

# 'Both/And' Not 'Either/Or': Reconciling Rights to Protection and Participation in Working with Child Sexual Exploitation

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## Abstract

Analysis of data from a two-year evaluation of the piloting of a child-centred framework for addressing child sexual exploitation (CSE) in England revealed an intrinsic practice dilemma, whereby many practitioners experienced profound ontological, ethical, emotional and intellectual dilemmas in reconciling young people's rights to voice, privacy and autonomy with their rights to safety, guidance and protection. 'No-win' scenarios left practitioners in a 'double-bind', whereby acting protectively might alienate a young person, paradoxically encouraging them to engage in further risky behaviours. An individual commitment to child-centred and participatory approaches, relational practice and reflective use of self was found to support professionals in exploring this tension with young people themselves, involving them as partners in reducing the risk of exploitation. However, practitioners will struggle to achieve this without manageable workloads, good supervision and organisational support for the emotional content of the work. Transformational learning is required across the disciplinary practice systems to achieve a more integrated practice of 'both/and' thinking and feeling. The tensions between protection and participation can then be surfaced in a way that is constructive rather than divisive.

**Keywords:** Child sexual exploitation, young people, risk, participation, protection

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## Introduction

There is increasing recognition in many countries that professionals working in the field of child sexual exploitation (CSE) struggle to find a way of balancing their statutory responsibilities to promote children and young people's welfare alongside their rights to voice, privacy and autonomy (Mildred and Plummer, 2009; Sapiro *et al.*, 2016; Stoebenau *et al.*, 2016). Many young people judged as at risk of CSE have complained that their views were ignored by practitioners, their confidentiality breached, their social lives constrained and their sexual lives policed as part of professional assessment and intervention (Brodie *et al.*, 2011; Dodsworth, 2014; Hallett, 2017). Yet there is also clear evidence that other children have not been sufficiently protected. In England, serious case reviews and public inquiries have revealed profound professional failures to act when children were being groomed and exploited (Coffey, 2014; Jay, 2014; Bedford, 2015; Davies, 2016). Similar problems have surfaced in other countries, such as the USA (Hampton and Lieggi, 2017) and Australia (McKibbin, 2017). There remains insufficient understanding of why professionals struggle to reconcile children's right to safety with their right to a say in how they are protected, and what factors might facilitate them in doing so (Berckmans *et al.*, 2012).

This paper addresses that gap in understanding through a secondary analysis of data from the authors' earlier two-year study (Hickle *et al.*, 2017) of the implementation within three multidisciplinary sites in England of a new child-centred framework for addressing CSE, which had enjoined professionals to address young people's rights to protection through enhancing their participation when assessing and addressing CSE risk (Berelowitz *et al.*, 2013).

## Why is it difficult for professionals to balance protection and participation?

The statutory definition of CSE guiding professional practice in England has recently been tightened:

It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual (Department for Education, 2017, p. 5).

This new definition emphasises the processes of exchange and seeming consensuality, often in a group or peer context, which can make CSE

particularly difficult to identify or comprehend, particularly in contrast with child sexual abuse, whereby roles of 'abuser' and 'victim' are more clearly distinguishable due to the transgression of a taboo family relationship and/or where there is a clear power differential in relation to age, intellectual ability, physical strength or authority (Beckett *et al.*, 2013). Whilst 'grooming' or explicit threats may well be present in some CSE situations, they are rarely the sole process involved. Children and young people involved in CSE have commonly experienced time in care, homelessness, problematic family relationships, abuse and neglect, poor educational experiences and bullying, which has limited their opportunities and support networks (Berckmans *et al.*, 2012). Their seemingly consensual exchange of sexual contact for benefits such as money, affection, a place to stay for the night, drugs, food or protection may be a reflection of their 'least worst option' (Hallett, 2017) amongst other constrained choices. Earlier experiences of sexual abuse, reinforced by wider societal patterns of gendered power dynamics and sexual violence, may leave young people uncertain of what counts as sexual coercion and how to resist it. Some may continue to desire comfort, affection and validation from an older romantic and/or sexual partner even when they have been trafficked around for status or commercial gain (Kalergis, 2009). A familial loyalty might be felt towards a gang, even in the face of sexual victimisation (Beckett *et al.*, 2013). Other children may be too terrified of the consequences of not complying (Berelowitz *et al.*, 2013).

