them, even if it does not have anything to do with the case. Further caseworkers described advocating for children and youth by standing up for them when other adults may be treating a child unfairly, or supporting a child in presenting a view that may be different from the views of decision makers, such as school administrators.

However, consistent with other studies in this area (i.e. Ruch et al., 2017), workers in this study indicated that they do not feel supported by the system in doing this work. For example, caseworkers suggested relational work that they do with children tends to take place outside of their “regular” tasks, such as paperwork, assessments, and even standard monthly visits. Also, caseworkers in this study indicated that meaningfully involving children in care and safety planning is rare. There were notable elements mentioned by young people as core aspects of meaningful participation, which were not described by caseworkers. For example, inclusive
communication was a major theme in young people’s narratives. At the heart of this theme is wanting to know and wanting to have accessible and relevant information.

Caseworkers rarely described any elements of inclusive communication, and suggested that there is a lack of time, training and tools to support caseworkers in providing youth friendly information and processing time for children and youth. For example, workers described having limited to no direct training for engaging with children. A few workers in this study described how their lack of knowledge about engaging with children could impact children’s safety, especially for children who have a disability. For example, one worker described having a number of children with autism on their caseload. However, they lacked any training or knowledge about working with children who have autism, especially non-verbal children, and felt unable to know whether or not these children felt safe.

Although some caseworkers described using participatory approaches with children and youth in this study, many did not. Given the lack of supports and resources for doing relational work with children, caseworkers usage of participatory techniques did not seem to be routine or standard. The marginalization of relational practice has been noted by other social work researchers, who suggest that child-centered and relational practice is rare and that workers who engage in these practices often draw on their personal resources or experiences to make it possible (Ruch et al., 2017).

**Deepening Our View of “Challenges” to Participation: Issues of Equity**

This study offers the lens of systemic disempowerment which could shed additional light on how system level challenges that caseworkers and young people face may interrupt children’s opportunities for participation. Findings from this study indicated that workers may experience disempowerment in their jobs, which some young people described as impacting their
experiences of services and their relationship with their worker. Young people described how their experiences of disempowerment within the system as well as their workers’ disempowerment could impact their self-esteem and also contribute to children not feeling supported in being able to ask for help when they need it. Also, young people suggested that not having time to process information or have access to youth friendly information contributed to them not feeling able to meaningfully participate.

From an intersectional childhood perspective, systemic disempowerment of workers and youth reflects issues of equity within the system where the culture of scarcity, lack of support for workers, and unaddressed trauma on the job due to racism and violence, perpetuate inequities for workers, which appear to influence children’s experiences of the system as well. It is not just that carrying large caseloads, not having enough resources, and lacking peer support and reflective supervision impacts worker’s success in their jobs, but these problems that workers face appear to impact children’s lives, their well-being, and their safety.

Limitations

This study relied on retrospective accounts of young people’s experiences in care as children. Although these retrospective accounts were powerful and provided valuable insight into youth experiences of child welfare services as well as what young people wished would have been different for them, they may not reflect views of children and youth who are currently in care, especially younger children. Future studies in this area, as many have, should include children and youth who are currently receiving child welfare services, especially in considering how workers could better support youth in feeling valued, understood and involved. Relatedly, some young people who were still receiving services through independent living programs participated in this study. Although they also shared important information about what children’s
participation might look like, they had a tendency to focus on their experiences as a young adult receiving services, rather than reflecting on their experiences as children. Although, when prompted, they were able to do this and provide value retrospective insight, their current views on professionals appeared to be more salient for them. This is not necessarily a limitation of this study, but rather indicates that future research in this area that is focused on retrospective accounts should consider how far removed youth are from their experiences of being in care while developing the recruitment scope.

Although the study demographic survey did ask open ended questions to allow participants to share their gender identities and racial/ethnic identities, the demographic survey did not ask participants about their disabilities or sexual orientation. In addition, the study did not specifically ask participants, either caseworkers or young people, about how they feel perceptions of their social identities may influence the way they experience youth participation. There were a handful of young people and caseworkers who brought up race, disability, immigration status and sexuality during their interviews but no specific questions were asked about how sexuality, gender identity, gender expression, racial identity, ethnic identity, disability, or immigration status were perceived by workers or youth or influenced the kinds of services or support youth received. As an example, this study did not ask young people what it would/does look like for a worker to support LGBTQ children and youth in participating in their care planning, or how workers involve LGBTQ children and youth, or consider implicit or explicit bias in worker’s engagement with children and youth.

The study aimed to intentionally recruit participants who reflected the diversity of the child welfare system, in terms of race/ethnicity, experiences of care/work, and worker’s educational background. Although the study was successful in recruiting participants with
diverse experiential backgrounds, such as caseworkers and young people who had only a few years of involvement as well as participants who were involved or worked in the system for a decade or more, the study participant group identified primarily as White, non-Hispanic and did not reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the child welfare population in Virginia. This limits the study findings, especially in terms of considering the diversity of views and experiences with participation.

Finally, as indicated in chapter 3, a divergence from the individual interview could have impacted how young people in that small group shared their views about children’s participation. For example, there is no way to know if a young person would have chosen to share different experiences if they were not in a group with their peers. However, in this case, the data collected from this group interview was generally analogous to the individual interviews. Given that at least for this group of young people, it seemed important to them that they be able to be with peers while doing the interview, this suggests that future studies done with this population build options for participation into the study design. This is also, consequently, consistent with what young people in this study shared which is that having real options was important for youth to feel they are valued and that they are meaningfully involved.

In addition, there was an unanticipated seven-month gap between initial interviews and group meetings, which may have impacted participation in the group meetings. The initial timeline for the study aimed to facilitate group meetings within a few months of interview completion. However, due to initial difficulty recruiting young people to participate in the study and the context of the coronavirus pandemic, as described in chapter 3, there was a longer than anticipated break between the interviews and the group meetings. This longer gap between interviews and group meetings may have contributed to young people not being able to be
reached. In addition, a few caseworkers had left their positions during this gap and were no longer reachable.

Although, some of the gap was unavoidable due to consequences of the pandemic, the gap may have had less of an impact if multiple ways to contact research participants had been built into the study design. For example, it may have been beneficial to get permission from the IRB to contact participants through social media, which may have enabled more direct contact with young people. Some studies have indicated that young people may not have a regular phone number or maintain an email address, but they typically are active on social media platforms and can be reachable through on those platforms. Future studies with this population should consider utilizing social media tools to engage with and maintain participation throughout the study period.

In addition, because the initial design included a short timeline between interviews and group meetings, there were no regular touch-points to reach out to participants built in. Although, I did reach out periodically to share updates, it may not have been enough to keep participants engaged in the study. I recommend building in regular touch-points, especially through social media posts, which could enhance participant’s engagement with the study throughout the process.

**Study Implications**

This section presents implications and extension in three areas: 1) implications for child welfare systems and child welfare policies, 2) implications for social work education and practice, and 3) implications for research about children’s participation rights.
Implications for Child Welfare Systems and Policy: “Presenting the caring”

Study findings indicate that ratification of the UNCRC is critical for the United States to advance social justice for children, to support children’s well-being and address chronic and pervasive inequities across systems and communities (see chapter 1 for more about this). However, as Melton (2005), Libal et al. (2015), Scherrer, 2012, have suggested, professionals should not wait for the United States to ratify the UNCRC before centering children’s rights in their practice. Findings from this study suggest that policy makers and practitioners reflect on how to reshape the child welfare system so that the system is centered around “presenting the caring” for children, youth, families and workers.

Study findings suggest that the child welfare system can better support workers in engaging with children by prioritizing relationships, and providing training, tools, and resources for workers to engage children. Caseworkers in this study described experiencing disempowerment through trying to heal the whole family without adequate resources to heal the whole family. For example, caseworkers described feeling that their role was to work with and support the entire family around a youth. Caseworkers view healing the whole family as the way that they could best support and keep youth safe. However, caseworkers also revealed that they felt they were often not able to help families or youth in the way they wanted to and indicated that they were prepared for recidivism knowing they would see a youth or their family again.

Caseworkers in this study shared a lack of training, education and support for engaging with children and youth. When asked about training caseworkers had on engaging with or working with children directly, most caseworkers indicated they had none to very little. Some caseworkers described forensic interviewing and learning about children’s development as training for working with children. This is troubling as neither of these includes practical
approaches or tools to engage with children in a way which is child-centered and meaningful to them. These findings imply there is an assumption by the system that workers already know how to work with or engage with children, or that they like to work with children. Caseworkers in this study described frustrations with not being able to communicate with children and youth who have disabilities, beliefs that they could not communicate with children who have disabilities, or beliefs that these children would not have anything meaningful to contribute. In some cases, caseworkers expressed concern about a child’s safety because the child was unable to verbally communicate but there were visible signs of violence.

Caseworkers described feeling challenged by working with teenagers, especially teen boys, who appeared aggressive or uncommunicative. This finding reveals questions about the ways in which the system supports workers in being able to meet the system goals. Workers in this study suggested that more training be offered about working with youth who have disabilities, working with teen boys, working with young children, working with youth who may be experiencing mental health challenges, working with youth who are not happy to work with them, and working with youth who are not connected to formal systems (i.e. unhoused, disconnected from school).

The challenge that young people shared for child welfare systems to consider is how to center the child’s experience of a process, how to consider the child’s subjective view of their participation, and then how to support the child in participating in a way that is meaningful and feels safe for them. Young people in this study suggested that it is about the feeling that children have about their experience as much as it is about what they actually experience.

Based on findings from this study, some reflective questions for systems, policy makers and practitioners to consider might be; how do adults make children feel when we ask them
questions knowing there is only one response, or when we ask them their views after a decision has been made, or when we give information to children which is not written in a way that they can understand it, or when we invite children to a meeting which is not “for them”? How do we make children feel when we tell them “I understand” and use this to preface why we can’t do something for them or minimize their feelings or perspective? How do we make children feel when we tell them they are using their “trauma brain”, or they are being too emotional, or they need to calm down and not be so excited? How does it feel when asked about preferences right before or on the way to an important meeting, after the agenda has been set, after the adults have already decided who gets to come and what they will talk about? How does it feel to be asked about difficult or potentially embarrassing topics in front of your family or caregivers? How might it feel for a child who is non-verbal or has a disability to be continually talked about but not talked to? These are questions that child welfare systems could ask in considering how to reshape the system to be more inclusive and responsive to children’s needs.

