Client Self-Management: Promoting Self-Help for Parents of Children in Foster-Care

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Abstract

Drawing upon Foucault's concepts of power, this article shows how a course given to parents whose children are in foster-care encourages a particular form of self-management—most notably, that their internal dialogues must be altered so that the parents can view themselves as people in control of their behaviour who are in a position to choose new behaviour. The article is based on a qualitative study conducted in Norway and centres on the support and development of participants in the course. Study results show increased self-confidence and self-respect in the participants, both as individuals and as parents. In addition, significant benefits were stated as finding that they could verbalise and describe difficult events and emotions, experiencing being 'normal' within a group and receiving feedback. From the perspective of child protective services, dialogue with parents is central, as it not only commits clients to specific behaviours, but—more importantly—commits them to a particular inner dialogue about parenthood. The course can be seen as a management tool in which the parent's 'self' becomes the central object, seeking to contradict the conventional conception of parents with children in foster-care as having nothing to contribute to their children's upbringing.

Keywords: Child protective services, parental competence, power, Foucault

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Introduction

When conflicts between the interests of parents and those of children arise, child protective services agencies in Norway have the authority to intervene and assume parental responsibility (the 1992 Norwegian Child Welfare Act,

nr. 100). Removing children from parental care is one of the most serious interventions that society can undertake (Angel, 1999); however, child protective services agencies are responsible for not only helping parents to accept the intervention, but also giving them an opportunity to improve.

Nevertheless, several studies show that the help offered by child protective systems in Nordic countries and Great Britain (Egelund and Hestbæk, 2003; Höjer, 2007), Australia (Hardy and Darlington, 2008), Canada (Manji *et al.*, 2005) and the USA (Kapp and Vela, 2004) is inadequate. An effective and timely response to parents' needs is crucial to successful engagement, though available literature shows that parents' needs are not being fully met. Parents' psychological and emotional problems need to be addressed before changes in parenting and the formation of better relationships with their children can occur (Maluccio *et al.*, 1986).

Various approaches and programmes originating from the social work field seek to balance inequalities of power and elevate parents' status (Adams, 2008). Social work concerns the relationship between the community and the individual and aims to promote self-help in the form of self-respect and self-recognition; in this sense, social work attempts to empower, or 'release', the client, using strategies that avoid coercion or repressive interventions (Bray, 1999).

Research shows that the quality of parental care is an important factor in children's development. For example, the combination of warmth (love and devotion), communication, regulation of the child through consequent discipline and respect for the child's psychological autonomy contribute to positive development (Sandler *et al.*, 2011). An authoritarian, indulgent and ignorant parental style often leads to less positive, or even negative, development (Chandan and Richter, 2008).

The responsibility attached to the parental role is challenging for some, which can lead to reduced mental health and vitality (Edwards and Higgins, 2009). Furthermore, psychic troubles, drug abuse and other problems that parents may have can negatively influence the children (Downey and Coyne, 1990; Glasheen *et al.*, 2010). At the same time, research has shown that parents can change their attitude and behaviour through participating in healthy relief measures (Scott *et al.*, 2010; Smith, 2010). Studies which have evaluated the effect of parental counselling find positive outcomes on parental style, children's difficulties and parent-child interaction (Hahlweg *et al.*, 2010; Almeida *et al.*, 2012; Rodrigo *et al.*, 2012; Sherr *et al.*, 2014).

Barlow *et al.* (2005) find that group-based parental programmes have a larger positive effect than individual programmes. They are also more cost-efficient, accommodate the sharing of participant experiences, reduce social isolation and strengthen the confidence of participating parents (Coren *et al.*, 2003). Parental counselling programmes have traditionally been directed towards particular parental groups, such as parents from lower socio-economic classes and those who have children with specific

issues, such as behavioural problems or handicaps (Boyd and Gillham, 2009; Hutchings *et al.*, 2011; McDonald *et al.*, 2012).

