Empowering parents whose children are subjected to care proceedings: a qualitative investigation into practitioners' experiences

Stephanie Jones[1], Jessica Wagner[2], Jason Randall[2], Anna Tsaroucha[2]

[1] Children's Services, Whitewall, St Helena Island
[2] School of Social Work, Allied and Public Health, Faculty of Health Sciences, Staffordshire University

Abstract

There has been a shift in recent years in care proceedings with parental empowerment being seen as a fundamental anti-oppressive social work value (Smith 2010). Research has suggested that although empowerment is often the objective the family may not feel this is achieved. Giovanini (2011) Sykes et al (2002) and Sinclair & Wilson (2009) looked at the experiences of birth parents during care proceedings. A key theme of the literature was that parents felt that social workers had not been helpful during the process, in terms of sharing information and offering support and advice. Therefore, this research focused on practitioners' views of their ability to empower whilst working with parents. The objective was to explore practitioners' experiences of attempting to empower parents of children undergoing care proceedings. Six semi-structured one-to-one interviews were undertaken. Participants were practitioners currently working in the care proceedings. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis. The practitioners reported that every effort is made to empower family members in care proceedings but felt that numerous barriers exist that hinder this resulting to the disengagement of many of the families. Further, practitioners highlighted that their key goal was to support the child and as such they did not have the capacity to continually chase families. The research suggests that in order to empower parents, a true partnership approach is necessary. This may not always be possible within care proceedings as the primary focus is, and must be, safeguarding the child.

Keywords: care proceedings; empowerment; families; practitioners; social care.

Introduction

During the late 1980s and early 1990s the concept of family empowerment developed (Baistow, 1994). The concept offered the individual the possibility of greater control and self-determination and could involve expectations of increased self-reliance and individual responsibility (Walker & Beckett 2011).

"The concepts of empowerment and advocacy are not simple and as such are almost impossible to define. Where the term 'empowerment' is used it often covers a whole range of activities from consulting with service users to involvement in service planning" (Leadbetter, 2002, p.201.

The NSPCC (2016) explains that Care Proceedings are Court Proceedings issued by the Social Services Department of the Local Authority where an application is made for a Care Order or Supervision Order in respect of a child.

The 1989 Children Act provided a new agenda for childcare policy and practice in the UK. The Act focused on striking a balance between the rights of children, the right and responsibilities of their parents and the role of the state. The concept of empowering parents

and working in partnership with parents, even in situations where the child is likely to be removed, is essential (Featherstone & Fraser 2012). Since the Act, it is clear that some progress has been made towards greater involvement and empowerment of family[1] members with a greater number of family members attending and participating in planning meetings (Masson et al 2013). Cleaver and Nicholson (2007) identify that, often, a more specialised response is required in order to assess parenting capacity and thus to involve parents in the court and assessment process.

Parents' involvement with practitioners usually starts because they need support looking after the child and sadly this often involves in the child being removed (McConnell & Llewellyn 2002). Research indicates that increasingly practitioners are working with parents who have learning difficulties[2] (Stevenson 1998):.Woodhouse et al (2001) suggested that two thirds of practitioners are carrying at least one case where the parents identify with a clinically diagnosed learning difficulty. This presents further challenges with empowering parents. Furthermore, Masson et al (2008) and Elvish et al (2006) suggested that this number is likely to rise significantly.

From 2008-09 to 2012-13, care applications in England rose by 70%. There has also been a 64% rise in the number of applications per 10,000 children across local authorities since 2008-09 showing that more children are the subject of care proceedings, (CAFCASS 2013) . The rise in the number of applications is significant in that it demonstrates that more children are the subject of care proceedings than in 2008-09 as a result of changes in thresholds or policy shifts, rather than as a result of population growth.

Research has indicated that without steps to provide genuine opportunities to empower parents, such as offering parents and children the opportunity to be involved in planning meetings, practitioners are essentially disempowering families (Lupton, 1998; McCammon, Spencer & Friesen, 2001). Masson et al. (2013) suggest that what is needed in the current care proceedings model is a practice that fits in with family procedures and empowers parents to become involved with the programme.

This ideal of parental empowerment and working collaboratively with families represents a shift from practitioners acting in a traditional direct role and instead becoming facilitators, guides and coaches that aim to empower parents and minimise children being removed from families (McCammon et al., 2001). Many practitioners state that this ideal is already reflected in the values and principles of collaborative practice that they undertake (Saleebey, 2006). Nevertheless, despite practitioners' beliefs, research examining family members' perspectives has suggested that empowerment is more of a goal than a reality in many settings (McCammon et al., 2001; Simpson, Koroloff, Friesen & Gac, 1999).

The literature has suggested that parents felt social workers had not been helpful during the process, in terms of sharing information and offering support and advice (Firestone 2008, Spratt & Callan 2004, Featherstone & Fraser 2012) and largely focuses on parental views. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore the nature of empowerment on parents whose children have been subjected to care proceedings from the distinct perspective of the social work practitioner.

