Empowering youth in care: the case of emancipatory research with care leavers

Caterina Arciprete[1]

Mario Biggeri[2]

Irene Fattacciu[3]

University of Florence;

ARCO -Action Research for COdevelopment

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Abstract: New sociology of childhood has emphasized that children are capable of being reflective, of behaving purposively and are able to influence the environment where they live. This concept is also referred to as 'children as capable agents' meaning that they can shape the environment. Despite this, children are rarely given the space for participation. The lack of participation is particularly evident within the child protection system, where the tension between children's right to protection and their right to participation becomes even more pronounced. Preventing them from participation is not only a violation of rights but also impacts their capability to exercise social citizenship. This can be particularly detrimental for care leavers who rank among the most socially excluded and disadvantaged groups of young people. This article addresses these issues by presenting the findings of the action-research project CarINg (Empowering Childcare Systems and Supporting Leaving Care from Inside), implemented in Italy and co-funded by the European Union. This research delved into the

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[1] Post-doc at the University of Florence and researcher ay ARCO (Action Research for COdevelopment). She has been a consultant for UNICEF Innocenti, UNICEF Madagascar, UNDP, Terre des Hommes. E-mail: caterina.arciprete@gmail.com

[2] Full Professor in Applied Economics at the Department of Science for Economics and Business at the University of Florence. He is also Vice-President of the Graduate Degree Course SECI – Sustainable Development, Cooperation and Conflict Management at the University of Florence. He is the Scientific Director of ARCO (at PIN -Polo Universitario della Città di Prato). E-mail: mario.biggeri@unifi.it

[3] She holds a PhD in History and Civilization from the European University Institute (2011) and a PhD in Sociology from the University of Turin (2019). Since 2021, she works at ARCO (Action Research for COdevelopment), conducting and coordinating research projects in the field of gender studies, disability, protection and welfare systems, energy poverty and empowerment processes. E-mail: irene.fattacciu@arcolab.org

participation opportunities for care leavers within the care system, with a dual focus on enhancing the local alternative care system and empowering care leavers to actively voice and influence the status quo. Results show how active involvement of care leavers in the protection system and in the production of knowledge can empower them as individuals and enable them to contribute to bringing about change within the alternative care system. Whether all these changes happen depends on the capacity of the institutions to recognize that children are authentic agents and participants of the society.

Keywords: care leavers; child protection; emancipatory research; Italy.

Empoderar a los/as jóvenes en el cuidado: el caso de la investigación emancipadora con egresados/as del sistema de protección

Resumen: La nueva sociología de la niñez ha enfatizado que los/as niños/as son capaces de ser reflexivos, de tener un propósito e influir en el entorno en el que viven. Este concepto también se conoce como 'niños/as como agentes capaces', lo que significa que pueden moldear el entorno. A pesar de esto, a los/as niños/as rara vez se les da el espacio para participar. La falta de participación es particularmente evidente dentro del sistema de protección infantil, donde la tensión entre el derecho de los/as niños/as a la protección, y su derecho a la participación, se vuelve aún más pronunciada. Impedirles la participación no sólo es una violación de un derecho, sino que impacta en su capacidad de ejercer la ciudadanía social. Este artículo aborda estos temas presentando los hallazgos del proyecto de investigación-acción CarINg (E*mpowering Child Care Systems and Supporting Leaving Care from Inside)*, implementado en Italia y cofinanciado por la Unión Europea. La investigación profundizó en las oportunidades de participación para las personas egresadas del sistema de protección, con un doble enfoque en mejorar el sistema de protección alternativo local y empoderar a las personas que egresaron del sistema, para que expresen activamente sus opiniones. Los resultados muestran cómo la participación de aquellas personas que egresaron del sistema en la producción de conocimiento, puede empoderarlas como sujetos contribuyendo a generar cambios dentro del mismo sistema de cuidados alternativos. Que todos estos cambios sucedan depende de la capacidad de las instituciones para reconocer que los/as niños/as son auténticos/as agentes y participantes de la sociedad.

Palabras clave: egresados/as del sistema de protección, protección infantil, investigación emancipatoria, Italia.

