

Master Thesis

Child Participation in Decision-Making: Qualitative Research into Views and Experiences of Foster Children and Professionals

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Abstract

This master's thesis presents the findings of qualitative research among 10 foster children and adolescents (6-20 years) and four professionals in foster care in the Netherlands. It aims to explore how foster youth and professionals in foster care experience participation according to Article 12 of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child and what opportunities for improvement they formulate in this regard. Whilst children and professionals in this study indicated that it is important for children to have a say in decisions that affect children's lives, the extent to which this occurred was limited. In general, among professionals, the age of children played a large role in whether they are involved in the decisions made about their lives. In addition, it appeared that lack of time and high workload hindered children's participation. Children and youth in this study expressed frustration that they were sometimes not listened to or that they were not informed until after a decision was made. Listening was also about having conversations with professionals; for example, the children in this study preferred to have conversations about their future rather than their past or about how they are doing rather than what happened. The children and youth also expressed frustration at constantly having to deal with different professionals to whom they constantly had to retell their story. Of the suggestions for improvement, the most important were to encourage asking children (regardless of age) for their opinions, promote informing children before decisions are made, encourage being honest with children about their situation (do not talk around the truth), and let children decide what they want to talk about.

Keywords: Child participation, Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, decision-making, foster care, voice, agency

Deze masterthesis presenteert de bevindingen van een kwalitatief onderzoek naar 10 pleegkinderen, pleegjongeren (6 tot 20 jaar) en vier professionals in de pleegzorg in Nederland. Het beoogt te onderzoeken hoe pleegkinderen, pleegjongeren en professionals in de pleegzorg, participatie volgens artikel 12 van het Internationaal Verdrag inzake de Rechten van het Kind ervaren en welke verbetermogelijkheden zij daarbij formuleren. Hoewel kinderen en professionals aangeven dat de participatie van kinderen in de pleegzorg van belang is, is de mate waarin dit gebeurt beperkt. Bij professionals speelt de leeftijd van het kind een grote rol bij het al dan niet betrekken van het kind bij de beslissingen die over zijn of haar leven worden genomen. Daarnaast blijkt dat gebrek aan tijd en een hoge werkdruk de participatie van kinderen belemmert. De kinderen en jongeren in dit onderzoek hebben hun frustratie geuit over dat er soms niet naar hen wordt geluisterd of dat zij pas op de hoogte worden gebracht nadat een beslissing is genomen. Luisteren gaat ook over het voeren van gesprekken met professionals. Zo voeren de kinderen in dit onderzoek liever gesprekken over hun toekomst dan over hun verleden en praten zij liever over hoe het met hen gaat dan over wat er is gebeurd. De kinderen en jongeren hebben ook hun frustratie geuit over dat ze continu met verschillende professionals te maken hebben, aan wie ze telkens opnieuw hun verhaal moeten vertellen. Van de suggesties voor verbetering waren de relevantste: stimuleer het vragen naar de mening van kinderen (ongeacht de leeftijd van het kind), stimuleer het informeren van kinderen voordat beslissingen worden genomen, stimuleer het eerlijk zijn tegen kinderen over hun situatie (draai niet om de waarheid heen) en laat kinderen beslissen waar ze over willen praten.

Steutelwoorden: kinderparticipatie, artikel 12 van het Verdrag inzake de Rechten van het Kind, besluitvorming, pleegzorg, stem, zeggenschap

Child Participation in Decision-Making: Qualitative Research into Views and Experiences of Foster Children and Professionals

The International Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) entered into force in 1989 (UNICEF, 1989). This law transformed tasks and powers of protection, guidance, and children's rights to participation, where they had been subsumed under human rights before the treaty was implemented. The starting point was that children differ from adults in their development, experience, and dependency. Since 1995, the Dutch government has been responsible for enforcing all children's rights (Rijksoverheid, 1995). They are legally obligated to ratify children's rights. The government has minimal freedom within this. The children's rights treaty is binding, which means that to implement children's rights, the Netherlands must ensure that all laws and regulations are consistent with the treaty's requirements.

Participation includes positive effects stimulating child development. One example is developing democratic skills, such as learning to formulate an opinion and cooperate with others (de Winter, 2012; Fitzgerald et al., 2009; Saywitz et al., 2010). Additionally, child participation positively impacts child and youth development; it increases self-esteem and self-belief (Rap et al., 2018). Therefore, appropriate participation benefits a child's development.

Results from previous research show that foster children find it important to participate, but they do not always want to be active participants (e.g., in meetings) (Pölkki et al., 2012). Foster children hope that professionals listen to them and consider their opinions and wishes when making decisions. Other research shows that foster children are mostly informed about decisions after the decision is made, and therefore they do not always feel included as active citizens (Clé et al., 2017). Moreover, Grietens (2011) notes that foster children feel insufficiently involved in the making of decisions regarding their foster care, for instance, health- and youth care or family choice. Furthermore, in making decisions, another study shows that foster children want to discuss different topics than adults might want to discuss (e.g., is there a dog where I go?) (Singer et al., 2012).

Generally, previous research shows that professionals experience a lack of time and human resources to involve children in decision-making (Pölkki et al., 2012; Rap et al., 2018). In addition, children's participation in decision-making seems generally limited or nonexistent (Toros, 2021).

Furthermore, findings indicate that the age of the child is an important determining factor concerning whether the child is given the opportunity to participate in decision-making (Rap et al., 2018).

