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# Children and young people's participation in child protection: outcomes of transformative participation in international contexts

## Børns og unges deltagelse i børnevelfærd: esultater af transformativ deltagelse i internationale kontekster

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### ABSTRACT

This article draws on case studies from Brazil, Denmark, Israel, Norway, and Nicaragua to analyse the outcomes of transformative participation in child welfare. Transformative participation occurs when children make meaningful choices, develop a sense of agency, possess the resources to exercise agency, and can make a real difference in their lives, their communities, and child welfare. Caring and inclusive attitudes, relationships, and practice approaches characterise transformative participatory professional practices. We demonstrate that transformative methods can create conditions so children feel recognised and empowered and empower themselves. They encourage children to collectively engage in actions to change cultural norms and develop new child welfare practice approaches and policies. We show how local-level practitioners in public and nongovernmental child welfare organisations can play a crucial role in fostering children's transformative participation.

### ABSTRAKT

Denne artikel bygger på casestudier fra Brasilien, Danmark, Israel, Norge og Nicaragua for at analysere resultaterne af transformativ deltagelse i børns velfærd. Transformativ deltagelse opstår, når børn træffer meningsfulde valg, udvikler en følelse af handlekraft, har de nødvendige ressourcer til at udøve denne handlekraft og kan gøre en reel forskel i deres eget liv, deres lokalsamfund og børnevelfærden. Omsorgsfulde og inkluderende holdninger, relationer og praksisformer kendetegner professionelle praksisser med en transformativ tilgang til deltagelse.

Vi demonstrerer, at transformative metoder kan skabe betingelser, der gør, at børn føler sig anerkendt, bemyndiget og styrket. Disse metoder opmuntrer børn til i fællesskab at engagere sig i handlinger, der kan ændre kulturelle normer samt udvikle nye metoder og politikker inden

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for børnevelværdspraksis. Vi viser, hvordan praktikere på lokalt niveau i offentlige og ikke-statslige børneværnsorganisationer kan spille en afgørende rolle i at fremme børns transformative deltagelse.

## Introduction

Until recently, child and youth protection was understood to be the concern of adults, with children and young people cast as victims of abuse or passive beneficiaries of the protective measures designed and administered by adult experts (Ruiz-Casares et al., 2017; Shemmings, 2000). While adults unquestionably remain responsible for children's safety and security, it is now recognised by child protection practitioners and scholars that children and young people<sup>1</sup> can play active, empowering, and indeed transformative roles in child protection at all levels, whether by collaborating and 'co-designing' alongside adults or leading their own projects and initiatives, with adults in a supporting role (Moore, 2017).

This article discusses the outcomes of transformative participation in child and youth protection. Drawing on case studies from Brazil, Denmark, Israel, Norway, and Nicaragua, we will examine the individual, organisational, and social consequences of children's involvement as change agents in social work education, research, and development and when participating in social movements to eliminate violence against children in society. The term 'child and youth protection' refers to public and nongovernmental systems of protecting children and youth from violence. Transformative participation is a type of involvement where children make meaningful choices, develop a sense of agency, possess the resources to exercise agency, and achieve their life choices (Kabeer, 2005; Shier, 2001). We focus on transformative participation by children and young people who are targets of interpersonal violence in the family and economic and political violence.

Transformative participatory practices seek to shift the power dynamic between adults and children by viewing children as active participants and contributors to decision-making processes. They aim to give children opportunities to transform their lives, communities, and society. Transformative participation recognises that children have valuable experiences and perspectives that can inform policy formation, social work education and practice, and social change initiatives.

This type of participation overturns traditional approaches where children are seen as passive recipients of care and protection and are not involved in decision-making that affects their lives. Instead, individuals or groups engage in collective action to challenge and transform power relations and social norms perpetuating inequality and injustice. Transformation participation goes beyond simply engaging in decision-making processes to actively working to change the structures and systems that create and perpetuate inequity. It involves creating spaces and opportunities for marginalised children and young people to participate fully in decision-making processes and work together to challenge and change the status quo (Hart, 1992).

