

DECISION MAKING: HOW INVOLVED SHOULD CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN INSTITUTIONAL TREATMENT BE IN THE PROCESS?

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Abstract

As an ongoing process of dialogue, action, analysis and change, participation is an important aspect of democratic society. Not only does this mean that children and adolescents have a greater influence on decisions affecting their lives, but it also serves as representation and confirmation that they are trusted within established democratic procedures.

In this paper we focus on children and adolescents involved in residential care treatment in institutions for delinquent youths. Qualitative research was carried out on the methods and level of participation of children and adolescents in the processes of help in which they are involved. Through the biographical statements given by them, analysing their thoughts and experiences, the research allows for a wider perspective and understanding of the implementation of the help processes required for the institutional treatment of children and adolescents with behavioural and emotional difficulties.

Key words: participation, children's rights, institutional treatment

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The child – from an object with no rights to a subject with rights

When we talk about participation, we are not discussing anything new; discussions about participation have been going on for quite some time on different levels and within various expert discourses. However, this does not mean that these findings have also been successfully implemented in practice.

For a better understanding of the concept of the participation of children and adolescents, we must look at the development of the concept of the child, long considered an object by western society – that is, someone who has no rights, is incapable of making rational decisions, and is passive in their posture and interactions with others, merely following the example set by adults. This way in which the child was perceived and presented had long been the case until the advent of the twentieth century.

This realisation concerning the meaning of the notion as to who a new-born and an infant was came about quite late (Kroflič 2011). The key changes in this concept and realisation only started to materialise in the twentieth century as the the humanization and concurrent politicization of questions related to childhood began to emerge. The concept of the child is, of course, an adult construct which is grounded in the influence of the social, cultural, and political environment.

In the Middle Ages, a child was considered to be a miniature version of an adult. A child was a being, an object with no rights of any kind. The results of linguistic research carried out in Europe, which reveal the names referring to a child in various languages, are of particular interest. Words like “slave”, “farmhand”, “servant”, “serf”, “page” and “little boy” (Snoj 2009) are mentioned. The concept of a child only began to slowly change in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It was then that attempts were first made to demark childhood and adolescence – and adulthood thereafter – using biological determinants. However, it is still considered to be a period in which the nature of a child was defined as wild and only tameable with discipline and strictness.

Recognition of the concept of childhood as a period in which the young person needs to be guarded, protected, and given plenty of attention – from a rearing perspective – began to increase in the nineteenth century. With the growth of capitalism, an era of wide scale child labour exploitation began. Children were seen as cheap labour and undertook various types of demanding and dangerous work in factories, shipyards, construction sites, and similar working environments. Education also

became mandatory at this point in history, which meant a shift in the concept of a child from being an active worker to a passive and subordinate student. New educational practices and a new concept of childhood were established in which the focus was on the child being taught, raised and educated.

The childhood experience is undoubtedly connected with various social contexts, the in which the child is raised, the cultural surroundings, and the social groups in which the child is brought up. All of this determines how the concept of childhood is interpreted, and influences the various ways in which the concept is viewed through the prism of different demographic environments such as, for example, modern-day Europe.

The crucial shifts that brought us the first ideas concerning youth participation began in the twentieth century. As well as an increase in concern for children, new discoveries emerged in child raising, family, and education. Consequently, sciences such as developmental psychology and paediatrics, which dealt with satisfying the needs of children, evolved rapidly. In light of these new discoveries, shifts in the sphere of education also began to materialise, specifically with regard to critical treatment of the established practices of the time such as the emergence of reform pedagogy, which is a combination of various concepts, models, experiments, manifestations, and reflections (Protner & Wakounig 2007). However, ideas concerning the participation or, rather, the involvement of children in making decisions and choices are found in all of these sciences.

