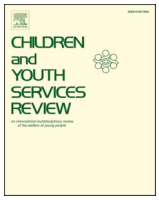
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What matters to me: a focused ethnography of children's agency in adoption preparation

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ABSTRACT

Adoption is commonly considered a promising pathway for children in care. Yet, the meaning of "best interests of the child" in adoption contexts is often determined by adults, with limited engagement with children's lived experiences and perspectives. This study responds to this ethical and practical tension by exploring how children in residential care experience adoption preparation through the Program for Preparing Children for Adoption (PPCA), a structured intervention that aims to support their transition into the adoptive family.

Using focused ethnography, the study was conducted over three months in a Portuguese residential care institution, comprising over 180 h of participant observation. Data were analyzed using the SAMMSA interpretive framework. Results reveal the coexistence of two local imaginaries: a dominant one that prioritizes behavioral regulation and order, and a counter-imaginary—introduced by the PPCA—that emphasizes relational closeness, emotional responsiveness, and individualized attention to children's experiences and needs.

A key analytical insight was the role of emotional salience in children's agency. Through three macro-themes—making sense of family, feeling valued, and being recognized as competent—the study illustrates how children express aspirations, concerns, and capacities in emotionally charged ways.

The PPCA was found to be transformative, both in influencing institutional imaginaries and opening space for a relational and responsive approach to adoption preparation. This study argues for an ethical reframing of children in care: not as passive recipients of protection, but as moral agents navigating emotionally-complex relational landscapes. Realizing this vision requires cultural, organizational, and ethical shifts in how child welfare is conceptualized and practiced.

1. Introduction

Each year, approximately 260,000 children lose parental care due to the termination of parental rights following severe harm or consent-based relinquishment (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2009; O'Halloran, 2021). Adoption emerges as a crucial permanent solution for many of these children. However, this process must be framed within ethical, child-centered practices that uphold the best interests of the child, as enshrined in international conventions and national legislation (Palacios et al., 2019).

While the "best interests of the child" principle is a normative standard in child welfare (Pösö et al., 2021; Tefre, 2020), its practical application often lacks specificity. What is deemed to be in a child's best interests is frequently interpreted and decided by adults, with insufficient attention to the child's own perspective. Despite a growing body of research on adoption as a lived experience (Brodzinsky et al., 2022), little is known about how children themselves make sense of the adoption process or how their views are acknowledged in decisions that deeply affect them.

The field of childhood studies has advanced a critical rethinking of children's roles in social systems, arguing for the recognition of children as active agents with the right and capacity to participate in decisions about their lives (James, 2007; Prout, 2004). Yet in practice, children's agency is often constrained by adult-centric assumptions and developmentalist thresholds that presume incompetence below certain ages or levels of "maturity" (Esser et al., 2016). These assumptions are especially dominant in the context of child protection, where children are frequently framed as vulnerable dependents in need of protection

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rather than as capable moral agents.

This framing has serious implications for children in residential care. These children are often described as hyper-vulnerable, due to prior experiences of neglect or abuse, and are thus frequently excluded from participatory processes in the name of protection (Carnevale et al., 2017; Keddell, 2023). However, this protective logic can create what Macdonald et al. (2021) call vulnerabilizing contexts—environments in which institutional structures, discourses, and practices compound children's vulnerabilities rather than mitigate them. Within such contexts, efforts to "shield" children from complex or emotionally charged topics, including discussions about adoption, may silence their voices and reinforce marginalization.

This presents a critical ethical tension: how to protect children from harm while simultaneously upholding their right to participate? To move beyond this impasse, a Childhood Ethics framework proposes an ontological and hermeneutic shift: one that recognizes children as self-interpreting moral agents whose voices matter ethically, not simply instrumentally (Carnevale et al., 2015, 2021). Rooted in Charles Taylor's notion of horizons of significance (Taylor, 1985, 2004), this framework contends that individuals, including children, interpret their lives through culturally, morally, and relationally situated meanings. Within this framework, children's moral experiences—their sense of right and wrong, of what matters, and how they are treated—are key to understanding their agency and well-being (Hunt & Carnevale, 2011).

Children in residential care develop these moral experiences within local and institutional social imaginaries—the shared values, policies, and narratives that shape daily life and ethical meaning-making (Montreuil et al., 2017). These imaginaries influence how children understand concepts such as family, belonging, justice, and change. The ways in which these imaginaries enable or constrain children's agency are central to ethical child welfare practice.

One structured intervention that attempts to embody this ethical imperative is the Program for Preparing Children for Adoption (PPCA). PPCA supports children aged 3 to 15 years through a narrative and metaphor-based journey designed to help them make sense of their personal histories and anticipate their transition into a new family (Henriques et al., 2017, 2021). Through activities that explore themes such as loss, identity, and belonging, and by involving the child as an active participant, the program promotes a collaborative and respectful relationship between professionals and children. In general, despite its promise, the implementation of such preparation programs occurs within broader institutional and social contexts that may remain vulnerabilizing. There is limited knowledge on how children themselves experience these interventions, how they navigate the moral dimensions of care and transition, and whether their voices are genuinely heard and acted upon.

This study seeks to address these gaps by exploring children's lived experiences in a Portuguese residential care institution that is using PPCA for preparing children for adoption.

To achieve this, we adopted a hermeneutic approach grounded in the moral experience framework advanced by the VOICE initiative (Carnevale et al., 2015, 2021). This approach foregrounds children's aspirations (what matters to them), concerns (when what matters is threatened or denied), and capacities (how they can act in light of these concerns) as expressions of agency (Siedlikowski et al., 2021). It also recognizes that children's agential capacities are shaped by their contexts, which may facilitate or obstruct expression of their agency (Spyrou, 2016; Esser et al., 2016). By focusing on how children articulate meaning within and against the social imaginaries of care and adoption, this study offers a child-centered, ethically grounded contribution to the understanding of adoption preparation. The next section details the methodological approach used to engage with children's perspectives within these complex institutional realities.

