

# Facilitating access and relationships in child protection services: the experience of a group of parents involved in service planning

**Laura Malacrida**

Catholic University of Milan, Italy

**CORRESPONDENCE**

*Laura Malacrida*

[laura.malacrida@unicatt.it](mailto:laura.malacrida@unicatt.it)

## *Abstract*

*Usually, people dealing with social workers experience the interventions carried out by social services as intrusions into the most intimate spheres of their lives, as inexplicable interference by strangers in their family dynamics, private lives, and relationships with their partners or children. Up to that point, such aspects exclusively concerned the persons directly involved; therefore, after social service intervention, there is a sense of violation of an intrinsically private nature.*

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*This article describes the experience gained by the Family and Child Protection Services of the town of Rozzano, where a group of parents, as service users, met to discuss some possible strategies aimed at overcoming the mistrust felt by the public towards social workers. From an examination of the team's experience, concrete indications emerged about the workers and the importance of service users' active involvement both in the phase of defining the aid projects and in the planning phase of the services provided.*

## *Keywords*

*Relational Social Work – Participation in service development – Child protection services – Experiential knowledge*

## **Introduction**

Being a social worker in the field of child protection often means being the object of stigma, prejudice, mistrust, and feelings of concern on the part of families and minors who are the recipients of the services. Usually, people dealing with social workers experience the interventions carried out by social services as intrusions into the most intimate spheres of

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their lives, as inexplicable interference by strangers in their family dynamics, private lives, and relationships with their partners or children. Up to that point, such aspects exclusively concerned the persons directly involved; therefore, after social service intervention, there is a sense of violation of an intrinsically private nature. To this are added the messages coming from the media or from «*rumours*» that often represent Child Protection Services as the enemy, «*home-wreckers*», and institutions from which it is better to keep one's distance and that should not be trusted. Furthermore, access to Child Protection Services does not occur by choice but by the imposition of Juvenile Court, thus making the imbalance of power even more evident between those who have decision-making roles (judges and social workers) and those who are affected by their decisions (minors' parents and other family members).

It is a challenging task to establish relationships of trust between service users and workers within a relational context so complex and insidious for all the subjects involved and avoid the risk of compromising the implementation of projects in support of families.

The Relational Social Work perspective (Folgheraiter, 2004, 2007, 2017; Folgheraiter and Raineri, 2017) and the Participatory Approach in service development (Warren, 2007; Braye, 2000) were implemented in the project to identify specific strategies to tackle these issues.

This article describes the project achieved by the Family and Child Protection Services of the town of Rozzano, where a group of parents, as service users, met to discuss some possible strategies aimed at overcoming the mistrust felt by the public towards social workers. From an examination of the team's experience, concrete indications emerged about the workers and the importance of service users' active involvement both in the phase of defining the aid projects and in the planning phase of the services provided.

## The Complexity of Social Work in Child Protection

The complexity of social work in child protection is linked to multiple factors. The complexity of the issues workers have to face include minors living in situations of hardship and suffering and adults who, in many cases, are unable to adequately protect or support them in their growth and development; the unpredictability of working in such a field, where workers have to deal with frequent emergency situations; the complexity of the institutional tasks to be fulfilled; and the need for workers to reconcile the act of helping families with effectively maintaining control in protecting the children (Cabiati, 2015).

One of the cross-cutting aspects of all these issues concerns the relationships between social workers and families and minors who are the service users. Although the need to build relationships based on authenticity and reciprocity, so they can be human and truly effective, is widely recognised (Folgheraiter, 2011), research shows a substantial flaw in the construction of this type of relationship between social workers and service users (Ferguson, 2014).

Traditionally, social workers consider service users to be in a «*worker-helper*» relationship, with the social worker being considered as the *helper* and the user as the one

being *helped*. In a relationship of this type, workers, who are regarded as the experts, define the objectives of the intervention and how it must be implemented, thus making the recipients of the aid passive and dependent on their decisions (Warren, 2007).

