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THE IMPLEMENTATION OF FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCES IN THE CHILD- AND YOUTH-CARE SYSTEM IN AUSTRIA/ CARINTHIA – CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS

Abstract:

“Family group conference” is a new and radical method of participating in the family system in the process of care planning within the public child- and youth-care. After the federal county of Lower Austria, Carinthia is preparing to implement a “family group conference” in the child - and youth-care system. The experiences from Lower Austria are well documented by two research projects, so it is possible to draw conclusions about things that function and those that cause problems in the process of implementation.

The first family group conferences already started in Carinthia and the first interviews with families und social workers of the youth welfare office were realized this year. Therefore, it is possible to take the first look on experiences.

Within the 13th Family Group Conference Network held in Klagenfurt in the beginning of September, with

about 100 participants from Germany, Switzerland and Austria, the issues about the necessary and most effective steps for the formal implementations in Carinthia could be discussed, so that a clear procedure would be defined.

The main issue in any process of implementation is the paradigmatic shift in the attitudes of the professionals from an expert system to cooperative and participative understanding of family situations within the frame of child protection.

1. The situation of the child- and youth-care system in Austria so far

“Although since decades there is growth of public funding of social and social-pedagogical activities, so far no efforts were made to provide public funding for research in the field of social work. Well-founded knowledge is missing about the type of activities that cause certain effects, there is missing innovation which is accompanied scientifically.”¹ (Translation: H.H.) (Pantuček-Eisenbacher/Gharwal, 2015, S. 5)

The child- and youth-care system in Austria is split up between the nine provinces, where each province has its own legal frame. This situation was tightened with the decision of the Austrian Parliament in 2018 to cancel the federal law providing guidelines. As a result, the way someone is treated depends on the province you live in.

The British discourse about child pro-

tection is just starting to have its counterpart here in Austria:

“The focus on protection rather than prevention means that the child in some sense has become an idealized and decontextualized child [...]. Separating children from their family context and culture results not in a safe child, but in a child without a human or real face [...] (Higgins, 2017, p. 299)

Very similar to Germany and Switzerland, there is an ongoing debate about effects and outcome of the interventions and supports for the children and families. While participation and family-orientation have been positioned in the legal texts, the day-to-day reality still shows a lack of these principles.

„The pressure to act, the demand to prove effects immediately, and the economization leads obviously to a day-to-day practice, where participation is eclipsed. The increase of standardization processes, too, leads inevitable to the situation, that involvement of the addressees is questioned.“² (Gadow et. al. 2013, S. 25) (Translation H.H.)

Hence, the tendency to a paternalistic attitude of professionals is still alive and the idea, that only professionals are experts for the lives of the clients, rules the support and care processes. “A cooperative relation between professionals and parents at eye level [...] does not exist.”³ (l.c., S. 27) (Translation H.H.)

³ „Ein partnerschaftliches Verhältnis zwischen Fachkräften und Eltern auf Augenhöhe [...] liegt nicht vor.“

However, on the other hand there are new efforts and concepts to overcome such attitudes and ideas.

2. The Family Group Conference

One of these – relatively – new concepts for the differentiated child- and youth-care systems of Europe and Northern America is the family group conference with its origin in the Maori practice in New Zealand. I give a brief overview of this concept, which is related to the paper “The Family Group Conference process” by the Family rights group, London.

Phase 1: The concern

The process starts with a concern from the social worker at a child- and youth-care office. To clear this concern, the social worker offers the family a family group conference and explains how this would be realized. “Whether or not a family group conference takes place is a decision made by the family. Under no circumstances can a family be made or forced to have a family group conference.” (Family rights group) Once the family agrees, the professional organizes a coordinator to the family.

Phase 2: Preparation

The coordinator helps the family to plan the meeting, who should be invited, where and when it will take place. The coordinator acts as a neutral person. “Families should be offered the opportunity to request a coordinator who suitably reflects their ethnicity, language,

religion or gender, and the family's request should be accommodated wherever possible." (l.c.) The coordinator organizes the meeting in cooperation with the child/young person, parents with parental responsibility and/or already involved professionals, identifying who is in the family network for the child. This can include close friends or "important others".

