

# CHILD PROTECTION, PATERNALISM AND PARTICIPATION: RE-FRAMING CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN CARE- A CASE STUDY FROM TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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## Abstract

This article shows how children and young people in residential care demonstrate their agency in response to formal hierarchies. Based on an ethnographic study conducted in two residential child care institutions in Trinidad and Tobago, the complexities of adult-child interactions in residential care are highlighted. It discusses the need for professionals in child protection to acknowledge the diverse ways in which children contribute to their lives and the requirement for supportive relationships between adults and children. The findings are useful for informing training and culturally relevant practice related to children in residential care and has implications for transitioning young people from care into independent living. On a macro level, the research addresses concerns about residential care being oppressive for children and young people, as well as the systemic approaches that are required to make the care experience more positive and sustainable.

*Keywords:* child protection, children's participation, paternalism in care, relationship-based practice.

## Introduction

This article challenges the conventional approaches used to engage children in care in the form of child protection. It highlights the point that children may be more influential than we think and with improved systems and procedures in place to support meaningful participation, better outcomes can be achieved. It provides evidence from a study with children and young people in care suggesting that adults may need to re-visit their commonly held assumptions that they know what is best for children. This point calls into question the "caretaker thesis" (Archard, 1993) that children should not be autonomous and adults should make decisions for them. As seen in this study, the young people were able to exercise their own agency, decide on whether or not what adults thought was important was indeed important to them, and respond accordingly; they adapted to their environment and created

informal ways of resisting paternalism. How the young people responded within formal hierarchies that were adult-dominated was interesting, as it emphasised their agency and challenged the traditional views adults held about children.

Paternalism, as an overarching concept, is said to exist “when a public body makes a citizen unfree to perform an action, intending the prohibition to benefit the citizen in question” (Weale, 1978, p.157). It therefore provides some groups with the right to act on behalf of some other group, which is perceived as lacking the capacity to act on its own behalf or to make decisions. Paternalism in this context is specifically being applied to the private lives of young people in public care. Its application to this study has to do with the power of traditional conceptions of adult-child relationships. It is arguably a universally applicable concept, since it is difficult to see how social work—not only in child care—can be justified without some conception of paternalism.

This research focused on the experiences of males based on findings from a pilot study the researcher conducted between 2010 and 2011, involving juvenile offenders and incarcerated adult males, where 90% of the participants experienced state care and were repeat offenders. The relationship between residential child care, male juvenile offending and adult incarceration became quite clear during the pilot, which raised some questions. The overrepresentation of males in criminal activities, particularly of the lower socio-economic group, is further substantiated by a report on young males and crime in Trinidad and Tobago (Ryan et al., 2013). The research therefore sought answers to the questions: How do children experience being in residential care and what is the quality of the relationships they experience?

The child welfare system in Trinidad and Tobago is traditional with residential care playing a major role. The history of children’s homes in Trinidad and Tobago dates back to the period of indentureship in the early part of the 19th century after the abolition of slavery. The traditions which exist have little place for children’s participation in decision making but there is potential for development in this area. Children in care are among the excluded and may be more prone to institutional and socio-cultural barriers to participation than children not in care, despite evidence of the benefits of their participation (Sinclair, 2004; Thomas, 2007). Adult-child interaction plays a significant role in developing opportunities and experiences for children and this impacts on their levels of participation (Mannion, 2007). By studying this aspect of child welfare, it will be possible to understand how children’s participation can be systematically and sustainably included in formal hierarchies such as child welfare and protection services.

At the time of this study, Trinidad and Tobago was in the process of reviewing its child welfare system. Establishing a formal child protection system became a priority, making alternatives to large scale residential child care imperative. Facility standards were being developed, the licensure of homes was initiated and public sector reform was also underway, with some departments, including the one responsible for hiring juvenile home supervisors were being restructured. The roles and functions of juvenile home supervisors as well as the minimum requirement of three Caribbean Secondary Examination Council passes were under scrutiny, with the need for higher qualifications and caregiving skills being advanced.

It has been the custom in Trinidad and Tobago as in other countries to have the needs of children in care determined by statistical data generated through activities such as the national census,

surveys or recommendations made by international corporations such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, World Health Organisation and the United Nations. In relation to poverty, the World Bank has criticised this top-down approach for being ineffective in meeting targets (Narayan & Petesch, 2002; Wong & Guggenheim, 2018). The limitation of this approach was further substantiated by local evidence that funding allocated to children failed to reach them directly, with the majority of funds allocated to personnel and equipment and less investment in child development programmes (Pantin, 2010). This may be attributed to the fact that children are often excluded from participation in areas such as planning how to use resources for their benefit (Thomas, 2007; Tisdall & Davis, 2006). As a result, “expert” panels in the form of Boards and Committees are usually responsible for designing policies and developing intervention plans for children without their input. Experts often lack familiarity with the children and their issues (Thomas & O’Kane, 1998), often underplay their agency and focus on negative experiences (van Oudenhoven, 2018), which makes the need for professionals equipped to work in the area of children and young people’s participation even more relevant.

