

# EMBRACING CHAOS:

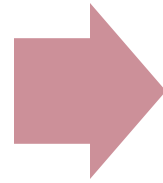
**Complexity theory-  
informed practices that  
normalise children's  
participation in child  
protection.**

*Samia Michail, 20 Nov 2024*

# Context

- + NSW Child Protection System
- + *Neoliberal times; hyper-individualism, economic control*  
*Shift of OOHC to community sector*  
*Child protection crisis; abolitionist views, staffing*
- + Children's participation discourse  
*UNCROC 35 years; increasing awareness of children's rights*  
*Disruption through global and national movements*  
*Mix of traditional and new social constructions of children*  
  
Children are not satisfied with their participation experiences

Complexity  
theory informed  
approach

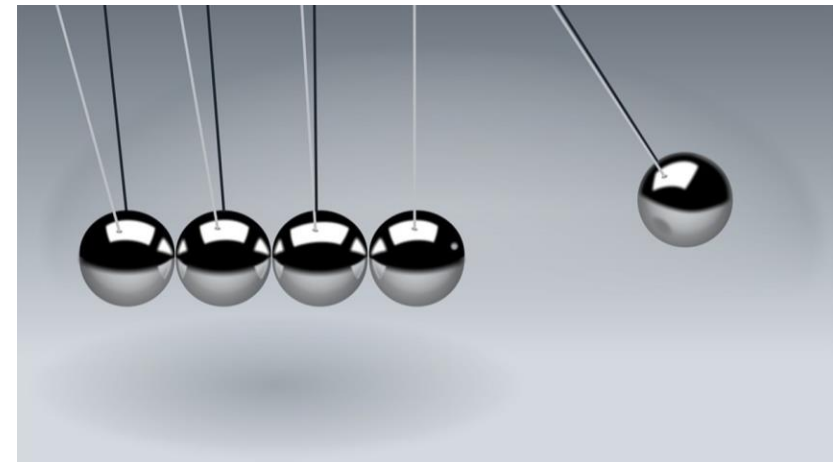


Children's  
participation to  
drive practice

- *“So children have complex cultural identity. And the system just doesn't even know what to do with that.”*
- *“But in the child protection system, I think it will take a long time before children and young people in that system are humanized as full humans...”*
- *“I think being in foster care, there's definitely that systematized version of children's voice that has both strengths and weaknesses, but you probably wouldn't change it.”*

# What makes our work complex?

- + Competing understandings of participation
  - Institutional and located understandings*
  - Personal/Procedural, Personal/Conceptual,  
Public/Procedural, Public/Conceptual
- + Child protection decision making is burdensome
  - (Michail et al 2023; Munro, 2019)*
  - Scope and Scale of decisions
  - Gravity of decisions
  - Emotional toll required

