Children in Youth Care: participation is more than talking.
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In youth care, the era of only speaking about children, young people and parents, is over. Child welfare organisations and social services now intend to provide guidance that really connects with what children, young people and their families need. Involving clients, informing them and giving them the opportunity to express their opinion is crucial. The Flemish Decree of the Legal Status of the Minor in Youth Care from 2004 provides the statutory framework for the participation of minors in the Flemish context (DRM, 2004). Participation is considered to be important in the individual care process as well as on a structural level, for example, participation in the policy of social services.

Allowing clients to participate on in the provision of care and on a structural level requires creativity (of staff?): the courage to change habits, to discuss with clients in a different way, to open reporting, etc. (Louwagie, Poppe and Van den Bussche, 2015). Young people and parents indicate that they are getting increasingly involved. The story of participation, however, has not yet reached its ending point. Clients are still critical about the way in which they can or are expected to participate and sometimes still experience a lack of participation (Ackaert, Eerdekens, Schoevaerts and Vandenbussche, 2016).

Too young to participate?

When young children are concerned, we notice that participation is less obvious. After all, how to balance between involving a child and protecting it? How can you communicate better with young children about decision-making in youth care? The participation of young children remains a quest and a challenge. However, through a participatory process, we can give them the opportunity to increase the grip on their own reality. It gives them the possibility to seek information themselves and to develop social and coping skills that will

make them stronger in their future life (de Winter, Baerveldt & Kooistra, 1999). A backpack full of skills to tackle challenges can be extra valuable for children in a context of youth care. As researchers, we have stepped over the thresholds and we have given the young child the time and space to speak up.

This research project covers several types of youth care systems. There were cases from juvenile court, governmental supporting team and on demand of the parents. The kind of care that children were receiving was: family counselling, day care centre, residential care. In daycare centre and residential care family (or context) counselling is always included.

Twenty-one children between the ages of 6 and 12 years old have told us about their experiences, opinions and wishes about the information and the participation they receive in youth care. Still, finding suitable ways and tools to be participatory in the research itself was challenging (Eerdekens, Raes, Vandenbussche, 2017). Also for us as researchers, collaborating with children was a process of trying and growing. And we noticed that there are a lot of parallels to be drawn between talking with children in research and in youth care.

Informing children

We have explored several ways to make information about the research project accessible to children. Eventually, we made a short and low-threshold movie to inform them (inspired by the Mayne study, 2015). We have learned that providing information is not enough: the information must be understandable, and children must also have the chance to ask questions and give feedback.

During the interviews, we have noticed that children were generally well informed about the various facilities that come across their path. They know the name of the service or facility, but what their specific function and goal was, remains often difficult for them to explain. We have also learned that children do not always know why they are in a certain facility, how long it will last and where they will go to afterwards. Children appreciate adults making the decision, but most of the children want to be well-informed. It was remarkable that children under juvenile court or Youth Care Service were better informed than children that were not under a mandatory system. They get vague or, according to them, sometimes offer no explanation. Children under juvenile court or Youth Care Service were able to explain remarkably better how the system works and why action had been taken.

A child tells his experience of going to a new facility unexpectedly, without information:

Researcher (R): Who told you that you would go to the day centre?
Child (C): Ann [fictitious name supervisor].
R: What did you think of that?
C: They said that at the end. That was really surprising. They also didn't tell me that I had to go there for the whole summer holiday. I was completely surprised by that they had not told me.
R: And did you understand why they decided that you should come here during the holiday?
C: Yes, that was mainly to support Mommy because Mommy needed help.

During a number of interviews, a person of confidence was present on request of the child. That person did not intervene but followed the entire interview. Afterwards, some of them mentioned they were surprised that the child did not give certain information, for example about past interventions or aid objectives. Of course, children can simply forget things, but it does show that one-off informing is not always enough to really be remembered by the children. Tailor-made information, repetition and two-way communication are tools to inform children about difficult matters.

Children and their care givers

The children from the survey are very satisfied with their caregivers. They know them by name and know them well: who is very kind, who is sometimes a bit strict, whom they can always approach with questions, ... An individual caregiver (IC) is very important for children. Some children indicate that they would be happy to choose their IC themselves.

R: What is special about your IC? What does she do differently from other caregivers?
C: I can sometimes choose what we will do next. Last time I asked her to ... go and play somewhere. And then we really went there.

For the children, it does not matter how many people are involved. Still, children like it when there is a counsellor or another adult who is recognisable and stays connected with the child for a long time. Sometimes this is an IC, sometimes a juvenile judge or consultant of the Youth Care Service who is a kind of point of contact.

Participation: a nuanced story

For the children whom we have interviewed, participation does not mean being involved as much as possible. For them, participation referred to having the choice to be informed and to be able to (co-)decide how and to what extent to be involved. Children do not necessarily want to peruse and know everything. But they do want to be asked and decide for themselves whether they want to see their files. For example, several children have indicated that they prefer not to know what is in their file: they find it too difficult or say that they would worry too much. Or they just want to know what is said in the conversations between the family counsellor and their parents.

Children want to have the possibility to participate, but they also want to be able to indicate on which topic. And it should be clear to what this participation leads and its purpose. It is about taking them seriously, taking their abilities and limitations into account.

Meaningful participation is also about paying sufficient attention to preconditions that give children the possibility to really understand, to express their opinion and to ask questions: being aware of time and space, basic attitude, tailor-made information...

