Independent Reviewing Officers’ and social workers’ perceptions of children’s participation in Children in Care Reviews

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Abstract
Purpose – The research reported here forms part of a study of children’s participation in children in care reviews and decision making in one local authority in England. The purpose of this paper is to outline the views of 11 social workers and 8 Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and explores their perceptions of children’s participation in reviews. The paper considers the barriers to young people participating meaningfully in decision making and how practice could be improved in this vital area so that children’s voices are more clearly heard and when possible acted upon by professionals.

Design/methodology/approach – The data reported here derive from a qualitative cross-sectional study in one English local authority. The entire study involved interviewing children in care, IROs, social workers and senior managers about young people’s participation in their reviews. Findings from the interviews with young people and senior managers have been reported elsewhere (Diaz and Aylward, 2018; Diaz et al., 2018); this paper focuses on the interviews with social workers and IROs. Specifically, the authors were interested in gaining insight into their views about the following research questions: To what degree do children and young people meaningfully participate in reviews? What are the barriers to participation? What can be done to improve children and young people’s participation in reviews?

Findings – During this process seven themes were identified, five of which concerned barriers to effective participation and two which concerned factors that appeared to support effective participation. These are summarised below and explained further in the following sections. Barriers to effective participation: social workers and IROs’ high caseloads and ensuing time pressures; high turnover of social workers and inexperienced staff; lack of understanding and training of professionals in participation; children and young people’s negative experiences of reviews and consequent reticence in taking part; and structure and process of the review not being child-centred. Factors which assist participation: quality of the relationship between the child and professionals; and the child or young person chairing their own review meeting.

Research limitations/implications – Although these findings reflect practice in one local authority, their consistency with other research in this area suggests that they are applicable more widely.

Practical implications – The practice of children chairing their own reviews was pioneered by The Children’s Society in North West England in the 1990s (Welsby, 1996), and has more recently been implemented with some success by IROs in Gloucestershire (see Thomas, 2015, p. 47). A key recommendation from this study would be for research to explore how this practice could be developed and embedded more widely. Previous research has noted the tension between the review being viewed as an administrative process and as a vehicle of participation (Pert et al., 2014). This study highlighted practitioner reservations about young people chairing their own reviews, but it also gave examples of how this had been done successfully and how it could improve children’s participation in decision making. At the very least, it is essential that young people play a role in deciding where the review is going to take place, when it will take place, who is going to be invited and what will be included on the agenda.

Social implications – The paper highlights that in this Local Authority caseloads for social workers were very high and this, combined with a high turnover of staff and an inexperienced workforce, meant that children in care struggled to have a consistent social worker. This often meant that young people were not able to build up a positive working relationship with their social worker, which negatively impacted on their ability to play a meaningful role in decision making.

Originality/value – There have been very few recent studies that have considered professionals’ perspectives of children’s participation in key meetings and decision making, so that this provides a timely and worthwhile contribution to this important area of work.

Keywords Participation, Child protection, Children in care, Childcare reviews, Childcare social work, Looked after children

Paper type Research paper
Introduction

There were 72,670 children in care in England as of March 2017, an 8 per cent increase compared to 2012, and the numbers continue to rise steadily (Department for Education, 2018). It is well established that the life chances for children in care in England are poor in comparison to their peers, culminating in pronounced difficulties in their transition to adult life (Berridge et al., 2015). It is challenging to disentangle how far this stems from care system failings, the effect of earlier abuse, multiple returns to an abusive home or the culmination of all these factors (Forrester et al., 2009). However, research suggests that pre-care adversities are particularly influential for the life chances of children in care (Wade et al., 2011).

