

Chapter 9: Conclusions and discussion

This chapter presents the conclusions of my research, which was guided by the following main research question:

What are the challenges of child participation within the specific context of child protection services, and what strategies are likely to move child participation forward in daily practice?

The research question will be answered by summarising and discussing the main findings per sub-question as outlined in Chapter 3:

1. What is meaningful participation within the child protection services: what are the perspectives of case managers, children and academics?
2. How does meaningful participation relate to child protection and existing child images and what barriers arise from this interaction?
3. What strategies are needed for children to move the participation agenda forward and what have children themselves to offer in this process of change?
4. What strategies are needed for case managers to address the identified barriers?

In the last sections of this Chapter, I discuss the implications of these findings for daily child protection practice, followed by a discussion of strengths and limitations of this study. The Chapter concludes with mapping directions for further research.

9.1 Defining meaningful participation in daily child protection practice

This study has identified what meaningful participation entails within the specific context of child participation in JBRA by exploring how both children and case managers in child protection practice conceptualise participation and what they believe is needed to achieve it in practice. First, the perspectives of the case managers and the organisation (JBRA) are described, resulting from the findings of Chapters 5, 6 and 8, followed by the perspectives of the children, which are derived from the results of Chapter 5 and 7. In the final part of this section, the perspectives of the case managers and children are compared with the scientific literature, to phrase a definition of meaningful participation within the context of Dutch child protection services.

9.1.1. *The case managers' perspective on child participation*

In this study, the perspectives of case managers were obtained by using different methods. Initially, case managers were interviewed and asked directly what they believe participation entails. How they conceptualise participation was elicited by asking about examples of participation in practice and the barriers encountered. Furthermore, in group discussions and observations of team meetings, it was also analysed how they in fact facilitate participation. Finally, during the reflexion meetings when using the toolbox, critical reflections on the actual experiences of the case managers were derived.

The study shows that, for case managers, participation is a subject that is not often discussed or central to their daily practice. Although almost all case managers have an idea of what participation entails, they define it slightly differently. However, overall case managers believe that participation is about *informing* and *hearing* children. It is not clear what weight should be given to the child's perspective. Also, *how* to inform children and *how* to ensure that a child is actually listened to and heard remain rather unspoken and under-conceptualised. Though all acknowledge that listening to (young) children in an adult setting and in relation to sensitive and often painful topics is far from easy to accomplish. Furthermore, according to the case managers, in defining participation they do not talk about *involvement* in the actual decision-making process, which is in the literature also mentioned as an important aspect of participation (Franklin & Sloper, 2005; Bouma et al., 2018; Kriz & Roundtree-Swain, 2017). When the involvement in decision-making was mentioned, it was mainly seen as a major barrier; the case managers believe there is no room for participation in the decision-making, due to lack of options and choices. For instance, when a teenager is placed out of home, there often are no foster families available, leaving group homes as the only option. Or when there is a need to find siblings a place and there is no family that can take them, especially in a crisis, the case manager is relieved to find a place at all. This (felt) lack of options is further exacerbated by the fact that case managers are afraid that if they ask children what they want, the children might automatically expect that their wishes will be granted. It is a more common misunderstanding that "letting" children participate in the decision-making process means letting the children decide what should be done. However, this study showed that, in the context of child protection, this misunderstanding might also be grounded in the attempt to avoid a painful confrontation with the children's feelings and the fact that case managers need to act quickly, which I will discuss in more detail below.

Another striking finding was that, when asking for illustrations for how case managers invite children to participate, almost all examples given were based on talking, while

case managers also pointed out that they are aware that, in accordance with the literature (Curtis, et al., 2004; Dedding et al., 2103; McIntyre, 2008), not all children are verbally competent and comfortable with expressing their wishes and needs to adults. Although the case managers are aware of this, they do not seem to use other strategies to explore what children need. This finding is especially striking because most encounters between the case manager and the child are in family meetings, so there are many grown-ups present and the child needs to express itself in a situation where adults are by definition better able to express themselves verbally.

Participation is now a common and even popular term, used in widely different policies and practices at the national and local level in the Netherlands (Bouma et al., 2018; Wet op de Jeugdzorg, 2015). This popularity simplifies the complex underlying processes of both actions and belief, and therefore seems to require little expertise in the meaning of participation, the theory behind it and what is needed to put it into practice. However, practice shows that this does not lead to an understanding of participation, or only a very vague or incomplete meaning of the concept. Even further, this study shows that although case managers think they understand the concept, they lack an awareness of what it means to facilitate it in practice. Therefore, to explore what participation entails, one should look at the examples and actions in daily practice.

