

Chapter 6

Participation in Child Welfare Services Through Information and Communication Technologies

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ABSTRACT

Case management systems were designed to open the way for increased participation of young people and their families in child welfare interventions, and, their standardised format provides a valuable opportunity to use ICT in social work practice. Existing research is unclear about how effectively case management affects participation, nor, the impact of ICT on social work interventions. This paper describes the findings of qualitative research with service users about their experiences of case management and how ICT could further their involvement in critical decisions for families. Service users are keen to use ICT and this could help overcome the limitations of paper-based case management systems and exploit the communication potential of the internet and mobile phones. However, before ICT could be used, the complex 'digital divide' affecting disadvantaged families would need to be addressed and social workers' understanding and current use of ICT would need to be explored.

INTRODUCTION

Young people and families involved with child welfare services have few opportunities to communicate about, or exercise power over, their lives. In typical western child welfare service systems, service users have limited opportunities to con-

tribute to planning their future (2004). They do not feel listened to or able to influence authorities (Create Foundation, 2001). Some young people experience multiple workers and foster homes, leading to loss of important information and poor understanding of how contribute to decisions (Cashmore & Paxman, 2006). Parents whose children live in the care system can be painfully excluded (Kleese, 2008) becoming alienated from

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opportunities to reclaim their children (Victorian Government, 2003). This paper poses the questions of whether Information & Communication Technology (ICT) could have a role in addressing these issues and what would need to happen to open such an opportunity.

One way in which ICT could be employed in child welfare is in conjunction with standardised case management systems. Case management systems have been developed over the past twenty years as part of an attempt to reform child welfare services and have spread rapidly, internationally (Cheers, Kufeldt, Klein, & Rideout, 2007). Part of their aim is to provide opportunities for families to be heard, be involved in decision-making venues and limit the autonomy of social workers (Jackson & Kilroe, 1996). However, the existing research is unhelpfully divided as to the impact of these systems on child welfare power relations and on how use of extensive written material affects participation. Social workers have also been generally reluctant to consider the impact of ICT on their work (Sapey, 1997; Tregagle & Darcy, 2007) and to look at the potential of ICT for communication.

This article explores these issues by describing research on service users' experiences of their participation in case managed interactions. It examines existing literature on ICT from a range of disciplines which could have implications for service users' ability to communicate in child welfare settings. This research shows that ICT could enhance participation and limit social workers' exercise of power if used in conjunction with case management systems, however, considerable barriers still need to be overcome.

The theoretical position underpinning this paper is one of social constructionism and the ideas of 'social shaping'. In this view, technology is seen to be shaped by social processes; however, aspects of the technology also 'afford' particular possibilities and introduce limitations upon the way that a technology is used (Hutchby, 2001, 2003). These 'affordances', in turn, shape social

processes. Hence, the way a technology is used requires an understanding of the social processes affecting the development of the technology *and* the varied ways that the technology can be employed. The 'affordances' of a technology may be different for different people; the use of the technology may be the result of the context in which the technology is employed. A particular technology may have a range of possibilities and limitations and these may not always have been foreseen in the original design. In this view, the applications of ICT are not necessarily inevitable or beneficial when used with highly disadvantaged individuals and must be understood as complex and not easy to predict.

Applying this theoretical framework to ICT in child welfare services shows that the take-up and impact of technology has significant implications for the ability of service users to participate. For example, the use of computers can be seen as shaped by social factors such as poverty, age and power relationships, which restrict access. ICT may alter capacity to communicate between particular groups of people, for example social workers (frequently tertiary educated), or by service users (predominantly have low literacy levels and are young). The technology may be used in a variety of contexts (such as offices or home) and may have multiple applications (such as data collection or social networking). The use of ICT in child welfare may also be very different from its intended design (such as using the internet for pedophile grooming of children). The 'lived' experience of highly disadvantaged families therefore needs to be explored carefully before we can consider its role in child welfare practice.

DEFINING CASE MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS IN CHILD WELFARE

Two case management systems are explored in this study. These are Looking After Children (LAC), a system originally developed in United

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