Alternatively, young people who I spoke to in this study had creative and thoughtful views on how to make it better for children and youth and how to support them in feeling that they are valued, understood, and involved. How might it feel differently if a child was involved with thinking about the problems that their family is facing, rather than having a worker tell them or define what the problems are? How would it feel for a worker to consider how it feels for a child to take part in a meeting? How would it feel if the worker took time to think about different options that the child might have to participate in a way that makes them feel good and know that they are valued? How would it feel for children connecting with workers who get down on the floor and play with them, or take time to communicate information to them in ways that make sense to them?
Why not have a graphic novel or animation that helps children understand the child welfare process, helps them understand the goals of the system, and gives them practical information about what to do when they have a concern or a question? Why not make sure that every child has an advocate, someone who aims to support the child in having their voice heard and having influence on a process, someone who has skills and tools to communicate with children who are non-verbal, who are multilingual or who have a disability? How would it feel for workers to be supported in doing relational work with children, youth and families? How would it feel for workers to feel confident in working with and engaging with children? How would it feel for workers to have more tools to ensure children’s safety and to support caregivers in healing and transforming themselves and their families?

**Virginia Specific Implications.** Virginia’s 5-year improvement plan for child welfare services centers all of their goals around youth and family engagement. This study suggests ways that Virginia can achieve its stated goals and make children’s participation a reality for children in Virginia. Family and youth engagement is placed at the center of practice and there is a notion that "good casework practice is not possible without the fundamental skill of engagement” (VDSS, 2019, p.5). The focus on family and youth engagement is exciting as it indicates a window of opportunity for making children’s participation a part of standard child welfare practice in Virginia. However, although the goals seem largely consistent with what young people shared would make participation meaningful for them, there appears to be limited practical, resource and training supports for actually engaging with children specifically, but also with families.

The policy indicates there is movement and recognition of the importance of placing children, youth and families at the center of decision making throughout the entire case but there
is little to no specific training available to workers to learn how to work with children. There is also little indication that there will be additional administrative supports to allow workers to spend more time with their young clients. Although the system goals indicate a desire to enhance children’s and families’ involvement in care planning and other child welfare practices, there appears to be an emphasis on engaging caregivers. What this study and other studies have shown is that by emphasizing caregiver engagement it is possible that the importance of child engagement could be missed, especially because those relational engagement skills that workers have are primarily geared towards engaging with adults rather than children (Ferguson, 2017; Heimer et al., 2018; Winter et al., 2017).

For example, as Ferguson’s (2017) study revealed, an intense focus on parents sometimes means that children are overlooked or even invisible to workers. The intense focus on parent support and helping parents respond to a child’s behaviors may lead workers to forget to “ask the child themselves”. As one caseworker in this study suggested, are we “missing the mark” by not asking children about their views and preferences? Virginia should make more direct efforts to consider how to realize their goals when it comes to child and youth engagement, for example by considering youth perspectives of their engagement. Virginia should consider supporting workers in being able to have tools, time, resources, support and supervision required to make children’s participation possible and a part of their standard practice procedures.

**Implications for Policy.** Virginia policy makers and others who are interested in realizing meaningful child, youth and family engagement in their community should consider the following recommendations:

- Mandating comprehensive training on direct engagement with children and youth for all direct service child welfare professionals (See also, Conners-Burrow et al., 2013). This
training should be developed from an anti-racism framework in order to enable participation for all children and youth, as well as emphasize training around supporting youth who may not express themselves verbally. As reported in chapter 1, a recent report indicated that 31% of children in foster care in Virginia had a disability (JLARC). This study indicated that some workers felt unable to engage with children who have a disability, and that they may be concerned for their safety. Virginia should mandate training for working with children who have a disability.

- Providing resources for supportive communication, including child-friendly and youth-developed materials for learning about child welfare system processes and grievance procedures. Care should be taken to consider how to meaningfully support engagement of children who have a disability.

- Enhancing cross-agency collaboration to support more effective engagement of children who have disabilities. For example, through collaborating with children’s school teachers to write social stories or support children in communicating their views.

- Increasing administrative support for front line and direct service child welfare caseworkers. For example, workers in this study suggested administrative staff could support workers in identifying resources for youth and families, coordinating transportation and meetings with clients and professionals, and processing paperwork on behalf of clients.

- Addressing racism embedded in system culture and processes which directly impact both caseworkers and youth themselves, including for example, mandated training on implicit bias.

- Developing child advocate positions in DSS modeled after CASA, which would be paid positions and housed in each local DSS. The child advocates would have specialized
knowledge and training in supporting children and youth throughout their time in care, supporting them in understanding the process, providing advocacy in meetings or at decision-points with other professionals, supporting youth in communicating their views and having those views have influence on the process, supporting youth in feeling safe by being there to offer support and facilitate help when needed. They could also offer training and technical assistance to caseworkers in their agency, especially around direct engagement and collaboration with children and youth.

- Gathering and acting on regular feedback and critique from children and youth about their experiences of the system. In particular, feedback should be collected from those who are overrepresented in the system which most directly and most critically effects their lives. Children and youth should be asked whether they feel/felt recognized and valued, whether they have/had supportive communication about their case, and whether they feel/felt involved during their time in care.

- Children and youth should be included in discussions about and implementation of any system changes to ensure that the system feels safe, feels helpful and feels affirming for all children and youth, including LGBTQ youth and youth who have a disability.

**Implications for Social Work Education and Practice**

**Human Behavior and the Social Environment.** Revise Human Behavior and the Social Environment (HBSE) training for social work students to include sociocultural models of children’s development and to educate students about existing critiques and debates within the field of developmental psychology, especially about staged developmental theories. As suggested by Taylor (2004) and supported by findings from this study, social work students should be made aware of critiques of staged developmental theories, especially in terms of the
potential impact these perspectives can have on how a child may be viewed as competent or able. Including a more comprehensive and critical perspective about children’s development in the social work curriculum could not only enhance social workers’ understandings about children’s needs and how they can work with children, but could also address inequities in children’s treatment.

Relatedly, US social workers should consider revising NASW standards for child welfare practice to center child and youth engagement throughout and to include children in the “youth engagement standard”, removing exclusionary language linked to age. As described in chapter 1, NASW standards do not adequately address children’s participation rights and the emphasis on contingencies of children’s participation, reflected in the youth engagement standard may be a barrier for younger children in being supported in participating. Also, educational training for social workers should include specific training for working with children who have disabilities, especially for social workers entering the child welfare field, given the prevalence of children who have a disability in the child welfare system.

**Core Competencies.** Strengthen knowledge about core competencies (Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), 2015) for social work as they relate to children’s participation rights. Consider refining core competencies to include a modern view of children’s development, emphasize the relational aspects of engagement and make explicit that the core competencies apply to children and youth, irrespective of their age, ability, behaviors, or emotional competence. For example, including the words “children and youth” directly in the engagement competency may be critical for enabling children’s participation in practice. As this study and others have shown, social workers and child welfare professionals in particular may unintentionally overlook children as individuals (Ferguson, 2017). In not directly stating that
social workers should consider how to engage with “children and youth” there is a risk that social work educators and students may overlook engaging directly with children and youth themselves.

**Engagement Competency.** The engagement competency (competency #6) suggests that social workers should “use empathy, reflection, and interpersonal skills to effectively engage diverse clients and constituencies” (CSWE, 2015, p. 9). As revealed by findings from this study, engagement has both instrumental and intrinsic value for workers and youth. Engagement should be given more weight in social work training, so that workers understand that meaningful and thoughtful engagement is integral to the process of assessing problems and developing an effective intervention for and with a client. This study indicates that without meaningfully engaging children and youth, workers may not be able to achieve success in their work, children may continue to feel unsafe, undervalued and unimportant. Engagement practices, as highlighted by workers in this study, take time, effort, reflection and planning if they are to be effective, they shouldn’t be rushed or abbreviated in order to move more quickly to assessment or intervention.

In addition, findings from this study suggest that the engagement competency should include explicit acknowledgement of specialized skills needed for meaningfully engaging with children and youth. Social workers who work with any clients who are children must have competency in engaging with children and youth. The interpersonal skills for working with adults and children may be similar, however, child-friendly practice looks different from adult-oriented engagement. Social workers should consider incorporating a multi-disciplinary perspectives about engagement, which may include pedagogical, arts-based, and play-based strategies. This study suggested that meaningful engagement with children and youth requires workers to consider a child-centered perspective of experiences, children’s feelings, and utilization of child-friendly
approaches to working with children. More effort could be made to include training and tools to support workers in feeling comfortable getting down on the floor and playing with a toddler or taking a walk with a teenager. In addition, given the high rate of children in the child welfare system who have disabilities, it is critical that social workers and child welfare workers have training and support for directly engaging children who have disabilities, especially non-verbal children.

**Human Rights Competency.** Consider revising competency #3, “Advance Human Rights and Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice” to make definition of human rights consistent with international standards and treaties. For example, making explicit that fundamental human rights include rights to self-determination, protection from violence and exploitation, and support for individual, family and community well-being (Hertal & Libal, 2011; Watts & Hodgson, 2019). The core competencies should highlight the importance of human rights for the domestic as well as the international context. Finally, the competencies should more explicitly state that human rights are for all human beings, including children. Social workers should advocate for system level changes supportive of children’s participation, equity in resources, addressing racism and supporting for workers in engaging in relational practice.

**Implications for Research about Children’s Participation in Child Welfare**

Future studies should further develop a theoretical model for youth views of participation. Model development should include perspectives of children and youth who are currently involved in the child welfare system about what meaningful participation does or could look like for them. Future studies could start with building an understanding about children and youth’s conceptualizations of participation and connect children’s conceptualizations to the
UNCRC. Research could identify where there may be divergence and also where the UNCRC is supportive of what youth suggest makes participation meaningful for them.

In addition, as suggested by Husby et al., (2018), van Biljeveld (2020) and O’Reilly & Dolan (2016), there is room to expand knowledge about pedagogical, arts, play based and activity-based tools and strategies that workers can use in engaging with children, especially younger children, children who are pre-verbal and children who have disabilities. Research about children’s participation should aim to expand understanding about how children with disabilities experience the child welfare process and their feelings about how they are engaged in their care planning. Although engagement of children with disabilities came up in only a few interviews during this study, the lack of training on working with children who may be non-verbal or have emotional or intellectual disabilities was alarming. Especially given the higher rate of children who have a disability being involved with the child welfare system.