Recognising such factors is essential to making sense of how children and young people become caught up in abusive and dangerous relationships and why it is so hard for them to leave (Berckmans *et al.*, 2012). Improved awareness of these dynamics, however, does not seem to have enabled professionals to resolve the dilemma of whether and when to respect a young person's autonomy and agency, even where this seems to collude with risky behaviours and harmful relationships, or whether they should always treat an exploitative situation as they would any other form of sexual abuse, domestic violence or commercial sex trafficking and protect proactively, even though the young person may well experience this as intrusive and controlling (Brodie *et al.*, 2011). As yet, there is not a shared view across disciplines about when and how to reconcile this tension (Brodie *et al.*, 2011).

This dilemma is not new and not confined to CSE. Safeguarding services do not necessarily operate from a fixed position regarding care and control, supportive or coercive stances: practice may move along a continuum depending on the situation, the individuals involved and the ethical stance taken by the practitioner with particular respect to power, advocacy and rights (Braye *et al.*, 2017). In situations of CSE, social mores regarding young people, sexuality, gender and risk can additionally play a distinctive role in shaping practice. Dominant discourses of sexual violence tend to classify individuals (and particularly young

people) as either vulnerable victims or blameworthy autonomous agents (Horning, 2012). In Rochdale, England, when young females went back over and again to places and situations where they were being sexually exploited, professionals tended to construct them primarily as troublesome, promiscuous or even as prostitutes (Jay, 2014). By ‘putting themselves at risk’ in such ways, young people are seen to merit protective responses characterised by control and discipline, such as deprivation of preference, goods, privacy and liberty (Horning, 2012). The prevalence of normative developmental conceptualisations of childhood in many disciplinary trainings can mean professionals do not feel particularly conflicted about over-riding young people’s preferences, privacy and liberty in order to safeguard them (Bay-Cheng, 2015). A climate of ‘moral panic’ (Cree et al., 2014) reinforces this, producing anxious practitioners who struggle to distinguish risky and dangerous situations from normative adolescent sexual and relational experimentation. In fact, there is limited information on who is actually experiencing exploitation, as some young people (males, disabled young people and individuals from more affluent socio-economic circumstances) are less likely to be classified as at risk (Jago et al., 2011). Homophobia, too, can generate professional difficulties in establishing the threshold between young males’ same-sex experimentation and exploitation (McNaughton Nicholls et al., 2014).

The impact of these control-oriented approaches on young people, however well intentioned, can be counter-productive: feeling disempowered, mistrusted and alienated, many young people are disinclined to accept interventions to disengage from unsafe lifestyles and relationships (Berckmans et al., 2012). The challenge for professionals is, then, to find a workable reconciliation between young people’s right to protection from sexual exploitation and their right to have their agency and voice respected (Sapiro et al., 2016).

## **Developing a participatory, child-centred response to CSE**

The inquiry into CSE in gangs and groups in England 2011–13 by the Office of the Children’s Commissioner (Berelowitz et al., 2013) represented a landmark in public understanding of the scale and nature of CSE and highlighted the potentially counter-productive nature of interventionist approaches:

Children and young people told us repeatedly that ‘being done to’ by the agencies charged with their care compounded their sense of powerlessness and hopelessness. They want to be partners in their protection and recovery plans and those that had this experience valued it immensely and felt stronger for being involved (Berelowitz et al., 2013, p. 56).

The inquiry report concluded that, as young people do not always accept that they are unsafe, practitioners need to be confident and skilled enough to engage them in exploring possible risks and changing behaviours. Informed by children's accounts of the complexities involved in 'recognising and telling' that they are being exploited (Cossar *et al.*, 2013), the inquiry set out a framework of foundations and principles for inter-agency responses to CSE that were explicitly rights-focused, child-centred and participatory. By ensuring their concerns and wishes were properly listened to and taken into account alongside their needs and rights as possible victims, this *See Me, Hear Me* framework sought to give equal priority to both young people's best interests *and* their voice, in line with Articles 3 and 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Thus, the aspired outcome of this new framework was to establish protection *through* participation rather than counterpose these as irreconcilable polarities.

