Children and young people’s participation and non-participation in research

Cathy Murray considers the involvement of children and young people in research in the field of adoption and fostering in the UK, based on a review in 2004 of the Quality Protects bibliographic database.1 The database comprises details of 182 research studies conducted since 1991, of which 72 were categorised as relevant to adoption and fostering. Of these, 38 (53 per cent) involved children and young people in the process. Three aspects of participation and non-participation in research are considered. First, researchers’ reasons for involving children and young people are outlined. Secondly, the role of gatekeepers is examined. When embarking on the review, it had been anticipated that ethical and methodological concerns would be the key challenges to involving children and young people in research. However, gatekeepers emerged from the research outputs as equally significant. It is argued that while gatekeeping is played out in specific research projects as an apparently individualised response, it reflects the pervasiveness of a protectionist model of children and young people over a citizen-with-rights model. Thirdly, the strategies that researchers employed to increase the likelihood of children and young people’s participation are reported.

Introduction
The shape of state intervention in the lives of children and young people over the last few decades in the UK has altered. This is particularly so for children in need of care and accommodation. Fewer children and young people are now removed from their homes following, inter alia, abuse and neglect. Moreover, those removed are now more likely to be placed with foster carers than in residential placements, as recent UK figures indicate. Of 78,853 looked after children at 31 March 2003, the majority (62 per cent) were living with foster carers compared with a minority (13 per cent) in residential placements (five per cent were placed for adoption, 16 per cent were living with their birth parents/family and four per cent were categorised as other) (BAAF, 2004). While some debates, for instance about placement stability and contact with birth relatives, have endured across the decades, additional ones have arisen, from the shortage of fostering and adoptive placements to the scrutiny of already existing but previously less publicised forms of accommodation such as kinship care.

Alongside changes in state care, there has been a slow but perceptible shift in attitude towards children and young people, who are increasingly perceived as capable of having an impact on policy, not least because the principle of participation is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. For example, in outlining an action plan to increase participation, the Department of Health asserted that

Ministers across departments are committed to giving children and young people a real say and real choices about government policies and services that affect them. (2002, p 4)

Developments reflecting this approach include the establishment of the Children’s Taskforce (Department of Health, 2002, p 11). Not only have young users’ views increasingly been sought in the policy arena, but they have also come to be constituted as evidence of the efficacy of services. For example, in respect of the Supporting Parents initiative, Margaret

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1 The Quality Protects research database was developed from a research mapping exercise commissioned by the Department of Health. The mapping was conducted by Thomas Coram Research Unit in 2000 to inform the development of the specification for the Quality Protects research initiative. It was later updated in 2002 (www.york.ac.uk/res/qualityprotects/files/links.htm). The database includes ongoing and recently published studies relevant to the Quality Protects objectives and with a bearing on services for families.
Hodge, Minister for Children, Young People and Families, noted that the Government’s commitment to improve services for families was to be based on sound evidence, which was to include the views of parents and young people themselves (Quinton, 2004, p 7).

In academia, it was the discipline of sociology which in the 1990s led the way in theorising and the ‘new sociology of childhood’ (James and Prout, 1990; Qvortrup et al, 1994; James et al, 1998) was established, although multiple disciplines have subsequently embraced the social studies of childhood. Comparisons across time suggest that childhood has not always been defined as a separate entity from adulthood (Aries, 1986), while comparisons across countries reveal a range of childhood experiences and children in roles as diverse as carers and fighters. Childhood is not represented as static or unitary, nor children as passive: rather, children are conceptualised as social actors, capable of affecting as well as being affected by their environment. Taking up this theme of children and young people as social actors and encouraging methodological innovation, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded 22 research studies in the UK in its programme entitled Children 5–16: Growing into the 21st Century, which ended in 2001.