Every child a file and sometimes a children's book

As far as reporting is concerned, during the research, we have seen that children greatly appreciate open reporting. In some facilities, the child has an adapted booklet, which shows the child's care process (within the facility), records of conversations, and decisions in a visualised way. The children like to show this booklet and know that it is theirs. Usually, children can take their booklet book with them when they leave the facility. Unfortunately, some children say that this has been lost. However, it is often when they get older that people feel the need to go back to their life history. For children in youth care, it seems even more difficult to reconstruct this. A file that 'follows' the child, both in terms of the care process and attuned to the age and level of the child, would be a big step forward.

The research interview: shared control

We have noticed that children enjoyed being able to make decisions during the research interview, for example, children could choose whether they wanted to draw or talk about a certain topic, about the sequence within and the duration of the conversation. We have noticed during the interviews that small interventions can be very meaningful in favouring children's participation. For example, we did not start from a 'standard duration' for the interviews, but we used a 'stop card' children could show us when they wanted to stop. In addition, as researchers we showed in 'small ways' that we really took children and their participation seriously, for example by using their words when we wrote down their quotes, by explicitly asking permission for the use and distribution of the photographs they were allowed to take, by providing the results of the research to them afterwards (again in the form of a video).

The impact of research

Of course, we hope our research project to be effective and that it can lead to youth care that is more tailored to young children. What we hadn't thought about in advance, is that the research act itself (interviews with children) can also have a lot of impacts immediately. Especially the explicit emergence of this impact was striking. For many children, the interview was more than 'talking about' several themes.

As a result of talking about participation during the interview, children started thinking about participation in their actual residential care. By asking questions about their path of care or IC, they began to wonder how long they can stay in the facility and whether they can choose their IC or swop...

We have treated those sudden and unexpected occurrences as carefully as possible. If a child was clearly having questions, we had a conversation with the child about with whom they could further discuss these questions. On one occasion, the child and the researcher talked with a caregiver together, on explicit request of the child. These examples suggest that communication in an organisation can seem to be open, but for children, it can still be a barrier to speak up freely.

We assume that some children might have had questions or concerns that we have missed during the interview, or that have arisen after the interview was finished. We came only once and disappeared again out of the lives of the children, ... and this while the interview itself was certainly not without impact. Even though children and caregivers could contact us afterwards, we know that it is not easy to just do so. We have learned from this that it is important to provide a good follow-up for the child. This was something we already knew, but this project has made us even more aware of it. And we can even transfer it to the participation of children in social services. In a conversation, there is always a selection of material. And there is also a lot going on between two contacts.

What can care givers do?

Participation is about your own attitude as a supervisor, counsellor, researcher... about installing reciprocity, setting yourself up in a low level and being open to feedback ... This can be about small things: for example, real and spontaneous reactions.

Participation is attuned to each individual child. A children's council is useful, but how do you ensure that the less assertive children also get a chance to speak up? How do you talk about youth care with young children, or about the youth judge? And how do you create a continuous process instead of one-off moments?

Participation is more than just talking. It is also about how you document. For example, with a two-year-old child who is in residential care, you may consider that it is too young to have a conversation about that decision. You can then choose to document this, to make it visible to the child and ensure that later in life, the child can read it.

Finally

The children were generally well-informed and satisfied with their level of participation in youth care. This is clearly a difference comparing to a previously conducted research with youngsters between 12 and 18 years old, who were more critical about their participation (Ackaert, Eerdekens, Schoevaerts, Vandenbussche, 2016). Generally, the children were also satisfied with the aid they received from youth care, the feelings about their school experience were more mixed. We collected more examples why they did not like school, for example, because of a strict teacher or missing friends from the previous school.

Participation is not about tools or methodologies only. It is mainly about the attitude of the professional. Involving children, asking their opinion... only makes sense if they are well-informed (at their level, in their language) and if they know exactly what it is about. There is the importance of openness, trust and autonomy (such as giving responsibility for the process, ensuring equivalence and reciprocity in the contact). To be able to participate, it is important to create space and time, but this does not have to be 'big': there are many opportunities in 'ordinary conversations'.

R: What should we tell the grown-ups if they want to help children?

C: Ask more questions to the children. What they want to do, why they want to do that.
R: Do they ask enough questions here [in the residential care]?
C: Yes.
R: What would be a good question?
C: I do not know. I did not think about it.
R: Should someone of them do something differently?
C: No. They are doing well, all of them.

And children repeatedly pointed out that it is important to visualise and to concretise.

R: If they [i.e. family counsellors] then come to your home, what do you do?
C: Talk.
R: What do you think of that?
C: Not so nice.
R: Do you have other ideas?
C: Yes, with pictures.
R: Has that ever been done with pictures?
C: No
R: That is a good idea of you. How do you get there?
C: Then I can better understand what they say.

Therefore, we can assure that children want to and can decide which information they want to receive and to what extent they want to be involved. They especially demand an open and transparent attitude from the adult. And for adults, it is even more important to put aside their own ideas about what children can handle. Instead, they should encourage children to get more overview and control.

Research results also available for children

The children we have interviewed were enthusiastic to work with us. As researchers, we have also worked as participatory as possible during our research process. After all, conducting research into participation challenges us to examine thoroughly the degree of participation in research. We informed the children in advance about the set-up and the used method by means of a brochure and a video. During the interview, we gave as much control and let the child participate as much as possible.

We wanted to extend the participation up to the final product and present the results of our research in an accessible and attractive way for children. We have reflection questions for children, reflection questions for caregivers, quotes from children and all this through a child-friendly website that the child and adults can browse. (http://www.arteveldehogeschool.be/hetkindindejeugdhulp).

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