



## Supporting child and youth participation in service design and decision-making: The ReSPECT approach

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### ABSTRACT

The ReSPECT Project (Reconceptualising Services from the Perspectives of Children and Teens) was conducted in a disadvantaged urban community in Australia, with young people who experience marginalisation and who were involved with multiple service agencies across a range of service sectors. Its purpose was to work closely with young people to understand their experiences of service engagement, their perspectives on the service priorities for young people in their area, and to support them in the development, trial and implementation of a youth led service initiative. This paper describes the methodology employed with the young people, its theoretical underpinnings, and the challenges that needed to be overcome in the conduct of this research. Critical to the ReSPECT approach is relationship building and capacity development with local service providers. This aspect of our work is also briefly described in this paper. The ReSPECT approach makes a significant contribution to the participatory methodological literature. It is distinctive from existing approaches because (1) it gives equal attention to the sustained engagement and scaffolding of young people in the development of ideas, and to the capacity building of service providers addressing organisational culture and constraints; (2) it follows the process of service change from the conceptualisation of youth-led ideas, through to development, partnership, implementation and evaluation; and (3) it is designed for engagement with marginalised young people with diverse service experiences, whose voices are so often absent from participatory projects.

### 1. Introduction

The purpose of this methods paper is to share the ReSPECT (Reconceptualising Services from the Perspectives of Experienced Children and Teens) approach to engaging children and young people in service design and decision-making. It seeks to contribute to a rapidly growing field of research that is moving beyond debate on the value of gathering the perspectives of children and young people on service delivery, to an interest in how to appropriately scaffold their engagement and leadership in a way that acknowledges them as critical stakeholders and innovators. The ReSPECT approach has been developed and trialled in an Australian study with young people from diverse disadvantaged communities, conducted in collaboration with three social service agencies, including two large non-government organisations and an Aboriginal

organisation. It draws on research evidence, practice wisdom and consultation with young people. It has proved to be a valuable methodological approach in our research, and as a tool to support broader social change activities with our partners in service design and implementation.

Research on child participation is largely underpinned by a Child Rights agenda, including their right to be heard on all issues impacting their lives and for their views to be given due weight in decision making (United Nations, 1989). Theoretical foundations include the Sociology of Childhood, which argues that children should not be viewed as passive beings in the process of 'becoming' but as capable and active participants in their environments (Prout & James, 1997). This has further developed in recent years, with a renewed emphasis on children's relationality and materiality. This 'ontological turn' (Spyrou, 2019) has

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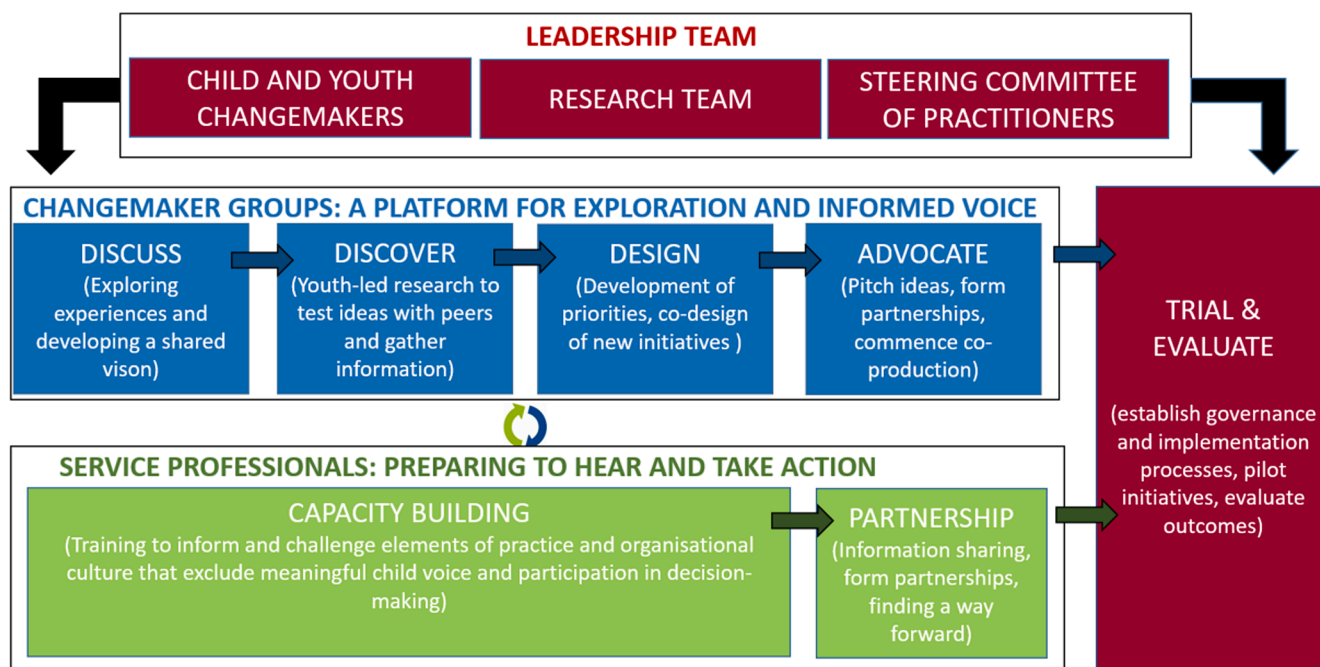


