How to Develop and Manage a Participative Organization in Social Services with Children and Youth?

Pavel Navrátil

Abstract: The idea that children and adolescents can and should participate in decision-making in the context of social services management for youth and children started to be discussed relatively recently in the Czech Republic (Nosál & Čechová, 2014). Earlier views on participation focused mainly on adults, and at the same time the area of services for children and teenagers was based on the assumption that by involving adults (parents, teachers and social workers) the best interests of the child would automatically be represented. McNeish and Newman (2002) note that currently there is no longer a debate about whether to include children and young people in the decision-making process, but rather ways are being sought to find different approaches to participation which apply in different conditions and situations. In the Czech environment, however, it still seems that the involvement of children and teenagers in decision-making in the context of social service management is not routine. The text is very first of the outputs of the Czech-Swiss project, whose research and the practical aim is to analyze and transfer experience from children and teenagers participation in the Swiss social services. The goal of the essay is to review the academic and professional literature on the topic of participation of children and adolescents, especially from the domestic and Anglo-Saxon environment to establish conceptual framework and knowledge base for empirical research (which we do not present here).

Key words: children · participation · youth · involvement · social services · development of organization

JEL Classification: D23 · L32 · L23

1 Introduction

Current debates about involvement and marginalization dominate the agenda of many European political debates. There is a growing concern about the stability and sustainability of social cohesion and an increasing number of groups of people who are seen as being at risk of being socially excluded. In today's discussions, welfare services (understood in a broad sense) have a central position. There are strong expectations that welfare services can limit marginalization and support participation (Matthies & Uggerhøj, 2014).

Also, all children have a fundamental right to participate (Grugel, 2013). Several provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child refer children's right to participation (The United Nations 1989). Participation is one of the fundamental principles of the Convention, as well as one of its core challenges. The Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child declares that children have the right to engage in decision-making processes that may be related to their lives and to influence decisions taken in their regard (within the family, the school, the community, and social services). This right is especially relevant for children in the child protection system (e.g. children in risk). However, participation is not a simple process and can be easily misunderstood. The literature presents an array of ideas about involvement, and the meanings of the participation concepts are often presented very contradictorily or even vaguely. We suppose that clear understanding of surrounding concepts is necessary to be possible to use them meaningfully. Therefore, we decided to dedicate the essay to clarification of the concepts.

2 Methods

This study is the grounds laying output of the Czech-Swiss project, whose aim is to transfer practical experience about children and teenagers participation in the Swiss social services to the Czech ones. On the base of this project, a series of theoretical and empirical studies should arise. In the text, we focus on the conceptualization of the issue of participation and elaborate the concept of participation, which we need for following empirical studies (mainly case studies). The principal method we use at this stage of research is the desk research (Huberman & Miles, 2002). In this article, we review the academic and professional literature on the topic of participation of children and teenagers, especially from the domestic and Anglo-Saxon environment to establish conceptual framework and knowledge base for next stages of empirical research. We focused on the articles published in peer-reviewed academic journals or monographs which focus on the topic children, youth, participation, social service/ social work. As well we relate to some international and national documents.

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3 Desk research results

The idea of participation currently brings very significant suggestions with regards to the innovation of social services in the field of social work with children, teenagers and their families (Nolan, 2007). It should, however, be noted that participation is not a simple and readily applicable concept. Besides, in the literature, there are various meanings of participation, and each of them brings a specific point of view or a way of understanding participation and also a particular concept for the participatory processes. Therefore, it is necessary to define different approaches and explain our understanding of participation.

3.1 Participation of youth and children in development and management social services

According to the Academic dictionary, the term participation can be defined as attendance, involvement or interest (Kraus, 2009).

