

Article

The Need for Participative Interventions in Child Protection: Perspectives from Nuevo León State

Elena Cabiati

Department of Sociology, Catholic University of Milan, Largo A. Gemelli 1, Milano 20123, Italy;
E-Mail: elena.cabiati@unicatt.it; Tel.: +39-349-832-3902

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Abstract: This article examines characteristics and social work practices within the Mexican child protection system by combining observations of practice with the voices and the views expressed by managers, social workers, families, children and young people. The results of the study confirm the need for and desire to adopt a participatory approach, in preference to the individualistic ideas that currently dominates practice. The traditional Mexican culture, the implicit and explicit representation of family and the social problems connected to drug trade conflicts appear to have contributed to a child protection system with a “child-centered perspective”, characterized by asymmetric power relationships, lacking the empowerment and engagement of service users. These practices seem to be counter to the legislative framework and appear ineffective. Reflections regarding how family needs are identified, understood and addressed reveal a commitment to find new ways of working with families among service users and providers. However, the biggest challenge in the Mexican context is to balance the protection of the child with support to their parents; without ensuring the former, the latter will remain a partial and counter-productive work practice.

Keywords: Mexico; child protection; families with complex needs; social work; institutionalization; individualistic practices; participatory approach; changes; qualitative research

1. Introduction

This article presents an overview of the characteristics and the functioning of the Mexican child protection system by presenting the results of research examining the testimony and the background of various actors in the field. The thoughts of these actors repeatedly highlight the need to re-think approaches to supporting two-generation families with complex needs. Considerations of the policies

and in particular the social work practices will be presented, starting with the views expressed by social workers, children, youth and families. Subsequently, the specificity of the Mexican context will be considered, as well as the difficult current societal context characterized by the violent situation related to the war on the drug trade. The heterogeneity of the various actors that took part in the research and their different voices confirm the need for and desire to adopt a participatory approach in preference to the individualistic ideas that currently dominates practice.

The Mexican Context

As Jusidman argues [1], inequality has deep historical roots in Mexico and is complex and multifunctional, related to ethnic, gender and aboriginal discrimination. According to Jusidman, social policies addressing such inequalities are necessary to transform asymmetrical relations of power.

Despite the progress achieved in social development in the 1990s, Mexico still has high levels of poverty and inequality that directly affect children. In spite of the fact that Mexico is a country with medium-high income that has made important progress in matters of social development, a large proportion of the population still lives under poverty and disparity conditions [2]. Mexico is characterized by a traditionalist culture, with a high rate of Catholicism and a strong conservative ethos: intra-family violence is considered acceptable by many people [3,4] and divorce is perceived as a problem that threatens the institution of family [5]. The everyday context is affected by violence and corruption in politics, justice and law enforcement, and citizens make use of solutions of private protection oriented to an individualism that may seem unrelated to Latin American culture. Since the 1990s, there has been a “drug war” involving armed conflict between the Mexican drug cartels and the armed forces of the Mexican government. The war started in Mexico in 1989 after the arrest of Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo for cocaine trafficking. There was truce in the late 1990s, but since 2000, the level of violence has increased. The states that suffer the most from the conflict are Baja California, Guerrero, Chihuahua, Michoacán, Tamaulipas, Nuevo León and Sinaloa. Due to its geographical position, Mexico has been widely used as a transshipment point for drugs, illegal immigrants and smuggling destined for the US markets—all activities which are based throughout Latin America. Mexico appears to lack effective strategies to resolve this situation, perhaps due to a deep state corruption that seems to discourage, and in some cases thwart, the development of any enforcement actions [6].

The traditional culture of the Mexican state and the profound social problems related to the conflict of the drug war [7] seem to have contributed to the structuring of a welfare system that follows a bureaucratic statist model in which each state, in accordance with its own legislation, has autonomy over health and social welfare. The Mexican child protection system is dominated by a benefits welfare culture: the state recognizes itself as a strong power, and considers itself able to respond to the problems of its citizens through a system based primarily on the provision of welfare services to which people are entitled according to predetermined criteria for access. The government widely advertises its services through popular media in ways that reflect traditional images of families, and that seems to invite people to achieve a specific idea of well-being.