1. Introduction

Although the rights of children to participate are firmly established (UN-CRC, 1989), evidence indicates that society is falling behind in its ability to provide children with meaningful opportunities to participate in decisions that affect them (Biggeri et al. 2011, Ch. 16). The lack of participation is particularly evident within the child protection system, where the tension between children's right to protection and their right to participation becomes even more pronounced (Van Bijleveld et al., 2015; Heimer et al., 2018). The capacity to participate has often been linked to that of the "competent child," disproportionately excluding highly vulnerable children. In fact, evidence shows that social workers grapple with uncertainties regarding the role of participation, especially concerning minors placed in out-of-home care until they reach the age of majority. There is a prevalent tendency among social workers to shield vulnerable children "from" the weight of decision-making and life responsibilities (Cossar et al., 2016). Professionals may harbor concerns about subjecting these minors, who have already undergone a process of adultization, to decisions and responsibilities that could prove burdensome. Additionally, children's problematic behaviors compound the barriers to participation from the perspective of social workers (Woodman et al., 2023).

Care leavers constitute an especially vulnerable and disadvantaged subgroup within the population of individuals with experience in the care system (Glynn, 2021). They rank among the most socially excluded and disadvantaged groups of young people (Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2004; Stein, 2006, p. 423). When they turn eighteen, care leavers find themselves abruptly exiting the care system, lacking the safety net and stable foundation (both economic and emotional) of a family to navigate their transition to adulthood independently. Prolonged periods of living outside a home setting have noticeable adverse effects on the growth of these individuals, hindering the development of their own identities and impeding the acquisition of social and cultural skills necessary for successful social and occupational integration thus increasing the risk of falling into poverty and social exclusion (Atwool, 2016; Mendes & Snow, 2016; van Breda et al., 2020).

Child protection and care local systems are crucial to prevent future scenarios of poverty and social exclusion. Giving care leavers the space for participating, i.e., being involved in planning and sharing responsibilities with adults while in care, protects them from these risks. Indeed, the promotion of agency and participation of children and young people are key elements to foster a healthy and balanced transition to adulthood.

The present article aims to examine this issue through the work conducted within the action-research project CarINg (Empowering Childcare Systems and Supporting Leaving Care from Inside). The project was implemented in Italy and co-funded by the Rights Equality and Citizenship (REC) Programme of the European Union from 2020 to 2023.

CarINg sought to enhance the local child protection system by establishing a community (Melton, 2014) where care leavers and future care leavers are provided with the opportunity to have a voice in matters that affect them. The theoretical foundation of the project is rooted in the concept of social citizenship for children (Biggeri and Arciprete, 2022), while the methodology adopted draws on emancipatory methodologies. Through promoting agency and participation throughout all stages of the research, CarINg demonstrates how active involvement of care leavers in the protection system and in the production of knowledge can empower them as individuals and enable them to contribute to bringing about change within the alternative care system.

The paper is structured into five sections. The second section introduces the theoretical framework. The third illustrates the methodologies employed to engage youth in knowledge production through an emancipatory approach. The fourth section provides an overview of the context of the CarINg study, highlighting potential elements of change and discontinuity in the production of knowledge for decision-making. The concluding section presents the main conclusions and discussion.

2. Children and youth as capable agents

The capability approach, firstly developed by Sen (1990, 1999) and Nussbaum (2011) and then enriched by other scholars (Biggeri et al., 2011, Hart et al., 2014; Robeyns, 2016) provides a valuable framework for understanding and promoting children's well-being and agency. According to the capability approach, individuals are not solely defined by their material resources or functioning but by the range of opportunities and freedoms available to them, enabling the pursuit of lives that hold personal value.

When applied to children, the capability approach recognizes that they have unique needs and entitlements as developing individuals. It emphasizes the importance of expanding their capabilities and creating conditions that enable them to flourish (Biggeri et al., 2011). Instead of focusing solely on outcomes, the capability approach directs attention towards the range of valuable functioning and capabilities that children should be able to achieve and enjoy.