Studies of follow-up programmes for parents who have lost custody of their children are lacking. One example of such a programme is a course that the Norwegian Directorate of Children, Youth, and Family Affairs (Bufetat) began offering in 2006 to parents with children in foster homes. The target group for the course is parents whose children will grow up in foster homes and parents who are seeking family reunification. The course offers each participant the opportunity for internal reflection and transformation. It is in this way that child protective services agencies invoke the participation of parents and give them a choice between being sovereign or a target of future negative attention from child protective services, and between subjugation or subjectivation. This study attempts to answer the following research questions: (i) What changes occurred in participants' lives? and (ii) Did the parents see themselves as more competent after completing the course?

Theory

The kind of power inherent in social work can be seen as the active force that occurs where help and control are present in a single action (Foucault, 1979). When social workers adopt this perspective with clients, they exercise power. This does not necessarily mean that clients experience an 'active force', but instead relates to how clients are viewed, categorised and described, as well as how clients interpret themselves in this context. The basis of social work is to promote social change and problem solving in human relationships, and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being (IFSW, 2012). In this article, social work is considered the act of leading clients towards self-help (Villadsen, 2007). Michele Foucault (1988) refers to this kind of practice as 'self-technology'.

Foucault (1979) stresses not only the importance of the connection between power and external authority, but also the materialism of power: its small and subtle techniques, its 'architectures' and how power—or what constitutes power—disciplines the individual. Power is present in every kind of relationship (i.e. between subjects, areas and objects), not just in relationships involving assault, abuse or oppression (Foucault, 1979). Power can also be linked to words and concepts used in everyday language that are not naturally associated with oppression or discrimination. Furthermore, power is linked to technologies, such as systems of surveillance and regulations applied across many areas of life, including those we do not immediately think of as being authoritative. Power can simultaneously be oppressive for one party and appropriate for another.

In 'Technologies of the self', Foucault (1988) distinguishes between technologies of power and those of the self, arguing that these are mutually dependent. Technologies of power are those that determine individual

behaviour through certain forms of domination or objectivising of the individual, in which the individual submits to an investigation of knowledge and upon which practical control is simultaneously asserted. For example, social service users (e.g. parents whose children have been placed in foster-care) are asked to explain their goals for treatment or change. In this way, they are given authority over what they want; however, at the same time, they are held accountable for their statements. Thus, there is a reciprocally stimulating relationship between technology and rationality, or power and knowledge.

Service context

Pursuant to the 1992 Norwegian Child Welfare Act (nr. 100), all municipalities in Norway are required to have a child welfare service office that is responsible for implementing measures for children and their families in situations where there are special needs in the home environment. When parents do not accept an intervention by child welfare services, county social welfare boards are responsible for deciding when and if children should be taken into custody and when or if they will return home.

In Norway, more than 80 per cent of children who are removed from their parental homes are placed in foster homes (SSB, 2012). Although kinship placements have become more common in recent years, most of these children live in non-family foster-care, with approximately 40 per cent of children living in foster homes for four years or more (Clausen and Kristofersen, 2008).

The Bufetat-sponsored course

The Bufetat-sponsored course in Norway is based on learning and attachment theory (Haus, 2005a) and states user involvement and empowerment as its primary goals (Haus, 2005b). The aim of the course is to strengthen parents' ability to provide care for their children, whether by mastering new methods of parenting while their children remain in foster homes or taking care of their children after family reunification (Haus, 2005a). The course emphasises participants' strengths and resourcefulness, which builds on their overall competence, rather than focusing on problems and shortcomings. The course was built along PRIDE-training lines (Parenting Resources for Information, Development and Education), the course model used for prospective foster parents. From 2006 through 2014, nearly ninety parents have attended the course.

The course intentionally focuses on parents' strengths (e.g. talents, individuality, interests and desires) in order to maximise their motivation, and is based on equality, co-operation, openness and respect. In addition, the parents and course leaders maintain an open dialogue about parenthood.

