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Decision Making in Dutch Child Welfare: Child's Wishes about Reunification after Out-of-Home Placement

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Abstract

The child is a major stakeholder in the decision whether to continue placement in foster-care or to reunify her or him with the biological family. This study investigated whether Dutch social workers are influenced by the child's wish in their recommendations about reunification. Data were gathered from 120 child welfare professionals and 120 students who read a vignette about a child in foster-care and completed a questionnaire about their reunification recommendation. Results showed a weak, but significant relationship between the child's wish and the recommendation (Cramer's $V = 0.295$ and 0.188 , respectively). Also, a moderating effect was found: participants who explicitly mentioned the child's wish in their justifications gave a recommendation that was significantly associated with the child's wish ($p < 0.05$) while, with those who did not mention the child's wish, there was no association. The results might seem obvious, but they are not consistent with prior research. The findings show that children might influence the decision-making process by stating their wishes. Raising children's awareness about this could be useful; believing that they are active agents regarding their own care might enhance motivation, co-operation and faith in their future. Explanations and implications of the results are discussed.

Keywords: Decision making, child welfare, fostering, child's wishes

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Introduction

Family foster-care is a form of welfare work in which children are removed from their family of origin for a certain amount of time and are placed in a different family (Strijker, 2009). A reason for considering removal of under-aged children from their biological family is that there is no healthy developmental environment, it is not safe at home or the parents are not able to raise the child well enough (Strijker, 2009). Once the decision to remove a child has been made, the next difficult question that will arise after a period of out-of-home placement is whether to place the child back in the family of origin or to keep it in foster-care. These placement issues, in which emotional and rational factors play a substantial role, are vital concerns in child welfare policy and practices (López *et al.*, 2013; Maluccio *et al.*, 1996), because the decisions about out-of-home care and reunification have enormous consequences for the children and their families (Arad-Davidzon and Benbenishty, 2008). Therefore, a good understanding of the decision-making processes in child protection and welfare is quite important, especially given the worrying fact that the number of Dutch children in foster-care increases every year (Pleegzorg Nederland, 2011). Indeed, in the past ten years, the number of children in foster-care has doubled (De Baat and Bartelink, 2011).

In the Netherlands, decisions about removal and reunification are made by licensed social workers employed in governmental child protection services. These professionals are authorised to examine and evaluate cases of children at risk and to decide on the best course of action. When professionals recommend removal or reunification, they are obliged to discuss this with their superior and a behavioural specialist. The child's and the parents' visions are expected to be included in this discussion. The case is brought to juvenile court when a parent or older child disagrees with the decision. The juvenile court mostly accepts the recommendation of the professional. In general, it is Dutch policy to provide care to children at risk as close to home as possible, the least intrusive as possible and as short as possible (Wouters and Konijn, 2006). The importance of the family in the development and well-being of children has been acknowledged in the policy and legal framework of various countries (Maluccio *et al.*, 1996), including the Netherlands. Regarding foster-care, the policy of the Dutch welfare system is to preserve the family as long as possible and to reunify children with their family as soon as possible. Foster-care can take different forms, short-term or long-term, but also part-time (e.g. the child only stays with a foster family in the weekend or during holidays). When it is decided that a child needs to be removed from home, a safe place is in the first instance sought in the extended family. Currently, foster-care is provided by the extended family in 40 per cent of the cases. In the Netherlands, foster-care is almost never converted into adoption and is essentially meant to be a temporary solution (De Baat

and Bartelink, 2011). A major concern in the child welfare is the absence of a solid foundation of empirical knowledge for decision making and of a concrete policy and guidelines (Osmo and Benbenishty, 2004; Wouters and Konijn, 2006). Social workers mostly need to rely on their own experience and discretion (Arad-Davidzon and Benbenishty, 2008). This is associated with low agreement among social workers (Lindsey, 1992). It is the social worker's responsibility to assess the risk of emotional and/or physical damage a child might face in the future and to determine what the proper intervention is (Osmo and Benbenishty, 2004). This is often not a clear-cut assessment with a logical outcome. In most cases, it is not obvious what the best move would be. Growing up in an environment where neglect and (sexual) abuse might occur is highly undesirable, but removing a child from home can do harm as well (Audenaert, 2010). Damaged relationships between parents and children have a negative effect on the development of those children (Audenaert, 2010).