As noted in chapter 2, Black children are overrepresented in the child welfare system and little is known about how racial bias influences their experiences of receiving child welfare services. As suggested by Graham (2007) studies about child welfare systems and children’s participation should intentionally center perspectives of Black youth because they may be more likely than White youth to experience silencing from system involvement and also are overrepresented in the system. In addition, some findings from this study indicate that workers of color experience the impacts of racism within the child welfare system, which can have an impact on their job satisfaction and overall well-being. Future studies should directly investigate how racism impacts workers’ feelings of success, safety and confidence in their jobs, and also identify facilitators for equity in resources and supports for workers of color with the system.
Finally, LGBTQ children and youth should be intentionally included and represented in all research about children’s experience of child welfare and research about children’s participation. As indicated in chapter 1, there appears to be an overrepresentation of LGBTQ youth involved with child welfare systems, however, their perspectives, especially related to the impacts from biases towards their social identities appears to be largely invisible in child welfare research. The first step in this regard may be to collect basic demographic information, which acknowledges and affirms children’s gender identities, gender expressions and sexual identities. Researchers should advocate for inclusion of children’s sexual and gender identities in demographics collected by large scale governmental surveys and standard child maltreatment reporting. Researchers should collaborate with well-established LGBTQ affirming, youth-supportive and youth-led organizations and agencies to ensure that research processes and procedures are inclusive, representative and affirming for all participants.

In terms of action, future research should aim to support children’s participation within policy development at all governmental levels. In addition, researchers should consider implementing studies that enhance children and youth’s meaningful participation in developing and modifying child welfare practice standards to be consistent with children’s rights and children’s perspectives. For example, Warming (2019) reported on “future workshops” as a research tool which may have potential for centering children’s perspectives in systemic and system level change efforts. In addition to involving children and youth, caseworkers, child welfare administrators and caregivers should also be included in future workshops or any other change efforts aiming to strengthen opportunities for children’s participation.

Finally, in terms of community change, action researchers should consider how to spark conversations about children’s rights and well-being in the community-at-large. For example,
through hosting collaborative learning events to discuss, learn and engage with children’s rights principles at schools, in churches and at community-based organizations. Researchers in the United States should consider implementing community-based participatory research that aims to build child-friendly communities, as suggested by UNICEF’s child-friendly cities initiative (UNICEF, 2020). The research could involve visioning about what a child-friendly community might look like with children, youth, professionals, community leaders, academics and policy makers, and then working with community partners to implement changes necessary to implement the communities vision (UNICEF, 2020).

Visioning Systems Supportive of Children’s Participation

What would it look like for our systems to support children’s participation? As indicated by chapter 1, children’s participation appears to be related to children’s well-being because it is supportive of children’s own views about whether or not they are meaningfully involved in their own lives, whether they feel valued, and whether or not systems are truly responsive to their needs and perspectives. Children’s participation rights cannot be realized in isolation from children’s human rights generally. For example, a system which supports children’s participation must also supportive of children’s rights to resources and safety. This system would directly and proactively address poverty, hunger and unstable housing so that every family and child would have their basic needs met without judgment, without strings, and without responsibilizing language.

Addressing Systemic Disempowerment

As indicated by workers and young people in this study, in order for the child welfare system to be supportive of children’s participation the chronic culture of scarcity and inequities, which characterizes the United States child welfare system, must be addressed. Child welfare
caseworkers should not have to “find a way out of no way” due to limited resources which lack uniform quality. Children and youth should not be in a position where their safety may be compromised because our system is overburdened by trying to support children and families without adequate resources. As one young person shared, children can feel when you do something whether or not you do it with care. The resources that we put into our systems reflect our societal values and indicates how we care for children, youth, families and caseworkers.

**Addressing Violence Against Children.** In addition to addressing resource equity in our child welfare system, consideration should be paid to directly addressing violence against children to make our systems supportive of children’s participation. For example, rather than focusing on whether a parent or adult “crossed a line” when hitting a child, our systems and society could support a view that violence is unacceptable at any level and that it is never okay to hit anyone, child or adult.

This would require a paradigm shift similar to what happened for cisgender women in the 1960’s when domestic violence was defined as a social problem, where gendered values and biases were identified as drivers of this problem, and where society began to develop a shared belief that there is no place for physical violence, psychological violence, or emotional violence in a relationship between adults. Movement towards this approach has been promoted by public health and children’s rights experts who suggest systems take a societal level rather than an individual level view of violence against children (Reading et al., 2008).

Overall, findings from this study suggest that children’s well-being is linked to their feelings of being valued as people. The findings suggest that without children’s and youth’s input, policy makers and other adult decision makers may develop interventions and programs that do not match the problems that youth are actually facing or acknowledge what is important
to them. This could cause our systems to be less effective in supporting children, youth and their families in a meaningful way. In devaluing and silencing youth from having their input make a difference in developing system policies, procedures and protocols, we may be inadvertently causing harm to the very population that we are trying to support through child welfare and other system level interventions.

If we do not ask children and youth their views and provide support for them to form an opinion and express their views, then we do not really know if the programs or interventions that our systems are supporting are useful for them. We do not really know whether or not problems they are facing have been addressed. We do not really know if they feel safe. The findings from this study have implications for all of our systems and policies directly impacting children and suggest critical questions about how we are showing children they are valued.

**What Children’s Participation Can Look Like**

In visioning a system supportive of children’s participation, we could start where workers in this study have started, with being open to asking children about their perspectives, being willing to hear what they have to say even if we don’t agree with their views, and then being compassionate enough to reshape our own perspectives in ways that can cause us to shift our own behaviors and mindset regarding children. One young person put the challenge this way:

*Advocate for [children]...make sure their voice is heard...explain these things to them...meet them where they are. Let them know the lingo...and just be supportive... in everything they're doing. Even if they...turn down this or...have a bad day...or...have continuous bad days. Don’t give up on them, because they’re in this place because they have no one else. So you are that person... and...I guess, just...act like it’s your life...*  
--- Young person 7

We can, as workers in this study have demonstrated, show children and youth that they are valued, we can be boldly vulnerable and relate to children, we can be advocates for and advocates alongside children and youth, and we can learn to share power with youth and center
their views. We can do these things so that all children feel safe, so that all children feel that they
can get help when they need it, and so that all children know that they are valuable human beings
who deserve to be treated with dignity and respect.
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Appendix A. Original Recruitment Flyer

Is it time for children to have a voice in child welfare decision-making?

https://rampages.us/participationinpractice/

We are looking for child welfare caseworkers and youth who have lived experience of child welfare to participate in a study exploring how to build capacity for children’s participation in child welfare planning.

Are you a Virginia Child Welfare Caseworker working in CPS, foster care or adoption?

Do you work directly with children and youth (0-21 years old)?

Then please consider signing up for an interview. We can learn from hearing your experiences working with children.

OR

Did you have experience with CPS, foster care, adoption services as a child in Virginia?

Are you between the ages of 18 and 25?

Then please consider signing up for an interview. We can learn from hearing about your experiences with having a voice in child welfare services.

Participants will receive $20 for a 45 minute to 1 hour long interview.

Sign up

Visit: www.rampages.us/participationinpractice/
Text or Call: Anna @ (804) 396-2875

This study is partially funded by the Hans-Folck Dissertation Award.
Appendix B. Youth Focused Recruitment Flyer

“How NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US” more than just words

How are YOUTH VOICES heard in CPS, FOSTER CARE and ADOPTION?

Children have a right to have their voice heard and taken seriously. But research shows that they often feel left out in child welfare planning.

JOIN the PARTICIPATION IN PRACTICE STUDY and help us learn how to support youth and caseworkers in collaboration on care and safety planning.

Study Eligibility

1. Did you receive CPS, foster care, or adoption services as a Child or Youth in Virginia?
2. Are you 18 to 25 years old?
3. Do you live around the Richmond metro area?

Consider signing up for an interview. Participants will receive $20.

To sign up or for more information:

Email: EMAIL
Text or Call: NUMBER
Visit: www.rampages.us/participationinpractice/

VCU School of Social Work

This study is partially funded by the Hans-Falck Dissertation Award through the VCU School of Social Work.

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Appendix C. Recruitment Presentation Script

Thank you for taking some time to meet with me today!

Just wanted to share a little bit about me and the study I am working on. I am a student at the VCU School of Social Work working on my doctorate. Before coming to social work, I had worked with youth of all ages as an educator. I was really impacted by working with youth who had experienced homelessness and trauma as well as youth who have autism. I saw youth get frustrated when they felt silenced by the adults in their lives. I am passionate about making a difference for young people by helping to create spaces where they have their voice heard and taken seriously.

The reason that I wanted to talk to you all today is to share the opportunity to participate in my study focused on learning how to support young people involved with child welfare have more of a voice in decision making about their own lives. The study aims to support child welfare caseworkers and young people to collaborate in care and safety planning.

I am currently interviewing 18-25 year olds about their experiences as minors with having their voice heard in child welfare planning (such as child protection services, adoption, or foster care services). This information can help me learn how I can support youth voice in child welfare practice. All participants get $20 as a thank you for the interview. The interview takes between 30 minutes to one hour.

Take a look at the flyer and get in touch with me to sign up. Also feel free to pass it along to anyone you think might be interested.

Does anyone have any questions for me?
Appendix D. Sample Young Person Interview Consent Form

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

STUDY TITLE: Building Capacity for Children’s Participation in Child Welfare Care and Safety Planning
VCU INVESTIGATOR: M. Alex Wagaman, Associate Professor, School of Social Work, CONTACT INFORMATION

SPONSOR: This study has been partially funded by the Hans-Falck dissertation scholarship award.

NOTE: In this consent form, “you” always refers to the research participant.

ABOUT THIS CONSENT FORM
You are being invited to participate in a research study. It is important that you carefully think about whether being in this study is right for you and your situation.

This consent form is meant to assist you in thinking about whether or not you want to be in this study. Please ask the study staff to explain any information in this consent document that is not clear to you.

Your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study. If you do participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time. Your decision not to take part or to withdraw will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY AND KEY INFORMATION

Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this research study is to find out more about how to support child welfare caseworkers in meaningfully engaging with children in care and safety planning.

Previous studies have found that child welfare caseworkers are motivated to engage with children and families in making positive changes in their lives. Caseworkers and the youth they work with have noted the importance of building relationships in order to foster trust. However, there are many challenges in the child welfare work environment, such as large caseloads and limited resources. These challenges make it difficult for caseworkers to find time to engage with youth in care and safety planning.
This study will explore child welfare caseworker’s and young people’s perspectives about how to make children’s participation in care and safety planning possible within a child welfare context.

**What will happen if I participate?**

You will be asked to participate in a 45 minute to 1-hour long interview. The interview will focus on your perspectives about and experiences with receiving child welfare services as a minor. For example, questions will be asked about:

1) your views on meaningful participation for young people in child welfare care and safety planning,
2) your perceptions about what it looks like when young people feel that they are not heard
3) your perceptions about what could help caseworkers and young people work together better

Approximately 40 individuals will participate in this study.