2. Methods

This study used focused ethnography to explore children's experiences within the context of a residential care institution implementing the PPCA program. Informed by a Childhood Ethics framework, grounded in interpretive and hermeneutic perspectives (Taylor, 2004), this approach was selected for its fit with context-specific, iterative, and meaning-oriented inquiry. Focused ethnography is especially suitable for time-limited studies with specific research questions in defined settings (Emond, 2005), and is well-aligned with research involving children. The study focused on how the PPCA was implemented, how professionals interpreted its principles in practice, and how children navigated moral experiences within this institutional context.

2.1. Recruitment plan and rationale

Following approval from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Porto (approval number 2020/05–2) the research team contacted the board of a residential care institution to request authorization to conduct the study on-site. Once institutional permission was granted for each child to participate in the study, informed agreement was sought from the professionals working within the setting. Children's assent was obtained through a three-stage process designed to ensure informed and voluntary participation, aligned with United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), Article 12, which recognizes the child as a full human being, with integrity and personality, and with the ability to participate freely in society.

First, the researcher was introduced to potential participants by the institution's Director and Psychologist, authority figures, who presented the study and encouraged children's participation. Following this introduction, the researcher spent two weeks in the setting without collecting data, engaging informally in the daily life of the institution. This familiarization period allowed children to get used to the researcher's presence and gain a concrete sense of what participation might involve (Emond, 2005).

Second, a children's advisory board, composed of four children identified by staff as influential and trusted peers, was created. This board discussed the study's practical aspects with the researcher, including ideal times and locations for observation, selection criteria for participation, and acceptable strategies for seeking assent. This participatory structure ensured that children's views informed the research design.

Finally, based on the advisory board's recommendations, the researcher presented the study to the broader group of children in accessible language, adapted to each child's communication capacities. After addressing their questions, each child was invited to participate and provided formal assent. A visually engaging brochure was used: children placed a sticker (chosen to represent themselves) near or far from the researcher's picture, indicating their desire to participate. They also signed their brochures, keeping one copy and giving the other to the researcher.

All eligible children agreed to participate. However, babies, toddlers under three, and children with severe communication impairments (due to neurological or developmental conditions) were excluded from data analysis, as it was not possible to access meaningful assent from them.

2.2. Data collection

Data collection combined participant observation and informal interviews, in line with focused ethnography conventions (Montreuil & Carnevale, 2018). These methods allowed for a contextualized understanding of children's moral experiences, as well as the institutional norms, discourses, and practices shaping them.

Preliminary consultations with the institution's Director and Psychologist supported the design of the fieldwork and reinforced

institutional openness to the researcher's presence. Data collection spanned three months, with the researcher present three days per week, each day lasting approximately five hours, resulting in over 180 h of fieldwork. The researcher's (and first author of this paper) background as a clinical psychologist with professional experience in residential care informed her sensitivity to children's experiences. This positioning facilitated access and relational attunement in the field, but also risked over-interpretation of affective signals. To address this, interpretations were consistently grounded in observable interactional shifts, recurrence across fieldnotes, and peer discussion within the research team. Reflexive memos were used throughout to bracket assumptions, to interrogate how professional training shaped analytic attention and to refine focus and identify data gaps (Birks et al., 2008).

The researcher observed a wide range of relevant moments: (1) children's daily routines (meals, play, homework, group activities); (2) PPCA sessions; (3) transition contacts between two children and their adoptive families; (4) preparatory meetings involving professionals and adoptive parents; and (5) team meetings among residential care staff. These observations were complemented by the analysis of institutional files, children's drawings, and other contextual materials.

A bottom-up, iterative process guided data collection, enabling real-time adjustments based on children's responses and contextual dynamics. Children could choose if, when, and how to participate. The researcher prioritized ongoing assent, attending closely to verbal and non-verbal cues to ensure children's willingness. One illustrative moment occurred when a child chose to continue playing on his console instead of speaking with the researcher. His choice was respected without question, reinforcing the importance of voluntary engagement.

2.3. Data analysis

Data were analyzed using SAMMSA (Macdonald et al., 2023), an interpretive analytic framework developed by the VOICE team and well aligned with focused ethnography (Montreuil & Carnevale, 2018). Rooted in the hermeneutic principle of part–whole circularity (Taylor, 1973), this approach allowed for iterative interpretation between individual experiences (the "part") and the broader institutional and cultural context of residential care and PPCA implementation (the "whole").

Analysis began with a comprehensive review of field notes and transcripts, focusing on children's moral experiences—how they made sense of what mattered, and how they expressed concerns, aspirations and capacities in context. Following SAMMSA procedures (Macdonald et al., 2023), data segments were coded using two complementary codes: Summary codes (S): descriptive summaries of observed interactions; and Analysis codes (A): provisional interpretations of their significance. Using an inductive process, S/A-coded excerpts were grouped into micro-themes based on content similarities, and then organized into broader *meso*-themes and macro-themes reflecting shared characteristics. For example, Day 15 (L.): S: L. talks with C. about her birth family and celebrates a visit scheduled for the next day; A: spending time and talking about her birth family is important to L.; aggregation: micro—Birth-family visit/anticipation; meso—Life in residential care (navigating family ties and routines); macro—Making sense of "family" while living in care. We maintained an audit trail linking each S/A code to its source excerpt and theme membership. All children in the residential care institution during the period of fieldwork were represented across the analytic corpus and contributed to the development of the micro-, meso-, and macro-themes.