This operating mode highlights an imbalance of power between professionals and service users. In fact, the latter will have difficulty expressing their point of view concerning their situation and will perceive themselves to be penalised, rather than as having the possibility of resolving their problems. Making reference to Dumbrill's analysis, the situation often found within such Services can be defined as one in which the «powerful» actors—the social workers—exert their *power over* the weakest subjects—the service users. This occurs to the detriment of the possibility of exercising it jointly, involving all the subjects engaged in the intervention (Dumbrill, 2006). While carrying out the intervention, it would be essential for professionals to consider the parents of children as *partners* and not as adversaries: In this perspective, parents should receive all information on the decisions taken and actions implemented in favour of their minor children (Harries, 2008). Besides, workers should consider parents' expectations regarding protection measures adopted for their children (Palmer, Maiter, & Manji, 2006). At the same time, whenever users feel distrust and fear of social services, these feelings should be identified and acknowledged by service workers. Instead, when a parent expresses such feelings, it is interpreted as a lack of commitment in the intervention or as the service user's personality problem (Thrope, 1993).

The difficulty of building a relationship of trust between workers and parents, therefore, seems to be closely linked to a lack of mutual recognition, with workers maintaining an attitude of superiority as experienced professionals and parents feeling labelled as incapable and incompetent (Palmer, Maiter, & Manji, 2006), without recognition of the contribution they could make to the definition and implementation of a help project aimed at improving their own lives.

Furthermore, it is important to underline that the involvement of service users appears to be minimal, not only in the decision-making process concerning interventions and in worker-user relations but also in service management and planning. In fact, the contribution users can make to the service definition and planning phase seems to be of little value to professionals (Beresford, 2000). In the Italian context, there are no regulatory requirements on the matter, and service planning, as well as the definition of social policies, seems to be the exclusive responsibility of professionals. In only a few experiments were participatory planning strategies implemented which included the involvement of those who were the policy and service recipients and listening to their point of view (Calcaterra, 2014).

The lack of involvement and disparity of power between operators and users create distance, distrust, and fear towards social services, especially those dealing with child protection. This negative perception is worsened by the way the media represent social services, often contributing to creating an attitude of fear, recrimination, and mistrust of social services and their professionals (Ayre, 2001). The media often write about social

workers after having acquired partial information on events that generate a sensation, spreading the image of immoral, incapable workers, who take advantage of families' issues and who can even be dangerous (Cabiati, 2015).

## The Relational Perspective

The Relational Social Work framework reverses professionals' view of users as passive and dependent subjects and is based on the idea that, even in situations in which people are facing life problems, help should not come exclusively and unilaterally from professionals analysing the situation and proposing an intervention (Corradini, 2018). On the contrary, only by integrating the knowledge and skills of professionals with the experiential knowledge of service users is it possible to co-construct the conditions for empowering people (Folgheraiter, 2004) and implementing projects aimed at overcoming the difficult situations they are experiencing.

The recognition and valorisation of experiential knowledge may be considered not only in terms of the definition of interventions carried out by social services but also in terms of the definition of social policies understood in a broader sense. The participatory definition and planning of social policies and of services aimed at helping people in difficulty is an opportunity to make the whole process more responsive to the needs of those who will have to use them (Raineri, 2011).

Promoting this type of participation gives users the opportunity to offer their personal perspectives on services, based on their direct experience of working with social workers (Warren, 2007).

In this sense, it is possible to plan a final network that involves a group of service users who can express their points of view which can be considered in future service planning (Braye, 2000).

The project described in this article is based on this perspective. The participation of a group of users of the Family and Child Protection Service of the municipality where it was implemented enabled the collection of directions useful to the definition of services that would be more responsive to the needs of citizens and reduce the distance between the public and social workers.

## Background

Rozzano is a town on the southern outskirts of Milan which started as a council housing district where Milanese workers had the opportunity to live in low-cost housing. It currently has a population of about 42,500 inhabitants and is divided into different districts: The central core consists of the so-called *Aler district*, where the council housing

and Town Hall building are located, as well as the headquarters of the Family and the Child Protection Service. The latter was established in 2002 and deals with all situations in which households with minor children live in difficult situations, regardless of whether minors are taken into care by order of the Judicial Authority or it is voluntarily requested by parents. Five social workers, a child protection manager, and a service director work for the Family and Children Protection Service. A sector manager who was appointed to maintain a connection between the social services and the political part of the municipality is responsible for providing guidelines of social services work and being the spokesperson for the policy guidelines defined by the City Council.

The workload of the Family and Children Protection Service on December 31, 2015 included 329 minors (4% of the total number of minors living in the area) and 217 families. Of these, 69% of the cases had a provision of the Court (57% by the Juvenile Court<sup>1</sup> and 12% by the Ordinary Court<sup>2</sup>), while 31% were in situations without the presence of a Court Order.