The combination of these factors suggests that the course design adopts social work perspectives of empowerment (Bray, 1999; Slettebø, 2013) by building up parents' view of themselves as being competent. Fundamentally, the course regards parents as an essential component for their children's successful development. This is reflected in both practice and theory, as the course is directed by a parent with prior experience of having children in foster-care, together with an experienced foster home social worker. The course comprises four separate evening sessions and a weekend at a hotel. Course leaders receive a 'toolbox' that consists of the course programme, the list of participants, and relevant articles, laws and regulations.

The first evening course addresses 'Being a parent without daily care/custody of one's child'. Following the explanation of the aim and purpose of the course, as well as the review and signing of a declaration of confidentiality, the course leader with the experience of being a parent without custody of his/her child initiates conversation by sharing his/her personal history in an effort to reduce others' unwillingness to speak frankly. The course participants then introduce themselves and share their personal histories in front of the group.

On the second evening, the topic is 'Anger, grief, and loss—how to deal with these feelings', during which participants acquire knowledge and a new way of understanding what these fundamental emotions can mean and how they can be expressed. They are challenged to think about how loss and grief may be expressed in their own lives, and become familiar with their own strategies for managing and mastering these emotions' destructive aspects.

For the duration of the hotel weekend, participants continuously exchange experiences and reactions. They address topics such as 'Meeting children's need for closeness and connection—taking good care', 'Working in a team—the importance of contact and interaction' and 'Allowing children to have two families', the latter of which is covered in the course-created film *Mama by Distance*, which provides a starting point for a discussion on the multi-family theme, which is emphasised as vital to the child.

The other course leader (i.e. the social worker) talks first when it is time for participants to share experiences and reactions. The other leader follows by sharing his/her experiences, feelings and perceptions in relation to the above themes. This format encourages parents to meet someone in a leadership role with similar experiences, which helps them to open up and share their own experiences and insights. Throughout the weekend, participants work to prepare questions and comments for a panel discussion with outside guests on the third evening of the course.

The third evening asks participants to 'Widen one's perspective and see things in a different light: My life and my children's lives in the future'. Various people involved in foster-care are invited to sit on a panel and course participants are encouraged to bring guests to the event. Panel participants answer questions from course participants and their guests, and may

be foster children, foster parents, foster parents' own children, parents with experience in having a child in foster-care or child welfare workers.

The fourth evening covers the topics of 'My children's life and mine in the future', 'Bringing the course to a successful end' and 'Thinking of how to proceed in the future', and culminates with the awarding of certificates.

The study

Data collection

Research questions were developed inductively and then individual qualitative interviewing was chosen to capture the richness of participants' experience and the unique narratives regarding the perceived benefits of participation in the course. The study obtained voluntary, narrative/qualitative data from parents whose children are in foster-care. Of the twelve parents who participated in the first course, nine were interviewed: three fathers and six mothers aged between thirty-three and forty-seven, one mother and one father being a couple. Among them, these parents had fifteen children: five boys and ten girls, aged between one and seventeen, who had been in foster-care for between one and thirteen years. An additional four children of these parents had remained in their home settings.

A semi-structured interview guide, in the form of descriptive questions, was used for the in-depth interviews. This study seeks to shed light on parents' experiences of attending the course, asking: (i) What changes occurred in the parents' lives? and (ii) Did the parents see themselves as more competent after completing the course? The interviews, which were recorded and then transcribed, were carried out six to nine months after the course ended and ranged in length from one to one and a half hours long.

Data analysis

The initial focus of the analysis was to discover the perceived benefits of participation in the course; however, the participants' narratives introduced new themes that were also explored. To improve accuracy, credibility and validity in the research, the study used a member check as technique (i.e. interview participants received a draft of the research report on their own study/course). As a result, they were able to comment on the interpretations and analysis of what was said, and the researcher's interpretation and findings in this article (Koelsch, 2013).

