



Seeing eye to eye or not? Young people's and child protection workers' perspectives on children's participation within the Dutch child protection and welfare services



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ABSTRACT

Objective: Child participation is internationally seen as a crucial aspect of child protection and child welfare. Scholars have differences of opinion about what participation entails, but even less is known about whether children and case managers have similar perspectives on participation and its goals.

Methods: An exploratory study was conducted, including 16 interviews with case managers and 16 interviews with young people in the Amsterdam area, the Netherlands.

Results: There is a large gap between case managers' perspectives on participation and its prevalence in practice and the experiences and perspectives of young people under the care of child protection and welfare services. Case managers see participation as important, but it is generally seen as an instrument to ensure the child's cooperation. Young people, on the other hand, understand participation differently. They primarily want to be heard, informed and taken seriously.

Conclusions and implications for practice: The level of participation that occurs and the different perspectives of young people and case managers show that there is currently no meaningful dialogue between the case manager and the young person. The knowledge and the experience of young people are not taken seriously, given the proper value or acted upon in the process of youth care. Although social scientists have shown that children are knowledgeable social actors, the practice of child protection is falling behind. Interventions to decrease barriers to participation should therefore focus on the case managers' perspectives of children and childhood, encouraging them to not only see but also approach children as knowledgeable social actors.

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1. Introduction

Traditionally, children are seen as vulnerable and in need of protection. Recent insights are increasingly recognizing children as social actors with moral and legal rights to protection, to the provision of services and to participation as active subjects (Bell, 2002; Bessell, 2011; Kellett, Robinson, & Burr, 2004; Sinclair, 2004; Tisdall & Punch, 2012; Toros, Tiko, & Saia, 2013). Within the domains of child protection and child welfare, this shift has resulted in a more child-centred approach in which children are seen as right bearing individuals who are active contributors, exercising their rights within the context of their families and community (Winter, 2011). As a consequence of these changes, child participation is receiving more attention in both policy and research.

As a reflection of this attention, there have been many studies of children's participation within child welfare and child protection services. These studies generally agree that participation is important for many reasons (Gallagher, Smith, Hardy, & Wilkinson, 2012; Healy

& Darlington, 2009; Holland, 2001; Vis, Strandbu, Holtan, & Thomas, 2011; Woolfson, Heffernan, Paul, & Brown, 2009). For instance, interventions seem to be more effective when they are better tailored to the needs and daily realities of the individual child (Archard & Skivenes, 2009; Barnes, 2012; McLeod, 2007). Furthermore, participation also has a positive influence on the development of children. For example, participation in decisions about their lives helps children feel connected and committed to the decisions that are taken (Woolfson et al., 2009). It can increase their self-esteem (Vis et al., 2011) and is associated with increased feelings of mastery and control (Bell, 2002; Leeson, 2007; McLeod, 2007; Munro, 2001).

The literature demonstrates that children's participation is important and indicates what should be done to facilitate children's participation in child welfare and child protection services. However, studies of the prevalence of participation show that acknowledging the importance of participation and willingness to facilitate participation do not necessarily mean that participation is implemented in practice (Gallagher et al., 2012; Healy & Darlington, 2009; Holland, 2001; Hubberstey, 2001; Woolfson et al., 2009). The gap between theory and practice might have a number of explanations, such as differences in academic definitions of participation (Hemrica & Heyting, 2004). In practice,

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the socio-cultural image of children may play an important role in how participation of children is understood. For example, the image of children as vulnerable and dependent offers different opportunities for participation than one in which children are seen as autonomous and capable of self-determination (Dedding, 2009). In the child protection and child welfare domains, the dominant image of children still seems to emphasize their vulnerability and need of protection (Barnes, 2012; Sanders & Mace, 2006). This image poses a challenge and barrier to participation of children (van Bijleveld, Dedding, & Bunders-Aelen, 2013).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was ratified by all European countries in the early 1990s. European countries have however taken different approaches to the implementation of child participation in national legislation. Despite the differences between countries, studies generally report similar findings on the status of child participation and its key features, namely, that although its importance is recognized, it is difficult to put in practice, and that there are many barriers to the facilitation of participation (Franklin & Sloper, 2005; van Bijleveld et al., 2013).