**What are the risks and benefits of participating?**

There are both risks and benefits of participating in research studies. There are minimal risks for you to participate in this study. For example, you may experience emotional distress in discussing your experiences of receiving child welfare services as a child. There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. However, information gathered from this study may help us better understand child welfare caseworkers and young people perspectives about how to support participation in child welfare care and safety planning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risks and Discomforts</th>
<th>Benefits to You and Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Participation in research might involve some loss of privacy. There is a small risk that someone outside the research study could see and misuse information about you.</td>
<td>There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. We hope the information learned from this study will provide more information about how to support children’s participation in child welfare care and safety planning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● The interviewer will ask questions about your childhood experiences working with caseworkers in child welfare services. Discussing your childhood experiences of the child welfare system may cause you emotional distress.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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WILL I BE PAID TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY?

You will be paid $20 in cash for the interview.

CAN I STOP BEING IN THE STUDY?

You can stop being in this research study at any time. Leaving the study will not affect your medical care, employment status, or academic standing at VCU or VCU Health. Tell the study staff if you are thinking about stopping or decide to stop.

Your participation in this study may be stopped at any time by the investigator without your consent. The reasons might include:

● the investigator thinks it necessary for your health or safety
● you are found to not be eligible for the study

HOW WILL INFORMATION ABOUT ME BE PROTECTED?

Audio recordings will be stored on a password protected laptop. Audio recordings will be transcribed by study staff or by a professional transcription service. If a transcription services is used, audio files may be uploaded to a secure portal for transcription by the service. Following transcription, audio files will be deleted. Any personally identifiable information in the recording will be deleted or changed in the transcription. Should you decide to participate you will have an opportunity to select your own pseudonym to substitute for your own name in the transcriptions.

VCU and the VCU Health System have established secure research databases and computer systems to store information and to help with monitoring and oversight of research. Your information may be kept in these databases but are only accessible to individuals working on this study or authorized individuals who have access for specific research related tasks.

Identifiable information in these databases are not released outside VCU unless stated in this consent or required by law. Although results of this research may be presented at meetings or in publications, identifiable personal information about participants will not be disclosed.

Personal information about you might be shared with or copied by authorized representatives from the following organizations for the purposes of managing, monitoring and overseeing this study:

● Representatives of VCU

In general, we will not give you any individual results from the study. Once the study has been completed, we will send you a summary of all of the results of the study and what they mean.
WHOM SHOULD I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY?

The investigator and study staff named below are the best person(s) to contact if you have any questions, complaints, or concerns about your participation in this research:

   Alex Wagaman, CONTACT INFORMATION
   and/or
   Anna Cody, CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have general questions about your rights as a participant in this or any other research, or if you wish to discuss problems, concerns or questions, to obtain information, or to offer input about research, you may contact:

   Virginia Commonwealth University Office of Research
   800 East Leigh Street, Suite 3000, Box 980568, Richmond, VA 23298
   (804) 827-2157; https://research.vcu.edu/human_research/volunteers.htm

Do not sign this consent form unless you have had a chance to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers to all of your questions.
STATEMENT OF CONSENT
I have been provided with an opportunity to read this consent form carefully. All of the questions that I wish to raise concerning this study have been answered. By signing this consent form, I have not waived any of the legal rights or benefits to which I am otherwise would be entitled. My signature indicates that I freely consent to participate in this research study. I will receive a copy of the consent form for my records.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature Block for Enrolling Adult Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adult Participant Name (Printed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult Participant’s Signature Date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name of Person Conducting Consent Discussion (Printed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signature of Person Conducting Consent Discussion Date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Investigator Signature Date</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E. Sample Caseworker Group Meeting Consent Form

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

STUDY TITLE: Building Capacity for Children’s Participation in Child Welfare Care and Safety Planning
VCU INVESTIGATOR: M. Alex Wagaman, Associate Professor, School of Social Work,
CONTACT INFORMATION

SPONSOR: This study has been partially funded by the Hans-Falck dissertation scholarship award.

NOTE: In this consent form, “you” always refers to the research participant.

ABOUT THIS CONSENT FORM
You are being invited to participate in a research study. It is important that you carefully think about whether being in this study is right for you and your situation.

This consent form is meant to assist you in thinking about whether or not you want to be in this study. Please ask the study staff to explain any information in this consent document that is not clear to you.

Your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study. If you do participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time. Your decision not to take part or to withdraw will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY AND KEY INFORMATION

Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this research study is to find out more about how to support child welfare caseworkers in meaningfully engaging with children in care and safety planning.

Previous studies have found that child welfare caseworkers are motived to engage with children and families in making positive changes in their lives. Caseworkers and the youth they work with have noted the importance of building relationships in order to foster trust. However, there are many challenges in the child welfare work environment, such as large caseloads and limited
resources. These challenges make it difficult for caseworkers to find time to engage with youth in care and safety planning.

This study will explore child welfare caseworker’s and young people’s perspectives about how to make children’s participation in care and safety planning possible within a child welfare context.

The study involves a series of virtual discussion-based meetings with two groups of people: child welfare caseworkers and young people (18-25) who have lived experience of receiving child welfare services as minors.

In this study, the child welfare caseworker group is called the “co-learning group” and the young people group is called the “advisory group”. The purpose of the co-learning group is to bring together a group of child welfare caseworkers to explore participatory practices with children in child welfare casework. The purpose of the advisory group is to provide the co-learning group with feedback and suggestions to consider about participatory practices from the perspective of young people who have lived experience of child welfare services.

You are being asked to participate in the co-learning group.

**What will happen if I participate?**

You will be asked to virtually attend a group meeting. You can join the Zoom meeting using video or call-in over the phone. Each meeting will last approximately 1 hour. You will be in a group with other child welfare caseworkers.

- In the meeting, you will be asked to talk about the themes from phase 1 of this study as well as to reflect on messages from the young people group. You will also be invited to share your vision for how workers could be supported in strengthening participation for children and youth.

The meetings will be recorded so we are sure to get everyone’s ideas, and we will ask you to limit your use of names so that they will not be on the recording. Group discussions/activities will focus on your experiences of practice approaches in working with children, rather than on detailing specific cases that you are involved with. Do not discuss or introduce any client information that could be identifying, such as client names or other potentially personally identifiable information about your clients.

**What are the risks and benefits of participating?**
There are both risks and benefits of participating in research studies. There are minimal risks for you to participate in this study. For example, you may experience emotional distress in discussing your work with children in the child welfare context. There is no guarantee that you will receive any benefits from being in this study. However, you may experience professional and/or emotional benefits from your participation. Similar studies have found group learning opportunities for child welfare caseworkers can enhance emotional well-being (especially as it relates to work stress) and provide opportunities to develop relationships with colleagues.

Information gathered from this study may help us better understand child welfare caseworker’s and young people’s perspectives about how to support children’s participation in child welfare care and safety planning.

Using a virtual method to have a group discussion may increase the risk to privacy as household members of participants may overhear group discussion. This is why participants are asked to join the meeting in a space which allows them maximum privacy and to remember to maintain confidentiality for all participants. For example, consider joining the meeting in a private space in your home, or using headphones to minimize potential for other household members to overhear the discussion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risks and Discomforts</th>
<th>Benefits to You and Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Participation in research might involve some loss of privacy. There is a small risk that someone outside the research study could see and misuse information about you.</td>
<td>There is no guarantee that you will receive any benefits from being in this study. However, possible benefits include enhanced professional well-being and building relationships with colleagues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● During group meetings you will be asked questions about your professional experiences with children in child welfare. Discussing your experiences as a child welfare caseworker and may cause you emotional distress.</td>
<td>We hope the information learned from this study will provide more information about how to support children’s participation in child welfare care and safety planning.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**WILL I BE PAID TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY?**

If you are able to accept the gift, you will be given a $25 e-gift card for participating in the group meeting.

**CAN I STOP BEING IN THE STUDY?**
You can stop being in this research study at any time. Leaving the study will not affect your medical care, employment status, or academic standing at VCU or VCU Health. Tell the study staff if you are thinking about stopping or decide to stop.

Your participation in this study may be stopped at any time by the investigator without your consent. The reasons might include:

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Audio recordings will be stored on a password protected laptop. Audio recordings will be transcribed by study staff or by a professional transcription service. If a transcription services is used, audio files may be uploaded to a secure portal for transcription by the service. Following transcription, audio files will be deleted. Any personally identifiable information in the recording will be deleted or changed in the transcription. Should you decide to participate you will have an opportunity to select your own pseudonym to substitute for your own name in the transcriptions.

VCU and the VCU Health System have established secure research databases and computer systems to store information and to help with monitoring and oversight of research. Your information may be kept in these databases but are only accessible to individuals working on this study or authorized individuals who have access for specific research related tasks.

Identifiable information in these databases are not released outside VCU unless stated in this consent or required by law. Although results of this research may be presented at meetings or in publications, identifiable personal information about participants will not be disclosed.

Personal information about you might be shared with or copied by authorized representatives from the following organizations for the purposes of managing, monitoring and overseeing this study:

- Representatives of VCU

In general, we will not give you any individual results from the study. Once the study has been completed, we will send you a summary of all of the results of the study and what they mean.

**WHOM SHOULD I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY?**
If you have general questions about your rights as a participant in this or any other research, or if you wish to discuss problems, concerns or questions, to obtain information, or to offer input about research, you may contact:

Virginia Commonwealth University Office of Research
800 East Leigh Street, Suite 3000, Box 980568, Richmond, VA 23298
(804) 827-2157; https://research.vcu.edu/human_research/volunteers.htm

The investigator and study staff named below are the best person(s) to contact if you have any questions, complaints, or concerns about your participation in this research:

Alex Wagaman, CONTACT INFORMATION
and/or
Anna Cody, CONTACT INFORMATION
Appendix F. Caseworker Participant Demographic Survey

Survey Purpose:
The demographic information shared below will be used by the study staff to account for inclusiveness and diversity within the participant group.

Participant Demographic Survey:
1. Age? (Circle one)
   a. 18-25
   b. 26-40
   c. 40-50
   d. 50-65
   e. 65+

2. Gender identity? (Fill in the blank below)

3. Race/Ethnicity identity? (Fill in the blank below)

4. Which Virginia child welfare systems have you worked for? (circle all that apply)
   a. Child Protective Services (CPS)
   b. Foster Care
   c. Adoption
   d. Prevention
   e. Other: __________________________

5. How long have you worked in the child welfare field?
   a. Less than 1 year
   b. 1 to 5 years
   c. 5 to 10 years
   d. 10 to 20 years
   e. More than 20 years
Appendix G. Young Person Participant Demographic Survey

Survey Purpose:
The demographic information shared below will be used by the study staff to account for inclusiveness and diversity within the participant group.