These parallel trends have contributed to and been fuelled by a dialogue about the viability of engaging children and young people in research, and increasingly their voice is expected. The question explored in the current paper is whether this change is reflected in research being undertaken in the field of adoption and fostering. It is equally important that children and young people’s right to refuse to participate in research is respected, and my focus on optimising participation is in no way intended to detract from this.

Review of the Quality Protects research database
A database of research about children and young people at the turn of the century might have been expected to reflect the trend towards participation of children and young people in research. In order to investigate this, a review was conducted in 2004 of the Quality Protects research database comprising 182 studies. The task was then to locate the outputs, whether reports, books or journals, of the studies in the database that were relevant to adoption and fostering and, of these, to identify the ones which had involved children and young people in the research.

The Quality Protects research database was developed from a research mapping exercise commissioned by the Department of Health. The mapping was conducted by Thomas Coram Research Unit in 2000 to inform the development of the specification for the Quality Protects research initiative. It was later updated in 2002 (www.york.ac.uk/res/qualityprotects/files/links.htm). The database includes ongoing and recently published studies relevant to the Quality Protects objectives and with a bearing on services for families (rather than a theoretical orientation). The mapping exercise was limited to research funded by the Government (the Department of Health, the Home Office, the National Assembly for Wales, the Scottish Executive, the Office for Northern Ireland), by trusts and charities which fall under the ‘family funders’ umbrella (eg the Nuffield and Joseph Rowntree Foundations) and by the ESRC.

Of the 182 studies in the Quality Protects research database, 72 were deemed to be relevant to adoption and fostering, either because the substantive topic was clearly about adoption or fostering or because the sample included some children or young people who were currently, or had recently, been fostered or adopted. Determining relevance was not as straightforward as anticipated. To take the most common example, many of the studies were about looked after children, which, given the high proportion of this group that are fostered, would be expected to be relevant to fostering (and adoption). Yet often the specific focus in each study, such as care-leavers, disability, mental health, teenage pregnancy or ethnicity, rendered the issue of fostering (and adoption) secondary and relatively hidden in the research outputs. Such studies have nonetheless been included because adopted and fostered
Seventy-two of 182 studies were considered relevant to adoption and fostering. Table 1 indicates that of these 72 studies, 38 (53 per cent) involved children and young people in the process. Of the research outputs in which the age of those interviewed or observed was identified, most indicated that the young participants were in their teenage years. More studies focused on children and young people who lived with foster carers than on those who had been adopted.

Studies were deemed to involve children or young people if they were seen by the researcher for at least one part of the data collection stage. Children and young people were rarely involved at other stages, such as framing the research questions or as advisory group members. All but two of the studies (in which children and young people were observed) employed individual interviews and these varied considerably. Unstructured interviews entailed either a topic guide or the young people deciding what they spoke about (within the constraints of the topic), while at the more structured end of the continuum, closed questions and standardised measures were employed. A mix of structured and unstructured approaches was not unusual. Additionally, studies employed surveys, group interviews, focus groups, observation and videotaping. Adults (predominantly social services personnel and parents or carers) were also interviewed, surveyed or videotaped in all but four of the studies.

A typical pattern was for the initial target sample to comprise hundreds of children and young people, in respect of whom biographical, demographic and historical information was collated from written social services or court files and/or surveys. A smaller sample of professionals and parents or carers and an even smaller sample of children and young people were then interviewed. What was striking was how rarely the target samples for children and young people were achieved and this paper will explore some of the issues relating to these low recruitment rates.