Then a narrative synthesis was constructed for each participant, integrating data across observations and maintaining fidelity to each child's voice and context (Crist & Tanner, 2003). Cross-participant analyses were then conducted by comparing *meso*-themes and individual narratives, leading to the development of a synthesis of syntheses—an interpretive structure capturing both commonalities and divergences across cases. Although themes were compared across participants, the analysis remained anchored in the particularity of each child's experience. This ensured that the findings reflected both collective patterns and the unique moral landscapes navigated by each participant.

To enhance analytic rigor, codes, themes and narrative syntheses were peer-reviewed by two team members through interpretive dialogue. Saturation was assessed through the hermeneutic principle of part-whole circularity, considering both thematic saturation (no new micro-themes emerging) and interpretive depth of individual narratives. The peer review process focused on collaborative interpretive engagement rather than statistical intercoder agreement, leading to theme refinement through critical dialogue while preserving fidelity to each participant's voice and context.

3. Results

This section presents the results of the focused ethnography, centered on the children's lived experiences in the context of the PPCA. We begin by describing the institutional setting and detailing the implementation of the PPCA, in order to situate children's experiences within their local imaginary—that is, the shared norms, values, and practices that frame how care and childhood are understood in the setting. This analysis reveals the coexistence of two contrasting imaginaries: One—predominant in everyday practices—prioritizes behavioral regulation and functioning of group life. And another—partially introduced by the PPCA—that emphasizes relational closeness, emotional responsiveness, and individualized attention to children's needs and voices.

Next, we introduce the analytical construct of emotional salience as a key feature of children's agency. Emotional salience refers to the intensity and visibility of children's emotional expressions, which signal the personal significance of specific experiences. These emotional responses, such as joy, withdrawal, agitation, or protest, highlight moments where children's agency becomes particularly visible and ethically meaningful.

Building on this, we present three overarching macro-themes that were identified from the data, each illustrating central aspects of children's moral experiences and agency: making sense of family; feeling valued; and being recognized as competent. Each macro-theme is explored through associated *meso*-themes, organized under aspirations, concerns, and capacities and illustrative examples, with emotional salience embedded in each case. To support analytic transparency consistent with interpretive ethnography, we present brief interpretive links alongside the descriptive vignettes. These links indicate how each episode informed the developing themes. To illustrate the interplay between these dimensions and contextual factors, each macro-theme is accompanied by a narrative synthesis presented in Supplementary information.

3.1. The residential care institution and the program for Preparing Children for Adoption (PPCA)

This study was conducted in a three-story residential care institution designed to resemble a family household, with spacious outdoor areas and rooms distributed across functional floors. The ground floor included a playroom, workroom, family visits room, and staff offices—spaces integrated into children's daily routines. The kitchen and dining room were on the first floor, where meals were shared. The second floor housed shared bedrooms, typically occupied by two or three children of similar age and gender.

At the time of the fieldwork, ten children lived in the institution (aged from 6 months to 11 years old), including sibling pairs. All had been placed by court order due to abandonment, violence, or sexual abuse, in the absence of protective family alternatives.

The children attended local public schools or daycare and contact with biological families varied widely: some had weekly visits or calls, while others had no ongoing contact. Stays in care ranged from months

to several years, with transitions decided by court: family reunification, autonomous living, or adoption. During the fieldwork, two siblings had a legal decision for adoption after over two years in care and were prepared for adoption.

Care was provided by a team of eleven adults: four long-term resident caregivers, five rotating staff handling daily routines (e.g., morning preparation, bathing), a seasoned child educator, and a recently appointed psychologist. Volunteers also supported homework and leisure activities, contributing to relational diversity in the children's everyday lives.

Within this setting, children with a legal decision for adoption were being prepared through the PPCA. Sessions were held in a private, child-friendly space, either individually or with siblings, usually in the late afternoon—after school and before dinner, when children were typically transitioning between routines. The timing and setting often required negotiation, as some children were reluctant to pause play or engage emotionally. These negotiations sometimes took place in shared spaces, where other children, present but not involved in the session, would comment, sometimes with curiosity, sometimes with apprehension about their own futures.

3.2. PPCA's influence on local imaginaries of Children's moral experiences

To understand how children express agency in residential care, it is essential to consider the local imaginaries—that is, the shared meanings, norms, and practices that shape how care and childhood are framed in a particular context (Montreuil et al., 2018; Taylor, 1985). Drawing on hermeneutic theory, particularly Taylor's work on social imaginaries, we approached children's moral experiences as relational and context-bound, emerging not in isolation but within an institutional culture that encodes what is possible, expected, and legitimate.

Through field observations, documentary review, and informal interactions, we identified the coexistence of two contrasting imaginaries in the residential care home: (1) A dominant imaginary, oriented towards behavior management and group harmony, where care is operationalized through structure, control, and routines; and (2) a counter imaginary – an alternative set of assumptions and practices that challenges the dominant orientation – activated through the PPCA, which prioritizes individualized attention, emotional attunement, and children's meaningful participation in decisions about their future.

Both imaginaries are underpinned by the intention to serve the child's best interests, but they enact that aim differently. We organized our analysis of these tensions across three interpretive spectrums, each representing a continuum of practices and values: Relational Distance ←→ Relational Closeness; Behavioral Control ←→ Emotional Attunement, Group-Centeredness ←→ Individual Responsiveness.