The coordinator cooperates with the social worker and other relevant agencies to ensure family members have the needed information about the child- and youth-care system and/or child protection concerns, which need to be taken in account at the family group conference. Any bottom line has to be defined what can, and, cannot be agreed as part of the plan for the child from a child protection perspective.

Phase 3: The conference

The family group conference takes places in three clear steps:

a) Information phase

This part of the meeting is chaired by the coordinator. He or she will make sure that everyone is introduced, that everyone understands the purpose and process of the family group conference and agrees how the meeting will be conducted, including explicit ground rules.

"The service providers give information to the family about:

- the reason for the conference;

- information they hold about the child and the family that will assist the family to make the plan;
- information about resources and support they are able to provide;
- any child welfare concerns that will affect what can be agreed in the plan (e.g. that the child must not have contact with a particular person); and
- what action will be taken if the family cannot make a plan or the plan is not accepted.
- The child/young person and family members may also provide information, ask for clarification or raise questions." (l.c.)

b) Family only

Agency staff and the coordinator are not present during this part of the conference. Family members and important others like good friends or neighbours have time to talk among themselves and come up with a plan that addresses concerns raised. They will identify resources and support to make the plan work.

c) Plan and agreement

When the family has made their plan, the social worker and the coordinator meet with the family to discuss and agree the plan including resources. "It is important to ensure that the children involved have a clear understanding of what is decided and that their views

are understood.” (l.c.) The coordinator should distribute the plan to family members involved and to the social worker and other relevant professionals.

Phase 4: Implementation of the Plan

Now the implementation of the plan starts – “everybody involved implements their parts of the plan within agreed timescales and communicates and addresses any problems that arise.” (l.c.)

Phase 5: Follow up conference

There should be a clear process for reviewing the implementation of the plan. A follow up family group conference has to be organized by the coordinator and it should be already fixed at the first conference. It is important that there is a review meeting to consider how the plan is working, who has fulfilled his or her commitments and to which extend. The follow up conference also enables to make adjustments or to change the plan.

3. Experiences and Outcomes

The family group conference as a method of finding sustainable solutions for concerns of the child- und youth-care authority within the family system is well documented and a lot of research proves the effects and outcomes.

The example below is from the University of Applied Sciences of Potsdam in Germany from 2015. The presentation was held at the University of Ap-

plied Sciences of Carinthia in April 2019.

- 96% of the families are satisfied with the plan they made.
- 98% of the specialists are satisfied with the plan the family made.
- 94% of the participants from the family knew before about the problem.
- 50% of the families can realize their plans without support from the child- and youth-care office.
- The quotations of the social workers in Lower Austria and Carinthia confirm these effects.

4. The example of Lower Austria

Would you recommend the family group conference to colleagues?

“In any case, in any case. I think it is totally meaningful. I think it is meaningful in terms that the family has so much more priority to decide on its own, to consider things, to talk frankly [...]. The daughter, too, she is 13 years old, gave me a good feedback, because she said she felt to be taken totally seriously, she was allowed to join the conversation, she was asked to make her proposals and I think, it is because so many things were articulated, which in other situations were not, also because nobody dared to.”
(Social worker in Carinthia)

Lower Austria, one of the nine provinces of Austria, with around 1.7 million inhabitants, started the implementation process in 2011 with a pilot combined

with scientific research: „Family Group Conference – Familienrat in Niederösterreich, Möglichkeiten der partizipativen Hilfe“. The report was published in 2012.

On the 1st of January 2013, family group conference became part of the official catalogue of countermeasures of the child- and youth-care system in Lower Austria. Along with that, the funding was defined: 43.-€ per hour for the coordinator (a maximum of 40 hours per case) plus a fixed expense allowance.

2016-2017 a second research programme on the family group conference in Lower Austria, integrated in the teaching of the school of social work of the University of Applied Sciences in St. Pölten, was underway and the report was published in 2017.

