The Participatory Evaluation of Children in Child Welfare

Case Study: the County of Iasi, Romania

Daniela Cojocaru *

Abstract

Child welfare and child protection policies are key discursive areas in charge of organizing childhood and the relationships between adults and children. In carrying out these practices, the practitioners (social workers, psychologists or physiotherapists) act as mediators between the state, children and their families. In this capacity, practitioners are strategic agents who strengthen and legitimize, through commitment to the individual cases of children they work with, the ways of defining childhood, as well as the desirable patterns for the relationship between parents and children, but also between professionals and families. In this context it is important to explore the extent to which the child, as a beneficiary of protection services, participates as an actor in the standardized assessment procedures and in the decision-making process concerning his or her situation.

Keywords: parenting, evaluation, participation, welfare, child protection.

1. Introduction

The sociology of childhood, based on the variability and diversity in interpreting children and childhood in general, in various historical periods and various cultures, embraces the idea of the social construction of childhood.

The concept of childhood as a social construct belongs to the French historian Philippe Aries (1962). He supported the view that childhood as a notion was absent in medieval society and only starting with modernity...
can we talk about children and childhood as a different realm from that of adulthood; the idea of childhood did not exist in medieval society; that does not imply that children were neglected, abandoned or disregarded. Moreover, the idea of childhood should not be confused with the affection for children: the former refers to the perception of the particular nature of childhood, one that distinguishes a child from an adult, even a young adult. In the medieval society, this perception did not exist (Aries, 1962, p. 125).

2. The participation of children

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child promotes a protective approach to childhood, but at the same time requires accepting children as participants in any field of activity that concerns them, starting with children's rights to education, health or other policies or institutions (Fattore & Mason, 2005).

Although the rhetoric of the social participation of children and youth is attractive, it is at the same time highly confusing, due to the ambiguity of the concept of participation (Cojocaru, 2011; Cojocaru & Cojocaru, 2011). The consequence is, on the one hand, the enforcement of participatory practices, and on the other hand the proliferation of certain types of conventional or formal participation of children and youth as a social group; nevertheless, another consequence described in the literature is the involvement of certain categories of children to the disadvantage of others (Reynaert, Bouverne-de-Bie, Vandevelde, 2009).

The range of motivations for the involvement of children can be structured on several dimensions (Cavet & Sloper, apud Drakeford, Scourfield, Holland, 2009): firstly, as a children’s right, enshrined in Article no. 12 of the UN Convention, secondly, as a form of investment in children’s education (as long as children learn about their civil rights and responsibilities, they will become responsible citizens in their adulthood); thirdly, the involvement of children is considered a necessity since they have a unique and specific way of relating to the world, which does not overlap to that of adults, and can only be grasped by consulting children and understanding their point of view.

As we deal with a concept that is difficult to define accurately, including both objective and subjective factors, a number of theoretical models suggest the notion of operationalizing the participation of children and youth in making decisions that affect them on certain dimensions (Kirby et al, apud Barber, 2009, p. 28): the level of participation in the decision-making process, the aim and content of the decision, the nature of participative activities, the frequency and duration of the participation, the children and youth involved (age group, gender).

Similarly, there are authors who suggest a distinction between the terms engagement, consultation and participation of the child (Barber, 2007):

*Engagement* is an umbrella term covering a wide range of activities, from supply and receipt of information to consultation on specific problems, without defining the extent to which youth can influence the methods or the results.

*Consultation* can also encompass a vast range of activities performed by adults with the aim of exploring the views of children, which encourage and support the approaches initiated and carried out by children and their autonomy. It can be undertaken either formally or informally and it is essential that "adults have the power to decide what they will do with the information" (Barber, 2007, p.11) obtained as a result of the consultation.

*Participation* refers to the fact that youth are established contributors to a project or process, their opinions carrying the same weight as those of the adults they work with. Participation refers to the involvement of children and youth in decision-making, whatever form it takes.

Similarly, a number of theoretical methods deal with the participation of children as a gradual process, in several progressive stages:

1. Children are listened to.
2. Children are encouraged to express their opinion and viewpoint.
3. Children’s viewpoints are taken into account and developed within the actions that concern them.
4. Children are engaged in the process of decision-making.
5. Children share power and responsibility with adults in order to make decisions.

3. The approach to childhood in the child protection system

Childhood is regulated, further to the UN Convention, as an ambivalent social phenomenon because, on the one hand, children are viewed as an object of the adults’ protection and are surrounded by their attention; on the other hand, children are considered autonomous individuals who are encouraged to present themselves as individuals with rights (Jans, 2004).

