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# **Evaluation of a national reform in Israeli child protection practice designed to improve children's participation in decision making**

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A national reform of child protection practice in Israel includes the ambition of strengthening children's participation in intervention decisions carried out in formal committees, called Planning, Intervention and Evaluation Committees. A qualitative study was conducted of how well this was being achieved by following 21 case studies of families referred to the committees over six months. Data was collected from interviews with social workers, field observations of the committees and a document review. A systems approach was undertaken as a conceptual framework in order to allow a whole-organisational understanding of what is happening in the field, and why. The key finding was a very limited realisation of the reform's aim. Only seven children attended the committees, and they had little influence on decisions, which appears to have made them less co-operative in implementing them. Those who did not attend rarely had their views conveyed to the committee by their social workers. The reform's lack of success is explained by being ill-suited to the organisational working environment and culture. The analysis identified a number of systemic factors influencing the failure to give greater priority to children's views, including: lack of skill and time, organisational messages about practice priorities and paternalistic ideology.

**Keywords:** Social policy, Decision making, Child protection, Children's rights, Practitioners.

## **Introduction**

The ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations 1989) by the government of Israel in 1991, placed on the state a duty to establish the measures required to secure children's right to participate in decisions about their lives, as prescribed by Article 12 of the convention. The objective of the current study is to evaluate a recent national reform in Israeli child protection practice which comes in the wake of the UNCRC and includes a mandatory commitment to listen to and consider children's views when making intervention decisions. To date, there is no systematic national data on the operation of the reform in everyday work, or its outcomes.

### **Children's Participation: The Message from Research**

Literature in the field of child protection highlights the contribution of children's participation to the effectiveness of intervention decisions. Interventions based on an accurate understanding of family life and its impact on the child, are more responsive to the child's needs and gain more co-operation when it's time to put them into action, even if they are inconsistent with the child's wishes (Cashmore 2002; Munro 2011; Shier 2001; van Bijleveld *et al.* 2013; 2014). Participation is acknowledged for its important benefit to the child's development. For example, meaningful participation advances young people's feelings of mastery and control, self-worth and self-esteem (Bessell 2011; Cashmore 2002; Munro 2001; van Bijleveld *et al.* 2013; 2014).

Nevertheless, international literature repeatedly reports a disappointing gap between the positive tone of formal policies around children's participation and their translation into practice; so that children are still not being sufficiently included in child protection work (Bessell 2011; Gallagher *et al.* 2012; Healy & Darlington 2009; Munro 2011; van Bijleveld *et*

*al.* 2013; Vis *et al.* 2012). The literature identifies several individual and systemic sources of difficulty in achieving child participation, such as a line of research into workers' attitudes towards children, childhood and participation, that shows how professionals' personal beliefs affect opportunities for participation. Adopting views of children as vulnerable, dependent and in need of protection is agreed to be an obstacle to participation, while seeing children as autonomous with capabilities and rights to self-determination increases their decision making power (Ruch 2014; Sanders & Mace 2006; Shemmings 2000; Vis *et al.* 2012). Research findings persistently indicate that a basic requirement for children's effective participation is the establishment of consistent, long term, enduring relationships between them and their workers through which they can get to know and trust each other (Cashmore 2002; Gallagher *et al.* 2012; Munro 2001; 2011; van Bijleveld *et al.* 2013). Building good and trusting relationships with children in the sensitive context of child protection takes time and sufficient skills. Children present a varied range of cognitive and communication skills and have different emotional needs (Handley & Doyle 2014; Cashmore 2002; Gallagher *et al.* 2012; Munro 2011). Their ability to trust and confide in adults may have been seriously disturbed, which imposes further obstacles to interaction and requires additional professional sensitivity (Munro 2011; Ruch 2014; Thomas 2002). Evidence shows that social workers lack the necessary skills, qualifications and confidence required to communicate effectively with children (Ruch 2014; Handley & Doyle 2014; Vis *et al.* 2012). In addition, research accounts for the increased priority given by organisations to bureaucratic tasks and procedural requirements, which compromise workers' time with children (Munro 2011; Ruch 2014; Winter 2009).