From the perspective of the intervention's timeframe, 40% were «recent» cases which had been receiving the services' aid for a maximum of two years; 51% had been receiving the services' aid for three years; and 9% for over three years.

## The Project

The project was carried out between January and June 2016 by one of the social workers of the Family and Child Protection Service of the Municipality of Rozzano. It was divided into several phases. Initially, the points of view of professionals and the parents helped by social services were identified through interviews concerning the relational difficulties between users and workers. These results led to the formation of a group of parents who were service users and with whom discussions were initiated on how to deal with such difficulties. What emerged in these encounters was reported to the professionals during joint meetings in which parents had the opportunity to present their opinions and the proposals developed during the group sessions. Finally, participants' feedback on the project and its possible future development were collected.

## First Phase: Collecting the Perspectives of Social Workers

The perspectives of professionals working in the field of child protection were collected by the author through semi-structured interviews. With the respondents' consent, all the interviews were recorded, and transcriptions were used to explore the points of view of

<sup>1</sup> The Juvenile Court takes action in child damage or neglect situations.

<sup>2</sup> The Ordinary Court takes action in separation and divorce of parents and makes decisions about child custody.

the professionals. The five social workers working at the local services and the director, supervisor, and manager shared their difficulties accessing and building relationships of trust between professionals and the public.

The social workers reported the public's difficulty in contacting them, especially when their requests concerned difficult family situations, parenting support interventions, or the need to express parent-child relational issues. This difficulty seemed to be linked to the fear that an intervention by social services could lead to the adoption of provisions limiting parental responsibility or, worse, aiming at the removal of minors from their families of origin.

Contacting social services was perceived as a risk and as «the last resort» when there was no other available alternative, formal or otherwise, to draw on to deal with difficulties. Social services were considered an institution from which to keep one's distance and from which it is necessary to protect oneself, to avoid incurring negative consequences.

According to reports by social workers, people express their fear of having to deal with a social worker in different ways: verbally, with words showing concern or references to news heard in the media or to experiences described by friends and acquaintances; or with angry and closed attitudes towards the possibility of talking about their family situation and children, as they fear this may result in removal measures. Families express such opinions especially in the first phase of their contact with social services, during the first interviews with the social worker. In some cases, however, these fears also persist during most of the process, during the assessment phase when there is an order issued by the Court, and sometimes, even during the implementation of the aid project. Usually, mistrust of the role and tasks of social workers is rekindled when families go through the most serious phases of the process, when they face difficult moments, or when they are waiting for the Court to issue an order. In these circumstances, even parents who seemed to have overcome mistrust in their relationship with a social worker have «regressed» to the initial phase, re-proposing the same issues that arose during the workers' access and acquaintance phase and externalising their feelings of lack of trust in them.

Surely attitudes of this kind of families and, sometimes even of minors, towards social workers, represent obstacles to the definition of relationships and interventions. Distrust, fear of judgment, and fear of authoritarian interventions by social workers make it almost impossible for people to trust and rely on professionals and consider them a useful resource for overcoming problematic situations and allies in facing the difficulties they are experiencing.

Social workers report that, to overcome these obstacles, they resort to their relational skills in one-to-one relationships with people, explaining in the most clear and detailed manner their tasks and role both with respect to the Court's orders and the organisations for which they work. They report on their attempts to reassure people through repeated explanations of their professional tasks; they promise the highest possible degree of transparency concerning the interventions and clarity about the working methods, time-frames, tools that will be used, and their objectives. Despite these strategies, they do not seem to

always be able to reach their goal, and, sometimes, they find themselves in relationships that are again characterised by distrust and scepticism which are difficult to demolish.

## Second Phase: Collecting the Perspectives of Parents

To discover the perspectives of people directly involved in interventions carried out by social services, it was decided to interview some parents, thus giving them the opportunity to express their thoughts on the issues that emerged from the interviews with professionals.

Social workers provided the author with the names of five parents involved in interventions, who were available to be interviewed individually. With the respondents' consent, all the interviews were recorded, and the transcriptions were analysed by the author. All the people interviewed were helped by social services for some time and living a phase of stability regarding the projects defined to cope with their family situations: Three of them had experienced the removal of their children in relation to a condition of serious uncertainty linked to the family's dynamics. Two of them had subsequently experienced the return home of their minor children. One of them was still experiencing a situation in which his two minor children were placed in a foster-heterosexual family. This parent reports that he agrees with this project and believes that it is the only solution for the well-being of his children; he speaks serenely of his relationship with the children and the foster families who welcome them and speaks in favourable terms of the relationship with the social worker, recognising the merit of having defined an intervention that allows his children to have the support he does not feel ready to offer them. Only one of the interviewed parents did not experience the involvement of the Juvenile Authority, and he voluntarily asked for help.