The Mexican system enjoys a good heritage of economic resources aimed at supporting all costs related to the institutionalization of children. In the year 2012, a state commission reviewed and evaluated the residential care for children in the State of Nuevo León, ordering the closure of more

than 20 of 68 homes, due to violence, maltreatment and disappearance of children ¹. Since this review, a dedicated body regulates and monitors the operation of these residential care homes, including through the creation of an official register containing the names of the children in care, developed as a result of unclear transfers of children from one home care to another and episodes of disappearance. Analyzing the Mexican legislative framework, it is possible to observe a distance between the objectives set out in the national and local regulations and the practices of social work. Examples of this include the law “Ley de la procuraduría de la defensa del menor y la familia”, which deals with the help to all family members in situations of vulnerability, and the national law “Ley para la protección de los derechos de niñas, niños y adolescentes” that recognizes the child’s right to live within the family, and establishes the duty of the state to provide help and support to families to avoid the child being removed from the family. These ideas seem to contradict the trend of the Mexican child protection system, mainly focused on the recourse to institutionalization as a strategy of child protection and to help families in complex situations, including those in poverty. Mexican families in the child protection system are almost exclusively lower-middle class and appear fatigued by social problems such as poverty or lack of schooling. Many are not even registered to the civil registry, with 3 million children not guaranteed identity rights [8]. A further particular category of service users is represented by indigenous peoples (descendants of Maya, Aztec, Toltec, and other civilizations), who live in all Mexican states in conditions of marginalization and poverty. The needs that come to the attention of the services appear to be multiple and the recourse of placing the children in residential care is the only way to safeguard their rights.

Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989, ratified by Mexico in 1990, compels the state to adopt the appropriate measures to help parents or other people responsible for the child to ensure adequate living conditions for the child’s development, and when necessary providing material assistance and support, in particular with regard to housing, nutrition and clothing. However, the system seems to be suffering a lack of alternative care and the knowledge of how to promote parental participation in the practices. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has the duty to examine the progress realized in the implementation of the Convention’s provisions. In recent years, this Committee has expressed concerns with regards to Mexican policy and practice, particularly in relation to the question of removing children from their families. The Committee required from the delegated authority, on the one side, to strengthen the existing measures to prevent that from happening and, on the other, to increase the opportunities for children and teenagers to receive other types of guardianship.

2. Review of the Literature

In this section a review of the literature about the topics investigated during the current study will be presented, in particular in regards to institutionalization of children and involvement of their families. Although few efforts have been made to investigate this, the primary need in the system of Mexican Child Protection is to overcome the recourse to institutionalization of children and to develop alternative forms of aid to families with complex needs [9]. Next to the overcoming of institutionalization, an even

¹ The argument refers to the Unicef Country Report [2] and the data have been collected during the research actions.

greater challenge is the ability to support both the children and their families. The idea is that in the absence of a dedicated familial network, supporting the child will always be only a partial and at times counterproductive practice [10,11]. Young *et al.* [12], taking up the provisions of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, suggest that the best approach to child protection actions should include a sufficient level of resources so as to ensure not only the development of the child, but also the participation of parents in the decision-making process, holistic support to the family, and the preservation of cultures and their different identities, rather than, as a first response, to remove children from a situation that is assumed to be high-risk, and only at a second stage to evaluate what can be done in reparation.

Following this idea, the same authors [12] have proposed the concept of “co-constructing social work” to indicate the processes between workers, families, children and communities, focusing on four key points which are seen to be essential for change: attention to children as active subjects and owners of rights; preservation of culture and tradition; consideration of the social capital of the family; and collective actions based on reciprocity.