The capability approach emphasizes the importance of ensuring that children have access to essential capabilities such as education, healthcare, social relationships, and

cultural opportunities. It calls for policies and interventions that address the multidimensional nature of children's well-being and support the development of their capabilities.

Applying the capability approach to children requires considering their specific age, developmental stage, and evolving capacities (Lansdown, 2005) and capabilities. Ballet et al. (2011) recognizes that capabilities develop over time, necessitating the continuous promotion of children's rights and entitlements as they grow and transition into adulthood.

In the context of child protection, the capability approach highlights the significance of children's agency. It recognizes that children have the right to be actively involved in decisions that affect their lives, and their perspectives should be valued and considered. By empowering children to express their preferences, voice their concerns, and participate in decision-making processes, the capability approach fosters their agency as a key ingredient of a developmental process.

Biggeri and Arciprete (2022) have built upon the concept of social citizenship developed by Andersen and Halvorsen (2022) and adapted it to children's capabilities. They propose that social citizenship is not solely acquired during adulthood but is instead a process that can be experienced to varying degrees by even young children.

Social citizenship encompasses three domains (Fig. 1): security, protection, and autonomy. The security domain is of particular importance for children, as it relates to social protection and the effective utilization of social rights to safeguard against significant life risks, such as multidimensional poverty and vulnerability. The autonomy domain is also crucial as it pertains to children's agency and their ability to participate in the decision-making processes that shape their lives. This domain recognizes the importance of allowing children to exercise choice and have a say in matters that affect them. Furthermore, the influence domain, often referred to as "voice," creates the conditions for children, as citizens, to participate in public deliberations concerning their lives and their future. It acknowledges the significance of enabling children to express their perspectives, opinions, and aspirations, and to contribute to the decision-making processes that impact them directly.

Figure 1 – Social citizenship for children
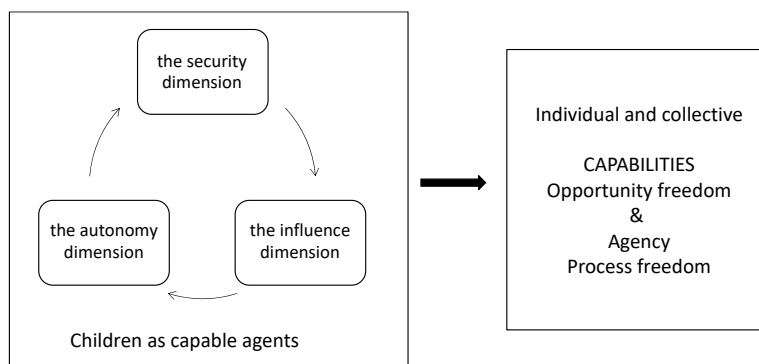
Source: Biggeri and Arciprete (2022)

By incorporating these domains into the concept of social citizenship, Biggeri and Arciprete (2022) highlight the multifaceted nature of children's rights and entitlements. They underscore the importance of ensuring that children have access to social protection, the opportunity to exercise autonomy, and the ability to voice their opinions and participate in shaping the policies and practices that affect their well-being and development.

Given the significance of social citizenship it becomes crucial to foster the participation and agency of every child, including those within the child protection system. In this setting, participation can be defined as:

> "A dynamic of power renegotiation in which adult and child/children recognize each other's authority in several aspects of the same matter. In other words, (..) the adult is asked to continually renegotiate and recalibrate his or her presence by not occupying all the space, to allow the child to feel his or her ability to decide, and thus to affect the reality around him or her." (SOS Children's Villages, The Right to Participation in Child Protection Pathways, 2017, p. 6)

Children and young people in the protection system often face relatively greater deprivation in terms of voice and autonomy compared to their peers: while they may receive protection, their opportunities for autonomy and voice are often limited (Bessel, 2021; Leeson, 2007; van Bijleveld et al., 2015); this in turn can hamper the process of evolving capabilities and their ability to become capable agents who can exercise social citizenship.

Thus, providing children in care with spaces for their meaningful participation helps them to develop capabilities, become active participants in the society, and it contributes to develop better policies for children (Biggeri et al., 2019), including within alternative care systems.