During the interviews, the parents were asked to share their experiences of building a relationship with a social worker, and everyone reported that when they had to ask for help or start a relationship with a social worker, they felt mistrust, anger, fear, and worry. Two of them had changed social workers several times over the years and therefore experienced different attitudes towards them as service users (some more welcoming, others more authoritarian). However, all reported that they overcame the negative feelings associated at the beginning and during the acquaintance phase with the social workers dealing with their cases and had established relationships of deep trust and collaboration with them, regarding the identification of strategies and projects to promote the well-being of their children. For three of them, in building a relationship of trust with the social worker, the support and mentoring of people unrelated to social services, whom they trusted and who supported them in contacting social services or in moments of great difficulty regarding the definition of aid projects were essential. One parent, on the other hand, told of having to do much work on himself, before being able to trust and share what the social services were trying to define with him for his children.

All of them agreed on what was reported by the workers in relation to the dissemination of distorted information about the role of social workers: Each of them heard from acquaintances, friends, or relatives, about prejudices related to the idea that social workers «would take away their children» and that they should be kept at a distance even when the family situation was unstable. Despite the positive experience of their relationships with social workers up to that moment, none of them seemed to have done anything to contradict these prejudices.

### Third Phase: Work with the Parents' Group

Both the social workers and interviewed parents reported difficulties encountered in the families' first contact phase with social services, when feelings of distrust and fear linked to the social workers' role prevailed and made building a supportive relationship difficult. Furthermore, the need emerged to promote working practices that are more responsive to people's needs, with the possibility of users being involved in defining aid projects and professionals' being committed to listening to their requests.

It was also observed that the strategies implemented by the social workers were functional for individual interventions but inadequate for dealing with the problem more expansively. Finally, it seemed useful to imagine a more significant connection between social workers and local families, so that accessing services would be perceived as a positive resource whenever a family faced difficulty.

It was therefore envisaged to address these issues by forming a group of service users who could define, by comparing and sharing their experiences, actions aimed at overcoming the difficulties encountered (Warren, 2007).

The parents interviewed were then contacted to ask them to take part in the group. Four of them accepted, and the author organised meetings every 15 days for about three months.

The group was characterised by voluntary participation and peer-level, direct interaction between its components to encourage dialogue, common purpose, and indeterminacy of paths (Corradini, 2018). The role of the facilitator within the group was to guide the discussion, assuming an intermediate attitude between guidance and non-guidance (Folgheraiter & Cabiati, 2016), focusing on the goal and accompanying the group to work for that purpose, and utilising reformulations and references to stimulate mutual comparison among group members.

Some reflections that emerged from working with the parents' group:

#### 1. Reducing the distance between social workers and the public

Generally, we are afraid of what we do not know and, therefore, keeping this consideration in mind, social workers and Family and Child Protection Services



should implement actions to get closer to the public and make them known to people who otherwise would stop at the information received from the media or their acquaintances, thus risking the feeding of stigmas and prejudices about this profession.

## **2. What do parents expect from social workers?**

Parents have the desire to make social workers aware of the expectations that people have towards them and of the attitudes they imagine having to deal with when interacting with social services. They wish to help social workers acquire a greater awareness of the expectations of the families they work with and, at the same time, to create a welcoming environment where they can express their feelings and needs, which is beneficial to the interventions they are carrying out.

## **3. Peer support when accessing social services**

The importance of establishing peer support and mentorship programs for people when they contact social workers, either voluntarily or by order of a Judicial Authority.

### *Reducing the Distance between Social Workers and the Public*

The first reflection (1) arose out of the feelings of loss and confusion experienced when members of the group had to present themselves at the office of the social worker following a written summons, or when they were advised to contact the services to seek help in overcoming a family difficulty. None of them knew exactly what the social worker's tasks were; the information they had collected was linked to television programs or experiences reported by acquaintances who told them about inattentive, barely interested professionals, with a propensity towards the removal of minors. This perception had increased their anxiety about relationships with social workers which, because of these assumptions, could never become relationships of help and trust. Two of the members of the group who were helped by the services for much longer than the others also reported that, in the past, they had dealt with social workers who had such behaviour and whom they did not trust at all.