Fig. 1. The ReSPECT Approach.

challenged standpoint theories which underpin much child participation research, by shifting the emphasis away from children as independent units of analysis, to children's relationships and what contextual conditions are required to support children's participation.

There is a plethora of published models designed to support participatory research and practice, two of the most influential early models being Hart's Ladder of Participation (1992) and Shier's Pathways to Participation (Shier, 2001). The ReSPECT approach is not another model. It is a methodological approach, informed by the principles of different models across the child rights, participation, citizen science and youth action research fields. The need to operationalise theoretical models in a structured way for use within service contexts is supported by research that demonstrates ongoing and widespread uncertainty amongst service providers around how to meaningfully engage with children and young people, particularly those who have been identified as 'vulnerable'. Service professionals describe feeling that child voice is complicated by concerns around developmental competency (Jeremic et al., 2016), a reluctance to burden or 'responsibilise' vulnerable or 'at risk' children in decision-making (Strömland et al., 2022), and

uncertainty as to how they can effectively convey complex information to children (Parkinson & Cashmore, 2008). These are further complicated by the resource constraints to implementing participation practices within organisations who have competing demands and whose core business is often to secure the safety and welfare of children and young people (Bessell 2015). Children and young people still struggle to be heard above the adults in the room, including their own parents, who may speak on their behalf with the best of intentions (Donnelly & Kil-kelly, 2011).

Seeking the voice and perspectives of children and young people is about much more than providing them with the opportunity to speak. It requires a framework that also prioritises building the knowledge and capacity of adults to listen and act (Graham et al., 2015). Prominent child participation scholar, Laura Lundy, argued that a child's right to be heard depends on the cooperation of adults who see the engagement of children and young people in decision making as a legal and moral imperative, rather than as a gift or nice add on (Lundy, 2007). The rights of children and young people extend beyond being heard, to having their views given due weight. This requires, according to Lundy:

#### Box 1

The five ideas the Changemakers 'pitched' to service professionals.

- A training program for mental health and social service professionals, entirely designed and delivered by young people, on how to effectively engage with young people and build trust.
- Regular days on which community service representatives (e.g. police, health, social services, employment services, welfare, housing, etc.) attend schools and are available to speak to students who have questions or require support. Annually, these community service representatives will be part of a 'transition out of school' day for students in the final year of school to secure appropriate supports as they move into their post-school lives.
- A health app for children and young people, that provides easily accessible and local information about service supports, reviews, frequently asked questions, and access to an online 'help' service where submitted questions are responded to by local medical professionals, social workers, and multi-cultural wellbeing service workers.
- A 'life skills' course for young people in juvenile detention to improve knowledge and skills in financial literacy, health and hygiene, meal planning and nutrition, help-seeking and service access, and self-regulation and coping strategies
- A young people's 'hub' that is homely, fun and welcoming, including a café and 'hang out' spaces, with a wide range of information available about youth services, community participation and employment services, and service professionals (recruited by a panel of young people) on site to provide support.

- Space (safe and inclusive environments),
- Voice (the opportunity to speak freely, to express themselves in ways that are meaningful to them, and to remain anonymous if this is their wish),
- Audience (access to the appropriate audience with a desire and responsibility to actively listen), and
- Influence (commitment to incorporate the views of children and young people in decision-making, with transparency on how this is done and the outcomes achieved).