3. Care Leavers' challenges in transition to adulthood: an overview

Although it is affirmed that the family is the best place to ensure the positive development of children, it is recognized that there may be some cases where childcare must be assured through alternative care (residential care or foster families)[4]. In most of the countries, at the age of eighteen the care provision by the State ends and, consequently, children must leave alternative care to start an independent life. Thus, the term 'care leavers' represent people who spent time in care when they were children.

A state of the art of literature concerning the situation of care leavers highlights that they constitute one of the most marginalized and susceptible segments within society (Atkinson & Hyde, 2019). Education disparities are a primary concern among care leavers, with frequent disruptions in their educational paths due to shifting placements. This instability often results in lower educational attainment, limiting their access to higher education and employment (Stein, 2006). Mental health concerns present another significant challenge for care leavers. Exposure to adversity within their development contributes to higher rates of mental health issues, including depression and anxiety, affecting their overall well-being and social integration (Dixon et al., 2016). Furthermore, the absence of robust social support networks exacerbates their vulnerability, leaving them isolated and impeding their access to essential services (Brady and Gilligan, 2018). To address these challenges, targeted interventions are crucial. Extended support programs beyond the age of eighteen, encompassing housing assistance, education support, and mental health services, are essential in providing care leavers with a safety net as they transition to adulthood.

4. An emancipatory methodology

The increased participation of children and youth in decision-making processes over the past decade can be attributed to Article 12 of the UN-CRC, as well as the contributions of the new sociology of childhood (Qvortrup, 1987; James and Prout, 1997). This field of study emphasizes that children are competent individuals who have the right to express their views on matters that concern them. However, involving children in research is not without its challenges, and creating space for their participation does not automatically lead to empowerment, both at the individual and collective levels (Lundy, 2007). In moving beyond

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[4] Within this article we use 'alternative care' as defined by UN (2009) Guidelines for Alternative Care for children. Within this framework alternative care may take the form of: (i) Informal care: any private arrangement provided in a family environment, whereby the child is looked after on an ongoing or indefinite basis by relatives or friends (informal kinship care) or by others in their individual capacity, at the initiative of the child, his/her parents or other person without this arrangement having been ordered by an administrative or judicial authority or a duly accredited body; (ii) Formal care: all care provided in a family environment which has been ordered by a competent administrative body or judicial authority, and all care provided in a residential environment, including in private facilities, whether or not as a result of administrative or judicial measures;

merely "hearing children's voices," researchers should strive for epistemic inclusiveness, where children's unique knowledge genuinely informs the research process and findings (Besset, 2021).

Oliver (1997) argues that to include someone meaningfully in the research "game," the rules of the game need to be changed. This is the fundamental principle of the emancipatory approach, which advocates for horizontal, non-hierarchical relationships between researchers and research subjects. In this approach, all participants are considered problem-solvers, thinkers, and learners, and their contributions are equally valued. Emancipatory research recognizes that marginalized groups in society need empowerment, and through critical analysis and discussion, they become aware of their rights, the structural causes of their oppression, and develop practical solutions to improve their conditions.

Emancipatory research encourages individuals to examine their own life and to take control of the processes of knowledge production that concern them. It aims to promote empowerment among marginalized groups, sensitizing and empowering communities and institutions, which can lead to social transformation and inclusive policies (Biggeri and Ciani, 2019; Biggeri et al., 2022).

Applying an emancipatory lens to research with children, particularly care leavers, involves a process of individual and collective empowerment, where children gradually understand that their individual experiences are shaped by unfair systems and by the social and cultural significance of childhood.

Conducting emancipatory research with children necessitates meticulous attention to specific considerations (Biggeri and Arciprete, 2022). Formulating research questions should align with children's interests, and the power dynamics between researchers and children must be explicitly recognized and addressed through tailored methodologies such as photo mapping, drawings, and role-playing. Prioritizing inductive approaches over deductive methods is crucial to uncover processes that might be overlooked by adults. It is imperative for children to cultivate awareness, skills, and an enhanced capacity to assess their situation through active participation in research.

