

FULL-LENGTH ARTICLES

A Multi-Stage Participatory Workshop Method for Engaging Children and Young People in Cross-Cultural Research on Preventing Family Separation

Christine Gale, PhD¹, Mehri Gul Ablezova², Charlotte Bredahl Jacobsen, PhD³, N'Dri Kan David⁴, Andhita Nurul Khasanah⁵, Ian Milligan, PhD¹, Cecilie Kolonda Moesby-Jensen, PhD⁶, Paola Maria Navarrete Galvez, PhD⁷, Roseline Olumbe, PhD⁸, Rosalind Willi, PhD⁹, Joumana Stephan Yeretian, PhD¹⁰

¹ School of Social Work and Social Policy, University of Strathclyde, ² Department of Sociology, American University of Central Asia, ³ Department of Social Work, Københavns Professionshøjskole, ⁴ School of Business and Social Sciences, International University of Grand Bassam, ⁵ Department of Psychology, Universitas Islam Bandung, ⁶ Centre for Social Work, University College Absalon, ⁷ Dirección de Investigaciones, Universidad Tecnológica de El Salvador, ⁸ Institute of Child Development, Daystar University, ⁹ Formerly Evidence and Learning unit, SOS Children's Villages International, ¹⁰ Higher Institute of Public Health, Saint Joseph University

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Around the world children continue to be separated from parents and placed in alternative care. There is an understanding that for thousands of children, this separation is unnecessary. Our research sought evidence on the reasons for such separation and how the placement of children in formal alternative care might be prevented in countries presenting differing contexts. In particular, steps were taken to address a perceived gap in research on this topic: the participation of children and young people. This article, recognising how such participation is vital in gaining their perspectives on issues affecting them, demonstrates how their involvement in the design of research questions and tools, contributed to methodological validity and transferability of the methodology across differing socio-economic and cultural settings. It goes on to affirm how the use of these research tools that allowed for playful and creative modes of expression, despite the topic being a serious one, was pivotal in gathering rich empirical evidence with children and care-experienced young people in 54 workshops across eight countries. Their contribution proved critical to informing recommendations aimed at improving multi-sectoral policies and services at a country and international level to help prevent child-parents separation and placement in alternative care.

1. Throughout this article, we use the term 'young people' to refer to those aged 18 to 25 although we also engaged with 17-year-olds in the young people's workshops. This differs from the UN definition of 'youth' as being 15- to 24-year-olds (United Nations, 2013). We use the terms 'children' and 'child' to refer to 0–17-year-olds as laid out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989).

2. Our use of the term 'disability' has been informed by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (United Nations, 2006) that includes 'those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis'.

1. Introduction

1.1. The lack of data on antecedents to placement of children in alternative care across the world

Clearly enshrined in the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) is the right that a child, ‘for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding’ (para 6). States Parties that have ratified the Convention have a duty to support families and address situations that can lead to risk of separation.¹ Such parameters are found in other international resolutions and guidance including the United Nations Resolution, the ‘Promotion and protection of the rights of children (2019), the UNCRPD (United Nations, 2006), and the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (the Guidelines) (United Nations, 2009).

Although efforts to obtain accurate data at national and international levels on the number of children in alternative care and the reasons for such placement have not yet been fully realised, it is thought this affects millions of children worldwide (Delap et al., 2024; Delap & Mann, 2019; Desmond et al., 2020; Goldman et al., 2020; Groza et al., 2011; Nankervis et al., 2011; Petrowski et al., 2017; Wilke et al., 2022). Studies suggest the placement of innumerable children in alternative care may have been unnecessary: i.e. not due to reasons of protection from harm. They also highlight a lack of evidence on antecedents to care placements that would help inform effective approaches and interventions to prevent separation of children from parental care in different countries (Chaitkin et al., 2017; Gale et al., 2025; F. S. Martin & Zulaika, 2016; Wilke et al., 2022). In particular, recognising the importance of the active engagement of those whose lives are affected by a specific concern (Ferguson et al., 2023), we focussed on developing an ethically grounded research methodology that addressed a particular omission in studies on family separation: the participation of children and young people from differing socio-economic and cultural settings across the world (Nankervis et al., 2011).

1.2. The participation of children and young people in research

To our knowledge, a key evidence gap in multi-dimensional studies on drivers of separation includes the lack of participation of children and young people and the gathering of their perspectives and ideas (Nankervis et al., 2011). Indeed, it is of concern, that the presence of children and young people in, and contributions to, research in general is noted as limited (Benninger et al., 2021; Proefke & Barford, 2023). This situation persists even with the ever-growing recognition and understanding of the right of children as laid out in Article 12 of the UNCRC to ‘express their views, feelings and

¹ All countries except the United States of America have ratified the UNCRC.

wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously' (Chrifou et al., 2024; Hossain et al., 2023; Murano, 2024; United Nations, 1989).

