Space between the borders?

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Summary
The purpose of this thesis is to provide insight into the participation in decision-making of young people during their stay in secure residential care. In order to do so, we formulated several aims to shed light on 1) the current state of knowledge on residential care and participation, 2) the experiences and perceptions of young people and professionals, and 3) supporting views of young people in decision-making. Because participation in decision-making of young people is seen as a key aspect in the care and treatment process, chapter 1 offers an introduction to the topic of participation and why it is necessary to look into the topic of participation in relation to secure residential care.

Current state of knowledge

In chapter 2, we focused on the question: What is currently known about the Dutch residential child and youth care practices? We hereby focused on the history of the Dutch residential youth care practices. In addition, we discussed the different types of residential care facilities, and the young people that stay within these facilities. Furthermore, we addressed the residential care process of young people, the outcomes of residential care, and some good practices in the field of residential youth care. We concluded this chapter by reflecting on the current developments and future perspectives of Dutch residential care.

In chapter 3, we presented a systematic review on the participation of young people in decision-making procedures related to their stay in residential care. In this chapter, we focused on current knowledge with regard to the opportunities to participate in relation to the content and setting of decisions that are being made, the possible challenges and facilitators to participation, and the possible outcomes of care related to participation. In our systematic assessment of literature from 2000 up to 2016, a total of 16 studies met our search criteria. The systematic review provided an extensive overview of the current knowledge on the topic of participation in residential care. Most studies showed that young people seemed to have limited possibilities to meaningfully participate in decision-making. Furthermore, the studies provided insight into various challenges and facilitators regarding the participation process, which we split up according to the level of: the young person, the professional, the organisation, and the (socio-cultural) context. None of the 16 studies provided evidence for a causal connection between the participation of young people in decision-making and the outcomes of residential care, mainly because most of the studies had a descriptive research design.

Experiences and perceptions

After focusing on participation in residential care practices in general, we zoomed into the area of secure residential care. In chapter 4, we aimed to explore the perspectives of young people on their experiences with participation in decision-making while staying in secure residential care facilities, such as a Juvenile Justice Facility (JJF). With this
chapter, we strived to gain further insight on how young people experience participation in coercive setting. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 young people staying in a JJF, in the northern part of the Netherlands. We analysed the interviews by using the software programme Atlas ti. 7 for qualitative data. In our outcomes, we distinguished between the content and setting of decision (everyday vs. higher order decisions), and the general perceptions of young people on participation in decision-making. We found that several young people felt listened to, and were able to share their views with care professionals. Unfortunately, not all young people experienced their participation process to be meaningful.

Chapter 5 reports on the perceptions of and experiences with youth participation of care professionals working in JJFs. The central question in this chapter was how care professionals working in JJFs perceive the topic of youth participation. In addition, we focused on the factors that might influence the young person’s participation in decision-making while staying in a secure residential care facility, therewith building further on previous participation models (Horwath et al., 2012, p. 158). We conducted 24 semi-structured interviews with care professionals, working in two different JJFs in the Netherlands. Our study showed that professionals seem to have an understanding of participation, and how they can use participation in their everyday work. At the same time, professionals oftentimes linked issues of ‘safety’ or ‘boundaries’ when they talked about participation. Based on our findings, we presented a conceptual model of factors that seem to influence the young person’s participation process.

Supporting young persons in expressing their views

In chapter 6, we focused on how young people participated in developing a self-report questionnaire for young people in decision-making procedures, namely the Best Interest of the Child - Self-report questionnaire (BIC-S). Together with young people, we aimed to construct a self-report questionnaire, which enables young people to express their own views on key aspects of their current and future living environment. In addition, we wanted to draw lessons from this participatory development process. The procedure consisted of three main phases, namely an exploration, consultation and pilot phase. Young people staying in secure residential care and care professionals were involved during various stages of the development process. Using this development process, we developed a differentiated instrument. Furthermore, we digitalised the differentiated instrument, developing a stand-alone version of the BIC-S for Windows. We described how to construct a theoretically sound questionnaire, which meets the standards set by young people themselves.

In chapter 7, we studied the psychometric properties (both construct validity and reliability) of the BIC-S. Our aim was to validate the BIC-S questionnaire and to determine whether the BIC-S is indeed a suitable instrument for young people to freely express their views about their current living environment. A total of 74 young people staying in
secure residential care participated in the study by completing a BIC-S questionnaire. The construct validity and reliability of the BIC-S were explored through a Mokken Scale Analysis (MSA). The results showed that 11 out of the 14 BIC-S conditions form a moderate scale (H=.40; Rho=.86). In addition, when looking at how young people experience their current living situation within the facility, young people brought forward issues which relate to safety, activities, and the relationship with care professionals.

**General discussion**

Chapter 8 consists of the general discussion of the results of this dissertation. We draw conclusions with regard to our main findings on the participation of young people in secure residential care. Participation of young people is one of the basic principles of the CRC and therefore also a fundamental right for every young person in secure residential care. At the same time, with this coercive context comes the complexity of the topic of (implementing) participation. Furthermore, strengths and limitations are presented and future directions for practice and research are formulated. These future perspectives include a further structural embedding of young people’s participation in secure residential facilities in a way that takes the needs and perspectives of both young people and professionals into account.