



Cultivating child and youth decision-making: The principles and practices of the ReSPECT approach to professional development

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Abstract

Participatory approaches are important to ensuring that the involvement of children in decision-making is normalised in service provision. Participation work requires that professionals have well-developed engagement skills, and a commitment to the right of the child or young person to participate. Effective participatory approaches also require that organisations provide active support for child-centred practice. The Reconceptualising Services from the Perspectives of Experienced Children and Teens (ReSPECT) approach is an Australian professional development (PD) program that addresses these key aspects of participation work. It offers professionals a way to: (1) increase their awareness of the complex issues, challenges and benefits surrounding participation; and (2) develop a sense of empowerment and competence in the 'doing' of participation work. The PD program encourages professionals to understand their own position in relation to participation work with children, develop bespoke strategies that account for their unique practice context and assemble support structures that can maintain their participation strategies beyond the training. The principles and practices of the ReSPECT PD program are outlined and positioned within the existing literature on

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theoretical and practice approaches. The paper contributes to critical debate on the mechanisms that can lead to changes in professional practice and organisational culture, for the meaningful engagement of children as stakeholders in decision-making. It is shared as a way of supporting others designing professional development approaches for child and youth decision-making.

KEYWORDS

child voice, children's rights, co-design, participation, professional development

INTRODUCTION

Children's participation (being involved and heard) in decision-making is a human right for all children,¹ yet remains largely elusive in many practice settings (Toros, 2021a, p. 141). This is for a combination of reasons, including professionals' conceptualisation of children as lacking in experience and being in need of protection, and having insufficient knowledge about what participation is and how to embed it within their work (van Bijleveld et al., 2015; Woodman et al., 2023). Additionally, while many professionals understand the importance of participatory approaches in principle, the culture, accountability and reporting requirements of their workplaces may not be conducive to supporting the involvement of children in decision-making (Healy & Darlington, 2009).

The implementation of children's participation in community services² is complex, requiring the articulation of the dynamics between culture, policies, practices, individuals and structures, including the assumptions, beliefs and discourse within which practice occurs (Michail, 2023). Children participate in an ecosystem of 'contextual complexities and connections between subjects and social structures' (Hartung, 2017, p. 54). The implementation of participation is, therefore, multidimensional and multimodal, relying on both the personal and public, confidence, skill, knowledge, responsibility, resources and the individual and collective positioning of children (Michail et al., 2023; Woodman et al., 2023). Therefore, participation hinges on the diverse structures and contexts of daily individual practices (Michail et al., 2023; Woodman et al., 2023). Furthermore, the participation strategies designed or taken up by organisations are often based on how they fit into established organisational ways of working, such as teams, programs and available resources, and not centred on the needs of children. Professional development (PD) training provides one avenue to help practitioners build participatory practice within the complexities of their practice environments. The challenge for any PD program on child participation is to be applicable to the particular setting of each professional, while demonstrating the universal values of children's rights applied in response to the needs of individual children.

PD in children's participation

There is a strong international policy imperative for community service organisations to embed child and youth participation in their work (Balsells et al., 2017; Healy & Darlington, 2009; van

Bijleveld et al., 2014). This imperative rests on the universally ratified right of the child to be heard (United Nations, 1989a). However, to date, research on children's genuine participation in decision-making shows it is still not happening well or to an appropriate scale in community services (Lauri et al., 2020; Toros, 2021a, 2021b). To operationalise meaningful participation, there needs to be capacity building and organisational cultural change that focus on attitudes and beliefs, in combination with staff skills and abilities, with changes in time and policy bounds to support participatory practice (Woodman et al., 2023).

PD to build practitioner capacity is a growing strategy utilised to encourage child participation and has been found to have a positive impact on staff attitudes and beliefs in participatory practice (Alexander et al., 2023). There are short PD courses available online that address participation, such as child rights courses delivered through the 'edX' platform (edX, 2023) of 160 member universities globally. There is a massive open online course (MOOC) by PARTICIPA (2023) titled *Children's Right To Participate In Early Childhood Education* developed by a consortium of European organisations and distributed by the European Commission. Recently, the University of Geneva launched a free MOOC on children's human rights from a multidisciplinary approach (University of Geneva, 2023). Other examples of available online PD include participatory practice short courses through the regional initiative 'ChildHub' (ChildHub, 2020) in Southeast Europe, and a course designed for practitioners wanting to use participatory methods in their work with parents from *Emerging Minds* in Australia.

These PD opportunities largely centre on universal principles of human rights and aim less at strengthening the capacity of professionals to innovate and operationalise ways of embedding participation in their real-world service provision setting. PD that builds the capacity of individual professionals with a sensitivity to their organisational and service system context can increase the chances of children being heard and their views actioned. This is particularly important given that even with a strong commitment to children's rights it is at the point of implementation where participation often does not eventuate.