Participant Demographic Survey:

6. Age? (Circle one)
   a. 18-20
   b. 20-25
   c. 25+

7. Gender identity? (Fill in the blank below)

8. Race/Ethnicity identity? (Fill in the blank below)

9. Which Virginia child welfare systems have you received services from as a minor (under 18)?
   (circle all that apply)
   a. Child Protective Services (CPS)
   b. Foster Care
   c. Adoption
   d. Other:

10. How long did you have contact with these services?
    a. Less than 1 year
    b. 1 to 5 years
    c. 5 to 10 years
    d. More than 10 years
Appendix G. Sample Interview Guide for Young People

*Young people with lived experience interview domains of interest:* 1) perceptions of what meaningful participation looks like for young people, especially in child welfare care and safety planning processes 2) perceptions about what it looks like when young people feel that they are not heard and 3) perceptions about what could help caseworkers and young people work together better.

**Example Youth interview questions:**

1. Reflecting back on your experiences in the child welfare system, can you describe when you felt engaged in decision making about your case?
   - a. *How were you engaged in developing a care or safety plan?*
   - b. *How did you participate in a “family group decision meeting” or “family partnership meeting”?*
   - c. *How were you provided with information about what was happening with your case?*
   - d. *Can you describe when you felt that you were an equal partner in identifying why child welfare was involved in your life?*

2. Could you share with me an example of when you felt heard by your caseworker?
   - a. *What made you feel that you were heard?*
   - b. *How did your caseworker show that they heard what you had to say?*
   - c. *How did you feel about this?*

3. Could you share with me an example of when you felt like you were not heard by your caseworker?
   - a. *What made you feel this way?*
   - b. *How could this have been different?*
   - c. *What do you wish would have happened here?*

4. As you see it, what challenges are there for caseworkers and youth to work together?
   - a. *What gets in the way of building relationships?*
   - b. *In your experience, where did things go wrong in terms of your relationship with the caseworker?*

5. What do you think caseworkers could do to build better relationships with youth?
   - a. *What advice would you offer a caseworker about how to work with a young person?*
   - b. *What advice would you offer to a child who is currently working with a caseworker?*
   - c. *What message do you think it is important for every caseworker working with youth to hear?*
Appendix H. Sample Interview Guide for Caseworkers

*Caseworker interview domains of interest:* 1) caseworkers motivations for entering into child welfare work, 2) perspectives about working with children in a child welfare setting, 3) perspectives about what meaningful participation looks like and 4) perceptions about what could help caseworkers and young people work together better.

1. Can you tell me about how you got into the child welfare field?
   a. *What motivated you to do this work?*
   b. *Did you have any experiences with child welfare before you got into the field?*

2. Take a minute to reflect on your expectations about what child welfare casework would be like before you entered the field. Can you tell me a little bit about whether or not your expectations match your experiences in the work?
   a. *Can you describe your role as a child welfare caseworker?*
   b. *Can you describe the role of children who receive child welfare services?*

3. In many research studies caseworkers describe how important it is to build relationships with children and youth they are working with, but also, find it hard to make this happen. What is your perspective about this?
   a. *What’s your perspective about some potential benefits to building relationships with youth?*
   b. *What challenges do caseworkers face in engaging with children and youth?*
   c. *What challenges do you think children face in engaging with caseworkers?*

4. Can you describe what it looks like when you work with children in your current role?
   a. *How do you involve children in care and safety planning?*
   b. *What is the child’s role in care and safety planning?*
   c. *How do you feel about working with children?*
   d. *What aspects of engagement are challenging?*
   e. *Are there any aspects of the engagement process which you feel could be traumatizing for the child? How was this addressed?*

5. Reflect back on your experiences in working with children, can you share about a time when you felt that you had made a meaningful connection with a child?
   a. *How do you know that you had made a connection?*
   b. *How did you feel about this experience?*
   c. *Have you kept in touch with the young person?*
   d. *Would you say this connection helped you better serve the young person?*
   e. *Can you describe how the child’s voice was heard during the process?*
   f. *Can you describe how the child was provided with information about their case?*
   g. *Can you describe what kind of information about the family situation or possible outcomes of the case was disclosed to the child?*
6. Without using names, can you share a story about when you felt that you were not as connected to a child as you wished to be?
   a. What do you think prevented you from being able to build a connection with the child?
   b. What do you think would have been helpful to you in making this connection?

7. What advice can you share about how managers and co-workers could support you in being able to engage with children in a way that makes a meaningful connection?
   a. What can supervisors do?
   b. What can co-workers do?
   c. What kinds of tools might be helpful?
Appendix I. Caseworker Group Sample Discussion Guide Original

Thank you all for taking the time to gather together today! As you all know, this is the first meeting of the co-learning group. Today we are going to spend some time getting to know each other, discussing the purpose/goals of this group, and having a group discussion and activity about children’s participation.

Before we jump into our activities today, I would like to review consent information with you all. Please take a moment to read over the consent information sheet.

Thanks for taking the time. As you know, these group meetings are part of a research study that I am conducting for my dissertation. Participation in this research activity is completely voluntary. This means that if you do not wish to participate in activities/discussions in the group or come to the meetings, you do not have to. There is no penalty for non-participation. Again, deciding to participate in the study is completely voluntary. Remember that consent is an ongoing process, meaning that you can decide at any point that you would rather not participate in the project. Let’s go over the consent form together.

1. **Group meetings will be audio recorded. Recordings will be transcribed. After the transcription has been checked for quality, the audio file will be deleted. Any personally identifiable information will be deleted or changed in the transcription. Should you decide to participate you will have an opportunity to select your own pseudonym to substitute for your own name in the transcriptions.**

2. **Our group discussions will sometimes focus on your experiences in practice working with children. Remember that we must all be vigilant in maintaining client confidentiality and privacy. Do not discuss or introduce any client information that could be identifying, such as client names or other personal information. Remember that group discussions will focus on your experiences of practice approaches in working with children, rather than on detailing specific cases that you are involved with.**

3. **There are minimal risks for you to participate in this study. For example, you may experience emotional distress in discussing your work with children in the child welfare context. Direct potential benefits for your participation in the study include: developing relationships with caseworker colleagues and enhanced emotional well-being from having time and space to reflect on your own work with children. Indirect benefits include: being able to support a research process which may support other caseworkers in engaging with children and contributing to scholarly knowledge about children’s participation in the Virginia child welfare context.**

Does anyone have questions about the consent process? Take a moment to consider your decision. If you would like to participate please sign the consent form and hand it back to me. Remember, that the signed consent form indicates to the ethics board that I have reviewed
information about the study with you and that you have given consent to participate, however, as mentioned earlier, participation is completely voluntary and you can make the decision to stop participating at any point along the way. Just because you signed this consent form now does not mean that you are obligated to see this project through.

Does anyone have any questions or concerns before we begin? Alright, I am going to turn on the audio recorder now. Thank you for your patience.

**Begin group discussion**

1. *Let’s start with some introductions. Could everyone say their name, the organization that they work for, and one goal that you have for strengthening your practice with children?* (Facilitator: write responses on board)

2. (Facilitator: Engage in discussion about participant’s responses.) *Thanks for sharing! It seems that (X and Y) is important to you all.*
   
   a. Can you tell me more about what you meant by (participant’s response)?
   b. Can you share what was on your mind when you said (participant’s response)?
   c. What motivated you to participate in this study?
   d. What strikes you about the words you see on this board?
   e. How can we work together to make (X,Y) happen for you?

*I would also like to share why I brought this group together. I am a social work researcher who wants to make a difference in the lives of young people and child welfare caseworkers. I have a passion for working with children, and previous experiences as an educator which leads me believe that participation is important for children’s well-being. I do not have experience in child welfare and am looking to you all for your guidance and expertise to help me figure out how to make children’s participation possible in child welfare practice. This group is called a co-learning group because my hope is that in our meetings together we can learn from each other.*

As you know in addition to this group, there is a group of young people who had received child welfare services as children who are participating in an advisory group which is part of this study. This advisory group will be reflecting on their experiences with caseworkers in child welfare and offering questions and ideas for you all to consider as you reflect on your own practice with children. There will be opportunities for you all to ask questions of them, which may be useful to you in thinking about your practice.

*This part of the study is considered action research. Has anyone heard of action research before? Action research is a type of research where the researcher and the participants have a partnership and work together to explore or solve a problem. An action research study aims to make research useful for everyone involved in a study and also have an impact on some social problem.*

Does anyone have any questions?
3. Great, moving on! One of the things that we will do together throughout the study is to review a summary of themes that are emerging from the interviews and group discussions. The idea is that we can discuss the themes and talk about whether or not they make sense to you based on your practice experience. Conversations that we have about these themes can help guide our discussions throughout the study and maybe help us discover opportunities for learning. Here is a summary of themes that came out of the interviews with caseworkers and youth. (Facilitator pass our themes summary).

Let's take a moment to review together.
   a. What stands out to you about the themes?
   b. Do these themes seem to be consistent with your experiences in practice?
   c. Which of these themes seem out of place?
   d. What surprises you the most about these themes?
   e. Are there themes that you hope we can spend time exploring in more depth in our meetings?
   f. What questions come up for you as we read and look at these themes?

4. Thanks for taking a moment to talk about these themes. We are going to switch gears a little bit and do a bit of pair share work. Could everyone find a partner? Thanks. In your pairs take 10 minutes to consider these three questions: (Facilitator: make sure that everyone has pair share worksheet # 1, copied directly after this guide).
   a. What are some ways that you have engaged children and youth in care and safety planning?
   b. How do you know when a child feels their voice is heard?
   c. What challenges have you had in engaging with children?

5. That was great work everyone! Could each pair take a turn to share what you talked about?
   a. Can you say more about that?
   b. How did you feel when that happened?
   c. How did the child show you this? (was it something they said, body language, or some other action)
   d. Can you think of anything that could have made a difference for you in that moment?

6. Thanks for sharing! Let’s go back to the goals that we talked about at the beginning of our meeting today. Take a moment to write down two additional goals that you have for yourself in engaging with children. Could everyone share their goals with the group?
   a. Why is this goal important to you?
   b. Which one of these goals rises to the top for you? Why?
   c. Was there a moment which sparked your interest in this goal?
d. Why do you think this goal might be important for the children that you work with?

7. Thanks for sharing. We are going to reflect more on these goals the next time we meet. However, what could we do at our next meeting which you think might be helpful in beginning to plan for action around these goals?
   a. For example, what discussion topic might be helpful?
   b. What burning questions do you want to explore as a group?
   c. How would you all like to explore approaches to supporting children’s participation?
   d. Is there some material that you think would be helpful to see?