Children’s participation means the direct involvement of children in decision making (Hill et al., 2004) and participation rights are enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), where Article 23 has been most explicit (United Nations Children’s Fund [UNICEF], 2003). It was ratified in Trinidad and Tobago on December 5th 1991. Since the ratification of the UNCRC, the state is legally obligated to implement the relevant child welfare policies. Following on from regional attention to children’s rights issues, in the 1999 Lima Accord and the 2000 Kingston Consensus, Trinidad and Tobago developed a series of laws, now commonly recognised as the “Children’s Legislative Package”, to ensure that national policy was consistent with regional and international directives. These include The Children Act (2012), Children’s Authority Act (2014), Children’s Community Residences, Foster Care and Nurseries Act (2000, 2008) and Regulations (2014).

Important to note is that the Homes in this study were established out of British influence and they continue to sustain a model of child care which has received much criticism in Britain and Europe in general, where de-institutionalisation has become commonplace (Smith, 2009). However, the value of residential child care is not totally discounted (Crimmens & Pitts, 2000; Smith, 2009; Smith et al., 2013; UNICEF, 2020; Utting, 1997). This is also true for Trinidad and Tobago, which continues to value this approach to child care. This study therefore seeks to explore ways in which the residential child care experience can be strengthened, where it is a last resort.

### **Gendered Socialisation and Child Care**

The gendered nature of socialisation and the stereotyping of gender differences in Caribbean families has been well documented (Barrow, 1996, 2011; Chevannes, 2001), and findings are consistent with the behaviour patterns of children in care today. Gendered socialisation for children in care is further complicated by the caregivers’ own upbringing and how they perceive children’s needs and vulnerabilities, which informs how children are socialised and cared for (Barrow, 2011). The potential for relational child care in formal settings to counteract the effects of unfavourable socialisation such as lack of communication in Caribbean families (Leo-Rhynie, 1993) and negative social bonding (Levy, 2012) is also well documented.

Caribbean research which examines the relationship between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and residential care placement is scant. ACEs have been found to significantly increase the chances of residential placement for Black and Hispanic males in the USA compared to their white male counterparts (Zettler et al., 2018) and these findings are also relevant to the Caribbean context. Research on the relationship between ACEs and juvenile offending and how residential programmes for males influence their decisions to desist crime (Abrams, 2006), have been quite enlightening. Caribbean discourse on masculinity has placed black males at the centre of crime and underachievement, being most vulnerable because of their socioeconomic status, expectations and socialisation (Levy, 2012; Ryan et al., 2013). This has also been attributed to the child-rearing practices associated with experiences of slavery (Patterson, 1969, 1982). During the study period, males continued to outnumber females in care (Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago, 2012), which was also concerning.

### **The Complexities of Children's Participation and Child Protection**

The complexity of children's participation and paternalism is a reality in a society that holds traditional values about children and at the same time is attempting to promote children's rights. Finding the balance between enabling young children to participate and protecting them from harm (Alderson, 2008; Lansdown, 2009) is therefore crucial. Because children are seen as most vulnerable and dependent on adults for their well-being and participation, they can easily be excluded as adults determine what is in their best interest (Lansdown, 2009; Thomas, 2002; van Oudenhoven, 2018). For the child in residential care, participation therefore becomes more complex (Thomas, 2002) because of this focus on protecting children.

The limitations of children's participation based on the power differences between children and adults are also emphasised, recognising that children can become miniature adults, fulfilling adult agendas (Hart, 1997; Mannion, 2009) and recommendations are made that these issues be addressed for meaningful rather than tokenistic participation to occur. Another complexity exists where children's participation is sometimes used synonymously with listening to children or giving them a voice and consultation (Sinclair, 2004). This interpretation of children's participation has been criticised by Lansdown (2009) and, Percy-Smith (2006). Listening to and consulting children on issues does not negate exclusion (Percy-Smith, 2006). Children have various ways of expressing themselves beyond voice (Lansdown, 2009; Mannion, 2007; Thomas, 2005): through avoidance and active resistance (McLeod, 2007), or by using art (Dockett & Perry, 2005) or graphic responses and diagrams (Darbyshire et al., 2005) and games and photography (Richards, 2019).

Also critical to note is that although there may be a shift towards a rights-based approach to children's participation in general, adopting a rights-based approach to child welfare (Fox-Harding, 1997; Cassidy, 2017), in which children's participation is included, may be deemed paternalistic and incompatible with children's interests (Calder, 1995) as it de-emphasises children's agency and their usual ways of participating. There are standard ways whereby children participate in care that adopting a rights-based approach may interfere with. This includes interfering with children's desires not to participate and their informal ways of organising themselves.

### **Justification for Children's Participation**

There has been a shift away from paternalism towards a rights-based approach (Theis, 2004), with the UNCRC providing a good reference point, although being criticised for being very broad and abstract (Skelton, 2007) as well as having many contradictions and inconsistencies (Quennerstedt et al., 2018). Although not explicitly stating children's rights to participate—except Article 23 that relates specifically to children with disabilities—there is a cluster of Articles which provides sufficient argument for their participation, as mentioned above. It is important to note, however, that participation is not new to the children's arena, for children have always naturally participated in families, communities, schools, and work (Kjørholt, 2001) - and this is certainly the case for Caribbean children (Barrow, 2011; Crawford-Brown, 2001; Lewis, 1993).

