

Partnership with Parents of Children in Care: A Study of Collective User Participation in Child Protection Services

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Abstract

This article presents the findings from a study of user participation in the Norwegian Child Protection services. Birth parents who have lost the custody of their children often feel disempowered by the authorities. The help offered to this group is often unsatisfactory. In this study, the parents were provided with the opportunity to form a group together with social workers and foster parents. The evaluation shows that the group offered the parents both the social support they needed and a forum to voice their opinions of the services. The group was mutually beneficial; it provided the social workers with useful knowledge, which resulted in organisational development, and the birth parents described their experiences as an empowering process. This study suggests that group strategies represent both a vital supplement to individual service provision and also a means to bring about organisational learning and change.

Keywords: Child protection, empowerment, parents, user participation

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Introduction

The idea of user participation is based upon the desire to enable users to exert an influence on the services they receive. Participatory practices in welfare are part of the social trend towards democratisation in the wider society and the movement towards more openness and accountability on

the part of public services. It is a part of a shift away from seeing people as the passive beneficiaries of welfare to emphasise the capacity of service users to be creative and reflexive and active agents in shaping their lives and acting upon the outcomes of welfare policies.

This article builds upon experiences from an action research project on user participation in Norwegian child protection services (Seim and Slettebø, 2007) and explores how dialogue-based participation in a support group can provide an opportunity for parents with children in care to improve service development in general. The study attempts to answer the following research questions: What were the parents' motives for attending the group? How did they evaluate it? Did user participation provide the parents with power to influence service delivery, or was it just another empty ritual? The purpose of the study is to throw light on factors that facilitate increased involvement among service users who often feel disempowered by the same services.

Being deprived of the right to care

It is well known that the majority of families involved in child protection experience multiple chronic stressors, including poverty, marginality, family problems, housing instability and social isolation (Kojan, 2010). A number of authors have demonstrated the intense emotions parents feel when a child is placed in care, especially when the decision is against their will. One review of 654 empirical placement studies in the Nordic countries and in England reported that the parents experienced powerlessness, neglect, a lack of information and a lack of participation in the placement process (Egelund and Hestbæk, 2003). Another review, based mainly on research from the USA and Canada, also described the parents' feelings of sadness, worry, lack of self-esteem, nervousness, emptiness, anger, bitterness, guilt, shame, isolation, but, for some, thankfulness and relief also (Frame *et al.*, 2006). We also know that some of these parents tend to place little focus on the pain and damage they may have inflicted on their child (Holtan and Eriksen, 2006). The parents who lose the right to care have mostly been unheard in child protection services. They have been largely absent as a focus of research, and they are often associated with stigma (Scholte *et al.*, 1999). In fact, the stigma of having had one's children removed may be a contributing reason for the lack of professional and academic consideration of life situations and services. Public documents have noted that the local authorities have unsatisfactory systems for following up parents with children in care (Parliamentary Report Nr. 40/2000–2001) and the lack of routines increases the risk that these tasks are subsequently performed in a casual manner (National Audit of Norway, 2003). Several research studies show that unsatisfactory help offered to parents is also a problem for child protection in Nordic countries and Great

Britain (Egelund and Hestbæk, 2003; Höjer, 2007), in the USA (Kapp and Vela, 2004), in Canada (Manji *et al.*, 2005), and in Australia (Hardy and Darlington, 2008). According to these studies, parents' particular needs may not be met. Responding to parents' immediate, practical needs is central to successful engagement. Additionally, these parents' psychological and emotional problems need to be addressed before changes in parenting and relationships with their children can occur (Maluccio *et al.*, 1986). Evidence suggests a positive relationship between achieving outcomes and goals and a parent's feelings of being listened to, valued and involved in service provision (Hardy and Darlington, 2008). Parents of foster children often present themselves as powerless, neglected and labelled as failures by public services and the community. They are often isolated from other parents, uninformed about agency services, unaware of their rights and unclear about their responsibilities (Slettebø, 2008). Being deprived of the right to care also means a loss of appreciation (Holtan and Eriksen, 2006). However, this is not the case for everyone (Schofield *et al.*, 2011). In order to build a working alliance, social workers must understand, accept and engage these negative and ambivalent feelings, while at the same time reaching for sources of motivation and hope.