The number of studies on child participation in foster care is limited. The question of to what extent Dutch foster children and professionals experience the right to participation is therefore important. With the outcomes from this study, a contribution can be made to improving foster children's participation rights.

How do foster children and foster care supervisors experience the right to participation under Article 12 of the CRC, and what needs do they formulate in this regard? This is the main question this study seeks to answer. It poses the following sub-questions: (1) What do children and professionals understand by participation? (2) How do children currently have a say in matters affecting them? (3) What do children believe is essential to enable their active participation in decision-making? (4) What do professionals believe is essential to better enable children's participation in decision-making?

The first section, "Theoretical Framework," highlights previous studies in which children have been interviewed and explains three important concepts: participation, voice, and agency. The "Methodology" section then describes the data collection and analysis. Following this, the "Findings" section describes the quotes from children and professionals and the themes linked to them. Finally, in the "Conclusion and Discussion" section, the key results are highlighted and implications provided.

Theoretical Framework

Defining Participation

As described earlier, participation is open to different interpretations. The UN Committee, in its General Comment no. 12 (2009), redefines participation as (1) children can participate and have a say in important matters in their lives, (2) children receive understandable information, (3) children's opinions are taken seriously, and (4) children are informed about how their opinions have been considered. Another paper by Roger Hart (1992) explicitly deconstructs participation for children into different categories. These categories can provide clarity.

Ladder of Participation

In 1992, Roger Hart established two goals concerning children and participation. First, it was necessary to clarify the meaning of child participation. A clear model was required to accompany the

concept. Additionally, a point needed to be made, characterized by the concept that children are not incompetent and can make reliable decisions. The 1992 paper, “From Tokenism to Citizenship,” outlined effective child participation using a participation ladder:

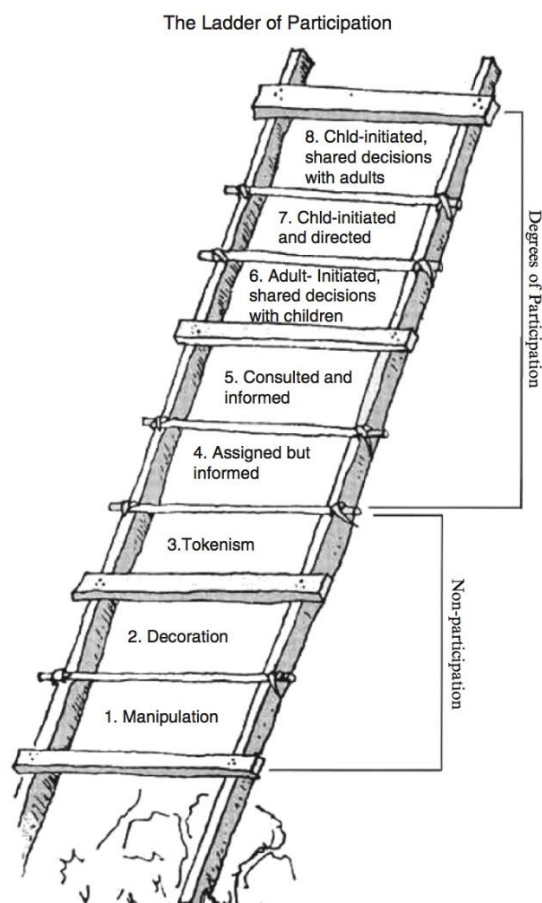


Figure 1

Note. Adapted from 1992 *Children’s Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship*, by Roger Hart. The model features eight “rungs” describing the characteristics associated with different levels of decision-making agency, control, or power that adults can give to children and youth.

Child participation, as viewed in the participation ladder (Figure 1), can take several forms. The first three rungs, manipulation, decoration, and tokenism, represent non-participation. Rungs 4–8 represent degrees of participation: assigned but informed, consulted and informed, adult-initiated (shared decisions with children), child-initiated and directed, and child-initiated (shared decisions with adults). According to Roger Hart (1992), manipulation, decoration, and tokenism are sham forms of participation with children. An example of this is when children are allowed to draw their ideal playground but are not consulted about how their ideas will be used in realizing that playground. With

effective child participation, starting at the fourth step (Figure 1), children would (1) understand the project aims, (2) understand who decided to involve them and why, (3) have a meaningful role, and (4) volunteer for the project after it was explained to them. The primary premise for Roger Hart is that child participation is only beneficial when these conditions are met. While a step higher may appear better, this is not the case. It is important to understand that child participation only occurs as it should from Step 4 onward.

Earlier Research

In a recent qualitative study (2020), Van Oosteren and Aartsen examined how foster children experience the special situation of “being a foster child.” The researchers interviewed 27 children, aged 10 to 18, living in foster care in the Netherlands. Most children indicated that they had positive feelings about their foster family. This is consistent with the findings of the Belgian researchers Clé et al. (2017). They interviewed 27 children, aged 12 to 18, living in foster care in Flanders. Both studies report that children believed that their opinions were considered sufficiently. Regarding the provision of information, an important component of participation, it appeared that children were often informed afterward, for example, about the choice of a foster family. However, they often did not mind this, as they trusted their supervisors to make appropriate choices. Finally, most children indicated that they went to their foster parents when they experienced problems. However, most did not formally know to whom to turn for important decisions regarding their foster care pathway.