This paper seeks to gain the views of social workers who are currently or have recently worked in this increasingly challenging area where attempting to meet the needs of the whole family while undertaking a statutory role.

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[1] Family is used here to not only refer to direct parents but to anyone involved in the care of the child(ren)

[2] The term 'learning difficulties' is used here as opposed to many other labels following its adoption by the self-advocacy movements in the UK

Method

A total of six participants took part in semi-structured interviews. All participants were female and aged between 30 and 55 years.   All participants have either current or recent practice experience in managing care proceedings.   The interviews were undertaken by two qualified social work practitioners who have both previously managed care proceedings and are currently academic researchers.   Both interviewers have worked in social work for over 10 years and have substantial experience of care proceedings. It is these experiences of working in the area that allowed for the development of effective rapport and could have aided the flow of information from the participants. Conversely, these experiences could have hindered participants' willingness to discuss negative experiences of the process. In addition, the interviewers' thoughts, feelings and knowledge could have influenced the interview and analytical process.   To ensure lack of bias during analysis the coding and identification of themes was conducted by one member of the interviewing team and one independent researcher (co-author); finally, all themes were discussed in depth by the co-authors to ensure agreement (Ryan & Bernard 2000).

Instrument

An interview schedule was used to guide the discussions. The interview schedule was initially developed by the first author and discussed and moderated by other authors. The interviews lasted between 35 minutes and 60 minutes and consisted of seven core questions. Supplementary questions were asked in order to seek clarification of the participants' information and views. The full interview schedule can be seen in Table 1. Each interview was digitally recorded with the consent of participants and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The interviews were undertaken by two of the authors and moderated to ensure reliability.

Table 1. Interview Schedule
1. How do you currently support parents whose child(ren) are subject to care proceedings?
2.   Does your relationship with parents change when you move into care proceedings?
3.   Is it possible to build a trusting relationship with parents whose children are subject to care proceedings?
4.   Is it realistic to expect to work in true partnership with parents whose children are subject to care proceedings?
5.   Now the Court process has moved to 26 weeks, how does this affect the ability to offer support to parents?
6.   What do you feel the current barriers are to supporting parents?
7.   How do you think we can better support parents? What can we do differently?

Procedure

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Staffordshire University Faculty of Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Participants were approached by the research team electronically through the appropriate management structures. This was via Service Managers

and Heads of Children's Services. All participants were presented with a detailed information sheet after the first point of contact. At the first meeting the information sheet was discussed and a consent form offered if they wished to continue. Following consent, the research team organised the interviews at a time, date and venue convenient to participants. All interviews were carried out in a private room at the university. All participants were debriefed at the end and thanked for their time.

Results

As a result of the thematic analysis the following three themes were identified:

1. Focus;

2. Barriers and challenges;

3. Support and Partnership.

Focus

All participants highlighted that the focus of care proceedings was ultimately about the child's needs rather than that of the parents "*it's called the Children Act and not the parent act*" – P3. As such, participants regularly highlighted that their "*focus is on the child's needs and not the parents*" – P3 which reflects the social work value base (Walker & Beckett 2011)

As highlighted in the following quotes, practitioners queried whether or not they should pursue parents if they chose not to engage with the support they are providing.

> "*If the parent doesn't comply with the assessment should we be chasing them and thus building drift into the proceedings, probably not as our focus is on the child's needs and not the parents*" – P1

> "*We can tell parents that they need to access the support or attend that programme, but they just see that their child has been taken into foster care and that it is too late*" – P3

It was common for participants to highlight that parents would not engage with support or programmes that were designed to support them during this process. This begins to emphasise the challenges with empowerment. In addition, some went on to suggest that if they did continue to focus on the needs of the parents it would not be in the best interest of the child.

> "*To empower them [parents] fully and to have them take control of the situation possibly would not safeguard the child*" – P4

Some participants suggested that it was often difficult to not get distracted by the parents' needs.

> "*It is difficult not to lose track on a human level that it is all about the children*" – P6.

However practitioners acknowledged the need to support parents on some level and recognised that this assistance reflected the social work value of empowerment (Beckett & Maynard 2013).

> "*Trying to safeguard the child and also trying to ensure that parents are ok . . . especially when parents haven't turned up for contact for two weeks and you have heard rumours that they are back taking drugs you do worry you can't help it*" – P3

This particularly suggests the need for parents to access the support offered during and beyond care proceedings.

Barriers and challenges

All practitioners identified barriers to empowerment, but particularly focused on "*the parents themselves*". Nonetheless, participants understood why this might be since "*we have just removed their children*". Participants went on to suggest that they often don't have the time to chase parents if they don't want to engage.

> "*Barriers are often . . . We haven't got the time or the remit to chase them, to make sure they [parents] are ok*" – P2

In addition to this, three participants identified high caseloads, resources and organisational expectations as barriers to supporting parents further. Other participants suggested that parents will never engage because ultimately there isn't agreement on what is best for their child(ren).