This ambivalence, symptomatic for contemporary childhood, has been mentioned by several authors and discussed in the context of child welfare policies and practices, which display a concern related to the status of object or subject the child or young person has in the evaluation or intervention process. (Cojocaru, 2008). A number of recent studies have described the phenomenon of childhood "objectification", which is the focus of child protection systems in several developed countries, i.e. transforming the child from a subject of the institutional policies and practices into an object of such practices, by reducing him/her to "case" status, despite the rhetoric supporting the "child’s best interest" (Butler and Williamson, cited by Mason, 2005, p. 92; Cace et al, 2012). Toby Fattore and Nick Turnbull report a contradiction between the paradigm of managerial efficiency, applied to institutional practices within the protection system, and the philosophy of childcare promoted by the institutions, focused on the child. The two authors believe "there is a competition between the management techniques that view children as clients and the practices employed by social workers in child welfare, whose purpose is to satisfy the needs of children as individuals (Fattore and Turnbull, 2005, p.55). The authors conduct a critical analysis of the welfare system practices with respect to the “child-focused approach” and conclude:

The role of social assistance institutions designed for children is not to promote the daily activities of children, but to guide the children's progress according to the development pattern implemented by child protection institutions. The children's perspectives are not relevant, since the children in these institutions act only in order to acquire predetermined skills. This pattern assumes that children lack competence, that their protection is necessary and in exchange it serves as a proof of their inability to actively participate in society. (Fattore and Turnbull, 2005, p. 47; Hassan Ali, H., M., 2012).

Similarly, a number of works that deconstruct the rhetoric of child protection in Western society highlight the marginalization of children in the very policies directed to their well-being, which is revealed by the way in which professions related to childcare are valued, regardless of their specialty: "Working with children is a quite low-status activity, and the work of researchers who listen to children and take them seriously, as the object of their study, is sometimes ridiculed and deemed insignificant because of puerile topics.(Kitzinger, 1997, p.173).


The child and family evaluation, aiming to ensure the welfare of the child, is one of the most complex and controversial areas of social work, approached in the literature and in practice with extreme variety, its purpose being to document and legitimise the subsequent intervention of professionals (Holland, 2004).

This study aims to undertake an exploratory and interrogative approach to the child evaluation activity in Romania, in order to capture the significance of child participation in the evaluation process, for the professionals in the field (social workers, psychologists). Moreover, we aim to find out the extent to which the child may be considered an actor in the evaluation process and the forms taken by child participation in the evaluation.

The study focuses on the course of the evaluation process in the General Directorate for Social Assistance and Child Protection within the county of Iasi, one of the Romanian counties with the largest number of children included in the child welfare system. For this purpose, 24 cases of children between 10 and 18 years of age were analyzed, and two focus groups were created, with the social workers and, respectively, with the members of the
Directorate’s management team. In addition, six individual interviews were conducted with social workers and psychologists from three different services (foster care, residential care and family reintegration).

5. Findings and Conclusions

The analysis of the tools used for collecting the data present in the children’s records reveals that they were exclusively structured around the opinions of experts, without integrating specific items designed to capture the views of the children as well. The occurrence of children’s viewpoints is non-systematic and sporadic in the records, due to certain systematic procedures used in the evaluation activity, and appears to be a rather random element belonging to the specific work manner of one professional or another.

If, despite all these, the views of children are recorded, there is no procedure regulating the way in which these views may affect the professionals’ decisions, therefore we cannot draw a conclusion related to the extent to which children’s views are reflected in the professionals’ interventions.

Even if the management team mentions the children’s involvement in the assessment process and specialist interventions, the professionals who work directly with the cases speak of the impossibility to treat children as subjects of evaluation by involving them in the process, often due to a lack of time and to the large number of cases assigned to each specialist (social worker, psychologist).

We can no longer work with children the way we used to, without informing them, without consulting them... nowadays the child is constantly involved (member of the management team, residential service).

One is inclined to consider the child an object of the evaluation, probably due to lack of time; in fact, there are numerous situations when we must intervene very quickly, not to mention the large number of cases on our hands... (social worker, emergency protection service)

In the children’s records we find a high incidence of value judgments, as well as a tendency to label the behavior and development of the child as being normal or not, but without providing factual data or reference points that would clarify those particular assessments.

The evaluations carried out by different professionals at different times have no continuity, they do not allow the reconstruction of the child’s life and they do not take into account past assessments or the child's opinions.

In residential centers, the children's participation takes place by means of a structure called the children's council, which influences the center’s decisions related to food, clothes or recreational activities; nevertheless, the individual contributions of children are never written down in their records.

The representations of children and the descriptions of their behavior are constructed around theoretical landmarks related to development patterns used by specialists, though there are neither detailed descriptions thereof, nor contextual case studies relative to these descriptions. Our results are consistent, in this sense, with a number of results in the literature (Hollande, 2001) showing that the representations of children in the evaluation process are structured around theoretical “universal” patterns of child development and do not take into account the specific background in which they occur.

In conclusion, we can assert that in the child protection system we have analyzed the assessment tools used have not yet integrated the practice of participation; as a result, we cannot speak of a routine of recording children’s views by means of specific items and standardized procedures, and the organization of children records reflects the almost exclusive interest of the specialists.

The participation of children in the evaluation process most often takes on the form of involving the children by informing them on the decisions that concern them, and only seldom by consulting their opinion; however, there are no standardized procedures for the implementation or use of children’s views in the professional actions and interventions of the specialists.
References