While various conceptual frameworks have been offered over the years to account for children's participation (e.g. Hart 1992; Shier 2001; Thomas 2002), today there is a consensus about the general recipe for how to successfully involve children when it is time to make decisions. These key elements are incorporated into the Israeli reform, soon to be presented.

Participation should start with providing clear explanations and preparing children for what is about to happen (Gallagher *et al.* 2012; van Bijleveld *et al.* 2013; Vis & Thomas 2009). Children should be supported to express their views, which may involve an adult speaking on their behalf, and have a choice as to the appropriate setting to do so (Cashmore 2002; Gallagher *et al.* 2012; Thomas 2002; van Bijleveld *et al.* 2013; Vis & Thomas 2009). Giving children the opportunity to attend meetings, reviews and case conferences was found to be an important factor affecting participation (Vis & Thomas 2009). When attending such formal meetings, children's experience can be facilitated by an informal setting, a small and familiar forum, the opportunity to communicate through writing or drawing, skilful chairing, a respectful attitude amongst professionals and access to the same information that adults have (Greegan *et al.* 2006; Thomas 2002; van Bijleveld *et al.* 2013). Meaningful participation includes giving weight to children's views in considerations and finally providing explanations about the decision making outcomes, particularly when those go against the child's wishes (Gallagher *et al.* 2012; Thomas 2002; Vis *et al.* 2012).

### **The Israeli Reform in Child Protection Decision Making**

In Israel, everyday child protection work is carried out at the local Social Services Departments (SSDs) of every municipality in the country mainly by generalist social workers who respond to a full range of local community needs and problems (Israel Ministry of Social Services and Social Affairs (IMSSSA) 2014). The two key authorities involved in child protection decision making are the courts and the Planning, Intervention and Evaluation Committees (PIECs) that operate within the SSDs (IMSSSA 2014). The committees consist of multi-professional forums, representatives of the social, education, and health systems, and family members, and are chaired by a senior qualified social worker, called a coordinator (Israel Ministry of Labour and Welfare 1995; IMSSSA 2004a). The PIECs have the power to authorise, for example, the removal of a child from his/her family or a return home from an out-of-home placement

(IMSSSA 2004a). In 2008 the government of Israel initiated a nationwide implementation of a well-resourced reform in the PIECs working procedures, developed over a decade.

The reform's guidelines set out an innovative model for working with children, described in Article 8 of the Implementation Team's Decisions Paper (IMSSSA 2004b) as including a new mandatory duty to listen to children's voices and give them weight when making decisions. The regulations prescribe various procedures, according to children's age. Children under twelve years should meet with their social worker or PIEC's coordinator in private, where they will be informed about the committee, their views will be elicited, documented and presented before the forum in due time, through the family assessment report written by social workers (called a psycho-social report (PSR)). The regulations recognise that there may be an easier way for children to communicate and so children can choose to write a letter to the forum. In exceptional cases, where workers and coordinators find it suitable to the child's ability, wants and best interest, children under twelve can participate in the PIECs. Young people, over twelve, should be routinely invited to directly participate in the committees. Deviation from this norm can be due to the young people's preference or when workers and coordinators conclude that it is in the child's best interest to be excluded from all or part of the discussion. When not attending, young people's voices should be mediated through professionals, as in the case of younger children. When attending, they should meet their social workers in advance in order to be knowledgeably prepared and be given full information about the committee's procedures, the participation activity, and decisions to be made. Participation can be supported by independent advocacy of the child's representative. Regulations regarding the discussion proceedings are designed to facilitate participation by placing a duty on the coordinator to ask and record the child's views in the meeting and give the child precedence to speak before professionals. After the PIECs, all children should be engaged with, in order to be briefed about

the discussion's outcomes and implications. This should be carried out through a face-to-face meeting with social workers or coordinators.