The Children's Commissioner subsequently issued a tender for evaluation of the implementation of *See Me, Hear Me* in three local authority sites in England in order to establish whether the framework might improve the identification and protection of children being sexually exploited. As a team of researchers from one university in England, we were subsequently commissioned to undertake this evaluation in 2014–16. The full methodology and findings were reported in 2017, indicating that the framework had supported the sites in developing practice systems and methods to enable staff to recognise CSE, work productively across disciplines and to engage young people and families in interventions to address risk (Hickle *et al.*, 2017). However, the extent of the professional struggle to give equal priority to both the protection and participation rights of young people became increasingly clear to the research team through the project. Subsequently to reporting, we undertook a secondary analysis of the data to further illuminate this practice dilemma and uncover the strategies that individuals and systems were developing to address it.

## Methodology

The three sites participating in the evaluation were selected to represent a geographical mix and encompassed agencies across each area involved in child safeguarding. The University of Sussex provided ethical clearance for the evaluation and standard ethical principles such as informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity were followed. A realist evaluation methodology was followed for the original project, which considered 'what works for whom, in what circumstances, and how?' (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). This method led us to determine the particular practice approaches and systems that were anticipated to lead to the specified

**Table 1** Numbers of participants

Site	Interviews with professionals	Observations of meetings	Initial survey responses	Second survey responses	Young person interviews
1	9	5	45	18	3
2	14	9	60	21	3
3	5	5	97	17	11
Total	28	19	204	56	17

project outcomes and what combinations of contextual conditions needed to be in place to maximise the likelihood that positive change was achieved and sustained over time. [Table 1](#) summarises the data-collection methods for the original evaluation. The quantitative data were analysed using SPSS Statistics software, version 23. Thematic analysis ([Braun and Clarke, 2006](#)) was undertaken on the qualitative data, using computer-assisted qualitative data-analysis software package NVivo version 10.

Secondary analysis is a valid methodology for providing a new perspective and conceptualisation that varies from that of the original questions of a research study, and enables more intensive scrutiny of aspects of the data-set relevant to the new focus ([Heaton, 1998](#)). The data drawn on for this secondary analysis comprise the following: regular observations of meetings regarding both strategic planning and multi-agency risk assessment in relation to individual children, peer groups or gangs; two surveys of staff working with CSE across each site, one conducted midway and one towards the end of the project; and interviews in the final tertile of the evaluation with professionals in each site who embodied key roles in relation to CSE and represented a variety of disciplines, sectors, and professional levels (see [Supplementary Table 1](#) at <https://padlet.com/Storyboard/supplementarytable>). Thematic categories were identified both inductively and deductively from the data, informed by the researchers' existing knowledge of the available literature. The first and second authors analysed the data together, discussing and resolving any discrepancies in interpretation throughout. Quotations are provided that are emblematic of particular themes and/or that enable the nuance of a theme to emerge.

## Findings

### Foregrounding risk, vulnerability and protection

By the time of the first survey, undertaken midway through our evaluation, professionals across agencies in the three sites had received inter-

agency safeguarding training on CSE, and had robust self-efficacy regarding recognition of CSE risk: 84 per cent were somewhat or very confident to identify risky behaviours in young people and 78.5 per cent to recognise indicators in the social or family environment. This had risen to 86 per cent for both in the second survey. Participants' confidence seemed rooted in actual awareness, too, with free-text responses at both time points indicating widespread knowledge of known risk factors relating to individual behaviour, family circumstances, peer networks and the local environment. Interviewees spoke of how awareness had developed and attitudes shifted in the wake of training: '... a sea change in people's understanding as to what CSE is and, you know, what that actually means for the people who are affected by it' (Interview: police strategic lead).