Justification for children's participation therefore includes its ability to strengthen young people's status in relation to adults (Matthews, 2003). It is important to consider the interactive and contextual nature of participation between adults and children (Christensen, 2004; Mannion, 2007, Garfat et al., 2018). This draws attention to issues of power in the adult-child relationship (Cairns & Brannen, 2005) and implies that adults need to accept a challenge to their authority for meaningful participation (Lansdown, 1995, 2009). For children in care, it has been found to be rare for the adults to share power with them (Mason, 2005) or some children simply use their power by resisting the adults' agenda (Levin, 1997; McLeod, 2007). Specifically applied to children in care, participation in decision making helps prepare them for responsible, independent living (Smith et al., 2013). After studying the relationships between social workers and looked-after young people, McLeod (2007) recommends that adults working with them should understand how powerlessness can shape the responses of marginalised children, and should therefore be prepared for resistance and challenge (p. 285).

Participation is likely to be especially hard to achieve in residential child care, where children are more likely to be overlooked as potentially able to contribute to decisions about their future because adults perceive them as needy and dependent. The diversity of experiences and circumstances surrounding children's admission to care (Gibbs & Sinclair, 2000) will shape their ability to participate in their new environment (Taylor, 2006). Children in care have their own psychological and physical consequences to deal with (Smith et al., 2013), which requires a good understanding of how to operationalise their true participation.

Child rights as a concept has also received much criticism (Cassidy, 2017; Franklin & Sloper, 2005). In the Caribbean region studies have found adults working with children blaming child rights for the increase in indiscipline in schools and care settings for example. There are claims that the UNCRC worked as a policing mechanism and serves as only the beginning of realizing Caribbean children's rights (Barrow, 2002, 2011). Understanding how relationships between children and adults can mitigate such challenges is therefore critical (Featherstone et al., 2018).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Theories such as care ethics (Held, 2006; Noddings, 1984, 2002), children's agency (Cockburn, 2013; Oswell, 2013) as an element of the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 1996), development ethics (Goulet, 1995), Hart's (1992) model of participation and critical social work (Allan et al., 2009; Fook, 2002, 2012) were useful for analysis. The theories provided concepts which illuminated the

interpersonal and broader, complex structural issues which affect residential child care and how the institutionalised system of residential child care operates and links to other systems. Hart's model emphasises the levels of participation from manipulation to power sharing between adults and children. Care ethics postulates that caring should be a foundation for ethical decision making and should therefore be relational, ethical, reciprocal and receptive to feelings and emotions (Held, 2006; Noddings, 2012). At the micro level of interpersonal relationships, care ethics can help explain how children's participation can be enhanced through better adult-child relationships. In applying critical social work theory, understanding how power manifests in social relationships is essential. This is important to note in the relationships with children in care who are confined by the formal hierarchies of their places of safety (Wattam & Parton, 1999). As related to residential child care, development ethics as posited by Goulet (1995) provides a useful theory for understanding the ethical basis for increasing children's agency through participation as a means of mitigating value conflicts and helping decision makers focus on processes and quality of human relationships in development.

*Children's agency* refers to the capacity of children to influence the prevailing construction of their life's experiences, where these are physical, cognitive or emotional (Oswell, 2013). It can be usefully applied to the analysis of the links between structural issues such as staffing and personal issues and how power is exercised by children and young people. Emphasising children's agency allows us to see children within a global context, and how it is influenced by politics and technology. Such ideas have been developed by Oswell (2013) in his work on children's rights and political participation, where he notes that adults' views of children's competency have been complicated "in the context of the international and a notion of global humanity" (p. 258), which is reflected in the application of the UNCRC. Children's agency as a concept advances the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 1996), which is not fully consistent with critical social work. However, the strengths perspective is recognised for its usefulness in analysing how a risk-averse approach to child protection, which fails to recognise children's strengths, can be destructive to children's development (Munro, 2008). The strengths perspective seeks to identify pre-existing strengths and capacities of service users and complements our understanding of children's agency. It encourages an interactive social work practice (Saleebey, 1996) that allows service users to define their needs and areas for intervention. It is a process that facilitates the use of inherent strengths and resources to identify and apply solutions to current situations. Self-protection is facilitated as children's personal resources are recognised and engaged. Despite being criticised for placing responsibility for social change upon service users and minimising the impact of structural inequalities on personal and social development (Gray, 2011), elements of this approach are valued.

### **Method**

A broadly ethnographic and social constructionist approach was applied in order to examine what children's participation in decision-making in both settings looked like and how it could be interpreted to improve services for them. This social constructionist approach essentially focuses on how people construct knowledge and truth based on their own subjective experiences (Hammersley, 1992), which acquire an objective reality through interactions with others (Berger &

Luckmann, 1966). Adopting the less rigid version of social constructionism, the importance of attending to how people think about social phenomena and that their version of reality may not necessarily be true, was acknowledged.

The primary research method was a blend of participant and non-participant observations and interviews. It was part of a larger four-year study conducted between 2010 and 2014, on children's participation in residential care, which included ethnographic field notes; documentary analysis; interviews with young people, caregivers, policy makers, administrators and focus group interviews with children. These provided rich descriptions of experiences that quantitative methods may not have been able to provide and because, more than quantitative methodology, it allowed new ways of thinking to emerge from the data (Creswell & Poth, 1998, 2016; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Silverman, 2006). Qualitative research facilitates collaboration between the researcher and the research subjects within a social-historical context such that it is locally constructed, pragmatic and participative (Smith, 1987). It is also consistent with social work values and principles such as partnership and purposeful expression of feelings (Biestek, 1957; Thompson, 2009) and it promotes reflection for both the researcher and the participants. Qualitative research such as ethnography provided a deeper understanding of how social meaning is derived by research participants and allows the researcher to examine at first hand their experiences and the context in which they occur (Brewer, 2000; Neuman, 2006). Building and sustaining good relationships with children and adults was also critical to accessing sensitive information, which ethnography afforded. Fieldwork procedures in ethnography were adhered to, as described by Silverman (2010) and Hammersley and Atkinson (1983), which also supported ethical research.

