Inclusion or Exclusion: Service provision for street children

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Abstract

As in other developing countries with metropolises, 'street children' have constituted one of the most important problems in Turkey, particularly in Istanbul, over the last two decades. The General Directorate of Social Services and Child Protection Agency (hereafter SHÇEK), is the state agency responsible for street children and their protection. The main focus of the study has been to explore the nature and organisation of state welfare service provision for street children in Istanbul and to develop conceptual framework, which describes, illuminates the state welfare service provision for street children in Istanbul from its service providers' point of view. Critically prepared grounding through the literature survey and preliminary field projects have provided the guidelines for the selection of methods and approaches which have yielded meaningful and reliable results in the hitherto uninvestigated aspects of the fields of service provision for street children in Turkey. The qualitative methodology like the 'Narrative Interview' method has been utilised to collect data on the services for street children. The approach taken in research participation with the service providers ranging from senior management through the frontline workers down to the support staff employed by the SHÇEK organisations has been richly rewarded by data amassed on the modus operandi and the shortcomings of these organisations not only supporting the reported results of similar research globally but also providing useful explanation for the apparent perpetuation of the street children problems of Istanbul. The most important result of the research is the demonstration that service provision cannot be assessed without the direct investigation of service providers because the service providers themselves determine the scope and the quality of the service provision. The research has proven that SHÇEK reproduces its marginalisation in the society, consequently of its employees which adversely promotes re-marginalisation of the service users.

A brief overview of the background to the study

This study explores the position of the street children in the service provision through the eyes of the service providers. The paper begins with background information to this study. Then the following areas are discussed based on the study findings: the socially constructed character of street children in Turkey, the features of the state welfare service provision for street children in terms of the children's perspective approach. The paper ends with a discussion on the importance of including the child's perspective into the service provision.

This study was focused on the nature and organisation of state welfare service provision for street children in Istanbul to assess how staff views and attitudes affect the quality of

the interaction between the service providers and service users. The qualitative methodology has been utilised to generate data on the services for street children.

In Turkey, the core agency responsible for the protection of street children is a state agency, the General Directorate of Social Services and Child Protection Agency (hereafter SHÇEK). The research participants have been recruited from SHÇEK which varied from managers to the frontline staff and down to the support staff. In total 37 qualitative interviews were carried out in order to reflect views from all denominations of staff positions in SHÇEK.

Socially constructed character of street children in Turkey

In Turkey, the term 'street children' refers to both those working and/ or living in the streets. Children working on the street can be classified into two groups (Aksit et al., 2001). The first group of children works on the street during the day, sometimes during the evening and night, but finally goes home to stay with their family. The second group of children coming mainly from disintegrated families work and live in the streets.

The concept of socially constructed character of childhood (James et al. 1998) constitutes one of the major theoretical tools helpful in conceptualising research findings on the street children phenomenon in Turkey. Research findings support the view that childhood is a construct which depends critically on culture and historical context and that it is the social space that determines how childhood is lived through as childhood is socially constructed (Kuznesof, 2005). The accounts of the participants reinforce the commonality behind the street children phenomenon as the street life in Turkey is an outcome of an organic and linear chain of adverse factors including migration, economic hardship, family dysfunction and child abuse (Altanis and Goddard, 2004).

Turkey is a large developing country with the fastest population growth rate in its region and holds one of the largest population of youth in the world. Istanbul is the largest city of the country. Istanbul, in which the present study was carried out, is not only the largest but also the most industrialized city in Turkey. Therefore, it attracts many migrants from all over the country, and especially from eastern and southeastern families dominate (Erman, 2001). As in all large cities in the developing world, the increase was due to higher birth rate in the subpopulation of migrants as well as to migration (Keyder, 2005). Lack of employment, lack of education, lack of health care, and in some cases social unrest have pushed many rural families to cities in Turkey probably to acquire a better life (De Santis, 2003). The outcome of this however, is the societal stress associated with social inequalities, rapid industrialisation and urbanisation (Aptekar, 1994). The issue of street children is one of the tragic evidences for the serious problems that disadvantaged people face.

Service Provision for Street Children: General Directorate of Social Services and Protection of Children (SHÇEK)

The research was carried out in 9 SHÇEK organisations. 8 of the organisations are called "Child and Youth Centres" that provide services for altogether 250-300 children in Istanbul. "Child and Youth Centres" are the boarding or day social service organisations

which were opened in order to serve children who live and work in the streets. They work with an 'open door' system such that a child is not forced to stay against his will. SHÇEK also have mobile teams affiliated to the organisations, bringing together social workers, psychologists and teachers who are on call round the clock to reach the 'hot-spots' where street children gather. If a child is involved in substance abuse and is amenable to treatment, he will be referred to a branch of Child and Adolescent Substance Abuse Treatment and Support Centres.

Study findings reveal that there is not a systematised care with a defined approach specifically developed for the benefit of the street children. The approach claimed by SHÇEK is the 'rehabilitation approach, but considering the ascriptions and the perceptions of the service providers, and the all importance of clearing off these children from the streets, the service applied can be taken as more of a correctional approach (Carizosa and Poertner, 1992).