Wrong decisions by social workers in these matters are harmful not only for the children and families it concerns, but also for the social workers themselves. Decisions with a dramatic ending often get a lot of media attention, such as in the *Savanna* case in the Netherlands in 2004. Savanna, a three-year-old girl, died after having been severely molested by her mother and step-father. The death of the girl led to a lot of commotion. The family was known to the child protection service. In 2002, the girl had been placed out-of-home. After a period of five months, the child protection service believed that the mother was capable of resuming the upbringing of her daughter and placed Savanna back in the family, with disastrous consequences. The responsible social worker was prosecuted for omission. She was eventually found innocent, because the judge stated that there was no direct link between her omission and the molestation of the girl. Public outcries about this and similar cases led to insecurity and pressure on social workers, which might shape their future decisions (Osmo and Benbenishty, 2004).

Given the above-mentioned Dutch policy on foster-care, it may be expected that social workers have the intention to facilitate reunification of the child with the biological family. An ideal situation would be that a child at risk is placed out-of-home for a short period of time (Wald, 1976) and, that during this period, the parents are provided with services that enable them to resume custody once the problems are resolved. Unfortunately, successful reunification processes appear to be a struggle. A longitudinal study by Taussig, Clyman and Landsverk (2001) based on interviews with children revealed that youth who had been reunified with their biological parents after placement in foster-care had more negative behaviour than those who were not reunified. The former group showed more self-destructive behaviour and substance use and were more likely to be arrested, to drop out of school and to get lower grades. With this in mind, more research in the area of decision making in reunification dilemmas is necessary to understand what happens and eventually to make reunification processes more successful.

Prior research in the Netherlands showed that the justifications that professionals mentioned when they decide to remove a child from home are, in decreasing order of occurrence: impotence in child-raising of the biological parents, emotional neglect, physical neglect and addiction problems of the biological parents (Okma-Rayzner, 2006). Divorce and death of a biological parent are also mentioned. Interestingly, the wishes of parents and/or children are not in the list of most-mentioned justifications. These wishes have been quite absent in research as well, according to Arad-Davidzon and Benbenishty (2008). This is peculiar, since the decision of the professional will have a huge impact on the lives of parents and children.

In the current study, the wish of the child about wanting to be reunified with the family of origin or not after out-of-home placement plays a central role. The question in this study is: Does the child's wish influence the professional's recommendation about reunification?

Wishes of the child

Taking the wishes of the child into account might positively affect the effectiveness of the intervention. A review study by Vis, Strandbu, Holtan and Thomas (2011) points out that successful participation of children in decision-making processes may have beneficial side effects. It might improve children's safety, increase the success of care arrangements and increase feelings of well-being for children involved. According to Lindsay (1995), when children in care have some choice about their placement, those placements tend to be more stable. If a child feels listened to, he or she probably co-operates better. The results of a study by Thomas and O'Kane in 1998 made clear that children above all wanted to take part in the dialogue with adults and they did not want one of the parties to solely determine the outcome. As the researchers conclude in their article, most children just want 'to be listened to'. Including children's voices in matters that affect them is getting more attention (Cashmore, 2002; Friesen *et al.*, 2011; Grietens, 2011; Kelly and Van Antwerp, 2002; MacNaughton *et al.*, 2007; Shemmings, 2000; Singer *et al.*, 2002; Thomas and O'Kane, 1998). According to Franklin and Sloper (2005), there are three features of children's participation in decision-making processes. First, understandable information is given to the child about the content of the decision making and about the options and arguments. Second, the child is given the opportunity to express his or her own opinion and views. And, third, the child's input is considered and has an impact on the final decision. This third feature is of interest in the current study. It does not mean that the child's wish should be followed, but it does mean that the child is at least heard.