8. As you all know, a group of young people who had received child welfare services as young people are engaged in this project as advisors. They are going to be reviewing materials from this co-learning group’s meetings and also offering feedback for you all to consider when reflecting on your practice with children. Do you have any specific questions or asks for advice that you would like me to share with the advisory group?
   a. Can you say more about what you mean by that?
   b. What do you hope to learn from them?
   c. What kinds of challenges have you had in engaging with youth?
   d. How do you think youth and caseworkers could work together better?

9. How is everyone feeling about our meeting today?
   a. Can you say more about that?
   b. Was this meeting what you all expected?
   c. Is there something that you hoped we would do today that we didn’t do?
   d. Is there something that you would like to do/discuss next meeting?

Thanks for sharing! I very much appreciate and value your time and energy. Our next meeting will be on (DATE) at (TIME). We will be meeting at (PLACE). To help us keep momentum, what do you think would be good topic or question for us to consider in our reflective journals until our next meeting? (Facilitator write down the one or two prompts generated by the group.) Great! Take a moment to write these down in your notebooks.

Thanks again for spending this time with me. I will be meeting with the advisory group (TIME FRAME) and sharing with them the themes from the interviews and our discussion today. I will also be sharing the questions that you asked me to bring to them. If anything comes up for you in between our meetings, don’t hesitate to reach out to me. Remember to take time to reflect and journal about your experiences working with children this month! Your reflections can help us move forward and help me learn more from you all. Thanks again for taking the time to jump into this study with me. Have a great rest of your week everyone!
Pair Share Worksheet #1

Reflect on your practice with children…

In your pairs take 10 minutes to consider these three questions:

1) What are some ways that you have engaged children and youth in care and safety planning?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

2) How do you know when a child feels their voice is heard?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

3) What challenges have you had in engaging with children?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
Thank you all for taking the time to gather together today! As you know, I brought you all together to talk about some findings from the study and reflect on messages shared by youth participants. I met with young people who participate in the interviews a few weeks back and they were eager for you all to hear their feedback.

Before we jump into our discussion today, I would like to review consent information with you all. Please take a moment to read over the consent information sheet.

Thanks for taking the time. As you know, these group meetings are part of a research study that I am conducting for my dissertation. Participation in this research activity is completely voluntary. This means that if you do not wish to participate in activities/discussions in the group or come to the meetings, you do not have to. There is no penalty for non-participation. Again, deciding to participate in the study is completely voluntary. Remember that consent is an ongoing process, meaning that you can decide at any point that you would rather not participate in the project. Let’s go over the consent form together.

1. Group meetings will be audio recorded. Recordings will be transcribed. After the transcription has been checked for quality, the audio file will be deleted. Any personally identifiable information will be deleted or changed in the transcription. Should you decide to participate you will have an opportunity to select your own pseudonym to substitute for your own name in the transcriptions.

2. Our group discussions will sometimes focus on your experiences in practice working with children. Remember that we must all be vigilant in maintaining client confidentiality and privacy. Do not discuss or introduce any client information that could be identifying, such as client names or other personal information. Remember that group discussions will focus on your experiences of practice approaches in working with children, rather than on detailing specific cases that you are involved with.

3. There are minimal risks for you to participate in this study. For example, you may experience emotional distress in discussing your work with children in the child welfare context. Direct potential benefits for your participation in the study include: developing relationships with caseworker colleagues and enhanced emotional well-being from having time and space to reflect on your own work with children. Indirect benefits include: being able to support a research process which may support other caseworkers in engaging with children and contributing to scholarly knowledge about children’s participation in the Virginia child welfare context.

Does anyone have questions about the consent process? Take a moment to consider your decision. (Ask for verbal consent from each member.) Does anyone have any questions or
concerns before we begin? Alright, I am going to turn on the audio recorder now. Thank you for your patience.

Begin group discussion

1. Let’s start with some introductions. Could everyone say their name, the organization that they work for, and something exciting that you are putting your energy into right now?

2. Thanks for sharing! It sounds like everyone is very busy these days. I appreciate very much you all taking the time to talk with me a bit today. If it’s okay with you all, I would like to start by sharing a bit about what I learned so far in talking with caseworkers and experienced young people.

I have talked with 13 caseworkers who work in a mix of child protective services, foster care, and adoption too. I have also talked with 9 experienced young people. All of the young people that I talked to have had experience with the foster care system in Virginia, and a few have also had experience with CPS, adoption, independent living and residential services.

My main goal for the study is to learn how to make sure that children and youth’s voices are heard by workers, especially when planning and making decisions about the youths own life.

I found 9 strategies workers use to support youth voices and that youth said they wanted workers to do consistently. These were:

1. “Bookending” – Starting and ending any visit or meeting with positivity and not being all about the paperwork.

2. Maximizing visits – Making visits safe, comfortable and fun for youth (going on walks, meeting with youth one-on-one). Doing stuff beyond paperwork at a visit and not meeting on a couch in front of the whole family.

3. Using a “listening ear” – Taking time to listen to what youth have to say, and also noticing when youth hold back. Youth shared they wanted workers to give them space to think about what is going on and time to consider what is important to them.

4. Taking an interest – Being interested in what passions and interests youth have. Not just focusing on their foster care identity, but being interested in the youth’s whole self.

5. Making paperwork meaningful – Making paperwork useful for youth and workers. Making sure youth’s views are included in the records and that the paperwork is relevant for youth.
6. **Being Boldly Vulnerable** – Workers talked about sharing their personal stories about challenges they faced with youth so that youth could relate to them and feel like they can trust the worker.

7. **Showing up** – Workers talked about just continuing to show up, even when things got difficult and showing up for important events for youth, not just in times of crisis.

8. **Advocating for and with youth** – Workers talked about showing youth that they had their back by advocating for them in meetings.

9. **Sharing power** – Workers talked about keeping promises, being honest with youth, and giving youth real options as ways they shared power. Youth noted the importance of being asked their opinion and view BEFORE a decision was made not after.

3. **What are your thoughts about these strategies?**
   
a. Which strategies stand out as especially useful/ important? Why?
   
b. Which strategies might be most difficult? Why?
   
c. Do you think there is something missing here? What?
   
d. What surprises you the most about these strategies?

4. **The group of Young People that I met with a few weeks ago shared messages they wanted me to relay to you all. Let’s take a moment to look at them together.**
   
a. What are your thoughts about these messages?
   
b. What kinds of feelings do these bring up for you?
   
c. Do you feel these might be relevant for your practice?
   
d. What kinds of questions do these bring up for you?
   
e. Is there a message that you wanted to share back with young people?

5. **Thanks for sharing! This leads us into our last topic today, visioning about worker supports for making youth participation more doable in everyday practice. What do you think needs to happen to support workers so that they can “be an advocate” or to “make paperwork meaningful” or to “be boldly vulnerable”?**
   
a. Can you say more about that?
   
b. What kinds of questions does this bring up for you?
   
c. What do you think policy makers and administrators need to know?

6. **How is everyone feeling about our meeting today?**
   
a. Can you say more about that?
   
b. Was this meeting what you all expected?
   
c. Is there something that you hoped we would do today that we didn’t do?
   
d. Is there something that you would like to do/discuss next meeting?
Thanks for sharing! I very much appreciate and value your time and energy. Thank you for going with me on this journey. I have learned so much from you all. I will send out the final themes to you all in a few weeks. Feel free to pass along any thoughts about this to me. And feel free to keep in touch. Would love to know how you all are doing as you continue your important work!
# Appendix K. Strategies for Youth Participation

## STRATEGIES FOR YOUTH PARTICIPATION in CHILD WELFARE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“BOOKENDING”</th>
<th>Taking an INTEREST</th>
<th>Being BOLDY VULNERABLE</th>
<th>ADVOCATING for and with Youth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Starting and ending interactions with positivity and connection. Using limited time with youth to make them feel valued.</td>
<td>Learning what is important to each young client. Taking an interest in them, their passions, and their viewpoints.</td>
<td>Sharing personal stories and emotions to build trust with youth. Leveling the playing field.</td>
<td>Showing youth that workers have their back. Supporting youth in self-advocacy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MAXIMIZING Visits</th>
<th>MAKING paperwork meaningful</th>
<th>SHOWING UP</th>
<th>SHARING power</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Making visits fun (walk in the park, go for a drive, crafting). Making visits personal. Using limited time to make a big impact.</td>
<td>Including youth’s voices in their story and plans for their own life.</td>
<td>Continuing to showing up, again and again, and again. Breaking through brick walls and building trust.</td>
<td>Giving youth real options. Being transparent and honest.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“LISTENING EAR”
Hearing youth’s words spoken and unspoken. Supporting youth in communicating their views.

**used by CHILD WELFARE PROFESSIONALS advocated for by EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE**

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FOR MORE VISIT: [www.rampages.us/participationinpractice/](http://www.rampages.us/participationinpractice/)
Appendix L. Strategies for Youth Participation Supplemental Sheet

ABOUT this document. These “Strategies for Youth Participation” were collected through conversations with Child Welfare Professionals and Experienced Young People as part of the Participation in Practice Study. In total, 22 individuals shared their views, including 13 Child Welfare Professionals (from across public and private agencies) and 9 Young People who had experience of foster care, child protective services and/or adoption services. These initial findings show how CWPs currently support youth participation in child welfare planning and decision-making processes and also the messages that Experienced Young People have to share with CWPs.

“BOOKENDING”
Starting and ending interactions with positivity and connection. Using limited time with youth to make them feel valued.

WHAT: CWPs work to make youth’s experiences positive and do small things to show youth compassion. For example, one CWP described using “bookending” where visits are started and ended with some positive conversation or activity that wasn’t related to completing a task. YP recalled that workers who took even a few moments to relate and not be all about business helped them feel more valued and cared for.

The CHALLENGE: CWPs have limited time to spend with youth and have many mandates prescribing how they spend time with youth. One CWP described the challenge like this: “...I’ve got X amount of time with you and so how do I communicate, in the shortest amount of time possible that...you have value just because you exist. Full stop. It’s like, there’s no more to it. Your existence is enough for me. That is the thing that I love more than anything else in the whole entire world.”

WHY this is important: For CWPs, doing the small things helped them feel a stronger bond to the youth they were working with and to feel good about the interaction. For YP this was important to them because it helped them to feel valued and not like they were just another task for workers to check off. As a young person shared, “the feeling is what the memory is, you know?”. 
WHAT: CWPs described maximizing monthly visits to make visits fun, comfortable and useful for them and for youth. For example, CWPs go on walks with youth, go to the park or playground, take youth to the mall or a cafe, or drive around town with youth listening to music. Even little moments of one-on-one time with youth were valued by CWPs and YP alike.