In the Netherlands, a basis for child participation is incorporated into the Youth Care Act 2005, which states that decisions should be made in consultation with the client. However, it remains ambiguous whether the term 'client' refers to parents, to children, or to both. Some parts of the act are clearly focused on parents. For example, the act states that 'even if the authority of the parents is restricted or has been delegated to the Bureau of Youth Care [the Dutch institution for child protection and child welfare services], decisions should be made which take into account the perspectives of the client' (De Wet op de Jeugdzorg in grote lijnen/The main elements of the Youth Care Act, n.d.).

Little is known about the actual practice of participation in child protection and child welfare services in the Netherlands. Also new in the discussion of the interpretation of participation and its aims within the child protection and child welfare is to include the perspectives and expectations of young people themselves and see whether this corresponds with the ideas of case managers. To address these gaps, the objectives of this study are to inquire both case managers' and young people's perspectives and experiences of child participation within child protection services and to explore how these views relate to each other and to practice.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The concept of participation

The implementation of child participation is hampered by the many different meanings assigned to participation (Hemrica & Heyting, 2004). Arnstein (1969) defined participation as 'the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future' (1969:216). Hart (1992), well known in the field of child participation and following Arnstein, describes participation as 'the process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives' (p. 5). He refers to an active form of participation and the possibility (his emphasis) that this participation will have an effect on decision making. He emphasizes that the goal of child participation is not that children always participate to the full but, rather, that every child should have the opportunity to choose the fullest level of participation that matches his or her possibilities, recognizing that circumstances will offer different opportunities (Hart, 2002). Other scientists take a more radical position, arguing that participation is a process in which disadvantaged groups are able to question existing social practices and overthrow those that are responsible for their social, cultural and political exclusion (Hart, Ackerman, & Feene, 2004). Within this study, we define participation as a situational and iterative process in which all relevant actors enter into mutual dialogue. Within this dialogue, the perceptions, knowledge and experience of all actors should be taken seriously and given the proper value, in all phases of

the process. In particular, this should involve attention to the perceptions, knowledge and experience of those whose lives will be affected by the decisions made during this process. Further, this process should lead to action and change (Dedding & Slager, 2013).

2.2. Child protection services in the Netherlands

The welfare policies of individual countries vary enormously. A distinction can be made between countries with a child protection approach, like Australia and the UK, and other countries with a family service system approach, like Sweden and Norway (Healy, Lundström, & Sallnäs, 2011; Katz & Hetherington, 2006). The child protection approach focuses on the child and the need to prevent abuse or rescue children from abusive situations. The family service system approach focuses on the psychosocial framing of problems and needs and sees the protection of children as an aspect of child welfare whereby interventions should take place to prevent maltreatment of children. Services are provided by resources as close as possible to the person who needs them, resulting in a relatively small number of serious cases in which the state becomes involved and a case manager is assigned to make the decisions and interventions are done by social workers (Healy et al., 2011; Katz & Hetherington, 2006).

The youth care system in the Netherlands can be described as a family service system approach. The case management function is appointed to 'the Bureau of Youth Care', which is the gateway to secondary youth care. When the primary care services, such as schools, child services and local support institutions, are not sufficient, families are referred to Youth Care. Here a case manager is assigned to the family to assess what care is needed, making a referral. Referral to the Bureau of Youth Care can be either voluntary or compelled by a judge.

The Bureau of Youth Care has 15 regional centres in the Netherlands. There is a central organization but each regional centre makes its own policy. This research concerns the Bureau of Youth Care in Amsterdam (BJAA), which is developing a family-centred approach with system focused case management. Since the beginning of 2012, case managers have been installed to handle all child welfare, protection and parole services, replacing teams of specialized child welfare, child protection and child parole workers.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Participants

3.1.1. Young people

Reaching young people was very difficult. They could only be contacted with the cooperation of their case managers, who needed to provide the contact details of young people, with approval of the young person in advance. The inclusion criteria for young people comprised being placed in a residential institution or an open unit while in BJAA's care and still being supported by a case manager. Exclusion criteria were being placed in an institution at a very young age, making it difficult for the young person to remember how decisions were made.

To get in touch with young people, 49 case managers were approached individually by the researchers. The purpose of the research was explained, and the case managers were asked to approach young people who met the inclusion criteria. Every case manager was given an information letter to hand directly to young people to ensure that as many as possible would know about the research and the researchers. In addition, another 50 case managers were contacted by e-mail. This contact involved a description of the research and a letter for distribution to their young clients. Finally, several residential institutions were contacted to request cooperation of clients who were under BJAA supervision. In addition, case managers of these clients were approached by phone.

Overall, 30 young people were approached by their case managers and asked whether they wanted to participate. Some 21 young people

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