Those scholars that do acknowledge the ability of children and young people to be 'competent social actors' (Gilchrist et al., 2013, p. 577), recognise that through participatory citizenship they can be actively involved in exercising their rights, enhance the quality of research, and help shape their own social environments (Cluver et al., 2020; Ferguson et al., 2023). Children and young people are increasingly recognised as experts in their own lives with the ability to represent themselves, articulate challenges and priorities, and offer a unique insider perspective grounded in lived experience (Arias-Urueña & Vaghi, 2023; Dar & Chopra, 2024; Haag et al., 2022; Henderson-Dekort et al., 2023; Herrmann et al., 2023; Liabo et al., 2017). It is these attributes that highlight the importance of placing them at the forefront of research, especially in subjects that directly and indirectly impact themselves, their families, and the services they receive (Bjorbækmo et al., 2022; Ferguson et al., 2023; Kalenjuk et al., 2024; Michail et al., 2023). Bell et al. (2023) argue for instance, that adults, 'whether they are researchers, politicians, or professionals – should realize that in order to make helpful systems for children, it is essential to know what is important for them' (p. 2). How, they ask, 'is a country supposed to make useful systems for children without knowledge from those who are affected by those systems?' (Bell et al., 2023, p. 2).

There are a number of reasons why children are excluded from research. In part, the lack of meaningful participation has been attributed to adult perceptions of children and young people as passive members of society and/or as too vulnerable to be exposed to a research process (Hossain et al., 2023; Liabo et al., 2017; Murano, 2024; O'Grady, 2022). Furthermore, the exclusion of children from vulnerable or marginalised groups is especially pronounced, as for example, children with disabilities, who are the least heard and largely absent from participation in research (Arias-Urueña & Vaghi, 2023; Huus et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2019; Parsons et al., 2020; Proefke & Barford, 2023; Samir et al., 2021).

Additionally, children and young people's participation is disproportionately limited in low- and middle-income countries reflecting broader inequalities in research investment in these contexts compared to high income countries (Blum & Boyden, 2018; Hasan et al., 2021; Hunleth et al., 2022; Zeinali et al., 2020). Further concerns include a lack of published guidance on approach, methodology and tools to elicit meaningful participation of young people across different socio-economic contexts, and insufficient training available to researchers to utilise such methods (Acharya & Pathak, 2019; Cheah & Parker, 2014; Hasan et al., 2021; Hunleth et al., 2022; Zeinali et al., 2020).

Consideration of these factors helped shape and guide the design of our study with a view to addressing gaps in evidence and ensuring children and young people from different national contexts participated in our research.

It is our hope that this paper contributes to methodological debates by demonstrating how participatory research with children and young people can systematically include their participation in design, be ethically implemented, and analytically robust, across diverse socio-economic and cultural contexts.

2. Background to the study

2.1. Research aim

A primary aim of our study was to address the lack of evidence on the multi-dimensional factors relating to antecedents of child-parents separation and decisions to use formal alternative care across different socio-economic contexts. In line with the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, formal care is understood as care ordered or authorised by a competent administrative or judicial authority provided in a family environment, as for example, foster care and formal kinship care (United Nations, 2009). It includes any residential setting, whether or not ordered by such official bodies (United Nations, 2009).

To achieve this aim, the research included the gathering of information from children and young people concerning the negative aspects of family life that impact unity within a household, as well as existing protective factors that could be built upon. This information, when considered in the full study that included data on antecedents to alternative care placement collected from professional stakeholders and family members, and complimented with findings of a desk review, provided a rich understanding of factors that can contribute to family separation (Gale et al., 2024, 2025). The research was completed in eight countries: El Salvador, Denmark, Cote d'Ivoire, Indonesia, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon and Uruguay between 2023 and 2024. This article solely reports on the aspect of the research undertaken with children and young people.

Project implementation was facilitated through the support of national member organisations of SOS Children's Villages with a focus on representation from low, middle, and high-income countries within the five UN nominated world regions.² Final selection of participating countries was undertaken by a project steering group within the organisation. In each country an emphasis was placed on partnership with a national university and the engagement of at least one national researcher. The final research team comprised an International Lead Researcher, nine national, and one UK

² <https://www.un.org/en/model-united-nations/groups-member-states>

based researcher, all of whom were co-authors of respective national research reports and apart from one, are co-authors of this paper. In-country research was supported by national research assistants.

2.2. Consideration of participatory research methodology for the engagement of children and young people

To ensure utilisation of the most appropriate approach to engaging the participation of children and young people, consideration of the research methodology was initially informed by a body of literature exploring principles of, and tools and methods utilised in, participatory research, and most especially, those relating to engagement with young participants (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015; Bromark et al., 2023; Grant 2017; Hajjes & van Thiel, 2016; Jamieson et al., 2021; Proefke & Barford, 2023; Shamji, 2007; Welty & Lundy, 2013).