### **Conceptual Framework: Systems Approach**

The conceptual framework applied in this research is the 'systems approach' developed in safety engineering to inquire into the causes of accidents and disasters (Munro 2005). It represents a substantial shift from seeing human error as a cause, to seeing it as a symptom of problems at a deeper level of the system (Hoffman & Woods 2000; Dekker 2002; Reason 2000). Systems thinking was later adopted to study the everyday performance of practitioners at the sharp end of service provision and contemporarily used by pioneering researchers in the field of child protection to analyse contributory factors to practice and policy outcomes (e.g. Fish *et al.* 2008; Munro 2010; 2011). The systems approach provides a vast literature which is beyond the scope of this paper. Principally, the approach considers practitioners within the wider system in which they operate when studying their performance (Munro 2005). It is a holistic perspective that captures individual front-line workers' practice within their organisational context, or multiple features of the workplace, and seeks to identify the interconnections between them (Dekker 2002; Reason 2000). Using a systems perspective in this study allows recognition of the underlying factors of the SSDs that interact to influence the implementation of the reform in everyday work. This advances the analysis from describing how changes prescribed by the reform are being acted on by social workers to understanding why.

### **Methods**

The research took place in seven SSDs affiliated to five local municipalities across the country. Site selection followed convenience sampling to include sites that are easy to get to and which are known to have cooperative staff. The study rigorously investigated 21 case studies that

were selected by coordinators as exemplifying the implementation of the reform in practice. In compliance with ethical considerations, both professionals' and family members' formal consent to participate in the research was required as a prerequisite to inclusion in the sample. For each case, three basic modes of qualitative data collection were used: direct observation of the committee's discussion; semi-structured interviews with the responsible social worker straight after the PIEC and six months later; and a review of case records. The holistic approach promoted by the case study design and a particular sensitivity in the data collection methods to the influence of context (Weiss 1998; Yin 1994) are hallmarks of a systems approach. As advocated by the literature, communicating effectively and responsibly with children necessitates both particular skills and the investment of considerable time in getting to know them, which is beyond the scope of this study. Thus, children were not interviewed directly but rather their experience was investigated through other means. This study complied with the London School of Economics and Political Science research ethics policy and the IMSSSA's ethical requirements of confidentiality.

Data was collected on 45 children; 30 boys and 15 girls. The children's ages ranged from 1 to 17.9 years, with an average age of just under 10 years ( $M=9.9$ ;  $SD=3.9$ ). Children aged from 6 to 12 years were over-represented in the sample (22 children). All 22 social workers who participated in the study (4 workers were responsible for 2 cases, and there was staff turnover between interviews) had undergraduate degrees in social work, and six workers participated in post-qualification programmes focused on children. The majority of workers were generalist social workers; six had specialist, or other, roles in the department. Seniority in social work practice varied greatly; participants ranged from having 1.25 to 26 years experience; only four workers had less than six years experience. Heavy workloads are a well-recognised characteristic of the SSDs (Ofek 2009). In the current sample over half the workers (13/22) were responsible for 120 to 200 families, and 3 for over 200 families.



The process of data analysis drew heavily on Miles & Huberman's (1994) sequential analysis process which the authors describe as "*a fairly classic set of analytic moves*" (p. 9). All data collected was transcribed and transferred to ATLAS.ti software. The process of building the coding frame involved on-going review of the literature and the text of the reform, while adding comments, ideas, and reflections about what was being learned from the data. Patterns, themes, relationships, sequences and differences were discovered between cases and within individual cases. Gradually, generalisations that show consistencies and trends were established, and accounted for the 'hows' and 'whys' of the findings.

## **Results**

### **Social workers' relationships with children**

The first striking finding of this study is the negligible contact social workers had with children for whom they were responsible. None of the children in the sample had enduring meaningful relationships with their workers. Prior to the referral to PIEC, only five children participated in a single meeting including parents and/or other professionals at their worker's office. As for the majority of the children, workers reported having short encounters with them in settings such as after school programmes, school or home visits, which usually did not involve one-on-one conversations. In preparation for the committees, only seven children and young people were approached and engaged in a single meeting. To put it another way, out of the majority of the children who had not attended the committee only three were met with to be given information and express their views. Out of the seven young people who did attend the committee only four went through a preparatory meeting. Two children attended the committee without being prepared in advance: a thirteen year old boy who was invited on the spot just outside the committee room, and a fourteen and a half year old girl whose mother requested that she not be informed about the PIEC's objective to discuss the option of out-of-