The approach in previous qualitative research borrows from a range of methods. While this research is predominantly associated with an inductive paradigm, deductive attributes can also be utilised at particular stages (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). Ali and Birley (1999) demonstrated a means of integrating deductive and inductive approaches in order to enable existing

theory and knowledge to be used whilst also maximising ‘the attention paid to the respondent’s perspective’ (Ali and Birley, 1999, p. 109). This study and its corresponding data analysis are rooted in Ali and Birley’s approach of using Foucault’s theories of self-technology and data gathered on an inductive/qualitative basis. Based on Foucault’s concepts of power and self-technology, the interviews were read and analysed through coding themes. In this way, analytical categories emerged that served to structure the study’s findings.

Ethical considerations

This project was approved by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD, 2000). In accordance with NSD ethical requirements, participation in the study was voluntary. Care has been taken to protect the anonymity of participants throughout this article.

Findings

All participants admitted to some change after participating in the course, and attributed the change to not only attending, but also by actively influencing, the topics and discussions, interacting with others with similar experiences, gaining other participants’ respect, and receiving help and support with parenting tasks.

Being conscious of self

Experiencing respect and feeling important can lead to greater parental confidence. Tove (female (f)), said: ‘To be with other parents who have struggled with issues in their lives and hear about how this has affected children has contributed to me becoming more aware of my own behaviour’, while Gro (f) stated that she became more aware of herself so she could see her child in a different light:

... to become aware of the fact that the life I have lived has had an impact on how my kids feel and have felt. I can see that they are struggling in their own ways and that their behaviours have to do with how I lived.

These representative statements indicate that the parents became more aware of their resources as well as their vulnerabilities, as they described and perceived themselves as being parents to their children regardless of the child welfare service arrangement. This perception generally corresponds to previous studies (Holtan and Eriksen, 2006; Moldestad and Skilbred, 2009; Schofield *et al.*, 2011). The statements also reveal that they still see themselves as their children’s parents, but the course has provided an altered view of themselves, their children and the relationship between them.

The feedback that the parents gave each other during group question-and-answer sessions served as ‘mirroring’. The course is thus an opportunity for an extended look at the competence of each participant, initiating self-reflection and self-processing, and ensuring that everyone considers themselves ‘a work in progress’, continuously developing. Some parents spoke of how improved self-confidence and self-assertiveness led to changes at the relational level. Anne (f) said: ‘I dare, more than before, to speak out and ask about things; I’ve got a little more self-confidence. And also towards child protective services—that one actually can make demands. It gives people a little more confidence.’

This correlates with another common change in how the participants viewed themselves, which is that they pictured themselves more positively. This, in turn, led to feeling more secure and better able to cope with difficult situations.

Changing thoughts about themselves

The participants were encouraged to engage in personal reflection, drawing on the experiences of their own lives and their children’s welfare cases. The course involves various forms of Foucault’s technologies of the self, including making use of reflection both in the ‘private sphere’ and as a part of group sharing sessions. Inger (f) stated:

You attend a course and listen to the stories of others, and then this starts up thoughts and recollections. Then one has someone to talk with (who is) in the same situation, and that makes one a little braver. That makes one take a broader view . . . Can see that things I’ve done was not good enough for the kid. That’s ok.

Jorunn (f) said: ‘Telling and reflecting together gave me a deeper faith to myself. I could see myself in the others.’

One particularly important change was that the participants started to see how thoughts can affect both actions and mindset and that these thoughts can be changed. Several participants felt challenged by this idea, but admitted to eventually overcoming negative thoughts about themselves as parents. Tove (f) said: ‘Well, it’s something about identifying oneself with other people, and then I became really aware that I am a good mother. I have realised this through the course.’

Participants also mentioned drawing on the course to help deal with everyday situations; for instance, stopping and thinking about what other participants had done in similar situations or what the leaders had said about such matters is another aspect that suggests the course serves as a technology of the self. Gunnar (male (m)) said: ‘I became more aware of my own role. Of what one can do so that they (the children) will be all right, so that (our) meetings go well.’