The study aimed to: (a) examine the adult-child interactions to determine how they negotiated values and agendas in their relationships, which may provide insights into participatory work with children in care; and (b) identify what were the motivations and experiences of children in care and how to encourage their participation in decision making.

Data analysis involved coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994) - both manually and using the scientific qualitative data analysis software programme Atlas.ti7 to assist in content analysis. Thematic analysis involved inductive coding where themes emerged from interviews and observations, which followed the conventional procedure of patterned regularity and significance (Creswell 1998; Luborsky, 1994) or the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1994), negative case and discrepant data methods (Creswell, 1998), where noteworthy differences in experiences added to the quality of analysis. Interpretive criteria included credibility, repeated statements or strong assertions, placing the meanings in context, negative examples or instances (Luborsky, 1994) and pattern saturation. Atlas.ti7 was particularly useful in supporting theory building with its features that identified connections between codes, which facilitated a deeper level of analysis of classifications and categories and a conceptual framework which fitted the data. Central to this process was the verification process, where data was cross-checked by research participants to ensure the validity of themes and conclusions.

## **Participants**

The research was conducted within two main children's homes in Trinidad (called H1 and H2). They were selected because they housed children in state care, they were available, and management

showed willingness to participate as new models of care were being explored at the time. Both homes were located in residential areas in Trinidad. They were managed by religious boards although they fell within the ambit of the state. At the time of the study, the number of residents living on the compounds numbered 88 (H1) and 53 (H2) aged 3 to 18 years, following the structure of large residential homes.

The primary sample comprised mainly males, 13-17 years old, 12 from each home, living there for over 10 years, chosen because they were preparing to leave care and could provide useful introspective accounts of their experiences. As mentioned earlier, they were overrepresented in the care and criminal justice systems. All the children were willing to participate in the research and were already part of the homes' formal transition programmes. Although only 24 were selected from the homes, all the young people leaving care were included in the observations. The male to female ratio for children at both homes was 2:1 and there was a total of 36 caregivers at H1 and 46 at H2. Data on girls was used solely for purposes of comparison as gender differences/segregation are highly significant in the running of the Homes. The predominant approach used in both institutions was a management and control model, with the Magistrates' courts playing a major role in determining discipline for children. However, both Homes were moving towards a care model that was more consistent with children's rights and building better relationships. Contributing to the leadership and decision making approach adopted by management is the fact that H2 had better access to social services for children and families such as counselling services and a Family Court. H1 relied on more informal approaches and, because of this, was a more fertile ground for participatory work with children. The Homes in the study have also been the focus of attention for unfounded claims about residential child abuse and this has had a significant impact on the workers. As a result, pressure was placed on management to strengthen the quality of care for children, but their efforts were frustrated by bureaucratic constraints such as hiring and disciplinary practices that were beyond their control but critical to the process of child care and protection.

**Table 1**  
Data Source and Data Collection Type

Source	Caregivers	Children	Managers
Data collection type	10-(6 structured ; 4 semi-structured)	24- (focus groups; semi structured interviews with a subset of 4 children)	2-Both interviewed twice using semi-structured and structured formats

*Note.* Additional data was collected via structured and/or semi structured interview from police officers, probation officers, magistrate, policy specialists, past residents, Social Worker/Welfare Officer/ Counsellor, volunteers and supplementary service provider agency staff

Ethical procedures included seeking permission from the board of management of both homes, obtaining approval for conducting human subject research from Lancaster University's research ethics committee, holding stakeholder meetings to clarify the objectives of the study and gaining consent and assent from participants, which outlined how the data would be used and recordings discarded. The children were aware that they could withdraw from the study at any time. All children except the nursery residents were made aware by the managers and supervisors about the research being undertaken. In fact, the idea about observing the girls came from the girls themselves, who initially expressed their feeling about being left out and wanting to be included. The focus groups were guided by Kitzinger's (1994) and Krueger's (1994) recommendations for conducting focus group interviews. As a trained and UK registered social worker, the researcher was obligated to practise ethically, upholding specific core values of integrity, competence, respecting the dignity of subjects and valuing relationships (Hepworth et al., 2010; Economic and Social Research Council, 2014). Abiding by research ethics was especially important for this study given the nature of the research subjects.

## Results

The themes which emerged from this study included: The complexity of caring relationships between adults and children in decision making; paternalism, participation, resistance and resilience; information and communication technologies as a new site of conflict for children's participation; children's participation in policy and development- possibilities and tensions; and positive residential practice. The findings presented here specifically relate to how children were able to manoeuvre institutional processes through resistance, demonstrating resilience, forging informal relationships with adults and their emerging sub-cultures, even when adults thought they were doing all that was possible to protect them and secure their best interests (Protection, Paternalism and Participation).