home placement. One girl had a phone conversation with her worker prior the committee. More seriously, data revealed that five children had been referred to PIECs without their social workers ever meeting or seeing them beforehand. After the PIECs, only four young people who had attended the discussion had an opportunity immediately afterwards to discuss their feelings and the decision made. This means that, all in all, only three young people had been engaged in meetings with their social workers both before and after the PIEC, as required. Follow up interviews revealed that during a six months period after the PIECs, 20 children had no contact whatsoever with their social workers; among these 11 children were in fact strangers to their workers who hadn't instigated any direct interaction with them (for six children, staff turnover led to a break in contact). There was no evidence of coordinators stepping in to engage with the children and, in fact, none of them met with the children either prior to, or directly after, the committee (one exception was a case where the coordinator was the child's therapist).

Here is an example from an interview of a worker's account of her lack of engagement with the family's children:

*Overall, we are discussing children that the school (staff) knows better than me. The school (staff) see them more frequent than me, I don't know the children. I saw them but I never had one-on-one conversations with them. I am familiar with the mother, I know the mother. I can work with the mother, but not with the children.*

This quote demonstrates several of the shared patterns of practice found. First, it shows how the interaction with children was a matter of 'seeing' them rather than communicating with them. It also indicates a lack of sufficient confidence and skill in communicating with children. Most notably, it reveals that workers do not perceive engagement with children as part of their role, for them, the service users are the parents. Another worker made the following comment:

*I don't have relationships with most of the children here. It is all around parents' requests, only if there is something exceptional or (due to) reports from school or such things.*

A third of the workers referred to children's characteristics, such as being introvert, avoidant, confrontational or uncooperative, as an obstacle to meaningful engagement with them. Yet, it can be argued, that this is an outcome of practice, where workers are utterly alienated from the children they are responsible for. A general tendency found was a reliance on school teams, who were valued for their daily interaction with the children, to represent the children in the decision making process. This was shown by the dominance given to school staff's accounts both in the PSR and in discussions.

### **Hearing the children's voices**

Pre-committee meetings with children were carried out in settings that did not allow free, confidential and private communication, separately from their parents. Meetings were conducted in conjunction with home visits or as joint consultations with parents and, in some cases, with other professionals. The following quotation is a worker's testimony of feeling awkward asking the child his views about returning home from placement in the presence of his mother during a home visit:

*It was less appropriate to ask this at that moment because the mother was also there. She told me: "go on ask him". It is obvious that he will say that he wants home, it seems pointless to me. I told her, "it is enough; I trust what you told me".*

Given very limited past engagement, these meetings were an encounter between strangers. Evaluating their effectiveness in eliciting children's views, based on information included in the PSRs, showed that they had very poor outcomes in terms of mediating the child's voice to decision makers. For five of the seven children who were met with, the reports included a short account of their opinion on one or two specific issues in no more than a couple of lines. The findings also suggest these encounters led children to feel distressed about the forthcoming committee meetings. For example, the teacher of an eight year old girl linked the onset of her

uncontrolled crying and stomach aches to the time she had been told about the committee. A sixteen year old girl described her reaction when she was told about the PIEC: *"I became frightened, I didn't sleep at night, and I haven't slept for a week"*. An eleven year old boy was found by the worker hiding under his parents' bed terrified she would take him away. After the PIEC he continued to fear her and hung up the phone when he recognised her voice. None of the children had been offered the option of self-expressing through a letter.