One way to operationalise these requirements in the design of community or service initiatives is through youth-led participatory action research (YPAR). YPAR models seek to engage young people in the processes of determining program objectives, developing a program logic model, designing, and implementing programs, and evaluating programs (Anselma et al., 2019). These approaches have come into favour in many jurisdictions, with public policy shifting towards governance and co-design models of working (Blomkamp 2018). The YPAR approach aims to be democratic and to bring about change, where the research is part of the change and not an objective measure of it (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003). Ideally, YPAR projects engage youth at every stage as leaders, scaffolding youth-led processes and decision making whenever possible. There are very few examples in the literature of projects that have been successful in involving youth as leaders across all phases of YPAR (Foster-Fishman et al., 2010). This literature commonly includes a narrative of youth capacity building and ‘empowerment’, built on the premise that voice and action will lead to positive life outcomes for the young people involved. A systematic review of YPAR supports this premise, finding that, overall, involvement in YPAR projects led to positive outcomes for youth, particularly related to agency and leadership, followed by findings relating to academic and career achievement, social, interpersonal, and cognitive outcomes (Anyon et al., 2018). Largely missing from this literature is significant discussion around outcomes for the participating adults and service organisations as the result of YPAR. To what extent do service professionals and service delivery organisations learn and improve their services as the result of engagement with this model?

Cahill and Dadvand (2018) challenge researchers and service professionals to avoid the assumption that participation is always inherently good and that voice will always lead to empowerment. There can be negative consequences that flow from participation depending on the context, circumstances, and relational dynamics. In part this assumption often ignores the political forces that shape the context in which participation occurs, something recognised in Hart’s original model and recently explored by Perry-Hazan and Bauml (2023), who argue that even in organisations committed to a participation ethos, manipulated participation may result where there is a high degree of conflict over an issue. Adults have an important role in being aware of the potential negative impact of engagement in participatory research and service-based initiatives on children and young people, requiring careful reflection on the seven ‘P’s’:

- Purpose – Are the goals and objectives of the research meaningful and relevant to the participating young people? Did they have a role in generating the purpose?
- Positioning – Reflect on how young people are positioned within the wider social discourse and how this might limit their participation. How can we interrupt or disrupt the assumptions made about young people?
- Perspective – Youth are not a homogenous social category. Ensure that our work is not reinforcing dominant discourses and value systems.
- Power relations – Reflect on how roles and responsibilities are adopted and enacted.
- Protection – Consider levels of risk and ensure balance between the right to protection and the right to participation.

- Place – The importance of inclusive spaces.
- Process – Ongoing conversations and reflections across each of the elements described above.

Another emerging literature that has informed the development of the ReSPECT approach, is the ‘Citizen Science’ literature, which is focused on partnering with community members to collect real world research data and potentially advocate for community change. The Stanford ‘Our Voice’ model (King et al., 2021) has been used to support child citizen science in the conduct of community projects on a range of diverse topics. The ‘Our Voice’ model has four components: Discover, Discuss, Advocate and Actions. This approach is researcher driven in that adult researchers design the questions, design data collection tools, and analyse the data that children collect. Children and young people, however, are active data collectors and advocates for change. While the principles and processes that guide participation in this model have some strengths, it is adult led and does not give focus to adult capacity building.

The ReSPECT methodology draws from these principles. It is informed by participation models that have operationalised children’s rights, and has tempered these with an awareness of the importance of relational aspects of childhood and institutional and political constraints in committing to participation, along with recent developments in citizen-led governance processes, to develop a methodology to do participation in practice.

### 1.1. The Australian policy context

The ReSPECT approach was developed based on our understanding of the existing literature and our experiences as participatory researchers and service providers with a commitment to child engagement. It was developed in the context of an Australian policy climate post the release of recommendations from a Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (Royal Commission, 2017), which required that all Australian service providers put in place mechanisms to listen to the voices of children and young people. The service response to this recommendation varies, however our observation is that this has largely equated to the development of complaint mechanisms for children and young people, supplemented by a growing number of youth advisory bodies. We were committed to developing a way forward that engages with children and young people, including those who experience marginalisation, at all levels of service organisations for two reasons: (1) because children and young people have a right to be heard on issues such as the nature of services designed to support them; and (2) because we see that a more sophisticated service and policy response is required to support outcomes for children and young people who experience adversity and disadvantage, and that young stakeholders have a contribution to make to the innovative development of effective solutions.

The intent to listen is present across Australian government and many service organisations, as evidenced by the consultation structures in place and some key national policy initiatives. For example, the *National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children 2021-2031* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2021) recognises the importance of children’s participation, and the most recent strategic plan from the Office of the NSW Advocate for Children and Young People (2022) commits to elevate the voices of children and young people as a core priority. Most Australian states and territories have government-funded youth peak advocacy bodies and many non-government organisations have Youth Advisory Groups. There are a small number of organisations whose main purpose is to support the voice and advocacy of children and young people, such as CREATE (national peak consumer body representing the voices of children and young people with an out-of-home care experience) and Canteen (leading national youth cancer charity providing support to young people and families impacted by cancer).