Children's universal participation rights from Article 12 in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989b) are only legislated in Australian child protection law but evident in a range of other service area policies at all levels, including federal policy (Commonwealth of Australia, 2021; Early Childhood Australia, 2023) and state level policy (NSW Parliament, 1998). Nevertheless, there are challenges associated with achieving participation in practice that go beyond tokenism and consultation, and towards children sharing power and responsibility, as outlined in Shier's Pathways to Participation (Shier, 2001) There are many participation guidelines and resources available to direct participation work with children.³ However, a scoping review by Canosa et al. (2022) on participation resources for organisations seeking to embed children's participation in decision-making found ambiguity around how to *operationalise* these resources, and a lack of exemplars of good practice. This may be because models of participation do not account for organisational cultures *across and within* organisations and their programs.

This paper describes a PD program, delivered both online and in person, that aims to address practitioner knowledge, skills, attitudes and practice supports, applicable in different work cultures and contexts, that may bolster professional capacity to engage children as active stakeholders. Adopting Brantefors and Thelander (2017, p. 463) description of different motivations for teaching human rights, albeit to children, the Reconceptualising Services from the Perspectives of Experienced Children and Teens (ReSPECT) PD program is underpinned by the intention to build *both* awareness ('*Develop awareness about the rights, and ability to protect and enjoy them[rights]*') and empowerment ('*Develop capacity to change social structures: increase social justice and equity*').

This approach intends to go beyond improving understandings of theoretical frameworks, and work with professionals to identify proactive steps to implement participation in their own practice, tailored to their organisational and program-specific cultures. In Australia, a change in practice cultures of frontline staff in statutory child protection services has been shown to improve when there is a focus on relational engagement and strengthening of skills and capabilities (Cortis et al., 2019). Work cultures also need to shift to support practitioners to freely articulate the emotional toll from their practice (Gibbs, 2009). Professional training that includes critical reflection components can support the development of good relationships that support ongoing meaningful knowledge exchange (Cree et al., 2016). This PD program incorporates all these aspects of practice change, to be experienced by professionals as both bespoke and universal.

Children's participation in practice is essentially about children's rights to express their views, so it is useful to consider the ways training can be provided about human rights. Felisa Tibbitts (2002) proposed that there are three distinct approaches to human rights education (HRE)—the values and awareness model; the accountability model; and the transformational model. The ReSPECT PD program comprises a combination of reflective, knowledge-based and applied training components that each resonates with one of these approaches to teaching human rights. These teaching models also relate to wider conceptions of adult learning and align with the principles of the PD program that aims to support the development of professionals' theoretical knowledge of children's participation, their policy and practice skills to engage with children and an understanding of the values associated with children's rights (discussed in more detail below).

This three-pronged take on what is needed for participation work underscores the key training practices used to produce the training we refer to as the ReSPECT PD approach. The principles underlying the PD program will be of use to those wanting to rethink how to support professionals to uphold children's participation rights in community services. It is hoped that the PD program not only encourages individual development of the professional but also provides a space to firstly identify and challenge organisational cultures that create barriers to the meaningful uptake of child-led decision-making; and secondly promote greater intra-organisational strategising for embedding child participation in programs and processes. This Australian PD program was designed and piloted by a team of cross-disciplinary researchers in collaboration with three not-for-profit partnering organisations, as part of a larger program of work, known as the ReSPECT Project. The program and associated pilot is being shared in the hope of supporting others designing PD approaches on children's participation.

THE ReSPECT PROJECT AND ITS DISTINCTIVE APPROACH

The ReSPECT project developed and tested a model made up of three key components: (1) youth engagement, (2) PD and (3) service innovation. The full ReSPECT approach, with its particular focus working directly with young people (who are referred to as 'Change Makers') is outlined in a forthcoming paper. A core principle of the ReSPECT approach is that any work to support child voice, must be accompanied by parallel work to prepare professionals and organisations to respond appropriately. There is little point supporting *voices to speak* when there are not ears genuinely *ready to hear*. The ReSPECT approach seeks to build the capacity of all stakeholders. Its concept of 'youth voice' gives equal prominence to both the empowerment of young people *and* the contribution of these voices to organisational change, service improvement and the

strengthening of professional capacity. This paper describes the PD arm of ReSPECT, outlining the processes of design, delivery and refinement.

Piloting the ReSPECT PD program

The ReSPECT PD program outlines both the principles (methodology, strategy and rationale) and the practices (methods, tools and approaches), to support professionals to work with children and facilitate their role as drivers of service design. The model has been refined over two cross-sector pilots of 25 and then 36 community service professionals, respectively, in New South Wales, Australia, including professionals from health, education, social services and youth justice.