This period of time brought the shift of focus on the child, the child's need to adhere to the child's autonomous world, and to the child's protection. The first postulates that a child has certain rights which have to be acknowledged and respected, and this resulted in fundamental shifts in the concept of childhood as a period of immaturity and incompetence. A child was no longer considered to merely be an object of concern for parents and adults. A new perspective began to assert itself which presented the child as a subject with certain rights, competences, and importance. Children are capable of having a dialogue with adults, are able to participate in decision making, and have potential that needs to be taken into account. This is the path to understanding their perspective, which is crucial in order to understand them.

The major political and social changes unfolding in the twentieth century were reflected in the area of understanding the concepts of childhood, child raising and children's rights, as well as in the development and passing of regulations in these fields. The development of international acts regulating children's rights occurred in tandem with the development of international acts concerning human rights.

The crucial step came with the passing of The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) which calls for learning to cooperate in decision-making processes and the right that this be carried out (i.e. that a person is able to actively participate in making decisions that affect his or her life) in such a way so as to become integral to the development and education of each child. Child participation is valuable to society (presuming that the society in question views citizen participation positively) because society 'profits' if its citizens are educated and committed. The cause of this lies in the fact that children who participate not only contribute to the society they live in but also serve to deepen the roots of democratic principles for the future. It ensures a respect for democracy and contributes to establishing peace and security in the world (Stern 2006).

The main purpose of the above-mentioned CRC is to establish the status of children as individuals with rights and to honour the fulfilment of their rights with the same validity as those of adults (Lansdown 2001). It also represents the first official document that highlights participation. Article 12 of the CRC states that children have the right to express their views and participate in decision-making processes that affect (or are important to) their lives. The CRC thus moves away from stating what a child *cannot* do towards what a child *can* do, and what decisions he or she is capable of making (Bueren 1998; Stern 2006).

What is the outlook on youth participation today?

Participation:

- does not simply mean that adolescents are present or involved; they must have influence concerning decision-making and actions (Kirby et al. 2003);
- is not a simplistic method, but a process of dialogue, action, analysis and change (Pretty in Collins 2006);
- represents an important aspect of a democratic society. This not only concerns children and adolescents having more influence concerning decisions that affect their lives, but also in relation to showing and granting trust to adolescents within established democratic procedures (Stern 2006);
- of children and adolescents means that they are heard; certainly the adults who work with them, who facilitate and support their participation, play an important role. It is essential that children and adolescents are heard, that their opinions and points of view are appreciated and taken into account when making decisions central to their lives.

The right to participate is a fundamental aspect of civic rights and one of the foundations on which democracy is built. The democratic aspects of the right to participate are important for the individual as well as for society in general. The right to participate and become actively involved in decision-making processes represents a special aspect of inclusion in democratic society (Skivenes & Strandbu 2006).

The higher the degree of child and adolescent participation, the more they gain in empowerment and responsibility. Active participation also means an opportunity to develop social skills, gain confidence, promote social behaviour and establish a sense of identity. It is, therefore, an opportunity in the field of personal development (Koller-Trbović 2005).

Having researched the participation of users in the process of assessing needs and planning interventions, Koller-Trbović (2005) takes the view that a participative approach yields positive results for all involved in the process. Children and adolescents gain in importance, power, responsibility; the experts gain in relationships, insight, understanding, and sharing responsibility with the user. Society, on the other hand, gains a solid foundation to expect better treatment results/outcomes.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research focused on the experiences of children and youths, their subjective perspectives, perceptions, and grades that they expressed through individual biographical experiences. Each person is seen as an active co-creator in the processes of assistance as well as in their own biographies, and is not perceived as the object of measures taken in the aforementioned aid processes. A qualitative approach was used for the analysis. In this way, insights were gained into the child's or youth's reconstruction of social reality, their understanding, interpretation and meaning of events, relationships, acts, situations, (Bitzan, Bolay & Thiersch 2006) and their life experiences (Kobolt & Rapuš Pavel 2006). The interpretative paradigm was in the foreground.