> "*Due to the nature of our work I don't feel that parents will ever fully trust us, just because they don't agree that their children should be removed*" – P3

This was supported throughout as:

> "*you can't hope to empower anyone if they won't engage*" – P6.

Pre-conceived ideas held by families may have negatively influenced their view of the social work role from the beginning.

> "*I have also worked with families that have resented social work involvement from the beginning so going into proceedings doesn't change anything, they are still resentful; and difficult*" – P3

Wider social issues were also implicated by participants who suggested media influence may impact parents' reluctance to engage in support (Walker & Beckett 2011).

> "*Families watch the tv and most believe what is portrayed in dramas and soaps about evil social workers who are just there to remove your children no matter what they do, how can you work with that*" – P2

Overall it was acknowledged that:

> "*We are providing a service that actually parents don't want*" – P6.

Although most participants did seem to understand why this was the case they still noted it as a significant barrier.

Support and partnership

All of the participants recognised the value of working in partnership with parents and strove to achieve this at all times although:

> "*Some parents don't see this as support, they see this as the LA sticking their noses in*" – P1.

This was commonly highlighted by participants:

"I always start with the premises of working in partnership even thought this is not always possible" – P2

It was common for participants to highlight that:

"parents need to want support for us [social workers] to empower them" – P6.

Most participants recognised that there was an element of choice in this process for parents but the outcome for the child(ren) was unchanged regardless of this engagement.

"If they work with us [parents] and engage great, but if they choose not to then that's also fine, it's their choice as adults" – P3

However, it was commonly recognized that the process was ultimately a child focused one.

"You can establish partnerships in so far that you have the trust element but other than that it is all about the child at the end of the day and we cannot change that" - P5

Despite the idea of empowerment, it was recognised that *"the power dynamic never feels as unequal as it does in care proceedings"* - P3 which links back to the social work value base of empowerment. Some participants then ultimately suggested that:

"*I just don't think empowerment sits well alongside court proceedings"* – P3.

This clearly links to power divisions that exist between social work and service user relationships within statutory social work practice (Smith 2010).

Discussion

Generally, this qualitative study has yielded some positive findings, with practitioners actively striving to empower parents whose children are subject to care proceedings but noting that the overall process should focus on the child first.

This may point to the fundamental social work value base remaining intact despite the difficult and often adversarial nature of statutory social work practice and regardless of the many barriers identified by those practitioners which ranged from the parents themselves to the wider social media.

The results support previous findings suggesting that empowerment is more of a goal than a reality in many settings (McCammon et al., 2001; Simpson, Koroloff, Friesen & Gac, 1999). Dale (2004) found hostility from parents toward social workers in Child Protection cases as parents perceived they were being 'monitored'. Additionally, Katz et al (2007) looked at barriers to parents' engagement with universal services and found that parents' level of engagement tended to be linked to how in control of services they were and that often, their perception of their own needs differed to the perception of the professional attempting to work with them. Evidently, parents whose children are subject to Court proceedings often do not feel in control of the process and often do not agree with the Local Authority Care Plan. Parents who find it difficult to engage with universal services are unlikely to engage with statutory services. The current findings suggest that although practitioners made every effort to involve parents in care proceedings they acknowledged that their ultimate goal is to care for the child and that time often does not allow them to pursue parents to ensure engagement in the process and recommended training. Previous research has also suggest that often caseloads and empowerment are hampered by parents' learning difficulties (Stevenson, 1998; Woodhouse, Green & Davies, 2001), although this was not a concern raised in the current group of participants.

It became clear that practitioners understood the need for parents to accept and engage in the support and assessment offered in order to promote positive outcomes for families (McCammon et al., 2001; Simpson, Koroloff, Friesen & Gac, 1999). However, there appeared to be an underlying tone of frustration suggesting that for practitioners, empowerment of parents remains a goal, rather than a reality of social work practice. Nevertheless, participants were primarily focussed on their fundamental role of safeguarding the child with empowerment seeming to be a desirable feature of the process although not over and beyond the practitioners' legal remit of the focus on the child's needs.

Conclusion

It is important to note that none the Local Authorities approached were able to participate in this research due to the high workloads of social work staff, and tight deadlines to complete this study. The researchers also acknowledge the lack of a male perspective in relation to both the participants and the researchers. Nevertheless, this study acts as a useful pilot to guide future research in this important field. Future studies should consider a larger sample from a wider geographical base. Additionally, it is important to recognise the importance of the families' views alongside that of the practitioners', so future research should seek to investigate the comparative views of practitioners and families.

Overall the results highlight the challenges with empowerment, and suggest that although every effort is made to empower families this is often challenging and is often influenced by family members' thoughts and opinions of care proceedings. However, from the study findings it has become evident that for the practitioners, ultimately, the child was their main focus and if, despite repeated attempts, the family did not wish to participate and be involved there was little more that the social worker could hope to achieve.

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