The PD component of ReSPECT was first delivered as a short training opportunity over two full days, delivered via an online platform (Zoom) to professionals and senior managers in child and family services. Online delivery was necessary due to COVID-19 restrictions in place at the time. The PD involved individual prework for participants using video content and written material, followed by online synchronous delivery of content (video and live presentation), discussion and groupwork.

The ReSPECT researcher team and partnering service leaders brought to bear their experience, reflections, academic and policy expertise, alongside feedback from participants to further refine the PD training. The PD content was updated and refined into an e-learning program, *Better Services through Participation of Children*, conducted via the Western Sydney University, Transforming early Education and Child Health (TeEACH⁴) Research Centre's online learning platform. Participant expressions of interest were open to our largest not-for-profit partnering organisation. A purposeful recruitment strategy was employed to ensure that staff from all roles (frontline/practice staff, program coordinators/team leaders, quality specialists etc.) and across all levels (workers, managers, and executives, thought leaders etc.) were represented among the participants. This e-learning program was then run from October to December of 2022 via six consecutive, weekly independent learning modules, including

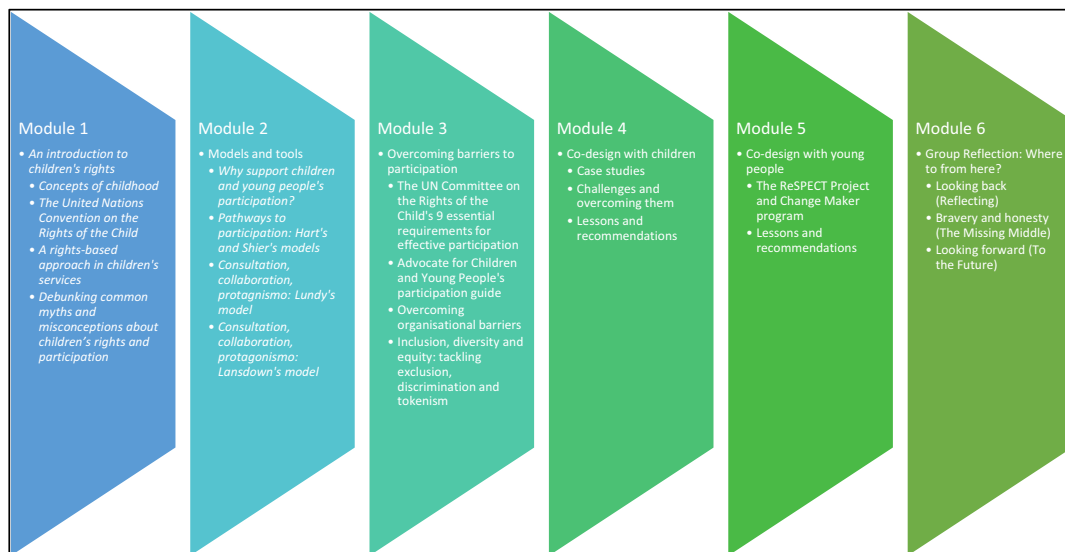


FIGURE 1 The ReSPECT e-learning program. ReSPECT, Reconceptualising Services from the Perspectives of Experienced Children and Teens. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions)]

one group reflection and activity module in real time over Zoom. The PD is now a comprehensive program offering a six-program modular structure, delivered asynchronously with one module in real time (Figure 1).

CONTENT AND METHODS

Theoretical and applied knowledge

The ReSPECT PD Program is distinct as it interweaves an emphasis on *awareness* of the right of children to participation with the *empowerment* of professionals to enact those rights (Brantefors & Thelander, 2017). It focuses on application in context to maximise participant engagement in a tailored way for a cross-disciplinary group of professionals at any level or position within community services. The ReSPECT PD program demonstrates the creativity, variety and flexibility needed for the application of participation work through the design features of the training experience. Table 1 below describes the array of techniques used to emphasise the development of awareness and empowerment, and the advantages of each training component.

Multimodal content delivery

Parts of the program are accessed asynchronously and others synchronously, sometimes as a large diverse group of professionals and decision makers, and at other times in smaller discussion groups with peers from similar services. It utilises group discussion, facilitated group work, worksheets, real-time webinars, video content, live presentation using a range of online and hardware mediums like Moodle, Zoom and Qualtrics Survey platforms and online quizzes. The content covers theory on child rights policy and practice, instruction on how to use participation tools/models, and fashioning support for tailored strategy development around the concept of participation. Embedded is a range of evidence and supports for participation practice from leading government and advocacy stakeholders. This includes policy and practice materials, practice guides, participation checklists, industry reports and scholarly literature as evidence for child-centred practice in service decision-making.