A key structural development was the institution of Multi Agency Sexual Exploitation fora ('MASE meetings') in each site to provide robust oversight and risk-rating of all of the young people in the locality where CSE risk had been identified. These differed substantially from traditional child-protection reviews that focus on an individual family. Whilst the new approach was efficient in identifying network and contextual risks (Firmin *et al.*, 2016), MASE meetings posed their own risks—to the young person's right to privacy:

... it's kind of like a dossier of information on a young person, who is a victim. But it's everything about their private life; their family; their sexual health; their, you know, crimes that they've experienced. And it just gets sent to this enormous distribution list of people in the area... the message that they're given is: you don't have the right to any kind of private life because we're worried about you (Interview: voluntary organisation practitioner).

In our observations of meetings, we noticed that there was little open debate about the ethicality of this—it seemed that the ends (protection) justified the means (intrusion) for the majority of practitioners, with a few left troubled individually.

Similarly, the early decision in the three sites to refer to all teenagers at risk of CSE as 'children' rather than 'young people' went largely uncontested in meetings. Much more than semantics, the aim of this shift was to shape attitudes, and ultimately practice, in favour of protection:

... recognising that that might fly in the face of what young people would want to be called, but actually for people in the room it was around challenging our own and other professionals' assumptions that somehow this was a choice... actually being really explicit, we're talking about children here (Interview: inter-agency strategic lead).

Exploring the developing professional discourse in the second survey and the interviews, we found respondents more split than had seemed

the case in public discussions. Only one-third of survey respondents believed the terminology shift to 'children' was helpful in promoting focus on risk and vulnerability. A third more preferred the term 'young people' as a way of foregrounding rights and voice. The remaining third of respondents thought either or both terms should be used, depending on the individual and the situation. While, for some participants, this seemed to stem from a deontological respect for young people's preferred terminology, for others, it was in pragmatic recognition that teenagers were easier to engage if you used a term they preferred. A few respondents signalled the need to find a more integrated position of 'both/and' rather than 'either/or': '... they are young people who are able to make their own choices and to partake in risk taking behaviour, but also that they are children who may need protection, sometimes against their will' (Second survey).

### **The aspiration for participatory and child-centred responses to CSE**

Although a clear priority, managing risk was not the only concern of the three sites. They sought simultaneously to operationalise a child-centred and participatory ethos that would enable young people to be 'heard' (participation) as well as 'seen' (protection). Promising indicators of commitment to children's voice were noted within the first survey: three-quarters of participants stated that children's right to participation was not only recognised in their agency policy, but realised in practice. However, over half (54 per cent) could not confirm that young people participated in deciding how they were involved with their organisation and, when participation was mentioned explicitly, it was often more as a means to an end (i.e. protection), rather than a right to be respected regardless: 'Without participation there is a risk that the plan is not complete and will not be as effective' (Second survey).

Both survey respondents and interview participants described difficulties engaging young people at CSE risk, describing 'chaotic lifestyles', abusive histories and fraught relationships with professionals. There was a general agreement in both the survey and interview data that providing a facilitating space and relationship over time, where the young person has the opportunity to receive information and support, and risk factors can be identified, was the optimum way of ensuring young people have a voice and feel most involved in the approach taken: 'You've got to have a relationship with someone in order to do any of that' (Interview: social worker).

Participants across the three sites described how the move towards child-centredness had resulted in some (certainly not all) practitioners being given time to allow for the persistent and slower-paced approach advocated by Jago *et al.* (2011), where they could build trust with young

people, be there at the right time when the young person was ready to share their experiences and concerns, and explore the complexities of their situations:

We can be more available to young people when they need us to be. We can be really responsive to them... go out and go for breakfast and do that and sort of not be looking at your watch... keeping stuff on the table of 'you don't have to talk about it, it's fine, but if you do want to talk about it we can do that whenever you want to' (Interview: social worker).

Practitioners felt that working relationally in this way engaged young people's trust, creating a sense of partnership where young people's feelings and priorities were acknowledged alongside professional concerns and different perspectives could be discussed openly. The pressures of resource-poor public services, however, meant this did not always happen.

### The struggles to balance the tension

Where practitioners had high workloads, with insufficient time to spend with young people, and there was pressure to produce reports for safeguarding systems, some participants found themselves or their colleagues needing to push too quickly, without the reflective space to make sense of how or why the young person was caught up in exploitative relationships or situations. Some participants described how, without such understanding, practice risked becoming more protectionist (Lowden, 2002), with the young person left feeling further disempowered and controlled. This might then increase their suspiciousness and hostility towards services. In an unhelpful spiral, we noted how, in MASE meetings, a young person's reduced engagement seemed to enhance professionals' perception of risk levels, and ultimately spawn more intrusive approaches that further contravened young people's autonomy, privacy and preferences.