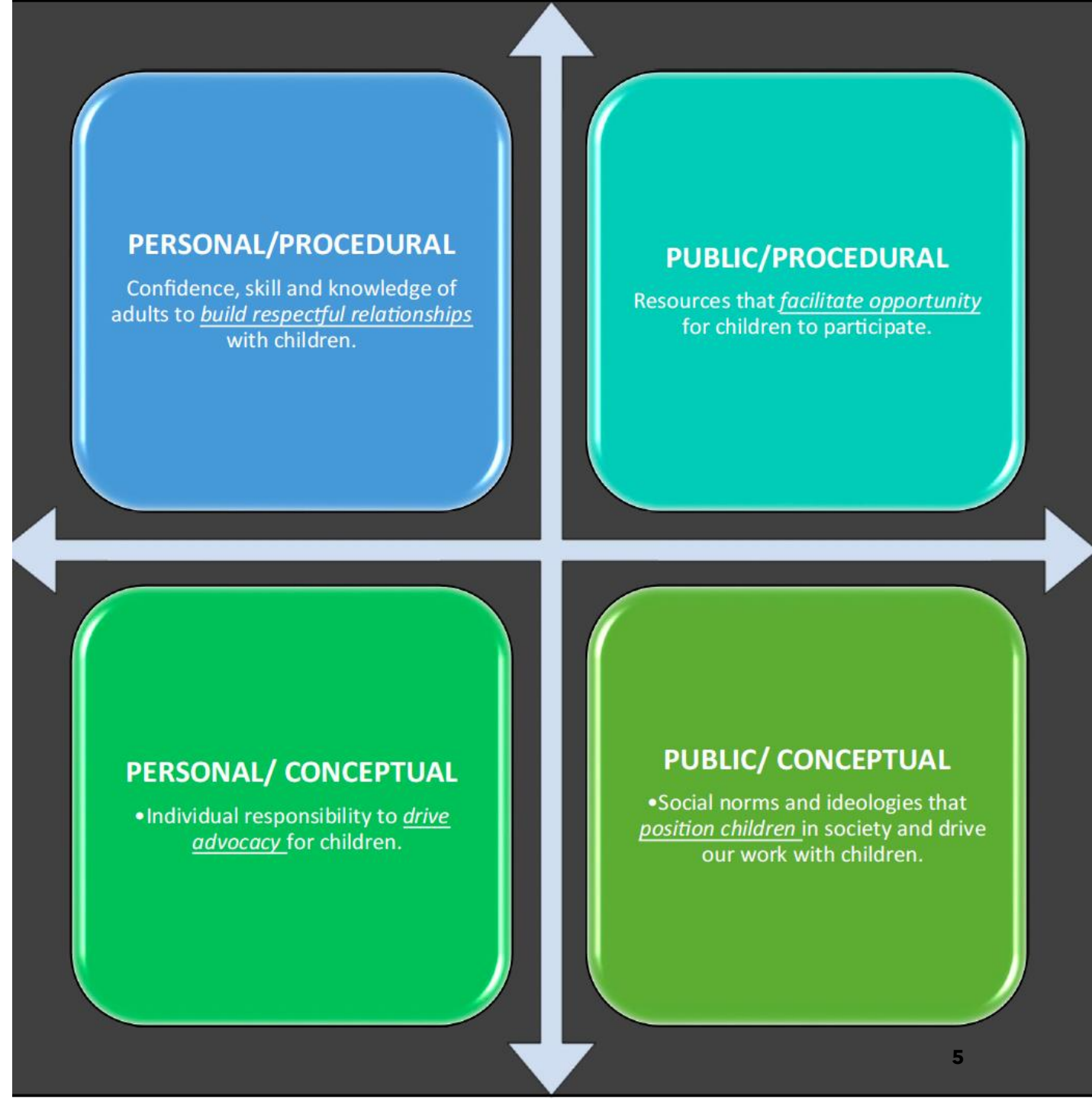


**Traditional organisational management fails to respond to the burden of decision making and disables child voice**

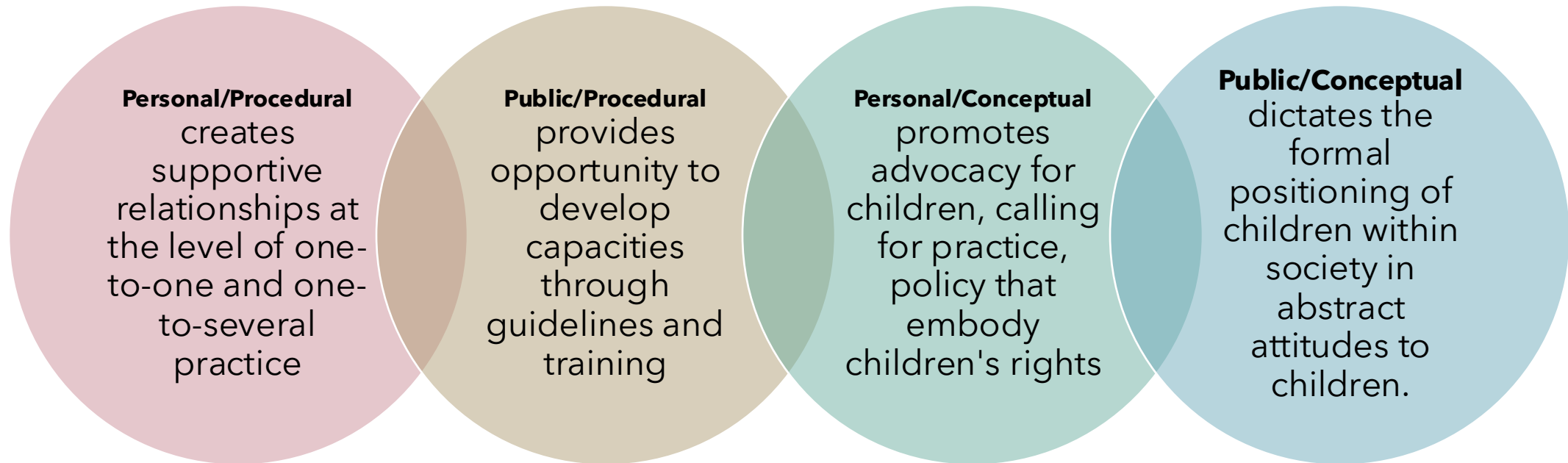
# Competing Understandings of Participation