### Why researchers involved children and young people in the studies

Before turning to low recruitment rates, the reasons which researchers gave for involving children and young people are outlined. First, it was considered to be ideologically desirable, as the following example illustrates:

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\ldots \text{in keeping with Save the Children’s philosophy of giving children and young people the opportunity to voice their own opinions, the study involved young people, not only as interviewees, but also as advisers on the content and design of the research process, from its inception through to dissemination, both locally and nationally. (Barry, 2001, p 17)}
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Secondly, hearing the perspectives of children and young people was in keeping with policy requirements to heed user views, usually by eliciting their perspective of the provision they experienced, as Ward et al (forthcoming) observed:

\[
\ldots \text{Best Value requires users’ views to be taken into account in all evaluations of service provision. However, data collected from case files provide little insight into children’s perceptions of their experience. Plans were therefore made to interview a subset of eight per cent of the sample children in order to obtain qualitative data about their own views of the positive and negative factors of being looked after.}
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Thirdly, researchers aimed to gain insights into children and young people’s own explanations of their behaviour, for example in this study into why they had gone missing from home:

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\ldots \text{a survey based on questionnaires completed by professionals cannot cap-}
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**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research involving children and young people</th>
<th>Number of studies</th>
<th>Percentage of studies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research that involved children and young people</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research that did not involve children and young people</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of studies relevant to adoption and fostering</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>100%</td>
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tured the intentions of young people when they go missing. We explored the circumstances in which young people see themselves as running away in the qualitative phase of the research, but our surveys were based upon professional understandings of running away, which may or may not coincide with the ways in which young people see their own behaviour. (Wade and Biehal, 1998, p 17)

Fourthly, children and young people were involved so that they might inform the direction of the research. Thomas and Beckford (1999) suggested that their qualitative approach allowed the adopted children to ‘direct the study into areas they saw as significant’ (p 2) and in Barry’s (2001) study of young people’s transitions, which included care leavers, the young people chose three topics for the interview from a list they drew up of relevant issues.

The role of gatekeepers

The number of children and young people interviewed in each study (excluding control groups) ranged from four to 142. The large samples achieved in a minority of studies no doubt reflect the positive role of professionals and parents or carers in smoothing the path for researchers. However, in most studies the target samples were not achieved and only between 15 and 30 children and young people were interviewed. There was evidence from outputs which provided such information that it was not poor response rates from the children and young people themselves that accounted for their non-participation in research. For example, in a study of adoptive children, the response rate was 83 per cent (Thomas and Beckford, 1999) and Wade and Biehal (1998), in a study of runaways, remarked that a very small number of young people contacted refused to be interviewed. Clearly there are a myriad of other factors involved, but one that emerged as key was the role of gatekeepers.

Gatekeepers are those with ‘the power to grant or withhold access to people or situations for the purposes of research’ (Burgess, 1984, p 48). Given the relatively powerless position that the young occupy in society, and that most research with them involves researchers approaching adults for their agreement, gatekeeping is particularly pertinent to children and young people. Additionally, many of those who are involved in the care system are surrounded by an array of people who act as gatekeepers, including foster and adoptive parents, birth parents, social workers, keyworkers, the local authority and professional bodies (e.g. Association of Directors of Social Services). These gatekeepers have legal rights and responsibilities to safeguard the welfare of children in their care; they also have a duty to take account of the views of children and young people, according to age and understanding, so decisions should be made in consultation with them. Given the centrality of gatekeepers to research with children and young people, our limited knowledge about them is surprising.

As things currently stand, children and young people rarely agree entirely for themselves to take part in research, as many of the studies reviewed exemplified. Brown (2002) explained how in a child protection study a letter was sent to eligible families ‘unless the social worker considered that it was not appropriate for them to be invited to take part’ (p 32), after which the parents were asked and finally the children were directly contacted for their consent. Clayden and Stein (2002), in their evaluation of care-leaving mentoring schemes, in which half the target number of interviews were achieved, commented that ‘it was clear that a number of projects were reticent to participate’ (p 26) and consequently many young people had never been approached by the project co-ordinators. Harwin et al (2003), researching care orders, reported that ‘the most common reason for children not being interviewed was that the carers refused to allow them to take part’ (p 25). In a study of adopted children and young people (Thomas and Beckford, 1999) about 50 per cent of parents passed the information packs about the research to their children. Often it was only when parents or carers had given their consent to themselves and their children participating that the researchers could contact
the children and young people. There were few instances in the studies reviewed of the children and young people being approached directly. Harwin et al. (2003) interestingly differentiated according to age, with researchers approaching only those 11 and over simultaneously with their parents or carers, while the latter were contacted about those under 11.