Cross disciplinary and cross sector

The ReSPECT program deliberately uses a cross-sector style that engages a combination of researchers, professionals and policy-makers. This facilitates collegial sharing of the different strengths and perspectives within the group and mirrors the makeup of practitioners' real-world service contexts. These design elements allow for a strong collective experience of participation, not only in direct practice across statutory and non-government services but also in research, policy and advocacy, enabling learning through shared reflection on these experiences. The decision to design a cross-disciplinary, cross-sector development opportunity in the participation space was based on an initial scoping paper that demonstrated complementary strengths in different sectors (Grace et al., 2019). We responded to this by including professionals and senior managers from child protection, health, education, juvenile justice and community services.

TABLE 1 Professional development techniques in chronological order of presentation.

Content	Teaching emphasis	Technique	Advantages
Participation theory	Awareness	Asynchronous	Flexible access
Critical reflection	Empowerment	Focus group: identifying barriers	Time and space to engage with colleagues in diverse parts of the sector
Contextual rights framework	Awareness	Synchronous presentation	Access current research and thinking on participation approaches and complexity
Theoretical perspectives on childhood	Awareness	Asynchronous presentation	Access to seminal research and thinking on the nature of childhood
Young people's design ideas	Empowerment	Video	Understanding young people's views and design ideas ^a
Models of participation	Awareness	Synchronous webinar	Dialogue with international expert in real time on diversity of implementation
Participation examples from the sector	Empowerment	Synchronous presentation	Exploration of participation exemplars
Application of participation tools	Empowerment	Small groupwork discussion	Development of bespoke strategies
Policies that support participation in the sector	Awareness	Video	Awareness of system supports for participation work
Networking structures	Empowerment	Cross sector/role/position collegial conversations	Sustained professional connection and support
Critical reflection	Empowerment	Focus group: Spaces for service redesign	Time and space to share participation strategies with colleagues
Reflection and feedback	Empowerment	Video and audio recordings	Opportunity to commit to implementing participation
Reflection and strategy development	Empowerment	Module quiz	Meaningful translation of theory to practice
Practice resources	Awareness	E-resource	Ongoing access to theory and practice tools

^aCOVID-19 restrictions prevented this from being face to face interaction with young people.

Individualised support mechanisms

The Australian service system has organised itself in disciplinary silos (Campbell et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2012), often resulting in the delivery of single-input services responding to only one aspect of a child and family's support needs. This approach does not reflect the real-world nature of challenges, which come packaged together in complex patterns of interaction. For example, the mental health challenges of a young person may interact with family environment, education and employment outcomes, socioeconomic status and substance use. The provision of meaningful support requires an integrated whole of system response, that centres children and seeks to understand and respond to the complexity of their support needs (Baker et al., 2022). This cross disciplinary and cross-sector opportunity met the overall aims of the ReSPECT Project to work across these siloed services. The varied roles and responsibilities of participants across diverse organisations, both government, non-government and advocacy bodies, discourage narrow responses to children's participation in siloed service systems. It promotes participation as the responsibility of the whole of society, as holistic multidisciplinary work for all community services. Participants in both pilots of the ReSPECT PD training came from wide-ranging service positions, which yielded rich conversations about challenges and strategies among participants and facilitators. The key principles and practices of the ReSPECT PD program as applied in both pilots are discussed in the following sections.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND PD PRINCIPLES

PD should be transformative in nature and bring about improvement in the human condition through critical reflection (Mezirow, 1997; Tibbitts, 2005). According to Mezirow, through transformative learning, we:

...become emancipated from our constraining habits of expectation and move to a perspective that permits interpretations which are more inclusive, differentiating, permeable and integrative of experience. The move to a transformed perspective enables us to see how dependency-producing and oppressive institutionalized social practices, norms and cultural codes must be changed through social action. (Mezirow, 1990, p. 141)

The transformative experience encourages professionals to explore the various ways children can be conceptualised, how a protection lens may have established constraining practice habits in their work and where they can take action.

There are three key principles underlying the ReSPECT program that we suggest provide this transformative learning experience. Together they enable deep critical reflection, encourage the sharing of multiple perspectives and challenge professionals to do things differently with the support of peers.

1. *Critical reflection to understand the complexity of participation work*: The first principle is raising **awareness** of the complexity of participation work (Bromark et al., 2022; Sinclair, 2004). Participants are encouraged to bring to the table their professional and

personal experience, theoretical knowledge, resources, skills, private attitudes about their work and conceptualisations of children and their capacity to make decisions in service design. The PD works to challenge the 'socio-cultural view of children as vulnerable and in need of adult protection' (van Bijleveld et al., 2015, p. 129), through critical reflection and facilitated discussion with experienced practitioners and researchers in children's participation.