### **The Sophistication of Children and Young People's Responses to Formal Hierarchies**

The study revealed the extent to which children in care were able to influence decision making in informal ways beyond the bureaucratic structure of the residential setting. These interactions included channels of communication and casual ways of relating to adults; the creation of a subculture and subgroups; and using an informal complaints mechanism, through researchers and volunteers, to get their voices heard and to influence decisions. These acts demonstrate the resilience of young people as they transcend convention and prosper in the face of challenges (Garmezy, 1996).

An emerging sub-culture existed within the Homes, as a form of resistance (Hall & Jefferson, 1979) to the patriarchal systems and dominant traditional values. During observations with policy makers, they tried to reassert these values as a response to a perceived increase in social disorder. The boys were mainly targeted as they were the ones who were deemed to be in need of greater control and monitoring as reinforced during the State of Emergency in 2011.

The young people in this study showed their disapproval of decisions imposed upon them in the most subtle yet obvious ways. How the children responded to situations depended heavily on how they defined the context and how they perceived adults' approach to them. For instance, the outcomes

of informal interactions among children and adults were important and resulted in greater satisfaction for the children as they demonstrated their agency. This was apparent in the way the young people from H1 influenced the resignation of the transition programme facilitator—a leaving care programme for all senior children, which was conducted by an external service provider—by showing their resistance to participation and making informal complaints about the programme delivery to their supervisors and managers. The review of their transition programme was delayed for several reasons and therefore it had never been evaluated at the home since its inception in the 1990s. However, the children’s response to the programme influenced its future delivery. The counsellor assigned to the programme, a retired school principal, although mindful of the fact that special competencies were required to work with the children, adopted a conventional classroom guidance approach. The journal extract below provides a list of behaviours observed during one of the sessions. In the end, the counsellor resigned her post, having acknowledged the deficiencies in the programme and her own competency to work with children whom she described as “difficult with complex needs.”

Resistance by the boys was demonstrated by beating on the desk, calling out to passers-by, not following instructions intentionally (this was usually accompanied by mischievous laughter and silent plotting among them), making inappropriate comments which they knew would offend the counsellor... they were also teasing each other about their mothers/parents; asking the counsellor about when the programme would end; derailing from the main topic and making jokes. (journal extract, 27/02/2012)

The young people collaborated informally to make collective decisions when they anticipated that adults would not support their wishes. Examples of this were when the children would meet informally to discuss issues and make decisions before formal meetings started. Whatever position they took at their informal meetings usually remained consistent, but this was truer for the boys than the females in H2, who were more often swayed by the adults during deliberations. In one instance, they changed their nominees for leadership positions in H2 when the facilitators questioned their suitability during an election process. The males maintained their position and justified their selection of prospective young leaders despite the facilitators’ reservations.

### **ICTs, Expressive Arts and Children’s Participation**

One finding of the research was the way in which young people’s interest in computers and other Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) influenced adults to become more tech-savvy. At both homes, adults were seeking new ways to incorporate technology into the sessions with children as they recognised that this was an effective way of reaching them. Additionally, young people’s involvement in activities at both homes was often determined by their level of discipline or by exercising their right to participate in informal ways, for example, through the active use of ICTs (See Williams-Peters, 2014). Adults in the study also highlighted the different responses they received from young people when interactions were not too formal as this facilitated a more comfortable and open relationship with adults. One male caregiver noted that the boys he worked with responded better when they knew that the caregivers were engaging them of their own free will and not because of a directive from management:

There are things you could do ... You know, take them out... and you do it in an informal way. It's not as though ok you go with them because you are told to. ... These are the things that foster better outcomes. (Male caregiver, H1-4)

The caregiver made reference to situations where children could benefit from informal arrangements with staff.

The young people had their informal ways of settling disputes among themselves, which were sometimes beyond the comprehension of adults. For example, they would trade duties among themselves or impose their own sanctions on each other. The young people also made their input during cultural events such as Carnival and Christmas concerts, through calypso, poetry and dance. In this too, there was evidence of partnership between them and their caregivers, who seemed to use the opportunity to voice their concerns to management through the young people. A good example can be seen in a satirical calypso entitled "Too Much Cooks in the Kitchen," which was written by a staff member and endorsed by a child who agreed to perform it at a carnival event:

Too much ah cooks in de kitchen  
 Better sister and dem order Kentucky Fried Chicken  
 Ah really don't know who cooking in de kitchen.  
 Better the manager order Kentucky Fried Chicken  
 One say: I is de real cook  
 The other say I have d look  
 One say I could cook curry  
 The other say I could cook in ah hurry  
 Sister, sister, call Ms. St. Rose D Minister [former Minister responsible for children's homes]  
 One say I cooking rice and peas  
 The other say: That could cook? Oh please  
 One say: I did not come here for bacchanal [confusion]  
 (Extract from "Too Much Cooks in the Kitchen", H2)

The calypso highlights the many instructions given by adults in their various roles, and how they seemed to be uncoordinated in their efforts and often in disagreement about what was best for the children. It points to management and staff conflict, of cohesion in making decisions and the influence of higher authorities in mediating or having the final decision. The fact that both children and junior staff members could relate to the song suggests that these relationships impact them in similar ways and further illustrates how they empathised with each other. Through the song, the children got the attention of management and staff.