Local authorities differed as to whether they enforced an opt-in or an opt-out approach to research. An opt-in approach necessitates the potential participant making contact if they wish to take part, whereas an opt-out approach assumes participation in the absence of any indication to the contrary. Inevitably, an opt-in approach decreases the likelihood of respondents agreeing to take part as it includes those who do not make contact for other reasons (e.g., lethargy). Those who argue in favour of an opt-in approach express ethical concerns that an opt-out policy will lead to the inclusion of reluctant participants. Ward et al.’s (forthcoming) study illustrates well the impact of the two approaches on children and young people’s involvement in research, as in the four local authorities where an opt-out approach was adopted 39 children were interviewed, whereas in the two local authorities in which participants opted in, eight children were interviewed.

The current review of the Quality Protects research database and subsequent scrutiny of the research outputs illuminate gatekeepers’ reasons for the non-participation of children and young people in research across a range of studies. These are outlined in Table 2.

The reasons given in Table 2 suggest an adherence to a protectionist model rather than to a citizen-with-rights model of childhood. From the outputs, it was clear that few of the reasons in Table 2 had emanated from children and young people themselves, but rather reflected adults’ concerns about them engaging in research. The language used reflects this protectiveness. For some adults, the need to protect stems from the perceived vulnerability of children and young people (e.g., that they would be upset by the change in routine that a research interview would bring) and for others, from the perceived lesser competence of children and young people (e.g., that they would not understand). Adopting a citizen-with-rights model would suggest an agentic child and the emphasis would be on their competence and abilities. This would in turn be reflected in research accounts in which children and young people’s own reasons for not participating would be evident.

This is not to suggest that adults’ reasons for children and young people not participating in research are not valid, as some of the explanations in Table 2 clearly are. Apart from practical reasons, such as moving house, those who have been repeatedly interviewed in welfare or legal proceedings may well not wish to be interviewed again, while carers who have not informed their child that they are adopted would understandably not wish them to take part. Likewise, few would risk disruption of an already unstable placement (or equally, a stable one) by

<p>| Table 2 |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gatekeepers’ reasons for children and young people’s non-participation in research</th>
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<tr>
<td>Child/Young Person (YP) has been ‘traumatised’ by experiences which led to their removal from home</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child/YP needs to be ‘protected from over-exposure to research’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child is too young (aged under 7 or 8)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child/YP has been repeatedly interviewed for care/court proceedings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child/YP is receiving therapy, so further talking to adults is not deemed appropriate</td>
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<td>Child/YP might be ‘upset by’, ‘would not be interested in’, ‘would not understand’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research might be ‘damaging’ to the child/YP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child/YP is not aware of the ‘full situation’ (e.g., that they are adopted)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social worker does not think it is ‘appropriate’, ‘advisable’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Situation is deemed ‘too sensitive’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child/YP is ‘too disabled’ to participate, has ‘profound communication difficulties’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child/YP has mental health problems</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child/YP does not ‘like strangers’, would be ‘upset by the change in routine’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adoptive/foster placements are ‘fragile’, ‘disrupted’, ‘difficult’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adoptive/foster placements are going well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families are too busy, ill, had recently moved house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents/carers were the alleged perpetrators of abuse or neglect</td>
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<tr>
<td>Families are not aware of the young person’s disclosure of abuse</td>
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taking part in research, if they considered that it would have a deleterious effect. However, other reasons may have less validity. For example, Berridge et al (2002) noted that, despite concern initially expressed by children’s home managers that young people were being over consulted, none of those who agreed to be interviewed had previously been involved in any research.