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), ratified by the UK in 1991, and the Children Act 1989, implemented in the same year, represented a shift from viewing children as objects of concern towards seeing them as citizens with human rights (Cashmore, 2002). In this paper, we are principally concerned with examining young people’s participation in decisions which affect their lives during the period in which they are looked after by the state. In accordance with previous studies in this area, we are interested in “finding out what is going on: to discover how and how far children take part in decision making processes, what factors influence, enhance or impede their participation” (Thomas, 2002, p. 96). Hart’s (1992) ladder provides a helpful framework for assessing professionals’ perception of children’s participation, and we refer to this later[1]. More recently, Lundy (2013) has reminded us that Article 12 of the CRC requires more than “giving children a voice”: that for effective participation they also require a space, an audience and influence. Others have challenged the “Article 12 model” (where children express their views and then adults decide) in favour of dialogue, where all voices come together in a process that looks for consensus (Fitzgerald et al., 2010; Mannion, 2010).

The Child in Care (CiC) review is a key process for ensuring professionals hear and respond to children’s views. The principal aim is to ensure that the state consistently meets a child’s needs until they reach adulthood. The Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) has been tasked with overseeing this process since 2004, to ensure that children play a meaningful role (Pert et al., 2014). The IRO decision-making powers are provided by Section 22 of the Children Act 1989 which requires that LAs consider the wishes and feelings of children in care when reviewing their care plans (Schofield and Thoburn, 1996). Additional legislation to support the care and participation of children in care is provided by the Adoption and Children Act 2002, which introduced the role of the IRO.

Amid concerns over the independence and efficacy of the IRO role, the 2008 amendment to the Children Act 1989 extended their responsibilities with regard to care planning and performance monitoring. This was strengthened further by the 2010 Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations (Department for Children Schools and Families, 2010), which came into force in England and Wales alongside statutory guidance for IROs with the introduction of the IRO Handbook (Department for Education and Skills, 2010). These provide clear guidance of how IROs should undertake their role. Consultation and participation are highlighted as a requirement in recognition that the IRO role and the review process should encourage meaningful participation for children in care and their parents (Department for Education and Skills, 2010).

Despite successive changes to policy and practice in pursuit of this, children in care have continued to report a lack of opportunity to engage in decisions about their lives (Pert et al., 2014). There has been extensive research documenting the views of children in care in relation to involvement in decision making (Murray and Hallett, 2000), efficacy of children’s advocates (Barnes, 2012), the role of IROs (Pert et al., 2014; Dickens et al., 2015; Ofsted, 2013), care planning and the courts (Timms and Thoburn, 2006) and experiences of the care system generally (Ofsted, 2011). Overall, these studies show that children’s voices are often not heard by professionals and that they experience limited involvement and power in decisions concerning their lives.

Specifically, research has shown that children have a limited role in their reviews and that their views are often not considered by professionals (Sinclair, 1998; Thomas and O’Kane, 1999; Munro, 2001; Thomas, 2011). A common theme is that children “report that the purpose of the meeting is to talk about, rather than to, them” (Munro, 2001, p. 9). More recently, Munro et al. (2011) concluded that although most young people (71 per cent) reported that they were
encouraged to express their wishes and feelings at review meeting, and only 53 per cent felt they were listened to. Pert et al. (2014) also found that few children were offered a genuine opportunity to influence any aspect of their meeting, and that they did not enjoy the experience:

The strength of feeling from the participants in this study confirms that children and young people do not enjoy being part of adult centric decision-making forums. Reviews were enjoyed when they were more child friendly, where they had choice in how they were run and in which they did not feel embarrassed or overwhelmed. (Pert et al., 2014, p. 8)

These findings are consistent with Thomas and O’Kane’s (1999) earlier study, suggesting that the introduction of the IRO role since 2004 has not made the difference in terms of improving children’s participation which might have been expected. A recent study by Jelicic et al. (2014) found that children’s experiences of IROs varied greatly, some having a very positive experience, others more negative. In this context, it is important that research seeks to understand the process from the perspective of social workers and IROs. The present study does just that, as part of a larger project which also studied children and managers (Diaz et al., 2018; Diaz and Aylward, 2018).