To understand the experience of foster children in the adjustment period, the period when a child is first placed in a foster home, Singer et al. (2012) interviewed 30 children aged 7–13 in the Netherlands. The results revealed that most children were not involved in deciding when they had to go to a foster home. Moreover, what foster children wanted to know about a foster care placement differed from adult criteria. For example, some children wanted to know the following: Is there a dog? Can I see my siblings? Is there a soccer club? Generally, the results indicated that children were not seen as serious interlocutors regarding decisions for a new foster home or how they were provided with information by adults.

To conclude, previous research indicates that foster children have positive feelings about their foster homes. However, it must be noted that some feel inadequately heard in decision-making and

that in some cases, what foster children want to discuss in this regard differs from what adults want to discuss. The reason may lie in adults' perspectives about child participation or their view of the child. Based on this, the current study involved conducting interviews with professionals, as well.

Agency

Children's agency was strongly emphasized when the CRC was introduced (UNICEF, 1989). The intention was to consider children such that they have a say in their own lives and implement active citizenship. Solutions needed to be sought in conjunction with children, and children's opinions needed to be taken seriously, which is an example of agency. Agency means that children can influence their lives and those of others (Krappmann, 2010). Agency is important because the underlying concept is that children are serious interlocutors who not only depend on adults but also have their own voices (Ansell, 2016). Although it is enshrined in the CRC that children must be viewed as serious discussion partners, participation in youth care and child protection in different countries generally portrays professionals as believing that children do not have the skills and competencies to participate and, conversely, that they should be protected from participation (Rap et al., 2018, p.39).

Voice

Ostensibly, the positioning of the "voice of the child" is complex. The term "voice of the child" appears differently in the literature (Brooks and Murray, 2016). Part of the problem is also that the expression "voice of the child" assumes that all children share a single opinion (Bakhtin, 1963). Additionally, Cruddas (2007) describes how the term "voice of the child" reflects a hierarchy in which children are portrayed as less powerful than adults. This positioning indicates a struggle within the claim that practice recognizes, values, and meets children's needs (Murray, 2019). Murray (2009) defines the child's voice as follows: views of children that are actively received and recognized as valuable contributions to decision-making affecting children's lives.

The fact that nowhere was it "unambiguously" stated what was meant by the "voice of the child" caused the Children's Rights Committee, 20 years after the CRC, to add a clarification to Article 12: States Parties must assume that children are capable of forming their own opinions and

recognize that they have the right to express them. However, this is a recommendation. The original treaty is legally binding.

Finally, it is important to mention a shortcoming of conducting research with children, where children do not participate in the research design or do so to a limited extent. This serves adults' agendas if no room is provided for children's input. According to Murray (2019), the best way to explore the "voice of the child" is to spend time and care in understanding children's agentic engagement with what matters to them.

Methodology

Interviews with Children

This study is qualitative. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 Dutch foster children aged 6 to 20 years to gain a better insight into the experiences, ideas, and needs of children in foster care. A foster child was defined as a child placed in a foster family. Interviews were conducted in March and April 2022 in the foster children's desired locations, such as at home or the school. E-mails were distributed to caregivers of foster children and children, inviting them to an interview. Attached was an information letter (Appendix B) and an informed consent form (Appendix C). Children were informed in writing and verbally about the voluntary participation and study aim. Moreover, children 12 years and older had to sign a consent form with their legal guardians. Children under this age were also informed and allowed to sign a consent form if they wished. Thus, regardless of their age, all children were actively involved in the research process, although this was not a legal requirement for children under 12. However, due to the nature of this study, where the child's voice is central, we considered this important. Interviews were conducted with the children, lasting around 20–30 minutes. Before the interviews with the children, some topics were prepared (Appendix D). Examples of question include: Do you feel like you have enough information about important decisions? Do you understand why that decision was made? The interviewer spoke as little as possible to maximize respondents' input. Finally, answers were audio-recorded and deleted after transcription. Table 1 illustrates the respondents' characteristics.

The reason for conducting qualitative research is because Morling et al. (2020) indicate, qualitative research is a useful method for identifying experiences, perceptions, and ideas. Moreover,

qualitative research adds an element that is harder to achieve with a standard questionnaire: namely, that participants can come up with their own topics. Since children in particular might come up with other topics, it was predicted that it would be necessary to give them space to do so.

Table 1

Respondents Characteristics

Age	Male	Female	Type of foster care
6 years	x		Network
8 years		x	Network
12 years		x	File
13 years	x		Network
13 years		x	File
15 years	x		File
15 years		x	Network
15 years	x		File
18 years	x		Network
20 years		x	Network

Note. Network (netwerkpleegzorg) means placed with a family member or friend. File (bestandspleegzorg) means placed in an unknown family.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical questions were approached cautiously throughout the study due to the children's vulnerability. Suggestions from the literature about conducting research with children (Christensen, 2004; Kyritsi, 2019) were incorporated into this study's design to approach children in a child-friendly way. These included allowing children to decide the venues for their interviews, informing them in advance that there were no right or wrong answers because children are sensitive to the desired answers, and indicating that they were allowed to stop at any time during the interviews.

Finally, special care was taken in reporting the results; personal details were not mentioned when quoting the interviews.

Interviews with Professionals

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four professionals to understand adults' perspectives on child participation in the field of foster care. A professional was defined as someone working with foster children and their legal guardians (in Dutch: pleegzorgbegeleiders). The interviews were held in May 2022 online via Microsoft Teams and lasted 30 minutes. Some topics were drafted before the interviews with professionals (Appendix E). Examples of questions included: At what stages of the foster care process are children allowed to participate? Can you give an example where the child's opinion is heard? Answers were recorded by audio and deleted after transcription.