Prior scholarship has discussed various processes and conditions related to transformative participation. Transformative participation requires opportunities for children to gather information and collaborate with other children and/or adults (Hart, 1992; Shier, 2001, 2010). Percy-Smith and Thomas (2010) emphasise the importance of creating spaces and opportunities for transformative participation, such as community-based organisations or participatory budgeting initiatives. Shier (2001, 2010) introduces the 'pathways to participation' concept, highlighting the various stages individuals or groups go through to fully engage in transformative participation. These stages include information gathering, consultation, joint decision-making, and shared leadership (Shier, 2001; 2010). Byrne (2011) provides examples of how transformative participation can be implemented in various contexts, such as community development projects, environmental activism, and human rights advocacy. She emphasises building trust and creating stakeholder partnerships for meaningful and lasting change (Byrne, 2011).

In this article, we analyse the effects of transformative participation and the role of local-level practitioners or LLPs in fostering it. LLPs are adult professionals, volunteers, and researchers acting as participatory allies to children. They work to implement child protection policies in collaboration with children in the public and nongovernmental child protection sectors. We will first describe our research methods and findings before summarising our argument about the effects of transformative participation and LLPs' roles in it.

## Research methods

This article analyses five in-depth case studies about children's participation in Brazil, Denmark, Israel, Nicaragua, and Norway.<sup>2</sup> We have chosen these countries because they represent different child protection systems (Berrick et al., 2023) and diverse scenarios with different approaches to children's rights and children and young people's transformative participation. The case studies encompass children's individual and collective participation and LLPs working for governments and non-profit organisations in various parts of the globe. Children's project participation was only financially incentivized in Israel and one project in Denmark.

Our analysis focused on two research questions: What are the outcomes of transformative participation for children and youth? How do LLPs create the conditions for transformative participation? We analysed these questions using a case study approach (see Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### Brazil

The information about the project in Brazil was gathered by us (the authors) because we were part of the organisation and supervised the cases we will discuss in the case study. The data we analysed are based on our experiences, observations, the notes we took as part of our work, and published project reports by the *Making History Institute*, all of which are anonymized. The Making History Institute has established and follows its own child safeguarding policies and procedures so that children voluntarily participate in the project's services. The coordinator of the residential homes or foster family services, who has legal custody of children while they are in care, authorised the participation of the children participating in the project. In addition, at the start of the project, the volunteers introduce themselves, explain the project's purpose, how it works, and what they can do together in the weekly meetings. The frequency, day, time, and duration of the meetings are agreed upon that day. Part of the Institute's approach is to present the child or adolescent with a written contract in simple, objective language about the agreements made. This contract is read, filled in, and signed by the volunteer and the child or adolescent, symbolising the pair's desire and commitment to carry out this work together. In 2017, the project underwent an external evaluation by researchers from the University of East London (Pickering-Saqqa et al., 2017).

In the information presented here, we have de-identified the participants using pseudonyms and omitting any information that could disclose a child's identity. The project participants are children and adolescents from various genders in residential or foster care. They are from marginalised communities, and most of them are Afro-Brazilians.

### Denmark

The two Danish projects we will discuss below involved researchers from the University College Copenhagen (UCC), students from the university's social work programme, social workers from the child protection department of the municipality, teachers, and community social workers. Children and young people were active researchers in both projects. UCC granted ethics approval. Various research methods were used, including observations, interviews, participation in meetings, workshops, discussions with children and young people, and case materials developed with young people and social work students. These activities are designed to engage with children and young people directly,

providing a platform for them to share their perspectives and experiences. Collaborative efforts extend to creating case vignettes, further amplifying the voices of the young participants in child protection.

Participants in both projects were youths from disadvantaged backgrounds. We attempted to recruit an equal number of girls and boys, but most participants in the Bella project ended up being boys. Gender affected the extent to which girls could participate in the project. Participants were recruited into one of the projects through youth clubs, which have traditionally been more used by boys than girls, regardless of their ethnic background. In addition, the girls who participated in the project did not possess Danish citizenship or a Danish passport, so they could not travel to the conference in Iceland. Contact with the children, parents, and youths in both projects was initiated through the professionals who were in contact with the families, and they obtained consent from the youths and parents.

The Roskilde project's selection criterion was that families had to be engaged in a safety plan. Project Bella's selection criterion was the youths' motivation to participate in a research project. The young people were motivated to participate for different reasons, including the opportunity to become co-researchers, paid as a part-time, after-school job (Project Bella), and gain skills and recognition.