Nonetheless, moving from policy to practice is not easy. The extent to

which children and young people are listened to and involved in decision making processes as this relates to the services they engage with very often depends on the receptiveness and underlying attitudes of the adults directly involved: the caseworkers, teachers, administrators, lawyers, health professionals and early intervention specialists that are encountered in different service contexts (Berrick et al., 2015). While the commitment to setting up processes at the peak advisory level is useful, these peak organisations remain one voice amongst many at the stakeholder level. This ‘top-down’ mode of participation is necessary, but not sufficient, for service delivery and practice to be participatory. Institutional cultures and norms that permeate into taken for granted orthodoxies, and the degree of discretion available by what Lipsky describes as ‘street-level bureaucrats’, are also significant influences as to whether participation gets done (Lipsky 1980). Clearly a more ‘bottom-up’ approach to doing participation within the sphere of service delivery involving young people is needed.

Organisations committed to child and youth participation in consultation and decision making often find it difficult to expand the young people’s sphere of influence beyond being part of advisory groups, or immediate and relatively tokenistic decision-making. For example, there are numerous accounts of organisations where young people have been asked to choose between a range of available activities or have been influential in shaping some element of a group, such as including more food breaks or making time for informal socialising. There are far fewer examples of organisations engaging children and young people in deeper discussions such as those around the purpose of services and how their success is measured, how they should be run and who should be involved in running them. The ReSPECT project sought to develop formal mechanisms through which to support the impactful participation of children and young people in service decision-making and reform.

## 2. The ReSPECT project

The ReSPECT approach is diagrammatically summarised in Fig. 1. The overarching purpose of the ReSPECT approach is to: ensure a shared leadership approach in which young people are respected as equal decision makers; to scaffold the critical role that young people can play as informants, researchers, co-designers and advocates; to support professional and organisational change so that youth voices are taken seriously and provided with opportunity to influence change; and to create youth-led initiatives for service settings that will support improved outcomes for children and young people. Each component of the ReSPECT model is discussed below, drawing on our experience of trialling this model.

### 2.1. The leadership team

There were three arms of our leadership team: (1) university researchers; (2) service provider partners; and (3) young people. The university-based researchers played the key co-ordinator role and assumed primary responsibility for supporting the engagement of representatives from the three formal service provider partners and the young people. What was critical to the success of the approach, is the diverse expertise each of these groups within the leadership could offer to the approach. The strategic use of different forms of expertise has been found to be critical to the effectiveness of participatory models of service design. However, it also presents one of the more significant challenges in doing participation well, if forms of expertise are ‘crowded out’ or the process is used to shift responsibility for service design and delivery from more to less powerful actors.

The overarching design of the ReSPECT approach was conceptualised in close collaboration between the researchers and the service provider partners, involving shared leadership and initiative. Consultation sessions were conducted with young people from a disadvantaged community early in the conceptualisation stage, who gave input into the research questions, methodology and recruitment

strategies. Original conceptualisation was not, therefore, a child-led process. It would more accurately be described as a child informed process.

Early establishment involved the writing of a major grant application, which could only be prepared and submitted by the research team, followed by a long delay before we knew the outcome. The gap between conceptualisation and commencement was approximately 18 months. Reliance on research funding to conduct a project of this nature reinforces a model in which the researchers play the key leadership role. The decision-making power of other actors, particularly children and young people, is restricted. Contributing factors are that (1) most often grant money is controlled by the research team, who are held accountable for all decisions relating to the use of research funds and cannot easily devolve this responsibility; (2) in order to spare children and young people the disappointment of an unsuccessful grant application, they are often not embedded within projects until funding has been secured (and ethical approval granted), by which time important decisions about research topics, research questions, methods, and stakeholder roles have already been made. It should also be noted that 18 months is a long time in the life of a young person, and sustaining the interest and engagement of one consistent group of young people over such a lengthy ‘holding time’ is unrealistic other than in exceptional circumstances.

This traditional research funding model is, therefore, not well aligned with a genuinely collaborative approach because it potentially tips the balance of decision-making power in the project towards the research team. Every care was taken to redress this balance and ensure a shared leadership model for the ReSPECT approach, including regular leadership meetings with stakeholder partners, and reciprocal engagement to strengthen partnerships and shared vision. For example, researchers provided free capacity-building programmes to service provider partners and participated in organisation events and committees. A relationship of mutual trust and respect was actively developed and sustained. The funding process also brought into focus how institutional processes necessitate the deployment of different forms of expertise strategically, to meet the overall aims of the project. In this case, the expertise of academics were deployed to successfully obtain competitive funds (Palmås and von Busch 2015).