2. *Choosing participation models aligned with practice options:* The second guiding principle is that the **articulation and meaningful translation of theories and concepts for direct relevance to real-world practice settings is critical**. Participants are encouraged to explore a range of participation models and choose the most suited to implementation in their specific work roles and contexts. Taking the time to align theoretical models to workplace context helps make efforts to operationalise participation more effective (Sinclair, 2004). This exploration provides a breadth of theoretical knowledge and extends participation to the deliberate, and strategic application of a model to a specific practice setting.
3. *Establishing sustainable support mechanisms:* Thirdly, the **assembling of support structures to sustain the long-term work of embedding participation in practice and organisational culture is essential**. The PD attempts to craft spaces for participants to share their experiences of limitations and supports within their organisation, thereby building a level of rapport and sustainable connections with other professionals across disciplines and contexts. For example, a workplace culture that does not tolerate 'trial and error' in practice stymies practitioner confidence to include child participation in their work (Munro, 2019).

The goal of enabling the participant to reach a personal and/or collective transformation is embedded throughout the programme, and all three principles contribute to this end. Particularly important, however, is the commitment to build new sustainable support networks to realise transformation in practice.

As Tibbits explains, the **values and awareness model** is about providing information about the content and history of human rights, and discussing global human rights issues with a view to building cultural consensus and legitimising human rights frameworks. In the ReSPECT context, this maps to the first principle of *Raising Awareness*, in this case knowledge of the context, history, rights framework and conceptual models of child and youth participation.

The accountability model is aimed at helping adults in public service, policy and power positions to develop their capacity and commitment as human rights duty-bearers, to fulfil their responsibilities and assume accountability in this role. This maps to ReSPECT's second principle of theory into practice, where participants prepare themselves to take practical action in support of children's participation, thus embracing their role as duty-bearers.

The transformational model is geared towards empowering the individual (and sometimes groups or whole communities) to reimagine themselves as agents of transformation (internal and external—including social and political change), and as supporters and defenders of human rights. Such transformational approaches often draw directly or indirectly on the 'pedagogy of the oppressed' (Freire, 2001). Human rights educators have used Freire's thinking to forge crucial links between personal and collective transformations, and thus illuminate the path from individual empowerment to social change (Lohrenscheit, 2006).

PD PRACTICES

In keeping with the aim to operationalise participation using these three principles, the ReSPECT PD training uses the following practices.

- A. It offers space and support for participants to *personally reflect* on the concept of children's participation, including their ideas, understanding and individual role in implementing participation, and the challenges they perceive in terms of their capacity to take this approach and use it in their organisation.
- B. Participants are equipped to *develop their own bespoke strategies* for embedding participatory practices into their work. This is achieved by exploring challenges and attitudes, building skills and knowledge for professional practice in tailored and applied ways.
- C. Participants are encouraged to *apply their knowledge* to their specific work context in dialogue with international experts in children's participation and children's well-being. Experts have experience in the Global North and South working cross culturally over the last 20 years.

This three-pronged approach focusses on issues of best practice, the evidence and tools for participation work and gives time and supported space for application and development, often not available otherwise due to work pressures. The way these principles and practices have been combined to produce the ReSPECT PD program is discussed in more detail below.

Principle 1: Critical reflection to understand the complexity of participation work helps raise awareness of the scope and scale of the work required

Training practice component 1. Opportunities for critical reflection on personal attitudes and experiences

Critical reflection, including the unearthing of tacit assumptions, can help investigate the complexity of participation work, validate the role of emotion within it, support professionals to engage with their own personal agency to improve their practice and bring about culture change as their values are challenged or reaffirmed (Fook & Gardner, 2007; Smith et al., 2017). Staff learning and development in the welfare field is promoted through '...the open expression of feelings, doubts and uncertainties' and is key to healthy work cultures (Gibbs, 2009). The training, therefore, begins with this critical reflection, where participants are asked to articulate what they perceive to be the personal and professional barriers to the idea of children making decisions, and why they might see participation as challenging in their work context. This component of the training recognises the need for individuals to become aware of and articulate their attitudes and past experiences of children's participation that have coloured their views. This process is what moves reflective practice to one that is critically reflective and potentially personally or professionally challenging.

The exploration of individual experiences of the conceptual and technical aspects of participation work is addressed in content on definitions of childhood, children's rights, and debunking common myths and misconceptions about children's participation. A combination of small group discussion, readings and videos on child rights and personal reflection questions are useful training tools or primers for critical reflection.

Training practice component 2. Understanding the role of children as competent social actors

The purpose of this component is for participants to recognise that childhood is not limited to the biopsychosocial immaturity of being a young human being, but is also defined by other markers, including the social and cultural norms about what is considered appropriate for children to do and not do. This has significant political and policy consequences, including whether children are seen as being capable of contributing to decisions affecting them.