Theoretical framework: empowerment and user participation

In addition to outcome research, models have been developed and evaluated that claim to support parents who have children removed from their care. Peer support and self-help have been reportedly promising components of services for parents in the child-care protection services (Carbino, 1981; Frame *et al.*, 2006; Hogan *et al.*, 2002; Levin, 1992; Manji *et al.*, 2005). The outcomes of mutual aid and social support intervention also suggested positive gains for indicators such as self-esteem, ability to cope with the challenges of daily living, attitudes towards parenting and perceived social support (Cameron and Lefcovitch, 2000; Thomson and Thorpe, 2004).

These approaches may be characterised as empowerment strategies. Empowerment covers a vast landscape of meanings, interpretations, definitions and disciplines. Within the field of social work, these strategies emphasise the recognition of personal strength, and the importance of increasing individual and political power so that service users can make decisions effectively, act to improve their situation and maximise the quality of their lives and have a greater voice in the institutional setting (Adams, 2008). The empowerment process is often described in terms of a reduction in self-reproach and the development of self-confidence and group consciousness, as well as an increased sense of competency (Gutiérrez, 1995). By raising the level of consciousness, users can rise above a purely individually oriented analysis of their problems.

User participation is a necessary part of the empowerment process, as empowerment aims to ‘enable people who are disempowered to have more control over their lives, to have a greater voice in institutions, service and situations which affect them’ (Braye and Preston-Shoot, 1995, p. 48). User participation in child protection is usually limited to individual involvement where the aim is to influence service delivery and decisions in the particular case, called individual participation. However, in this article, attention is paid to collective user involvement, a form of political participation, aiming at developing and improving the services in general, and where the collective refers to the goal of improving services for everyone in the same situation. It is the aim or goal that determines whether the act is individual or a collective (Seim and Slettebø, 2011). The focus in the article is on dialogue-based participation, but other initiatives could be user boards, dialogue-conferences, focus groups, working groups, etc.

The level of user participation varies on a continuum, from users being heard, being consulted, to their providing advice, to allowing them to participate in decision-making processes, to situations that manifest user control and where they have the power to influence and control decision making (Arnstein, 1969). Simply providing information to and listening to service users is not, strictly speaking, participation because there is no guarantee that the knowledge that they communicate is used. When decisions are negotiable and recipients are involved in the negotiations, users begin to have real influence. This is what Arnstein describes as partnership in her classic article ‘A ladder of citizen participation’. Although Arnstein’s ideas have been disputed, the ladder metaphor is useful because it differentiates between tokenism and true participation. In this article, the parents’ degree of participation is discussed in light of Arnstein’s ladder metaphor.

The user participation project

The context of the study is a larger research study that looked at how child protection service users and social workers understood the concept of participation. What were their actual experiences with regard to participation, and in which way could the users increase their power. In accordance with an action research approach (Reason and Bradbury, 2001; Kemmis, 2001), the researchers explored and developed models that had the potential to provide users with more power. Testing out these models provided the researchers with the opportunity to study in depth some of the factors that might promote participation in real organisational settings (Seim and Slettebø, 2011).

In preparations for the different initiatives, the researchers interview all social workers and a random selection of twenty-one parents and ten youths in order to chart their experiences with participation, their attitudes

towards participation and to collect concrete suggestions for improving participation.

A significant aspect of the research findings was that most of the parents received services provided by the child protection services while their children were living at home. These parents suggested that their participation in decision-making processes had been effective. However, parents who had lost the custody of their children felt disempowered in their dealings with the authorities, but they were, quite surprisingly, interested in testing models for collective participation. The article is based on data collected from this point onwards. Subsequently to these interviews, a working group was established in order to brainstorm ways to improve services to parents with children in foster-care. The working group invited all the parents (altogether forty-five) with children placed in foster-care to a hearing. Of those invited, five mothers and two fathers showed up to discuss the survey findings and consequences. This first meeting of the user group took place in April 2003 and meetings continued until June 2007. Throughout this period, thirty parents participated at one time or another, as well as three social workers, two representatives from the Association of Foster Parents and various guests. The author attended the hearing and all the user group meetings within the role as researcher.