Particular recognition was given to Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). Benninger et al. (2021) describe YPAR as ‘specifically aimed to increase full youth participation in research and social change’ (p. 2396). Smith-Carrier and Van Tuy (2024) note how PAR emerged as a methodology offering researchers alternative approaches to traditional research tools to be used in community-led evidence gathering and shaping of public policy. Mountz et al. (2023) see PAR as challenging traditional ways of gathering knowledge by championing information that originates from those with lived experience whilst others recognise this methodology, along with Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), as particularly applicable for use within marginalised and vulnerable communities (Gammage, 2025; Preece, 2006). Such an approach has been viewed as helping bridge the divide between research, theory, and real-life application, and to challenge ‘distinct practical, epistemological, ethical, and relational’ concerns (Smith-Carrier & Van Tuyl, 2024, p. 64) in the pursuit of community-based social justice (Smith et al., 2021). When deciding on approaches to our research, elements of PAR methods were identified as being particularly relevant to our pursuit of information across different countries that make use of what Stenbom and Turunen (2018) describe as, ‘aesthetic, experiential, embodied and emotional ways of knowing and creating knowledge’ (p. 449). This also informed an approach deemed appropriate in facilitating interaction between professionals and community participants in a way that questions, generates knowledge about, and explores a shared understanding of factors that impacts their lives within differing contexts (Anselma et al., 2020; Mandoh et al., 2023; Samir et al., 2021).

Whilst aware of critiques of PAR and other participatory research methods in which some observers have spoken of such concerns as potential tokenism, ongoing power imbalances, and insufficient risk assessments (Dedding et al., 2021; Lake & Wendland, 2018; Levac et al., 2019), building on PAR, and YPAR, as well as other approaches to participation, also helped inform our understanding of child and youth friendly tools that provides an inter-

active and creative focus to research (Clark & Statham, 2005; Johnston-Goodstar et al., 2022; Levac et al., 2019; Scott et al., 2023; Welty & Lundy, 2013). Arias-Urueña and Vaghi (2023) see PAR for example, as a way of capturing opinions and experiences in a more participatory, creative and expressive manner. Documented examples of appropriate tools include the use of photography, drawing, posters, poetry, discussion boards and audio and digital instruments (Anderson et al., 2023; Arias-Urueña & Vaghi, 2023; Kesby, 2000; Scott et al., 2023). Such tools are helpful in providing non-intrusive mixed methods that allow for the sensitive gathering of information on topics that may recall distressing circumstances (Robinson et al., 2023), as for example, family separation.

Taking note of this guidance, it was felt that utilisation of simple but inter-active workshop activities in our study would allow for a methodology that would sensitively engage the participation of children and young people from vulnerable backgrounds in exploring positive and negative aspects of family life. This guidance was also important when considering the use of participatory methods that would be transferrable across different countries, contexts and languages, allow for comparative analysis, and take into consideration the limited time researchers had available to build trusting relationships with participants during the workshop process.

At this stage, we also reflected on key methodological choices and exclusions. While individual interviews with children and young people could have allowed for more detailed personal narratives (Flewitt, 2013), participatory workshops were prioritised to support collective sense-making and reduce pressure on individual disclosure. Similarly, our decision to use fictional scenarios during the workshops, rather than ask participants about their own experiences, involved a trade-off: although this limited direct attribution, it enabled children and young people to articulate sensitive issues in a distanced and safer manner with a view to enhancing participation and breadth of responses across diverse contexts (Goss et al., 2021).

3. Theoretical framework

During development of the research theoretical framework, we were careful to consider the research participants we hoped to engage in the study. To this end, the framework was informed by a number of approaches, theories, and principles including those related to children's rights and ecological systems theory. The research was also informed by principles of research ethics, and most especially, those associated with the participation of children and young people. These considerations intrinsically shaped the development and implementation of the participatory research methodology.

3.1. A child rights-based approach and consideration of ecological systems theory

Paramount to designing the research framework was consideration of a child-rights-based approach. This being the recognition of the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) as a comprehensive and holistic framework governing

all actions relating to children. In particular, Article 12 outlining the right to participation in decisions affecting them, signified the importance to us, of their inclusion in our research.

To examine the complex multi-sectoral determinants of family separation, the study drew on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986, 1994), which conceptualises children's lives as shaped by positive and negative interacting factors across micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-level systems. This framework informed our analytical focus and understanding of the way household dynamics intersect with all aspects of broader socio-economic and structural conditions. It was taken into consideration therefore, when designing data collection tools and analysing the differing factors impacting family relations.

3.2. An ethical approach to research

It was imperative we apply an ethical approach that would adhere to the principle of 'do no harm' (Robson, 2002), help safeguard, and demonstrate care and respect for, participants, many of whom were children and young people from vulnerable backgrounds. To this end, ethical considerations applied to the governance framework of the research meant clearly defining the parameters of children and young people's participation, whilst taking into consideration methodological options, and the reality of timeframe, budget and other available resources (Duckett et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2021). Ethical approval was obtained from a national university in each participating country.