Once funding was secured, 26 young people from disadvantaged communities, aged between 14 and 18 years old, were recruited to the project. They were invited to join the project as leaders, participants, co-researchers and co-designers. We deliberately sought out young people who experienced marginalisation and required support from a range of formal services, including child protection, youth justice, housing and homelessness, mental health and health, disability, migrant and refugee, and alternate education or education support services. The group was representative of diverse service experiences and diverse cultural backgrounds. What was common to all the young people however, was their expertise of the service system, obtained through their lived experience of the system.

Youth involvement in the leadership team took a fluid form. It involved a group of young people in project decision making early on in the development of the grant application. Once funding was secured, the young people who were recruited to be ‘Changemakers’ (see below) moved between being participants to being involved in project decision making. They were engaged in decision making at every stage of the project on how the next phase should be conducted, who should be involved, and how data should be interpreted. Because we were working with a relatively small number of young people, it was not difficult to facilitate their role as both project leaders and project participants. If a much larger group of Changemakers were involved, it would be important to establish an overarching youth steering committee.



## 2.2. The Changemaker groups: A platform for exploration and informed voice

The recruitment of the Changemaker group occurred in one of two ways: (1) young people were introduced to the project by their service providers and caseworkers; or (2) young people volunteered to be part of the group in response to flyers distributed through the community. We had originally hoped to work with the ‘Changemakers’ as one group over a sustained 12-month period. Instead, due to a range of factors including delays and challenges with recruitment, and the availability of the young people involved (alongside the significant impact of COVID-19 restrictions during the study period), they participated in one of five small groups, with one group being entirely online. The groups either met regularly in short sessions over a 12-month period, or came together in a series of five or more full-day workshops.

A diverse group of young people participated in the study as part of the Changemaker groups. Of the 26 young people, most were female ( $n = 23$ ). They identified their own cultural backgrounds as: Anglo-Australian ( $n = 7$ ), Aboriginal ( $n = 5$ ), Samoan ( $n = 2$ ), Turkish ( $n = 1$ ), Afghani ( $n = 1$ ), Pakistan ( $n = 1$ ), Māori ( $n = 1$ ), Spanish ( $n = 1$ ), Lebanese ( $n = 1$ ), or unspecified ( $n = 6$ ). All the participating young people had service engagement experience with between two and six services across: Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal health and mental health, disability, housing and homelessness, education, social welfare, multicultural, migrant and refugee, youth justice, rehabilitations, out-of-home care, and employment.

The participating young people opted to call themselves the ‘Changemakers’ to capture their role within the project. All Changemakers participated in at least 20 h of group work in Phase 1 of the project, which was the research phase conducted in advance of the ‘trial and implementation’ phase (in blue in the diagram above). All were compensated for their participation at \$10 per hour. Catering was provided at every session, and assistance with transportation was provided when needed. There had been much debate within the leadership team around whether it was appropriate to offer payment and place monetary value on the contribution of the young people. We collectively decided that payment at a rate equivalent to the average youth casual hourly wage would (1) support sustained engagement, (2) honour the expertise that comes with lived experience in at least a small way, and (3) help to reduce power imbalances by ensuring that the young people were compensated for their participation as was the case for the researchers and professionals who were involved as part of their salaried role.

Phase 1 of the project involved four stages, as described below. These were designed to move from discussion and reflection, to design and action. By developing initial ideas and testing these with other children, this provided a means to revise, refine and increase the legitimacy of initial ideas, which then provided a foundation for design and implementation.

### 2.2.1. Discuss: What would an ideal service system for young people look like?

The process for the initial stage (Discuss) was guided by a transformative learning approach, which argues for the importance of providing learning environments that facilitate critical reflection on assumptions and existing frames of reference. This approach calls for ‘effective discourse’, free from coercion, in which information, imagination and empathy are all valued resources in exploring new frames of reference (Mezirow, 1997).

Creative activities, including painting and drama activities, were used to stimulate conversation and discuss youth experiences of participation in support services. The discussion aimed to encourage the development of a shared vision of a service system that the Changemakers believed would best meet the needs of young people who experienced adversity and marginalisation. The Changemakers were assured that they were under no obligation to share their own personal stories, and all questions were framed around what they felt would be

important to young people generally, rather than specifically around what would be important to them individually. Nonetheless, group rules of confidentiality and respect were established by the Changemakers, and many did choose to disclose personal experiences. Changemakers were reminded of the rules for engagement and their right not to disclose personal information at the commencement of every session. They were also reminded that, beyond being part of service transformation, this work was also part of a research project and that the discussion was being recorded as research data. The research methods were rigorously reviewed and approved by the Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee (WSU HREC 5201600565). All participants provided informed consent to participate in the research. Those under the age of 16 also required consent from their parents or guardian.