### **How Children and Young People Navigate Institutional Processes**

The young people also demonstrated the ability to adjust to the management and care styles of adults and in some cases successfully negotiate their spaces. They adjusted to institutionalised care and learnt how to get their way around staff members, as seen in a disciplinary process which will now be outlined. Two young people at H1 were involved in an altercation and were reprimanded by their senior supervisors who thought that the issue needed to be seriously addressed to set an example for

other children. On interviewing one of the perpetrators about the incident, he described in steps, the disciplinary procedures and outcomes for him as he saw it. He explained how different staff members would respond to his actions and turned out to be right about this. He explained that upon being sent to the office, he would be required to write an official report and a threat of calling police would be made. His case would be sent to the welfare officer who does not work on Saturdays (the incident took place on a Saturday). He continued that the welfare officer would call him to talk to him for the most part and might not follow up the issue because of the lapsed time. He added that an apology would eventually suffice. He seemed more confident in the process he described than a senior staff member that was interviewed about the incident. She was confident about a specific course of action which never materialised because of the tedious procedures she had to follow and the number of other issues which diverted her attention.

Therefore, the efforts to intimidate and discipline the children by calling the police were futile in this particular case and presumably in many previous cases, considering the child's accurate prediction of the outcome. This provides a good example of the kinds of hindrance the caregivers face when seeking to use the courts as an option for disciplining children. The two children eventually resolved the conflict between themselves, as they were seen talking casually in the dormitory while the adults in the office were working out the disciplinary actions to be taken. The victim explained that he did not want his peer to get into trouble and that they sorted out their differences. In this scenario it was evident that the adults focused on formalising and institutionalising children's behaviours rather than negotiating with children to address the issues. Adults were therefore not working effectively within the dynamics of formalised child care and instead choose to invoke external authority, a procedure which is complex, time consuming and unresponsive, and may result in more harm than good for the young people.

The two interpretations of the disciplinary measures revealed the limitations of the disciplinary system, which was inflexible and uncoordinated, leaving room for the child to predict outcomes and resort to informal means of seeking justice. Punishment or threats of it were no longer a real deterrent for them. Similar findings to those in Sykes's (1958) study of prisoners are found here, where punishment becomes an ineffective means of control as the children cannot see their situation getting any worse. As such the disciplinary procedures do not serve as a deterrent to poor decision making. The children in H2 who were more familiar with the court system as a disciplinary option were far more desensitised than the children in H1. This was also noted by a magistrate who was interviewed. She indicated that some cases should be addressed internally at the homes and did not need court intervention.

### **Discussion**

This study supports arguments that child care systems need to focus on strengthening relationships between children and adults (Garfat et al., 2018; Smith, 2009; Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2011) while being cautious about standardising systems and adopting risk-averse approaches which overprotect children (Featherstone et al., 2018; Munro, 2008). The underlying philosophy of paternalistic protection of the young, and how children in care developed their own creative ways of overcoming constraints to getting their views considered and acted upon by adults is highlighted.

Emphasis is placed on child protection in response to the prevailing discourse on child abuse and neglect and the prevailing social disorder. The young people in the study had their own informal ways of influencing adult decision making despite constraints, which suggests the complexity and dynamism of interactions and relations of power.

Using Roger Hart's (1997) Ladder of Participation to analyse the participation experience of children in care, it may be concluded that the young people were primarily engaged at tokenistic levels. Such tokenism failed to meet their essential needs (Hart, 1997) or to prepare them for independent living, for instance. As such, they found more meaningful ways to demonstrate their agency. As we witness a change in the way children are viewed and the changing roles of adults in a dynamic environment, understanding children's participation in relation to adults has become more crucial to the Caribbean development and citizenship debates (Freire, 1988; Girvan, 1997; Best & Levitt, 2009). A development ethics analysis reinforces the need to move beyond tokenistic levels of participation, which also supports earlier research (Gordon, 2015; van Oudenhoven, 2018).

In this study, it was evident that participation for young people goes beyond having a voice in decision making (Lansdown, 2009; Percy-Smith, 2006; Tisdall & Davis, 2006). They demonstrated the various ways in which they could contribute to their life space whether through participation or non-participation, actively or passively. The young people in the study did not deny adults' guidance. They were mainly concerned about how adults regarded them in the caring relationship, and how they were able to influence decisions being made about them. In essence, they wanted to demonstrate their agency in participatory ways with adults (McNeish & Newman, 2002; Thomas, 2005). This may not be as simple, as understanding the differences in young people's demonstration of their agency based on gender is also important.

As mentioned earlier, males took a more collective approach when responding to adults, with females even allowing them to represent their views to some extent. Females on the other hand were more easily swayed by adults to change their decisions and were more individualistic and sensitive in their approach, sometimes emotionally abusive to caregivers. Additionally, adults responded to the young people based on their own perceptions of what may be the outcomes of males versus females. Girls for instance were thought to be more dependent than the boys and more likely to return to vulnerable situations. This awareness influenced staff to take a different approach to caring for them, which entailed being more protective and focused on the practicalities of leaving care and being more critical about life chances for the females than for the males. This approach may have also been related to the fact that there were more female caregivers than male caregivers at both homes.