An interesting study that took the wishes of young children into account is the research by Arad-Davidzon and Benbenishty (2008) in Israel. These researchers investigated how professionals' risk assessments and

recommendations concerning removal and reunification of children at risk are influenced by the wishes of the child and the mother. It appeared that, in Israel, the child's wishes regarding reunification with the family of origin had no impact on the risk assessments or recommendations of the professionals. Although the welfare of children at risk is the reason for investigating their situation, in Israel, their opinion apparently does not influence the decision-making process or the decision.

Justification

What is missing in the research by [Arad-Davidzon and Benbenishty \(2008\)](#), as the authors themselves point out, is an examination of the reasoning behind the decisions. The present study addresses the justifications of the decision makers. More specifically, the question is whether explicitly mentioning the child's wish in the justification of the reunification decision increases the association between the child's wish and the decision. It would be wise to explicitly consider, although not necessarily follow, the child's views, since there is evidence that taking the wishes of the child into account leads to better intervention outcomes as mentioned above. However, in light of findings of [Thomas and O'Kane \(1999\)](#), it may be expected that the children's wishes will not be a central theme in the justifications of decision makers. These authors found that, when professionals were asked what reasons children would give for wanting to participate in meetings, a number of professionals incorrectly put 'getting what I want' at the top of the list. Actually, children put 'having a say' at the top of their lists of reasons and 'getting what I want' at the bottom.

Professionals versus students

A way to study decision-making processes of people working in child welfare is to compare them with others who do not have any relevant training and expertise in this domain ([Osmo and Benbenishty, 2004](#)) or with others who do not have the same amount of experience yet. In this study, professionals and students will be compared. The professionals and students have been or are being trained and educated in child welfare, so the largest difference between the two groups is the amount of experience working in this area.

[Gold, Benbenishty and Osmo \(2001\)](#) found significant differences in intervention strategies between Israeli and Canadian social workers, but only among the more experienced workers (with more than three years of experience). This suggests that experience in the work field influences the decision-making process. That makes sense. Less experienced workers would probably respond to professional dilemmas more purely in terms of what they have been taught during their education and training, given that

they cannot use past experiences. Since including children's voices in child welfare and decision making is getting more attention recently in Dutch university courses on child and family social work, the expectation is that students take the opinion of the child into account more often than professionals do.

Present study

The child's opinion played a central role in the current study. The goal was to examine the relationship between the child's wish and the decision of Dutch professionals and students about reunification with the family of origin after a period of out-of-home placement. It was hypothesised that there is no association, consistently with prior research conducted in Israel. Considering the limitations of prior research, this study additionally aimed to look at the justifications that professionals and students give for their recommendation. The hypothesis was that there is a relationship between the wish of the child and the decision about reunification for the people who do mention the child's wish in their justification. The second hypothesis was that students would explicitly mention the child's opinion more often than professionals in their justification.

Methods

Participants

In this study, 120 professionals and 120 students participated. The participants were selected completely randomly from a larger sample. The professionals were mostly child protection workers from child protection services in five (of the twelve) Dutch provinces: Groningen (15.8 per cent), Drenthe (18.3 per cent), Gelderland (15.0 per cent), Utrecht (21.7 per cent) and Limburg (9.2 per cent); 19 per cent of the participants did not indicate their province. The professionals ranged in age from twenty-one to sixty-four years old ($M = 38.17$; $SD = 10.62$) and most of them were women (72.5 per cent). They had worked as child protection workers in their current job for one to over twenty years ($M = 3.30$; $SD = 1.40$) and worked on average between twenty-four and thirty-six hours a week. The majority had more than five years of experience in the welfare field (69.2 per cent) and in working with children (71.7 per cent). Most professionals had a bachelor's (BSc) degree (80.8 per cent) and some a master's (MSc) degree (14.2 per cent).