At the moment there are 12 approved coordinators in the different regions of the province.

The following accompanying measures have been realized:

- At every child- and youth-care office the contact details of the approved coordinators in the region are available;
- Further trainings of the professionals about the family group conference and the verbalization of the concerns of the child- and youth-care office were offered and undertaken;
- Professionals of the child- and youth-care offices got the offer of support by the government of the province,

when they had questions related to the organization and realization of the family group conference;

- Statistics on processed family group conferences was created;
- Family group conferences were part of the guidelines for the planning the process of child- and youth-care cases;
- Professionals of the child- and youth-care offices got a booklet entitled “Family Group Conference” with anonymized examples of verbalizations of concerns and additional information;
- The psychological counselling board recommended the realization of the family group conference related to the concrete case;
- From 2011-2019 54 family group conferences were held in Lower Austria, that means not more than six per year.

Regarding the big efforts and the research projects, what were the obstacles so far that the implementation proceeded very slowly?

4.1 The research results⁴

“Professionals of the child- and youth-care offices still often do not think

⁴ For the following chapters I refer to the two research papers: Ilse Arlt Institute on Social Inclusion Research, (2012): Family Group Conference, Familienrat in Niederösterreich, Möglichkeiten der partizipativen Hilfe, St. Pölten. Fachhochschule St. Pölten (2017):

of family group conferences as a crucial method to include the family system.” (l.c.) So, the basic question is what went wrong in the very long process of implementation, so that the concept is still often out of sight?

4.1.1. How did the involved professionals become aware of the family group conference?

Where did you obtain an information about the family group conference (N=47, multiple answers possible)?

33 got information from the department of the government of the province, 27 had sources of their own, 26 professionals were informed by colleagues, 14 by superiors and 4 had other sources.

There seems to be a good mix of different ways to acquire information about family group conference.

4.1.2 Verbalization of concerns

“Verbalization of concerns” is a new technique to change the attitude and the appearance before addressees. Social workers should no longer talk about problems and deficits, but show their involvement by talking about concerns and worries. The social workers not only had to learn a new method of radical participation, they also had to learn

to verbalize their concern in the first and second step, so maybe this was an excessive demand.

The question was, if the professionals think that there is more training needed on the verbalization of concerns. 50% (8 out of 16) of those without experiences in family group conferences answered that it is very important/important to have more training, but 71% (17 out of 24) answered very important/important with experiences in family group conferences.

For the conference process it was more important for the professionals to know about the verbalization of their concerns. „I think this method is still much unknown, but so important for our work. Here there is a need for more public relations and more clearness about the process and the necessary steps to be undertaken [...]” (social worker in Lower Austria)

4.1.3 Preparation time

74% of the professionals think that the preparation time for a family group conference is longer than for other measures in the planning- and in the care process. „Resources of time are limited at child- and youth-care offices. As the preparation takes pretty much time, in stressful situations one prefers things that are well known.“ This is an experience, which cannot be found in other research reports from Germany or Switzerland. So maybe we assume here a status quo bias from a big part of the involved professionals. Another hint for

“Das Verfahren Familienrat in der Kinder- und Jugendhilfe in Niederösterreich: Rückblick und Ausblick“, St. Pölten. Furthermore I refer to the first interview transcripts with social workers and families who ran through a family group conference process in Carinthia.

this hypothesis is that a not quantified number of professionals also mention that the unknown outcome of family group conferences is an obstacle to realize it.

4.1.4 Setting of a date

65% (n=47) of the professionals think that setting a date for meeting the family is difficult (right /rather right). This is also a very specific phenomenon in Lower Austria. Especially the professionals are afraid that they have to fix dates in the evening or in the weekend.

4.1.5 The coordinators

The professionals wish to work with coordinators, who are already experienced in family group conference. But how shall they get experience? The professionals also mention a lack of avail-

ability of coordinators and stress that a personal contact is important. And they also expect the coordinators to have an exchange about experiences as coordinators.