The research

The data reported here derive from a qualitative cross-sectional study in one English local authority. The entire study involved interviewing children in care, IROs, social workers and senior managers about young people’s participation in their reviews. Findings from the interviews with young people and senior managers have been reported elsewhere (Diaz et al., 2018; Diaz and Aylward, 2018); this paper focusses on the interviews with social workers and IROs. This paper focusses solely on adult perspectives to supplement and further elucidate the organisational, professional and structural barriers to children’s meaningful participation in reviews and to try to support improved practice. We interviewed eight of the nine IROs in the local authority (the ninth being unavailable) and we interviewed 11 social workers in childcare teams, all of whom had worked for at least a year with children in care. The research design was cross-sectional which means the collection of data at a single point in time from a number of participants (Bryman, 2012). Specifically, we were interested in gaining insight into their views about the following research questions:

RQ1. To what degree do children and young people meaningfully participate in reviews?

RQ2. What are the barriers to participation?

RQ3. What can be done to improve children’s and young people’s participation in reviews?

Through a purposive sampling method (Babbie, 2004), professionals were recruited who currently worked with children in care, either as social workers or IROs, and who had attended at least one CiC review. Invitations were sent to professionals using the local authority employee database. All participants were provided with information about the research prior to interviews. Ethical approval was given by the Social Research Ethics Committee at the sponsoring university and the local authority ethics committee.

Data were collected through audio-recorded semi-structured interviews with 8 IROs and 11 social workers practicing across multiple sites within 1 English local authority area. This is a large, rural authority characterised by a broad spectrum of deprivation and wealth. An inductive approach to data analysis was used to examine the interview data (Babbie, 2004). Data were thematically analysed, which involved identifying common themes and testing against deviations considered and addressed within the context of the participant’s interview (Silverman, 2005).

During this process seven themes were identified, five of which concerned barriers to effective participation and two which concerned factors that appeared to support effective participation. These are summarised below and explained further in the following sections:

1. Factors which act as barriers:
   - minimal available planning time due to high caseloads and management deadline pressures;
   - high turnover of social workers and inexperienced staff;
■ lack of understanding and training of professionals in participation;
■ children and young people’s negative experiences of reviews and consequent reticence in taking part; and
■ structure and process of the review not being child-centred.

2. Factors which assist participation:
■ quality of the relationship between the child and professionals; and
■ the child or young person chairing their own review meeting.

Barriers to effective participation

A common theme that emerged during the interviews with the IROs and social workers concerned the fact that they were under a great deal of pressure and were struggling to carry out their role as outlined in statutory guidance such as the IRO Handbook (Department for Education and Skills, 2010). Barriers to IROs enabling effective participation of children covered a range of different aspects of the working life and practices of IROs and social workers.

Minimal available planning time due to high caseloads and management deadline pressures. High caseloads were an especial challenge highlighted by all IROs and social workers:

IRO 3: We’ve got so many kids coming into care […] for me, any Child in Care Review, you wing it and if you don’t wing it – I know that’s awful to say. That’s what social work is about. You know, you deal with crises don’t you […].

This notion of “winging it” described above was consistent with how other IROs and social workers described review meetings. A plethora of research has demonstrated that frontline childcare social work can be extremely challenging, not to mention that it is difficult to plan for every single eventuality (Shoesmith, 2016; Bowyer and Roe, 2015; Munro, 2012). However, the above quote also suggests that meetings are responded to in the context of crisis focussed working as opposed to a planned feature of the overall review process. It is reasonable to extrapolate from this that reviews held in an unplanned and ad hoc fashion are likely to present a significant challenge for how far children and young people can actively engage in the review process.

All the social workers and IROs expressed that high caseloads had a detrimental impact on their ability to ensure that the child or young person was able to participate in their review in a meaningful manner. This routinely accepted reality of having too much work relates closely to the culture of the profession as often being in a state of crisis (Muench et al., 2017; Leigh, 2017; Shoesmith, 2016):

Researcher: Do you think social workers have the time and resources to prepare people for the meetings?
IRO 3: No. But I think they could make time and find time to some degree. They’re so busy […] they’re so, so, busy, and I don’t mean just on the ground but in their heads. They’ve got so many things they’re carrying, so many pressures […] they’re not able to think ahead or plan ahead because everything is on the ground.