### **Nicaragua**

The information about the Nicaragua case study came to us directly from the local community organisation CESESMA and was not gathered by university researchers nor under the aegis of a university research project. As a grass-roots organisation working with children and young people in rural communities, CESESMA was not subject to any external ethics process to legitimize its work with children. Nevertheless, CESESMA developed its own child safeguarding policy and procedures, as described in detail in Shier (2023a, p. 94). These procedures involved CESESMA supporting children in local schools to develop child protection policies in collaboration with parents and teachers. Children and adolescents played an active role in monitoring the implementation and evaluation of these policies. Due to local recognition of CESESMA as an established grass-roots community organisation dedicated to defending children's rights, children and young people were unfailingly enthusiastic to sign up for any new initiative.

The Nicaragua case study describes several projects over a ten-year period. In all projects, participation was voluntary, and participants were self-selected. The organisation CESESMA was well-known in the rural communities in its catchment area and maintained good communications with children, parents, teachers, and community leaders in these communities. Younger children often became involved initially in arts, crafts, organic farming, or reading workshops, and through this involvement, they heard about new activities or projects that were proposed and were able to express their interest and get their parents' consent. The main selection criteria were the young people's interest and enthusiasm and their parents' consent. While CESESMA ran certain gender-specific projects (Young Women's Groups and the 'New Masculinities' Programme), apart from these, there was no gender segregation and typically equal levels of participation of girls and boys. The concept of non-binary gender identities, though nowadays well-understood, was little-known in rural Nicaragua at this time and was not accounted for in the case study described.

The CESESMA team saw their role as supporting the young people in these activities rather than asking them for support. Therefore, financial compensation was never offered. Travel and subsistence, however, were always provided. Given the extreme poverty of many families involved, it was not unusual to see participants secreting part of the lunch provided in their backpacks to take home and share with younger brothers and sisters, giving rise to discussion in the CESESMA team on the ethical implications of this situation.

### **Norway**

The 'My Life Education' project is based on a cooperation between the Change Factory, the University of South-eastern Norway (USN), and the Norwegian University of Science and Technology

(NTNU). It was financed by the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth, and Family Affairs, and its evaluation included children and youth from all genders who volunteered to participate in the project. The participants were between 15 and 20 years old, had recent, direct involvement with the Norwegian child protection system, and were willing to share their experiences in higher education settings. The data for the evaluation study of the results of the project included formal and informal interviews, conversations, written reflection and notes from meetings and teaching, and the author's direct participation in the project. The author obtained ethics approval for the project and consent from the participants.

### **Israel**

The case study, which sought to deepen understanding of the engagement of marginalised youth in policy design, analyses board members' political resources, self-efficacy, and opportunities to engage in policy advocacy. The organisation involved was the Israeli Council for the Child in Care, a national non-profit organisation supporting children and youth from all demographic groups in residential group homes and foster families. All participating youth in this study, which underwent ethics approval by the Tel Aviv University Review Board, were 18 years or older and had transitioned out of residential state care and group homes (excluding foster care).

Participants' histories of adverse childhood experiences within their families significantly hindered their potential for family reunification in adulthood, and all youths lacked familiar support systems. Consequently, they were enrolled in a transitional housing programme designed for youths who had aged out of state care. Participants were selected using a convenience sampling method from the advisory board of the transitional housing programme. Due to the vulnerability of the participants and the challenges associated with recruiting key participants, gender segregation was not implemented.

### **Findings**

In the following, we discuss the main findings about the outcomes of transformative participation in each case. Each case description first provides background information about the projects before discussing the LLPs' roles in and consequences of transformative participation.

### **Brazil**

The 'Making My Story' project for children in residential and foster care in Brazil is part of the Making History Institute (*Instituto Fazendo História*), a non-profit organisation founded in São Paulo in 2005.<sup>3</sup> In weekly meetings with volunteers, children and young people create strong emotional bonds and build a life storybook with photos, drawings, paintings, texts, and stories. This approach ensures that every child and young person in out-of-home care knows and owns their past, present, and potential future stories. The project creates an intergenerational emotional bond and an environment of trust where participation occurs. It gives children a voice in their interactions with foster carers, social workers, and judges because they can express themselves through images and words. The LLPs involved include professionals working for the Institute and volunteers trained by social workers or psychologists from the Institute. The volunteers, social workers at group homes, and foster parents become allies to children and young people by collaborating with them on creating their stories.