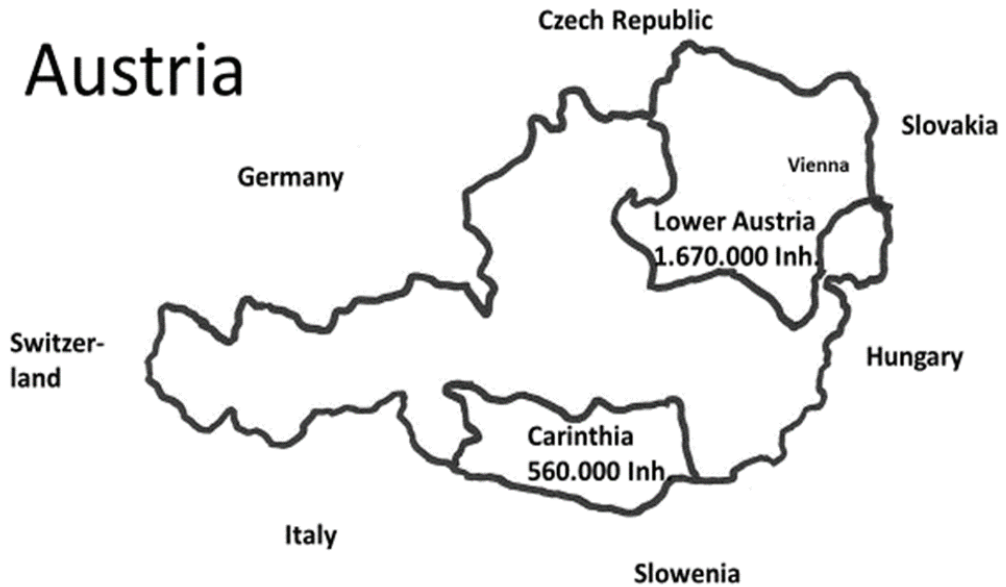
The fact that a follow up conference is not obligatory, causes criticism: „[...] It cannot be, that, If I apply a participative method, after two weeks I start again controlling. Yes, and if I do not want that, then I need a follow up conference, if I want to go on with participation [...]“. (social worker in Lower Austria)

4.1.6 Effects

Increase of cooperation is described:

[...] after every successfully realized participative method the cooperation improves, the tolerance among the professionals increases, the ability for agreements gets





better. Especially in the interviews with the clients it is clear, that they experience the child- and youth-care system by the method as a cooperative partner and they experience themselves by self-determination, as accepted experts in their own life situation and estimate.“ (FH St. Pölten, 2017)

How far do families stick to the agreements?

„Predominantly, not all of them, but that was no reason to intervene, not every single agreement was realized, I mean not every proposal was performed word by word, but basically what had to be done was done.“ (Social worker in Lower Austria)

What about participation?

„Families (are able to) accept and realize self-determined agreements for better support, [...] than in com-

parison heteronomous solutions.“ (FH St. Pölten, 2017)

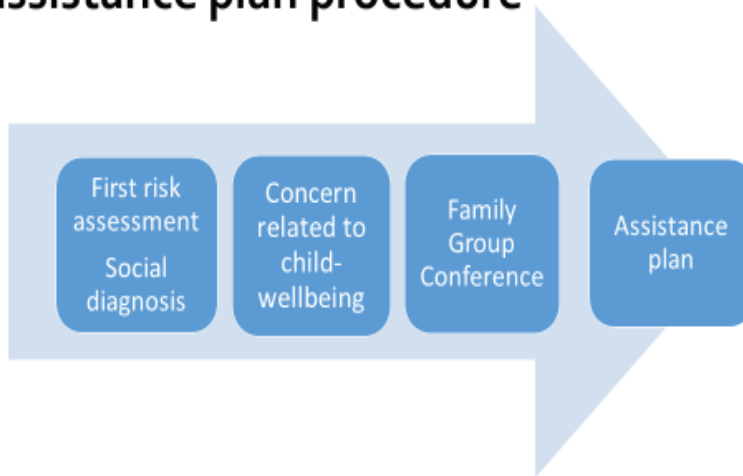
In which respect professionals felt to be challenged?