Boyden and Ennew (1997) however, explain that there are at least two basic concepts of participation. According to the first, the term participation is a synonym for the simple attendance or the presence at a place or activity. The second approach seeks the essence of participation in the sharing of power, and it understands participation as a form of empowerment that allows all parties actually to participate in decision-making. Although we prefer the understanding of participation as a form of empowerment that allows a real contribution to decision-making, we recognize that this requires a much more sophisticated approach than is described in the first concept of simple participation, which appears to be relatively easy to reach.

The participatory approach to children and teenagers is based on discussions of participation, which were originally carried out in the context of adult members of society, i.e. citizens with voting rights. The authors Sherry Arnstein (1969), Brager and Specht (1973) who are now considered classical, published reflections on the participation of adults which is still influential to this day. Arnstein (p. 216), for example, in her notion of participation emphasized the idea of sharing resources in a democratic society and she understood participation to be a means of fundamental social reform: “…citizen participation is a categorical term for citizen power. It is 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.”

The visionary work of Arnstein (1969), Brager and Specht (1973) has been intensely elaborated upon in the last three decades in the context of participation of children and teenagers. For example, Czech author Kaplánek (2012) in understands participation as a tool for the education of a democratic citizen, i.e. an individual who is capable of “everyday democracy” and is prepared for the maximum involvement in the decisions that concern them. According to him, it is already necessary to experience participation from childhood, and in all socialization systems: in the primary (family) and the secondary (kindergartens, all levels of schools, educational establishments, alternative care facilities). It is, therefore, essential that children in social care also enter into the participatory processes because these children are particularly vulnerable and for them the participatory experience is a means of strengthening and empowerment.

In general, it seems that regarding the participation of children and teenagers the same principles can apply as those relating to the participation of adults. However, it is necessary to take into account some specifics, which are relevant to childhood and the young age of the subjects. McNeish and Newman (2002) point out that the following factors should we consider the participation of children and youth. Social interpretations of childhood in a given culture; legal and social competence; continuity and speed of development; a different perception of time by adults and by children. We are now going to outline the basic reasons on which participatory thinking is based when working with children.

3.2 Reasons for involving children in management of social services

Are there any reasons for participatory practice in researched literature? There are many good arguments for involving children in decision-making. The range is very diverse and among them, we can find ethical, political, legal, pragmatic, religious and philosophical motives (Thomas, 2012). Some of them we will now present and outline.

One group of arguments refers in particular to the need for enforcement and implementation of children's rights. In principle, it points to the fact that children are citizens and service users and share the same basic rights to attend and participate like everyone else. They (the rights) should not be denied. Another group of arguments relates to the development of the rights of customers and users. Different groups of customers and users of social services express their wish to participate in the development of the services. Their interest in and specific pressure are increasing (even in the target group of children and teenagers) as they want to influence the goals and the form of services that are provided either by state or non-state organizations. The participation can also be viewed as a simple legal obligation. The children's right to participation is contained in a series of legal documents, particularly in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (specifically Article 12), in the Law on Social Protection of Children 359/1999 Coll. (and, of course, others). Participation can also be understood as a tool to improve the services provided. The consultation with children enables an improvement of the provided services and their adaptation to the changing needs. The children can help define them. Participation, therefore, leads to more accurate, more appropriate decisions that are better informed, and thanks to the participation the likelihood that the jointly made decisions will be implemented and will be more

- It is an opportunity to understand children better.
- Children bring new perspectives and knowledge.
- You can develop more effective policies, services, programs by including children’s perspectives in their design, planning, and delivery/implementation.
- You can build a more positive, democratic organization.
- You can decide where to use your resources (like money, people, and time) more effectively.
- You can promote positive attitudes towards children.