Technologies of the self, in the form of putting difficult events into words, making observations, and sharing views and experiences with others, made several of the participants realise they could be good parents. They learnt in this way to lead themselves as parents by taking responsibility for their emotions and actions.

Being seen

The fundamental thinking behind the course is that it should disrupt the lives of the participants, primarily how they interpret themselves as parents, in order to ‘reverse’ the understanding they have of themselves. The course removes parents from their usual relationships and care scenarios, and brings them into contact with people they cannot ignore without the option of leaving. Anne (f) said: ‘That someone look[ed] at me as a parent, it is so unique.’

Several emphasised that they enjoyed the experience of being seen as their true selves—as a parent, woman/man—and that the child services agency should have offered the course sooner. This means that parents had a clear opinion that child welfare services should have been focusing not only on what was best for the child, but also on the needs of the parents, in order to achieve a more holistic improvement.

Participants found it significant that they were invited to help develop the themes and programmes of the course. Svein (m) expressed himself in this way: ‘To be allowed to make wishes for what we were talking about and be allowed to participate in the design of the course was great. This is the first time I have experienced anything[like this] from the child welfare.’ Solveig (f) said: ‘I think it was a little hard to get what I wanted. I was not quite prepared for it. But when I think of it, it is ok. We’re adults.’

Establishing user involvement is consistent with the empowerment mindset, and being invited into the design of the course was rated by participants as positive.

The course activates new relationships that are in the best interest of the parents. This is based on thinking popularised during the Enlightenment period, with its confidence in the possibility of human perfectibility under good governance. The approach requires some element of persuasion to maximise the opportunity for the parents. Bringing about parents’ compliance through discipline is achieved through normal sanctions—what Foucault (1979) calls the ‘supervisor’s gaze’—and a constant return to the purpose of the course.

Hope and self-help

Another change observed in the study related to how the participants described ‘greater hope’ as a result of their course participation. They said

that attending the course had given them the belief that change was possible. Svein (m) said: 'To attend the course provides a faith and hope that things will be better than [they had] been. Talking about experiences, sharing reflections and that we did it together gave me strength.'

This is another indication that the course acts as a technology of the self, enabling participants to successfully apply their new knowledge when faced by challenging situations such as their children's reactions to inadequate parental care, organised time with their children and their reactions to their own past behaviour.

Expressing feelings, thoughts and experiences while speaking in turn can be seen as 'signals' that follow the principles of 'good dressage' (Foucault, 1979). Learning the 'signal code' and how best to answer enables the creation of a scale to measure each participant's ability and willingness to exhibit self-discipline and adapt him/herself to the system. Thus, they are learning to govern themselves as parents by recalling what they have learnt about what it means to take good care of children, while also gaining an understanding of themselves in line with society's expectations. This involves both collectivisation and individualisation.

One of the chief aims of the course is to help participants acquire the knowledge necessary to enable them to be more competent parents to their children, whether the children grow up in foster-care or are eventually returned. Parents receive support during their efforts to see their own potential, experience respect, acquire strength through interaction with others in similar situations and thus be encouraged to move forward (Bufetat, 2005; Haus, 2005a).

Several of the parents interviewed spoke about fewer restrictions being placed on their parenting owing to their participation in the course. Gunnar (m) said:

I experienced fewer restrictions on being a parent. I was allowed to call more often to my child and when I met my child and foster parents in town we could go to a cafe for a quick chat. And when I was visiting the foster home the case-worker did not have to participate. I could talk more freely and meet my son and the foster parents more.

Participants took comfort in this commonality and felt supported to meet the challenges of parenting children in foster-care.