Recognition was given to the importance of representation in research, and particularly the inclusion of children and young people whose opportunities to have their voices heard have previously been precluded due to perceived vulnerabilities as for example, because of their age, ability, socio-economic background, or other attributions (Bauer & Wieszorek, 2016; Clark & Moss, 2011; Moesby-Jensen, 2021; Murray & Xie, 2024). To this end, clear guidance was issued to national organisers on how to invite participation from children and young people from diverse backgrounds and ensuring representation in terms of sex, gender identity and sexual orientation, abilities and disability, ethnicity, religion or belief. Invitations to participate in the research were issued to children living within a family who had been, or remained, recipients of governmental and non-governmental agency social support programmes. Bauer and Wieszorek's (2016) description of vulnerable and marginalised families was used as a guide when identifying participants. This definition highlights those living in challenging situations determined by social, economic and environmental factors that increase susceptibility to the impacts of challenging life events, deplete coping mechanisms and impact well-being.

The participation of young people who had graduated out of alternative care (care-experienced), was facilitated through networking with different national organisations. We were conscious that their overall engagement, and particularly our research methodology, should be considerate of the

well documented vulnerabilities they may be facing as a result of their care experience (Gypen et al., 2017; Howard et al., 2023; Simkiss, 2019; Stein, 2012; Stein & Munro, 2008; Waddoups et al., 2019). Due to ethical concerns, children and young people currently living in alternative care were not included in the research. It was thought that direct exploration of family life might become too distressing for those who had recently experienced separation from their families. Instead, information on the reasons children and young people are placed in alternative care was sought during semi-structured interviews and an online survey with professional stakeholders in another component of the overall study.

Creating a research environment of safety, trust, and in which dignity is upheld, was a key consideration (Bjorbækmo et al., 2022; Cluver et al., 2020; Hanson et al., 2023; McAra, 2016). This meant employing methods that ensured participants felt valued, respected and were able to engage in research situated within settings they found to be safe and comfortable (Beazley et al., 2009; Cluver et al., 2020; Samir et al., 2021; Welty & Lundy, 2013). In this respect, national researchers played a vital role in developing a rapport with participants. Further steps to provide a welcoming environment included the use of workshop spaces that were bright and airy and had enough room for all the activities including high energy icebreakers and energisers. Frequent breaks for snacks and beverages and the opportunity for participants to take time out of the workshop were also an important consideration. Careful thought was also given to the time children and young people attended workshops so as not to disrupt schooling, work, and other responsibilities.

Being aware of previously documented concerns regarding the power balance between researchers and participants, and especially any potential imbalance relating to the domination of adults over children and young people, attention was given to the status of the researchers and an approach that would help ameliorate such disparity (Haag et al., 2022; Herrmann et al., 2023; Kalenjuk et al., 2024; S. Martin et al., 2023; Spencer et al., 2020). This concerned the issue of reflexivity and the researchers being actively conscious of how their own beliefs and perspectives might impact their style of interaction, particularly in relation to being supportive of children and young people's active and meaningful participation in the research and active listening (Hanson et al., 2023; Mountz et al., 2023; Robinson et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2021). In part this was addressed through in-country preparation with researchers, and guidance on these topics included in the workshop handbooks.

A prominent ethical consideration was the safeguarding of children and young people during the research (Furey et al., 2010). To this end, a safeguarding protocol laid out the expected conduct of all researchers. A 'responsible adult' in the form of a social worker or equivalent was present on the premises during workshops with children and young people in case someone became distressed or wished to talk to someone other than the researchers about an issue. A referral mechanism was also established if a

researcher or responsible adult was made aware of a child or young person who might be at risk of harm. In addition, a ‘quiet’ room was also provided in all workshop locations in case participants wanted time out. The use of a quiet room was only used by two participants during the research and no child or young person sought out the ‘responsible adult’. Researchers reported any noted concerns to the ‘responsible adult’.

Recognition of research ethics informed the development of age and language appropriate Information Sheets given to potential participants notifying them of the aims of the research and what their participation would entail. Gaining informed assent and consent was obtained through the use of assent forms for children and consent forms for young people and adults that provided a clear opportunity to decline or accept to participate (Grasser et al., 2016; Robinson et al., 2023). We applied the practice of seeking assent as being the willingness to participate by those able to understand the proposed research but were legally a minor (Cotrim et al., 2021). Parental or legal/customary guardian consent was also sought where appropriate. Confidentiality was guaranteed including anonymity in reports (Bos, 2020; Hanson et al., 2023). Principles of confidentiality also informed the careful transfer and storage of all collated data in accordance with the General European Data Protection Regulation.³

Recognising the importance of providing feedback to participants (Murray & Xie, 2024) short, age-appropriate handouts were developed for the children and young people who participated in the research in each country. They included a summary of the information they had shared and how the data had been used to inform policy makers and practitioners at a national and international level.