When working with children and young people, the research design should encompass considerations for long-term and effective change, along with maintaining a delicate balance between individual and collective empowerment. Emancipation is a gradual process, and when engaging a group of children and young people, time becomes an even more critical factor.

Lastly, within the emancipatory approach, gaining agency and the ability to participate are not merely mechanisms for improving one's own life; they can also be leveraged to

contribute to the well-being of others and society. This distinction sets it apart from conventional participatory action research.

5. Caring project

In Italy, the protection of minors involves a division of responsibilities between the central government and regional/local authorities. National laws address aspects of child protection, including custody and parental rights. The Ministry of Labor and Social Policies at the national level plays a role in shaping policies. Local authorities, such as Municipalities, implement child protection policies on the ground through Social Services. Regions may have specific regulations and dedicated bodies for child protection. Juvenile courts handle legal matters concerning minors, including custody decisions. The National Authority for Childhood and Adolescence, an independent body, ensures and promotes the rights of minors nationwide. In May 2021, this approved the 5th National Action Plan, addressing Education, Equity, and Empowerment. It involves twelve general objectives and thirty-one actions, with a focus on the "public and integrated system of services for care, safeguard, and protection." Notably, actions 18 and 19 target children and adolescents in the care system, addressing the identification of essential levels for the protection network and establishing a permanent working table on the protection and social inclusion system. Additionally, two key documents, the "Guidelines for family foster care" and the "Guidelines for residential care services for minors," serve as reference points for national entities and organizations in child protection care.

In recent years, the Italian care system has made considerable progress in incorporating children's participation rights into welfare policies and legislation, with the aim of building an integrated system based on multilateral approaches and a holistic perspective. Two key examples include two national programs. The first program, P.I.P.P.I. (*Programme of Intervention for Prevention of Institutionalization*), is a national multidimensional intervention program designed to prevent the institutionalization of minors at risk of being placed in out-of-home care due to vulnerability and potential neglect within their own families. P.I.P.P.I. is implemented in targeted Italian municipalities. This program adopts an approach based on participation, mutual engagement, and an integrated system that offers comprehensive responses to families and children in need. The second program "Sperimentazione Care Leavers," introduced in 2019, is a national experimental program specifically aimed at care leavers. It encompasses a series of actions intended to support independent living through targeted measures for social inclusion and active citizenship. This includes individualized planning by a multidisciplinary team and direct involvement of the care leavers. This is also implemented in targeted municipalities.

Despite the innovative national framework, the successful implementation of these programs and guidelines is not automatic and relies on various interconnected factors and stakeholders' commitment at local level such as local child protection systems and the training of social workers.

The CarINg project seeks to enhance participatory practices within childcare systems in Italy. Caring is coherent with other projects funded by the European Union that aim to strengthen the voice of care leavers in the protection systems[5]

CarINg is implemented in two neighboring municipalities, Florence and Prato, in the region of Tuscany (Italy). While Florence is included in the national "Care Leavers" programme, Prato is not. Both social services share the content of the "National Guidelines for Intervention with Children and Families in Situations of Vulnerability" approved by the Unified Conference on 21/12/2017. They have also adopted the theoretical reference framework known as the "World of the Child," which represents the Italian adaptation of the English and Scottish Assessment Framework experience.

The situation analysis conducted as part of the CarINg project has revealed clear and consistent standards concerning formal issues and requirements, such as documents, services, and structural/organizational aspects of facilities and processes. However, a notable gap exists in the system, lacking an equally clear framework, including monitoring mechanisms, to empower children and ensure their meaningful participation in decisions that impact their life projects—especially in preparation for the transition out of care. This finding aligns with the observations made by Biffi et al. (2023).