Despite many studies on child participation in child protection services, interventions to facilitate child participation and adaptation in local legal policies (Arbeiter & Toros, 2017; Berrick et al., 2015; Bouma et al., 2018; Healy & Darlington, 2009; Kriz & Skivenes, 2015; Munro, 2011; Pert et al., 2017), child participation does not yet receive enough direct attention within the organisation and daily practice. Overall, case managers acknowledged that participation was not often discussed in the workplace and they felt the absence of a clear vision and guidelines, rendering case managers novices in the subject of participation, with little understanding of what participation fully entails in a very complicated context; difficult to oversee and stressful circumstances in which they often have to act in the moment. Especially in this complicated context, they need all the available knowledge and support to bring the right of children to participate into practice. At the same time, it should not be forgotten that youth care is in a period of transition, leaving little time to innovate, and participation is not part of the main working method, which might help to explain why, although it is a child's right, it does not yet receive much attention. And when they do find the opportunity to give child participation more attention, specifically for child participation in child protection services, there is no practical body of knowledge, meaning that case managers and the child protection organisations have to discover for themselves the how and what, while actually doing it.

9.1.2. *The children's perspective on child participation*

The perspectives of the children were gathered during the timeline interviews with young people aged 12 to 19 years, and during the interviews and co-creating sessions with the younger children (aged from six to 13), children shared clear examples of what would help them express their views during meetings with their case manager. Interestingly, the tools they developed were directed towards *becoming* a serious partner in conversation, rather than their current felt status as “just being present”. Contrary to what the findings of other studies suggest (Barnes, 2012; Jobe & Gorin, 2012; Leeson, 2007; McLeod, 2007; McLeod, 2010; Winter, 2010; Woolfson et al., 2009), children did not develop tools related to content of the conversation, while this is the main focus of current tools for talking with children, such as Signs of Safety, where the child expresses what he/she needs or wants to change (Edwards & Turnell, 1999), tools directed at expressing feelings and emotions (Maynard, Monk & Booker, 2011) or at understanding a child's daily life and routines, like sociocards (Dongen: Sociocards, 2016). They also did not express that they needed to spend time with their case manager in order to build a relationship of trust, which is often mentioned as essential to create an environment in which the child feels comfortable to reveal its thoughts and needs (Barnes, 2012; Jobe & Gorin, 2012; Leeson, 2007; McLeod, 2007; McLeod, 2010; Winter, 2010). The children expressed that they wanted to create a relationship by understanding each other and the rules of conversation. This suggests that for children, participation is not yet about informing, hearing or being involved, but addresses topics even before that: for children the first step is about being seen and acknowledged as a conversation partner, introducing one another and determining how to interact with each other.

Another striking finding is that while other studies show that often older children are more involved in the decision-making process than younger children (Berrick et al., 2015; Cossar et al., 2016; Healy & Darlington, 2009; Leeson, 2007; Vis et al., 2012), mainly because case managers believe that young children cannot take the responsibility that comes with participation (Atwool, 2006; Holland, 2001; Pinkney, 2011), this study shows that it is especially leaving out the younger children that leads to the older children displaying a feeling of learned helplessness (Dweck & Reppucci, 1973): the young people (13-19 years) expressed having many experiences in which they did not feel heard or that they were being taken seriously. These previous experiences have led to a feeling that they could not make any changes and even said they stopped expressing their views during the guidance of the child protection services since their views were not heard by the case managers. As Sanders & Mace (2006) and Dedding et al (2015) also reported, when children withdraw from the decision-making process, either by remaining silent or by disrupting the conversation,

it is also a way of participating. However, it is a form that is often not recognised and seen, since we are so focused on verbal signs, which can result in children remaining voiceless. Furthermore, the young children (aged 7 to 12 years) showed themselves to be most certainly capable of and eager to express their wishes, feelings and thoughts, but indicated that they need more help from the case manager to express those thoughts and ideas in the family meetings and within the complex family situations they are in. This finding suggests that children (besides having the right to be involved and feature specific information) **do** need to be involved in the process of decision-making from a younger age, before negative experiences lead to some form of learned helplessness, and negatively influence their actions.

9.1.3. *Defining meaningful participation in the context of child protection services at JBRA*

Studies on child participation within child protection services report at least three aspects that are important for meaningful participation, namely (1) informing, (2) hearing, and (3) involving (Franklin & Sloper, 2005; Bouma et al., 2018; Kriz & Roundtree-Swain, 2017). Interestingly, in this study, the children and case managers mainly report on hearing and informing. Not mentioning involvement as an aspect of participation does not mean that the children and case managers think that being involved in the decision-making process is not important, but it does show that for them, it is not (yet) the case. It raises the question whether it is an immature process of participation or the most desirable/achievable level of participation in these difficult circumstances.