In conclusion, it was a combination of the above principles that consciously shaped the development and implementation of our participatory research methodology with children and young people.

4. Methodology

The study employed a mixed qualitative design incorporating a desk review and the gathering of qualitative primary data. The latter included a series of participatory research workshops with children and care-experienced young people, which are the focus of the present article.

4.1. Desk Review

A desk review of hand sourced academic and grey literature was undertaken with a focus on factors associated with family separation and participatory research methodology. Further contextual analysis included

³ <https://gdpr.eu/>

examination of socio-economic conditions, the child protection system, and the use of alternative care in each of the eight participating countries. This information was important to carefully framing the research methods.

4.2. The participation of children and care-experienced young people

Utilising a purposive sampling process, primary data was collated during a series of research workshops with 517 children and care-experienced young people in the eight participating countries. The process of research design and gathering of data had two phases. Phase one included the participation of children and care-experienced young people in research design workshops in El Salvador and Lebanon. This was followed by the piloting of the emergent methods in those countries and further participatory research workshops in another six countries.

As noted in Tables 1 and 2, in total, 266 children aged 13-15 years and 251 care-experienced young people between the ages of 17-25 years who had left alternative care participated in the research. Governmental permission for inclusion of children was not granted in Uruguay. When reaching out to governmental and non-governmental organisations in Denmark, requests for the participation of children and care experienced young were mostly denied with high levels of existing commitments of professionals, and the protection of the children and young people they are responsible for, being the reason provided.

Table 1. Details of children and care-experienced young people participating in research design workshops

Country	Children aged 13 - 15 years	Care experienced young people aged 17-21 years
El Salvador	10 (7 females and 3 males)	10 (5 females and 5 males)
Lebanon	12 (6 females and 6 males)	10 (3 females and 7 males)
TOTAL	22	20

Table 2. Details of children and care-experienced young people participating in research workshops

Country	Children aged 13 - 15 years	Care experienced young people aged 17-25 years
Denmark	14 (10 females and 3 males and 1 non-gendered)	0
Cote d'Ivoire	49 (26 females and 23 males)	36 (20 females and 16 males)
El Salvador	9 (4 females and 5 males)	26 (17 females and 9 males)
Indonesia	35 (15 females and 20 males)	40 (21 females and 19 males)
Kenya	49 (26 females and 23 males)	37 (21 females and 16 males)
Kyrgyzstan	55 (31 females and 24 males)	38 (19 females and 19 males)
Lebanon	33 (15 females and 18 males)	30 (12 females and 18 males)
Uruguay	0	24 (16 females and 8 males)
TOTAL	244	231

Between 9 and 12 participants attended each workshop. This number reduced to 4 children in a workshop in Denmark.

4.2.1. Participation of children and care-experienced young people in the design of research questions and methods in El Salvador and Lebanon

We believed that most efficacious gathering of accurate and pertinent information from children and young people in different country settings would be better achieved through research methods they helped develop. To this end, as noted in [Table 1](#), 22 children aged 13 to 15 years old living within families experiencing vulnerable circumstances, and 20 young people aged 17 to 21 years old who had graduated out of alternative care, participated in a total of four age specific research design workshops in El Salvador and Lebanon. Each design workshop lasted two full days. The aim of the workshops was the development of research questions and methods that would be transferable and suitable for use with other children and young people across the eight participating countries.

4.2.1.1. Information Meetings for children and care-experienced young people invited to participate in design workshops

To make a fully informed decision about their participation in the research design workshops, the children and young people in El Salvador and Lebanon were invited to join initial information meetings and provided Information Sheets. During the meeting, they were provided details of the research, involvement in inter-active exercises that provided a taster of what their involvement would entail, and an opportunity to ask questions. All those involved in the information meetings agreed to participate in the design workshops.

4.2.1.2. Research design workshops with children and care-experienced young people in El Salvador and Lebanon

At the beginning of each workshop, participants were again provided an overview of the research purpose, and their informed assent /consent was sought. Due to time available and resource limitations, although recognised as desirable, it was not possible to conduct design workshops that started at a stage prior to the overall research aim being agreed, or some ideas for research exercises already considered. This would have required substantially more time for meetings, discussion, and preparation with children and young people than available resources allowed for. Therefore, the final format of the design workshops involved children and young people being invited to 'test' and evaluate different research exercises initially designed specifically for their age group by the Lead Researcher as informed by previous critiques of PAR and other methods of participatory research, as well as discussions with national researchers.