The participating students studied at the University of Groningen (69.2 per cent), at the Radboud University Nijmegen (5.0 per cent), at the University of Applied Sciences Arnhem-Nijmegen (25.0 per cent) or studied at another college (0.8 per cent). The students ranged in age from seventeen

to forty-seven years ($M = 24.56$; $SD = 4.91$), most of them were women (91.7 per cent) and they studied for a BSc degree (30.8 per cent), a MSc degree (63.3 per cent) in Orthopedagogy or post-master's (5.8 per cent). Orthopedagogy is a typical Dutch discipline, combining international disciplines such as developmental psychology, special needs education, and child and family social work.

Participants were informed about the purpose and design of the study, and participation was voluntary.

Procedure

This study is part of an international study into out-of-home placement and reunification of children at risk. It utilises a factorial design based on a vignette or case description (Taylor, 2006). The vignette and the questionnaire about the vignette were originally formulated in English by Arad-Davidzon and Benbenishty (2008). The case was a composite derived from authentic files. It was intended to depict an ambiguous situation that requires careful deliberation and discretion. The case was translated into Dutch, followed by back-translation as a check. A pilot study was performed with eight respondents to make sure the translation of the vignette was correct.

Permission was granted by the child protection services in Groningen, Drenthe, Gelderland, Limburg and Utrecht to obtain the necessary data from the professionals. The contact person of each child protection service sent professionals the digital questionnaire by e-mail or distributed a paper version among the professionals with the request to complete it. To motivate them to participate, a presentation of the research results was offered.

Permission to approach students to participate was granted by the coordinator of the studies. Students in Groningen were asked to complete a paper version of the questionnaire directly before a lecture. In Nijmegen, an e-mail with the digital questionnaire was sent to Orthopedagogy students studying for a MSc degree at Radboud University or who were in their last year studying for a BSc degree at the Radboud University or at the University for Applied Sciences. To motivate students to fill in the questionnaire, two iPods were raffled after data collection was finished. The data were collected between March 2011 and January 2012.

Instruments

The vignette consists of two parts. The first part (1,310 words) describes a family before any action was taken. There are three children: two girls aged six and four years old and a two-year old boy. The case was reported to the child protection services by the teacher of the oldest child, Diana, after seeing black and blue marks on the girl's hands and back, as well as a

broken hand and dislocated shoulder in the previous six months. The teacher also reported that Diana sometimes arrived in inappropriate clothes and without food or school supplies. Her parents were described as having tumultuous pasts. They were struggling financially and had no ties in the community or support from family. The first part of the vignette ends with the opinion of the mother concerning removing Diana from home for an undefined period of time: the mother either agreed to removal of the child or objected. After reading this part of the case, participants were asked questions about risk assessment and the recommended intervention.

The second part of the vignette (160 words) describes the same child's situation after two years in foster-care. Diana's situation had improved. She had a good relationship with her foster parents and peers, she had fewer outbursts of anger and she did well in school. No changes had taken place in the biological family. The parents refused to accept welfare work and ignored Diana and her foster family. The mother, however, insisted on getting Diana back and was willing to take the case to court. The second part ends with Diana's wish concerning reunification with her biological family: she either agreed to reunification or refused. Participants were then asked questions about the risk of emotional and physical damage when Diana would be reunified with her biological family and to select between the two courses of action: reunification with the biological parents or prolonged stay in the foster family. Participants were asked to justify their recommendations in an unrestricted open text field.

The last part of the questionnaire consists of a list of questions and statements about the case and about general attitudes, such as concerning out-of-home placement and reunification. The questionnaire ends with questions about the participants' demographic information.