Determining the threshold for when child-protection risk should outweigh the young person's preferences and autonomy remained an ongoing challenge for participants. Numerous examples were provided in the survey and individual interviews of a consequentialist stance (Gray, 2010), whereby over-riding young people's entitlement to privacy, choice and liberty could be justified on the grounds of safeguarding concerns; this included removing young people's mobile phones, 'seizing girls' knickers and sending them off for DNA testing', imposing curfews and having criminal checks carried out on their friends' parents if they wanted a sleep-over. Those working in statutory settings driven by safeguarding responsibilities (e.g. police officers, front line social workers, paediatric health) seemed more likely to accept these protectionist impositions:

I don't have that great a dilemma about under 16s making their own decisions. They often make rubbish decisions and it's up to us to try and

make them do better... I think it's for the agencies to be looking to adjust under 16s behaviour if they're making bad decisions (Interview: police operational manager).

Applications for a legal order to place a young person in secure accommodation had increased following other high-profile cases in England and remained the backdrop option in the sites where all other safeguarding strategies had failed. 'Secure' was characterised by most interviewees as a 'necessary evil—not ideal, but at least a way of plucking the most at-risk children out of very dangerous situations, and giving them a breathing space. The need for protection was thought by the majority to over-ride other ethical considerations: '... that immediate containment for her own safety because of the situation she was putting herself in. I genuinely, I'm not sure she'd still be alive if they hadn't done that' (Interview: social worker).

Without such measures, practitioners would be left holding high levels of risk, and this often felt too unsafe, particularly for inexperienced practitioners: '... if this all goes dreadfully wrong this is down to me and what implications that will have for me' (Interview: social worker).

Even whilst recognising the immediate safety benefits of removing young people from a risky environment, some queried possible counter-productive effects from more risk-averse practice:

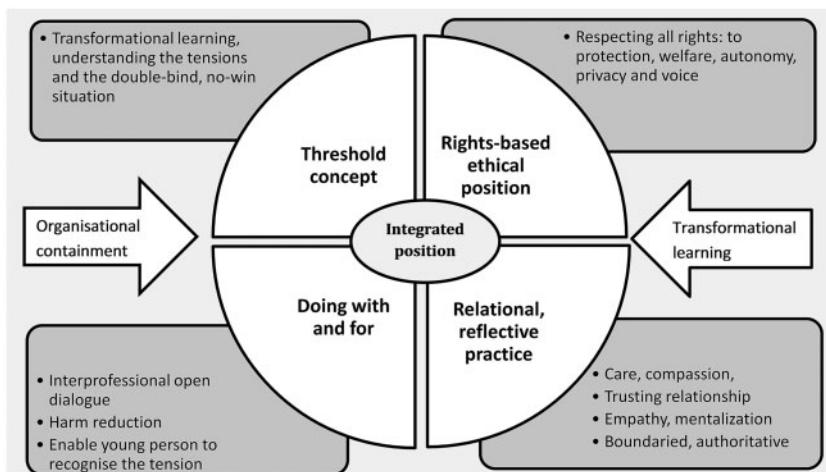
I think she's become incredibly secretive around friendships and relationships that are actually pretty normal to have... I know she's probably got a boyfriend.... She's a young girl, she's socialising, why wouldn't she, but she'll never talk about that... because I think she sees it as this thing that's got her into so much trouble in the past that she can't talk about it in any sort of open normal way, which is completely negating the point of what we're doing (Interview: social worker).

In such examples, participants seemed to find themselves in a 'no-win' situation—the classic double-bind (Bateson *et al.*, 1956), where both acting protectively and not acting could increase the risk of harm. Workers striving to achieve a balance between protection and participation, by creating a space for reflection and negotiating, rather than leaping to protection at all costs, could find themselves castigated by the system:

I felt that it was okay to leave it those few, those couple of hours for her to disclose that herself, because I thought then she's in control of sharing her own information... anyway, they really disagreed. They felt that I should have immediately notified social services (Interview: voluntary organisation worker).