*The social workers we often had to deal with behaved like teachers, like experts who claimed to know exactly what is good for other people's children.*

[Any]

*The social worker and the educator I had before came to my house and insisted on telling me what and how I had to do things. The educator reported everything to the social worker who, in turn, wrote to the Judge without my knowledge, and I didn't know what parts of my daily life were described. I did not understand, and this made me very angry.*

[Albert]

It also emerges that they succeeded in establishing relationships of trust with the social workers who had recently helped them, also because the latter explained to them in a clear and transparent manner what their duties, obligations, and limitations were; they had told them the decisions for which they were responsible for and explained who was responsible for others. These people experienced an authentic relationship of trust that allowed them to understand the role of social workers at the Family and Child Protection Service and led them to revisit their initial opinion built on negative experiences or rumours. It was precisely for these reasons that they considered it essential for social workers to make themselves and their work known to people so that they could form their own opinions, making this profession become part of the collective imaginary, just like the professions of doctor and firefighter.

From these reflections came the proposal to organise moments at the school during which social workers could introduce themselves to students and parents and tell them about their work and the situations they deal with, to give faces and names to a profession that is often little known and which few are able to define.

*Like firefighters, who go to elementary schools to explain to children what they do and do a little bit of road education, social workers should also explain what they do.*

[Anna]

They imagine that one of them could be present on such occasions to share his/her own direct experience with the services, thus reducing the distance perceived between the public and social services.

### *What do Parents Expect from Social Workers?*

The second reflection that emerged (2) was born with reference to the topic of a trust relationship between social workers and service users. The group underlined that, despite the efforts of some social workers to adopt welcoming attitudes and to consider users as persons and as the experts with respect to their own lives, others continued to behave in authoritarian and self-centred ways, considering themselves to be the only experts and thus making autonomous decisions concerning the families they are trying to help. It was wondered whether *social workers knew what attitude people expected of them*, and it was considered useful to present their expectations to social workers, to make them aware of them. The study shows that, in most cases, service users rarely find the courage or the right time or way to express their points of view to social workers and their expectations concerning the helping relationship. This attitude is connected to the anxiety that precedes the interview, concern for one's situation, and uncertainty about interventions that will result from contacting the Services.

*When I'm out there waiting to be called, I think about a lot of things: my children, my family, who I will meet, my friend who told me that they would take my children away ... certainly, I don't think of asking her to be kind.*

[Any]

Service users also feel intimidated by the imbalance of power they experience which leads them to the fear of being unable to express themselves freely about the relational modality they would like to have with their social workers.

*If I then say that I want to understand better or be informed of what happens, who knows what the social worker will think and how he will interpret it ... he might think that I'm not good enough because I do not understand.*

[Clara]

Therefore, while reasoning how to bring the expectations of users to the attention of social workers, the group saw itself as a spokesperson to the social workers.

### *Peer Support when Accessing the Service*

The third (3) and last reflection that emerged from the group is linked to the importance of peer support for people who have to contact Child Protection Services.

This stems from the direct experience of the members of the group: All, in fact, can identify a person who, at the time when they had to meet with the social worker for their first interview or during the intervention, supported them in their relationship with the social worker and in overcoming the fears and resistance they felt.

*Fortunately, there was a Caritas volunteer ... I trusted her a lot, and she knew the social workers. She called to say that I was scheduled for an interview and that she would accompany me.*

[Anna]

*A friend of mine had a good experience with the social worker. When I arrived at the office, I hoped to meet with the same social worker, and I felt calmer.*

[Clara]

Therefore, it appears that the support and mentoring of a trusted person—someone who is emotionally close to and shares the service user's concern with the family situation and the decision to contact social services—can help overcome their resistance towards social workers and their fear about the interventions that could be implemented. The group envisions being able to assist social workers by playing a supporting role for parents who approach it for the first time, as already happens now in some social service

experiences connected to mental health issues (Stanchina, 2014), in which experienced users and family members have taken active roles in facilitating access to the services.

## **Fourth Phase: Meeting between the Parents' Group and local Social Services**

The reflections that emerged within the group were valorised and analysed at a practical level during a meeting between the members of the group, the social workers, and the managers of the Family and Child Protection Services of the Municipality of Rozzano and some political representatives from the Town Hall.