To ensure the well-being of a child it is also important to focus on the support to their parents, so that the protective actions lead to positive results [10]. If the focus of the social workers is individualistic and centered on the child, it becomes extremely difficult to find a balance between the needs of children and those of their parents, even when the latter seem to be important in order to deal with the situation, or they arouse a genuine empathy in the practitioners [12]. An individualist or a technical-procedural approach, that professionals often follow faithfully, cannot be the only approach of services, because otherwise the assessments would be reduced to mere neutral processes of data collection and objective application of the results to different complex situations [13].

Participatory and reflective processes are essential ingredients in the success of attempts to support a child and his or her family. Sometimes social workers, absorbed in the urgency of the services, seem to live a kind of suspension of personal powers of reflexivity, depriving themselves of their internal conversation [14,15]. Folgheraiter [16] defines social work practices in terms of a *developmental approach*: in relational support, there is learning and development of the subjects even beyond the range of the specific provision, both for practitioners and service users. People who are motivated and able to act start a path of emotional and functional learning that keeps the impending problem under control and at the same time makes people grow in their basic human skills.

Although it is recognized that the complexity of the needs affecting families can influence the likelihood that children may return to their families [17], several contributions in the literature show the importance of working with the families, even in serious situations where the only solution is to resort to institutionalization of children. Several research studies [18–21] have pointed out that maintaining contacts between children and their parents is key to exiting protection procedures and to facilitating the return home of children and youth. For example, Cleaver [21] has indicated that the maintenance of the relationship is not a sufficient reason to promote the reunification, but that it is always essential to work with the parents on the problems that led to the child being placed in care.

Beside the needs of the child, it is also important to consider the needs of the adults, because their well-being or malaise has inevitable consequences on how and how much they are able to take care of the child, and on their degree of motivation to affect the change desired by the social workers. To improve the quality of everyday life of children in situations of risk or harm, the practitioners should support the parents in recognizing the need for change, in deciding how to make the necessary changes

and maintain the changes made [22]. In addition to the family members of the children, social work practices should also be able to pay attention to other subjects that are or may be an active part in the situation. The failure to consider the social network around the family or the child may indicate social work approaches that center primarily, if not exclusively, on the subject under protection, giving little importance to the surrounding social and relational environment.

In this regard, Bronfenbrenner argued that child protection social workers are required to consider the whole world of the child by adopting an ecological perspective [23]. The guiding principle of a democratic and participatory approach includes different work practices characterized and mobilized by certain principles: the family has the right and the responsibility to meet the needs of its children; the family has strengths and resources to help their children; and the family is provided with the opportunity to participate in the design and implementation of interventions in favor of the child [24]. This holds not only for the “normal” family, but also the “complex family, with problems”; the family that is plunged into a reality we call “discomfort” should be considered a resource, rather than a repository of institutional provisions and of professional clinical aid [25]. In the planning stage it is crucial that the family can meet the challenge of reworking its situation and plan a life project together with the practitioners. In the relational perspective social workers should agree to reschedule their professional spirit in contact with family, pursuing a shared reasoning [26]. With this in mind, the planning of interventions can only be understood under a shared point of view, in which families and experts work together towards a desired purpose of well-being. The same commentators note that people that face problems that affect their lives become experts by experience. This life experience gives a precious sensibility that could drive complex actions, even those of the professional [27].

For the purpose of a fruitful and true collaboration, the research conducted by Thoburn *et al.* [28] and then by Buckley [29] has shown the importance of information sharing between social workers and parents. The testimony of the latter has repeatedly reported experiences of poor communication, in which the professionals would have kept the information about their children secret. Again, with reference to the supportive relationship between service providers and families, the conclusions of a Canadian study [30], written by child protection service providers with the involvement of parents and professionals, have shown that professional interventions of the social workers should concentrate first of all on the gap between them and the parents, recognizing and legitimizing the fears that the latter could feel. The authors report that: “Parents reported responding to intervention in three ways: ‘fighting’ through openly challenging and opposing practitioners in court; ‘playing the game’ by feigning co-operation; and working with services in what appeared to be genuine and collaborative relationships”. Most researchers do not include conflict between practitioners and parents as a variable, even though conflict is a frequent occurrence in everyday practice [31,32].