The belief that research can be damaging to children and young people, implicit in several reasons in Table 2, is held not only by gatekeepers. Given that one of the key tenets of ethical research, according to professional codes (eg British Sociological Association), is that research participants should not be harmed, it is incumbent upon researchers and ethical committees to consider seriously their studies in the light of such concerns. While a partial view, it is interesting to note from the outputs in the current review that researchers’ comments about participants were positive, as illustrated by the following excerpts:

• In drawing out and focusing solely on the young people’s life stories, the interview process was generally seen as a cathartic and enjoyable experience for these young people. Many appreciated the opportunity to talk, to map out their lives in a more systematic way and to analyse their thoughts and feelings in more depth. (Barry, 2001, p 24)

Biehal and colleagues (1995) observed that ‘in many cases, it was the professionals who were more anxious about being interviewed than the young people’ (p 11) and in other studies young people made explicit their reasons for participation:

• I was thinking all day about what I was going to say, how I was going to explain things… the reason I offered [to take part in the research] was because I think people in the future should know what [young people] feel like now… if it helps in any way. (Young person, quoted in Masson et al, 1997, p 45)

Gender was not included by gatekeepers as a reason for non-participation of children and young people. However, it was notable that in the studies for which details about gender were available, the sub-samples of those who had been interviewed (as opposed to the initial sample) included more girls than boys. This indication that sample recruitment may be differentiated by gender raises two possibilities. Was it just that more boys were refusing to participate in the research than girls, or did the filtering by adult gatekeepers have a gender dimension? There was some suggestion that the latter might be the case. For example, Thomas and Beckford (1999), in their study of adoptive children, made the point that the difference was related to the action of the gatekeepers, not to the response of the boys and girls:

• the final sample of 41 children included 25 girls and 16 boys. The bias in favour of girls was due to parents passing more invitations to participate in the project to girls rather than boys. Of the children themselves who considered taking part, proportionately as many boys as girl agreed to be interviewed. (p 13)

This led to the concept of what I shall term ‘gendered gatekeeping’ and to the tentative hypothesis that the likelihood of gatekeepers agreeing to individual children and young people participating in research is affected by their gender. It is not possible to draw firm conclusions from the current review, and this remains a hypothesis to be explored in further research. It could also be extended to other dimensions, such as ethnicity or disability, details of which were even less consistently available in the outputs for any pattern across the dataset to be discerned. However, it is interesting to consider, when researchers and others claim to listen to the voice of the child, whose voice is being heard.

Strategies to increase children and young people’s participation in research

From the research outputs it was clear that a range of techniques, solutions and suggestions from the researchers were being utilised to meet the actual or perceived challenges posed by involving children and young people in research.
Strategies emerged in relation to three phases of the research process: engaging gatekeepers, engaging children and young people once gatekeepers had agreed to researchers contacting them, and the data collection stage.

First, in respect of engaging gatekeepers, three examples illustrate the types of approaches that were useful. In a study about leaving care, Dixon et al. (2004) invested a considerable amount of time in building relationships with the gatekeepers, including social services staff, before they gained access. They sustained the contact throughout the study, initially by visiting the gatekeepers in their offices and thereafter by maintaining regular contact by telephone. In a child protection study, Brown (2002) noted that letters prepared by the researchers sent directly by the director of social services to eligible families, while ensuring confidentiality, were not successful in engaging respondents. The approach was changed later in the research so that the letters were sent directly from the university, the site of the research, and included more information. Heptinstall (2000) suggested that asking maternal foster carers to take part in the study may well have increased the number agreeing to their children’s participation. These experiences underline the importance of a proactive role for researchers in engaging gatekeepers.