Measures

In this study, the focus is on the wish of the child, namely on the second part of the case description. Our independent variable 'wish of the child' had two possible values: (i) Diana agreed to reunification and (ii) Diana objected to reunification. The decision about reunification was coded as: (i) when the participant advised a return of the child to her home or as (ii) when it was advised to keep the child in foster-care. The justifications were an answer to an open request without a restriction in number of words. They were given the score 1 when the participant explicitly mentioned the child's wish and the score 2 when the child's wish was not mentioned.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics provide an overview of the variables included in this study: wish of the child, reunification decision and justification. For both

professionals and students, the association between the dependent variable, reunification decision and the independent variable, wish of the child, was examined using Pearson's Chi-square test. The moderating role of justification was examined by splitting the data into two groups: Those of (i) participants who explicitly mentioned the child's wish and (ii) participants who did not mention the child's wish in their justifications. For each group, the association between reunification decision and wish of the child was then again investigated using Pearson's Chi-square. Differences between professionals and students were also analysed using Pearson's Chi-square.

Results

Table 1 shows that the majority of the professionals and the students recommend leaving the child in the foster family instead of reunifying the child with the family of origin. From the table, it can also be deduced that the majority of both groups do not mention the wish of the child in their justification. Unexpectedly, it appears that students do not explicitly mention the wish of the child in their justification more often than professionals do. It seems that there are no differences between students and professionals on the reunification decision ($\chi^2(1) = 13.976$, n.s.).

Association wish of the child and reunification decision

Contrary to prior research and expectations, we found a significant association between the wish of the child about reunification and the decision made by the professional ($\chi^2(1) = 4.227$, $p < 0.05$) and student ($\chi^2(1) = 10.439$, $p < 0.05$). It was a weak association (Cramer's $V = 0.188$ and 0.295 , respectively), but it shows that, to some extent, for children who want to go back to the family of origin, it is more often decided to reunify them than for children who do not want to go back.

Moderation

As hypothesised, a moderating effect of the variable 'justification', namely explicitly mentioning the wishes of the child in the justification for the reunification decision, was found. For the professionals as well as the students, analyses showed that there is a significant association between wish of the child and reunification in the group of people who do mention the child's wish in their justifications (professionals $\chi^2(1) = 11.769$, $p < 0.05$; students $\chi^2(1) = 11.667$, $p < 0.05$). It was a reasonably strong association (Cramer's $V = 0.588$ and 0.577 , respectively). The results showed that there is no significant association between these variables anymore for the group of people who do

Table 1 Percentages of professionals and students mentioning the wish of the child in the justification for the placement decision

Decision	Professionals (N = 120)			Students (N = 120)		
	Mentioning wish of the child in justification (%)	Not mentioning wish of the child in justification (%)	Total (%)	Mentioning wish of the child in justification (%)	Not mentioning wish of the child in justification (%)	Total (%)
Reunifying child with family of origin	Child wants to be reunified	5.00	3.33	8.33	5.83	4.17
	Child does not want to be reunified	0.00	2.50	2.50	0.00	0.83
	Total	5.00	5.83	10.83	5.83	10.83
Leaving the child in family foster-care	Child wants to be reunified	5.83	35.83	41.66	6.67	33.33
	Child does not want to be reunified	17.50	30.00	47.50	16.67	32.50
	Total	23.33	65.83	89.16	23.34	65.83
						89.17

not mention the child in their justification. It can therefore be concluded that there is a moderating role of the variable 'justification', which means taking notice of the wish of the child does influence the decision-making process.

Discussion

In this study, the relationship between the wish of the foster child and the decision of Dutch professionals and students about reunification with the family of origin after a period of out-of-home placement was investigated. The expectation was that the wish and the decision would not be associated. Further, the role of explicitly mentioning the child's wish in the justification for the decision was investigated. It was hypothesised that there would be a relationship between the wish of the child and the decision about reunification for those people who explicitly mention the wish of the child in their justification and no relationship for the people who do not mention the wish of the child. The analyses were performed separately for professionals and students. It was expected that, in their justification, students would explicitly mention the child's wish more often than professionals.