Methods

Data collection

The research questions have been answered through methodological triangulation. Descriptions and evaluations of the group meetings are based upon field notes from participatory observation of thirty-two meetings, eight focus group sessions with parents, foster parents and social workers, and ten in-depth interviews with five fathers and five mothers. In addition, a telephone interview was conducted with the first twenty parents who had participated at user group meetings for their first time. The questions posed, both in individual interviews and in the focus groups, were related to the parents' motives for attending and their evaluation of the meetings. These questions were also the focus of personal observation at group meetings and the analysis of the interaction and verbal discourse in the group. In addition, six parents who attended one meeting but did not return were also interviewed. The researcher wrote minutes from the hearing, the meetings and the focus groups. The individual interviews were recorded and transcribed.

In accordance with an action research approach, the author participated in the planning and execution of the meetings from the beginning and to end of the group's existence. The participant action research approach enabled an in-depth understanding of the processes in focus, but the close

relationship with parents may have simultaneously diminished a critical view of group processes and participants. In order to underline the researcher's role in the course of the interactions, the participants were interviewed. The participants did also receive a copy of the notes from all the meetings and from the focus groups. However, action research rejects arguments for separating praxis and theory in social research. The social inquiry aims to generate knowledge and action in support of liberating social change and through a collaborative communicative process (Greenwood and Levin, 2000).

The project was approved by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD). In accordance with the ethical requirements from NSD, participation in group meetings was voluntary. Care has been taken to protect the anonymity of participants throughout the text.

Data analysis

The research questions were developed inductively, and the analysis started at the hearing and first meeting with the parents. In the beginning, the main theme of analysis was related to issues around participation. However, being confronted with the narratives of the parents' involved in the user group, new themes were added and explored. What were their motives for attending the meetings? Why had some of them dropped out? Did the support group meet their needs, and in what ways? These themes were studied through a cross-sectional analysis of the various data. Along with the principles of respondent validation, parents, social workers and foster parents read all the written material produced, and drafts of the research report. As a consequence, they were able to comment upon the interpretations and analysis of what was said, done at group meetings and the researcher's interpretation and the findings in this article. One of the limitations of the study was that it was dependent on social workers self-reporting when organisational learning was concerned. The research did not include the perspectives of the rest of the social work staff, which would have provided better information about the implementation of the results within the organisation. However, the results have later been presented at staff meetings and, in that sense, the results have been validated through peer evaluation.

Results

The parents' experiences became the themes for discussion in the group

At the hearing, the parents were keen to share their experiences within the child protection services. They agreed that they had needed help when their

children were placed, but disagreed with the way in which the help had been provided. The parents wanted more influence in their interactions with child protection services, and they needed more information: How were the services organised? How were decisions made? What was their view of their rights as parents? They had also experienced difficulties in gaining access to their social worker. The parents suggested the need for follow-up services once children were placed. They believed that they should be given the option of therapy and the opportunity to participate in self-help groups. They wanted more support from the social workers when conflicts arose between foster parents and themselves (Slettebø, 2008).

The parents' experiences with the child protection services are, by and large, consistent with Norwegian and international research findings for parents with children placed in foster-care (Egelund and Hestbæk, 2003; Scofield *et al.*, 2011) and speak to the importance of forging greater co-operation among these actors. Partnership, however, is not always possible. Research findings underscore the difficulties of building co-operation in cases in which there is disagreement among the parties concerning the basis for child protection services taking action in the first place (Thoburn *et al.*, 1995), or in cases in which maltreatment of the child is denied by parents (Bell, 1999). Moreover, given the psychological and emotional difficulties of many of these parents, it is difficult to work on changing parenting practices, especially in the early stages of the contact with the services.

