

This assignment will identify and discuss the theories relating to the concepts of empowerment, agency and anti oppressive practice within the role of an advocate. There are a number of requirements under the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act (2014) in relation to advocacy, referring to the need for an independent professional advocate (IPA) to be offered in instances where vulnerable adults and children are struggling to communicate their wishes and feelings. This may happen when a person lacks capacity due either to mental illness or learning disability, or when a young person is being looked after by the state. Other advocacy provision can be made for health service patients wishing to make a complaint, or an elderly person fighting for better community care, however, for the purpose of this assignment; will consider the role of an IPA employed by an agency separate of statutory services and the client, a child who in care of the state, who needs an advocates support.

The Welsh Government (2018) defines a child in care as having been provided with accommodation by the local authority for a continuous period of twenty four hours or more. As of March 2018 when the latest figures were last published, 6,407 children and young people were in care in Wales. Ten percent of these having had three or more placements. Research by The National Society for the Prevention of cruelty to Children (NSPCC), (2018) suggests that when compared to children of the general population, looked after children tend to achieve poorer outcomes in areas of education as well as both physical and mental health. The charity observes that within the priorities for looked after children are the opportunity for them to have a voice and an influence, aiding more opportunities to realise issues that are important to them and influence their own lives in the care system. (Henderson and Pochin, 2001, p.v) observe that there are times in all of our lives when, for any reason, we may not be able to stand up for ourselves or assert our authority when necessary and claim that advocacy offers an individual and unique partnership of support. This can be especially difficult when adults deem themselves to have power over a child and a child lacks the confidence, skills or voice to make themselves heard. Advocacy information, (Child Law Advice, n.d.) advise that an IPA acting on behalf of a child or young person should ensure that a child always understands what has happened and what will happen, that a child advocate must only concern themselves with the views of the child and to maintain the standards as laid out in the advocacy charter and national standards. Establishing a professional client/advocate relationship from the outset will allow an advocate the means with which to negotiate, persuade and represent the client in discovering beneficial changes in his client's life. As The Value of Advocacy Report (The Children's Society, 2012) points out children and young

people have a legal right to be involved in the decisions made about their lives and have their feelings and views heard.

When a child is in the care of the state, there are many professionals from different organisations coming together in a multidisciplinary manner, each bringing their own ideas into how best to support the young person. This may be a positive approach for services but teams may be restricted by budget constraints, staff levels, time spent and institutional bias. The concept of involving an IPA gives the corporately parented child one person with whom she can build a relationship of honesty and respect and can trust to support and report their wishes and feelings to all of those statutory services. Unlike social workers, key workers and other statutory professionals who frequently change within a cared for journey, the IPA can spend time developing a friendly trusting relationship with a child at a pace suited to the child, free of jargon and abbreviations and in a language that the child understands. Research by (The Children's Society, 2019) shows that the respect, patience and friendship offered by a child advocate as the most fundamental part of the equal status created to be able to express their feelings and make informed judgements about their lives. This relationship, at its best, creates a sense of empowerment for a young person. It promotes feelings of self, of choice, and of the capability to make important auto telic decisions. The research goes on to allow an understanding of just how important it is to self confidence and self esteem to be able to speak up for one's self. Being able to communicate freely benefits a child's development, ability to build resilience, and helps to create a sense of independence, crucial for the transitional stages within their care situation and the ongoing journey into adulthood.

Empowerment is difficult to define, however, in its simplest form and in relevance to the role of an IPA it can be seen as individuals being supported in numerous ways to achieve greater control over their lives and circumstances (Thompson, 2007, p23). (Wilkes, 2012, p99) however, suggests that there are two types of empowerment, structural and psychological and that 'participation is the key component of the empowerment based model of advocacy'. It is difficult somewhat to communicate to a young child that empowerment is part of your advocacy endeavour and the concept of conscientisation, realising that you are not to blame for your situation but that society has contributed to your circumstances even more complicated. However, it remains a valid and vital part of advocacy with children and young people bringing about the confidence to advocate for one's self where appropriate (Boylan and Dalrymple, 2009, p. 141) remind us that children and young people can feel disempowered by the services seeking to support them, and that the balance of power needs

to be shifted. A child in care may feel powerless in relation to their placement and the foster carers they live with, however, by supporting young people to have control over the decisions being made, an IPA is enhancing feelings of control and influence and together they are challenging potentially oppressive practices. (Boylan and Dalrymple, 2009, p.86) also, observe that this is essential if children are trying to gain access to services or care that would benefit them in a more positive way and increase their well-being.

(Dalrymple and Burke, 2006, p.48) define anti oppressive practice as social justice, a commitment to positive change for individuals to take back their lives and reassert themselves as active and participatory in their own communities. (Montgomery and Burr and Woodhead, 2003, p.236) remind us that that the concept of participation can be implied in multiple ways in a child or young person's life, for example, choosing what food they eat what clothes they wear and which music they listen to. These examples highlight an individual's agency, choice and encourage well-being. Participation enables feelings, ideas and beliefs to be demonstrated, it requires consultation and respect. Hart (1992, quoted in Boylan and Dalrymple, 2009, p.67) focused on reconstructing **Sherry Arnsteins 1969** ladder of participation model. The ladder's are a guide to who has power when important decisions are being made and similar to the original, Hart related the rungs of the ladder to children rather than society as a whole and maps out the progression of the participatory stages. Though the lower rungs on both ladders are concerned with manipulation and tokenism, the societal ladder is linked to active citizenship and Harts to 'child-initiated shared decisions with adults'. As one is given access to participate more, confidence is gained, choices become informed and one hopefully becomes more empowered and agentic. As (Bounds and Hepburn, 1996, p.15) Point out, 'individuals can not be empowered by others, but can be enabled to empower themselves'