Again, with reference to collaborative practice, an Australian study [33] provides two key reflections regarding the operational practice of the social workers in child protection. The first is the lack of evidence that demonstrates that the practices of collaboration between social workers and parents are considered a goal or a result of the protection. The second concerns the twofold role of the social worker, commonly defined with the dichotomy “help and control”. The research explains how this can be experienced in a problematic way, not only for professionals, but also for parents, since for the latter the operator is the only source of support and at the same time the person that removes the child from their home. In this study, the parents identified trust as an essential component for a successful

supportive relationship with social workers, and explained that, in their opinions, it strengthens and consolidates itself by feeling respected, appreciated, and kept informed about their children.

Other research has been undertaken regarding attitude and power on the role of social workers in child protection, bringing to light that work practices that are respectful towards parents have never been common in social work services [9,34,35]. Some authors [36] have dealt with this specific subject, and claim that in complex situations of child protection the power of the family has to be restricted and valued at the same time. In welfare systems the concept of power appears to not only be counterproductive but also paralyzing, harmful and disabling because it completely bypasses the individual, the relationship and the context [37]. Professional knowledge is associated with powers and privileges [38] and, regarding this, Senge [39] argues that it is not that people and families are reluctant to change but that people are loath to the idea of *being* changed. While acknowledging the importance of anti-oppressive practices aimed at empowerment, social workers should not act on behalf of the service user because of preconceived distrust, but wait for them to act, support it, and possibly provide feedback to direct it [40].

The involvement in decision making is not just about the relatives and the other important subjects within the situation, but also about the children themselves. According to Ferguson [41], achieving high quality child protection involves the skillful management of actively engaging with children and their environment. However, the idea of listening to children and making them an active part of the decision-making processes is not readily apparent in highly focused operational approaches and social work practices such as child protection. On the contrary, some authors [13] highlight the risks associated with a “child-centered” perspective that does not allow children to express themselves nor involves them in the decision-making process, but merely seeks to protect or assist them. In the context of research on children living in residential care, Montserrat [42] reported the satisfaction that the children expressed about being consulted on decisions that affected them, reporting unhappiness and anger instead when they perceive that they were not being listened to. They like to be consulted regarding possible decisions in the reviewing of their case and are unhappy when they feel they are not heard. They show concern at having a change of caregiver without being previously consulted and criticize professionals harshly for not being honest with them about the reasons for the change. According to Cleaver *et al.* [43] the key to protecting and promoting children’s well-being is the ability to understand their situation from their point of view.

3. Methodology

The research presented in this article is the result of two periods as a visiting researcher in the State of Nuevo Leòn as part of the project “Understanding and supporting families with complex needs” funded by the European Commission. The research was conducted by the Italian author of this article, in Spanish language. The author has a Ph.D. and is also an experienced social worker in child protection.

The goal was to understand how the Mexican child protection system engages families with complex needs through ethnography [44]. To this end, this qualitative research study used focus group discussions, interviews, shadowing, documentation and observations. Table 1 describes in detail the research activities carried out in the field in the relative goals.

Table 1. Summary table of research activities.

Method	Number of actions	Subjects	Goal
Shadowing	5 weeks	5 child protection social workers	Understanding work and practices of social workers
Depth interview	13	13 child protection practitioners (6 social workers, 2 psychologists, 2 lawyers, 3 care social workers)	Gathering practitioners' opinions about work criticality and potentiality
Focus group	3	6 child protection social workers	Collecting social workers' perceptions and opinions about work practices, in particular about help relationships with parents or relatives
Observation	2 group encounters on behalf of care social workers	A conductor (psychologist) and 10 care social workers	Collecting perceptions and opinions of care social workers
Depth interview	7	Parents/relatives of children and adolescents in home care institution (4 mothers, 1 grandmother, 2 fathers)	Gathering feelings and opinions about their child protection institution experiences as service users
Interview	6	Parents/relatives of children and adolescents in home care institution (3 mothers, 1 grandmother, 2 fathers)	Collect their opinions and experiences about the help process
Observation	3 group encounters on behalf of parents or relatives of children in residential care	The conductor (a social worker) and 5 participants	Observing the conductor role and the group dynamics. Collecting information about work process in progress
Focus group	3 group encounters with boys and 3 with girls	7 boys (10–13 years old); 6 girls (14–18 years old)	Gathering needs, feelings, wishes and thoughts of youth living in home care institution