Observational data showed that overall decisions were made although there was no clear understanding of the individual experience of the child in the family. It is one thing to know for example that the child's mother has a long history of alcohol misuse or severe mental problems, and quite another to understand how this affects the child's every-day life. The general tendency was not to investigate or discuss the effects family circumstances, difficult life events, abuse or maltreatment had on the individual child; instead, a universal negative impact of life circumstances on children's emotional condition was automatically inferred. When assumptions and impressions were conveyed, they were laden with professional jargon and empty standardised terms. For example, here is a social worker's conclusive statement regarding a case of three young children living with a schizophrenic mother who tended to violent, uncontrolled acts towards them, their father and herself: *"The difficult relationships between the parents created a tense atmosphere at home, exposed the children to difficult situations and risked their emotional state"*. This worker could not have added more since he had never seen two of the children he was reporting on.

This is not to say that children's voices were completely missing. 14 children's opinions about the intervention solution were delivered to the forum, mostly by their parents, in some cases by school staff and very rarely by social workers. Yet, in some cases, conflicts of interest between parents and/or disagreements between parents and professionals all wishing to represent the child, made it impossible to understand what the child's preferred option of help

was. The reform specifically warns against these situations, Article 8c of the reform's text cautions decision makers to be mindful of the difference between children's views and others' impressions about what they are: "*The PIEC will make sure the child's view is presented before it and distinguish between the child's views and professionals' impression of his/her behaviour and wishes.*" (IMSSSA, 2004b, p. 6).

One way or another, there was not much evidence of children's views affecting the outcomes of the decision making process. Observational data showed that children's wishes were given very trivial weight in the considerations. For example, a father who pleaded with the social worker to engage with his boys in order to find out their position before the drastic decision of their removal from home, had been refused with the claim that it is '*unnecessary*' since '*here it is clearly a matter of adults' decision*'.

### **Children's participation in PIECs**

Only half of the 14 children in the sample who were eligible to participate were invited to attend in the discussion. In addition three eleven year olds had been given the opportunity to participate. Since three children had chosen not to participate, overall seven children attended the discussions. With only one exception, coordinators were not involved in the decision whether to enable children to attend the committee. This was left solely to the workers' discretion. On the whole, social workers voiced a very reluctant and doubtful position towards children's participation in PIECs. In conversations about their points of view in general, and in the particular case studies, there was no advocacy that children's participation matters, or that it is the right of children to be heard and have an impact on decisions concerning their lives. In regards to young children (usually up to 12 years), it was the consensus that participation is likely to cause them distress or sufficient harm, in particular talking in front of a large forum of professionals and being exposed to very sensitive content, and hence they should be denied

this experience. Here is an example of a worker explaining why an eight year old girl was not invited to participate in a discussion about her removal from home:

*To me it was clear that I should not have invited her to the committee, she is too young... She is 8. She is going through enough suffering anyways. I think the move to placement is hard enough for her. I think that standing before the committee would only agitate her and turn her stomach; it will turn a lot anyway during the first days at placement.*

This quote demonstrates another prevalent notion amongst workers, i.e. they were (very rightly, as will be shown later) unconvinced about the contribution that children can make to the final outcome of the PIEC.

It seems that workers felt compelled to follow regulations in regards to young people. Nevertheless, young people were not invited in order to be competent partners in the process or have an influence. They were invited only if their attendance was expected to serve an instrumental function, such as to allow members of the forum a direct impression of them; send them a punitive message of control and authority; promote their co-operation with adult's decisions about removal from home; or allow them to witness that the considerations behind the decisions were in their best interests. Some workers argued that children, regardless of their age, should not be involved in the PIECs decision making since they are unreliable, do not know what is best for them, and tend to change their minds. For example: *"I would not like to think that children can take part in such decisions because it is too big on them to decide such things"*. None of the children had been advised to bring along a supportive representative on their behalf.

With the exception of one sixteen year old girl, children did not participate all through the discussions. They were present for between 6 and 24 minutes, in discussions that went on from 44 minutes to an hour and a half. Hence it is more accurate to state they were mostly present outside the committee room; waiting for half an hour to one hour before being invited in.

According to early conversations with coordinators, partial participation was the norm, thus the findings of this study were not exceptional to the habitual practice.