A good balance between paternalism, protection and participation is therefore required, as the argument is not simply a matter of whether or not paternalism should facilitate young people's participation, but how much is needed to allow young people's views and experiences to be considered in decision making to facilitate better outcomes (Lansdown, 2001). In addition to this, paternalism or authoritative caring is recognised as being necessary for securing young people's own well-being. An emphasis on child rights is acknowledged in this study as having a useful place in child welfare and its usefulness as a blueprint is therefore not denied. As it relates to young people's participation rights, it can support stakeholders by providing them with a framework for shaping the welfare outcomes of young people but can also be criticised on the grounds of being contextually inadequate. A rights-

based approach to children's participation is however not the only option, as this study has shown, similarly to the findings of Mannion (2007; 2009), that a relational approach that promotes positive adult-child relationships may be more applicable. Practitioners should be equipped to successfully navigate the challenges associated with marginalised groups and engage in relationship-based practice that promotes power sharing and positive engagement with relevant systems (Featherstone et al., 2018).

In general, Caribbean societies can be viewed as caring societies where children are concerned, with adults seen as having an important role in safeguarding children, both formally and informally. Supporting indigenous child care practices which foster more meaningful collaboration with children may be more welcomed than strictly a child rights approach which is seen as an imposition and disempowering. Although not the focus of the study but it became relevant due to the COVID-19 pandemic at the time of writing, is the importance of addressing factors which may contribute to children and young people's resistance to rules which can impact public health and safety. More so that children in care are more restricted in their movements and more is expected of them to take personal responsibility for their health. As this study revealed, children's lack of meaningful participation in managing the crisis can result in resistance and rebellion. In this instance, it would mean not adhering to safety protocols because of authoritative approaches. The importance of children and young people's meaningful involvement in planning and implementation as in the case of home schooling practices and the reopening of schools is therefore reinforced.

## **Implications for Policy, Practice and Future Research**

### ***Policy Perspective***

The principle of children's participation should not be compromised but rather that realistic and feasible measures should be adopted to ensure the best approach to engaging young people through fostering meaningful adult-child relationships. This process should begin from the time a child is recognised and accepted as being in need of care and protection so that children are engaged at an early stage. The findings from this study support a transformational approach to children and young people's participation (Long, 2001; Watkins & Shulman, 2010), where emphasis is placed on shifting the focus of children and young people's participation from events to processes and on recognising the integrity of these processes. The social, historical and cultural contexts are important (Allan et al., 2009), which implies the need to be culturally sensitive and to apply knowledge of cultural practices to the process of promoting children and young people's rights to participate. This principle extends to the organisational culture of children's homes and other children's agencies, where children's participation should be embedded, making participation structures and engagements part of the standard operations beyond the mandate of the state. To complement this, a policy position must be established to support positive views about children and childhood in care such that they are encouraged to contribute to decision making. This would ensure that all involved will have a clear sense of who the children are that they engage with and how they should participate with children according to their individual and cultural differences. The children's and juvenile court can be a useful site for modelling the demonstration of children's agency and for children to learn systems of advocacy.

Care settings should aim to create a culture of participation in which children are expected to exercise agency and develop skills that will help them survive as independent individuals. In this regard policies and procedures need to have the input of caregivers and children to ensure that children's rights are recognised and respected, social inclusion is practised, and the best interests of children served. Doing otherwise will be denying them of the experiences required to bring about the transformation that is needed to demonstrate their agency.

### ***Children's Participation, ICTs: Now and the Future***

Children in care will be in a better position to participate in decision making when they have opportunities to interact with adult decision makers and have access to information which broadens their perspectives on life (Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008). They will benefit as both consumers and producers of ICTs and this must be facilitated to support participation in decision making processes. Safe access to ICTs is therefore important in enabling decision making and therefore balancing safety and participation is important. Safety issues include managing confidentiality and access to online content. Child protection policies as they relate to ICT use should be strengthened in ways that deter child predators and safeguard children and their peers from victimising others. ICTs should facilitate communication at all levels, where children should be able to communicate with each other and with caregivers. ICTs should also be used to facilitate a process of monitoring, surveillance and capacity building for both adults and children in care. This will entail specialised security and tracking computer software, and special arrangements for computer use such as the schedules developed at the Homes and ICT training for staff and children. There can be special e-services for children leaving care so that they can access information about relevant services or receive training that prepares them for citizenship, such as registering for identification cards, applying for drivers' licences and completing job applications.

### ***The Ethics of Care and Ethics of Justice***

Applying a combination of restorative justice and care ethics to participatory work can present a feasible means of enhancing the quality of care for children living in residential settings. Restorative justice approaches include restorative conferencing and informal restorative meetings and discussions as well as mediation and other conflict resolution strategies. Restorative justice is therefore a way of promoting children's participation and reducing the criminalisation of children in care (Littlechild & Sender, 2010; Taylor, 2006; Willmott, 2007). The approach is consistent with the principles of participation, communication, care and justice and it presents an alternative to bureaucratic disciplinary processes as it does not rely on rigid procedures. The structure of the Homes in the study provides a good opportunity for restorative work to be done and to be successful. The blend of formal and informal relationships and the nature of the children who will need to develop alternative problem solving skills based on their past experiences with abuse and neglect also provide ideal opportunities for restorative justice work. This approach should be coupled with activities that promote adults caring with children so that the message of justice and care is communicated clearly. By caring with children, adults will acknowledge that children can contribute to their well-being in planning, service delivery and evaluation

of services and adults will provide ample opportunities for children to demonstrate their agency and develop skills which foster independence.