The experiences that parents had had with child protection services were used to develop themes for discussions in the user group. Due to the degree of conflicts with the protection services, the members were always allowed to express their personal stories and feelings. Their sufferings had to be recognised. Parents chaired the meetings themselves, which was a new experience for most, but fit well with the ideology of empowerment and the development of transferable skills. After the discussions, participants shared meals and the evening ended with small talk. A permanent portion of the meeting agenda was set aside for 'the freedom to vent' and the parents could speak about any matters of importance to them. The social workers took care of all of the practical arrangements, for example, making referrals to the group, providing speakers, distributing mailings, as well as informing and recruiting other staff.

Parents were also critical of one another. Some were sceptical of co-operating with the authorities; others believed that 'the battle was already lost'. Some were hesitant to participate because they were afraid that the other parents would repeat what had been said at meetings. Several parents did not return after having participated in their first meeting. These parents could not identify with the negative experiences expressed by frustrated parents who complained about the failures of foster parents and/or of child protection services. The parents who didn't

return believed that the other parents were too emotional and that they showed little understanding for those who had different experiences from their own. The majority of the parent's who did not return had accepted the removal of the child and were quite content with the child protection services. This suggests that the service users' voices presented in the article are not representative of all the parents with children in foster-care, but represents the small proportion of parents.

The motives for attending the group work meetings

The individual interviews documented that the parents attended the meetings for various reasons, from being solely motivated by their individual needs to those who were more concerned with having the opportunity to influence the practices of the services. Some expressed both concerns. For instance, one noted that they had been pleasantly surprised by the invitation to attend. One parent said 'It was the first time ever that I received such a friendly telephone call from my social worker, and I simply had to go'. The other said 'I felt that I was given a vote of confidence by being invited'. Parents found the group interesting because it was so different from the activities ordinarily suggested by their social worker. Some attended because they had been recruited through the recommendation of other parents. Most of them wanted to meet other parents in similar circumstances to see whether others shared their experiences. Still others wanted a forum where they could go and express their anger, frustration, resignation, sorrow and their feelings of being unjustly treated—something that was often reiterated when newcomers presented their motives for coming to the rest of the group. Some parents noted that they attended because they needed support and help—as one noted, 'You feel so alone when your child is removed'—while others hoped they would receive more information and supervision regarding how to cope with their own problems.

Several parents underscored both in interviews and at meetings the importance of engaging with social policy. They hoped that their narratives would effect changes in the service practices. These parents saw themselves as being an informed resource for organisational learning. As one said, 'In spite of everything, I do have ten years of experience with child protection services'. Some parents noted that their participation had been a strategic decision. For most of them, attendance was justified because of their own personal needs and because they wanted to exert an influence on policy and practice. In one of the focus groups, a father expressed this in the following way:

The goal is to express the anger which is a result of my relationship with child protection services and foster parents. I hope that my experiences will be able to change the attitudes of those who work for the services.

Families should be made better use of by the services and different supportive initiatives should be attempted before children are placed. I want to contribute to the development of child protection services, and to make sure that they are better for those parents who follow after me.

This quote summarises what many other parents said: there were issues they wanted to voice and emotions they wanted to express. They did not believe that their family situations would be improved as a consequence of them joining the group, but the parents hoped that other families would benefit. They also wanted to show that they were able to co-operate and hoped that the social workers would change their attitudes towards them. These parents sought recognition from the authorities that had disempowered them. Within this context, even their most difficult life experiences became meaningful because they provided a form of expertise that could be of use to improve the services.

Peer support was most important

In both focus groups and the individual interviews, the parents stressed the importance of meeting other parents. The observations of the group process also underlined this point. By telling the story of their loss and listening to the narratives of others, the parents noted that they found it easier to cope with their own life situations. 'It was really good to meet up with others, good to leave the hibernating stage behind,' one reported. Even though life situations were different, meeting other parents helped them to feel that they weren't alone.