Study findings strongly argue that service provision evidently cannot meet the particular requirements of all groups of children in care according to their capabilities and backgrounds. As a result, SHÇEK organisations are perceived as 'depots' by the service providers who have participated in this research. As one of the participating managers has stated, these organisations are perceived by the service providers as the "*rubbish bins*" of the city to which those children who for one reason or another cannot integrate into the mainstream are sent.

The term "*rubbish bin*" has strong implications regarding service providers' perception of themselves and the service given as well as of their service users, and suggests that they perceive their activity as working with worthless "material" that is to be disposed of. This derisory term also suggests that the function of the centres is only to provide the children with a place of stay, i.e., a depot. There isn't the belief that a true rehabilitative service is provided.

Although the research participants have expressed the view that the phenomenon of street children is a social problem, in practice, a clear shift from socialisation to individualisation of the problem can be observed in service providers' interaction with children. The discrepancies between claimed norms and actual practices have been largely justified by the participants in reference to work load, lack of resources and other similar circumstances. Participants have reiterated that service provision is understaffed, poorly equipped and insufficiently financed.

Service providers, as do the members of the public, generally associate children's behaviours with mental health problems which interfere with normal development and functioning. Most participants of this research have described street children as antisocial, unreliable, undeserving, and unwanted and so on. In this sense, the term 'street children' is a symbolically loaded term that concerns social class as much as location; it represents a kind of symbolic apartheid (Scheper-Hughes and Sargent, 1998).

By labelling specific individuals as 'delinquents', 'criminals', 'victims', 'clients', we fail to see them as human beings. Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman (1998) wrote that this is a convenient way to avoid confronting the more fundamental social and economic

problems affecting the families and communities of the poor. This partly explains why the interventions follow the ideology of removing street children's from society and correction of their personal pathologies.

It can be argued that 'criminalising street children' could be a way to bring them under state control. Holmes (2002) called this kind of social control a 'pastoral power' implemented by 'psy' disciplines such as psychology, psychiatry, psychiatric nursing and social work. These disciplines, through their respective 'scientific' knowledge, seek to achieve normalisation of individuals and populations. This is what Curtis (1995) had earlier called the new art of government. Removing children off the streets, in some instances forcefully and bringing them to the state organisations appear to be the government's way of imposing social control over street children, and therefore the society. In this way priority is given to the clearing off streets from children rather than paying attention to the true needs of this particular group of children to help their integration into the society. Thus cities are cleaned up as the presence of poor, barefoot, ragged children is viewed as illegitimate (Kuznesof, 2005).

To varying degrees street children are subject to a process of being socialised away from the institutions of family and education. Street children appear to have created a place away from their parents and schools, therefore away from government's correctional facilities, in short, a place at the margins of the society and outside the governmental control. West (2003) underlined that the use of the term 'street children' is a sense of children being out of place in a particular context. The concept of '*govermentality*', as defined by Foucault (1991, cited in Holmes, p.84, 2002) would be helpful in thinking not only about the society as a whole but the SHÇEK organisations by themselves. 'Govermentality' involves domination and disciplinary techniques as well as ethics of self-government. Governing implies a deliberate attempt to direct human conduct in order to regulate, control, shape and turn to a specific end (Holmes, 2002). The art of government rests upon the many and varied alliances between political and other authorities that seek to govern economic activity, social life and individual contact. Family and school are the two major institutions of the society through which government controls its citizens at a distance. To fully understand the 'art of government', as termed by Foucault, Morris (1998) drew attention to the process of governing at a distance. In this sense, street children constitute one of the most challenging groups of people as they fall into a place relatively outside of governing. Society's attitude towards street children pushes them even further away from the mainstream because placing children as dependents is the reason behind excluding them from political participation. Wyness et al. (2004) point out the powerful political and social sources. Instead, a voice should be given to those who would be otherwise marginalised in policy debates and decision making.

Degrees of participation can be linked to how children are seen in society (Stevens, 2006). Dominant policy for street children in Turkey however fails to acknowledge street children as actors (Ataöv and Haider, 2006). Parental control is a prominent feature of child rearing in the traditional Turkish family. In Turkish culture children are viewed rather as a "novice" playing a passive role and pushed to the margins of social structure by adults as their lives, needs and desires are controlled through careful training (James at al., 1998). The current practice of policy-making in Turkey treats childhood

essentially as an educational matter and very quickly excludes children outside of the school system as a residual category (Değirmencioğlu et al., 2008). In schools, for example, codes of conduct include respect for authority and reflect great concern about students' dress with detailed listing of dress requirements. Turkish schools have uniforms and detailed references to zero tolerance consequences for breaking rules. Raby (2005) argued that dress and discipline codes are correlated to knowledge production and attempts to secure internalised discipline. In this regard Raby believes that children are seen to be incomplete, at risk and in need of guidance, a position that legitimise school rules and their enforcement. This view contributes to the view on children as possession of their parents. This reflects a recurrent tendency to view children as 'human becomings' rather than 'human beings' (Qvortup et al., 1994). In Turkey only some private schools provide greater possibilities for student involvement and provide students with more say and focus less on the top-down rules.