This study shows that especially case managers are novices when it comes to child participation, not knowing what to expect of their role and rights in the conversation. For the children, a lack of positive experiences with adults actually taking them seriously, and not discussing the concept and its implications and implementations in practice, makes them novices too. Together, this leads to a lack of participation options for children in practice. One could argue that case managers should be better educated on what participation entails, including the importance of involving the child in decision-making. This is what studies have tried, by educating professionals and changing policy and law in different settings (Berrick et al., 2015; Bouma et al., 2018; Vis & Fossum, 2015; Munro, 2011). However, I would argue, based on the findings of this study, that if you want to improve participation in daily child protection services, you need to match the perspectives of the case managers in relation to the rights, needs *and* wishes of the children, leading to a more detailed and nuanced interpretation of meaningful participation as described in literature. Therefore, instead of referring to meaningful participation in terms of informing, hearing, and

involving, meaningful participation in the studied context requires (1) making clear agreements on how to deal and communicate with each other, including why this is important; (2) what each person needs to feel welcomed/appreciated and how each person makes known what he or she thinks is important; (3) informing what will happen with the information given, and what the involvement of youth protection means; (4) ensuring that everyone has expressed their wishes, feels they are being taken seriously; and (5) explaining the decisions made and how each and everyone's opinions have been taken into account, with special attention, if necessary, to explaining why certain options are not possible, while acknowledging the child's wishes and experiences are taken seriously. Furthermore, it should be realised that participation is not a one-off action, but a continuous process and therefore needs constant attention. Overall, then this requires of the case manager that with every new case and client, they start with asking attention for participation, explaining what it entails, why they value it so much, asking how individuals feel comfortable in sharing their needs, give examples, and always share afterwards and how they will facilitate this. Furthermore, it asks that with every child, they examine how in this specific case and in this specific context they will communicate with each other.

9.2 The interplay between child image, child protection and child participation

As described in the theoretical background, the literature identifies many barriers for the facilitation of child participation in child protection services (Archard & Skivenes, 2009a/2009b; Barnes, 2012; Bell, 2002; Gallagher et al., 2012; Pinkney, 2011; Sanders & Mace, 2006; Smith et al., 2011; Vis et al., 2011; Vis et al., 2012; Winter, 2009). It was found difficult to facilitate an actual change in the levels of child participation. The question is where to start, which in the end demands a sociocultural shift in an organisation. By using different instruments to discover the underlying barriers for the facilitation of child participation in child protection services this study indeed found that, although well-known barriers such as time constraints (to build a relationship of trust), a focus on minimizing risks, balancing the needs of both parents and children were mentioned, after close observation and reflection, three underlying, deep-seated barriers were identified, namely (1) the image of children as not yet competent and vulnerable; (2) the idea that participation is about providing and collecting information; and (3) the task at hand to protect children and how this relates to participation.

At JBRA, when asked directly, case managers describe children as social actors who have an influence on their own life and environment. And, again in theory, case managers are aware that children should and could participate, have a say concerning their own situation and should be listened to. But how and to -what? And under what

conditions is it (felt) safe to invite children to participate? Intuitively they feel it is the right thing to do, however, when it comes to their core business, their actions and choices showed something else; in practice they shift to a child image based on “protection of the child” and “taking over”. In the actions of the case managers, children are considered incapable of overseeing the complex and unsafe environment that they are in and should not be burdened with decision-making. Besides, adults are considered to be more capable of making the decisions, especially the case managers. In addition, in line with other studies (Vis et al., 2011; Winter, 2009), case managers consider the problems children encounter mainly as adult problems, involving children only on the periphery, and therefore the tendency is to work mainly with the parents to solve the problems. This also conforms an underlying image of children as vulnerable, with little influence on the situation. Thus, this study found, in line with studies into the perspectives of child protection professionals in other countries (Collings & Davies, 2008; Fern, 2014; Heimer et al., 2017; Vis et al., 2012), that, although the child image contains aspects from multiple discourses, the caretakers’ perspective is the most dominant due to the emphasis on protection from and the prevention of abuse and neglect. This being the strongest, deep-seated, not always conscious view of children and childhood had a strong impact on case managers’ actions in relation to participation and protection; namely that they switch to a mode in which they take over on behalf of the child and make the decisions themselves, in the belief that they are acting in the child’s best interest. Interestingly, case managers are often unaware of this underlying view of children: when asking case managers about their child image, what they portray is different than what is shown in their actions. In this difference, there are most certainly openings to discuss child images and how these relate to participation, as explained in Chapters 6 and 8.

