Parents' participation in the life of children in care: What social workers say about it

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Abstract

Parents' participation in child protection is a complex topic both in its theoretical/methodological interpretation and for its operational implementation.
Given the regulatory acknowledgement of parental responsibility to educate their children, decide in their best interests, and provide for their development (UN Convention, 1989), it is crucial to reflect on how to guarantee the exercise of these rights and duties in situations where children or young people need to be temporarily removed from their family for their protection.
After a theoretical introduction of the concept of participation and brief outline of research on parents' participation in child protection, a detailed analysis is presented of the results of research on parents' participation in the life of their children removed from home and living in three children's homes. Specifically, the viewpoint of child protection social workers regarding the advantages and critical issues of parents' participation in the life of their children in children's homes is highlighted.

Keywords

Participation, parents, child protection, children's home, social work.

Defining the concept of participation

The concept of participation has been extensively studied in the field of social work. In 1969, Arnstein published in the *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* his proposed ladder that defines eight levels of citizens' participation in interventions for the well-being of their communities. Starting from the bottom, the first two rungs describe situations in which participation is missing (manipulation, decorative). From the third rung, the author describes increasingly wider spaces for citizens' action in relation to the action of experts. In summary, the first level of participation is provided by the possibility of being informed, followed by the consultation that accompanies the information, opportunity to decide together with experts, opportunity to decide and implement initiatives independently,

and opportunity to define citizens' proposals involving experts. Note that these levels of participation are not to be understood as progressive in terms of the «validity» of the interventions, as in any situation we should strive to attain the last rung of participation. Rather, they represent different concrete possibilities for citizens to work together with experts in planning, defining, and implementing initiatives that offer them increasingly more room for action as they progress up the rungs of the ladder.

Hart (1992) defines participation as the process of sharing decisions that affect the lives of individuals and their community and highlights the active dimension of participation and possibility of guiding the decisions to be made. The same author uses Arnstein's ladder of participation in relation to the participation of children and young people.

On the other hand, Folgheraiter's studies (2004, 2009) emphasise the relational dimension of the concept of participation. Reflecting on the relationship between social workers and service users, the author identifies levels ranging from an absent or low relationality, in which only practitioners make decisions while users benefit from the interventions planned for them, to maximum relational dimensions, in which experts and users together define the goals of aid projects and strategies for implementing them.

Essentially, experiences of participation are more so when they allow users to affect the decisions concerning their lives and experts let themselves be «conditioned» by service users' viewpoint when planning their work with them.

Participation in child protection

In the context of child protection, implementing participation is challenging, as it requires that practitioners work with families and implement interventions to protect children from their family's issues while considering the mandates of the Juvenile Court. It also implies knowing how to manage power in the relationship between social workers and parents (Bundy-Fazioli, Briar-Lawson, & Hardiman, 2008), because parents do not lose the right and duty to contribute to decisions concerning the life of their children despite the limits of their responsibility.

There are several documented critical issues and obstacles regarding the participation of parents and family members. Practitioners must make decisions in the best interests of the children considering the interests of the other parties involved (parents, organisations), any restrictions on participation imposed by the Court, and inability to communicate in an appropriate professional way with parents dealing with serious issues (Archard & Skivenes, 2009; Barnes, 2011; Gallagher, Smith, Hardy, & Wilkinson, 2012; Forrester, Kershaw, Moss, & Hughes, 2008; Vis, & Thomas, 2009; Winter, 2010).

Some research indicates the risk that social workers put in place paternalistic participatory approaches that while seeming like open spaces for participation, actually seek service users' confirmation of their choices (Kvarnstrom, Hedberg, & Cedersund,

2012). Families who have their children placed in care, especially when feelings of anger and shame accompany the experience of separation (Walker, 2011), are unlikely to have collaborative and participatory attitudes.

Darlington, Healy, & Feeney (2010) note that practitioners are aware of the limitations of approaches to parents' participation. They identify challenges to participatory practice, which include conflicts between the statutory duty of social workers and need to include them meaningfully in decision making. Muench, Diaz, & Wright (2017) also identify the importance of relationships of trust and highlight social workers' difficulties in building a relationship with the child if they have a difficult relationship with that child's parent(s). Ultimately, this reduces participation.