2.1 The sample and data collection process

Eight children and youths were included in a form of institutional aid in the sample. We used an unstandardized semi-structured interview, which was based on relevant and actual research carried out in biography-oriented interviews with children and youths, and their participation in the processes of carrying out aid (Bitzan, Bolay & Thiersch 2006; Normann 2003; Pluto 2007).

2.2 Data collection and processing method

The analysis of the material acquired was conducted in accordance with the qualitative analysis procedures prescribed: editing the material, the definition of coding units, open encoding, the selection and definition of relevant concepts and categories, and second level encoding and formation of the final theoretical formulation (Mesec 1998).

The semi-structured interviews recorded were then transcribed. The breakdown into coding units, classification, clustering, integration, and the formation of individual thematic categories then followed. With the help of the related data we attempted to form, explain, extract, and formulate a theory using the data obtained.

2.3 Purpose of the research

The aim of the research was to gain a greater understanding and insight into the child's or youth's methods of experience, their thought processes, and expectations. This would result in a better foundation for joint planning of assistance and improved approaches concerning the integration and participation of a child or youth in the decision-making processes affecting their lives. These processes include the processes of assistance in which the children and youths were or still are a part, and which are key factors in their biographies. We were also interested in where and the extent to which youths participate in everyday institutional life.

3. CONCLUSION

The result of the research is that institutionalized youths have a somewhat limited opportunity to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives. This refers to establishing house rules, how they spend their free time, and their involvement in various types of assistance. The level of participation is still relatively low which can be explained through the opinions of experts who state that youths in institutional treatment have no structure and solid frameworks in place in their everyday lives, similar to how the situation was in their families. This is why rules, structure, and plans organising how they spend their days are more or less defined by experts employed in the institutions.

It must be stressed that, in the opinion of the youth, participation only really occurs when their suggestions and requests are granted. From this we can gather that dialogue with the youth is important and that the concepts of participation, accepting negotiation rules, making decisions and taking responsibility for decisions made have to be clarified.

We must be aware that the participation of children and adolescents has its own limitations. Many factors are involved in the process of participation, as well as its shaping, guidance and definition, and which, of course, can significantly influence its results.

Through the implementation of active levels of participation for adolescents in planning processes, and offering them assistance within the operation of the institution itself, experts employed in institutions which deal with raising children outside the family unit can soon feel a threat to their own expertise. On the other hand, adolescents express a great deal of scepticism concerning the levels of success that their own involvement in this process might afford.

Adolescents in this process use a variety of strategies to approach their participation; they use socially accepted patterns of behaviour and actions, but they can also show resistance and defensive behaviour. Throughout the entire process of their participation, strong support from adults (experts, parents, significant others), trust and acknowledgement are vitally important.

In terms of actually planning the assistance and the location of operation, it is important to ascertain precisely what those addressed are aware of and the contexts of their lives. A conversation about a plan for providing assistance is vital, as is establishing contact in genuine way that is directed towards avoiding formalities and striking a balance between aspiration and caution.

Another question that arises is that of parental participation, the parents' involvement with the institution, its life and its process of operation. By introducing these processes of participation, we are soon faced with some contradictions; for example, the principle of participation versus the rigid rules of the institution, decentralised assistance versus centralised models of involvement, an individual setting versus institutional involvement, etc.

When is the right time for participation, for its incorporation into the ordinary working day of an institution and in terms of actually including the adolescent in the various processes that concern his or her life? The answer to the final part of the question is, at least in theory, relatively simple, whereas the implementation of the principles of participation into everyday practice represents a longer, more drawn-out process, which calls for changes to the established operating procedures of institutions, jobs, experts and, last but not least, every person. Since changes of this magnitude do not happen overnight, it could be said that now is the time for research in this area to flourish, so that these ideas might actually come to life in the near future. And if we were a little cynical, we might say it was high time they did.

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