Participation gives children a certain level of influence and an element of choice and can help them understand their wishes and needs. Another set of arguments emphasizes that participation leads to a strengthening of the democratic processes. Through participation, children become better prepared for life in a democratic society and, therefore, can become active members of their community. At present, the question of the development of “civic-mindedness” has also become highly attractive and political. Children as the future citizens (with voting rights) must be able to learn "somewhere" how to be active members of their community and state, how to participate in their management (governance). For promoting participation experience also shows that participation improves the protection of children. Participation is proving to be an important element in the protection of children. Repeatedly it has been confirmed that it was the failure to listen to children, which in specific cases contributed to their abuse. Other arguments then point out that participation helps to develop important life skills, mainly: communication, negotiation, prioritization skills, and decision-making. This set of arguments is followed by another, according to which participation does not only support individual skills but also encourages the development of the whole personality. Effective participation, in fact, may contribute to the development of confidence in their abilities, to increase their self-confidence and to help clarify their identity. Many authors see participation as a comprehensive process, which is also associated with the transcendence of our being. A man becomes a man precisely because they participate in the divine dignity, in their environment, in society, in the context of culture. Participation is presented here as something fundamental and innately human, without which a man cannot be a man.

Based on the above arguments, participation could be seen as a panacea that will eliminate all the difficulties and problems of society and individuals. Such a simplified understanding would certainly be naïve and incorrect. Participatory discourse brings the significant focus on democratic values, which brings the interaction of man with his social environment into focus. Such an object of interest is perfectly in line with the core values and focus of social work. At the same time, it is to be noted that the practical implementation of participation has some ideological and practical limits. As Healy pointed out (Healy, 1998), participation is a process that must be seen in context. However, to rigorously analyze the circumstances that influence participation, one must first clearly define the areas in which the participatory processes occur. Each area is undoubtedly restricted to different contexts that define the specific conditions which either limit or support participation, its potential, and necessary forms

3.3 Basics for children and youth participation

Matthies and Uggerhøj (2014) define participation as an involvement of people into the decision-making process, management and administration. The same authors, however, in addition to political participation also refers to participation in the economic and social spheres. According to them, the context of economic participation is especially about a co-decision in the areas of work and the job market. Social participation by Matthies and Uggerhøj then relates to the affiliation of a citizen to social groups and possible voluntary memberships in clubs, associations, and other organizations.

However, there are also other typologies of areas, which describe the application of participation from another standpoint. When working with children and teenagers participation may be implemented in five areas according to McNeish and Newman (2002): 1 / individual decision-making; 2 / the development of services; 3 / involvement in the community; 4 / politics; and 5 / research. The first area of participation is, therefore, an area of individual decision making and relates to the decisions about all aspects of a young person's life. Therefore, in this sphere, the point is to allow children to be involved in decisions about themselves. The participatory law applies not only to ordinary family life but also especially to situations, where there is a crisis, and the child enters the system of social (as well as health) services. For example, when a family and marriage disintegrate, in situations of child neglect, in foster care, when in need of medical treatment, etc. It does not mean, however, that the participatory rights should only be limited to a crisis. To the contrary, participatory thinking must permeate an everyday approach to child care, it is a component of individual social work. In crisis situations, however, the assurance of participatory rights is essential. How can we support the increase in the quality of services in individual decision making?

McNeish and Newman (2002, p. 195) provide a list of essential conditions that need to be complied with and possibly developed, to support young people during their individual decision-making process:
Figure 1 Key factors supporting individual decision-making

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Informing children</td>
<td>Children should be adequately informed so that they can make informed decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time and explanation</td>
<td>Children should be provided with sufficient time and adequate explanation so that they could understand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ongoing consultation</td>
<td>The decision-making process must be set up as a continuous process.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-judgmental support</td>
<td>The support must be available and above all non-judgmental.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place and conditions</td>
<td>It is also necessary to prepare a suitable location that is sufficiently comfortable and private.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time for preparation</td>
<td>The child must be prepared for such a situation, and the situation must also be re-evaluated with the child.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Impartiality</td>
<td>A worker who facilitates the participation process must be capable of an unbiased attitude.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Priorities of the children</td>
<td>For the child to feel that they are a partner in the process, it is necessary to take into account their priorities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child’s &quot;advocate.&quot;</td>
<td>In many situations, it is preferable that an advocate represents the view of the child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs of children</td>
<td>The involvement of a child in the decision-making requires specific sensitivity to all their needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>It is necessary to discuss and examine the resulting situation with the children.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Adapted according to McNeish and Newman (2002, p. 195)