Consequently, the project aimed to implement the right to participation for care leavers and future care leavers. To achieve this objective, various activities were conducted at distinct levels to cultivate an ecosystem capable of encouraging children's participation. Different meeting opportunities were established among social workers, educators, operators in care facilities, and foster families. Consultations, training sessions, and exchange meetings provided occasions for operators to share experiences and reflect on their roles within the lives of care leavers. Participatory workshops facilitated the recognition of the perspective and competences of social workers, fostering reflexivity within a framework of collective learning. All these voices were then triangulated with the perspectives of a selected group of care

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[5] Among these are initiatives carried out by the Care Leaver Network, European projects such as PANDA (https://reacch.eu) and the Leaving Care Project (https://www.sos-childrensvillages.org/leaving-care-project).

leavers[6] who were actively involved in emancipatory research processes[7].ì throughout the entire research period. Here is a selection of activities that specifically engaged care leavers.

5.1. Participatory assessment

During the initial phase of the project, care leavers were engaged in consultation activities where they were asked to reflect on their life experiences within the care system, discuss the Nussbaum's capabilities, and explore the meaning of participation. As illustrated in Biffi et al. (2023), a collage inquiry approach was used (Butler-Kisber, 2008) as well as play-based languages (Demetrio 1999) to ensure that every participant could express him/herself in the most suitable activities. Four workshops have been conducted.

Consultations have highlighted that requests for their participation are limited, consultation is poor, and insufficient detail is provided to support informed decision-making. Furthermore, even when they are given opportunities to express their views, their participation in decision-making is limited. Although this problem affects all age groups, it becomes particularly relevant during the care leaving phase when teenagers approach the age at which they will exit the care system and are expected to suddenly become autonomous, develop life projects, and consider their rights and responsibilities within the community.

These findings were triangulated with a quantitative questionnaire which was administered to seventy-eight future care leavers who had been placed in foster care or residential care homes. The survey investigated the level of hope, participation, and well-being. Results are described in Pepe et al. (2023). Participation was used through the Child and Adolescent Participation in Decision-Making Questionnaire (CAP-DMQ; O'Hare et al., 2016). CAP-DMQ is a self-report measure developed to evaluate child and adolescent participation in decision-making. It is composed of ten items related to the possibility of being informed and making decision with a certain degree of freedom. With respect to participation, findings showed that on the average that children indicate a moderate level of agreement (4.46 out of 6) in feeling that they make decisions on relevant matters in their lives and also; in feeling involved (4.16 out of 6) when decisions about their lives are made and in receiving

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[6] Care leavers have been selected by the involved municipalities with reference to the following criteria established by the partnership: the presence of participants placed both in protection system and in foster families; the presence of migrant unaccompanied minors; age 16-21; both female and male; sufficient knowledge of the Italian language; inclusion of participants with disabilities; proactivity and interest for the project, free and voluntary participation. Final number was 18.

[7] Involvement in the study was entirely voluntary, with no monetary or financial incentives provided to participants. The research received approval from the Ethics Board at Milano-Bicocca University (protocol N. 0010874/22) and adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2000) and the American Psychological Association code of conduct (Knapp et al., 2004). Informed consent was secured from each participant.

necessary information to make informed decisions (4.16 out of 6). The level of participation decreases when considering the children in residential care homes.

5.2. Participatory audiovisual product

The selected group of care leavers was then involved in the production of a participatory video. Drawing on Kindons (2003) we assumed that involving young people in the production of knowledge through participatory video can offer unique advantages for young people in care, enabling them to reclaim their voices, build self-confidence, and advocate for their rights. Evidence (Hall and Janesick, 2014; Mitchell (2008) show for example that participatory video methodology allows young people to gain a sense of agency, empowerment, and ownership over their narratives, breaking preconceived notions and stereotypes; furthermore involving them in a participatory video offers them a space to develop technical skills, such as filming and editing, which can be valuable in their personal and professional lives; finally it create opportunities for young people to improve relationships with their peers and with their caregivers.

Within CarINg this activity was organized around six workshops conducted by professional video-makers with the support of experts of participation.

Building on the work done during the consultations, the children involved in the video workshop were able to choose their own subject, at the same time having the opportunity to elaborate a more complex understanding of the reason why that word was important to them:

"*I realized how much I have and what it is worth and how important it is to me. Sometimes I tend to forget these things and sometimes remembering the meaning of these words helped me even more*" (P. 19 years).