These spectrums do not reflect rigid categories but illustrate dynamic tensions within everyday practices. The dominant imaginary tended to lean toward relational distance, control, and group-focused routines, emphasizing order and efficiency. In contrast, the PPCA introduced a relational shift toward closeness, empathy, and individual responsiveness, creating moments where children's voices were more fully recognized.

The PPCA's influence, though modest and context-dependent, functioned as a counter imaginary that opened space for different understandings of the child: not as someone to be managed, but as a person whose emotional world, aspirations, and moral concerns deserve attention. The adoption preparation process, with its structured, relationally sensitive approach, allowed for more dialogical encounters between professionals and children—where children could explore their stories, express preferences, and reflect on transitions. Both the spectrums of contrasting imaginaries and observational examples illustrating of PPCA's influence are presented in Fig. 1.

Although the PPCA did not radically transform the institutional context, it activated an alternative moral space within it. This allowed glimpses of a different way of being-with children.

It is also important to recognize that children possessed their own local imaginaries—unique understandings shaped by their personal histories, everyday experiences, and interpretations of the social world around them. These imaginaries became visible through their moral experiences, expressed in how they acted, reacted, and made sense of what they perceived as right, wrong, fair, or unfair within the institutional setting and in the course of adoption preparation.

3.3. Unveiling children's moral experiences and agency

Drawing on childhood ethics' moral experience framework and the SAMMSA analytic strategy, we identify three central dimensions of agency—aspirations, concerns, and capacities (Siedlikowski, et al., 2021)—and propose a fourth feature, emotional salience, which captures the felt intensity and personal relevance of these experiences for each child.

3.3.1. Exploring Emotional Salience as a Fourth Feature of Agency

Through our observations, it became clear that children's agency was not always conveyed through words. Instead, their emotional expressions, ranging from joy and excitement to withdrawal, protest, or distress, often revealed what mattered most to them. These expressions disrupted the flow of routine and called attention to moments of heightened meaning. To capture this phenomenon, we introduce emotional salience as a fourth feature of agency.

In the following sections, we explore three macro-themes that were identified within the observational data and revealed meaningful dimensions of children's lived experiences: "making sense of family", "feeling valued", and "being recognized as competent". Each macro-theme is supported by *meso*-themes reflecting discrete expressions of agency (aspirations, concerns, capacities) and illustrated with emotionally salient examples chosen to best represent each *meso*-theme, ensure diversity of participants and settings, and show a clear S/A linkage.

To support this analysis, we developed three narrative exemplars, one for each macro-theme, based on individual children's trajectories. Each exemplar integrates the four dimensions of agency and illustrates how the relational environment, shaped by both institutional culture and the PPCA intervention, ither supported or constrained agential expression. These exemplars, presented in full in the Supplementary Information, offer rich, situated accounts that enhance the understanding of children's moral experiences and contextualize the macro- and *meso*-themes discussed.

3.3.2. Macro-Theme 1: Making sense of family

For children living in residential care, "making sense of family" was identifyed as a key task in navigating their current realities and imagined futures. It involved interpreting their past experiences, adjusting to institutional life, and redefining relationships with biological family members. Emotional salience was especially evident when family ties—whether present, absent, or anticipated—were brought to the fore.

Children's intense interest in family visits, their questions about adoption, and their reactions to contact or lack thereof with siblings signaled the emotional weight these moments held. These reactions were not simply responses, but expressions of moral meaning, marking family as a site of aspiration.

> *"One participant frequently inquired about the timing of their family's visit. On a specific occasion when their parents missed an event for all families in the residential care, the participant displayed visible distress. However, upon being comforted, they enthusiastically nodded when a professional suggested that during the next phone call, they could inquire about the reasons for their parents' absence".*

Similarly, as children engaged in PPCA sessions, they used those opportunities to revisit past family memories and explore what it might