On this occasion of sharing and exchange, the group was able to present the reflections that emerged during the meetings and its operative proposals. The meeting represented a real opportunity to build a connection between the professional and experiential realities, promoting recognition of the work done by the group and the dialogue between social services and the public, in an atmosphere of equality and mutual appreciation.

All the participants were sharing the same space, sitting in a circle in the same room, to facilitate the flow of communication between subjects belonging to different realities, who gathered with the common goal of identifying strategies to deal with the mistrust that people feel when they approach Family and Child Protection Services.

For the first time in the experience of the township of Rozzano, social workers and municipal officers were open to listening to what service users had produced, expressing their amazement and gratitude towards those citizens who had tried to support others, despite the difficulties in their personal lives, and led them to be service users.

The actions that were presented, and for which the institution (social services and township representatives) gave its availability, are the following:

- The organisation of informative meetings in schools, during which social workers, together with some parents helped by the services, would have the opportunity to introduce themselves and explain their role, duties, and responsibilities, thus enhancing the voices of those who have experienced such relationships with local social services. These meetings could be part of a path towards strengthening relationships between schools and local social services and are already scheduled for the following school year.
- The presentation of a poster, realised thanks to the Erickson Study Center (Malacrida, 2016), which sums up what people expect from local social services workers. Through this graphical tool, the group had the opportunity to represent the voices of service users, asking social workers to acknowledge their needs. The contents of the poster specifically state that social workers should:

- *Provide explanations of what they decide to do and what they think about the situation;*
  - *Know how to meet users' needs and answer questions they submit to them, showing interest in what they say;*
  - *Respect the urgency and anxiety arising from people's stories, without minimising them;*
  - *Know how to reassure users with kind words;*
  - *Know how to listen even if people talk a lot and say senseless things;*
  - *Do not judge people or their stories;*
  - *If the children have been removed, reassure their parents about the community where they are and immediately allow contact with them;*
  - *Be available to meet with people when they need to;*
  - *Answer phone calls or return calls as soon as possible.*
- Open the group to other parents who are in the position of having to start the process of being helped by the Family and Child Protection Service and could benefit from the support of parents who have already experienced this type of relationship with local services. In this way, they have the possibility to share their concerns, doubts, and uncertainties and receive support and mentoring from those who have already had the same experience. The group envisioned that social workers could propose to other parents to join the group, by handing out a brochure containing the location and dates of meetings during their first interviews with the social worker.

The joint meeting was to afford workers and managers alike the opportunity to «experience first-hand» the value of experiential knowledge and the strength people can develop when they have the opportunity to do so; for the group, it was an opportunity to see their skills recognised and a stimulus to continue the work started. After the meeting, social workers, managers, and political representatives committed themselves, for their own parts, to supporting and encouraging the actions defined by the group and the continuation of the planned work, ensuring spaces for meetings, identifying people who could be invited to participate in the next meeting of the group, and ensuring the commitment to work with schools which would be implemented in the following months.

### **Feedback on the work done by the parents' group and by social workers**

After the meeting between the group of parents and social workers, the author met the group of parents and professionals to collect their feedback on the work done.

All the members of the group expressed a general sense of satisfaction for a job that, initially, most did not imagine could result in the acquisition of new awareness about their skills and resources. Everyone acknowledged that the group experience was not only an opportunity for personal growth but also an instrument to experience first-hand the opportunities that participatory planning can offer in terms of bonds, positive reinforcements, and skills. Everybody firmly expressed the hope that the project would continue, as it led them to engage, also personally, in the possible involvement of other parents who were their acquaintances and who could be invited to participate in the next meetings of the group. At the same time, they expressed their desire to spread the knowledge about the work done, as they requested to hang posters at the offices of their children's paediatricians or in the schools they attended.

The feedback collected from the social workers of the Family and Child Protection Service of the Municipality of Rozzano and the other individuals who took part in the project (in particular, those who were present at the meeting with the parents' group), concerned both the initial perception that they had when they were asked to carry out a project of this type and what emerged following the meeting everyone attended. They were asked to express both the feelings experienced from an emotional point of view and their evaluations from a more «technical» point of view regarding what has been achieved so far.

What emerged is that, initially, among the social workers and managers, even if they had placed a good level of trust in the project proposal, there was also some fear about the involvement of parents, especially because they were still being helped by the services. This ambivalence was linked, on the one hand, to the fear that the project could in some way undermine the relationship between them and the parents and their willingness to follow the aid paths initiated by the services and, on the other, to the conviction that the group's experience could be beneficial for the parents and the expectation that a project could emerge that would also be beneficial to other families helped by the services.