Then these topics were transformed into subjects to be developed in video form. Parallel to these, participants were given the competences on the basics of filming: designing documentation, content structuring, stylistic indications for screenplay, rudiments of production structuring. Once they acquired these competences, each care leaver realized his/her own video with the support of others. Throughout the production of the video, attention was put to keep a delicate balance between the recognition as a group and the recognition of the value of the single lived experience of each participant. As Terzi (2005) puts it: we need to identify children's difference while keeping "the sameness" and offering common perspective. The process was for some of them deeply significative:

It was choosing your own theme, your own message and finding a way to express it. I really liked this I think it was yes, an individual work, but it was also a group work, and this I think was a very profound thing. I think it created a special bond that was different from what would have been created in school, at home. It was good to listen to each other, to feel free to express. It was the space to get to know each other, to get to know the other person,

to accept it and to tell you it's not just me, you're not the only teenager who has suffered, because we're all of us who have experienced it (M. 19 years)

One of the most recurring topics of the videos was autonomy. But what is autonomy? According to one of the participants:

I think autonomy is an important thing, but I think at any age one everyone needs fixed points of reference. Autonomy I don't think is ever complete, it would be relying only on oneself, us relying only on ourselves, I don't think it's really like that for anybody. I think there is something different between being independent and being alone. It's one thing to be independent and have responsibility for our actions and another to be and have no one to rely on. To come home and find no one. (B. 17 years).

Community, relationships, family, autonomy are just some of the key words that animated the videos produced by the boys and girls of the CarINg project. Through collective reworking and discussion, they came to transform their own feelings, reflections, and ideas into moving images, each building their own storyboard with the support of the others. In some cases, the experience also gave the opportunity were also transformative of the participants' relations:

The other person [in the video] I decided was my foster mom. I was hesitant about the choice because with this video I communicated to my mom that she offered me an umbrella under which I sheltered. For me it is risky, because there are personalities that tend not to say "I feel protected," whereas since I have been with them I have changed a lot , they have taught me trust, and also that when I feel fragile they are there to protect me and I chose her because having had my biological mom who had died, then that was the figure who protected me. Then she also, she didn't show it, but she was happy, she wanted to appear even more! (S. 20 years)

Thanks to the support of each other and the two directors, the stories came to life in an individual short films[8]. Then, care leavers presented the video to social workers, judges, and other professionals. This fueled a collective learning experience where social workers learnt what matters for care leavers, and care leavers themselves found themselves capable of representing sharing needs in an a-conflictual manner.

5.3. Co-design of assessment and monitoring tools

After their involvement in the video and in the consultations, the group of care leavers was engaged in the co-design of assessment and monitoring tools together with social workers. Including beneficiaries in the definition of monitoring indicators provides an opportunity to understand their needs, perspectives, and subjective assessments of service effectiveness (Barnes & Prior, 2011). Furthermore, active participation of beneficiaries in

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[8] Link to the video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOHvlT5K-Mc&t=1393s

defining evaluation indicators promotes a greater sense of involvement and accountability towards the services. This can strengthen trust between beneficiaries and social service professionals, fostering more effective collaboration and better service quality (Needham, 2018). Ultimately, the co-design of assessment tools fosters a culture of transparency and accountability, valuing the voices and perspectives of beneficiaries in the shaping of service delivery and evaluation processes.

After having stimulated a common reflection on the meaning of participation, care leavers and social workers were able to agree on an assessment tool based on the four dimensions of satisfaction, participation, well-being and autonomy and the related list of dimensions. The final tool is set out below'[9].

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[9] The questionnaire comprised five positively worded items to be rated on a Likert scale ranging from 0 (at no time) to 5 (all the time).

