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Pål Børmark

Reflections related to the Brief Methods and Tools.

(Nine minutes Audio Podcast)

Inger Sofie:

Good morning. I am Inger Sofie Dahlø Husby, and I am a scholar at the NTNU university in Trondheim city Norway. Together with me today I have a colleague from the child Welfare unit in Trondheim city.

Pål:

Good morning. My name is Paul Børmark, and I am a social worker in the municipality of Trondheim city in Norway. And I have been in the field for a long time. I really enjoy doing social work with children and families, especially the young children.

Inger Sofie:

Nice to hear you saying so, because today we are going to have a conversation about how to come around barriers to children's participation in child welfare work. To be even more specific we are going to talk about methods and pedagogical tools fit for participatory practices with young children.

But before we go more into this, we are happy to tell that we are both partners in the Erasmus plus project Panda, in which we for nearly three years have worked on how to make child participation in decision making, trying to make this a collaborative process and a joint effort.

And today, in this podcast we highlight the use of tools to make collaborative processes happen in the encounters between children and social workers.

Pål, what do you think about this entrance; the use of tools and play in welfare work with young children?

Pål:

According to my experiences, pedagogical tools are not that common in the everyday practices with children and families. Some social workers enjoy using various tools, but very often they show up empty-handed and count just on their talking skills.

Inger Sofie:

ups! May I throw in a remark: Your reflection reminds me of an experience I had last weekend. I helped facilitate a gathering for young adults and children from Norway and Finland. The aim was to share experiences with child protection in two countries with each other. And as you probably know, Finnish is very different from Norwegian, and we had to speak in English. We had a whole day together and to break up from sitting on chairs and only engage in verbal conversations, I introduced a collage session. I brought newspapers, colored paper, glue, scissors, markers, wool thread, sticky notes, etc. and I have to admit that I was quite nervous about what the young people would think of the activity. But I was also worried about what my colleagues would think.

From my point of view this narrative illustrates very well the uncertainty that appears as soon as we introduce play, activities, or art. Why is that? From research and literature, we know that such activities may help the verbal conversation to become more profound and reflective, and illustrations can also sometimes speak more than a thousand words.

Pål, what are your comments to this? Are you an emptyhanded social worker or are you the one with a toolbox?

Pål:

Perhaps a bit of both. I prefer to talk in my everyday job, but I have given a lot of thought about how to make meetings with children both helpful and interesting, relevant, and fun. And tools come in very different sizes and shapes. Last week I had a talk with an 8-year-old girl while she was jumping on a trampoline outside our office. It was her idea of a meeting activity, not my idea. I also played with bricks, collaborating with kids building brick-tower together while talking about family, good and bad life experiences, or towers in general. It's very useful to have a common focus in a specific activity while "talking business" with small children.

Drawings are an activity that many children enjoy. Figures, dolls, cars, or all different kind of toys.

In our line of work we are sometimes committed to talk or even investigate about sad or bad episodes that had taken place in the child's life. I remember a little boy who coincidentally had a box of small crackers in his pocket, crackers that makes a bang when you throw them on the ground. We made a play that had the rule of cracker responses, because he wasn't able to talk about the hurtful experience, so throwing a cracker to the ground meant yes to my questions, and silence (not throwing) meant no.

We managed to crack the conversation sort of speak ...

It's not necessarily the activity itself that is crucial but the variety of being together and having focus on the relation with the child. Being together in an activity makes connections and help you to know each other better. When we and the kids are confident it's possible to explore resources, problems, and possible ways of solutions together.

So don't forget to introduce yourself first and foremost, before suggesting use of tools.

Tools can be helpful in facilitating dialogues, expressions or get to know the children's perspective and experiences.

I like to think about tools as something the child can decide to use. Remember to always ask children. Not everyone likes to make drawings for instance.

Inger Sofie:

Yes, Pål, I agree, the use of tools are not a sort of quick fix to work collaboratively with young children. It is more about a change or a shift in the way we look at children and families, starting to see them as partners, collaborative partners – not being a receiver or a user, whereas we, the professionals define the problems and decide the solutions on our own.

Pål:

But Inger Sofie, your story is not finished; I'm curious about how things went with you at the gathering last weekend?

Inger Sofie:

Well, I stuck to the task of making a collage and it was a success. As soon as I opened to get started the youth almost rushed forward and picked equipment and set off. After the session they came back, showed the collage, and talked in depth about what they had shared in the groups.

I have no doubt that the work with the collage facilitated the communication between the young people and helped us all to a greater understanding of the possibilities and limitations when turning child participation into a collaborative session between youngster and child welfare workers.

Pål:

What was the group collage about. Should it represent something or say something to others in the meeting?

Inger Sofie:

The assignment was to give a response and reflect upon the statement; our understanding of the phrase "equal partnership between service users and professionals".

Pål, you said something about that the child can decide to use an activity, a tool, or not. What do you mean by that?

Pål:

If you try to see tools as invitations and not mandatory, that's an approach that suits me and probably also the children because children are different. But on the other hand, it's a question about to lead or be lead, and as adults, as social workers, as people with power, I think it is very important that we try to invite when we can, that we decide when we have to, and we have perhaps a mission or a task, that gives us a framework of something that we have to do, so it is more a question about how to do what you have to do with joy, playfulness in collaborating and cooperating with children.

Some final words: We have shared some thoughts and experiences with the use of tools within the social work with children. If you are interested to learn more about this approach, we recommend the brief for practitioners named «Methods and tools that inform collaborative work with young children»

Pål:

Thank you all for listening. Bye from the Norwegians in the Panda project.

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