Secondly, researchers indicated ways of increasing the likelihood of children and young people agreeing to participate and, subsequently, turning up. Considerable emphasis was placed on sending out information to young participants that was both extensive and accessible, in terms of language and graphics. In addition, Thomas and Beckford (1999) included a photograph of the researcher and a tape about the study, advantageous to those who were unable to, or preferred not to, read. Some researchers employed the practice of offering remuneration, usually in the form of £5 or £10 gift vouchers, as a token of appreciation for participation in the study. Several researchers noted that when the arrangements were made through a gatekeeper, they were less successful than if the young people were contacted directly to arrange the timing and location of the interviews. For example, Morris (1998) found that:

\[\ldots\] there were instances of visits being arranged in a way which didn’t suit the young person, but because they hadn’t made it themselves they didn’t ‘own’ it and sometimes they felt able to (and presumably motivated to) break the arrangement. (p 47)

Other researchers adopted the practice of telephoning the day before the interview to confirm its suitability.

The third and most commonly alluded to strategy adopted to optimise children and young people’s participation was to focus on improving the data collection stage, which, as already stated, usually involved interviews. Similar to research conducted in other realms of child welfare and beyond, a range of techniques was employed, from Thomas and O’Kane’s (1999) decision-making pocket chart, designed to develop discussion about decision-making processes, to Neil’s (2004) adapted ‘Four-field map’, an exercise in which children place play people on a map to indicate how they feel about family members. Only four of the 38 studies focused on very young children in the interviews or observation, and in these studies techniques specifically aimed at this lower age group were employed. For example, in Schofield et al.’s (2000) study of experiences of growing up in foster care, ecomaps, puppets, pictures and story-stem completions were used with children aged four to 12 years old. Another strategy, adopted in several studies (eg Brown, 2002), was to make the interview with the children shorter than the interview with the parents or carers. Alternatively, researchers simplified or rendered more ‘child friendly’ already existing instruments, as did Williams et al. (2001), who added cartoons and pictures to their questionnaire.

While the search for easier, briefer, more entertaining and varied techniques in research with children and young people most often reflects a respect for recognising and responding to the heterogeneity of people’s communication styles, it is important that assumed
differences between adults and children are constantly questioned. Two examples will illustrate this point. First, in considering child-centred techniques, researchers sometimes refer to the limited capacity, such as low concentration levels, of children compared with adults. Yet it is interesting to note that Barry (2001), who introduced alternative methods ‘to boost concentration levels and facilitate discussion of the issues raised’, concluded after the study that:

*It was nevertheless surprising that the young people involved were able to talk in so much depth and over a relatively long period of time without seeming to lose concentration or momentum.* (p 23)

Secondly, it is often assumed that children and young people prefer other techniques to straightforward questions, which is an accepted format in most adult research. The ESRC programme, *Children 5–16: Growing into the 21st Century*, referred to above, encouraged researchers to use innovative approaches and in our own study in the programme (Hallett et al., 2003) we wholeheartedly adhered to this demand, providing the young participants with a plethora of techniques, from video clips of television soaps to a ‘secret box’, in which the young people could place a piece of paper with their anonymous worries written on it. However, when asked at the end of the interview which methods they had preferred, more of the young people indicated a preference for straightforward questioning than for any other technique. Equally, differences between younger and older age groups of children need to be recognised, as the young people in our study (Hallett et al., 2003) were aged 14–15. Thomas and O’Kane (1999) noted that the 8–12-year-olds in their study described the more traditional approach as ‘just sitting there talking’, which encouraged the researchers to use a range of activities (p 369). Both examples underline the worth of seeking feedback in future research from children and young people about their preferences.

**Discussion**

Policy, legislative and academic developments have increasingly emphasised listening to the voice of children and young people. The question underlying the review of the Quality Protects bibliographic database, undertaken in 2004, was whether these developments are reflected in research in the field of adoption and fostering. Of the 182 research studies in the Quality Protects database, 72 were categorised as relevant to adoption and fostering. Of these, 38 (53 per cent) involved children and young people in the process. When embarking on the review, it had been anticipated that ethical and methodological concerns would be the key challenges to involving children and young people in research. However, gatekeepers emerged from the outputs as equally significant, according to researchers. Access has previously been discussed more in relation to individual studies, whereas in the current review it has been possible to consider access across a range of studies.