The programme encourages meaningful interactions between adults and children by fostering an environment filled with warmth and care. Adults engage with the children in a nurturing atmosphere through various activities, including playing games, reading books, and embarking on creative endeavours. Central to the methodology is its flexibility, tailored to meet the unique needs of each child. The adults in the programme take on a supportive role, actively listening to the children's

stories and perspectives. Moreover, they facilitate open communication channels with other responsible adults, such as social workers and judges. By bridging this gap, the programme ensures that the children's narratives are shared with decision-makers, potentially empowering them to make well-informed choices rooted in the child's experiences and aspirations.

One notable project involves crafting a life storybook, a captivating collage of the child's experiences. This unique life storybook blends photographs, drawings, paintings, and texts, all carefully curated to reflect the child's journey and imagination. What makes this initiative truly special is its inclusivity; even children who are pre-literate can actively participate in creating their books. Encouraging forms of expression beyond words ensures that every child's voice is heard and understood. Children actively engage in the process of narrating their life stories, playing a significant role in shaping their narratives. This empowerment is facilitated through a comprehensive approach that ensures children receive information about various aspects of their lives, including their family context, the child protection measures, and the potential alternatives and consequences.

This proactive involvement equips children to better understand their circumstances. The personal life storybook resulting from this process becomes a cherished possession, accompanying children as they transition out of care. It is a powerful tool for children and young people, aiding them in comprehending, embracing, and taking ownership of their past, present, and future. Through this understanding, children are better equipped to develop their opinions and articulate their life desires.<sup>4</sup>

## **Denmark**

This case study involves two projects in Denmark in which children and young people participated in social work research and community development.<sup>5</sup> One is a three-year research project called the Roskilde project, which investigated children's participation in decisions about their safety between 2011 and 2015. The other project, Project Bella, involved young people as researchers and change agents in Bellahøj, an area in Copenhagen, from 2016 to 2018. This project aimed to counter young people's marginalisation and promote their motivation and interest in continuing their education.

Project Bella represents a dynamic community organising endeavour led by young individuals from marginalised immigrant backgrounds. Project descriptions were meticulously developed through a series of meetings, aligning with the mission of presenting the experiences and concerns of the young people's local community to a broader audience. Field trips, conference presentations, and workshops further enriched the project's scope, providing the participants invaluable exposure and learning opportunities. One notable aspect of Project Bella involves young people leading guided tours of their housing project, offering community members and international social work students' insights into their lived experiences. The young people actively engaged with researchers and professionals, contributing to a documentary that shed light on their community's unique challenges and strengths. The initiative included a trip to Iceland, where participants gained diverse perspectives and shared their experiences at local and international conferences.

Beyond project-specific initiatives, the municipality provided crucial support to the young people by collaborating with experts experienced in child protection research and policy design. This support encompassed capacity-building efforts, logistical assistance, and emotional support from LLPs, including teachers, social workers, and community workers. Recognising the importance of firsthand experiences in shaping effective policies, the organisation facilitated meaningful collaborations between experts of experience and professionals, ensuring that the voices of those directly impacted by child protection systems were integral to the research and policy-making process.

In Project Bella, young participants underwent a transformative journey, acquiring essential skills to effectively run meetings, conduct research, document findings, analyse information, and present topics relevant to their well-being and safety in the local community. As a result, the young people emerged as change agents, advocating for themselves and others in their community. The project

profoundly impacted their self-esteem, fostering a sense of empowerment and agency. Moreover, Project Bella facilitated a deeper understanding and dialogue between the young participants and LLPs. This exchange of perspectives contributed to a more collaborative and inclusive environment, breaking down barriers and fostering mutual respect.

The young people involved in Project Bella gained valuable insights into the roles and responsibilities of professionals, particularly teachers and social workers. This firsthand experience broadened their understanding of these roles and gave them a unique perspective on the intricacies of political decision-making and democracy. Consequently, they actively contributed to developing policy recommendations and became informed advocates for positive change. Another noteworthy impact of Project Bella was the significant improvement in school attendance among the participants. This positive change can be attributed to their active involvement in the project, demonstrating the motivational influence of empowering young people to lead change in their community. In the Roskilde project, the young people played a pivotal role in shaping child protection practices. A new practice approach was developed resulting from their evaluation and contributions, transitioning social work practice from child-centric to child-directed.