This notion of being mentally and emotionally over-stretched is in line with research carried out by Ruch (2012), as well as Forrester (2016) who describes this as “zombie social work”. Reflecting on the challenges of modern-day child protection social work, Forrester (2016) contends:

In research we frequently observe social workers doing a visit because they are meant to do one within a certain timescale (the “stat visit”). Their computer is literally flashing at them, they do the visit, fill in the form and the computer stops flashing. But the visit itself is often characterised by a purposelessness that leaves worker and family confused about what is happening […] To me this is symptomatic of a system which has developed an obsession with effective management, without sufficient attention to the wider values and aims of the service. It is like a zombie social work - moving and busy (very, very busy!) without any sense of being truly alive. (p. 12)

The IROs interviewed for this study also reported feeling subjected to this bureaucracy. A significant majority acknowledged that some reviews took place without young people even
being present so as to meet agency timescales. This meant that the young people would not always attend their review simply because it did not fit with the IRO’s or social worker’s diary:

IRO 3: If there were more time to prepare then IROs would insist on children being present, because you’d have the time to help prepare for that and to meet those around, and social workers would have the time to prepare [...] and plan for it.

Researcher: Do reviews ever take place where children just wouldn’t be able to attend because of your diary and the social worker’s diary?

IRO 3: Yeah. Sadly, yes [...].

Within this particular local authority, some review meetings took place without children and young people even being aware that they were happening, because professionals were under such pressure to ensure that they occurred within a set timeframe. One IRO cited an example of a review meeting (to which the young person was invited) taking place on the child’s birthday to meet the statutory timescale. As a time-saving measure, several social workers reported that they would combine CiC reviews with Personal Educational Plan meetings at the school:

Researcher: Did that seem to work well?

SW 1: [...] they can end up being quite long meetings and a child might be more comfortable if it is in their home instead of being dragged out of class, sitting around with however many professionals looking at them and then leaving again [...] I have one boy that very much just thought it was a process and he’d sit there like “great, I’ve just got to do this”.

High turnover of staff and inexperienced social workers. Almost all professionals interviewed raised the issue of high turnover of social workers serving as a potential barrier to children’s participation in reviews. The interview extract below from IRO 3 illustrates the impact of the inexperience of many of the social workers in this local authority upon how children and young people were prepared for reviews. This was presented as being due, in part, to the social workers themselves not understanding the purpose of the review:

IRO 3: I think the challenge is though, a lot of social workers don’t really know what to expect from a Child in Care Review [...] So, often the social worker comes to a review and they might not know what to expect so aren’t really able to prepare the child, which makes it very difficult then [...] and also we all practice slightly differently, so I think there’s an issue about IROs being consistent because we’re independent.

This quote raises two issues: first, inconsistencies within the IRO team pertaining to the way different IROs manage the process; and, second, less experienced social workers do not always understand the purpose of the review themselves. This was also noted in the interview with IRO 7:

IRO 7: they [social workers] should be talking with them and asking questions [...] that, in my experience, often doesn’t happen and so I’ve been at reviews, sadly, where young people don’t know what the plan’s going to be, let alone think about things that we need to talk about, so that can make it really, really difficult to have an honest and open discussion.

The implication is that if the social worker has not explained to the young person the plan, and in some cases may not even be clear what the care plan is themselves, then there is automatically a significant barrier to fulfilling one of the core purposes of the CiC review, namely, reviewing the care plan, as well as to ensuring that the young person can participate.

Lack of social workers understanding of children’s participation rights and limited training of professionals in enabling children’s participation in decision making. One interesting finding from this research was that although IROs, like social workers, recognised how important participation is, IROs had greater awareness of the barriers within current practice. This could be because the IROs were more experienced social care professionals. It may also be because a central tenet of the IRO role is to ensure that all views are heard and considered. A key finding was that despite the recognition of the importance of children’s participation in decision making, only one professional interviewed (an IRO) had received any training on participation:

IRO 5: I went on some IRO training (name of externally commissioned provider) a few years ago in Manchester, which covered stuff like that [participation][...] the training for IROs is atrocious, I have to say. We used to look at as a team for training and find bits and pieces from BAAF or whoever and we’d go on it and we’d think, actually – not being arrogant – but we knew that!
This extract reflects the IRO interviewees’ experiences of the inadequacy of current provision for IRO training, and in particular the dearth of training on children’s participation.