With this purpose in mind, the ReSPECT program works to ensure participants are aware of their own sociocultural image of children and are open to seeing young people and even young children as knowledgeable social actors capable of participation and meaning-making (Kelly & Smith, 2017; van Bijleveld et al., 2015). Awareness of self requires participants to be exposed to a variety of ideas about participation and *This includes the need to discuss and develop a shared understanding of what user participation means and the objectives of user participation at different organizational levels, among units in the social services, and among different authorities* (Bromark et al., 2022, p. 9). The training endeavours to demonstrate that children's participation can be understood in a variety of ways, for example, as an element of child-centred practice, as direct consultation, as children's right to be heard or using transparent processes in decision-making (Woodman et al., 2023). In this PD, participants access international experts in real time who can offer detailed responses to a range of views and experiences because of their own direct work engaging with children in service decision-making.

Critical engagement with the principles underlying practice is an essential dimension of learning. The program therefore, challenges participants to question the basic assumption of 'what is a child', to unpack often taken-for-granted assumptions about what children can and cannot do. This unpacking of assumptions is key to participants thinking about what is possible, and why children are excluded from decision-making and therefore extending possible imaginaries of children's participation in policy and practice. Specifically, this part of the training:

- explores how 'childhood' is an interaction between the biological realities associated with age-related development and the cultural beliefs, representations and discourses of childhood, which has profound implications for how children are treated in any given society.
- outlines historical, psychological and sociological approaches to understanding children and childhood, both as tools to aide understanding and to demonstrate that childhood has developmental, time-specific, geographical and social dimensions.

Principle 2: Choosing participation models aligned with practice options results in empowerment of staff because of the articulation and meaningful translation of theories and concepts for direct relevance to real-world practice settings.

Training practice component 3. Exploring the range of participation models

The purpose of the third component of the training is to canvass models for the real-world participation of children in decision-making. This part of the ReSPECT PD program details different frameworks individuals and organisations can use and adapt to allow for meaningful participation of children. The models were presented as heuristics, recognising that any model needs to

be adapted to suit the interests and needs of the children involved, the personal capacity of the practitioner, the purpose of participation, organisational demands and resources and the broader social context in which participation occurs.

Systematically investigating multiple participation models allows participants to understand the unique strengths and limitations of each, the type or facet of participation attended to and the varying objectives and outcomes of different models. Not all participation models lead to children's participation or the same type of participation. For instance, participation can be invited or autonomous (Cornwall, 2008), formal and informal (Kirby et al., 2003). The following participation models are explored in the ReSPECT PD program, with a focus on the nuances between them in how they work towards children's participation.

- Hart's (1992) seminal model of participation provides ways to *differentiate between genuine and other forms of participation*, including those antithetical to children's interests, including participation as 'manipulation', 'decoration' and 'tokenism'.
- The work of the Article 31 Action Network (Shier, 1995) provides a model that centres on children as experts on *what is and what is not child-friendly*, including introducing diverse elements of participatory action, such as enjoyment and inclusion.
- Shier's (2001) 'Pathways to Participation' model *differentiates stages of adult commitment to child participation* based on 'openings', 'opportunities' and 'obligations', noting that all three need to be present for meaningful participation. Moreover, these three 'O's' need to be understood within a broader framework of power, specifically to what extent adults are able and willing to share power with children—from listening to children through to sharing power and responsibility for decision-making. In so doing, the model is useful for critically assessing practice and identifying ways to improve.
- The 'Participation Tree' model (Shier, 2010) links participation explicitly with the social activism of children, such as securing, promoting and defending rights to education, equality, equity and respect for children. The leaves of the metaphorical tree represent the *variety of ways children are empowered to act as protagonists in their communities*, such as being planners, educators and defenders of culture. It emphasises what resources children need to plan and undertake autonomous political action. This approach draws on the Latin American concept of 'Protagonismo infantil' (Taft, 2019).
- The 'Participation Matrix' (Lansdown & O'Kane, 2014) utilises Lansdown's (2011) three-way model of child participation—as a continuum between consultation, collaboration and pro-activism—and applies this to a policy cycle, from problem definition through to dissemination. By forming a matrix that maps onto this process and different levels of participation, organisations can therefore use the *matrix to map out which aspects of the process are, or can be, more or less participatory*. This can therefore be used to plan a project or evaluate how participatory a project is.
- The Lundy Model (2007) applies the Article 12 right to *participation across four domains that exist in any decision-making or action-setting*—space, voice, audience and influence. The model can therefore not only be used to plan participation, but by identifying these domains can be used as a tool to analyse situations, identify strengths and weaknesses and solve problems.

This component of the training ensures participants have nuanced knowledge of each model and can distinguish between them to decide which model is suitable and has significance in their work. While the above models are featured within the program, pointers to the many other models available are also provided, see, for example, Abbott (2020).