Furthermore, this study shows that how a case manager looks at children is also influenced by the environment in which the case manager operates. Within a professional field with a focus on child protection, risk-management and shielding children from harm, it is not surprising to find, as this study did, a more pedagogical and psychological perspective (Lee, 1992; Vis et al., 2011; Vis & Fossum, 2015). However, this study also shows that the present dominant child image influences how protection is defined. Therefore, the summary of child perspectives, as described in Table 2.1 of the theoretical background, should be supplemented with ‘the definition of child protection’, to fully understand how child image influences the opportunities for participation in the child protection setting (see Table 9.1).

Table 9.1: An overview of the three child perspectives, including protection

| Perspective | Caretakers Perspective | Sociology of childhood | Child liberator perspective |
|---|---|--|--|
| A child is.... | Children are vulnerable, in need of protection | Children are social, knowledgeable actors | Children are equal to adults and therefore should be equal in rights |
| The proper role of adults is... | Parents should protect, control and provide | Parents should consult children and take their perspectives into consideration | Parents should acknowledge children's rights and treat children as equals |
| The perspective on child participation is.... | Children are not competent enough for decision-making and should not be burdened with it | Children are able and should be enabled to represent their views in a way that matches their capabilities | Children always have the right to participate in decisions affecting their own lives, and should be involved like adults are |
| The relation to child protection is... | Child protection problems are based on adult problems, therefore the solution lies with the parents | Child protection problems are based on the interaction between parents and child, therefore all should be involved in changing the situation | Child protection problems are based on the violations of a child's rights and those rights should be restored |

Also important is the finding that the case managers themselves are not aware of how the focus and emphasis on protection influences how they relate to children and their part in the situation they are in. This has not been addressed in other studies to date. The relationship between the focus on protection and the embodied child image and the choices the case managers subconsciously make has therefore been underexplored. However, this finding shows that how one sees the relationship between participation and protection is most certainly a determining value in the process of facilitating child participation.

In addition, case managers in child protection services experience a tension between child protection and child participation. The UNCRC holds that children have both the right to be protected and to participate and attaches equal importance to both rights (Archard & Skivenness, 2009a) Even further, although participation rights were ratified in the UNCRC for the purpose of enhancing children's rights and protection, in practice, this is often not yet considered to be the case. One explanation stems, as also found in other studies, from the belief that it takes time to build a relationship

with a child, which is necessary to create an environment in which the child feels comfortable and safe enough to express its wishes (Abma, 2005; Barnes, 2012; Gallagher et al., 2012; Jobe & Gorin, 2012; Leeson, 2007). And especially in the field of child protection services, case managers often experience enormous time pressure to make quick decisions to safeguard the child. Therefore, they often feel that they have to choose between participation and protection. And, not surprisingly, when they feel they have to choose, protection always wins. However, it is interesting that according to the children participating in this study, time was not considered the most important for building trust: for them it was about *how* the time is spent – explicitly discussing what to expect from one another, how to communicate and what is done with the information given by the child will give the child a feeling of trust to discuss content.

Although the three barriers (child image, understanding participation, the relation between participation and protection) itself may not be new (Barnes, 2012; Gallagher et al., 2012; Sanders & Mace, 2006; Smith et al., 2011; Vis et al., 2011; Vis et al., 2012; Winter, 2009), the interplay of child image, participation and protection has not yet been explicitly studied. While this study shows that where the case manager plays a crucial role in the facilitation of child participation, how the case manager looks at children has an influence on what participation possibilities one sees for children (Thompson, Wojciak & Cooley, 2017; Vis & Fossum, 2015). James et al. (1998) state that for child participation, children should be seen as ‘knowledgeable social actors’. One has to believe that children are not just influenced by their social environment, but actively influence their social environment, theorised by social scientists as agency (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998). Furthermore, one has to believe that children are knowledgeable, informed, give meaning to events that happen, and act on that meaning. Therefore, the child image a case manager embodies is a determining value in whether and how a case manager will facilitate child participation and thus should be part of their training and critical reflection.