### ***Staff Recruitment, Training and Motivation for Participatory Work***

Having acknowledged that participatory work with children in care requires caregivers who are confident enough to share power with children and who have the qualities associated with caring and nurturing relationships, a selection and recruitment process which supports these requirements is necessary. This will ensure that the child's needs remain at the centre of care relationships and at the same time balance professionalism with personal commitment. The process will therefore require an appropriate system for evaluating the personal qualities and personality traits or virtues of child care applicants, and a training regime which will harness self-awareness, self-care and reflective skills so that workers value the role of using self in practice (Dewane, 2006). Standardised personality evaluation tools which measure emotional intelligence and personality traits will need to be included in the recruitment process. This means that an entire paradigm shifts in the philosophy of child care in Trinidad and Tobago, and by extension the Caribbean, is needed. A training policy framework will include: (a) The development of appropriate training modules for caregivers with a heavy focus on practical components, to be administered by training institutions and (b) The development of current staff and the training of new staff so as to build capacity in a modernised framework for child care which supports a shift in conventional ideas about children and childhood, with a focus on caring relationships. A stipulated staff-child ratio that provides more individualised and responsive support for children in care and the provision of living spaces which are designed to model family settings and encourage active child participation will support training.

Also significant to the process is the realisation that increasing staff training and qualifications alone will not solve the problems associated with child care (Choy & Haukka, 2010; Sinclair & Gibbs, 1998). Other issues to consider include the culture of homes, understanding how staff members make sense of change, how they see the need for change and come to terms with change situations, which create feelings of loss and despair (Marris, 1974). At the same time staff members need to maintain their self-worth and understand they are needed by the children and management. They should therefore be included in the change process as much as possible at every level. A useful approach is to engage both adults and children in consultation sessions where they can work together to devise new care strategies. The perceived losses and motivations of adults coming into child care work have to be taken into account - these were often revealed as wanting to rescue children from harm, to instil discipline or to avoid further harm to children.

Promoting a shift in power relations between adults and children may lead adults to feel threatened with a loss of power and control, more so when this is perceived as an externally imposed mandate such as by the United Nations. Helping caregivers to see children's rights and participatory work in a positive light may therefore be challenging and caregivers will require time to reach this position. The recommendation is that during the transformation process, managers should ensure that adult caregivers do not lose their sense of self-worth and that they are encouraged to contribute innovatively to the change process. The transition should also be made gradually rather than abruptly

to allow time for reflection and expression of feelings and to develop creative responses to these thoughts and feelings.

Taken together, the findings of this study do not support strong recommendations to discontinue residential child care but rather support the idea of repositioning the balance of power in adult-child relationships. The findings suggest the need for a re-examination of those characteristics such as traditional values, roles, responsibilities, managerialism and other policies which define the bureaucratic structures. The study supports arguments that child care systems need to focus on strengthening relationships between children and adults (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010; Smith, 2009) while taking a cautious approach to standardising systems and adopting risk-averse approaches which overprotect children (Featherstone et al., 2018; Munro, 2008). It further provides a basis for the exploration of how adults and children redefine their space within this structure of relationships through a realignment of their perspectives on children's participation.

The findings are instructive for social work, child care and child protection in the Caribbean, given their role and ideologies about people, systems and relationships. The recommendations describe a discourse that situates the participation of children in the process of decision making as a central and critical pillar in the construction of an enabling environment which seeks to serve their best interests. The application of such recommendations brings a valuable perspective on anti-oppressive practice (Featherstone et al., 2018), ensuring justice, fairness, equity and safety for service users. Interestingly, how do we draw the line with participation when there are clear rules about what children should and should not do, such as smoking and consuming alcohol and participating in some social and highly risk-taking activities or choosing to continue home schooling as opposed to returning to regular school? Who will set the limits? Understanding how to engage them in meaningful ways and what this means for the adult agendas are certainly areas for further exploration. What approaches to children's participation in decision making are most sustainable for children in care over time? Further work can explore answers to these important questions.

## **Conclusion**

As indicated earlier, at the time of writing this article, the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced the positions advanced. With the importance of practising self-care, self-monitoring and self-protection being highlighted throughout the public health crisis, promoting children's participation in decision making about their personal health and safety beyond a paternalistic approach becomes more relevant. Children and young people should be fully empowered to make decisions that serve their best interests and those of others' in the absence of being told what to do and this can only be achieved satisfactorily by encouraging their participation from very early stages. How this takes into account child psychopathology is considered and left to be explored, with qualitative approaches providing some answers (Dockett & Perry, 2005; Berson et al., 2019).

Given the escalating situation of Venezuelan migration to Trinidad and Tobago and how children are being affected (UNICEF, 2020), a growing concern has also been the placement of migrant children in state care as part of the social protection measures. Their cultural differences pose many challenges for both them and staff with implications for ethical and fair practices that this research can provide some answers to. Institutions working with children and young people require systems

that encourage their critical thinking and independent action. This will reduce the chances of them becoming resistant and rebellious in the absence of such supports and ultimately minimise catastrophic outcomes. Children as agents of change should be placed on the agenda of regional deliberations beyond tokenistic approaches, as the outcomes of these can inform policy makers and practitioners about their work with children and those particularly who are usually silent, with physical, learning and mental challenges.

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