Another pattern found was that children were usually asked to go in and out of the committee room several times, so they were absent at two crucial stages, when information about them and their families was shared and at the actual decision making point. For example, in two PIECs after children took their seat like the rest of the members they were asked to leave the room. They were called in only after all the reports were presented and some discussion into intervention alternatives had already started. After a short conversation they were asked to leave again returning only to be informed about the decisions made. A ten year old boy was only called in for the first time after there was already an agreement on the intervention plan and two siblings were not invited in again to be informed about the outcomes. Children's position as outsiders at the meetings was reinforced by the fact that throughout all stages of the discussions they did not have access to the information that adults had; so that their understanding of the issues at stake and the actual power and authority of the PIECs was compromised. Information was either not provided or over simplified. For example, in the few cases where explanations as to the discussion's objective were provided they were very abstract, e.g. *'to think together what can help'*. When introducing themselves to the children members tended to omit their precise professional role and mostly only mentioned their names. Explanations of the interventions decided on were also very elusive, particularly in regards to out-of-home placements.

The PIECs were not a 'child friendly' decision making arena. The picture revealed before children when they entered the committee room was of a large group of adults including 7 to 10 professionals, four or five of which (excluding the researcher) were unknown to them, sitting around a big table. The dialogue with children lacked effective chairing, and was not well-organised or controlled by coordinators. Children's involvement was mostly responding

to members' questions which gave the communication an interrogative nature. At times they were not given respectful attention due to members conversing among themselves or on their mobile phones. As was evident from children's verbal and non-verbal behaviours, attending the discussion was a distressing experience for them. Obvious stress markers demonstrated were speaking in a very low voice, avoiding eye contact, swinging legs restlessly or laughing at unsuitable times. Children's responses were sometimes merely 'ok', 'yes/no', a nod, a shake of the head or no answer. Despite their very limited verbalisation (e.g. a fourteen year old boy said only three sentences), what they did say was an honest and coherent account which shed new light on events. A striking example was a sixteen year old girl with long-standing problems of attending school who disclosed that she was going through daily sexual harassment on the bus to school. Children were incredibly aware of their difficulties and had a very clear opinion about what help they did and did not want. Nevertheless, with only one exception, they had no influence over the decisions.

Participating in the PIECs was shown to have a destructive effect on the children, both immediately after and in the long term. Their experience of participating in the committees, yet not being able to influence the decisions, led to frustration, anger and later avoidance of engagement. After hearing the final decisions, four children responded by crying, shouting, violent behaviour, and in two cases, suicidal threats. The most extreme response was that of a fourteen and a half year old girl who came to the PIEC totally naïve. The decision about removal from home came as a dreadful surprise to her. She cried, screamed, cursed, banged chairs, beat her mother and spat on her. She threatened to hurt herself, and was referred to psychiatric evaluation on the spot. Follow up data revealed a negative change in most of the children's attitudes in the six months that followed their participation. They developed a harsher oppositional position to any professional intervention in their lives. Not only did they



not collaborate with the implementation of the decisions made, they now also refused any alternative solution offered, even if, as in one case, it was what the child initially wanted.

## **Discussion**

This study found that overall, children and young people's voices were neither heard nor taken seriously into account when making decisions in PIECs, despite a new reform which makes children's participation a mandatory requirement. Procedures designed to promote the involvement of children in decision making, whether by creating opportunities for them to speak directly or to have their views represented, were completely ignored, partially and inefficiently carried out, or projected onto other professionals, mainly school staff. The findings also suggest that the way regulations were implemented in practice did more harm than good.

The analysis identified a number of factors influencing the failure to give greater priority to children's views. It is argued that the lack of collective ideological movement from the traditional all-knowing paternalistic culture towards recognising children's right to participate is a barrier to meaningful involvement of children in decision making and allowing them to have an influence. This may also be the reason why the options of individual advocacy and self-expression by letter were not offered to any of the children; they were not anticipated to make a difference. This study adds up to a robust line of evidence showing that professionals' attitudes and views play a role in enabling children's genuine participation. Similar to evidence from other studies, when tension arises between professional attitudes and official policy, one option is to involve children merely as a matter of paying lip service to regulation (Welsby 1996; Shemmings 2000). In the current study, meetings with children prior the committee were not conducted in an environment in which they could feel free to speak, and attendance at the committees did not include their presence at the time when decisions were made.