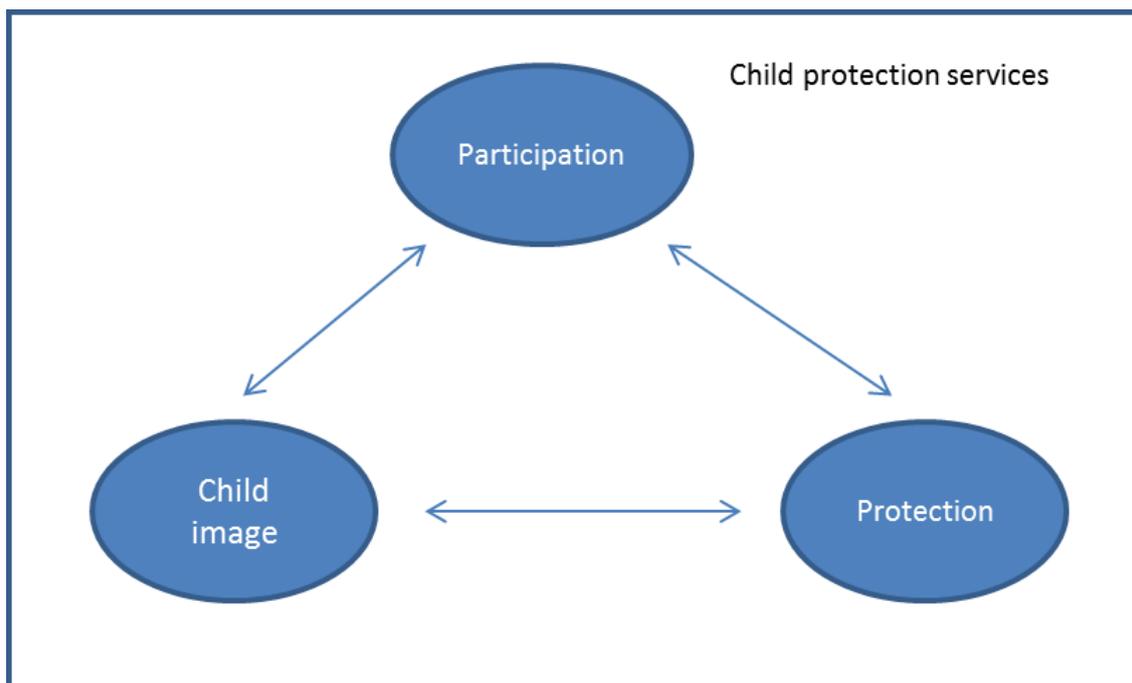


Figure 9.1: The interplay between participation, protection and child image within the context of child protection

Therefore, I consider the interplay between these three concepts, child image, participation and protection as a crucial interaction one should understand and tackle in trying to improve child participation in child protection services, as shown in Figure 9.1. But how do they relate to each other? As described in the theoretical background, seeing children as social, knowledgeable actors is important for the facilitation of child participation because it acknowledges children in their capacity to have an influence on the environment, but also emphasises that they do not necessarily influence it in the same way as adults do (Sorin, 2005). However, this study shows that the ideal conditions to optimise the chances for children to participate include not just a context in which children are seen (and this view is also embodied) as social, knowledgeable actors, but also in which participation is seen not just as a right, but also as a continuous process that is in the child's best interest and a means to enhance protection. Both protection and participation receive attention and case managers are aware of how these subjects interact. Children are seen as capable of sharing their views and understanding the situations in which they find themselves, while taking into consideration that they might be limited in how they can achieve this without adult help.

As described in Figure 9.2, in a protection-centred approach, with a high focus on protection and a low focus on participation, as was the case in this study, children will be mainly seen as vulnerable and in need of protection, and issues of child protection

will be regarded as mainly adult problems, leading to the situation that a child’s right to participate will be pushed aside. Studies showed that with a focus on risk management and protection, the opportunity for participation diminishes (Lee, 1992; Vis et al., 2011). When the adults responsible for the final decision-making are afraid to make mistakes, there is a greater chance of unilateral and unrepresentative decisions (McCafferty, 2017; Weatherall & Duffy, 2008). These findings were confirmed in this study. Although case managers had state the intention to focus on ensuring that the child was heard, during the meetings they shifted to gathering information quickly, in order to make a swift assessment of the situation and to estimate what was needed to safeguard the child. However, in a participation-centred approach, with Articles 12 and 13 of the UNCRC considered to encompass the most important rights for children, there is a risk of not acknowledging the situational difference between adults and children, and overlooking the approach a child might need in order to be capable of expressing its wishes and feelings. Furthermore, the boundaries of participation are insufficiently explored and discussed, especially in this complex yet practical situation of child protection.