The LLPs experienced a paradigm shift in their perceptions of young people's capabilities. Learning to have more faith in the potential of young people and discovering effective ways to collaborate with them were crucial takeaways. This shift in perspective strengthened the relationships between young people and professionals and contributed to the young people's sustained motivation to continue leading positive change in their community. The consistent relationship characterised by trust, respect, and a willingness to collaborate played a pivotal role in the success of these initiatives.

## **Israel**

The 'Bridge to Independence' programme, operating under the auspices of Israel's Council for the Child in Care, implemented an inclusive approach by enlisting care leavers to serve as advisory board members in policy-related decision-making processes.<sup>6</sup> This initiative recognised the invaluable perspective that individuals transitioning out of care can offer in shaping policies that directly impact their lives. By involving care leavers in advisory roles, the programme aimed to bridge the gap between policy formulation and the real-life experiences of those navigating the challenges of independent living. The programme employed a multifaceted approach, blending legal frameworks with practical measures to enhance the participation of care leavers in policy-related decisions.

To facilitate meaningful participation, young people engaged in two-hour bi-weekly meetings and an annual weekend seminar organised by social workers associated with the Council. These sessions were crucial platforms for open dialogue, enabling the young participants to share their insights, experiences, and suggestions. These gatherings' structured yet inclusive nature provided a supportive environment for constructive discussions on matters relevant to care leavers' well-being and future trajectories.

The youth advisory board associated with the 'Bridge to Independence' programme showcased a proactive approach by compensating the young participants for their involvement in each meeting and covering their travel expenses. This financial acknowledgment recognized the value of their contributions and helped overcome potential barriers to participation, ensuring that the voices of care leavers were heard and valued. The facilitation of these meetings and the annual seminar involved the expertise of two dedicated social workers. These professionals were pivotal in ensuring the sessions were conducive to open and constructive discussions. Their facilitation skills created an environment where the young participants felt empowered to express their opinions, fostering a sense of ownership and agency in the decision-making processes that directly affected their lives.

Children in care played an active role in the democratic processes of the Israeli parliament (the *Knesset*), demonstrating a powerful commitment to advocating for the rights and comprehensive services of care leavers. Through their participation in parliamentary deliberations, these young



people contributed to the call for a comprehensive set of services tailored to support those transitioning out of care. This engagement highlighted the importance of including the voices of care leavers in policy discussions and showcased the potential impact of their advocacy efforts on shaping systematic changes.

Recognising the potential impact of these young advocates, the Ministry of Social Services and Social Affairs sought their collaboration in designing the first ombudsman agency specifically for children in care. This invitation affirmed the value of their insights and positioned them as active contributors to developing crucial oversight mechanisms. The collaborative approach underscores the importance of including those with lived experiences in creating systems designed to safeguard the rights and well-being of children in care. In reflecting on their experiences, the young people highlighted their appreciation for the non-judgmental stance of the adults involved in the programmes. This sentiment speaks to the importance of creating a supportive and understanding environment, free from judgment, where the voices of young individuals in care can be heard and respected. The positive relationship between the young people and the adults served as a foundation for their active participation and contributed to the overall success of the initiatives.

As part of their journey toward independent living, a new programme was established to provide mentorship to graduates of the independent living programme. This innovative approach acknowledges the complexities of the transition to independent living and recognises the need for continued support beyond the initial programme. The mentorship component serves as a crucial bridge, offering guidance and assistance to these young people as they navigate the challenges associated with autonomy and self-sufficiency. Participation in the deliberations and programmes also fostered a profound sense of belonging and solidarity among the board members. This interconnectedness contributed to a supportive community where individuals shared everyday experiences, fostering a supportive environment essential for personal and collective growth.

This case illustrates how care leavers' engagement in service and policy design may increase service quality, social inclusion, and children's active citizenship. The initiatives yielded tangible skill development among the young participants. Through their involvement, they gained communication, negotiation, and organisation skills, enhancing their ability to navigate the complexities of both personal and professional life. This skill development and the experiences gained through advocacy efforts significantly boosted their self-confidence.

## **Nicaragua**

This case demonstrates how children have organised to claim and defend the right to live without violence, drawing on experiences from Nicaragua.<sup>7</sup> Focusing on the children's role in social change, the case study presents ten examples of how children and young people have taken practical action to defend their right to live without violence, all drawn from the author's experience supporting child workers on the coffee plantations of northern Nicaragua between 2001 and 2012. Shier worked with CESESMA, a Nicaraguan NGO founded by a group of local schoolteachers in 1994, which is rooted in the local communities it serves. The organisation, comprised of schoolteachers and child rights activists, embraces a child rights-based approach, focusing on supporting rural children and adolescents in promoting and defending their rights, including the right to live without violence.