It was clear that in order to reach children and young people, researchers in many of the studies reviewed had to approach a succession of gatekeepers, perhaps more in child welfare than in other fields. It has been argued that while gatekeeping is played out in specific research projects as an apparently individualised response, it reflects the pervasiveness of a protectionist model of children and young people over a citizen-with-rights model, as exemplified in the reasons gatekeepers gave for children and young people not participating (outlined in Table 2). It is suggested that researchers record, where known, the characteristics of those not participating in, as well as those participating in, their studies. This would enable the ‘gendered gatekeeping’ hypothesis, that gender (or other variables) may affect whether gatekeepers consult with young people about participating in research, to be tested. Meanwhile, researchers have to be cautious when claiming to listen to the voice of the child and question whose voice – in terms of gender, ethnicity and disability – is being represented.

It is crucial to note that gatekeepers are often the gateway as well as poten-
tially the barrier to children and young people’s participation, and that those samples that were achieved were almost invariably due to families and agencies enabling access. Moreover, not only gatekeepers have an impact on participation or non-participation. Other factors include the skills and enterprise of the researchers themselves, and some of the strategies they employed have been considered. Inevitably, as these outputs were written by researchers, they portray their perspective, yet little is known about the views of gatekeepers and children and young people at the access stage. What barriers do researchers (as opposed to gatekeepers) present to children and young people participating? Are researchers too intrusive or not persuasive enough? Could they present their research in more accessible ways? Do they discuss what they consider to be the benefits of research to children and young people, as outlined above? What aspects of research do gatekeepers consider potentially damaging to children and young people and could these be ameliorated or avoided altogether? These and other questions could fruitfully be explored in the future.

Whatever the cause, there are several implications of the low recruitment rates of children and young people identified. First, it is not possible to hear the voice of children and young people who do not participate in research. Secondly, there is an issue of sampling bias. For example, in one of the few studies specifically set up to compare families who participate in child welfare research (in this study, sexual abuse) with non-participants, Lynch et al (1993) noted that despite similarities in demography and in the level of abuse experienced, differences between the two groups still emerged. The authors concluded that ‘the more dysfunctional families were less likely to participate in the study’ and ‘non-participants were offered less therapy’ (p 943). Thirdly, in many studies an inordinate amount of time was taken to establish any size of sample of children and young people, the longest reported being 18 months. As Hepinstall (2000) rightly noted, the impact of low recruitment rates of children and young people has to be taken into account when researchers calculate the number of social services departments they need to approach for inclusion in their studies (p 871). Moreover, costings in research proposals should realistically reflect the additional time and resources required in gaining access.

Finally, funders have rarely concentrated resources solely on hearing the voices of children and young people in child welfare research. In the context of multi-stranded studies that include requirements to scrutinise case files, elicit the views of parents or carers and seek information from professionals, there may have been a tendency for these to be prioritised. Meanwhile, programmes with a focus on children, such as that funded by the ESRC (above), included few studies on child welfare. One way forward, if there is a commitment to hearing the voices of children and young people in adoption and fostering, is for programmes with a clear and sole focus on hearing these to be funded in this field. Studies within such programmes could additionally elicit users’ views on the research process, as well as the substantive topic, in order to address some of the questions raised in this paper and to provide both positive and negative perspectives of young participants. It is likely that future research in the field of adoption and fostering will also reflect the trend towards engaging children and young people in research not only as participants but also as co-researchers, for example as interviewers (eg Alderson, 1995) or as ‘peers’ in peer-led focus groups (eg Murray, forthcoming).

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Hazel Cameron, University of Stirling, for her assistance in locating the outputs of the studies in the Quality Protects bibliographic database, to the authors who took the time to discuss their research and send related material, and to the reviewers for their helpful comments.

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