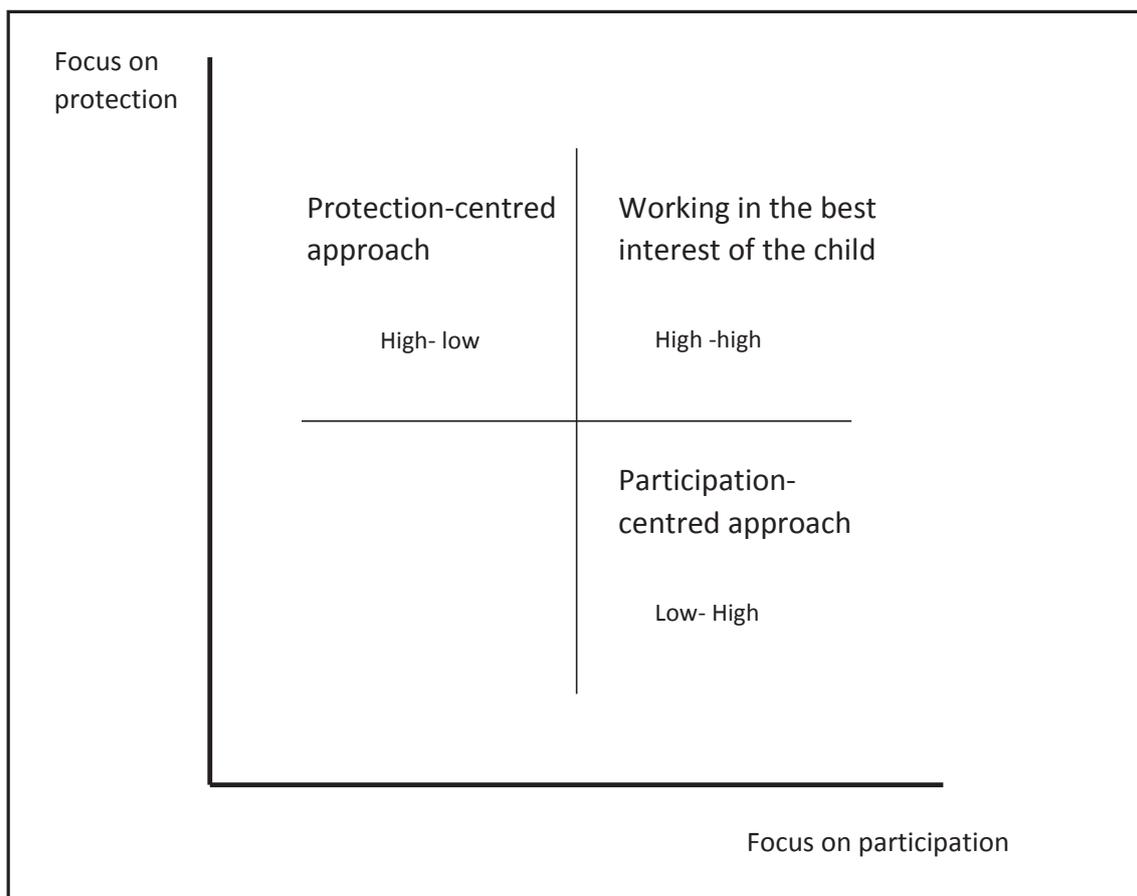


Figure 9.2: The relation between participation and protection

The literature has shown that when an intervention focuses on only one of the three aspects (child image, the relation between participation and protection, and what participation entails, it is difficult to achieve any real change (Gallagher et al., 2012; Pinkney, 2011; Smith et al., 2011; Vis et al., 2011; Vis et al., 2012; Winter, 2009). This study shows that child, understanding participation, and the relation between participation and protection are all important and intertwined. Right now, at JBRA, there is mainly a protection-centred approach, focusing on child protection from a belief that children need to be protected and shielded. This means that there is little focus on participation and how to achieve it in practice, and to how participation works in favour of protection. It calls for a change in perspective and behaviour, which cannot be achieved simply by following a list of actions but involves a change in underlying core beliefs and strategies/skills. This requires getting out of the familiar routine and comfort zone and creating a situation in which there is an optimal eye for the meaning and knowledge of children, and (hence) the safety of children is optimally guaranteed.

9.3 Strategies for moving the participation agenda forward in daily child protection services

This study explored with both case managers and children what they believe is necessary to facilitate a change in child protection. Their input has led to two main strategies for moving the participation agenda forward, namely (1) to involve the children in the change process, and (2) to facilitate knowledge exchange and critical reflection. Both strategies are described below.

9.3.1. Involve children in the change process

All children participating in this project had clear visions of what is needed for them to reveal their thoughts, feelings and wishes to the case managers, showing that children are capable and knowledgeable conversation partners. Even young children (aged 7–13) have concrete ideas and are able to translate them into tools for daily practice. However, they need an environment which matches their needs and capabilities to express themselves, and creative facilitators. Moreover, this study showed that we can learn a great deal from involving them in the process of change. Where the tools developed by adults are mainly directed at helping children to express themselves, the tools the children developed aimed for something else first, namely to facilitate the very basis of a conversation. Not focusing on *what* someone wants to say, the tools developed by the co-creation are about *how* to relate to each other, who is expressing himself when, how and to whom. According to the children, this basis for the meetings is not facilitated in practice, showing that children can give solutions or directions that adults have not thought of. Finally, the children showed how important

it is to be involved from a young age, because having multiple experiences of not being taken seriously, makes them “give up”. Therefore, it is even more important that from the start, children understand who the case manager is, why she is there, what they can expect from her and how they are going to interact with each other. In conclusion, according to the children, they must be taken seriously as a discussion partner from the start. Children must be given the space to indicate in their own way what they consider important. It is vital to actively involve children in this process. While they are discouraged by negative experiences, they will also amaze you with their ideas and visions.