Social and psychological changes also occurred as a result of the meetings. One parent said that participating in the group had strengthened his feelings of self-worth: 'As a result of my experiences I have discovered that I had a lot to offer to the services.' The group had strengthened that parent's feelings of being a worthy human being and of being a member of society in line with others. Others referred to an increase in self-respect. Another parent said 'I have begun to think differently about myself and I am proud of what I have managed to accomplish as a parent'. Some parents claimed that sharing their experiences with others had been 'therapy' and had enabled them to continue the struggle with the authorities. Several reported that they had expanded their social networks by maintaining contact with one another between meetings, and they would recommend the group to others.

The experiences of these parents correspond well with the experiences that parents have had in similar groups in Ireland (O'Connor, 1996), the USA (Frame *et al.*, 2006; Levin, 1992) and Canada (Cameron and Lefcovitch, 2000; Manji *et al.*, 2005). These reports noted that parents in this situation require social support from peers and professionals, but also gaining self-confidence and a sense of control in order to be inspired to make behavioural and lifestyle changes.

Mutual learning and respect

The parents described participation in the group as a learning process. Having experienced expectations by the professionals that were unclear, not articulated, or inconsistent, parents within the child protection system often feel unsupported, out of control and unfairly blamed (Hardy and Darlington, 2008). One parent, who had been in contact with the services for a long time, expressed in one of the focus groups that the group ‘had taught her a lot about child protection services from the inside’. The parents stressed the benefits of having both social workers and foster parents included in the group, as discussions cast light upon themes from different perspectives. One parent explained this, noting ‘Only by working together can we find good solutions’. Several parents voiced the view that the group had helped them to better understand how social workers thought and evaluated cases. Receiving a response created security in a relationship that previously had been characterised by professionals receiving and defining information, and seldom responding to the information received from parents. They had gained more information about what the services could offer and how decisions were made.

The foster parents and social workers also expressed that they had benefitted from the group. Foster parents had not always recognised themselves in the critical descriptions made by parents. They learned about the parents’ feelings about having their children living with other families, what the parents found most difficult in the situation and the importance they attached to being acknowledged by foster parents.

The social workers discovered new and not previously apparent resources in many parents, including their ability to express themselves, to co-operate, to chair meetings, to develop brochures, to talk in front of audiences, as well as about many of their hobbies, interests and their good sense of humour. Social workers became conscious of the feelings of crisis parents experienced during proceedings leading to and after the placement of their children. They began to realise the importance of follow-up services. The social workers noted that their attitudes towards the parents had changed, and they realised that this was a precondition for better co-operation. Following a group meeting, one of the social workers said:

We believed that we were previously engaged in user participation, but that wasn’t the case. I can see that there are resources in these parents that we were previously unable to recognise. They have suggestions for improved services. I never realised that they could sit together and discuss these matters in the way they have.

The stories of the services users and foster parents and the reflections that those stories generated expanded the social workers’ perspectives. It provided them with new insights into ways of understanding and tackling

difficult situations. The narratives generated during these meetings helped social workers identify both potential ways forward and examples of how cases should not be handled.

Continuous observations in the user group showed that the group created a face-to-face forum for experiences to be communicated between parents, foster parents and the social workers. The stories told within this space made it possible to ask questions and to gain a more in-depth perspective on the themes under discussion. Discussions took the form of a dialogue, beginning with the participants' experiences and viewpoints and continuing to suggestions for changed practices.

The exchange of experiences among all the participants made it possible to underscore their differences. Disagreements provided the group with a good basis for further discussion. Situations that participants initially interpreted quite differently led to necessary clarifications, justifications, more precise descriptions and contextualised points of view.

One might imagine that the presence of professional workers in the group would dampen the critical spirit of the group. Notably, however, parents did not seem to experience the presence of professionals as a hindrance. In the interviews, the parents reported that they were not afraid to express their viewpoints regarding the services, foster parents or social workers within their group meetings. In fact, most parents wanted their social workers to be present at the meetings, so that they could become better acquainted and so that the professionals could learn from them. The parents were action-oriented and wanted to set in motion constructive changes in the practices of the services. The parents also had the additional concern to show the social workers that they could take on other roles than just that of an unsuccessful parent. The act of confronting professionals with one's pain and experiences, and being met with respect and acknowledgement, were part of a reconciliation process that helped the parents to move on with their lives.