### 2.2.2. Discover: What do other children and young people perceive as the priorities?

The next stage of Phase 1 required the Changemakers to become co-researchers. This was an opportunity for the Changemakers to test ideas generated in the ‘Discuss’ stage and ask questions of their peers. For example, one group had decided to focus on youth mental health, and wanted to find out whether this was also seen as a priority for their peers and, if so, whether their peers would prioritise providing additional supports in the school context, the broader community context, or the online context. A total of 215 children and young people participated as survey respondents.

Changemakers were provided with research training in the design of research questions, participant recruitment, survey design, data collection and descriptive analysis. The research team took responsibility for securing ethics approval for this stage (WSU HREC 5201600565), and scaffolded the Changemakers in their research leadership. Research design for each group became limited to an online survey because the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) would not approve an interview or focus group design (despite this being the strong preference of most of the Changemaker groups). The concern from the HREC centred on the risk of disclosure of personal information to peer researchers, requiring a data collection method that allowed all respondents to remain anonymous.

### 2.2.3. Design: What is the one initiative we would like to help instigate and/or progress?

Each of the five Changemaker groups, directly informed by their collective experiences and survey results, designed one initiative for young people that they would have liked to see implemented in practice. This was a co-design exercise between the Changemakers and the research team, with the young people bringing expertise in lived experience and the researchers supporting them by providing policy and research evidence in relevant and accessible forms. During the Design stage, selected service professionals were invited by the young people to contribute expertise and information to inform the design and address feasibility of the ideas the young people were exploring (See Box 1).

### 2.2.4. Advocate: Will you partner with us to make this happen?

All five groups attended a ‘Pitch Day’, which was also attended by local and regional service providers, senior service leaders and policy makers. The NSW Advocate for Children and Young People attended as a keynote speaker and special guest. At this event, the young people ‘pitched’ their ideas to service professionals and invited service providers to partner with them in the implementation of their ideas. To date, one of the pitched ideas has been taken forward and is being implemented in partnership with a non-government service organisation. A second pitch idea is currently under development in partnership with service providers. The young people and the research team continue to advocate for the uptake of all five pitch ideas.

### 2.3. The service professionals: preparing to listen and act

The ReSPECT approach invests in building the capacity of service professionals across different levels of the service system, from leaders and policy makers through to local practitioners, to listen and act. This acknowledges that service providers may in principle be committed to participation, but may face constraints in their own knowledge and resource capacities, or lack the organisational power to effect change. This element of the methodology recognises these constraints and also the significant role that service professionals play in facilitating participation. There were two components of the work with service providers that attempt to address these constraints and acknowledge the centrality of service providers: (1) capacity building, and (2) scaffolding partnership with the Changemakers. Please note that a full description of this training and its components will be published in a separate paper (reference withheld to maintain anonymity of authorship).

#### 2.3.1. Capacity building

Professional development workshops were rolled out with local service providers across a range of sectors, all of whom work with children and young peoples. We deliberately ran the workshops in multi-disciplinary and cross-sectoral groups with the aim of supporting shared learning and creative thinking. Thirty-eight service professionals were involved in the original training workshop. The ReSPECT professional development training has since been rolled-out more widely, and an online format has been piloted.

There were four elements of the training:

1. Critical reflection for service providers on their personal attitudes and experiences, as well as organisational barriers they may face to engaging children and young people as decision-makers.
2. Building understanding of the role of children and young people as competent social actors. We explored the theories and principles underlying practice, including historical, psychological and sociological discourses of childhood.
3. Exploration of participatory models and frameworks and their implementation in practice.
4. Working together to develop bespoke and conceptually meaningful strategies that could be trialled within their own organisational and practice settings.

A variety of professional development techniques were used throughout the training, including small group work, resource sharing, research presentations, case studies, and critical reflection sessions. Videos containing messages from the Changemakers were also included in the training. The service providers recorded messages responding to the Changemakers, committing to hear their ideas and give them due weight.

#### 2.3.2. Scaffolding partnership

The service providers who indicated their willingness to work with the Changemakers on the implementation of their pitched initiatives, were then introduced to the Changemakers, and a partnership formed to further develop the proposed initiative. Adaptations to the original ideas were made in this new co-design phase, to accommodate the needs of the partnering organisations and address issues associated with feasibility, without compromising the priorities of the young people. A governance group was established for initiatives that were taken forward, with equal representation from young people and service providers.