## Strategies for reconciling protection and participation

A number of strategies were identified that supported professionals in reconciling protection and participation (see Figure 1). Feeling clear about the threshold for concern helped professionals to be more



**Figure 1:** Strategies for reconciling protection and participation.

confident about times when respect for a young person's preferences, autonomy and privacy might take precedence over protective strategies, or vice versa. Training within and across agencies was ongoing, with an increasing recognition that the inherent complexities of these situations meant standardised guidelines on risk levels were not always possible. Interview participants spoke of the need for a safe space for mutual reflective learning, so that team members could explore freely and challenge each other. Group supervision had become the norm in social work teams within one site to facilitate such shared reflection. There were also attempts being made in the sites to develop shared learning across the inter-agency safeguarding systems in relation to particularly problematic cases; creating a safe enough space for challenge and disagreement was a key area for development in this.

Some participants suggested that young people should be made partners in assessing and addressing risk, rather than professionals and parents being wholly responsible. By viewing children as having the potential competence to evaluate the risks they faced, professionals then had a particular responsibility to ensure children had the necessary information and support to maximise this potential. A trusting relationship with a child-centred and participatory ethos was considered essential to exploring with young people the relationships, behaviours and environments that others considered risky, and the constrained choices they faced. A young person's suspicion, fear and hostility were thought to be weathered by practitioners listening carefully, and being non-judgemental, open, honest, clear, reliable, persistent and consistent:

... say to them 'I know you don't agree with this. I know you think this isn't happening to you and I need you to trust me that little bit and

we've worked together a long time... what I need you to do is to trust at this time is that you're not making safe decisions'.... If you haven't got a relationship with the young person I don't think you'll be able to negotiate that (Second survey).

Principles of 'harm reduction' (Hickle and Hallett, 2015) were starting to emerge in specialist CSE teams and sexual health agencies. This approach, drawn from substance-misuse services, sought to find ways of making a young person's contact with exploiters as safe as possible, in recognition that it was probably impossible to stop it completely:

... while we're still not agreeing that they should have contact with that person, how can we make it as safe as possible because we know it's going to happen?... It's a 'needle exchange' approach... I think we have to work with risk.... We drive it underground and then they're more at risk, I think (Interview: CSE team manager).

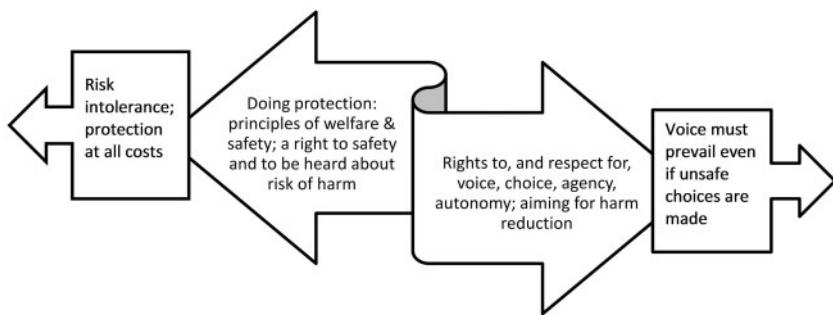
Practices included advocating that a young person keep their mobile phone, even if this enabled them to telephone exploiters, because then they had a way of calling for assistance in dangerous circumstances. Whilst the discourse of some participants suggested they were motivated in this by a deontological rights paradigm that sought to secure voice and agency within the protection process, for the majority, children's rights to autonomy were more likely to be operationalised through a consequentialist pragmatism (Gray, 2010):

... it isn't about telling young people, but it's about developing their skills to manage risk to make positive choices.... But then alongside the normative approaches we'll say, no, we do need to do the harm minimisation stuff—this is how you use a condom (Interview: adviser for personal, health and social education).

Some spoke about participation as 'doing with' young people, involving young people as partners in evaluating the riskiness of their situations. Other participants spoke of 'doing for'. This might involve 'holding on' to concerns about risk for as long as it took, waiting for the young person, who might have initially rejected this view, to 'catch-up'. It could also mean 'being the voice' for the young person, advocating to the professional system on their behalf to ensure that their right to autonomy, choice and privacy was considered. The latter was considered particularly important where a young person's disengagement from the system, or difficulty in expressing themselves, limited their self-advocacy.