It was therefore observed the coexistence of the desire to offer the parents they were helping an opportunity for growth and reflection that could also be extended to other service users and of resistance to the actual recognition of the resources that those parents could put in place for themselves and others. These feelings confirm the difficulty often encountered by social workers of adopting a different work perspective from the traditional one: Users are no longer considered passive objects of the interventions proposed by professionals but subjects with resources that can be beneficially used to solve their family situations and to support other people. This struggle on the part of social workers is understandable if one imagines a profession based on the traditional approach of social work, in which the social worker is considered a lighthouse— a reference point and guide for users who, in turn, are called on to follow the directions of professionals to overcome the difficult situation they are going through. Overturning this perspective

and adopting one that allows users to be considered active subjects and recognises them as possessing competence and knowledge independent from their help by social workers makes them autonomous with respect to the aid paths taken and favours the development of their resources, both for their own benefit and for that of other people in similar situations. However, this change of perspective, which is far from obvious within the social services scene, finds fertile ground for implementation on occasions such as the project described here, which started with the initial open attitude expressed by social workers and political decision-makers and was later confirmed by the results obtained by the parents' group.

The social workers and managers were able to overcome their initial resistance and agreed to identify the people who could participate in the project. They respected the time necessary for the group to constitute itself as such and work on the proposals, which they later accepted when they were submitted. This attitude on the part of the social workers allowed us to think over and freely define the objectives of the project while maintaining a connection with the institution, which then resulted in the joint meeting of all the actors involved in the project.

Regarding the evaluation that followed the project's completion and the actions it envisaged, the social workers and service managers expressed feelings of amazement and surprise. They did not expect that the group would reach such a level of self-awareness and, above all, they did not think such recognition could be obtained from the outside (referring to the poster). They also said they were very satisfied with the actions defined by the group and recognised the value of the results that could be achieved by implementing a participatory definition of intervention, even within a service dealing with child protection. They expressed their complete openness to inviting other parents to participate in the group, demonstrating that they had fully understood the objective that the group had set and the way in which the actions were designed.

As for the political representatives who took part in the meeting with the group, they reported that they had no doubts about starting the project: They probably were not very familiar with the thoughts and reflections that led to the establishment of the group and did not directly know the parents who were part of it; therefore, they had less difficulty considering their involvement. Instead, they expressed evident gratitude towards the group and recognised the merit of having defined feasible, simple actions that could potentially have extremely positive repercussions on the work carried out by the local social services. The meetings at the school and the participation in the group of other parents helped by the services could, in their opinion, improve the perception that the public had towards the local social services and thus reduce the complaints they often received from the public about the social workers' work.

The manager and councillor expressed their intention to support the project in the months ahead, thus giving their approval to a participatory work method that could have significant positive effects on social service work by increasing its visibility.

## Conclusions

The experimentation of this project offers several useful clues for social workers in the field of child protection.

The involvement of service users in the planning of actions that can be implemented within social services constituted an opportunity for recognition and enrichment for both the professionals and the users involved in the project. The former had the chance to experience the contribution of those who are traditionally considered passive beneficiaries of the interventions implemented by the professionals. Welcoming service users' opinions, about social workers' methods of intervention and the operational strategies that could be implemented resulted in the carrying out of some concrete actions: the organisation of informative meetings in schools, in which social workers, together with some parents helped by the services, would have the opportunity to introduce themselves and explain their role and the promotion of the parents' group as a form of peer support for other parents in the position of having to start the process of being helped by the Child Protection Services and could benefit from it. Moreover, maintaining a connection between the social workers and parents' group will reduce the distance between the services and the public, facilitate the construction of positive relationships between the parties, and promote the adoption of a work vision more centred on the parents.

From the point of view of the parents who made up the group, the work carried out allowed them to be active subjects in their relationship with the services, to have their experiences valued, and to be recognised not only as «parents facing a difficult situation' but as people able to offer their own contribution to defining concrete actions aimed at helping those going through the same experience in their relationships with social workers.

Furthermore, working with the group has been a source of empowerment for its members. It developed the dynamics of mutuality and of experience sharing, which resulted in the enhancement of the opinions of all participants. Parents began to think that their experiences with social services, which had always been considered negative and stigmatising, could have value not only for themselves but also for other parents in the same situation.

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