There appeared to be a weak, but significant, association between the wish of the child about reunification and the decision to reunify, with both the professionals and the students. With regard to the role of mentioning the wish of the child in the justifications of the participants, in both groups, results confirming the hypotheses were found. There appeared to be a reasonably strong relationship between the wish of the child to be reunified or not and the decision about reunification with the family of origin after a period of out-of-home placement for those participants who mention the wish of the child in their justification. There is no relationship between wish and decision when the participant does not mention the wish of the child. No differences were found between professionals and students. It can thus be concluded that people who take the wish of the child into account when justifying their recommendation more often come to a decision that meets the wishes of the child than people who do not take the opinion of the child into account.

This result may seem obvious, but it is not consistent with results of prior research in Israel by [Arad-Davidzon and Benbenishty \(2008\)](#). These authors did not find a relationship between the wish of the child and the decision about reunification of the professional. An explanation for these inconsistent results might be found in cultural differences between the two countries. A comparative study between Canada and Israel found significant differences between professionals in both countries about risk assessments and decisions about out-of-home placement ([Gold et al., 2001](#)). Canadian professionals were more stringent in their assessments and recommended removing a child from home significantly more often than Israeli professionals. This seems plausible, since Canada is a more rights-oriented and less family-oriented society than Israel ([Gold et al., 2001](#)).

In Israel, listening to the child's wishes and taking his or her opinion into account might be less obvious than in the Netherlands. As the current study has shown, that factor (whether the child's wish is mentioned in the justification) does influence the decision of the professional and the student. It would be interesting to investigate the role of explicitly mentioning the child's wish in these decision-making processes in Israel.

Using the word 'obvious' for the situation in the Netherlands is a bit excessive though. Less than one-third of the participants mentioned the wish of the child. While participants may have been justified to think that other factors, such as ongoing risks in the family of origin or stability in the child's situation, are more important, this is still an alarmingly small group in view of Article 12 of the [United Nations \(1989\)](#) Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 12 states that 'the child has the right to give his or her opinion about all matters that concern the child. The government will make sure that the child can express oneself and that he or she will be listened to'. It seems, from our data, that this is not really common practice in the Netherlands. We should also note that mentioning the opinion of the child does not mean that the child actually participated in the decision-making process. Three main reasons are suggested why children would not be allowed to participate: communication difficulties, participation not being deemed necessary or that participation was considered inappropriate because it might be harmful ([Vis et al., 2010](#)). In the current study, not listening to the child could also have something to do with the age of the child. Participants might judge eight years as being 'too young to know what is good for you'. But can children ever be too young to express their opinion and ideas? A case study in Australia ([MacNaughton et al., 2007](#)) showed that young children, namely children up to eight years old, are quite capable of expressing their views on matters that affect them. The participating young children had distinct views about what was needed for their well-being. Besides services directly addressed to them, these views concerned even broader policy areas, such as community infrastructure and safety, and public spaces. The children enjoyed and valued the chance to express themselves ([MacNaughton et al., 2007](#)). Just like the children participating in the study by [Thomas and O'Kane \(1999\)](#), they simply wanted 'to have a say' in the matters that affect them (see also [Aubrey and Dahl, 2006](#); [Clark and Statham, 2005](#)).

No differences were found between professionals and students. An explanation for this unexpected finding could be that, in this study, professionals were compared to advanced graduate students. [Garb \(1989\)](#) reviewed studies on training, experience and clinical judgements. He points out that experienced clinicians were no more accurate than less experienced clinicians in personality assessments or in diagnostic classifications. Compared to graduate students, clinicians did not make more valid judgements in the mental health field. However, advanced graduate students did make significantly more valid ratings than beginning graduate students. So, according to [Garb \(1989\)](#), training has some effect on judgements in the mental health

field, whereas job experience does not. These findings are in line with the results of the current study. Research would be useful to determine how professionals could learn from their experiences.