Still, at the international level, families as well as children and young people increasingly participate in planning interventions aimed at their well-being. These include the development of *Family Group Conferences* (Burford, 2010; Morris, 2008) and dialogical practices (Arnkil, 2012) in many European countries, provision of the support of an *advocate* to facilitate the participation of children and young people in formal decision-making processes in Anglo-Saxon countries (Boylan & Ing, 2005; Boylan & Dalrymple, 2009), documented experiences of working with groups of parents whose children have been estranged in Northern European countries and Australia (Slettebø, 2013; Thomson & Thorpe, 2004), and various studies on the participation of children and their family members in child protection (e.g. Darlington, Healy, & Feeney, 2010; Healy & Darlington, 2009; Healy, Darlington, & Feeney, 2011; Hall & Slembrouck, 2001; Križ & Skivenes, 2017).

These experiences draw on the importance of the relationship between social workers and service users (Folgheraiter, 2004). Furthermore, when parents do not choose to become involved with these services, Smith et al. (2012) suggest that good relationships are more important than formal procedures. Gladstone et al. (2012) found that engagement between social workers and the people they were supporting was related to good outcomes.

Some participation practices have also been explored in the context of child protection services in Italy (Calcaterra, 2014a, 2014b, 2016; Calcaterra & Secchi, 2011; Maci, 2011); however, the country still has a long way to go. Belotti's (2016) study on social workers' perception of participatory practices accounts for the understanding of the concept of participation that is *applied as a deliberate strategy carried out by the operator aimed at collecting information to have a more defined and in-depth view of the situation* (p. 124).

Context and methodology of the research

This paper presents some of the results of research on how parents' participation is implemented in the life of children in children's homes. The study involved three children's

homes in northern Italy that adopt working strategies to encourage parents' participation. The study first analysed their children hosting practices and those developed to encourage the participation of the children's families. To this end, semi-structured interviews were conducted with their three representatives and service documentation was analysed. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted with parents/family members[1] (six parents) and with nine children from these families to understand their perspective of their parents' involvement. Finally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five social workers who were the referents of the families. In this paper, we present the practices developed by the children's homes to encourage the participation of families and the results of the analysis of the views of the social workers.

Five social workers were interviewed, all female, and each with 7 to 15 years of experience in child protection.

The interviews aimed to explore social workers' perception of parents' participation in child protection; the possibilities for families to participate concretely in the life of their children in care; and the advantages, risks, difficulties, and obstacles to parents' participation.

All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed, and the content of the interviews was thematically analysed according to the topics of interest. The data were processed in compliance with the privacy legislation, and the research was conducted in compliance with the Code of Ethics of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart (Directive 9350/2011).

Practices to support parents' participation

The organisation of the children's homes provides formal practices for the participation of families in the various phases of the stay of children, which are combined with the participation opportunities provided by the working methods of the care social workers.

In the introductory phase, even before meeting the children, care social workers meet their parents to introduce them to the home, agree on the project, and get to know the child based on what their family members tell them. When possible, care social workers also ask parents to participate in the first meeting with their children, which usually takes place in the presence of other social workers. Therefore, placements are carried out with the collaboration of the parents who as far as possible accompany their children to the home.

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[1]   For the sake of synthesis from here on, we refer to children and young people as children. Furthermore, the term parent includes any other family members (grandparents, uncles, etc.). The term social workers refers to social workers who work for the Local Authority Child Protection Services and who are in charge of situations, while care social worker refers to a practitioner who works in a children's home with young people.

After the introductory phase, care social workers define an Individualised Aid Project with the participation of the children and their family members, which is then monitored regularly through network meetings in the presence of the parents, children, and social workers. During the children's stay in the home, parents are expected to attend meetings with their school, family doctors, and sports organisations, etc. On holidays and the children's birthday, care social workers organise celebration events at their facilities, and invite the families to participate, thus creating another opportunity to participate in the life of their children. At the time of the research, one practice being tested was the preparation of Participated Reports, which record the progress of child placement projects and are drafted with parents' collaboration. Family members who wish to do so have the opportunity to participate in the self-help group organised for them. The group meets monthly at the children's home and although not explicitly aimed at parents' participation, is described by both care social workers and participating parents as an opportunity for reflection and involvement in the lives of their children. Finally, specific projects have been defined to promote the building of bonds with families, for example, the «Let's dance together» project, which involves the children, parents, and social workers in group dance lessons.

In addition to these formalised practices, the interviewees describe the work approach adopted by care social workers in their relationship with parents as one that opens up further space for participation, even in situations not specifically structured. For example, parents have the opportunity to have coffee with care social workers when they go to the children's home to visit their children and take them back after their weekly visits home. On these occasions, parents can talk to the care social workers and if necessary, they can update each other. These are work-related opportunities care social workers consider fundamental in building relationships of trust to ensure that parents gradually get to know the children's home better and over time, open up to the possibility of actively participating in the project.