All the interviews were tape-recorded for later transcription. Through shadowing it was possible to understand the reality of practice [45]. Focus groups allowed the different participants to elicit their feelings, attitudes and perceptions about selected topics [46], and allowed the collection of a lot of information in a short period of time, while the group interactions stimulated the richness and differences in meaning [47]. For various reasons, during the research, it was not easy to meet families and collect their viewpoint. They often did not physically attend the services, and, due to security reasons, it was not practical to visit their home autonomously. Furthermore, the professionals' engagements with families were not appropriate situations to undertake research, and some of the families showed an initial distrust in being asked to share their experience. To collect families' viewpoints it was necessary to attend institutions' official "open-door" days for families; for example, on the September 15th national holiday when Mexicans celebrate independence day, families can attend the party arranged within the service. Although only about fifteen parents were effectively present at the party (230 children were in residential care), attending these events enabled interviews with a selection of fathers, mothers and grandfathers of the children.

Children's views and participation have received the least attention in research [48]. Interviewing children and adolescents is perceived to be more challenging than interviewing adults [49]. However,

attracted by the presence of a foreign researcher and motivated by the possibility of satisfying their curiosity about a European country, during the focus group the interviewed children showed availability and openness, answering properly to the presented questions which were intended to gather some information about their experience in the institution, with references to positive and negative aspects and their future desires. Following the methodological approach of Corbin and Strauss [50], the transcripts collected through the focus groups were compiled and read, considering all possible meanings and examining the context carefully. After subsequent readings, elements of each narrative were labeled according to the identified construct. The interview schedule consisted of the following four main questions: “How are you feeling here?”; “Which are the positive and the negative aspects?”; “What are your desires for your future?” and “What is a family for you?” The first three questions were offered to both the groups of youth (one composed of boys and the other of girls), while the meaning of family has been researched only with adolescent girls, because they were older and more willing to deeply explore these issues. Given a reminder, in order to avoid any possible influence and support spontaneity and heterogeneity of opinions, the interviewed were first invited to write individually their answer on a post-it and to display it later and share it within the group. Finally, before the beginning of the focus groups, a step with the practitioners of the institution took place, in order to illustrate the goals of the work, to show the draft of the interview, and to receive instructions about the inappropriateness of using it with certain children. The referring operators stated no limitations about the work, only excluding children arranged in the ward of the structure of the interview used in the focus group.

The research design also involved an analysis of bibliographic and legislative material available on the topic of child protection and on major social issues present in the country.

The main scenarios in which the fieldwork was carried out were both social services and home care institutions, la Procuraduría de la defensa del menor and the houses of families. All these places are located in the city of Monterrey.

4. Findings

4.1. Views on the Mexican Child Protection System

In this section a general overview of the Mexican child protection system will be presented. To follow, data will be presented divided by actors interviewed. Interviewees consistently suggested that the Mexican security system is sufficiently resourced to ensure children and adolescents have good living conditions in terms of primary needs; children in residential care are entitled to medical care, including specialist care (dentists, dietitians, pediatricians), school and job training courses, games and sports, artistic and cultural activities (workshops, cinema, daycare centers).

The distinctive features of the Mexican child protection system are found not only in a benefits welfare mentality, but also in hierarchical organization according to a strict separation of powers, roles and tasks. The three levels of the system (policy, management and field-work) are conceived with a top-down approach, with processes governed by bureaucracy, control and efficiency. In this perspective, the need for support tends to become chronic and permanent, with an emphasis on preventing acute need or crisis, rather than in supporting a family to address the underlying difficulty so that they might disengage from the aid [51].