## **Discussion: developing 'both/and' thinking**

As found elsewhere (e.g. Brodie *et al.*, 2011; Berckmans *et al.*, 2012), understanding and integrating what often felt like countervailing poles of protection and participation were key challenges within and across



**Figure 2:** The countervailing poles of protection and participation.

agencies in this study. Tensions were spawned between young people and practitioners, between professionals across different agencies and disciplines, and even within an individual him or herself, that seemed at times irreconcilable.

Our secondary analysis found that the welfare principle of 'acting in the best interests of the child' was instantiated primarily in this data-set by a focus on the *doing* of protection *for* the child: professionals acting authoritatively to protect young people at highest risk, even where this transgressed the latter's liberty and wishes. Where there was a conflict between protection and participation, the majority of respondents (both as individuals and systems) chose 'safety at all costs', seeking to eradicate risk from the lives of children whom they framed primarily as vulnerable (see Figure 2). They constructed children's rights as primarily encompassing the right to safety, with rights to participation seen mainly in terms of ensuring children were helped to talk about concerns, risks and abuse (i.e. the underlying focus still being protection rather than a right to voice qua voice).

For professionals in this study, as elsewhere (Jago *et al.*, 2011; Horning, 2012; Dodsworth, 2014; Hallett, 2017), making sense of the dynamics of CSE from the young person's perspective can be emotionally, intellectually and ethically challenging. It was as if participants were required to engage in 'doublethink'<sup>1</sup> to avoid the cognitive dissonance that is engendered by thinking of a young person as both agentic in this exchange and, at the same time, a victim of CSE (i.e. being able to hold two contradictory beliefs in mind simultaneously, and accept both of them (Orwell, 1949)). Our perception was that the tension between these countervailing poles provoked at times a 'splitting' (Ruch, 2012) within and between professional groups, systems and individuals

<sup>1</sup> 'Doublethink' is defined in the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as 'The power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them' (Orwell, 1949, p. 220).

whereby there was a presumption of a definitively right way to act and differing perspectives needed to be defended against through denial or denigration. We would suggest that working with the high-level risks, conflictual ethical nuances and distressing emotional material inherent to CSE work would naturally provoke this kind of anxiety, primarily stemming from a concern about ethical trespass (Weinberg, 2014): it feels impossible to ‘get it right’, and ‘getting it wrong’ might result in harm to the young person. However, anxiety seems to be further intensified by professionals having to operate in a context of highly critical media coverage that does not allow the complexity involved where there are few right answers or certain outcomes. Political criticism and government rhetoric about the possibility of prosecuting professionals who fail to act protectively (Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, 2015) heightened such professional anxiety further during the life of this project.

Constructing those at risk of CSE into vulnerable ‘human becomes’ (via a developmental paradigm of children as lacking maturity and intentionality) rather than additionally as agentic and rights-bearing ‘human beings’ (Uprichard, 2008) is comprehensible within this context. By adhering to ‘protection at all costs’, professionals can feel safer from being accused (internally and publicly) of failing to protect. Needing to accept that autonomy and participation have equal weight to protection, and that young people might be justified in their dissatisfaction about their rights to privacy, freedom and choice being undermined, conversely means it may not be possible to ‘get it right’. Being faced with this limitation, in the context of heavy workloads, resource constraints and service reorganisations, recognising the limitations of their approach provoked intolerable moral distress (Braye et al., 2017) for some of these participants.

There was evidence that, given a safe reflective space, such as that offered by the interviews, many participants *could* operate from a more balanced position where they could reconcile protection and participation. However, the difficulty for some in finding a more integrated position, which they could hold to over time, was apparent. A key starting point appeared to be the necessity of professionals understanding that a young person might be *both* vulnerable *and* agentic, competent *and* struggling, autonomous *and* exploited—sometimes sequentially, sometimes synchronously, often quite inconsistently (Uprichard, 2008). We pose the wave-particle ‘duality paradox’ from quantum mechanics (Kumar, 2009) as a useful metaphor here, of how all elementary particles may be partly described in terms not only of particles, but also of waves:

It seems as though we must use sometimes the one theory and sometimes the other, while at times we may use either.... We have two contradictory pictures of reality; separately neither of them fully explains the phenomena of light, but together they do (Einstein and Infeld, 1938, pp. 262–63).