Professionals rely on their organisations for providing them with appropriate conditions, qualifications and support to do their job well. This research showed that most of the methods suggested by the reform to enhance children's participation are not being used due to SSDs falling short on these requirements. The research revealed a child protection system where workers responsible for over a hundred families are being deflected from spending time with children due to other pressing demands being given greater urgency. And so, social workers have adjusted to a way of working in which children are not seen as the service users. The alarming fact that decisions are being made about children without a social worker even seeing them is a seriously dangerous defect that should serve as a warning sign of the deep alienation of children from the practice.

The predominant pattern of engagement with children was through sporadic, brief interactions which did not commonly involve meaningful conversation. Since most social workers avoided interactions with children they could not represent their feelings, worries, views or wishes during the PIECs. When involvement of children in the decision making process was attempted, it was carried out as a detached, isolated episode and hence the reform's well intentioned hopes for strengthening children's participation is failing. This study strongly reinforces the message from literature that participation should be carried out as an on-going process, a way of working rather than a one-off event (Archard & Skivenes 2009; Vis & Thomas 2009; Vis *et al.* 2012). Israeli children deserve what their counterparts' overseas recognise as the most valuable element in the help process: a continuous relationship with a reliable, dedicated, kind and trustworthy social worker (Munro 2011; van Bijleveld *et al.* 2013).

Statutory requirements for children's participation do not fit with social workers' skills and capabilities in communicating with children. However, there is more to it than this. It became apparent through this study that workers lack confidence in their skills to converse face-to-face with children, leading eventually to almost total disengagement. Direct communication with

children was uncommon, and when carried out it was only with older children and mostly jointly with their parents. Furthermore, evidence of coordinators unsuccessfully struggling with the same challenges as front line workers can only mean that IMSSSA overestimated the knowledge and skills of its workforce and failed to identify the key practice weaknesses. Moreover, the evidence raises concerns about poor quality of communication with children, prior to, and during, discussions which are not only inadequate to allow understanding of children's perspectives, but also having a distressing emotional impact on them and subsequently leading to withdrawal from further engagement with professionals and rejecting help opportunities.

The findings also revealed that coordinators did not fulfil the responsibilities and tasks assigned to them by the new regulations. They did not embody the change or motivate staff towards the intended way of working. When local organisational leadership is not committed to change and does not put pressure on staff to comply, it is not difficult to understand why the implementation was so deficient. Coordinators conveyed a solid message to the workforce about what they ought to be doing or not be doing, but, as it happens, they sent workers a message to keep business as usual.

This study was based on a small-scale, non-representative sample. Yet it was not designed with the intention of meeting standards of rigor such as random sampling or generalisability to a higher level, but rather to provide in-depth, systematic and trustworthy insight into the operation and outcomes of Israeli reformative policy actions to enhance children's participation in decision making which was not available before, and in that it is argued that it has achieved its goal. This study can be drawn on and inspire further research efforts and it is particularly essential that children be included in future research.

## Conclusions

This research evaluated a reform designed to reinforce children's participation in child protection decision making which, although including the right building blocks recommended by the international literature, such as informed preparation, opportunity to attend committee meetings, and several options for communication, did not meet its target. The systems approach taken by this research proved to have advantages in allowing a thorough understanding of why these components were so difficult to achieve. It is argued that organisations need to be geared towards providing workforce enabling conditions, such as sufficient time, skills and professional guidance, to work directly, consistently and effectively with children in order for meaningful participation to be achieved. It is also claimed that participation will occur when practitioners truthfully understand the need to be open to, and influenced by, the views and wishes of the people, both adults and children, who know best what is wrong in their lives and experience the impact this has on them. The strong message from this research is that policy makers need to stop simply telling workers what to do, and direct effort towards establishing systems that enable them to do it. It is for this quality that the research possesses the significance and pertinence to allow its implications and conclusions to be projected into other contexts.

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