Data Analysis

The data collection and analysis relied on Strauss and Glaser's grounded theory (Morling et al., 2020). Grounded theory is a structured yet flexible methodology (Tie et al., 2019). This methodology is appropriate when little is known about a topic. The goal is to produce or construct an explanatory theory that maps a process inherent to the substantive area of research. Since there is still limited research on participation of foster children in decision-making, this method was chosen. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then coded inductively, openly, axially, and selectively. This process was performed in NVivo. During coding, links/themes were selected and compared. The links/themes form the study's results section.

Findings

Based on the analyses of the interviews with the children, a number of six core issues were identified. These include: 1) Participation, 2) Information, 3) Transparency, 4) Participation needs, 5) Everyday life decisions (e.g., school, pocket money, and sport), 6) Wishes and needs. It seems the topic of participation was significantly more important to all children, as it was salient in the responses of all participants.

Children's Perspectives on Child Participation in Foster Care

Thinking Along and Having a Say is Important for Children

Some children expressed their desire for participating in the decisions about their lives by saying that they know best what is good for themselves, and others were concerned that if they were

not involved, their opinions or wishes were not considered. These responses implied that children experienced an urge to be part of the decision-making process, which means that children's agency was important to them and that they wanted to have a voice in matters that affect them.

P (age 12): "It is just important that children can also say what they want. That they can think about it and not just about the fact that a youth social worker has learned to do this; she always knows better. And I think that a child always knows best what he or she likes. And not what someone else likes."

Lack of Prior Explanation

Most older children (around 13 years old) indicated that they were talked to and asked for their opinion; other children, mostly younger children (around 7 years old), reported that this was not always the case. In situations where the children's judge was involved, children aged above 12 received a letter from the judge inviting them to state their opinions and wishes. Children under 12 did not receive this letter. This implies that children did get talked to and asked for their opinions; however this was often done only after the adults had already thought about a solution and thus had already considered possible decisions. Participation opportunities for children therefore become more limited, as their own suggestions may not be possible by then. In addition, the letter that only older children receive from the judge and the experiences of younger children in this research imply that younger children are less likely to be seen as serious interlocutors and thus get a voice in decision-making, whereas this is more often the case with older children.

P (13 years old): "Um no, I just heard late that we were going to stay here longer and if I was okay with that."

In contact arrangements with biological parents, two children wished they were more involved in the decisions made about this because they were usually informed afterward about how this would occur. One child, aged 15, wanted additional explanations about how this was arranged.

P (15 years): "It's more like, okay, we'll make an appointment with your mother. And then I get a message from my foster father, for example – or a phone call. Then it is more like yes, just come to that building. And then it's more like I know from myself, okay, just wait somewhere; we'll pick you

up, and we'll see ... I think maybe tell something more that maybe it also feels safer for us (biological mother) both or so."

One 8-year-old child – placed in foster care along with her younger brother and older sister – mentioned that foster care is there to help children and parents when they are apart. She would have liked more explanation about this. Moreover, she was not spoken to, but her sister (aged 13) was.

I: "Can you tell what foster care is according to you?"

P (age 8): "They help children and mother and father when they are apart."

I: "Have you had any explanation about that from anyone?"

P (age 8): "Not really."

I: "Would you like to?"

P (age 8): "Yes."

I: "Is there anyone from foster care who did talk to you when you came to live here?"

P (age 8): "No."

A 12-year-old felt that his opinion was listened to far too little. Sometimes he did not understand a thing about what was going on. It all happened very quickly, and he often had to move between foster homes. He was 7 years old when he was being placed in a foster home for the first time.

P (12 years old): "There were a lot of decisions made like, new foster home, new foster home, new foster home. Without telling me anything at all. And that was really overnight."

I: "And when you were seven, could you have an opinion about that? What do you think?"

P (12 years old): "Well I could. Believe me I could."

I: "You did find even then that you could have an opinion that you could think something about it..."

P (12 years old): "...yes!"

Children Want More Transparency

Some children felt that the truth was talked around. For example, during the time when they were no longer allowed to live with their biological parents, they were told different reasons by different adults. Other children experienced this by saying that sometimes appointments are made when they were not present. This implies that children were not always seen as active citizens who can participate in talking and thinking about their lives.

P (age 12): "Um, well, I don't know who lied or said what, but ... there is some unfairness in talking too."

P (15 years): "... then you hear stories like that from your mother, then you're like are those real stories. Then you hear from your grandma again, and you're like, wow, that's so much more. And then you get the foster care organization, and that's another kind of story."

Children Have Different Participation Needs

Not every child wanted to have (more frequent) conversations about their situation. One child indicated that he wanted to be less involved. Another child indicated that she wanted to live as normal an existence as possible and that many conversations with professionals prevented her from doing so. In addition, most children experienced having to share their stories of the past every time, reporting that professionals frequently asked them what happened in the past. They would rather engage in different kinds of conversations (e.g., "how are you doing?" instead of "what happened?"). This implies that children benefit from not only being allowed to co-decide on their own lives in terms of what care they receive but also from getting a voice in terms of how their care is organized.

Children have different ideas of what their foster care path should look like. For example, one reported that he wanted fewer conversations with professionals, but another said she wanted to be more involved in consultations about decisions that affect her life. These responses indicate that children have different opinions and participation needs.