A key concept in relation to empowerment as (Thompson, 2007, p.24) reminds us is agency. That is to be responsible for one's own actions and the consequences. This is not always possible for a child to achieve and an IPA needs to consider any age, capacity or language barriers there may be, however, every child is entitled to express themselves as much as they are able which is recognised in multiple articles of The United Nations Rights of the Child (UNCRC). One way of encouraging a sense of agency is to apply the strengths based approach. Rather than looking at problems and seeking solutions, this avenue allows an IPA to spend more time looking at and improving upon resources already to hand and less time figuring out and solving problems and finding new solutions. This encourages a co

productive relationship and again aids participation, allows for confidence in decisions made, and promotes the voice of the client (Morgaine and Capous- Desyllas, 2015, p.103). Another important concept of agency is self and the theory of self efficacy. There are no limitations on an advocate promoting and practicing this process with a child. Self efficacy is a person believing that they are able to demonstrate the behaviours required within a situation to achieve the best possible solution. The more self efficacy you can achieve for a particular goal, the more likely you are to maintain the effort needed, persist in trying to achieve and succeed. This all builds resilience. Bandura (1977, quoted in Kassin and Fein and Markus, 2014, p589) argues that there are four specific ways in which people can enhance their self efficacy. What he calls ‘performance experiences’ are related to failures and successes which may weaken or elevate a sense of achievement. With this comes a comparison of one’s self within peer groups. Secondly, watching other people’s achievements or failures can promote the same feelings. Watching someone win a game provides a sense of success where as a loss could support thoughts of how strategies can be improved. Thirdly, verbal and vocal praising of a person creates a confidence boost. If a young person is trusting of her advocate, he can support her to feel more confident in her thoughts and abilities just through praise. Finally, the fourth source is one's emotional responses and physical state. Episodes of alarming and unsettling emotional behaviours are not a sign of healthy self efficacy, where as coping with a difficult or threatening activity in a calm manner can be observed as becoming more resilient, able to hold one’s own and developing a sense of agency.

The lack of engaging with a child or young person and its risks are documented widely. For example, multiple areas of the Victoria Climbié Report (UK Government 2003) highlight the lack of intervention and conversation with her alone and it does not state within the reports that her feelings or wishes were ever sought by any of the professional bodies involved in her care. England appointed a children’s commissioner shortly after this investigation, (Aynsley–Green, 2019, p.176) reports how the failures of communication and a mismanaged failure to keep the best interests of a child at the heart of the case was worsened by mismanagement, financial restraints and poor leadership. Had Victoria been communicated with directly by an individual assigned completely to her or even of the many local education staff, health workers and social service employees, the outcomes of this case may well have been different. (Aynsley–Green, 2019, p.67) highlights that on taking up his position as commissioner he met with the post holder in Sydney. She inspired him with a fundamental set of ideals with which to launch his position. These being that

‘Children’s and young people’s participation must be embedded in the organisation’s culture; children and young people have a key place in decision making. Adults must adapt to the way children work, children and young people get reward and benefit from participation and developing mutual understanding and trust’.

These principles can be compared to the desired capabilities of a child IPA, and are similar to the guidelines within the Code of Practice for advocates (2014).

Relating these theories back to contemporary Britain and more locally in Wales, we can see the importance of an advocate working with and on behalf of a child in care and that the need is great. Much is being attempted behind the scenes within the local authority. Ceredigion is about to pilot a Regional Advocacy Service and both Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire hope to use the evaluation of the pilot to form the basis of service provision (Social care and health scrutiny committee, 2019). Possible complications from such a service are maintaining complete independence from its funding body. (Henderson and Pochin, 2001, p,22) remind us that an advocacy service must be able to do this to remain credible. Also, needing consideration is locality and the possibility of competing services in urban areas and not enough in rural locations. Resources need to be distributed equally for all to have the benefits of the service and key difficulties such as communication difficulties or negative behaviours catered for. There is also much current research around providing the best possible advocacy practice. (The National Children’s Bureau, 2013) include a commissioning checklist within their Independent Advocacy in Child Protection report which details the guidance for policy makers. This includes children and young people always being involved in their case from the start, the option of choice for children at meetings relating to their care and providing a child centred approach when finding different ways on how to express themselves. A good advocate should maintain positive relationships with other key professionals provide and research current and accurate information and maintain complete independence. It is important to add that an IPA will always be monitored and supervised by a manager in the advocacy company in which they are employed. Making sure, they are sensitive to the needs of the child or young person and ensuring the advocate himself remains supported.

To conclude, though the concept of advocacy has been around for generations, the idea of supporting children in care with a person of independence within policy and

legislation has not, and it is therefore difficult to measure the outcomes. This essay has discussed the need for advocacy for children in care and highlighted the fatal aspects of not allowing or offering children a voice. Numbers of children needing care from the state continues to rise and is at an all time high in Wales. It is reassuring though to realise the acknowledgement of children and young people needing a voice in arrangements being made, and that key professionals are being educated in ways in which to do so. Awareness of advocates, advocacy agencies and their services needs improvement and oppressive practice, imbalances of power and lack of encouraging agency may occasionally undervalue efforts being made to promote the rights of a child or young person, however; it is obvious that lessons are being learnt and that positive strides are being made.

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