Did the parents obtain real power?

Did the user group enhance the influence of parents or were claims of increased influence solely rhetorical? One precondition for participation is information. Several of the parents reported that they had received useful information through the user group:

I know more than I did before. I know something about the National Association of Children in Care. I know more about the social worker's role in child protection, and I know more about the way in which officials within the services think.

The discussions contributed to a more nuanced view by parents concerning the services, even though they were not always in agreement with the

assessments made by those services. Parents learned that they had a better chance to exert influence on the services through co-operation. Some found it paradoxical that foster parents were offered courses from which they could learn how to co-operate with the birth parents and child protection services, while the birth parents had been left to their own devices.

According to the social workers, the interaction with the parents during the meetings contributed to changes in the practice of foster-care. This was due to the fact that the social workers in the user group informed the rest of the staff on a regular basis of the content of the group discussions and proposals for changes. Routines were reconstructed so that parents and foster parents were more closely followed up by social workers. More emphasis was given to supervision of the social workers and to the resolution of conflicts in the most difficult cases. Social workers began to refer parents to the user group as a new and different initiative. The social workers involved in the user group reported that their own attitudes had changed regarding the parents and that this change had been the most important consequence of the group. The group enabled the social workers to see parents' strengths and to learn that the parents had a crucial type of knowledge to impart.

The foster parents passed on the information generated by the group to members of their association, which led to a new policy of inviting parents to attend courses offered to new foster parents. Additionally, in the training courses for prospective foster parents, greater emphasis was placed upon the importance of maintaining contact with the foster child's birth parents.

In addition, parents who were members of the user group tried to exert influence upon the public by contacting the media. Parents have been interviewed by newspapers in order to introduce the group to a larger segment of the public. One of the national Norwegian radio channels made two documentaries about the group.

User group parents have been conscious of the role played by the social researcher in the group. They expected the researcher to convey the experiences of the group to students, faculty members in relevant educational institutions, practitioners and politicians engaged in child protection work. This seems to imply that parents believed that social research can be another channel for exerting influence.

The user group: empowerment in practice?

How much influence did the user group have? Parents were asked individually whether their participation in the group had led to changes. Most parents reported that their own participation in the group had not led to any changes in their individual cases. However, as one noted, 'In the User Group parents, for the first time, have become visible for the authorities'.

Some of the parents wondered whether or not the user group had had any effect. One father said 'As far as my own family is concerned, the ship has already sailed'. Still, he hoped that conditions would be better for parents who risked losing custody of their children in the future. This hope seems to imply that he saw himself as a citizen responsible for using his experiences to improve the conditions for others. The parents did also explain at meetings how they had acted differently as a consequence of their participation in the group. One father said that he had started to give vent to his aggression and frustration in the group instead of in his meetings with the foster parents. Another reported that she decided to cancel legal action to regain custody of her teenaged daughter after having discussed the matter in the user group. Several of the parents noted that they did not have anyone to discuss questions about parenting with, and they appreciated the opportunity to discuss these types of matters in the group.

Through the user group, the parent participants increased their influence. The participation of parents in the group is not an example of user control because parents' influence was very much dependent on the professionals' will to empower. However, by engaging in dialogue with social workers and foster parents, parents were able to enter into negotiations and influence decision making. According to Arnstein's (1969) definition, the interaction between child protection services and the service users could be described as partnership because this step allowed for the co-determination of policies between the service users and the practitioners.

The user group is primarily an example of collective user participation in child protection services, as the group focused on system rather than personal change. However, the participants also reported personal changes as a result of the group. The theoretical difference between individual and collective participation may therefore be more blurred in practice. The dialogue at meetings was a pre-condition for mutual learning. The group enabled a new form of co-operation between parents and social workers, by building a mutual alliance that generated support and learning. The group consisted of participants that regularly met on a voluntary basis. The service users identified and defined the problems they wanted to discuss and they decided upon the composition of the group and its purposes.