In summary, the reasons for this methodological choice, which are aimed at parental participation and in compliance with the limits imposed by the Juvenile Court, are as follows:

- acknowledgement of the importance of the roots of the children hosted and of the temporary nature of the placement in the community;
- acknowledgement of the experiential skills of family members who are still present and interested in the well-being of the hosted children;
- desire to reduce the loyalty conflict perceived by children between their family and the care social workers, leaving open space for collaboration and mutual understanding;
- the belief that the participation of motivated family members can guarantee the definition of better aid projects oriented towards family reunification, unless proven otherwise.

Parents' participation: Social workers' viewpoint

Risks, difficulties, and obstacles to parents' participation

Creating participation spaces in children's homes for parents whose children have been removed for their protection is difficult and involves addressing critical issues.

The representatives of the children's homes did not report any particular risk connected with parental participation, except that creating relationships of trust between families and care social workers can sometimes lead to an excess of delegation from the former to the latter. In most cases, difficulties in managing the different meetings were reported, especially network meetings, where it is easier for families to consider care social workers as «their allies in the fight against the services» (Children's home Representative). However, a critical issue concerns the possibility of disagreements with local authority social workers. Although the participatory approach is clearly included in the Service Charter and on the organisation's website for children's homes, the interviewees reported that their colleagues from the child protection services are often not completely in favour of parental participation (e.g. in network meetings) and ask to organise update meetings for professionals only. However, a clear objective obstacle is that many parents live far from the children's home and can only reach it by train, whose schedule limits the possibility of attending and participating in some proposed activities such as the self-help group, which meets in the evening.

Instead, all interviewed local authority social workers reflected on the effort to find the right balance in creating a closeness with parents, understanding their difficulties, and at the same time having to intervene in an effective and directive way in their lives to protect the children from the issues of the parents with whom they are trying to collaborate. These social workers talk about the need to keep professional boundaries, as they perceive the risk of changing power relations, which would blur the imaginary line and make it more difficult to make decisions if they lost their objectivity. This is reflected in the statements below:

> The risk is that if we create a very strong closeness, we could compromise our technical, unbiased view of the situation. (Social Worker C)

> The difficulty in maintaining the boundaries that define the different roles of the individuals in the network can lead to a confusing situation, in which the individual specificity and responsibility are lost. (Social Worker E)

In addition, as social workers, they also perceive the risk of experiencing more significant difficulties in carrying out their work due to the needs to justify some of their choices to parents and to reach agreement. In fact, it would be simpler to make a unidirectional decision without having to deal with families, as illustrated in the following statement:

> It would be easier to tell parents what they can or cannot do, and we make the decisions: it would save a lot of time. Otherwise, we will have to deal with many complaints,

problems, and readjustments that arise from giving these parents a role, which is their legitimate role, but it needs to be well integrated with everything else. (Social Worker D)

Clearly, this type of intervention requires a greater organisational effort. Obviously, options that exclude instead of including are certainly easier to implement, at least in operational terms. (Social Worker F)

A significant difficulty experienced by social workers, especially in the initial phase, concerns the effort to motivate parents to participate in defining the aid project despite the anger they feel about the separation:

If anger and what else comes from the trauma of separation prevail, that's when it is difficult to create the conditions for participation. The greatest difficulty is building a relationship of trust starting from a traumatic separation. (Social Worker C)

Furthermore, it is acknowledged that this working method asks social workers to change their paradigm to conceive the helping relationship in a dimension of reciprocity with their users. Families, despite experiencing sufficient difficulties to have suffered the removal of their children, still have skills and if guided and supported, can become proactive and mindful collaborators in the choices to be made and objectives to be achieved to build their well-being. Regarding the helping processes from a relational perspective is challenging in child protection. Social workers are called to reconcile on one hand the need to intervene directly to protect children, and on the other, the participation of the same parents and family members who have been declared, albeit temporarily, unable to take care of their children. This is elaborated in the following statement:

When we talk with other social workers working in other services and share this experience, which was a great stimulus for us in planning how to deal with children in children's homes, they are surprised and scared of this level of parents' participation. Obviously, if they come from the previous system where «I am here, and you are there», separated by a wall, thinking of working this way is challenging. It is difficult to make them understand the advantages of participation. (Social Worker C)

The advantages of participation

Despite the difficulties highlighted, the child protection social workers interviewed identified several advantages connected with parents' participation in the life of their children in children's homes, as implemented following the methods proposed by their organisations.