All the social workers interviewed agreed that it was very important that children participate meaningfully in their review meetings. However, there was confusion about what this actually meant in practice. Social Worker 8 put forward a definition of participation, which was fairly typical of those provided by other social workers in the study:

SW 8: Participation to me just means a group of people all working together for the same goal or achievement.

Arguably, this definition of participation more adequately describes inter-agency working, and bears little resemblance to the legal or theoretical definitions of children’s participation outlined in the introduction. In terms of Hart’s (1992) ladder of participation, children’s participation in reviews was most frequently described by social workers implicitly as “tokenistic” or “manipulative.”

One potential reason for social workers’ limited understanding of participation in practice is that none of our respondents had attended any training on participation. In addition to this, there appeared to be a disconnection between the importance social workers attributed to children’s participation and how far they actively sought to ensure that children participated in reviews and decision making. Although all 11 social workers interviewed asserted that children’s participation in review meetings was extremely important, they also reported that either they or the IRO would make all key decisions regarding the arrangements for the meeting. This may be seen as an example of what Argyris and Schön (1974) identify as a disjunction between “espoused theory” (what professionals say they do) and “theory in use” (what they actually do). Whilst these social workers appeared to view children’s participation as important, there was little evidence that their practice ensured that this happened. The reasons for this may be outside social workers’ control, in the shape of structural barriers such as heavy workloads and bureaucracy, but there remains a pronounced dissonance between what is espoused and what actually takes place in practice: one social worker acknowledged that in practice children’s participation in reviews was often tokenistic:

Social worker 6: I think […], that a lot of what we do can be quite tokenistic. You know, it’s one thing going and getting the child’s view before the review which is what I’ve done, but on reflection that’s still quite tokenistic. That’s a visit to a child with a pre-set of questions for a meeting that isn’t going to change it in structure, and the actual issues can be pretty abstract and complex and they are very, very difficult to explain to a child.

The social worker here is articulating a view that many of the participants had in this study, namely, they had a paternalistic approach which means that they think that the concepts are too complex for children to understand, and that even if they see the child ahead of the review it will not impact on the agenda, structure or focus of the review. This ties in with a notion that all professionals had which was that “keeping children safe” was more important than upholding their rights to participate meaningfully in decisions made about their lives.

Children and young people’s negative experiences in reviews and ensuing reticence about attending. The IRO Handbook states that the review meeting should be child-centred, i.e. it is the child’s meeting and they should be given the opportunity to give their opinions and whenever possible for those opinions to be acted upon. Notably, all the IROs interviewed for this study reported instances of professionals, in particular school staff and foster carers, using review meetings to chastise, rebuke or shame the young person. The research by Pert et al. (2014) and Dickens et al. (2015) did not highlight this as an issue, although it is mentioned briefly in Thomas’ (2002) research. The following interview extracts testify to this problematic practice:

IRO 1: Foster carers and teachers will use the review as an opportunity to shame the child by bringing up their bad behaviour. I did a review at a secondary school the other day. The boy is in Year 7[3] with quite a few additional needs and his care plan is complex, but he was on that day facing permanent exclusion and the head had made a decision that he couldn’t enter the school that day for his review. That got turned around but then there were about four education representatives
and […] the big male teacher, head of year, he wanted to take us through the whatever, 28 incidents, and he was a tiny little boy, very small for his age with some physical disability, and I could just see him shrivelling up. So, how on earth can that child have a voice in that meeting? And foster carers sometimes will talk about behaviour incidents, I think sometimes to justify or to defend their own position.

Overall, the IROs in this study reported that such practices of blaming, shaming or being placed under the spotlight served as a significant barrier to children and young people attending, engaging and participating in reviews:

Researcher: What do you think the main things are that lead to good participation from young people in children’s care reviews?