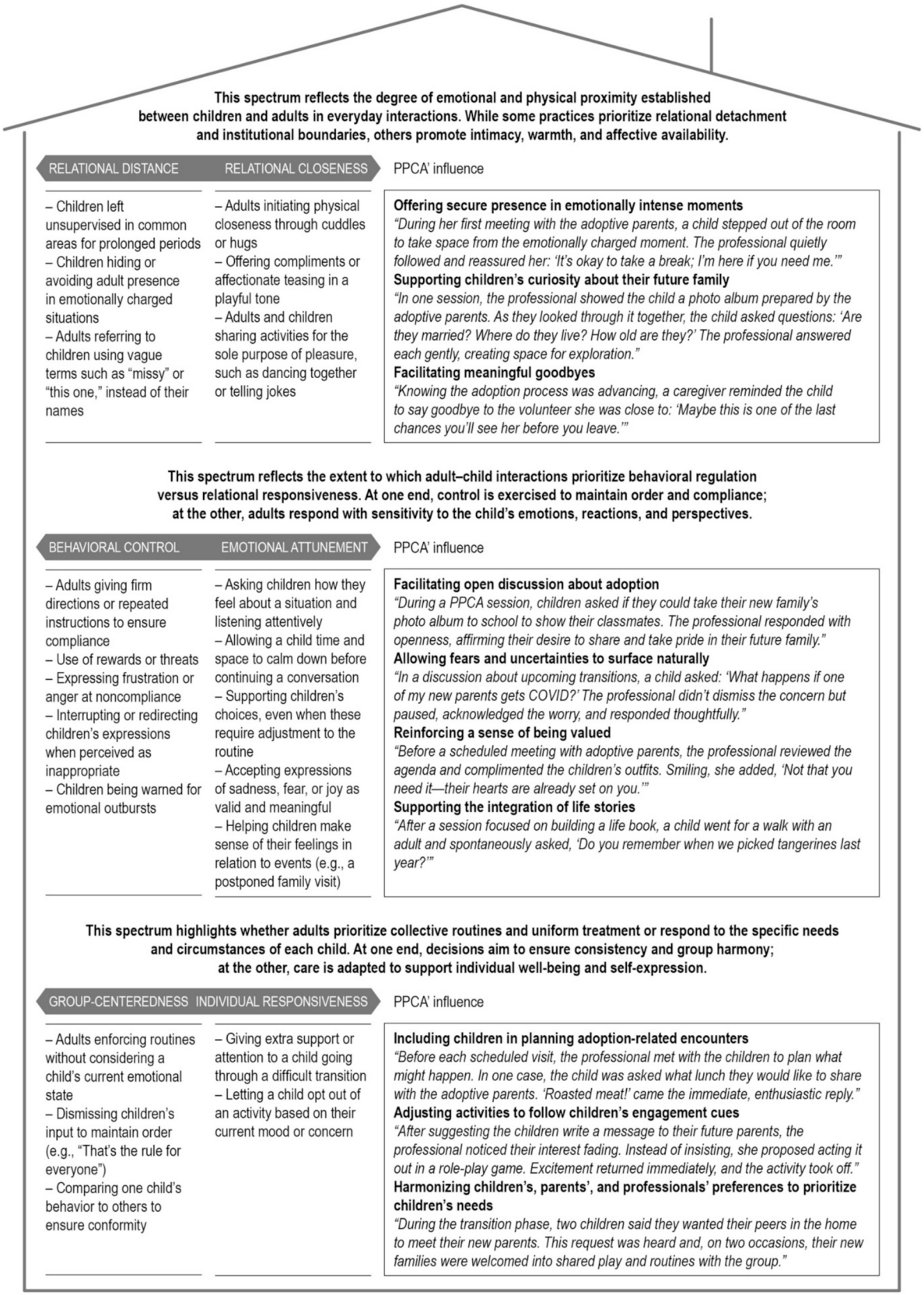


Fig. 1. Contrasting imaginaries in residential care and PPCA-related shifts across three spectrums.

mean to become part of a new one.

"After meeting their prospective adoptive parents, two participants eagerly shared their life book with them. They responded with enthusiasm to their new parents' curiosity about their time spent in care and their memories of their biological parents".

Table 1 presents the aspirations, concerns, and capacities related to "making sense of family" and illustrative examples, with emotional salience embedded in each case.

3.3.3. Macro-Theme 2: Feeling valued

Across all participants, the aspiration to feel valued stood out as a central experience within the residential care setting. Living in a group context where care is distributed among professionals, each child developed a distinct need to affirm their individuality and be recognized as someone who matters.

"On one occasion, a participant engaged in a conversation about their future, expressing humorously that upon leaving, all the adults in the house would miss them so much that they would cry every day. The adult present laughed and nodded in response, acknowledging the child's statement".

This playful exchange carried emotional salience: it wasn't just a joke, but an attempt to affirm the child's importance and ensure they would be remembered. It revealed how deeply the child desired to be seen and valued, even in imagined future absences.

The significance of being valued also surfaced in the context of adoption transitions, particularly in how new relationships were formed and interpreted:

"In one instance, as the new adoptive parents arrived in the morning for a day of activities, their son joined them in the room. The father playfully mocked the child's previous play, hiding behind the door and surprising him."

The child's joyful reaction marked the emotional salience of this moment. What might be seen as a simple joke became, for the child, a sign of personal recognition, especially meaningful in contrast to previous reprimands for similar play. The father's gesture mirrored the child's own way of relating, and affirmed it as worthy of attention.

These moments underscore how emotional salience acts as a marker of value, highlighting when children perceive their identity and presence as recognized by others. To explore this theme further, Table 2 presents the aspirations, concerns, and capacities related to "feeling valued", along with illustrative examples where emotional salience marked moments of significance.

3.3.4. Macro-Theme 3: Being recognized as competent

Children participating in the study consistently revealed a desire to be perceived as capable in everyday activities. Their aspirations were often accompanied by visible emotional reactions, particularly when facing challenges or being denied opportunities to demonstrate competence. For instance:

"At the table in the activity room, a participant became visibly upset while playing a number-sequencing game. Frustrated, she yelled in anger at her difficulty in understanding. With the adult's help, she eventually answered correctly and received praise from others, shifting her emotional

Table 1
Macro-theme "Making sense of family": children's aspirations, concerns, and capacities with illustrative examples highlighting emotional salience.

Dimension	Meso-Theme	Illustrative Example with Emotional Salience
Aspiration	Making sense of life in care	"It's always difficult… but it happens to all of us… and then one gets used to it," says a child about friends leaving care. The calm tone contrasts with the emotional charge of the theme, suggesting a resigned but meaningful effort to understand and normalize separation.
Concern	Ambivalence about adoption	Speaking of a friend's adoption: "I'm happy for him… but sad because we won't see each other again." The mix of joy and sadness conveys emotional ambivalence, highlighting the depth of relational bonds and the tension of anticipated separation.
	Keeping a connection with siblings	Upon hearing a visit was confirmed, a child runs to share the news with their sister. The eagerness and immediacy of the gesture mark the strong emotional importance of sibling ties.
	Thinking about their future	When others are called to a PPCA session, a child asks if she too will be prepared for adoption, then talks about the judge's decision. Her reflective tone and spontaneous question point to an emotionally charged awareness of her own life trajectory.
Capacity	Caring for others	During a first visit with his adoptive mother, who slipped while playing, the child interrupts the game, helps her sit, and brings a pillow. The gentle, unprompted gesture indicates an emotionally meaningful act of care—perhaps a sign of emerging attachment.