### 2.4. Trial and evaluate

The final stage of the ReSPECT approach involves piloting the youth-led initiatives in practice, employing an action research design to examine the acceptability, feasibility, and impact of these initiatives. There will be three waves of action research, with each wave

representing approximately a three-month period. Wave 1 will primarily focus on setting up the initiative within the services that have agreed to trial it and reviewing program logic. Wave 2 will focus on quality implementation and any necessary adaptations. Wave 3 will focus on client and worker satisfaction with the initiative, experiences of change and perceptions of impact. At the end of each wave, the governance group, including Changemakers, will review progress and processes, and plan for the next wave.

### 2.5. Evaluation of the ReSPECT approach

Critical evaluation of the ReSPECT approach is underway. We are gathering observational, survey and interview data to explore: youth priorities for the service system; their perspectives on their role in service design and decision making; and outcomes as the result of participation in the ReSPECT project as this relates to sense of empowerment, self-concept, community engagement and aspirationalism. Focus group and survey data is being used to explore organisational barriers to engaging children and young people in decision making, and their views on the effectiveness of the ReSPECT professional development training program. However, a research programme like ReSPECT that seeks to generate long-term and sustainable transformations affecting young people, service professionals and service systems requires a long-term impact evaluation, which must be conducted *after* the anticipated transformations have time to work through. In this case, we will need to evaluate the long-term impact of (a) our ongoing professional development programmes (reference withheld to maintain anonymity of authorship), and (b) the youth-led service initiatives described above. These longer-term findings will be reported in subsequent papers, which we intend to co-author with service partners and with the young people.

### 2.6. Challenges within the ReSPECT approach

The ReSPECT approach is not possible without the engagement of young people who have experience as service users— young people who are generally perceived by service providers to be vulnerable and in need of protection. Inviting the participation of the young people was heavily reliant on the engagement and support of workers, many of whom exercised their role as intermediary or ‘gatekeeper’ to make decisions about who would and would not be invited to take part. The underlying motivations for gatekeeping are well understood and almost always driven by good intent. However, overcoming this element is a major challenge for research like the ReSPECT project. A significant investment in securing genuine partnership across all levels of a service organisation is required to support research of this nature. Senior managers, champions and thought leaders within service organisations are instrumental in supporting workers to overcome their discomfort and understand that it is not appropriate to allow one right (to protection) to trump another right (to voice). The choice whether to participate should sit with the child or young person, and participatory researchers share with service providers a strong commitment to ensuring the wellbeing and safety of every child and young person. That is, our research starts from the premise that the central barrier, but also resource, for doing participation with young people well, are organisational capacities at multiple levels, from leadership commitment to front-line worker capacity. The structure of the ReSPECT project reflects this by involving service professional engagement in a number of ways, with service providers involved in the leadership group, service managers and workers being involved in the capacity building stage, and the larger service system involved in the ‘pitch’. However, central to these activities to engage with the service system are the processes involving young people.

Sustained work built on partnership requires time and resources. The turnover of research staff and service staff within partnering organisations can impact continuity in relationships, level of trust, and shared expectations. Maintaining young people’s engagement over an extended

period can also be challenging, as their interest waxes and wanes, and their priorities are influenced by other events in their lives. While it is possible for the groups of young people to change – for some young people to leave and for others to come in – sustaining a consistent group is important if at all possible. The systemic issues that are being addressed in the sessions are complex, and it takes time for young people to develop their own understanding of these issues.

In order to successfully complete a project through all phases of the ReSPECT approach, it is necessary for a service organisation to demonstrate their willingness to genuinely engage with the young people's proposals, and commit to invest in working with the young people to develop the proposals into viable initiatives for trial and evaluation. For a stand-alone project, this is perhaps one of the more innovative aspects of the ReSPECT project, in that from the outset the research had a dual focus, working with young people *and* service organisations. Working with service organisations in advance of pitch day to prepare them to come with an open mind to working with the young people is very important, as is timing the “pitch day” so that it is held during the window of time when organisations are making decisions about the allocation of funding for the next financial year.

Traditional research grants generally do not fund the partnership and advocacy work that is required for the ReSPECT methodological approach. Resourcing is a significant challenge if the conduct of this work relies on research funding only. Securing additional financial support from partnering service organisations who are committed to engaging with children and young people using this approach is ideal if possible.

### 3. Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to outline the ReSPECT approach in the hope that it may be useful to others, and provide an exemplar of participatory and co-design research. We believe that the ReSPECT approach is distinctive as a methodological framework for three reasons: (1) it gives equal attention to the sustained engagement and scaffolding of young people in the development of ideas, and to the capacity building of service providers addressing organisational culture and constraints; (2) it follows the process of service change from the conceptualisation of youth-led ideas, through to development, partnership, implementation and evaluation; and (3) it is designed for engagement with marginalised young people with diverse service experiences, whose voices are so often absent from participatory projects with young people.