Training practice component 4. Developing bespoke and contextually meaningful strategies

The fourth component of the ReSPECT PD program asks participants to bring together this new theoretical knowledge of participation models and their own critical reflections to create tailored strategies for implementing participation in their unique workplace. We see this as the most distinctive component of the ReSPECT PD program. The objective is to custom-build strategies that respond to the challenges participants articulate in the first component of the PD training. These strategies are shared with other participants potentially struggling with similar or different issues. Participants thus share mutual support with other professionals, through which they legitimise the complex nature of participation work, leading to discussion that generates and extends strategic planning ideas. This is a supportive mechanism for professionals searching for concrete ways to bring change into their practice setting. It also affirms their efforts towards engaging children as relevant and necessary for good practice.

Participants pinpoint a participation model best suited to their specific work culture and context aided by an explicit set of questions. This component affords participants the time and space to *apply* their chosen model. Our program proactively acknowledges, articulates and addresses the confines of the workplace that can make it difficult to operationalise participation guidelines and models once professionals return to the workplace. Participants have the chance to leave the PD with at least one simple, relevant, actionable strategy for improving children's participation in their practice setting. They have ideas about how to manage the boundaries of their practice setting and increase their chances of implementing their participation strategy.

In addition, the ReSPECT PD program dedicates time to understanding co-design principles, using real-life examples from current research. These examples are used to facilitate critical thinking about how children can lead service design. One of the distinguishing methods of the PD was the inclusion of video content from the ReSPECT 'Change Makers' speaking about their ideas for service innovation in a range of different service areas. This was originally planned as a face-to-face opportunity for young people to present their ideas. However, due to COVID-19, this was presented in the form of video content. This aspect of the PD demonstrated how to co-design with young people in a way that respects their right to voice at every stage, including planning, policy-making and dissemination. The inclusion of young people's ideas on service design was thus a core component of the content delivery. The ReSPECT Change Maker program highlights the struggles encountered in this type of participation, which promotes valuable learning for others starting out in co-design work. More information on the ReSPECT Change Maker Program can be found in Grace et al. (forthcoming).

Principle 3: Establishing sustainable support mechanisms means assembling diverse ways in which implementation could be achieved for the long term.

Training practice component 5. Creating safe space for sustained support

The final component of the training sets up sustainable support structures that can sustain professionals' personal reflection and development of bespoke strategies for co-design with children. Bromark et al. (2022) indicate that participation work is best served when there is common ground, commitment and trust among practitioners. In our trial, one participant

listed their participation strategy as *creating forums where user participation is discussed and developed*. The program recognises the importance of creating sustainable safe space for this sort of forum. The training therefore introduces different networking strategies that promote professional connection and collegiality, thus continuing to guide professionals through participation implementation. Participants explore sustained ways of sharing practice such as Communities of Practice, becoming, identifying or delegating Participation Champions from Boards and Senior management, and deciding on a 'Participation Buddy'. All these structures allow for respectful exchanges between professionals at all levels, as they 'need support in handling recurring dilemmas and challenges and managers need the tools to offer such support' (Bromark et al., 2022, p. 12).

DEVELOPMENT OF PARTICIPATION STRATEGIES

Participants consented to the final discussion in the PD program being recorded. In it they shared the ways in which they planned to apply what they had learned in their training in their work context. Some of the emerging strategies they put forward are listed in [Table 2](#).

Four key strategy areas emerged from the responses, those related to Organisational Structure, Policy, Process and Generic Approach strategies. These demonstrate both an awareness of children's right to express their views and a level of confidence to act in ways that meet these rights.

One set of strategies developed by participants were those aimed at changing service structures by giving children decision-making positions (Organisational Structure). Strategies aimed at changing organisational structure included those for making organisational practices and processes more democratic, for example by creating a specific governance structure, space, and time to listen to children's views, for example through the development of working parties, youth advisory groups and designation of staff time to support these governance processes. These strategies reflect the awareness and empowerment aims of the PD program.

Participants also discussed strategies aimed at changing organisational policies (Policy) around the ways of doing work within an organisation, thus embedding participation practices as expectations around how the organisation, in general, operates. These strategies use existing policies to normalise child participation (awareness) as staff are accountable for this practice (empowerment). For example, changing policies that impact key processes like recruitment, or integrate child participation and safety standards more explicitly in the way the organisation should do business, are examples of this policy strategy.