The CHALLENGE: Monthly visits take lots of planning, coordination for CWPs and are usually centered around completing tasks. Some CWPs also describe visits being more difficult when they experience physical violence or feel threatened during a visit. YP wanted CWPs (especially foster care workers) to do more pop-in visits, to check on each youth’s health and safety. YP recalled sometimes feeling unsafe in a foster home, not getting the help they needed and feeling trapped when they didn’t have an opportunity to discreetly speak with their CWP. YP felt one-on-one time was important not only to make sure their perspective was heard but also to help them feel comfortable talking to CWPs about stuff they might not want to share in front of their family.

WHY this is important: YP and CWPs shared that putting away the paperwork and just taking a few minutes to talk, play, or take a walk helps build connection and helps youth feel safer. When CWPs took time, even little amounts, to spend one-on-one with youth, it made youth feel valued and cared about. CWP shared that one-to-one time helped them feel like they were keeping youth safer and making a stronger connection to youth.

WHAT: CWPs described listening deeply and with empathy. They wanted to hear what youth had to say and also what was unspoken, listening between words, listening for hesitations and silences. One CWP described it like this: “so, i’ll ask them a question, and yes they may say ‘no’, but there’s a ‘but’ behind it. And it’s just having that listening ear, to listen beyond.”

The CHALLENGE: Deep listening requires time and a place for reflective communication. Also, CWPs indicated challenges communicating with non-verbal youth (especially young children or youth who have a disability) due to a lack of training, resources and support. Some CWPs described having concerns about a youth’s safety when the youth were unable (due to a disability) to verbally communicate their needs, experiences and preferences. In addition, YP described experiencing challenges in communicating their views with CWPs who did not speak their preferred language. YP wanted youth to have support in communicating their feelings and
perspectives. For example, they wanted CWPs to talk through options and information with youth, and ask youth proactive questions. YP suggested that CWPs slow down and allow youth to have time to process what is happening and what is important to them, instead of asking them questions about their preferences right before a meeting, during a meeting or at a home visit in front of their family.

**WHY this is important:** CWPs listening deeply and supporting youth in communicating their perspective (both spoken and unspoken) was important to YP because it showed that the CWP cared, had empathy and were interested in learning about the youth’s perspective. CWPs felt they could more effectively communicate with youth and also more successfully understand the youth’s perspective when they used their “listening ear”.

**WHAT:** Taking an interest in what was important to youth and learning about their passions and interests helped CWPs relate to youth. For example, CWPs took time to learn about a youth’s passions for writing, painting, singing, playing sports, and also youth’s favorite TV shows, video games they like to play or music they like to listen to.

**The CHALLENGE:** CWPs have a laundry list of tasks getting in the way of time spent with youth. Also, CWPs are challenged by working with youth who put up emotional “brick walls” making them feel that sometimes youth don’t want CWPs to take an interest in them.

**WHY this is important:** YP shared that it was important to them that CWPs saw their whole selves and not just focused on their identity as a foster youth or youth in care. YP expressed that even if they seem “hard”, they still want to be shown that they are cared for and cared about, and for many YP at least one CWP in their life had done just that by encouraging them and believing in them. CWPs found that taking an interest in youth helped them build a more meaningful relationship and also made them feel more successful in their work.

**WHAT:** CWPs described documenting youth’s interests and preferences in planning and reports. Some CWPs also described using youth’s own words in documentation, especially in planning documents and developing goals with youth.

**The CHALLENGE:** CWPs are challenged by paperwork mandates and templates which may not be useful or relevant for them or their work with youth. Some CWPs developed planning documents themselves, however, this meant that sometimes they were doing double the paperwork (one version for their own use, and another to meet requirements). YP wanted more accessible
documentation (i.e. preferred language, disability inclusive, youth friendly) and to have their perspective included in the paperwork.

**WHY this is important:** Meaningful paperwork may support successful case outcomes by facilitating communicating between CWPs, youth and family members, and setting clear expectations and goals. YP wanted to be seen, heard, and understood and having their perspective included in paperwork is one way to show youth that this is happening and that their perspective matters.

**WHAT:** CWPs shared stories about their personal life and experiences in order to relate and connect with youth. YPs suggested that this type of sharing helps them feel connected, find common ground and learn to trust CWPs.

**The CHALLENGE:** CWPs are challenged by being able to get personal with youth while also maintaining an emotional and professional distance. CWPs described feeling conflicted about avoiding emotional attachment or emotional responses, but at the same time feeling an emotional connection to youth. As one CWP noted, “you might be the only person in that person's life that they have any sort of trusting relationship with”.

**Why it is IMPORTANT:** YP described how self-sharing may help youth feel more comfortable with sharing their own stories with CWPs. Youth may more deeply relate and trust CWPs when they feel like they have common ground. CWPs feel that self-sharing is important to level the playing field and disrupt the power imbalance between CWPs and youth. In being boldly vulnerable CWPs are sending a message to youth that they are not alone and that they can trust their CWP to have empathy and compassion for them.

**WHAT:** CWPs described being present for youth by continuing to show up again and again, despite the difficulties that youth might be experiencing or the multitude of tasks on the CWPs plate. CWPs showed up at times of crisis to comfort and support youth. CWPs also described giving youth space to reflect and observe, in order to build trust. CWPs also attended events that were important to the youth, to show their support and encouragement.

**The CHALLENGE:** CWPs described challenges in working with youth who seemed emotionally distant (like hitting a brick wall), or expressed intense anger about the situation or the CWPs themselves. YP suggested that CWPs focus less on negative behaviors or actions of youth and rather consider the underlying causes or feelings.
which the behaviors express. YP wanted CWPs to ask youth what was going on with them, and express concern for them, rather than focus on disciplining youth for “bad” behavior.

**WHY this is important:** CWPs found that being present and showing up for youth again and again helped them build trust with youth. YP expressed how they felt valued and cared for when CWPs stuck with them through good times and bad. In showing up, CWPs sent youth a message that they were important and that they mattered.

**WHAT:** Advocating for youth helped CWPs build trust with youth. For example, in speaking up for youth in meetings with school officials, CWPs showed youth support and compassion. A few CWPs also described advocating to keep a youth on their caseload or advocating for a youth to remain at a school or community during a placement change.

**The CHALLENGE:** YP shared that they wanted workers to continue to fight for them, represent their interests and support them in advocating for themselves as well. For example, YP recalled wanting workers to advocate for maintaining them on their caseloads. YP also suggested that CPWs could advocate by standing up for youth in foster care and residential settings and advocating for youth voices to be heard by other professionals and family members too.

**WHY this is important:** For YP and CWPs, worker advocacy is a path towards building a meaningful connection. YP felt that they wanted support in building their own advocacy skills, not just to impact their future but also their present. CWPs found that advocacy was a way to connect with youth who may have been “brick walls” and build trust with youth.

**WHAT:** Keeping promises, being honest, and giving youth real options were ways that CWPs balanced power in working with youth. One CWP described sharing power like this: “...trying to find ways to work with them, to share power with them, to offer them choices, to offer them compromises...”

**The CHALLENGE:** CWPs were challenged by empowering youth while also being an authority figure in the youth’s life. YP wanted their own vulnerabilities to be recognized, but did not want to be defined by their vulnerabilities. YP wanted to have real choices and to be involved in decisions made about their own lives, to be informed about what was going on and to have a powerful presence at any meeting about them even if they didn’t attend in person. YP wanted support to express their true feelings, views and opinions, even if they are young and even if the conversations are difficult.
WHY this is important: For YP, having real options gave them some control over their own life. Whereas, if they were only asked about their feelings after a decision had been made, it made them feel like they weren’t important enough, smart enough or good enough to have a say. As one YP shared: “I’m trusting you with my life.” In taking steps to empower youth, CWP’s send a message that they trust and value youth.
Appendix M. Messages for Caseworkers from Young People

MESSAGES from Experienced Young People for Child Welfare Professionals

"I appreciate the things that they’re already doing. Because it sounds like the group of social workers that...were interviewed...were very good... I like the fact that they mentioned that being an advocate is one of the things that they do... I think that’s great. I also think the trust part is good and showing up for youth and foster kids is great as well. So I really appreciated everything they said. And I’m glad that they get hear, um, the voices in the opinions of youth...so that they can continue to currently advocate for youth. So, those are the big things that I really, really like."

"...Just be supportive...in everything they’re doing. Even if they do, you know, turn down this or, you know, have a bad day this day or, you know, have continuous bad days. Don’t give up on them, because they’re in this place because they have no one else. So you are that person, you know. So and I, I guess, just...act like it’s your life, you know, would you want to do this? You know, would you want to stay here?"

"They should do their best job at trying to make every kid a priority. And doing their best to make sure that they’re doing what they can for each and every kid. It is a stressful job, but it is their job also and I think that they should be doing the best they can for kids. Cause every kid deserves to have someone that they can trust and go to, that has their best interest."

"Just be mindful where you are placing...younger folks. And just ask them...is this what they want...the decisions that you are making for them are life-changing (*emphasis -- pause). You know, they are moving from home to home, you know, you never know what home it's in...ask them every time they move to a new home how they feel."

"I was just pretty much saying that...you’re not a kid on a caseload and not all social workers look at you like that. There is, like I said, you get lucky and get good social workers and they do...everything to make sure that you’re happy, out of a crappy life."

"Like, honestly, I couldn’t choose just one (talking about strategies for Youth participation). I think all of them are amazing things and that it would help a lot of kids if social workers could be more like that. I feel like kids in foster care are more broken as is. So someone keeping their promises, and having someone to trust, and then, you know, some social workers throw out there like. I know what you going through. And, like, you being a kid, you know, like, “you don’t know what I’ve been through.” So...telling them like their past and things that they’ve been through. And letting them trust them. I think that would be very helpful. And like you said, like going to like events and stuff, and like supporting, instead of like you just feeling like another kid on their caseload..."

"Advocate for them...make sure they’re voice is heard, you know, explain these things to them... meet them where they are. Let them know the lingo, you know."

MESSAGES shared by experienced young people (N=3) who participated in follow-up meeting for Participation in Practice Study

For more about this study visit: www.rampages.us/participationinpractice/
Appendix N. Sample Theme Development Document Version #1

Research Questions:

\[Q1\]: How do caseworkers and young people with lived experience perceive children’s participation in child welfare care and safety planning processes?

\[Q2\]: Where are there opportunities for enhancing and strengthening participatory approaches with children within child welfare care and safety planning processes?

Youth perspectives: Youth want to be involved and listened to because this is their life. They want some control over their own life. They want to take their power back. They want to be advocates and be advocated for, not necessarily looking for relationship. They want action, to be heard, to be helped and to have real options. They want workers to be open to feeling, be empathetic and show care. They want recognition and support.