The meetings maintained an open and tolerant quality with room for criticism and emotional outbursts. The parent became accustomed to speaking directly about matters that they felt were unsatisfactory. The social workers tolerated criticism and often were in agreement with the criticisms expressed, but could also directly respond when the viewpoints appeared to be unreasonable. The critical potential of the user group did not decrease. Mutual respect, trust, openness and the willingness to tackle criticism by engaging in co-operative measures were characteristic

of the group process. Social workers did not muffle the criticism that parents expressed and they, in fact, acknowledged that criticism from parents could and should lead to new ways of thinking and to changes in practice.

For parents, meeting other parents who had children in care was very important for the development of a collective identity and for the awareness of personal and collective strength. Participation in the group helped the parents to reduce their feelings of self-reproach. In discussions with other parents and with social workers, an understanding emerged that their family problems were not solely due to parents' own failings. The group acknowledged that society at large and public services in particular also played a part. In one of the meetings, a father asked: 'Why is it that almost every parent that is in contact with child protection services receives disability payments?' These kinds of questions contributed to increased political awareness. They were in contrast to the individualised way of thinking that tends to dominate child protection work. The experiences of the parents in the user group seem to have contributed to a reduction of self-reproach and overcoming stigma through the development of personal strength, collective identity, political consciousness and transferable skills. Accordingly, the parents' experiences of the user group can be described as an empowering process.

Some of the parents who validated the report asked for clarifications concerning the use of theoretical concepts like empowerment. This gave the author the opportunity to explain these in further detail, as well as to hear the participants' understandings in greater depth. One of the mothers replied to the description of empowerment this way:

I think I understand. I used to sit alone at home and cry after my child had been removed, but now I have moved on. Crying is important, but it does not solve your problems. You have to get on with your life. Meeting the other parents in the User Group has helped me to gain the strength to become an active person again.

The parent described in her own words her empowerment process, from feelings of sadness and shame, to the need to take on responsibility and how this process had been stimulated through meetings with others in a similar situation.

Conclusion

In the project, parents who had lost the custody of their children were able and willing to work to improve the services, and said that they benefitted from participation when given the opportunity to do so. In contradiction to what one might expect, their negative experiences with the services were a source of engagement and participation.

There were both benefits and problems of organising the group within the child protection service context. Many factors hinder parents' participation, including fear and negative perceptions of the services, their sense of failure as parents, the challenges of confidentiality, and various social and health problems. The services supported the group with access to social workers and potential parent members. Professional support was important because the parents did not have the time and resources required for developing the programme alone.

The research suggests that the user group had the potential for effecting changes in the foster-care practice. This was due to various factors. The close link between the professionals and the services promoted organisational learning, as did the child protection services' willingness to accept and deal with concerns and criticisms raised. Gradually, the parents became more confident, informed and better focused, especially after their needs for personal support had been met. This shows how parents' support can be compatible with goals of organisational learning and changes.

This study suggests that a Parents' Group can be a complement to traditional case work. This type of organisation offers new roles and opportunities to parents and social workers, and it can provide a space for developing positive relationships between parents without custody and professionals. The child protection services may underestimate a parents' need to understand the purposes, the organisation and the procedures of the foster-care services, as well as parents' need to understand their rights and obligations. Lack of information seems to be a vital factor that prevents parents from participating as partners in the protection services. In addition, the services seem to underestimate the parents' feelings of loss, guilt, anger, rejection and social isolation that accompany many of the placements of children outside the home.

On the basis of this study, one can conclude that traditional casework, when available, is not sufficient to meet the needs of parents who involuntarily have children placed in care. Supportive relationships with peers, foster parents and social workers can represent a vital supplement to individual services, not only for the impact for the group members, but also for changes in agency policies and services. Despite obstacles, this study shows how an empowerment-based approach may counterbalance interventions that are perceived as a measure of social control of families. Future research might address how the empowerment of parents affects the children who are in foster-care.

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