The child and youth participatory research field has evolved through a number of very important stages over the last 30 or more years, beginning with research and theory that advocated strongly for children and young people's voices to be heard and treated as legitimate sources of information and perspective (e.g. Hart, 2002). Once there was widespread understanding of why voice was important within research, a wave of literature emerged around how to engage children and young people in research. It was a technical literature, focused on ethics and strategies for safe and effective engagement (e.g. Alderson & Morrow, 2020). The next wave of research demonstrated our commitment to, and expertise in, participatory methods. As researchers, we produced an expansive body of literature exploring children and young people's perspectives on a vast array of issues, albeit shrouded in critique around whether or not this body of research was democratic and representative (e.g. Grace et al., 2019). Concern then emerged around the extent to which the gathering of young voices was making enough difference in real-world settings. There was concern that the second part of Article 12 in the UNCRC, which is about the views of children and young people being given due weight in decision making, was not being honoured. The work of leaders in the field, such as Lundy (2007), prompted widespread reflection on the critical role of adults in child voice. The ReSPECT project is part of the most recent wave of child participatory research literature, that is most interested in how we support children and young people as vital stakeholders in service decision making about

the supports that are needed, how they are delivered, and how their success or otherwise is measured.

The ReSPECT project proposes a methodological approach that draws on what we know about how to do participatory research well, and applies it specifically to the service context. It sits alongside the YPAR approach in actively supporting child and youth engagement in service design and decision-making processes, however it builds on this to facilitate and require active reflection and change on the part of service providers and organisations. It draws on Citizen Science methods to support children and young people to be active in the gathering and analysis of information and in advocacy for change, however it opens the way for children and young people to determine the questions that should be asked in the first place, and to support a role for them in the design and governance of new initiatives in response. It benefits from the guidelines and principles that underpin ethical participatory research (e.g. Cahill and Dadvand, 2018; Lundy, 2007), giving focus to the creation of respectful and safe spaces for children and young people, while also preparing adults to play their role as audience, fellow stakeholders, and critical players in bringing about the cultural and organisational changes required.

The ReSPECT approach requires the investment of time. As Lenette and colleagues (2019) argue, it takes significant emotional labour to forge and maintain the relationships that are critical to impactful participatory research. This is the investment that is required to avoid tokenism, particularly when working with young people who are perceived by service providers to be ‘vulnerable’ and are likely to need time before they feel comfortable sharing their ideas and engaging directly with researchers and service providers. Shier (2019) argues that there is a process required for the empowerment of young people. The conditions surrounding their engagement must be such that young people feel themselves to be capable of having influence. Their empowerment is dependent on a personal attitude that recognises their own ability and a willingness to join forces with others to address challenges, balanced with the need to be scaffolded in their capability by people with appropriate knowledge and skills. The ReSPECT approach addresses these elements in our work with young people, and with service providers (who also require a sense of empowerment in order to respond to young people and engage with them in the design of new initiatives), underpinned by investment in supportive relationships built on mutual ‘respect’. Equally, effective participation requires recognition of the constraints service organisations and front-line workers face in their work, and that doing participation well may be compromised by structural constraints and political factors, even though participatory practices contribute to service effectiveness and organisational efficiency (Brady 2020, Haldane et al. 2019, Sinclair 2006). The ReSPECT methodology has attempted to engage with these complexities, by building the capacity of workers and by building partnerships with service leadership from the outset. However, whether this leads to more enduring changes in practice is unknown.

For the purposes of the project described in this paper, the Change-makers were invited to develop a service initiative in any area that was a priority for them. We did not want to limit the young people by imposing strict boundaries or even by assuming that the young people would think within the silos that currently organise and place firm edges around Australian services. The ReSPECT methodological approach could also be utilised in projects with a defined objective in terms of the type of service that needs to be co-designed (e.g. specific to a particular service sector or cohort). In line with the work of Cahill and Dadvand (2018) described earlier, projects that do have a pre-determined purpose have a much higher chance of attracting meaningful youth engagement if the purpose is aligned with the priorities of the young people. An important first step in a project of this nature would be working with young people to refine the purpose and support them in feeling that they can take ownership of the project and its objectives.

#### 4. Conclusion

The ReSPECT approach contributes to the methodological literature for participatory research focused on engaging children and young people in service design, decision-making, implementation and evaluation. It aims to support voice, capacity, empowerment and innovation for both the participating young people, and for the service providers who partner in this work. Impactful participatory research and co-design projects are only possible if all involved (including the researchers) see that they have much to offer, much to learn, and share a confidence that we can all play a role in bringing about positive change for even the most vulnerable children and young people.

#### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

#### Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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