IRO2: Well, I suppose they’ve got to feel safe […] [They] feel like they’re under the spotlight. They’re being kind of criticised, everyone’s talking about them, everyone’s looking at them, they’re worried about bad things that will be said and so that’s the kind of thing which deters young people.

Both of these extracts from IROs 1 and 2 outline how these meetings can lead to young people feeling blamed. The organisation VCC (2005) has outlined how stressful, difficult and oppressive a review meeting can be for young people, whilst more recent research (Mannay et al., 2017) found that some teachers had prejudicial views about children in care and that this was borne out in CiC reviews.

Factors which assist participation in review meetings

Social workers and IROs also identified two factors in particular which they felt helped young people to participate in their reviews. These are considered below.

Quality of the relationship between the child and professionals. All the social workers and IROs interviewed agreed that participation in the review process was very important for young people and that a trusting relationship with the social worker and IRO was integral to this:

SW 1: It’s that child and it’s that child’s life, so they need to know what’s going on and have a say, because it’s them that’s got to live with it every day. It shouldn’t just be a tick-box exercise […] it’s normally done with an IRO, isn’t it? So, in the hope that they have the same IRO every year that they can build a relationship with and speak honestly with, because they may have had several changes of social workers. But it’s […] whether that relationship is built with them or it’s just another meeting that the child’s got to sit in and whether they feel they can speak honestly about it […] it can only be meaningful if that relationship [with the IRO] is actually there.

All participants concurred that the concept of a positive relationship (between the IRO, social worker and child/young person) should be at the heart of meaningful participation but for the reasons explained below it was very difficult for them to build this relationship in practice. As a result of having high caseloads none of the IROs in this study visited children either prior to or between reviews as suggested by the IRO Handbook (Department for Education and Skills, 2010) unless they were in formal dispute with the local authority which was extremely rare. Moreover, they all acknowledged that this had a detrimental impact upon their ability to build and maintain meaningful relationships with young people.

Studies of children’s participation in decision making suggest that “developing an effective procedure for eliciting children’s perspectives and establishing a trusting relationship takes time” (Anderson et al., 2003, p. 212). Each IRO reported a caseload in the region of 85 children, which is considerably higher than the IRO Handbook recommends (50–70 cases). Six of the eight IROs reported that they did not need long to build rapport with a young person and, in fact, that they were able to do so in just a few minutes prior to a meeting. This appears contrary to research (Ruch, 2012) which suggests that it takes a considerable amount of time to build up a trusting relationship with a young person. With respect to this issue, and the fact that they only meet young people twice a year, social workers raised concerns about the ability of IROs to build relationships with young people:

SW 1: I wonder whether he would have actually spoken truthfully to his IRO about this, because he took a long time to build a relationship with (me) and a lot of intense direct work.
The child or young person chairing their own review meeting. Most IROs and social workers spoke positively about their experiences of young people chairing their own reviews, although they also raised some reservations:

SW 5: It can go either way, can’t it. It can become extremely productive with a really engaged young person. I can think of one or two over the years that would, I think, be really switched on and really actually would have made a lot of professionals maybe buck their ideas up and maybe become a bit more child-focused. I can obviously think of one or two where they might feel it is an opportunity to rub a few people’s noses in it and maybe have a bit of fun at everyone else’s expense.

This view was shared by other social workers and IROs, who also voiced concerns around how far the procedural functions of the review could be carried out in such circumstances. Most social workers spoke positively about young people chairing their own reviews and, indeed, saw it as an effective way through which to increase meaningful participation by young people in the review process:

SW 4: I did a Child in Care review about six-months ago where it was chaired by the young person […] and he decided how he wanted to do it, and we started off by playing “hangman” to work out what his favourite things were […] so it was completely different to how a normal Child in Care review would be. My experience would be that when things are calm and settled and straightforward then participation is thought of more. When things are falling apart or in crisis, or we feel like adults need to step in and make those decisions.