What participation means for youth: Being supported in being seen, heard, felt, understood, and treated with care and compassion. Being advocated for and being supported in self-advocating. Having options. (Participation does not mean going it alone or autonomously making decisions.)

Informational support

- **Meaningful information about own case and life**: all info needs to be formatted in an understandable and meaningful way, needs to be in youth’s preferred language, needs to be considerate of youth’s reading comprehension level, needs to be accessible for youth who have a disability, consider youth’s perspective about their information (using pedagogical tools)
- **Education about system**: about process, about grievance procedures, about supports, about rights
- **Education about advocacy**: (related to system knowledge and emotional support)
- **Wanting Transparency**: Wanting workers to share information about youth’s life, even if it is difficult to hear, youth want to know about their family, knowing about their case, wanting to know about meetings, knowing why..., knowing about their options, knowing what’s next

Process support: “*Not what you say but how you say it*”

- **An advocate** focused on learning about youth’s wishes and needs, advocating on behalf of youth, and also supporting youth in self-advocacy
  - Wanting support/advocacy for youth have have a disability, and youth who are struggling with mental illness or substance use
- **Real options**: not wanting to feel like saying “yes” is the only option, wanting to have say in placement decisions, worker changes, other major and minor decisions impacting life,
- **Support in communicating** (including non-verbal communication): using creative means to enable youth to reflect, to learn and to form opinions; using hand signals/gestures, eye contact to communicate; Wanting to be asked: about preferences, about feelings, about perspective
- **Safe and supportive environment**: wanting workers to talk to youth in private (not just in living room with entire family), wanting workers to be creative with environment (going for walks, going to the park, driving around)
- **Having time**: wanting workers to spend time with youth not talking about the case or completing tasks, wanting time to process information and consider options,
- **Writing own story**: Wanting to write own narrative OR wanting to be a part of own life narrative: wanting paperwork to be meaningful, wanting plans and reports to include youth’s perspectives and concerns, not wanting to feel like everything written about them is about their foster care status (related to wanting to be recognized and valued as a whole person)
- **Having participation options for meetings**: wanting to be invited, wanting to have space to express opinions and needs, wanting to have perspective shared and heard in meeting (either through advocate or in person), wanting to know about outcomes,
- **Privacy**: not wanting to feel like everyone is making judgments because they are a foster youth, (related to: Lacking control over own story:: linking to regaining control after trauma experience)

**Emotional support**: youth remember how they felt even if they don’t remember details about what was said

- **Being encouraged**: wanting workers to say ‘you can do this’ and believe it,
- **Being valued**: wanting workers to learn about youth’s interests and passions
- **Being seen** as a whole person and an individual: Singers, artists, teachers, social workers, family focused, parents, mentors, sisters, brothers, foster youth, student, friend, advocate
- **Being heard and understood**: wanting to be listened to, wanting to have perspective considered
- **Building bonds**: Wanting support in building and strengthening social connections (i.e. mentors, extended family, supportive community friends)

**Role of worker**: “I’m trusting you with my life.”

- **Be an advocate**: advocate for maintaining youth on caseload, advocate for youth in foster homes, advocate for youth to be heard, take action for youth
● Be proactive and invested, don’t wait for youth to ask for help: asking youth who they can be supported, not wanting for permission to visit foster home

● Be personable, don’t be all about business: put away the lists and the forms and just talk or play or take a walk, “do these little things with these kids that most people don’t see” -- (Linked to paperwork)

● Be trauma informed: wanting workers to talk to youth about why they did x,y, or z. Wanting workers to take time to understand youth’s perspective, instead of just focusing on bad behaviors, Wanting workers to be supportive not disciplinarians

● Be open to feeling (use emotional competency): wanting workers to trust their instinct and gut feelings, paying attention to youth’s silences and non-verbal communication, considerate of youth’s feelings, "the after feeling is what, it's going to carry the memories", youth made to feel unimportant (b/c not time for individual), youth made to feel unintelligent (b/c no opportunity to talk through options)

● Be empathetic and relate: Self-sharing helps make youth feel more comfortable, wanting to know more about workers and their struggles, Wanting empathy not sympathy, Wanting workers to really consider youth’s feelings and experiences: wanting workers to build understanding about youth’s perspective, not wanting workers to say “I understand” or I’ve seen this before

● Recognize power: Wanting workers to recognize power differentials: “The signature is not on the piece of paper. The signature is the feeling that, you know, when the communications done, you know, that’s that signature it’s gonna stay there.”

Hurdles to youth’s participation: "the power...is way off"

Feeling burdened

● Caring for workers: sometimes worrying about not bothering workers, means that youth don’t reach out for help when they need it. Youth aware of administrative burdens on workers -- making youth feel like they can’t speak, making youth feel like their burden isn’t great enough to ask for support, making youth feel like they aren’t worthy of help, (Could be linked to youth’s self esteem and also reinforced by hearing about workers caseload, difficult youth, and paperwork, linked to power dynamics -- making vulnerable person feel guilty for wanting support),

● Caring for family: not wanting to get family members or carers in trouble

● Burdened by ‘intergenerational transmission’: placing responsibility on youth to “change” and disrupt “cycle” of violence -- related to tough love, telling youth you will end up like….

● Feeling weight of papertrail: “All they know is a girl with anger problems”, Seeing impacts of record, paper shaping youth’s lives, feeling judged, feeling misunderstood, wanting workers to look beyond records, wanting workers to include youth’s perspective in records
Feeling silenced, minimized, devalued

- **Treated like a task**: by system (turnover), process and worker actions, i.e., **Youth sometimes feeling like a task for workers to complete**, feeling rushed, feel like they are a burden, making youth feel like a “datapoint”
- **Having fear**: Fearing unknown, **knowing consequences of voice**, Fearing isolation,
- **Being too good or too bad to be heard**: “good” kids don’t get heard because workers don’t feel they need as much support, “bad” kids don’t get heard because workers focus on “bad” behaviors rather than coming from understanding
- **Feeling unsupported**: “figuring life out on my own”, Overwhelmed by responsibilities, Overwhelmed by skill gaps, Strengths and interests unacknowledged, nonresponsive workers
- Feeling controlled: feeling forced, medications, Lacking real options
- Feeling minimized: Views minimized, Feelings minimized, Resilience minimized, Experiences minimized, Knowledge minimized, Self minimized (feel that workers only see one aspect of youth’s self)

**Strategies youth use to take power back:**

- Disruption as resilience: running away, being difficult, forcing worker changes, taking back power,
- Using voice: taking action, remaining silent, getting attention, having consequences
- Youth using their power: controlling what they eat, controlling behavior, controlling what they say ((linked to loss of control))

**Foster Care experience:**

- Feeling isolated: Being separated, Being moved, Being restricted, Being alone
- Feeling hurt: Young people feel hurt in foster home, experience violence and emotional abuse
- Living inequity: feeling used, feeling misled
- Wanting foster parents to be more accountable
- Diverse experiences and feelings about the system: Depending on experiences in system: Some youth have positive feelings about system, see the system as keeping them safe, others who have had bad experiences in foster homes, view system as placing them in harms way. Also, good system views from people who self described a positive, optimistic personality, and felt confident in sharing views. However, even those with good experiences in the system shared experiences of not being heard or not being advocated for when they needed support and still felt unimportant. “Best thing that could have happened to me” --
Worker Perspectives:

- Negotiating role: With other providers, With parents, avoiding stepping on toes
- Wanting to be helpful: Empowering parents, Empowering youth, Offering advice, Sharing resources, Teaching parents about trauma
- Working for youth through parent: Not wanting to interfere in youth parent relationship
- Viewing youth participation: “we’re there to ask questions”, About worker getting information, contingent on…, Asking questions, Telling youth about rights (foster care rights document), “Earning the right to have a say” :: linked to “good” behavior, maintaining composure, not doing “illegal” things, maintaining placement, Thinking about what it means for a youth to do a “good job” in a meeting, Initiating participation: youth who make it easy by initiating participation, and make “reasonable requests” get to participate -- or more like get to have a say in how their worker supports them
- Learning about working with youth: Training in child development during MSW, Training in forensic interviewing on the job, Observing other workers, Using TLP (state form) and “Nothing about me without me” to know what to ask kids
- “Bogus” service plans: making depersonalized service plans
- Feeling intrusive
- Feeling set up
- Feeling weight of CW decisions
- Feeling powerful and powerless
- Feeling helpless
- Wanting to know youth: Having a ‘listening ear’
- Wanting to show compassion
- Feeling angry: angry at system, angry at youth being violated
- Feeling hopeful: breaking cycles, seeing resiliency in action, seeing love
- Viewing youth: “Great kids” -- vocal, “on top of things”, making “reasonable requests”,

Children’s Participation:

- CW continuum and youth participation: leveling youth participation depending on view of parent’s role (i.e. removal or reunification),
- Informing
- Accessing
- Participation :: is rare and is passive
- Not youth centered :: Making connections with youth not central to doing child welfare work

Youth engagement strategies mentioned by workers
- TBRI
- Asking questions
- Driving in cars
- Forensic interviewing
- Information about case:: foster youth get a folder to keep paperwork, youth get workers card,
- Double duty:: Caseworkers describe doing plans which are simplified with more of a focus on goals to make planning for meaningful for youth -- means that sometimes DSS workers are having to do two plans -- one for adults and one for youth themselves --

Worker challenges:

- **Struggling to be a macro aware clinician in micro role:** MSW adds to worker stress, feeling weight of macro work and limits of micro work, without knowing how to bring them together. Workers can become frustrated and lost, feeling unsuccessful and unfulfilled. Doing macro track and then going into micro work.
- **Documentation stressful and ineffective:** Processing documentations, pushing papers, focusing on meeting obligations, using templates, quick timelines, struggling with youth and families over documentation
  - **Service plans useful for auditing services but not useful for youth or workers themselves:** designed to be audit trail of services provided -- helpful for billing and for proof of service provided -- can be used by state to claim that they helped youth as much as possible -- can be used by providers to bill state for care provided
  - System set up to move young people through, different tiers -- designed for young people to encounter multiple workers -- paperwork is the constant
- **Struggling with boundaries expectations:** Workers wanting to avoid getting close, avoid being counselors, bringing emotional baggage, also told to have barriers which seem impossible in practice, also enforce distancing from youth, Believing that being a professional means avoiding emotional attachment or emotional responses.
- Policy Conflicts: Perspectives about how policy influenced practice: feeling that policy mandates do not keep kids safe
- **Who is the client?:** Workers express perspective about whole family as the client -- family systems perspective -- really means the parents is the client -- view position as helping parent “fix the family” so that the kid can live in a safe environment. -- view importance of empowering parents which means that building connection with child or incorporating child’s view is seen as impediment to this.