P (15 years old): "When things went well, there were still a lot of conversations. And then I had to keep telling my story over and over again. To many different people and so on."

Participation in Care-giving Activities in Everyday Life (e.g., School, Pocket Money, and Sport)

The decisions made in the lives of foster children can be divided into two types. One concerns the decisions made about the child's care (e.g., how often they may have contact with the biological parents). The other concerns participation in daily activities (e.g., what time to go to bed). In most cases, children indicated that they were allowed to have a say in and make decisions regarding daily activities, such as school choice, pocket money, or which sport they want to go to. From these responses, it is clear that foster children are allowed to participate in their foster home and that means that they are taken seriously, involved by their foster parents.

P (15 years): "I can just say I would like to go to – I don't know – dance again. Well, then, she says, okay, you're good at it; you can do it."

Two children in this study had worse experiences with their foster care parents in the past. They reported that their current foster parents took them seriously and took care of them, but their former foster parents were strict and said the foster parents were neglectful. Therefore, foster children were not able to participate in the decision-making in their daily lives in all cases; instead, foster parents made the decisions for them.

Children's Recommendations

Children in this study had their own ideas about how their participation in foster care could become better for them and reported ideas they had not only for themselves but also for other children. Some children wanted to talk less to professionals about the past and more about the future (e.g., "how are you doing?" or "what would you like to be later in life?"). These children also thought that important information will come up by itself, saying that a child will come up with important details when he or she is ready for it. Most children also wanted adults to ask for their opinions more often, saying that before a decision is made, the child should be asked what he or she wants. They also wanted more explanation of their situation, preferably before decisions are made. This demonstrates that children's say is limited in foster care and that they want more voice so that they can have their ideas expressed, as well.

I: "How do you think children in foster care can best be helped?"

P (8 years): "More to conversations and more conversations with them and um, that they also understand what a child knows and doesn't know."

I: "For example that if they start asking questions that they know what you already know."

P (age 13): "More asking for a child's opinion before you make a decision or something like that. And more just explaining about why you are in foster care, how you can be helped, how long it will take, just things like that."

P: (12 years): "... I want a child to always be able to tell. Even if he or she doesn't think it's right or good. If you let a child, for example ... if you don't keep on asking questions, but in a different way, and the child comes up with it at a certain point, you know that the child is ready to talk about those kinds of things."

Professionals' Perspectives on Child Participation in Foster Care

Definition of Child Participation

For professionals, child participation meant involving children in care. They did this, for example, by asking children questions about the situation but also by involving them in decisions (e.g., visitation or return). They also did this by giving them choices or sometimes by accommodating their wishes.

P: "Participation for children in foster care is very much about connecting with children. Giving them space, hopefully making them feel comfortable to be able to express themselves, to be able to ask or explain things, and very much including them in decisions that have to be made and, where possible, giving them the choice options. At least allowing them to think along."

P: "Participation of children in processes and with rules of the adult world. That they are allowed to participate in thinking about things that affect them."

It is interesting that the term "adult world" is used by one of the professionals. This raises the question of whether decision-making is an activity of the adult world. If so, this implies that adults

make decisions that children need to be involved in, rather than the other way around: decisions by children that adults need to be involved in. Additionally, based on this professional's words, who does he/she think agency should have? Are children considered capable of making their own choices and decisions. The word allowed suggests that children should be allowed to have a say or make decisions. This shows that decisions are made thinking from the perspective of the adults. And it seems that agency of children is underestimated.

Age-dependent participation

All the professionals indicated that they considered the child's age regarding the extent to which a child could participate. One of the professionals thought that young children should be protected from making decisions for which they could not predict the consequences.

P: "If I have a child of about 14, 15, 16, yes, of course, he should just have a say."

P: "It does also depend on the age of the child."

A widely held view among foster care professionals in this study seems to be that the age of the child plays a role in whether children are involved in the decisions that affect their lives. In contrast, the professionals in this study did place value on involving children, but the expectation here was that younger children are less able to oversee the consequences of their eventual decision, so adults need to protect them from it. Making decisions with older children (average age 13 or older) happened more often. Further, one professional indicated that the age of the child is not always relevant in determining whether children are capable of making choices or participating in decision-making.

P: "You have children of 12 who cannot formulate themselves very well yet, but you also have children of 9 who can. So, age basically doesn't have to have a limit to be able to participate in decision-making or talking."

Professionals seem to decide if children are capable of formulating themselves. Professionals apparently determine by feeling, for example: based on the child's education or social skills, the extent to which children are able to give their voice in decision-making processes. Therefore, children with

lower school levels may have less opportunity for participation as well as children who have difficulty expressing themselves.

Most professionals informed the children about their situations. However, again, age played a role. Some professionals believed that children from the age of 10, for example, understand what is happening better than younger children. With younger children, they conveyed the information differently.

P: "It also very much depends on the age. ... with younger children, you discuss it in a slightly different way."

I: "And how different?"

P: "Dad or mom can't take care of you enough, or mom and dad need to work on themselves first. Something like that. But, often, that's not easy to say either. Often there is also a story made by the therapeutic team. They support us with that."

Another professional used puppets to inform younger children about their situations.

P: "Children develop in different phases. And per phase, they develop different questions about that whole process. So, with toddlers, for example, I often explain that with dolls. Or we draw houses. But later, when they are eight, for example, they already think about it very differently. Then they have much more insight."