The second area concerns the participation in the development of services. In this area, the children and young people as service users can participate in the planning, delivery, and evaluation. The involvement of children and young people in this area can help an adequate shaping of services that can then better meet the needs of the target group. It should be noted that while the involvement of children and young people in all stages of service development is in recent years relatively common, the young people engagement in this context is still quite taboo in the Czech Republic. There are many forms of participation of children and young people in service development (see Fig. 2). Some of the common forms of participation of children and teenagers in the development of services abroad (Switzerland) are mainly consulting, but also more active forms of participation, where young people cooperate on a long-term basis with project managers. Some agencies, for example, engage young people in the advisory, or directly in the governing bodies. In most of these bodies, the young people cooperate with adults, but there are also cases where these bodies are composed entirely of young people. Other forms of participation of children and teenagers also include participation in tenders for representatives of a service or project, collaboration in shaping the principles and standards of a service or project and a presentation of a project. Recently, an increasing effort has been made not only to engage young people in designing new projects but also in their evaluation.

Figure 2 Overview of forms of service innovation by engaging children and teenagers in Switzerland

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form of participation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One-off consultation with children from the target population (in/out of care)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Active (long-term) cooperation with managers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Establishment of advisory bodies</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Committees</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• These bodies can be composed only of young people, combined</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The involvement of former service users</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Evaluation of services</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Training of workers</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Provision of services to children and teenagers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: author

Experience with the involvement of children and teenagers was first made in the private non-profit sector, but it is also increasingly imported into the public service (Omeni, Barnes, MacDonald, Crawford, & Rose, 2014).

Another (third) area of children and teenager participation is in the community sphere. This area of participation opens up new opportunities for children and young people to participate in community development. The community here might be a local community, but also interest groups that do not respect common geographical location. The fourth area of participation is the area of politics and public opinion. New ways are being investigated which would encourage children and teenagers to be involved in influencing public opinion and politics. Often it is done through the involvement of young people in the media and public campaigns or their participation in public discussions, etc. The last (fifth) area of participation can also be the area of research. Young people can participate in research in various roles, as consultants, interviewers, they may participate in the formulation of research questions or the questionnaire and, of course, they may enter into the next phases or activities of the research.

3.4 Levels of participation

Literature recognizes not only the areas of participation but also the levels and forms. By the form of participation we understand ways of how to learn it, implement it and raise its level, while the level of participation on the other hand rather assesses the degree and quality of participation. Sinclair (2000) compares the concept of forms and levels of participation by various authors:
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Figure 3 Forms and levels of participation

<table>
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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Civil proceedings</td>
<td>Delegated power</td>
<td>Involvement in the development of services</td>
<td>Decisions initiated by children shared with adults (self-management)</td>
<td>Children share power and responsibility for decision-making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delegated power</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Decisions initiated and implemented by children</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnership</td>
<td>Partnership</td>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>Decisions initiated by adults shared with adults</td>
<td>Children are involved in decision-making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reassurance</td>
<td>Involvement</td>
<td>Consultations</td>
<td>Consultation and information</td>
<td>Children's views are taken into account</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultations</td>
<td>Full awareness/information</td>
<td></td>
<td>Decisions implemented by adults, children are informed</td>
<td>Children are encouraged to express their opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
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<td>Tokenism</td>
<td></td>
<td>False P.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Therapy</td>
<td>Reassurance</td>
<td>Decorating</td>
<td></td>
<td>Children are listened to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipulation</td>
<td>Manipulation</td>
<td>Manipulation</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Sinclair (2000, p. 2)

Figure 3 presents a typology of forms and levels of participation by various authors, who base it on the general (political) concept of Sherry Arnstein (1969) and adapt her model to the situation of children and teenagers. Perhaps the most famous models of the level of participation of children and teenagers include Hart's model (1992; 1997). He distinguishes between types of participation regarding the degree of power that is shared with the children. As we consider his classification to be representative and especially usable in practice, we will pursue it in more detail in the text below. How can the Hart's typology help us? It can help on the one hand to distinguish what can be considered actual participation, but it also, on the other hand, supports our thinking about the level of participation which is reasonable in a given situation.