9.3.2. *Facilitate knowledge exchange and critical reflection*

For the case managers, as shown before, participation is not just about acting, it is also about feeling and believing. The same goes for always being told that your job is to protect children, and that children should not be bothered with adult problems, that they should be shielded to protect their innocence, and now you all of the sudden have to let children share their ideas on the decisions that have to be made. And most of those decisions are about subjects that you always have learned not to burden children with. So “how to do what I always learned not to”.

This study has shown the underlying entangled relationship between participation, protection and child image. Changing one of the three concepts will not make a change in practice. The actions of the case managers are guided by underlying beliefs regarding all three concepts, which is why an integral approach is needed that takes all three aspects into account.

For participation, it is necessary to get a better understanding of the concept, but especially of the process of participation. Through gaining knowledge, case managers need to learn more about child participation, how it is facilitated and what are its pitfalls. Furthermore, special attention should be given to the relation between participation and protection.

Concerning child image, knowledge of different child images and how they relate to participation and protection is necessary but not sufficient to facilitate change. First, as also shown in this study, the child image case managers think they have is rarely the image they embody. By educating them on child images, they possibly will relate to the image they think they have, not giving them the opportunity to discover the underlying, and often dominant, image. To become aware of the underlying child image, case managers need to reflect on their actions and thus discover which deep-rooted image of children they embrace. Furthermore, this image is something someone embodies. It relates more to attitudes and feelings than to knowledge.

Therefore, experiencing and reflecting are more effective in facilitating change than expanding knowledge.

Regarding protection, this is and always will be the core business of child protection services. It is therefore important to underline that nowhere is it said that this has to change. However, it is important for case managers to understand how this main focus on protection influences the choices they make and how this relates to other processes, in this case participation. Even here, case managers can be taught about theories of the relationship between participation and protection, how participation can amplify rather than harm protection, and how their child image relates to how they feel they should protect children. It is important to realise that there is no practical body of knowledge specifically for child participation within child protection services. As described in the theoretical background, different attempts to increase the participation of children in child protection services have so far led to little change. And the case managers cannot rely on experiential knowledge to address the complicated triangle of participation, protection and child image. Therefore, to translate the discourse into daily practice, they need to critically reflect together on their daily actions.

9.4 Implications for practice

As the results of this study have shown, facilitating child participation in child protection services is an immensely complex and challenging task. It calls for knowledge on participation, child image and protection, self-reflection, being vulnerable, to try and make mistakes, to balance different needs and to stand up to time pressure and demands from society. Therefore, as mentioned in the previous section, to facilitate a change in the participatory process of children in child protection, case managers should have the opportunity to “learn while doing”, combining education with reflection in daily practice. However, this also requires organisational change, because to create a shift in focus and belief, and to ensure that this change is also translated into action, this shift in inner beliefs has to be supported and also experienced by the team managers and even the board of the organisation. This requires that participation is made more explicit in the workflow and daily processes and reflection on both actions and beliefs related to child image and child participation is built into the working process. The organisation could start with questioning prevailing child images, and from there make reflection a permanent part of the implementation of a ‘new’ value. And these ‘new’ belief could also be translated into the written vision statements of the organisation, including the pedagogical vision and description of the work processes. Furthermore, the organisation can help the case manager to stay focused on the perspective of children

as well as their contribution to the decision-making, by making it explicit in the written reports the case managers have to present, as well as to actively question each other on these subjects during case discussions.

Furthermore, child protection organisations like JBRA are just one link in a larger chain, all influencing one another. Making changes within JBRA will also require changes from the surrounding organisations as well, like the Council of Child Protection, the Advice and Reporting Centre for Domestic Violence and Maltreatment and the Juvenile Court. In order to embed meaningful participation in child protection services, the whole chain of institutes involved need to have clear and uniform policy documents that do justice to children's participatory rights and to improve the responses to child abuse and neglect, share best practices and learn from other fields.

Moreover, in this study, the children developed tools for a participation toolbox. These tools were used by case managers in their daily practice. The toolbox served different purposes, including helping the case managers, in combination with reflecting on the use of the toolbox to become more aware of child participation, how they involve children and what decisions they already make for the children, giving the case managers a means to start a conversation about participation with the children and families, and giving the children a chance to show the case manager how they could and wanted to participate. Although the toolbox was designed and produced by the children and the researchers, it should be further developed and professionalised. Then it might serve as a tool to help implement child participation in practice.