Preventing powerlessness and contributing to change

The course adopted several strategies to help counter parents' sense of powerlessness, including group and individual reflection, relaxation techniques, knowledge of the interactions between the body and thoughts, reaction patterns and interaction with the environment. The group format of the course was strongly emphasised as a benefit and factor for change (Coren *et al.*, 2003; Barlow *et al.*, 2008). Inger (f) said: 'It's something about that, when one identifies with other people . . . and being able to talk to other people in the

same situation, for I had been thinking this is so difficult.’ Ivar (m) said: ‘The fact [is] that you participate in numerous others’ stories. It’s an enormous mental strain, and when you’ve started, you cannot stop. Just as if you have been in treatment and have to continue.’

These extracts show how power and knowledge serve as an organising force, directing the participants towards specific ways of thinking about themselves and regulating their relationships with others (Foucault, 1988). Dialogue in the course is about producing ‘subject positions’, or roles that parents can occupy (Foucault, 1979). It centres on giving voice to whatever kinds of change are desired in the presence of others.

The parents expressed a sense of community and security—a platform that provided an opportunity for individual alteration and growth. As a clear indicator of growth, they had decided to continue to meet with one another and spoke of a plan to invite experts to give lectures on topics that interested them. The communal benefits mentioned as being most significant were finding that they could verbalise and describe difficult events and emotions, experience being ‘normal’ within a group and receive feedback.

One aspect of this simultaneous collectivisation and individualisation is ‘normalisation’ (Foucault, 1979); for example, normalisation in relation to the technology of power is when course participants are compared with others along a given norm or common standard. In this case, the standard included the rules, internalised codes and signals (i.e. speaking in turn). To individualise (or make visible ‘for better or worse’) within the context of the course means to differentiate (Foucault, 1979). Several participants emphasised the fact that they were accepted purely as themselves, as parents and as individual men and women, instead of being seen just as incompetent parents.

Relation to their own children and foster parents

The course also addressed the situational realities of the children in the foster home as well as the foster parents. Thus, the course was not only focused on the parents who had lost the care of their children. One of the fathers, Ivar, said:

I can see him (my son) in a different way. I would never take the kid from them (foster home), my kid when he is so attached there, it is absolutely massive, I would never try to spoil something, he will be able to stay there and be there.

Several of the parents reported that they had a much better relation to the foster parents, particularly the foster mothers, after the course. Inger (f) said:

Being told what arrangements (are) applicable to foster parents and the foster parents receive training, so I can see them in a different light. I got into a conversation with the foster mother to my daughter about this and she explained how it was for them. After that we can talk about many other things than just the relationship between them, my child, and me.

The course is steered so that the parents perceive themselves as individuals who are able to choose and to change. Jorunn (f) said: 'Learning about and talk(ing) about parenting and what it means for children I should have had long ago. And talk about different reactions one can have when one loses custody of children.'

In this way, the parents are reconstructed as people in control of their behaviour who are in a position to choose new behaviour (Foucault *et al.*, 1988). This is in contrast to the conventional conception of parents with children in foster-care as have nothing to contribute to their children's upbringing. The course gives parents the opportunity to self-improve with regard to parental morality (i.e. providing adequate care) and how they think about themselves in relation to others. In doing so, participants effectively 'recreate' themselves (Foucault, 1990).

Discussion and conclusions

The relationship between citizens and society has become increasingly contractual with regard to rights and duties. As a result, establishing social contracts within social work and welfare fields has become widespread both in England and throughout Scandinavia (Vincent-Jones, 2006; Andersen, 2007). This practice has become valid within the domain of social work; for example, in Norway, social contracts may exist with respect to job seeking, youth crime rehabilitation programmes, immigration and child welfare services.

Help is designed to encourage citizens' individual abilities to be independent and self-regulating (Sullivan, 1997). Based on Norwegian social policy, this article shows how the articulation of 'being a parent' can lead to a relational 'contract' between child protective services and individual citizens. These contracts are linked to not only particular behaviours, but also a specific inner dialogue about duty and freedom. Child welfare is becoming dependent on this dialogue, the contract between child protective services and parents, and the dialogue and contracts that parents develop within themselves.