In this respect, services for street children in many ways reproduce the traditional child rearing approaches in Turkey. Most importantly, just like in traditional child rearing practices in Turkey, children's authentic voice cannot be heard and their active participation is not sought in the service provision for street children. At SHÇEK decisions regarding children's daily lives and even children's needs are made by the senior managers and rather than by the frontline staff who are closer to the children. Instead of appreciating and supporting the differences of children, the children in care are expected to become unified.

Lack of active participation by the children

Findings of this research reflect the literature (Leonard, 2005) in that children who are working and living on the streets are observed not only to make use of existing networks of the adults, but also to develop their own network both to survive and earn money on the streets. Street children are defined, define themselves, and become social agents (Kuznesof, 2005). While the nurtured children are the rich and the ultimate consumers and unexpected to engage in productive activity, street children are the 'nurturing children as a result of poverty (Duyan, 2005). They are expected to from an early age to contribute to the production and income of the household (Kuznesof, 2005).

Service provision however has failed to recognise children as people, let alone as citizens with rights (Scheper-Hughes and Sargent, 1998). Service provision is directed at a greater surveillance, control and regulation of children and is quite academically oriented. For example, street children are expected to start going to school and show academic achievement. In SHÇEK care stations there are activities in place after school hours. It has been reported that, quite expectedly, these children cannot easily adapt to school life. Most of them lag behind other children at school and refuse to attend school as a result. This is partly why runaway attempts are prevalent in SHÇEK organisations.

Lusk (1992) argued that street children are prescribed with special type of education rather than formal institutionalized education, which is thought to suit their needs. This once again brings to mind that service provision is not developed accordingly to children's needs as well as their skills and abilities. Children in general find their voices silenced, suppressed or ignored in their everyday lives. Karabanow and Clement (2004)

suggested that instead of imposing their ideas and expectations service providers need to be reflexive to the particular children and believe that people can change. Agencies equipped with a rigid specific set of policies related to working with children and allowing for little flexibility and individuality in the worker approach are described as ineffective on a few levels. It is important to modify therapeutic interventions to be more culturally appropriate by always considering background issues. The idea of children's spaces being not just physical but also social space, cultural space and a discursive space changes the conceived relationship between professionals and service users. Professionals become facilitators and both the children and the adults are co-constructors of knowledge and expertise (Hill et al., 2004).

Street children as agents

Street children have challenged the idea that the child is a subject in a family where the parents are responsible for creating activities. The idea of the child being a subject in a family has led to the incipient exclusion of children from public space and making children more subject to regulation and control. Therefore, while the space of childhood is becoming more specialised and more localised for 'ordinary' children, it is the opposite for street children. Gill (2007) argued that today's children, spend much of their time under greater surveillance and control. Street children, however, to a certain extent have freedom.

Although children as service users do not have their say and are not consulted about their residential care environment, they are indeed capable of exercising rights and making decisions concerning their welfare by themselves and for themselves. It can be argued that street children are courageous children in being able to leave their dysfunctional families behind and resilient enough to survive in the streets. However research findings have indicated that children brought to care stations cannot adapt and internalise the service provision. That is why the government is struggling to control these not easily obedient children. Stevens (2006) drew attention to the ambivalence about the views on children in care. They are either seen as potential victims who need looking after, or as potential threats who need to be controlled. One of the consequences of this ambivalence is that they are seen as passive recipients of services and not as 'active and creative actors'. In thinking about street children and childhood, street children prove that children *are* active agents. Street children in particular are forcing us to implement a participatory approach in which children's voices and concerns are immediately accessible. Participatory approach creates possibilities with children determining the way in which they choose to participate in their own terms and attempt to contribute to political debate within local national groups, institutions, organisations and services on their own right.

It is important to note here that it is not only the SHÇEK service users who cannot actively participate in the service provision, but the service providers, too. Service providers participating in this research have reported that they do not have initiatives and consequently do not feel empowered either. Service providers find their voices just as silenced, suppressed, or ignored as their service users do. Participatory approach is needed not only for street children but service providers too. There is a need to ensure that service providers' as well as service users' views and voices are heard.

Conclusion

The study findings suggest that society's view on children has a profound effect on the service provision developed for them. Turkish state welfare service provision, including mobile teams and institutional care has practices directed at a greater surveillance, control and regulation of children. Children's authentic voice however is not included into the service provision.

Children's voices should play a greater role in developing policy and practice. The benefits of children's participation can be profound both for the children and residential care environments. In this way attitudes and real needs of young people better understood as opposed to their perceived needs by the professionals. Also participation can help children gain a better understanding of the organisations charged with their care. If the needs of individuals are reflected in the programme, it is highly likely that street children would be cooperative and enthusiastic (Veeran, 2004). Otherwise further damages will be incurred in the already fragile egos of street children who need to stay strong in order to survive on the streets (Orma and Seipel, 2007).

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