Table 2
Macro-theme "Feeling valued": children's aspirations, concerns, and capacities with illustrative examples highlighting emotional salience.

Dimension	Meso-Theme	Illustrative Example with Emotional Salience
Aspiration	Asserting individuality	During a drawing session, one participant was offered a volunteer's smartphone to watch YouTube videos. As the other children gathered around, she stood up, walked to the far corner of the room, and firmly stated, "She lent it to me!" Her action and tone expressed a clear wish to protect a rare moment of exclusivity, highlighting her need to feel singled out and valued.
Concern	Feeling inequity	While taking a time-out, a participant noticed a lollipop stick on the ground. Assuming others had received treats, he exclaimed that he too deserved one. This reaction revealed more than desire—it reflected emotional vulnerability and the distress of potentially being overlooked.
	Facing injustice	A child noticed that others were breaking a rule without consequence and complained: "Why do I have to follow the rules if they don't?" His protest expressed frustration and a need for fairness, tied to recognition and adult validation.
Capacity	Building positive relationships	During a conversation about adoption, a peer commented positively on a participant's photo album. The child smiled and responded, "They're coming later." The pride in his tone and facial expression showed a desire to be affirmed and the emotional salience of being seen through association with a new family.
	Asserting control or status within the group	A younger participant, feeling excluded from a video game played by older children, suddenly unplugged the console. This impulsive act, followed by visible tension and avoidance of eye contact, expressed frustration and a deep need to assert his presence and significance, revealing the emotional salience of peer recognition.

state. Later, as the game grew harder, her distress returned, and she gave up."

This interaction illustrates both the salience of success and the sensitivity to perceived failure, which shaped the child's ongoing engagement. Even younger children expressed similar aspirations. In another case:

"During a group activity involving cutting fruit, a young child placed the plastic knife in their mouth. An adult intervened and removed the knife for safety reasons. The child became visibly upset and later ripped drawings off the wall."

This reaction suggests that the child did not simply want to take part but to feel competent and trusted in doing so. Table 3 presents the *meso*-theme categories identified within children's meaningful experiences of "being recognized as competent," grouped into aspirations, concerns, and capacities. Each includes an illustrative example that integrates emotional salience.

4. Discussion

The limited consideration of children's experiences in the adoption preparation process within residential care settings is a critical problem addressed by this study. As the first of its kind, this research directly explores children's experiences in preparation for adoption, contributing to a growing body of literature advocating for meaningful inclusion of children in discussions, decisions and actions that affect them (Fenton-Glynn, 2014; Watkins & Fisher, 2014). The main results highlight the significance of emotional salience in understanding children's agency. The study also uncovers two distinct local imaginaries within residential care, each offering unique perspectives on the well-being and care of children. Furthermore, the PPCA has transformative effects, manifesting in two distinct ways: first, it influences the local imaginaries within residential care, shaping how children are perceived and cared for in these settings; second, it significantly impacts the preparation for adoption practices. These findings underscore the need for child-centered approaches to adoption preparation (Butlinski et al., 2017; Contente et al., 2013; Henriques et al., 2021; Mariscal et al., 2015) and have dual implications for improving both residential care practices and adoption practices.

Table 3
Macro-theme "Being recognized as competent": children's aspirations, concerns, and capacities with illustrative examples highlighting emotional salience.

Dimension	Meso-Theme	Illustrative Example with Emotional Salience
Aspiration	Experiencing success	A participant was assigned the task of organizing his clothes. After completing it, he exclaimed, "That turned out terrific!" and excitedly asked other adults to come and see.
Concern	Avoiding feeling incapable	A child trying to solve a difficult puzzle noticed it was partly complete in the box. Aware of an adult watching, he said, "I'm cheating—I'm bad," revealing shame and frustration.
	Worrying about how adults perceive them	After insulting others and seeing he was being observed, one child asked, "What are you writing?"—clearly concerned about adult judgment and its consequences.
Capacity	Deciding the best course of action	After being banned from using nail polish, a participant stormed out of the room. Moments later, she slowly returned to the table and chose to rejoin the group, showing reflection.
	Avoiding "difficult" conversations	After scribbling on others' drawings, one child withdrew to the far corner of the room, nearly out of sight. His body language signaled distress and avoidance.

4.1. Emotional salience and children's agency in adoption preparation: Exploring the significance of emotions for understanding children's experiences

Our findings reveal that emotional salience plays a central role in illuminating children's agency by introducing a novel conceptual extension within the Childhood Ethics framework. As argued, salience, expressed through vivid emotional reactions, signals what truly matters for a child in a given moment. While aspirations reflect what children hope for, concerns reveal what troubles them, and capacities describe how they can act upon what matters (Siedlikowski, et al., 2021), salience refers to the emotional intensity that marks these experiences as personally significant. This aligns closely with Charles Taylor's concept of *strong evaluation* (Taylor 1985), where moral agency involves discerning between higher and lower desires, what he calls "distinctions of worth" (Carnevale, 2021). In Taylor's terms, agents not only act but also evaluate motivations and experiences based on moral significance, reflecting on what is authentically worth pursuing.

In the context of our study, children's tears, agitation, withdrawal, or elation are not merely emotional expressions, they are evaluative indicators pointing to what they consider most meaningful. When a child protests strongly against washing a gifted item, it is not mere resistance, it reflects a strong evaluation about preserving connection with their birth parent. Similarly, when a child anxiously wonders whether they too can choose meaningful items "to take home", their restlessness indicates a deep-seated concern about their place in the adoption process. Emotional salience makes visible the underlying moral weight of children's reactions, enabling adults and researchers to recognize not only *what* they value, but *why* and *how strongly*. Salience reveals the felt importance of a particular matter to the child. It conveys a child's self-understanding regarding the meaning of that matter and their ability to be heard or take action to have their aspirations and concerns recognized. For children, especially those with limited language or autonomy, emotions become a powerful way to communicate these strong evaluations.