*"...institutional and located understandings of participation, thus emphasising the different interests of adults..." p1585*

Michail, S., Baird, K., Fattore, T., & Grace, R. (2023). Operationalising Children's Participation: Competing Understandings Of The Policy To Practice 'Gap'. *Children & Society*, 37(5), 1576-1595.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12708>



Distinctive conceptualisations lead to distinctive implementation strategies.





# Decision Making *Scope and Scale*

- + CP decision makers regularly attend to competing interests
- + CP decision makers straddle professional and personal demands
- + CP decision makers are obligated to integrate complex information about culture
- + CP decision makers are repeatedly balancing organisational risk with the best interests of the child



# Decision Making *Gravity*

- + CP decision makers understand that the consequences of their decisions are severe
- + CP decision makers require specialised skills to understand and embed within practice the lived experience of the child
- + CP decision makers have difficult choices to make





# Decision Making *Emotional Toll*

- + CP decision makers make a personal investment in relational work
- + CP decision maker's 'self' is impacted
- + CP decision makers need to respond to trauma and create safety
- + CP decision makers experience discomfort to address abuse
- + CP decision makers can feel anxious



(Cullin, 2022; Keddell & Hyslop, 2019; Woodman et al., 2023)

- + *“People are making decisions based on, you know, big broad organisational risk, big broad allocation of resources. And what grabs your attention is often what you have to do legally. So that’s important. Legislation really matters. Policy frameworks really matter in terms of decision making.”*  
[KI#6].

Child protection decision making is burdensome

Decision makers are ambivalent about child participation

# Complexity Absorption

INGESTION	DIGESTION	ABSORPTION	ASSIMILATION	ELIMINATION
<i>Taking food into body</i>	<i>Breaking down food</i>	<i>Moving food into cells</i>	<i>Making food part of cell</i>	<i>Removing unused food</i>

*"[practitioner]...seeks to avoid forming any conceptions of how things should be, preferring to follow the emerging situation which has its own internal logic in order to benefit from that natural evolution of events (Jullien, [1999](#))... **fosters the skills** to act in a way that is in alignment with the emergent situation that leads to everyday strategic outcomes (complexity absorption) rather than deliberate goal-setting activities (complexity reduction)."* (Zhang, 2017)

- **Timing and Action**
- **Context and Situation**
- **Values and Gut**

# Complexity Absorption

- + Unfamiliar roles and new patterns of working
  - Explore the contribution of competing epistemic differences
  - Articulate system ambivalence
  - Distributed decision making
  - Inclusive horizontal structures *with* children and young people
  - Critical reflection 'in' and 'on' action (Schön's,1991)
  - Normalise collective risk



## + **Complexity Absorption**

- + Collective endeavour
- + Utilises inherent risk
- + Enhances decision-making quality
- + Integrates diverse perspectives
- + Fosters inclusive practices
- + Empowers children's voices
- + Encourages adaptive strategies
- + Supports holistic approaches

## + **Complexity Reduction**

- + Individual responsibility
- + Manages risk (to self and service)
- + May lead to decision paralysis
- + Risks overlooking critical details
- + Can complicate operational efficiency
- + Requires extensive individual training
- + May increase emotional strain
- + Challenges traditional frameworks

# Questions?

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Does your system allow for dialogue that explores epistemic differences about participation? In what ways?

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What are your experiences of complexity absorption in child protection services? In what ways does this complexity absorption normalize children's voices?