According to the professionals, the referrer, parents, and the foster care worker are responsible for informing children about foster care. For example, they must explain what foster care is and what it means. Most professionals also saw a substantial responsibility for the foster parents to inform children and viewed it as their task to guide them in this. In addition, professionals did not inform children about their participation rights.

Professionals had no standard working method for implementing child participation.

P: "No there's not a protocol or anything for child participation, but there are guidelines that you engage with children and explain things to them and involve them."

Participating in Discussions and Decisions

Professionals often proposed choices to children. An example is when a child can no longer live with their parents, and a professional provides choices about what is still possible, such as living with an aunt or grandmother.

P: "And then you talk to the child about: it's very sad that you can't live at home, but how are we going to make sure that you can have as nice a time as possible with your foster parents, for example, or with your aunt or with your grandmother and hopefully still have good contact with your parents and can see them often."

In some situations, the decision is made about the child, such as in a crisis.

P: "There is actually no time for that in a crisis. I think that's when decisions are made very much about you. What would be the best place for you? And parents are included in that, but also far too little, let alone the child."

Having Conversations with (and Sometimes without) Children

Professionals indicated that conversations are consistently held with children. However, lack of time sometimes means that children cannot be present at some of the meetings. Conversely, if there were more time, they would invest more in seeing the child.

P: "... especially when children are in school or when foster parents are working ... I work on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and then I have time in the afternoon. I have 16 on my caseload. If you have nine adolescents among them, you have to calculate when I will have time to meet with them after 3 o'clock (after school). I do have time in the morning, but then they are at school."

P: "... very cliché, but that there is just often too little time. Also, from youth protection workers. I think they are often overburdened. And, yes, with children, you sometimes have to invest more to be able to gain their trust and see them regularly."

Discussion

There has been limited research on the involvement of foster children in decision-making within their foster path in the Dutch context. This study sought to determine how foster children and

professionals in foster care experience the right to participation under Article 12 of the CRC and what needs they formulate in this regard. To this end, 10 in-depth interviews were held with children aged 6–20 years. Four interviews were also held with professionals.

In line with findings by Clé et al. (2017) and Grietens (2011), it was found that information is often provided to children after a decision has already been made. This is usually the case with an out-of-home placement and applies even more frequently to crises. The reason that children are informed after the fact may have to do with the speed with which professionals have to make a decision about the child's safety. Additionally, the information may be unpleasant for children to hear, so professionals decide to explain the story to the child at another moment. On the other hand, there were also examples of decisions where children could have been involved and informed in advance. In addition, children in this study expressed a desire to know immediately why something was happening and believed that this could be done in a child-friendly way.

Some children in this study did not mind if adults sometimes make decisions for them. They trusted them. They did want to be informed about the decisions. For example, they wanted to know how their opinion was considered in the decision. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that foster children trust their caregivers to make appropriate decisions (Nordenfors, 2015; Clé et al., 2017).

In contrast to previous research showing that adults consider children less capable of making decisions (Ansell, 2016), this study found that children around the age of 15 also began to believe that their younger self was less capable of co-deciding. Children spoken starting at age 12 thought very differently about this. They thought their younger selves (approximately at 8 years old) were capable of participating in decision making. It appears that in developing an adult attitude (which may start around 15 years old), a widespread perception arises that now that you are older, you understand.

Furthermore, the children in this study experienced having to re-share their stories with many different professionals. Previous research by Het Vergeten Kind (2020) has shown that this is a common problem in Dutch Youth Care. However, contrary to previous research, this study found that children found it particularly unpleasant to share their stories because it is about their past, whereas children would rather talk about their future. Some children had gotten used to having to tell their

stories continuously but did not like it. Children also found that adults are sometimes not honest about their situation, and the truth was sometimes avoided. One explanation for why children may often need to talk about their past is because professionals are trained to ask about the situation in different areas of life, thinking about parenting and developmental history. Moreover, talking about the past may also provide tools for professionals to learn to understand a child's behavior. On the other hand, children felt that this only had to be done once if professionals looked at their files. Why the truth is sometimes avoided may be because there is disagreement between adults (e.g., arguments between a father and a mother) or because professionals want to make arguments/stories understandable to children, and by telling it differently, they think they may achieve that.

The participation needs of children can vary. Particularly, a difference can be observed between children who stay in foster care for a long time and those who still have a chance to return to their biological parents. For example, the children in this study who had been staying in foster care for years – sometimes no longer having contact with their biological parents – appeared to have less need for a say in foster care because they were doing well at home, in school, or both. This illustrates that children's needs for participation can vary depending on factors such as the duration of foster care, the amount of agencies involved (e.g., youth services, mental health services, school), a good relationship with the caregiver (e.g., if the relationship is not good children may drop out of participating), the amount of time participation takes and what it provides, and how things are going in life. That said, children differ from one another in many ways, and their need for participation is one of them, as it is possible that there are children who would design their participation in a different way than others.

In Roger Hart's (1992) terms, child participation means that children are seen and involved as serious interlocutors, just like adults, and the more the children are allowed to decide for themselves, the more participation takes place. This study found that not all children have a say in important decisions in their lives. In addition, in line with previous research, there is still debate about the extent to which children are capable of making their own decisions (Ansell, 2016). Possible explanations for why children are not given the opportunity to make their own decisions are their age (the younger the child, the less involvement) or because there is not enough discretion to do what the child wants. An explanation from one of the children themselves is that adults do not believe that children can think

seriously about serious matters (see p. 10). Moreover, an explanation from the perspective of the professionals involves thinking that younger children are less capable of making decisions, which means that age-dependent participation plays a role in why children are not always involved in the decision-making.