„It was challenging, because it forces us to think differently, to step back with our professional attitudes, which is not easy. One tends to impose on the clients any methods and measures, without reflecting a lot about them.“ (social worker in Lower Austria)

„For me as a social worker I experienced that I have a totally different role. If I start a traditional intervention and support, then I can determine very much by myself. I mean, of course you work with plans of care where you talk with the family, but in the end or first of all it is in my ideas what the problem is, where the resources lie und what the objectives are. This all is in my head und then I have to formulate a concern – but with a family group

Position of the family group conference in the assistance plan procedure

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conference I deliver all this.” (social worker in Carinthia)

„I am a fan of the family group conference. Yes, it is like that you have to step back a little bit. I mean, and I believe this, you can realize a family group conference parallel to other interventions and support, as I saw it with Mrs. Y. I know that she also needs something else, family group conference is not the only approach, but it is still great that I can see that we are supporting people, because an intensive family care programme, I mean the child and youth-care system can never cover what a family group conference covers.“ (social worker in Carinthia)

4.1.7 Recommendations

The second research report makes recommendations as follows:

- Parallel evaluation
- Info documents and guidelines
- Trainings at every child- and youth-care office
- Trainings on the management level
- Compulsory training of at least one professional per child- and youth-care office
- Secured funding
- Network-meeting of the coordinators
- Follow up conference as compulsory standard

5. The implementation of a family group conference in Carinthia

In the beginning of September 2019, the 13th network meeting of family group

conference took place in Klagenfurt, the capital of Carinthia. There was a discussion about how to implement this new concept in the child- and youth-care system in Carinthia.

In this year 2019, there are some supportive circumstances for implementing new things in Carinthia: The representative of the federal government has asked the school of social work first for a strategy to realign the child- and youth-care system and now in summer to make the planning for the child- and youth-care system for the coming decade. The family group conference became part of the concretion of the strategy line: increase of quality by participation, standardization, social diagnosis, compulsory trainings.

It is important to learn from the experiences of Lower Austria. The whole bundle of measures to provoke the decision to realize a family group conference in a concrete case does not seem to be very effective, although each single measure seems meaningful. Good information and profound trainings on all levels have to happen. The follow up conference has to be – not like in Lower Austria – obligatory. But the implementation process also seems to need a kind of monitoring, which means more than research. The challenge is to get a critical mass of professionals to cause a cultural change. “Large child protection systems, with their bureaucratic tendencies can often get means and ends confused [...]” (Turnell 2010, p. 7) So the child-and youth –care system may say:

we have family group conference on our list (as a method), and so we have realized participation at its best (as an end). Even parallel research with positive results does not motivate the system to act. So should the family group conference be obligatory for all social workers in all assistance plan procedures? The answer of the about hundred participants of the network meeting in Klagenfurt was no. As opposed to Lower Austria and different from what is planned in Carinthia so far, the family group conference should be positioned in the assistance plan procedure and not after this procedure is finished by the social worker.

And the best way to implement the new concept would be to identify one child- and youth-care office in one of the ten regions of Carinthia, where a pilot can be started for one or two years. In this pilot in every single assistance plan procedure, a family group conference has to be offered to the family, as soon as the risk assessment and the first social diagnosis leads to a profound concern. Depending on the size of the region that could mean one or two hundred family group conferences per year. Enough resources for this amount have to be provided. And of course a parallel research must be conducted. Its conclusions have to support a monitoring process. With the results of such a pilot the concept can be spread over whole Carinthia.

„I think in the end, even though there is nothing at all, but somehow the family group conference suits

in every case. Yes, it suits actually in all cases. That does not mean that maybe I have to do something in addition, but for me it always suits, because I can see what is there and of course they also feel honoured if they get their responsibility back.” (social worker in Carinthia)

The main issue in any process of implementation is the paradigmatic shift in the attitudes of the professionals from an expert system to cooperative and participative understanding of family situations within the frame of child protection.

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