CESESMA actively supported, resourced, and facilitated various activities initiated by children and young people to defend their right to live without violence. These activities included impactful initiatives such as Youth Theatre Against Violence in the Home, Festivals Against Violence Towards Children, Child Consultants Investigating the Problem of Violence on the Coffee Plantation, The Dragon of Violence, Young Women's Groups, the 'New Masculinities' Programme, Transformative Research by Children and Adolescents, Children Researching Children's Understanding of Sex and Sexuality, Developing Child Protection Guidelines from the Bottom-Up, and a Weekly Radio Show titled 'Children and Adolescents' Voices Heard.' Through these diverse initiatives, CESESMA

provided a platform for children and young people to actively engage in research, advocacy, and community-driven solutions, fostering a participatory and empowering environment. The organisation's multifaceted approach exemplifies the potential for transformative change when children and young people are recognised as active agents in shaping their own lives and communities.

In the coffee-growing zones of Nicaragua, a transformative approach known as 'protagonismo infantil' empowered children and young people to collectively advocate for and defend children's rights within their communities. This method emphasises children's leadership in initiating and implementing social change, fostering a sense of agency and collective action among the younger population. Local schoolteachers initially established CESESMA to make education more relevant for working children in rural communities. Over time, the organisation evolved to adopt a child's rights approach, assisting rural children and young people in asserting their rights, with a particular focus on protection from violence.

The engagement of adults working for the NGO played a crucial role in facilitating youth-led actions for social change. While children took the lead in transformative initiatives, adults provided vital support by enhancing the capacity of children and young people, assessing potential risks associated with their proposed actions, and establishing rules and safeguards to ensure their safety and well-being throughout the process. Training and capacity building were integral components of the approach, encompassing a broad spectrum of rights advocacy, facilitation, coordination, and research. The emphasis on capacity-building aimed to equip children and young people with the skills and knowledge necessary for effective engagement in transformative processes.

The case study shows how transformations occur throughout communities, leading to a safer, less violent society when children are informed and empowered as rights-holders and recognised as active citizens. The children involved in these projects assumed roles as community activists rather than merely recipients of public services. Their engagement focused on raising awareness and advocating for cultural and societal changes aimed at protecting children from violence. This approach reflects a paradigm shift where children are not passive beneficiaries but active agents in driving social change within their communities.

Children and young people actively participating in these transformative projects experienced various personal and developmental benefits. Through their engagement, they developed essential qualities such as self-esteem, motivation, critical thinking, initiative, perseverance, and solidarity. These outcomes contributed to their individual growth and empowered them to navigate challenges and actively participate in shaping their communities. Numerous social change actions emerged from the initiatives, all organised, led, and run by children and young people. These actions spanned various areas, including education, protection from violence, and creating policy guidelines to address children's risks of traveling to school.

Published reports resulting from these projects provided valuable insights into children's perspectives on critical issues (CESESMA, 2012a; Young Consultants of Santa Martha, 2010). Noteworthy reports included an exploration of children's understanding of sex and sexuality (CESESMA, 2012b), as well as an examination of safe, quality schools from the viewpoint of children and adolescents (CESESMA, 2009). These reports not only served as documentation of their experiences but also acted as advocacy tools to bring attention to the needs and concerns of the younger population (Shier, 2023a).

## **Norway**

Children and young people with experience with the child protection system in Norway participate in training future child protection caseworkers in relational skills and collaborative case practice in the 'My Life Education' project 6o78o8787p78.<sup>8</sup> The 'My Life Education' project promotes co-production, which goes beyond participation, by allowing children and child protection workers to engage in meaningful interactions that lead to mutual learning and improvement. The project

has shown positive outcomes for social work students who can improve their relational and collaborative skills through open and genuine exchanges with the programme participants, referred to as PROs. The PROs have reported an increase in self-confidence and a healing effect from being able to share their stories with social work students. Meanwhile, social work students have become more aware of their subjective experiences and histories and gained relational and collaborative skills, making them feel more confident in their ability to practice collaboratively with children and young people. The project involved the PROs, university social work students, faculty, and social workers.