Technologies of the self have become an important analytical concept in studies of the instruments and procedures that individuals use in relation to themselves. In line with previous research (Hahlweg *et al.*, 2010; Almeida *et al.*, 2012; Rodrigo *et al.*, 2012), this study finds that parents can increase their confidence by seeing their positive traits reflected in others with similar experiences. This increased faith makes it possible to change their view of themselves, their children and the foster home. At the same time, parents could view and interact with the child welfare services in a more appropriate manner. In this way, power is productive (Foucault, 1988; Villadsen, 2007). Technologies of the self are tools that subjects can use to isolate specific aspects of themselves in order to gain knowledge and

control. The course described in this article helps parents whose children have been placed in foster-care to isolate different aspects of themselves as a means of management and/or to help create an image of power. The key is that modern power rarely appears as an active force, but instead is about cultivating and influencing the abilities and behaviours of the free individual. Accordingly, the subject is at a point of intersection where he/she is at the same time formed by technologies practised by others and technologies of self (Foucault, 1983).

New strategies of leadership and guidance in the social work field centre on clients' self-relation. Social work based on self-help and, involving respect and recognition, paradoxically contains elements of power. This article uses the term 'technologies of the self' to illustrate societal expectations—indirectly represented by the course in terms of society's expectations of parents with children in foster-care and how parents assume the same understanding of themselves as parents during the course. The analysis shows how participants are guided towards specific ways of thinking about and managing themselves, which in turn makes them feel valued and secure as parents. This is consistent with previous studies (Hahlweg *et al.*, 2010; Almeida *et al.*, 2012; Rodrigo *et al.*, 2012).

The course uses self-management tools (i.e. technologies of the self) to train participants to systematically observe their situation from multiple perspectives: How is this for my child? How is this for the foster parents? Several of the parents were able to view their own child welfare case from both the children's and foster homes' perspectives after completing the course, and claimed to feel better about themselves (Hahlweg *et al.*, 2010; Almeida *et al.*, 2012; Rodrigo *et al.*, 2012; Sherr *et al.*, 2014) and have an improved relationship with the foster parents. The course initiates a process within the participants that results in change, with parents' views of themselves as the central object of control and leadership, linked to their autonomy. Overall, the course guides the parents' self-management in the direction of liberation and responsibility.

The analysis shows that power is not only vested in the community or in child protective services; rather, it is also present in the technologies inherent in the course, which have been developed with the aim of strengthening participants' parental abilities and their identity as autonomous individuals capable of taking responsibility for themselves and their behaviour.

From Foucault's point of view, the establishment of a course like the one assessed in this study can be seen as a revolution in the social work discipline, helping to turn participants into more capable parents of children in foster-care and less disruptive for foster parents and the foster system in general. Nevertheless, power in the foster-care system is unavoidably paternalistic, since it provides both support and control.

The analysis shows how the composition of the course, the technology of management and the kinds of conversations that take place within its structures effectively control both participants and leaders. A therapeutic

atmosphere is established in which all involved stand—through confession—face to face, even with themselves. To be seen as they are offers the hope of positive change to better cope with life. Hope is the perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals, and motivate oneself to use those pathways (Snyder, 2002).

Similarly to programmes offered to parents who have daily care of their own children, this course seems to have a positive impact. This study indicates that traditional casework is not sufficient to meet the needs of parents with children in foster-care. For social work and child welfare services, similar courses could represent a vital supplement to individual services. Further research might address how this type of supportive social work affects the children who are in foster-care.

Only nine parents participating at an early stage of a new programme were included in this research. In addition, the Hawthorne effect can be considered as a weakness. The strength and importance of the study are that involvement of parents took place over the duration of an intensive programme that brought out participants' own experiences.

There is little research on what exactly this group of parents thinks about the opinions and measures directed against them or on how best to support them in their parenting role. This study begins to fill this knowledge gap.

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