Our use of emotional salience sits within the "emotional turn" in childhood studies, which places emotions at the center of children's experiences, agency, and safety in child-protection contexts (Drake et al., 2019; Pinkney, 2018). It also aligns with the view of emotions as evaluative judgments about what is at stake morally (Nussbaum, 2004). Traditionally, especially in Western philosophy, emotions have been seen as the opposite of reason, something to be controlled. Philosophers like Plato and Descartes described emotions as threats to rational thinking, and this view influenced legal and cultural systems for centuries (Solomon, 2008). More recently, this has been challenged (Minner, 2019). For example, neuroscientist António Damásio (1994) showed that people who cannot feel emotions also struggle to make decisions. Emotions, he argues, are not obstacles to reason, they are essential to it (Sripada & Stich, 2004). Philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2004) states that emotions are not just feelings, they are also judgments. When we feel something strongly, it's usually because something we value is at stake. Emotions help us see what is important, what is fair or unfair, and how we should act. For Nussbaum, emotions are part of how we think ethically and make sense of the world. This is especially relevant for children in care, as it is essential that caretakers are able to recognize and interpret what truly matters to each child. Their emotions (joy, anger, fear, or sadness) are not just behaviors to manage. They are meaningful signals. They inform about the child's relationships, hopes, fears, and sense of self. Recognizing this helps move beyond simply managing behavior to truly understanding children as moral agents.

Related frameworks emphasize different facets of emotions and agency: work on affective agency shows how emotions such as shame and anger can mobilize relational action and resistance within care systems (Willa, 2024), while emotion-laden participation highlights

how feelings including guilt and fear mediate whether and how children engage with protection processes (Wilson, 2025). A transactional developmental lens further underscores that these experiences are relationally co-constructed through co-regulation with adults (Sameroff, 2010).

Emotional salience extends these perspectives by focusing on the intensity and meaningful power of children's emotional experiences, including hopeful, affiliative, and aspirational states, as they interpret family, belonging, and identity during adoption preparation. Our findings on emotional salience are closely aligned with the literature on transitions in residential care and adoption readiness, which consistently describe these processes as periods of heightened emotional uncertainty for children and for the professionals who accompany them (Neil et al., 2015; Selwyn et al., 2014). Adoption preparation unfolds in a context where hope, fear, loyalty conflicts, anticipation, and loss coexist and fluctuate rapidly. The emotionally salient moments identified in this study capture how children actively interpret and evaluate these uncertainties in real time. Importantly, this lens supports an interpretation of children's emotional manifestations not as behavioral instability or immaturity, but as agential evaluations through which children actively position themselves in relation to the impending transition. To our knowledge, this articulation, and its empirical demonstration, has not previously been theorized and linked in this way.

4.2. Contextual factors and local imaginaries: Navigating incongruent perspectives in the residential care setting

The findings reveal the presence of two distinct local imaginaries within the residential care setting, each with its own distinct perspective on the well-being and management of children. The dominant local imaginary emphasizes behavior management and order, whereas the PPCA program introduces a counter-imaginary that prioritizes enhancing children's experiences and recognizing their agency.

These imaginaries are not simply theoretical constructs; they reflect deeply held beliefs about what constitutes "good" care. Both are conceptualized as background moral frameworks that shape what counts as legitimate practice, good care, and meaningful participation. These imaginaries do not operate as fixed or mutually exclusive institutional positions. Rather, they coexist within the same organizational space and are enacted by the same individuals in different situations. Professionals working within the dominant imaginary often act as moral agents, genuinely seeking to protect children but relying on paternalistic models that limit children's participation. This is consistent with critiques of traditional child welfare systems that prioritize safety over autonomy, frequently excluding children from decisions about their own lives (Keddell, 2022; Toros, 2022). Institutions shaped by the dominant imaginary tend to operate with rigid structures and routines that restrict children's opportunities to express agency, conditions exacerbated by underfunding and limited staff training (Bolin, 2018; Hlungwani, 2023). Although young people in care often report satisfaction with material support and relationships with caregivers, they also highlight a lack of autonomy and opportunities for meaningful participation (Montserrat et al., 2021; Pérez-García et al., 2019).

The PPCA program challenges these limitations by introducing an alternative imaginary grounded in respect for children's perspectives, the importance of emotional expression, and the recognition of children as moral and relational agents. Rather than imposing fixed norms, the PPCA seeks to understand what matters to children, attending to emotional salience as a cue for interpreting aspirations, concerns, and capacities.

These imaginaries are not easily reconciled. The tension between them reveals a form of incommensurability, a fundamental difference, in how childhood, care, and agency are understood. Bridging this gap requires a paradigm shift, one that reimagines language, roles, and institutional logics. As Gaspar et al. (2024) argue, Portugal's care system must prioritize children's voices and invest in practices that support emotional safety, and future-oriented participation.

Crucially, studies show that positive place attachment and the perception of being heard and protected are associated with greater psychological well-being in residential care (Magalhães et al., 2020). The PPCA aligns with this by fostering emotionally responsive, rights-respecting interactions that strengthen both children's sense of belonging and their capacity to act in meaningful ways.