During the design workshops the process of developing a set of research questions that, most importantly, could be easily understood and used with other children and young people such as themselves in different countries, began with a discussion about the study's aims and objectives. A series of exercises, as for example the use of quizzes, were used to explore ways to

formulate and practice asking each other questions that would elicit specific information. This progressed to developing questions that would gather information about unity and problems in the family home, as well as possible solutions to identified challenges. To achieve this, participants split into groups and worked together to draw a picture depicting a typical house in their community and the family that lived there. Together they developed questions about this family that would elicit the information being sought by the research. The groups then came together to discuss their work and decide on a final set of questions they all agreed on.

At the end of the workshops, a consolidation of what were very similarly worded questions across all the sessions led to the development of the following research questions:

- What makes children/young people in this family happy when they are at home?
- What makes children/young people in this family worried or unhappy when they are at home?
- What makes the adults in the family feel happy, strong and united when they are at home?
- What makes the adults in the family feel worried or unhappy when they are at home?
- What is needed to help families be happy, strong and united?

Participants were also consulted on a set of research workshop exercises that would gather answers to the questions they had developed and were suitable to use with other children and young people. This was achieved by 'testing' a range of possible research exercises each based on the idea of using visually creative activities to help engage and encourage the active participation of children and young people. The decision to introduce such exercises was based on literature on participatory methods (Arias-Urueña & Vaghi, 2023; Levac et al., 2019; O'Grady, 2022; Scott et al., 2023) and previous research conducted with vulnerable children in many different countries by the International Lead Researcher.

Following the completion of each research exercise, participants were given an anonymous evaluation sheet containing questions about the efficacy of the activity, whether they thought it suitable for others the same age as themselves, and if it would gather the information the study was seeking. They were asked if the exercise should be changed and if so, their suggestions for re-design, or if they had ideas for different activities. Discussions also helped gather feedback and ideas. Almost all the participants thought the exercises were 'very good'. They particularly liked the exercises that involved the use of art materials and drawing. Suggestions included making some of the exercises easier, more 'active', and shorter. They also said others in their

age groups would enjoy the use of icebreakers and energisers. Overall, the exercises were assessed as appropriate for eliciting answers to the research questions from other children and young people within their age group and different contexts. In light of the feedback, the workshop methods were adjusted by shortening two of the exercises and increasing the number of energisers.⁴

A final set of workshop guidance handbooks was produced for use by the national researchers to ensure comparability in the implementation of the research in all eight countries. The handbooks contained a compilation, and step-by-step guide on the use of, the different research exercises the children and young people had helped develop.

Overall, these considerations and actions, also informed by the aforementioned ethical principles, led to an approach involving simplicity of tasks, visual and creative modes of expression, a unified workshop structure, and research questions eliciting child and young person-led construction of meaning, that could be applied across diverse socio-economic, cultural, and linguistic contexts, while still allowing for local adaptation where necessary.

4.3. Participatory research workshops with children and young people in eight countries

Following the design sessions in El Salvador and Lebanon, a further 54 participatory research workshops were undertaken with children aged 13 to 15 years old (11 to 16 years old in Denmark) living with their family, and care-experienced young people aged 17 to 21 years, or 19 to 25 years old, depending on the customary/legal age of graduating out of care in a country. The workshops were held in two locations in each country: one urban and one rural/semi-rural. Exceptions were Denmark where it was not possible to involve the participation of care-experienced young people and workshops were only held in an urban setting.

4.3.1. Introductions and evaluation of research exercises

All research workshops began with exercises that introduced the topic of the study and allowed the participants time to get to know one another and the national researchers. To ensure the research methods were appropriate in each country, apart from in Denmark, the duration of the initial workshop with the first group of children and young people was extended to allow them time to evaluate the research methods. They were asked to evaluate each exercise with a view to ensuring applicability and acceptability within their country. Feedback resulted in no changes being made as they unanimously said they were happy with the methods and their appropriateness. We believe this was in part, due to involvement of children and young people being a key design element of the research tools, as well as use of simple and creative

⁴ The methodology and questions developed during co-design workshops were used to develop similar workshops with family members. For further information please see Gale et al., 2025.

exercises. Consultation with national researchers prior to the workshops also helped check for any concerns. Based on their advice, the only change made in each country was the list of appropriate activities, as for example eating pizza in El Salvador or falafel in Lebanon, in an ice breaker exercise.

4.3.2. Drawing a family home

Each workshop, whether for children or young people, centred around the idea of an imaginary family. Breaking into two groups, they worked together to draw a picture of this family living in a home they thought was typical of their local community. As this proved a popular exercise, we made sure sufficient time allowed for the drawing and any additional decoration using an array of art and craft materials.