First, these social workers mention the advantage of favouring the creation of a relationship of trust with practitioners. However, they go even further. Social workers also highlight the positive impact of this participation in their relationship with families. They tell of less angry parents, who manage to reason with them about things to do together and with whom it is possible to share aid projects:

Parents can participate in the daily life of their children as much as possible and can organise their children's party with their schoolmates in the home where they live. They get to know their children's companions and their parents. These are the everyday life situations that parents miss when their children are placed in a community. Being able to have parents participate in these occasions is important and significant. It allows them to build a relationship of trust over time. (Social Worker C)

Avoiding polarity, we lined up on one side with our swords and parents on the other with shields, trying to defend themselves from the services, but instead, aiming at «us together for...». This system makes cohesion easier, creates a less angry and hostile climate that works wonders; for example, we can keep a professional attitude, but it is closer, more human, closer to people, and easier to do if relationships are more peaceful and relaxed. (Social Worker D)

The possibility of creating a relationship, a bond with family members, which makes them feel an integral part of the project itself. (Social Worker E)

The social workers also acknowledged that parents can contribute concretely and significantly to defining the objectives to be pursued, which enabled them to develop projects considered better and more achievable because they are planned together. Network meetings seem to be occasions for participatory decision-making, which although requiring great effort, work and guarantee spaces for authentic participation for all involved. This is illustrated in the following statement:

Sitting at a table and talking about what I see, what my colleague sees, what the representative of Child Neuropsychiatry or other services involved sees, directly with the parent, who not only can listen but also respond, contest, and call into question the issues, is the foundation of co-building. At that point, it becomes clear to everyone what the next objectives should be and who should work on achieving them. (Social Worker C)

These opportunities for participation become valuable and concrete, as the process of expressing personal opinions, which affect the decision-making process, results in the commitment of all those present who contributed to defining the envisioned direction. This helps to avoid delegation or the centralisation of power on either side:

It is also a way to have everybody take their own responsibilities and make sure that nobody bails out of them. Social workers and families, everybody commits and carries out their task responsibly. (Social Worker C)

The benefits of a participatory approach also affect the lives of the children in care. According to the social workers interviewed, knowing that their families are still present as far as possible and working with the social workers towards a change helps children in their placement away from the family by reducing their understandable loyalty conflict between defending their roots and their caregivers:

[Children] feel less alone in this path. They feel they don't have to side with one party or the other; they don't have to have a loyalty conflict. Children rarely side with services, in some cases, they can side with the services for a time, but then they return to their parents, the roots they love. They feel the call of their origins. Why put them in the position of having to choose? (Social Worker D)

Since the placement outside the family is a difficult experience for children, as they have to live in an environment different from their home where they have to relate with strangers, their family's involvement encourages them, also because they can perceive the struggle and commitment their parents are experiencing. (Social Worker E)

It is reassuring for children. In my opinion, the family can participate by supporting them while they stay at that place. (Social Worker B)

Moreover, they need to realise that the placement outside the family is temporary and that this guided and committed participation is part of the planning process aimed at family reunification.

The involvement of the families also facilitates their preparation to welcome the children back at the end of their placement path, which is among other things, the ultimate goal of the intervention. (Social Worker F)

Conclusions

This research explored the participatory practices implemented by three children's homes in their work with the families of the children and young people they are hosting. Parents participate through meeting opportunities designed by care social workers and structured hosting practices that facilitate such participation. The practitioners also adopt a relational approach in their educational and helping relationships that considers the families of the hosted children as collaborators with whom to build over time the project of the children's placement in care. They do so despite the difficulties and in compliance with the limits set by the Juvenile Court.

Social workers of the child protection services consider parents' participation in the life of the children placed in care a possible and beneficial challenge for various reasons. It allows building trust relationships between families and social workers, increases the possibility of planning better projects, stimulates all people involved to actively commit, is a source of support and reassurance for the children and their families, and supports parents in regaining confidence in their skills and in the possibility of improving the situation.

However, attention should be paid to a possible iatrogenic effect of participation. Participation allows parents to build significant relationships of trust with the care social workers, sometimes to the extent of delegating to them choices regarding their children's

lives, choices to which they could contribute, but have instead renounced their participation because of their trust in the operators.

The experience studied highlights the importance of creating relationships of trust between social workers and parents, and of establishing aid processes that open up a space for collaboration with families. This approach should be applied even to situations where social workers control the life of families and had to intervene for the protection of the children and young people (Smith et al., 2012), and when they deal with parents and family members' issues that require important interventions to protect the children. Even in these situations, the goal of the practitioner's work is not only controlling, but also guiding families towards a change in their difficult situation and recovery of their parental responsibilities. Working with coping networks, the common aim is to safeguard the children involved (Folgheraiter, 2004; Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2017).

The task for the social worker is to define practices that allow collaboration with families. The aim of this is to support these families in accepting participatory proposals and help them contribute.

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