The Change Factory's methodology is rooted in the belief that those most acquainted with problematic systems are the individuals within them. This foundational idea underscores the importance of tapping into the knowledge and experiences of those directly impacted by a system to identify and implement practical development solutions. By centering the voices of those with lived experiences, the Change Factory adopts an inclusive and participatory approach to address challenges and drive positive change. The organisation employs a 'participatory change methodology' based on Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) (Thomas, 2004). This methodology serves as a framework to encourage young people to discuss and evaluate their situations openly. The participatory nature of this approach fosters an environment where young individuals feel empowered to share their experiences, opinions, and insights. By incorporating PLA principles, the Change Factory promotes active engagement and collaboration, recognising the inherent value of involving young people in decision-making that directly affects their lives.

Several Norwegian public entities, from municipalities to universities and the parliament, have collaborated with the Change Factory to develop public services centered on children's rights. This unique approach positions children as recipients of services and as active developers and participants in the design and implementation of these services. Adults working with the PROs of the Change Factory seek to ensure the authenticity of the young participants' stories and suggestions. The PROs are paired with adults they know and trust. Trust resulted from a long process established between the researcher and the PROs through positive interactions and a supportive relationship. (The researcher worked on this project for eight years.) These supportive relationships extend to their interactions with social work students, where the Change Factory takes proactive measures to prepare PROs for meetings and conferences. Additionally, a debriefing process is in place to address any challenges or discomfort the PROs may experience during their interactions with university students. This emphasis on maintaining the integrity of the PROs' voices ensures that their perspectives remain unaltered and genuine.

Norwegian society places a high value on children's social status, and the state has been actively endorsing youth-led initiatives in child protection for an extended period. This positive outlook reflects a broader cultural and legal commitment to recognising and respecting the voices of young people, positioning them as active contributors to shaping policies and practices that directly affect their lives. The 'My Life Education' project, operating in Norway, has received robust support from public entities, encompassing cultural, financial, and organisational backing. This multi-faceted support underscores the commitment of public institutions to facilitate initiatives that empower children and young people, recognising the importance of investing in projects that amplify their voices and experiences.

Norwegian law places a strong emphasis on safeguarding the participation rights of children. This legal framework ensures that children actively engage in decision-making processes concerning matters that affect them. This commitment to children's participation rights is a fundamental aspect of Norway's approach to promoting a society where young people have agency and influence over issues concerning their well-being. The Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth, and Family Affairs has played a crucial role by producing national guidelines that explicitly recognise the value of children's knowledge. These guidelines assert that the insights from children's experiences hold equal importance alongside knowledge from the practice field and evidence-based

scientific knowledge. This acknowledgment signifies a paradigm shift, promoting a more inclusive and collaborative approach to knowledge generation and decision-making processes.

The training sessions facilitated by the Change Factory have yielded significant outcomes, with social work students reporting enhanced self-awareness regarding their limits in relationships and comfort zones in interacting with others. This increased awareness has translated into a more profound feeling of community among students. There is evidence of improved cooperation, stronger mutual connections, and deeper interpersonal relationships among students. Particularly noteworthy is the emphasis on the importance of actively listening to each other's life stories without prejudice. This heightened understanding of personal limitations in training contributes to students' preparedness to become more effective and empathetic social workers, fostering a culture of inclusivity and understanding in their future professional endeavours.

## Discussion and conclusion

The country case studies from Brazil, Denmark, Israel, Norway, and Nicaragua showed the consequences of children's transformative participation in countries with different child protection systems (Berrick et al., 2023). They analysed the roles of LLPs in children's transformative participation. LLPs contribute to transformative participation by developing robust, trusting, and inclusive emotional bonds with children and creating opportunities for all children to participate in decision-making and collaboration. They embrace attitudes that are strengths-based, child-centered, nurturing, inclusive, and sensitive to potential biases.

They are willing to be trained in and embrace approaches encompassing children's creativity, capacities, and skills, and they are open to collaborating with children as genuine partners. Facilitative and transformative support from authority is founded on a child-centric participation ethic and participatory practice approaches by professionals, which are especially important when laws and policies do not promote children's participation or fail to protect children from violence. In addition to LLPs' attitudes towards and rapport with children, upskilling children and adults, logistical and financial support, and protecting children from potential risks of participation are crucial.