4.3.3. Identifying positive and negative factors influencing family life

Participants were asked to think about and write down factors that brought unity to, and positive, happy elements of, family life in the household they had drawn. They were then asked to think about and record factors that negatively impacted the unity within the family. They were told they could write as many or as few words they liked on post-its and could use as many post-its as they liked. For those unable to write, answers could be provided in picture form. In the workshops with children, to help engender a sense of safety and encourage their participation, they confidentially folded up and placed their post-its in small bags which were then opened by the researchers after the workshop. Depending on the advice of the national researchers, in some countries this was also repeated with groups of young people otherwise they placed their post-its on their drawings. Young people were then asked if they wanted to discuss their answers with the larger group. There was no pressure to do this and we did not explore issues they were not comfortable with.

4.3.4. Finding solutions to identified challenges

Children and young people were asked about solutions to the challenges they had identified. Children individually drew their idea of a superhero and chose three ways they would use their superpowers to help families. Solution trees were used to elicit ideas from young people. In some groups they ranked their solutions in order of importance. Once again, participants were asked if they wanted to present and discuss what they had produced.

4.3.5. Use of icebreakers and energisers

Other activities included an exercise at the start of each workshop to create shared 'ground rules', as well as opportunities throughout to ask questions and seek clarification. The use of ice breakers and energisers were important in helping alleviate any tensions and making the sessions more fun, and lively. The provision of snacks and meals during break times were well received and an opportunity for participants to socialise with each other.

4.3.6. Adaptation of research methods to support the inclusion of children and young people with disabilities

Firmly believing all children have valid and relevant perspectives on matters concerning their own life and that of their families and, in the particular knowledge that children with disabilities have often been excluded from research (Shakespeare, 2015), it was important to ensure their participation. A workshop with children with disabilities was introduced in Lebanon during which the children completed the session whilst the researcher carefully considered the right of participants to choose the degree to which they participated in different exercises. Building on the experience of the workshop with children with disabilities in Lebanon, the researchers in Kyrgyzstan also facilitated the participation of children with disabilities in one workshop. At a later period of the project, building on the original methodological approach, Dr. Cecilie Kolonda Moesby-Jensen further developed the research methods for two workshops with children and young people with disabilities in Denmark. These methods were also used in one workshop with children with disabilities in Indonesia. Indicating the adaptability of the initial tools, these workshops utilised the same research questions and a methodological approach to ensure predictability, structure, and clarity and ensure participation was accessible, pleasant, flexible, and not stressful (Fayette & Bond, 2018; Moesby-Jensen, 2019, 2021). This included for example, the use of pre-created, visually creative tools that allowed for easy communication of, and participation in, the tasks. Moesby-Jensen & Gale (2026) have published further details of this approach.

4.4. Analysis

Kousholt and Juhl (2023) highlight the importance of not losing children's voices in the process of analysis of data, and to heed what has historically been seen as the more powerful perspectives of adults over those of children, including the dominance of those of researchers, in the reporting of research findings. Understanding this vital premise and wanting to ensure proportionate and true representation of the data provided by children and young people, particularly in light of their constituting 45 per cent of all research participants in the full study that also included adult informants (Gale et al., 2025), efforts were made to ensure their voices were not downplayed, and were given due weight, during analysis and reporting. To obtain an accurate understanding of their input, in the first instance, their contributions were analysed independently of other participants.

In total, children and young people shared their thoughts and ideas during the research workshops by providing 4,738 written answers on both positive and negative factors they understand impact the unity of families, both positive and negative, and 1,136 responses when asked about solutions to address the challenges they identified. All their written answers were transposed into digital word documents. These documents were imported

into NVivo 11 data analysis software and through a text query process, extracted and collated 'instances' of similarities (and variances) were used to inform emerging and core themes.

The analytical focus on repetition across written responses was treated as an indicator of thematic saturation rather than analytical redundancy. Given the volume of written contributions and the consistency of recurring themes across countries, age groups, and workshop settings, this pattern strengthened confidence in the robustness and validity of the participatory approach and methods.

For the final study report, data gathered from adult research participants was triangulated with that provided by children and young people and used to inform a set of findings and recommendations at both a country and an international level (Gale et al., 2025).

5. Findings from the research workshops

The findings as presented below, are included primarily to illustrate how the multi-stage participatory research approach and methods enabled the generating of rich and consistent data on internal and external factors impacting family life across low-middle and high-income countries. Several elements of the methodology proved particularly effective in this respect, including the research design phase, the structure and flow of workshops and exercises, and age and ability-appropriate adaptations.

In the first instance, analysis of children and young people's narratives regarding challenges impacting family life resulted in the emergence of three primary themes: all forms of violence, both against children and between adults in the household, poor familial relationships, and issues related to poverty. The issue of disability was noticeably absent in their contributions.

Physical and sexual violence were common themes across all counties except Denmark, and with suggested prevalence varying between other countries. A further prominent factor was emotional violence and the lack of bonding, communication, trust, and understanding within families. Connections linking emotional violence and discord between parents with divorce and family separation were offered. A sense of physical and emotional dominance of men over women also came to the fore.