Limitations

It is not appropriate to accept the conclusions from this study without noting the potential shortcomings. In the current study, the biggest limitation was the vignette. First, only one case vignette is used. Of course, it could not represent all possible situations that professionals have to deal with in practice. Although we have no reason to doubt the validity of the patterns we found, a different case vignette could have led to somewhat different results. Second, it was a hypothetical and digital case and it is unlikely that participants felt the same responsibility, worries and pressure that they would feel in real cases, involving actual people with their emotions and frustrations. Although the case vignette approach is used and has been validated in diverse disciplines to study professional decision making (e.g. Carlson, 1999; Jorg *et al.*, 2003; Langley *et al.*, 1991; Ludwick *et al.*, 1999; Peabody *et al.*, 2000), it is recognised as a method that should preferably be complemented by other, including 'real-life', methods (Taylor, 2006). Third, with almost 90 per cent of the participants recommending leaving the child in foster-care, the vignette is not as 'gray' as it was thought to be. A more 'difficult' case with the same number of factors that favour reuniting the child with the biological family and leaving the child in the foster family could alter the results, since it would have made justifying decisions harder, with participants possibly but not necessarily giving more weight to the child's wishes. Fourth, in total, only one sentence was used to address the child's wish. In this study, the child's wish was the focus. Instead of just mentioning whether the child does or does not want to go back to the biological family, it might have made a difference if the child would say a bit more in the vignette about the situation. On the other hand, an extra emphasis on the child's wishes might point participants in a direction they would not normally follow.

Further, in this study, the justifications of the professionals and the students were only scored on whether the wish of the child is explicitly mentioned, since that was the focus of the current study. No attention is paid to other things the professionals and students used to justify their advice. Maybe there are differences between professionals and students in other justifications.

More research is necessary. For future studies, it is desirable to use more vignettes that describe different situations that professionals have to deal with in practice. For instance, a vignette might be used in which the parents are making progress as well, or a vignette in which the child is a few years older. Also, the use of complementary methods to study professional judgement and decision making such as, for instance, analysis of existing files or 'think aloud' protocols (Benbenishty, 1992) is strongly recommended.

Implications for practice

The main outcome in this study could give us some faith in the future of the Dutch child welfare system. The fact that mentioning the wish of the child (in the justification of the reunification decision) strengthens the relationship between the child's wish and the recommendation by the decision maker is a comforting finding. It implies that those professionals and students who do notice the child and his or her wishes about the placement take it seriously into account and actually use it in making the decision. While we do not know if the subsequent decision is correct or not, it does tell us that children can be respected participants in the decision-making process. Raising children's awareness about this could be useful. Decisions affecting children in care are often made by a number of adults, namely parents, child protection workers, judges and lawyers (Cashmore, 2002), some of whom have not even met the child. The results found in this study could make children believe that they can be active agents regarding their own care instead of powerless victims (Van Nijnatten, 2010; Weithorn, 1983).

In our study, less than one-third of the decision-makers mentioned the wish of the child in the justification for their decision about reunification. This seems to indicate a need to inform child protection services to address children's opinions, views and ideas. People working in the child welfare field should be made aware of the importance of hearing children's voices. Including children in the decision-making process should form a central aspect in the education and training of professionals. Besides raising awareness, teaching concrete ways of listening to children and involving them should be addressed as well (Hallett and Prout, 2003; Milner and Carolin, 2000). There is work to be done in noticing the child and hearing his or her wishes. Our results give reason for hope.

Conclusion

In summary, it can be concluded from this study that the wish of the child about reunification after a period of out-of-home placement is quite often not reflected in the decision made by the social worker, except when they explicitly mention the wish of the child in the justification for their decision. This is an important finding, because it shows that children can influence the decision-making process. People working in the child welfare field should be made aware of the importance of including children's voices in the decision-making process. But especially children in care should be made aware of these results. Believing yourself to be an active agent in your own care instead of dependent on the thoughts and desires of adults might enhance motivation, co-operation and confidence in your own future.

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