Another important point repeatedly reported during interviews was an increase in recent years in the number of children in residential care due to their abandonment by parents because of serious poverty in order to protect them from involvement in conflicts related to drug trafficking. The principles offered by the relational methodology [52,53] and by a comprehensive and participatory approach to family in the perspective of Family Decision Making [24,54] appears distant.

In addition, another important issue reported by managers is that there does not yet exist a foster care system, and therefore the only solutions available for a child removed from the family are institutionalization, adoption, or placement with a relative (in most cases almost exclusively grandparents that in Mexico have the parental authority upon grandchildren along with parents). Specifically, a director of a child protection social service explained that five years earlier he had tried to start a process aimed at the development of foster care but, faced with the refusal of the legislator to legitimize it and with some cultural resistance, the whole process was halted. Interviewees explained that the lack of this form of alternative care noticeably affects the quality of professional practices, especially for children with no parents.

4.2. “Families Call Us Trampas”: The Voice of Mexican Social Workers Engaged in the Work with Families and Children

To get an idea of the reality of Mexican child protection, consider that in 70% of cases the residential care of children and adolescents occurs on the spontaneous request of the family. Workers reported this statistic and explained that most of these families have a strong social fragility resulting from a lack of literacy and education, unemployment or precarious employment, multidimensional poverty, and a lack of a parental support network to meet daily difficulties and the management of a crisis.

Social workers reported that economic and human resources are devoted to the large number of families who are in most serious need, as it is believed that the more affluent households have the economic, emotional and cognitive resources to refer themselves to consulting services or private therapy to resolve difficult situations.

The child protection professional team for each case consists of a social worker, a psychologist and a lawyer who serves as the child’s legal representative so as to ensure his or her rights are respected. The voices of practitioners highlighted that working in child protection is both emotionally and professionally demanding; they described various pressures of child protection practice on their personal lives. This confirms the idea that social workers need to have both human and professional attributes to sustain their child protection role.

The opinion of practitioners and what was observed in their work show a “child-centered” practice tendency, concentrated around the primary goals of protecting the child and guaranteeing good living conditions. During the weeks spent alongside the social workers it was possible to observe how, essentially, no real measures exist to help the parents and accompany them towards the improvement of their own capability and consequently towards a better family welfare. Weeks of shadowing in the field demonstrated that, in regard to the difficulties of families to effectively care for their children, social work practices are implemented that focus on the rights of children and young people in care: the goal expressed by practitioners is their protection and little importance seems to be given to recovery of parenting skills. In this sense practitioners separate the protection of the child from the

work with families with complex needs. The individualistic perspective that focuses energies and resources mainly on the child and does not extend its gaze to the entire family network deeply affects all work practices. In this regard, one practitioner reported that “*Situations are very difficult...we work with children, unfortunately parents almost never are able to change*” [55] and explained how often the strong level of prejudice causes the removal of children from families as the only option that can be offered to the child to guarantee his or her well-being.

Practitioners appear focused mainly on parents’ vulnerabilities rather than on their strengths. For the practitioners, the recourse to child residential care represents a solution for the children, while their “wrong parents” continue to be considered irredeemable. The opinions of practitioners reflect few hopes for parents and confirm the lack of a comprehensive and participatory approach for families. From this perspective it’s difficult to imagine a positive experience of support for families with complex needs. The aim of supporting a child, as recognized by the Mexican legislative framework, is unthinkable and unrealizable without a substantial engagement of parents or relatives. Although the importance of anti-discriminatory practices in social work is officially recognized, this study shows that this principle is not always respected. Mexican child protection legislation embraces a model of intervention on behalf of families with complex needs that is more democratic than the reality of social work practices.