The area called false participation, represents different forms of child participation where such involvement of children is seen only as instrumental concerning the interests of the adults. Adults through “the involvement of children” reach their own goals. Children are subordinate to adults in their powerlessness, and their engagement is not authentic. It does not express their essential interests, views, feelings though the adults may think it does or they may pretend so. In contrast, the area of actual participation includes such forms of involvement of children in which children gain an opportunity for authentic expression while the level of implementation of their interests varies according to the type of participation. While the children are seen to be rather passive recipients of the adults' notification, in the context of self-management they are becoming autonomous entities, fully implementing the power over their projects.

In the researched literature, there is a discussion about whether it is necessary and desirable always to strive for the highest level of participation. Many authors believe that the participation level must be carefully assessed with regards to the relevant circumstances of the child or children involved. For example, according to Treseder (2004), the idea that it is always necessary to achieve the highest participation level is quite misleading for it is necessary to choose such a level of participation that best meets the interests of the child. The purpose of participation is to benefit the children, rather than to expose them to undue burdens or responsibilities. Participation, therefore, should be accepted as one of the tools supporting efforts in promoting the child's best interests, not as mechanically applied device.

4 Conclusions

The right for children to participate in decisions affecting their lives was established in Articles 12 and 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified in 1989. Since then, children's and young people's participation in child welfare and protection services has been the focus of research, policy development and legislation. The Convention determines that children must be heard and that their views have to be taken into account by age and maturity (Vis & Thomas, 2009). International research community first focused on whether children and young people had a say in decisions about their lives. It was accompanied by a growing knowledge of the benefits of children's participation in such decisions, an awareness that has been increasingly transformed into legislation. Many studies have emphasized the importance of participation in the development of children, especially children in care. For example, participation in decisions about their lives helps children feel connected and committed to the decisions that are taken (Woolfson, Heffernan, Paul, & Brown, 2010); it may lead to an increase in self-esteem (Vis, Strandbu, Holtan, & Thomas, 2011) and personal mastery. Additionally, by taking children's views, wishes and expectations into account, management of interventions might be more responsive and, therefore, more effective (McNeish & Newman, 2002). Although there is a general agreement about children's and young people's participation, it is difficult to put into practice.
The goal of the essay was to review the academic and professional literature on the topic of participation of children and teenagers, especially from the domestic and Anglo-Saxon environment to establish conceptual framework and knowledge base for empirical research. First, we briefly outlined the basis for participation of children, next we discussed the meaning of the topic of participation of children and teenagers, we also described the areas of participation of children and young people and lastly we considered the levels and forms of participation. Based on these concepts and knowledge we finally described pre-requisites for the involvement of children and teenagers in the development and improvement of the quality of social services, and we proposed a model for the implementation of the participatory practice.

Acknowledgement

This project consumed a huge amount of work, research and dedication. Still, implementation would not have been possible if we did not have a support of many individuals and organizations. Therefore, we would like to extend our sincere gratitude to all of them. First of all, we are thankful to Embassy of Switzerland for their financial and logistical support and for providing necessary guidance concerning projects implementation. We are also grateful to the Czech-British non-profit organization for the provision of expertise, and technical support in the implementation. Without their superior knowledge and experience, the Project would like in quality of outcomes, and thus their support has been essential. We would like to express our sincere thanks towards volunteer researchers who devoted their time and knowledge to the implementation of this project. Nevertheless, we express our gratitude toward our families and colleagues for their kind co-operation and encouragement which help us in the completion of this project.

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