The effects of children's transformative participation occur at the individual and institutional levels and affect children and adults. At the individual level, transformative participation changes (children's and adults') consciousness about children's capabilities and transformative potential. There is also evidence that, at the individual level, it changes children's emotional well-being by increasing their self-confidence, self-worth, and sense of agency.

At the institutional level, children's transformative participation changes child protection practices, research, and policies. The case study of Brazil illustrated that non-governmental organisations may play a crucial role in building children's capacities to express their experiences, develop their voices, and participate in decision-making. Children with experience in the child protection system developed a new approach to social work practice in Denmark. Care leavers have shaped child protection law and policy in Israel. In Nicaragua, children, as civil society actors, equipped with support from a non-governmental organisation, can effectively mobilise to prevent violence and promote social change. The Norwegian case study shows co-production with children, which goes beyond participation by allowing children and child protection workers to engage in meaningful interactions that lead to mutual learning and improved opportunities for children.

While not a focus of this article, we have also identified challenges that arise when implementing participatory practices, including overcoming power imbalances, ensuring the meaningful involvement of children in decision-making processes, addressing cultural and contextual barriers, securing sustained support and commitment from adults and institutions, and preventing the silencing of vulnerable children and those in precarious circumstances, which often occurs when their supposed 'vulnerability' is misused as a reason to deny their participation rights.

This last-mentioned challenge is particularly critical in the field of social research. As we seek to generate legitimate new knowledge about child protection and safeguarding, the very people we need to collaborate with and whose voices need to be raised and heard, namely children and young people with personal experience of child protection services, are those most often labeled as ‘vulnerable,’ and as a result, kept silent (Shier, 2023b; Stalford & Lundy, 2022). This attitude can most clearly be seen in the ‘ethical research’ policies and procedures enforced with increasing rigidity in universities around the world, where researchers are pressured to avoid contact with participants identified as ‘vulnerable’ (Carter, 2009; Coyne, 2010).

To conclude, in the context of the transformative approaches to child protection discussed here, it should be clear that the supposedly ‘vulnerable’ children and young people not only have the most to contribute to participatory research but also have the most to gain from such participation in terms of recognition, skills development, and empowerment (Porter et al., 2023). As Shier (2019) notes, ‘empowerment’ denotes more than capacity-building or provision of resources to children and young people. It results from children and young people taking a leading role, acting in changing their lives, and transforming the person (Shier, 2019).

## Notes

1. Following the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), the term ‘children’ here refers to individuals below the age of eighteen years. ‘Young people’ and ‘youth’ refer to adolescents and young adults into their mid-twenties. There is an acknowledged overlap between the two categories.
2. The authors originally presented these case studies in Križ and Petersen (2023). The book includes case studies from more countries, but we have selected the five discussed here as the most suitable for an in-depth, thematic analysis of children’s transformative participation. The book focuses on the different pathways to and methods of participation without examining the commonalities of the individual and social *changes* resulting from participation and the role of local-level practitioners in children’s transformative participation in the five countries – the two questions this article addresses.
3. The Brazilian case is based on Vidiz et al. (2023).
4. While there are transformative outcomes on the level of individual children, the project’s impact on decision-making by social workers and judges appears to be limited because of the lack of financial resources, related capacity issues, and time limitations.
5. This case study is based on Petersen (2023).
6. This case analysis draws on Meital Schwartz-Tayri and Lotan (2023).
7. This case study is based on Shier (2023a).
8. This case analysis is based on Sundby (2023).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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the title, abstract, and keywords were originally written in Danish, as it is the native language of the corresponding author.

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**Harry Shier** is an Irish activist, researcher, writer, facilitator and commentator on children's rights, participation and play, who has worked internationally in community groups and NGOs as well as research institutions. In the 1990s, he developed the 'Article 31 Children's Consultancy Scheme,' which enables children to act as consultants to the management of cultural institutions; an experience crystallized in his 2001 paper 'Pathways to Participation,' which introduced a tool for analysing children's participation now widely used throughout the world. In 2001, he moved to Nicaragua in Central America to work with local community organisation CESESMA, supporting child workers on coffee plantations in claiming and defending their rights. He holds a PhD in children's rights from Queen's University Belfast, awarded in 2016 for his study on Nicaraguan children's perceptions of human rights in school. He now lives in Ireland, where he is officially retired, though still involved in a range of children's rights and participation initiatives. His published work from 1984 to the present can be accessed at [www.harryshier.net](http://www.harryshier.net).

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