9.5 Strengths and limitations

Discovering the relations between participation, protection and child image requires an understanding of both the conscious thoughts of those involved, as well as their underlying norms, values, and beliefs leading to their actions. This is not easy to achieve. In this study, we used different methods (e.g. interviews, observations, focus group discussions, reflexive learning sessions) to get an understanding of all aspects. Comparing thoughts and actions has led to greater and deeper understanding of daily practice, including its strengths and challenges, and what is needed to make actual change. The use of different methods to explore the views and practices of both children, the subjects of the child protection cases, as well as their case managers, also strengthened the internal validity of this study. Furthermore, the use of methods, especially the reflexive monitoring in action, have already led to changes in daily practice. By participating in this study, the case managers gained knowledge about and awareness of child participation, how this right is now (barely) translated into practice and how their own actions influence the child's opportunities to be involved.

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Furthermore, also discussing the project and the results with the organisation, both at management and middle-management level, created an awareness of the need and possibilities to invest more in the facilitation of child participation, also leading to a willingness to look for possible changes in practice. However, the risk of this project is that its duration was too short to make actual practical, concrete changes in daily practice and that the awareness and willingness might fade away in the daily hectic and consuming practice. Therefore, to make an actual change requires a cultural change, which needs more investment and guidance than this project could offer, for which continued supervision would be desirable.

This study was mainly of a qualitative nature. Therefore, it is not possible to generalise the findings to children, young people, case managers or child protection services beyond the sample. Even further, although the exploration was thorough and the results give direction for future improvement, since the implementation of child protection services is very diverse between countries and even within the Netherlands, the study results cannot be automatically generalised to other child protection services or other countries. Nonetheless, this study does provide concepts, suggestions and guidelines that can be used by other child protection services, other professional fields and other countries.

This study focused on children and case managers, but more parties are involved in child protection services. Parents and other professionals were excluded from this study, but also have an influence in the process of child participation. This study shows that the relationship and the different perspectives of children and case managers is already complex and challenging in itself, and so was the focus I chose to start from. However, it will be crucial also to include the other parties in some way in order to make a real difference. Therefore, how all perspectives relate to one another and how all parties are influenced in a process of change needs to be mapped as well.

Finally, the participants in this study represent only a small part of all children and case managers. As also shown in Chapter 5, there are already differences between case managers in this study and also the other Chapters (6, 7 and 8) show diversity between children and between case managers. For example, in Chapter 8 we chose to work with case managers who were open and enthusiastic about the idea of child participation. The groups that are more reluctant or even reject child participation might therefore need to start reflecting more on their own behaviour. However, this is not explored in this study.

9.6 Directions for further research

In this study, we did not focus on the ‘actual’ decision-making in the child protection cases. Although some family meetings were observed, this was not the focus and so not enough to make assumptions about the actual interaction between the children and the case managers. In this study we focused on the different perspectives and how these relate to the starting point of the process of child participation, to discover the conditions required to start facilitation. I recommend further exploration of the actual decision-making in child protection practice, through more direct observation, because as shown in this study, what case managers believe they do does not always correspond with their actions in practice.

Furthermore, as suggested in this study, making a change in the facilitation of child participation is not easy to achieve, especially in the complex field of child protection. This study aimed to investigate and understand the status quo and the conditions necessary to facilitate change. It would be interesting to investigate actual change in daily practice, by starting an implementation process and closely guiding and following this through the use of reflexive monitoring in action – especially since this research method is based on the same principles as are suggested in this study as necessary to create a change: combining knowledge with practice and intensive reflection.

Finally, it would be interesting to conduct a similar exploration in other child protection services, both in the Netherlands, as well as internationally, to compare situations and to learn what aspects and suggestions apply to a wider range of child protection services. Currently various studies are ongoing in many countries. However, little is known about how the underlying processes are similar or dissimilar between countries and how lessons can be learned from one another.

Overall, this study, like many others in the field of child protection, shows that participation in decision-making is recognised as an important and essential condition for qualitative care. There are various ways of looking at the concept of participation, and even more, at its translation into practice. As shown throughout this thesis, the importance of making child participation more explicit in practice, by bringing together the views of the organisation, the professionals working there and the children undergoing interventions from those professionals, is crucial. I sincerely hope that for the children who are in need of protection services, the situation will change into a work process in which they feel better heard and taken seriously and that helps them to become stronger, more confident and better prepared for the challenges they face and their future ‘adult’ life.

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