Consistent with previous findings by Rap et al. (2018) and Pölkki et al. (2012), this study also shows that the lack of time and high workload for professionals is a barrier to shaping child participation. However, it should be noted that in contrast to lack of time of professionals, there is also lack of time of children to consider. Consultations that are about the children may take place, for instance, during school hours, a sport, or other leisure activities, leaving less room, besides high workload of professionals, to involve the children. The question remains whether this could be solved and how. Possible solutions for professionals and foster care organisations are to set goals correctly and prioritize wisely to set aside more time for participation. For example, there might be tasks that are less relevant, such as registration or regulatory pressure, which is a common problem in the Dutch care system (Ontregel de Zorg, 2018). Increased use of digitalization could be another solution by using a smartphone or laptop to communicate more often with children. Other far-reaching solutions are to give children more space to schedule their own school hours, leaving them with space and time to participate in their foster care journey. That, however, is unlikely to be possible in the short term given the complexity of the education system.

Finally, some limitations of this study should be noted. A first limitation concerns the importance of interpreting the information from this study as from a child's perspective who is dealing with different professionals and organizations. There was insufficient space and time to explore the extent to which children are able to interpret differences between different fields of youth care they encounter. This is important because children in this study referred to a variety of problems that are also related to professionals from youth protection.

A second limitation is the lack of other stakeholders besides foster care professionals in this study. Often, municipal officials, a teacher, or a family doctor also affect children's lives. Their opinions on participation are important to find out how to improve children's participation from a

broader societal perspective. Further research could interview more professionals who are involved with foster children to see what could be improved.

Recommendations

In the light of the discussed findings, this study concludes with seven recommendations for taking child participation in foster care to the next level:

1. Children should be considered as serious discussion partners with a say on the issue.

Although children are taken seriously in most cases, it appears (also with older children) that age still plays a major role in how much children can think and decide. According to Article 12 of the CRC, the child's age is irrelevant. Provided children can provide an opinion – and want to – they should be able to do so.

2. Consider providing more child-friendly information. Children in this study indicated that they did not want to tell their stories repeatedly. They believed that important information from their side will emerge when they are ready. They preferred to talk about how they are, what they want to do later, or (with young people) their life goals.

3. Encourage caregivers (i.e., professionals, parents, foster parents) to be honest and forthright with children and give them space to make mistakes. The children in this study did not want to mediate between two parties since this can complicate their choices. What they consider right for them may disappoint one of their caregivers. They find this annoying, so they may not dare to choose what is best for themselves. Moreover, give children the truth. They do not need to know everything at a young age, as that may be too overwhelming. However, seek opportunities to be simultaneously honest and child-friendly. Never avoid the issue.

4. Promote informing children about the decisions being made more often. Even if they are not involved, there may be a reason for this. Consider discussing this with them.

5. When making the above recommendations, always consider the children's participation needs. These can differ for each child.

The following recommendations are addressed to a greater extent to the foster care organization and policymakers in youth care:.

6. The possibilities to improve child participation partly depend on a sufficient budget. Many professionals have a high workload and lack of time, making it difficult to involve children. This can also lead to an increased turnover of professionals (the many faces). Unless a solution other than employing more staff can be found, this is a point that deserves attention, especially given the importance of children being able to participate in discussions and decisions.

7. Try to make child participation part of the working method. For example, provide an extra module in the child's file, stating the child's participation needs. This can also be supplemented with what the child wants but also how this has been addressed. This evokes a conversation with the child about their rights. Specifically, it is recommended to collaborate further with professionals regarding how to incorporate the points for improvement mentioned by the children, for example, in this report, into the working method. Consider thinking creatively, as children do. Moreover, consider how to enable the children to realize their ideas.

Conclusion

This research aimed to identify children's and professionals' experiences of participation in foster care and explored how children and professionals believe it could be improved. Based on qualitative analysis, it can be stated that foster children, no matter their age, want more voice in decisions that affect their lives. For example, they want to be informed earlier about important decisions, such as which family they will be going to and for how long. They also want to specify wishes in this respect. Additionally, children want to converse about other topics, such as their future (e.g., who they want to become) rather than the conversations about the past (what happened).

Children also find it annoying to have to tell their stories repeatedly to new professionals. The results indicate that younger children (under the age of 12) are less involved. Moreover, children want adults to be honest and inform them in advance about all issues that affect them, such as why their parents can no longer take care of them. Professionals in foster care consider children's participation important. However, professionals experience lack of time, as well from the side of children (due

circumstances such as being at school), as an obstacle to involve children more often in decision-making.

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Appendix D: Topic List Children

Gespreksleidraad

Deze generieke gespreksleidraad is bedoeld als ondersteuning tijdens de gesprekken met kinderen over kinderrechten. Tijdens de gesprekken laat de interviewer zich leiden door wat de kinderen zelf inbrengen, en kunnen onderstaande vragen dienen als checklist en voor verdieping.

Introductie

- Uitleggen doel van het onderzoek/onderzoeksvragen, privacy/anonimiteit/toestemming ouders, wat er gebeurt met de resultaten, agenda voor het gesprek (wat gaan we doen, hoe lang duurt het gesprek?).

Inleidende vragen.