4.3. The influence of the PPCA: Fostering meaningful adoption preparation experiences for children

The findings suggest that the PPCA had a transformative influence on children's experiences of adoption preparation, particularly in how they made sense of their life stories, felt recognized within relationships, and were empowered as competent individuals. These experiences are closely tied to three core strengths of the PPCA: the opening of communication about adoption, a child-centered intervention framework, and the recognition of each child's capacities. In the remaining sections, we explore how each strength of the program significantly shaped the way children experienced adoption preparation, influencing their agency and emotional well-being.

4.3.1. Opening of the communication on adoption: supporting children in making sense of family

A key contribution of the PPCA program lies in its deliberate effort to open space for conversations about adoption, challenging the tendency to avoid difficult or emotionally charged topics in child welfare settings (Edwards & Panlilio, 2023). Traditional approaches often adopt a protective stance that silences children's questions about their biological families or the reasons behind their separation, assuming that such discussions are too distressing (Fuentes-Peláez et al., 2013). However, avoiding these conversations can limit children's ability to form coherent narratives about their lives, hindering identity development and emotional processing (Neil et al., 2015).

The PPCA adopts an alternative stance by promoting structured, competence-appropriate conversations about children's life stories. In doing so, it acknowledges children's right to know about their past and supports them in articulating their memories, meanings, and hopes. This aligns with findings that narrative coherence contributes positively to adopted children's self-concept and emotional adjustment (Brown & Shelton, 2023; Cook-Cottone & Beck, 2007).

4.3.2. Child-Centered intervention: promoting the experience of feeling valued

The PPCA's child-centered approach places a strong emphasis on the individuality of each child, even within collective residential care environments that often prioritize routines and behavioral conformity. This aligns with a growing body of literature emphasizing the need for relational, empathetic engagement in child protection (Vis et al., 2011).

Children in the study expressed a strong aspiration to be seen, heard, and appreciated. By creating responsive and emotionally attuned relationships, professionals supported children in feeling valued and understood. This approach resonates with relational conceptualizations of agency, which emphasize that children's capacity to act is not solely internal or fixed, but co-constructed within the dynamics of caregiving relationships (Montreuil & Carnevale, 2016; 2018). Agency, in this view, is fostered when adults engage in dialogical and collaborative relationships that validate children's experiences and promote shared meaning-making (Montreuil et al., 2020). In the PPCA, professionals cultivate this through personalized attention, shared rituals, and consistent efforts to understand each child's perspective, offering emotional presence as a basis for mutual recognition, as argued in the Childhood Ethics framework (Carnevale et al., 2021). The experience of being treated as someone who matters becomes both a condition and a catalyst for the child's participation in their own life story.

4.3.3. Recognition of children's capacities: empowering children's agency

Finally, the PPCA promotes a dynamic and contextual understanding of children's competence. Rather than using age or developmental stage as the sole indicators of capacity, the program emphasizes situated, relationally-supported participation. This approach is informed by sociological perspectives that argue that capacity is co-constructed within context, not solely biologically determined (Spyrou, 2019; Esser et al., 2016).

Children's expressions of agency were supported through opportunities to choose, to voice preferences, and to make sense of complex experiences. This recognition of capacity allowed them to actively participate in their own adoption journey, reinforcing their sense of control, responsibility, and self-efficacy. Such practice aligns with international frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which emphasizes the right of children to be heard in all matters affecting them and the right to have those views considered seriously (Lundy, 2007).

Taken together, the PPCA's distinctive features — openness in communication, child-centeredness, and capacity recognition —offered a counterpoint to dominant paradigms of control, protection, and silence in residential care, illuminating how children can be supported to construct meaningful narratives, feel recognized in their uniqueness, and act as competent decision-makers in one of the most significant transitions of their lives.

4.4. Limitations

The findings must be interpreted in light of key limitations. First, the research was conducted in a single Portuguese residential care institution. We provided here one account of how the PPCA operates with numerous contextual details so that readers can judge the transferability (Sandelowski, 1986) of the results to other settings.

5. Implications and conclusion

The PPCA emerged as an intervention with transformative potential precisely because it temporarily shifted the local imaginary that shape the possibilities for children's agency in powerful ways. By inviting children into structured, emotionally attuned dialogue about their histories and futures, the program made room for them to reflect, be heard, and feel seen. Crucially, it did not rely on verbal exchanges alone, it recognized that agency is relational, embodied, and expressed in multiple ways (Carnevale, 2020).

However, this potential was not "automatic". The PPCA's influence depended on how it was embedded within daily practices and relationships. Where care teams embraced the counter-imaginary of responsiveness and respect, the program amplified recognition of children's sense of agency. Where institutional routines prevailed, the space for genuine participation narrowed. This tension reveals the limits of "intervention" when broader structures, local imaginaries, and the power dynamics embedded within them, remain unchanged. These contrasts reflect how wider conditions shape what is possible in everyday practice. Rights-based policy frameworks that formalize children's participation tend to widen the space for agency, whereas risk-averse or compliance-driven governance narrows it (Lundy, 2007). Also, socio-economic conditions (staffing stability, training opportunities, and everyday material resources) further determine whether such practices can be enacted and sustained (McCafferty, 2024).

To realize the PPCA's promise, a shift is needed in how institutions conceptualize children—not as passive recipients of protection but as moral agents (Carnevale, 2021) navigating complex emotional landscapes. Policy and practice in child welfare can draw on these insights to reimagine adoption preparation as a deeply relational, meaning-making process. In conclusion, this study advances an integrated ethical and empirical understanding of adoption preparation. It contributes to ongoing efforts to center children's experiences in systems that often marginalize them.

During the preparation of this work the authors used ChatGPT, an AI language model developed by OpenAI, in order to improve language and readability. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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