This 'both/and' position necessitates the professional system perpetually presenting and re-presenting young people through both welfare and rights lenses. In some of the organisational systems within which they worked, with high workloads and insufficient supervision and support, it seemed almost impossible for individual participants to reconcile both positions on their own. But a containing supervisory dyad or team, or inter-disciplinary meeting, could, even in the most complex of situations, enable differing perspectives on risk, safety and rights to be counterposed and held in tension so that the world might be pictured from the young person's perspective and the level of coerciveness in intervention could be calibrated as matters developed.

The troublesome nature of recognising and integrating these dual rights to protection and participation leads us to consider this as a threshold concept for those working with CSE, without which a professional cannot progress in their understanding. Whilst much of the knowledge needed for CSE intervention (such as risk and vulnerability characteristics) can be framed as 'core concepts' that progress understanding, threshold concepts are integrative 'portals' to 'new and previously inaccessible ways of thinking' that represent a transformed way of understanding, viewing or interpreting knowledge (Meyer and Land, 2003, p. 4). The paradoxical nature of many threshold concepts requires an ontological as well as a conceptual shift. During such transitions, individuals are said to occupy a 'liminal' or 'unstable space' in which they 'may oscillate between old and emergent understandings' (Cousin, 2006, p. 4). The struggles reported by participants earlier in this paper are richly illustrative of such oscillation between 'protection at all costs', 'participation rights must be respected' and the more pragmatic 'we'll alienate them if we don't listen'.

Our secondary analysis suggested that professionals who had developed an understanding of this threshold concept had been helped by reflective learning in relation to a tricky case that raised ethical dilemmas and provoked strong feelings about balancing protection and voice with a particular young person. Some participants had achieved this learning on their own, but it was often facilitated by psychologically containing supervision (Ruch, 2012) and manageable workloads that offered the space to think. This reflective learning process seemed to draw on principles of critical incident analysis (Fook and Garden, 2007), with transformational learning coalesced around recognition that a dichotomised response was unhelpful.

## Conclusions

In the three sites within this study, we could see no evidence of systemic cultures where risks of harm posed by CSE were denied or minimised. A strong commitment to reducing risk was apparent in each area, unsurprising in the wake of government-commissioned inquiries (e.g. Home Affairs

Committee, 2013) and media condemnation (e.g. *The Daily Mail*, 2015; *The Guardian*, 2015) of situations in which young people had been left at risk and abusers went unprosecuted. No statutory service could have ignored the strong policy guidance in favour of a protective stance (e.g. HM Government, 2015). So, it was understandable, and possibly advisable, that participants erred on the side of caution when it was difficult to reconcile young people's rights to welfare and safety with those to autonomy and voice. However, it was apparent in this study that the 'protection at all costs' approach can ensnare professionals in a double-bind, no-win situation whereby alienated young people become more secretive about their activities, disengage from interventions, run away more and become further drawn into exploitative situations.

Our secondary analysis provides a window into the individual, professional, organisational and social influences that make it particularly difficult for workers at all levels to even see this tension between protection and participation, let alone address it. It also sets out strategies that some individuals and systems have found useful in developing a more integrated approach of 'both/and'. Whilst an individual commitment to child-centred and participatory approaches, relational practice and reflective use of self is foundational, expecting individuals to be able to achieve and sustain this in isolation is unrealistic. Manageable workloads, good supervision and organisational support for the emotional content of the work are prerequisites for transformational learning and to enable individuals to engage in critical, relational and child-centred practice with children, young people, parents and each other. However, in England, as in many other countries, economic pressures on public spending mean reduced staffing and increased responsibilities, with the inevitable effect that polarised practices of 'protection at all costs' are prioritised. The impact of such policies on practice approaches, and the concomitant experience of young people, must now be fully recognised and challenged.

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## Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at *British Journal of Social Work Journal* online.

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