Process strategies reflect Organisational and Policy strategies at the level of implementation. These strategies integrate participatory practice in some of the standard operating procedures of the organisation, which differentiate them from Organisational Structure strategies—which are about new mechanisms for doing participation, and Policy strategies—which are about signalling the value of participation for the way the organisation works. For example, process strategies include having young people on interview panels for new workers, seeking children's views as part of program evaluation and integrating child and youth participation within audit and quality assurance processes. These measures demonstrate an appreciation for young people's views to shape the organisation (awareness of rights) and of embedding children's views in core organisational processes (empowerment).

Generic Approach strategies reflect those aimed at changing the discourse around participation within an organisation, or to develop or alter, taken-for-granted understandings of what participation is and whether and how it can be done within an organisation. As such many of

TABLE 2 Participation strategies developed by participants of the ReSPECT program.

Strategy area	Strategy examples
Organisational structure	<p>Create a working party/committee to address children's participation in programs</p> <p>Create a youth advisory group out of high school students from diverse backgrounds in a disadvantaged community</p> <p>Designate staff that support and engage with youth reference/advisory groups</p>
Policy	<p>Put responsibilities around participation into job descriptions so that can be revisited on review, etc</p> <p>Integrate participation into the National Framework to make it part of the culture, accredited, natural for all services so that large organisations can take it on</p> <p>Link children's participation to practice on NSW child safe standards</p>
Process	<p>Having young people on interview panels for new (worker) positions</p> <p>Ask children who have been through the program (previous clients) to form a steering committee that provides advice on programming</p> <p>Include two questions on how we capture children's voices into quality assurance audit as part of the organisation's continuous improvement processes</p>
Generic Approach	<p>Start small in one program to increase children's participation</p> <p>Create less prescribed opportunities for children to meet, talk together, and lead the conversation. This means engaging in ways that are relevant to young people, less questioning and sitting with any silences</p> <p>Engage senior management and the hierarchy to agree that children's participation is an important issue</p>

Abbreviation: ReSPECT, Reconceptualising Services from the Perspectives of Experienced Children and Teens.

these strategies are ‘bounded strategies’ (Lindblom, 1959), adapting existing practices in ways that are implementable and which could potentially lead to further, more substantial, changes in the direction of participation. Examples included implementing participation strategies in one program only, using less structure in program design to open up spaces for children to engage with the program on their own terms, and bringing children together (awareness) as a way of beginning to shift attitudes of senior management (empowerment).

These strategies reflect a key design of the ReSPECT PD, that of recognising organisational practices, including barriers and resource constraints, as an essential context for the doing of participation (Alfandari, 2017). It is on this basis that more broad scale system reform might occur, identified as essential to a child-centred approach in child protection (Munro, 2011). There is value in this approach to training as it supports participatory practice at multiple levels. Furthermore, the varied range of strategies may suggest the ReSPECT Program fostered the development of bespoke and diverse implementation strategies that have meaning to individual practitioners and managers.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

The ReSPECT PD Program is an emerging approach that may help tackle some of the complexities of participation across sectors and disciplines, as ‘models of participation rarely leave room for the complexities of their application’ (Healy, 1998). It is a unique style of PD addressing both awareness of child participation and empowerment to operationalise in practice. It couples an exploration of professional understanding and attitudes with an exploration of skills, structure, and process *in context*, maintained by ideas for ongoing support in everyday work.

It responds to research by Woodman et al. (2023) that have found practitioners need training that helps them understand participation, develop their confidence to implement it and receive support to uphold children’s participation rights. Furthermore, training has been found to influence practitioner views on involving children in decision-making and their confidence to speak with children (Woodman et al., 2018). The ReSPECT PD works towards increasing the capacity of professionals within community services to both hear children’s voices alongside the other essential direct work with children to ensure they are equipped to speak. While the ReSPECT team had hoped for but not explicitly identified it as a target outcome, a *Practice Specialist* among the PD program’s participants invited other participants to develop and contribute to a community of practice. This was an unanticipated but promising outcome of the PD program and deserving of subsequent follow-up study of its impacts.

There is opportunity for future research to understand if specific training components or combinations of them are more effective than others within a cross sector context, and how useful the training would be if delivered to professionals in the same sector. Additional research is needed to determine the impact of the online mode of delivery on the participant experience. It is hoped that further iterations of the PD program are based on participant feedback in addition to input from service partners and academics with expertise in operationalising children’s rights.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The term children is used to refer to children and young people for brevity.
- ² In Australia, the term ‘community services’ refers to services that provide support and assistance to children, young people, and their families in a range of welfare domains such as health, education, child protection, juvenile justice, housing, mental health, and any aspect of well-being.
- ³ See for example, Child Safe Standard 2—Children participate in decisions affecting them and are taken seriously, Sept, 2022; CREATE (2020); NSW Office of the Advocate for Children (2019); NSW Office of the Children’s Guardian (2022).
- ⁴ Western Sydney University, Transforming Early Education and Child Health (TeEACH) Research Centre https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/teeach/about_us.

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