Although here the social worker acknowledges the importance of participation, it is still deemed to only be realistic if the placement is settled and things are going well. The implication, then, is that participation is a choice (for professionals), rather than being essential to the functioning and ethos of the process.

There have been a range of studies exploring social workers’ views of children’s participation, which have considered care vs control within statutory social work practice. For example, Shemmings (2000) found that social workers had a desire to “protect children”, including protecting them from “adult decisions and discussions”, and viewed this as more important than upholding children’s rights to participate in decisions made about their lives, whilst Vis et al. (2010) observed that professionals often consciously sought to prevent participation by children within the child protection system as they did not think young people were mature enough to be involved in decision making and they needed to be protected from such decisions.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted multiple barriers to children’s effective participation in their reviews, including organisational culture, inadequate workforce training and resources, and a lack of understanding or strong commitment to meaningful participation. Although these findings reflect practice in one local authority, their consistency with other research in this area suggests that they are applicable more widely.

It is lamentable that after decades of policy commitments, guidance, research and initiatives to promote children’s right to be heard in decisions taken about their lives (Grimshaw and Sinclair, 1997; Thomas and O’Kane, 1999; VCC, 2005), and despite the introduction of the role of the IRO, so little progress has been made in this area. This study has found that this problem is multifaceted and requires structural, as well as individual levels of change. Whilst many professionals in this and other studies clearly wish to include and involve children, there appears to be a disconnect between what this means to practitioners and how this can be realised in practice. Workplace stress, agency bureaucracy, inadequate resources and limited training were all found to be contributing factors, in conjunction with a limited understanding about what “participation” is and its implications for individual practice. Furthermore all the professionals interviewed for this study saw their primary role as “keeping the children safe” and this always had to be the priority over ensuring they participated meaningfully in decisions about their lives. This was evidence of adults having a paternalistic approach which appears in line with previous research carried out on children’s participation in decisions about their lives. We would argue, rather, that children’s views on their safety should always be considered, that children’s rights to
participation and protection should go together rather than be set in opposition to each other, and that empowering children is in important ways crucial to their safety and wellbeing.

It is frustrating to see that, while there is ongoing work in the theory and practice of children’s participation that challenges the Article 12 model of adults listening to children and then deciding whether to take any notice of what they say, this research confirms that routine social work practice has not yet reached that basic level, and shows in many respects very limited real progress since 1991. Some questions that this research prompts are: is the IRO part of this problem or part of the solution; how do we strengthen relationships between children and practitioners (Munro et al., 2011); and does the phenomenon of children chairing reviews have the potential to take us into a new place in terms of participation as collaboration?

The practice of children chairing their own reviews was pioneered by The Children’s Society in North West England in the 1990s (Welsby, 1996), and has more recently been implemented with some success by IROs in Gloucestershire (see Thomas, 2015, p. 47). A key recommendation from this study would be to research how best this practice could be embedded and developed more widely. Previous research has noted the tension between the review being viewed as an administrative process and as a vehicle of participation (Pert et al., 2014). Indeed, Munro (2001) suggested that the idea of the review meeting itself needed to be entirely reconsidered for this precise reason. This study highlighted practitioner reservations about this issue, alongside highlighting how the personal motivation of professionals is integral to the success, or otherwise, of children chairing their own reviews. Evidently, there are manifold complicating factors that require consideration and, of course, chairing reviews will not be right for every child; however, it is one way through which to ensure that the child, as a person, is more authentically involved at the centre of decisions about their life. At the very least, it is essential that young people play a role in deciding where the review is going to take place, when it will take place, who is going to be invited and what will be included on the agenda.

Notes

1. Hart’s ladder, with which readers may be familiar, distinguishes levels of participation of which the highest is “young people and adults share decision making” and the lowest is where young people are merely informed; and also levels of non-participation (manipulation, decoration and tokenism). Also useful is Shier’s (2001) typology of the steps that organisations can take to embed children’s participation.

2. “Children fiercely resented occasions when the review was used to focus on negative aspects of their own behaviour, sometimes including episodes which they thought were over and done with” (p. 149).

3. Age group 11–12.

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Further reading


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