Satisfaction	1. **Do you feel treated well by your friends?**
	2. **Do you feel protected in the place where you live?**
	3. **Do you like the person you are?**
	4. **Are there many things you know how to do well?**
	5. **Do adults around you treat you fairly?**
	6. **Are you happy with going to school/university?**
	7. **Are you satisfied with the work you are doing?**
	8. **Do you sometimes feel anxiety and fear about the future?**
Autonomy	Thinking about your age.
	1. Do you feel capable of doing the main things? (e.g., buying a bus ticket)
	2. Do you manage various aspects of your life independently? (e.g., making appointments, cooking)
	3. Do you feel responsible for certain things? (e.g., choosing an educational path, managing your financial resources)
	4. When you face difficulties, do you turn to someone for help?
Participation	1. Is your opinion sought when decisions are made that concern your daily life?
	2. Do you feel involved when you must make decisions that affect your life?
Well-Being	In the last week...
	1. Did you feel cheerful and in a good mood?
	2. Did you wake up feeling rested?
	3. Did you feel active and energetic?
	4. Did you feel calm and relaxed?
	5. Was your everyday life filled with things that interest you?

This tool has since been digitized and now forms an integral part of the social workers' toolkit.

6. Conclusion

Despite widespread recognition of children's right to participate and the establishment of various programs and regulations to support it, the actual implementation of this right remains inadequate, especially within child protection systems. The CarINg project aimed to redefine the concept of participation by actively involving care leavers and other stakeholders in the alternative care system. By bringing together professionals and those with lived

experience in participatory activities, a process of mutual knowledge and recognition was initiated, benefiting both care leavers and the system itself.

During the project, several participatory activities were conducted. The video workshop provided an opportunity for self-reflection and storytelling for care leavers, allowing them to focus on their own life experiences and envision their future. This facilitated individual and collective growth, fostering a common voice to advocate for their needs within the institutions. The video served as a powerful tool for communication and empowerment, strengthening the dialogue between operators and young people. It led to increased engagement from institutional actors and a greater willingness to embrace the recommendations and innovations proposed.

Also, care leavers involvement in the co-design of assessment tools proved to be a valuable opportunity for developing a more inclusive and child-centered evaluation system considering diversity and the various perspectives of the beneficiaries.

Overall, their involvement in the production knowledge proved to be highly transformative both at the individual level, group level and the community level. This was clearly shown during the final conference where care leavers made initial introduction and final remarks. Here below an extract of the speech written by them[10]:

"As the CarINg group of care leavers, March 30th was a significant day for us. The final conference gave meaning not only to the project we have been working on for almost two years but also to our pain and moments of confusion during our individual journeys. Finally, we came together to speak, to make our voices heard, express our emotions, and share the real needs of young people like us. Throughout the CarINg journey, we became like a family, sharing pain, suffering, joy, and ideas for the change we strive for. Autonomy was a central theme for us. We realized how this concept is imposed upon us as we approach 18 years old, without receiving proper guidance on how to achieve it. Autonomy for care leavers means much more than just managing practical tasks; it also involves self-awareness, understanding one's limits and resources, and making peace with the past that influences our present and future. We shared our vision for a better care system that provides the tools and support for young people to pursue their aspirations and dreams. The system should foster participation, transparency, and meaningful relationships between care leavers and caregivers. Building trust and stability are crucial for care leavers to thrive. The CarINg project allowed us to reevaluate our past and create a future with a stronger foundation, higher motivation, and a common goal. We hope this project not only helps us but also empowers professionals to use their power and tools more effectively. Together, with commitment, we have sown the seeds of change that we believe will grow with everyone's efforts." (Care Leavers' speech at CarINg final conference).

The involvement of youth and children in research is a crucial step towards translating normative statements into practices that are embraced by all stakeholders. The participation of care leavers in the CarINg project not only transformed isolated practices into a working

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[10] https://www.caringproject.eu/la-voce-dei-care-leavers/

methodology but also fostered individual and collective empowerment that will extend beyond the project's completion.

The project highlighted the need for a cultural shift that enables children to flourish, participate in decision-making processes, and become active agents of change. This requires a transformation in social workers thinking and behavior.

More generally, this implies a radical shift in adult thinking and behaviour, from a world which is defined solely by adults to one in which children contribute to building the kind of world they want to live in (UNICEF, 2003, p. 5). This takes time, but the involvement of youth and children in research, as we have seen, is a key step in transformative normative statements into practices that are owned and promoted by all actors involved. Indeed, when boys' and girls' voices are seriously considered through involvement in research and decision making, it turns out that they can be part of the solution.

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