Poverty was a further concern within households and applied to all countries. Children and young people noted how economic hardship made it difficult for parents to meet basic needs such as food, housing, and the cost of utilities. The degree to which these hardships are felt differs from country to country but remain a significant factor contributing to parent's stress and the tension within households.

When children and young people were asked about solutions to address the familial challenges, once again, there was an overall concurrence across countries as to what this might entail. We conclude that, not only were the contributions of all children and young people important, but the significant and rich information they provided helps confirm the applicability of the methods that supported their participation.

The participatory methodology implemented with children and young people was designed to explore factors affecting family life and identify ways to strengthen it. The information they provided was aligned with evidence from other components of the full study providing insights into drivers of child-parent separation and use of alternative care (Gale et al., 2025). Findings illustrate the way multiple and inter-related factors, consisting of both internal and external socio-economic and cultural influences impact family life that may then lead to situations of child-parents separation. The methodology contributes to the understanding that the challenges families are facing are most often resolvable and that for thousands, or even perhaps millions, of children around the world, placement in alternative care is preventable. We also believe the research methodology and tools were instrumental in collating data that will help identify gaps in policy and service provision at micro and macro levels. In this manner, while child protection systems often focus on responding to risk of harm, the findings highlight the need for more appropriate investment in unrestricted access to preventative universal and specialist services and the development of evidence-based legislation, policies and strategies that tackle the root causes of separation (Gale et al., 2025).

6. Limitations

Although the principle of full and meaningful participation of children and young people was an important consideration in our research process, we recognise the lack of their inclusion in all elements of the research development, implementation, feedback on findings, and dissemination. This was due to several factors including the pre-determined aims of the research and budget made available by the commissioning organisation.

A focus was placed on the use of creative activities rather than group discussion or individual interviews with children and care experienced young people. We understand this may have limited a more in-depth exploration of some of the issues raised and sufficient attribution as for example, through disaggregation of findings by sex and age.

Asking participants to depict a “typical” household provided a safe and accessible entry point for discussing family life but may have obscured diverse or non-normative family structures and encouraged more idealised representations; this was partially mitigated through open-ended follow-up discussions.

Due to differing constraints within local organisations setting up the in-country studies, workshops with children with disabilities were only held in four of the eight countries and overall, the research did not engage with a representative number of participants with disabilities. In each country, we only had sufficient resources to conduct the study in two locations: one urban and one rural or semi-rural. We realise this may not have fully reflected the situation throughout a country, especially in those as large and diverse as Indonesia.

Previous authors have noted how research can be restricted when resources are pre-determined by donor-driven studies (Duckett et al., 2010; Proefke & Barford, 2023). Whilst being grateful for the resources that were made available to conduct this important research, limitations highlight the importance of calculating, negotiating for, and obtaining sufficient resources, including those of time and budget, at the outset of research so as to allow for full and meaningful participatory research with and by children and young people in all stages of the research.

7. Conclusion

The literature on participatory research recognises the involvement of those whose lives are directly affected by the topic under study as essential to gathering relevant data and informing well targeted, evidence-based policy and service provision. However, the absence of participation of children and young people in research, and specifically that on understanding drivers leading to child-parents separation and placement in alternative care, has been noted across different countries of the world.

Our study took steps to address this concern by undertaking research involving children and care-experienced young people in eight countries with differing socio-economic and cultural contexts. This process was initially informed by careful consideration of research ethics pertinent to working with vulnerable populations. It was then achieved through the development and use of a multi-stage participatory approach and methods that proved appropriate in terms of eliciting pertinent information and transferability across diverse country contexts and languages.

We believe our study demonstrates how the engagement with children and young people in shaping the research questions and methods incorporating simple and creative activities, was crucial to ensuring appropriate tools for evidence gathering with others in their age group across the participating countries as well as the ease we found in conducting comparative analysis. Such consultation and participation also exemplify how it is possible to utilise research methods that help facilitate a sensitive exploration of challenging factors impacting family life, and identification of relevant solutions, from the perspectives of those living in difficult circumstances.

We consider affirmation of how the research methodology we used was instrumental in bringing together the ideas, perspectives and insights of those with lived experience, is evident from the richness and breadth of data that provided a clear understanding of the positives associated with family life as well as challenges and required solutions. We further conclude that the thematic saturation of data, found within the 5,874 written responses from children and young people, indicates the research methodology and tools proved not only suitable for eliciting the sought information, but also in providing robust and credible evidence.

In this paper we have provided an overview of the research tools we used in order to prompt ideas for future research. However, we would also draw attention to the importance of adaption and creation of tools as appropriate

for individual studies, and the competency and/or training of researchers to use them. The study demonstrates the potential of inclusive research to generate new knowledge and strengthen the participatory foundations of developing relevant policy and service delivery. We recommend that future studies should continue to prioritise well-resourced and innovative research methodology, deepen cross-cultural inquiry, and ensure the meaningful participation of children and young people, including those from vulnerable backgrounds.

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