- Hoe heet je en hoe oud ben je?
- Wat was vandaag het leukste/stomste wat je heb meegemaakt?
- Met wie woon je? Hoe ziet je pleeggezin eruit?
- Heb je broertjes of zusjes?
- Wanneer ben je hier komen wonen?

Leefwereld kind.

School

- Naar welke school ga je?
- Hoe is dat zo gekomen dat je naar die school gaat? Wie heeft er besloten naar welke school je gaat? Leg uit.
- Heb je zelf mogen meepraten of beslissingen over naar welke school je toe gaat (met je begeleiders, ouders, pleegouders, e.d.)? Leg uit.
- Hoe is dat gegaan?

Sport, vrije tijd, muziek

- Wat vind je leuk om te doen in je vrije tijd?
- Zit je bijvoorbeeld op een sport? Zo ja, leg uit, is het leuk?
- Luister je ook muziek?

Gezin

- Heb je mee mogen praten of beslissen over bij wie je kwam te wonen? Leg uit.
- Begrijp je waarom die beslissing werd genomen?
- Toen je naar een pleeggezin ging, heb je toen van te voren te horen gekregen wat er met je ging gebeuren? Hoe is dat gegaan? Wat vond je daarvan? Wat ging er goed of wat kan er beter?

Organisatie niveau.

Pleegzorg

- Zijn er mensen die jouw helpen? Een begeleider, een meester of juf, iemand van Levvel?
- Wordt er weleens aan jouw gevraagd wat jij wilt? Leg uit.
- Heb je het idee dat je voldoende informatie hebt over belangrijke beslissingen? Leg uit.
- Heb je het idee dat erover het algemeen goed naar kinderen in de pleegzorg wordt geluisterd? Leg uit.
- Stel: jij bent de baas over de pleegzorg. Wat zou je dan doen om participatie in de pleegzorg nog beter te maken?
- Wordt je betrokken bij jouw pleegzorgtraject? Leg uit. Vindt je dat goed gaan of minder goed?
- Zijn er dingen die jij belangrijk vindt als het gaat om kinderen in de pleegzorg?

Participatie in het algemeen.

- Heb je een voorbeeld waarin er echt goed naar je geluisterd is?

- Zijn er nog dingen die volgens jou beter kunnen in de pleegzorg? Hoe denk jij dat kinderen het beste geholpen kunnen worden?

Bescherming in het algemeen.

- Voel je je veilig in [plaats]? Op school? Leg uit.
- Als iets niet goed gaat kan je dan terecht bij iemand? Bijvoorbeeld iemand die je goed kent?

Voorzieningen in het algemeen.

- School
- Vrije tijd
- Speeltuinen
- Andere activiteiten.

Afsluiting

Zijn er nog dingen die je wil vertellen, waar we het nu nog niet over hebben gehad? Bijvoorbeeld wat gaat er heel goed in je leven/waar ben je blij mee, of wat zou je juist willen veranderen?

Bedanken en informeren over wat er met de resultaten gaat gebeuren.

Appendix F: Topic List Professionals

Gespreksleidraad pleegzorgbegeleiders

Deze generieke gespreksleidraad is bedoeld als ondersteuning tijdens de interviews met professionals over kinderrechten. Anders dan de gespreksleidraad met kinderen is dat bij de professionals ook gevraagd wordt naar organisatorische aspecten van participatie, zoals naar de werkwijze van de organisatie en naar het perspectief op kindparticipatie.

Vragen over werkwijze...

- Op welke wijze wordt vorm gegeven aan kindparticipatie?
- Wie spelen er een rol in het organiseren van kindparticipatie?
- Wat is volgens u de betekenis van kindparticipatie?
- Wat vindt u van kindparticipatie? Is het belangrijk? Waarom wel of waarom niet?
- In welke fasen van het pleegzorgtraject mogen kinderen participeren? Leg uit.

Vragen over de mening van kinderen...

- Kunt u voorbeelden geven waarin de mening van het kind gehoord wordt? (Hoe, wat, waar, met wie?) Was de mening doorslaggevend? Waarom wel of waarom niet? Hoe oud was het kind?
- Kunt u voorbeelden geven waarin de mening van het kind niet is gehoord? (Hoe, wat, waar, met wie en waarom?)
- Kunt u voorbeelden geven van hoe kinderen de mogelijkheid krijgen om te reageren op beslissingen die gemaakt worden en die hun leven beïnvloeden? Hoe oud was het kind?
- Vanaf welke leeftijd kunnen volgens u kinderen hun mening geven? Leg uit.

Vragen over beslissingen die worden gemaakt...

- Kunt u voorbeelden geven waarin kinderen betrokken zijn geweest bij het nemen van belangrijke beslissingen? Wat gaat er goed? Wat gaat er minder goed?

Doorvragen op thema's als:

- Familie keuze
- Hulpverlening en zorgteam-overleg
- Beleid
- Opvoedingsbesluit

Vragen over de informatie naar kinderen toe...

- Kunt u voorbeelden geven over hoe kinderen geïnformeerd worden over bijvoorbeeld belangrijke beslissingen? Wat is de werkwijze? Wordt er rekening gehouden met de leeftijd van het kind?

Afsluiting:

Als u het voor het zeggen had, wat zou u dan doen om participatie voor kinderen beter te maken?

Zijn er nog dingen die ik niet heb gevraagd, maar die u wel belangrijk vindt om mee te geven?

Bedanken en informeren over wat er met de resultaten gaat gebeuren.