4.2.1. Social Work Practices

Observing social work practices, the professional evaluations tend to focus almost exclusively on how parents fulfil their parental roles and tasks, rather than on their personal and social difficulties. The workers dedicate their energies to needs evaluation and to child protection procedures (the latter sometimes enacted even in the absence of certain elements or evaluation), which are implemented rigorously and promptly. Once the child or the adolescent is in care, little time appear to be dedicated to working with the families. In reality, even the assessment process itself takes an individualistic perspective: on arrival at the service (either because they are summoned or forced through police intervention) children and parents or responsible relatives are received separately by different professionals, and the assessment process unfolds through interviews and medical examinations that do not include the simultaneous presence of child and relatives. The impression this leaves is that, once the child is in care, the family continues to be seen mainly from the point of view of its dysfunction and poor chances of recovery or change.

Whilst social workers carry out home visits to the family’s home, this intervention is used in an unusual manner compared to the traditions of social work. Except for situations of extreme urgency, when law enforcement agents accompany the social worker to the residence in order to immediately remove the child, or when the family goes directly to the social service to ask for the child’s residential care, the home visit represents the first contact between the workers and the family. Given the great distances that characterize the city of Monterrey, the workers on shift dedicate an entire day to home visits, leaving in the morning and returning at the end of office hours. Furthermore, for security reasons, the procedure requires that home visits are always to be carried out in the presence of two social workers and with the help of a service vehicle.

The goal of home visits is to meet the family, summon them to the service through a convocation notice and gather information from the neighbors. Although called home visits, in reality, for security

reasons, the workers almost never enter the families' houses and instead invite the family to go out on the street, thus transforming the home visit into a brief interview on the street. By not entering the house, the workers cannot understand or evaluate the household environment or observe the family dynamics and, as a result, they do not have the opportunity to gather comprehensive information about the household through direct observation of the people's living environment and their interactions [56,57].

Again for security reasons, during that first meeting, the family receives only partial and generic information regarding the fact that the service has received a report. During this intervention, the service's practice requires that no further such information is shared with the family, often leaving them visibly perplexed or disoriented. Still in the context of home visits, often the social workers acquire information from neighbors. It was observed that the social workers, remaining at the door, ask neighbors questions about the household, the most common of which were: "How long have you been living here? Do you know Mrs...? Do you see her children? Are they well taken care of? Do they leave them at home alone? Do you see drunken people? Do you hear shouting and crying? Is there anything important we should know?"

During the home visits some neighbors, despite obviously being inside the house, refused to answer, some claimed not to know the family and others gave only vague information. Invited to examine this practice more in depth during the interviews, the social workers reported that this first contact with the neighbors is rarely followed by a second one; one could therefore say that the social workers "invade" the family space by obtaining summary information from the neighbors and noting it on the file, but then they never see the neighbors again during the process and rarely consider them as natural sources of potential support to the family. On the contrary, it is conceivable that turning to the neighbors in this phase of the process, and without having first discussed the situation with the family, could influence negatively their informal relations, causing conflicts and increasing the level of distrust and insulation of people. In exercising this practice, the workers seem to be primarily driven by the desire to acquire information on the child, while the domestic, the relational and the social dimensions are neglected. The practice seems to have as its "object" the removal of the child, and not the relationship that bonds him with his family and social network. Fostered by the system's hierarchical logic that marks the relational asymmetry between the family's world and the world of the professionals, the individualistic approach adopted by the latter and by the organizations they belong to seems to focus all actions and all energy on the child and therefore his surroundings are cut out or considered of secondary importance.

In the case of parents with mental health problems, addictions or other problems for which they would require personalized help by a specialized service, the workers give the family a phone number and an address they can turn to, but no networking is done between the different services and neither is the person accompanied during the visit so as to receive help.

4.2.2. Defensive Attitude of the Social Workers

From the information gathered it emerges that social workers maintain an attitude that Banks [58] would describe as "defensive": that is, an attitude aimed at executing the procedure by the letter and at fulfilling their duties and responsibilities as defined by the authority and by the law. In this case, doing one's professional duty means fulfilling their obligations towards the institution rather than taking the

ethically correct action. With this professional approach, personal values and institutional values tend to remain separated and, when acting as a social worker, the latter are usually adopted. During the moments of exchange (even informal) with the workers, a divergence could be observed between what they think of the profession (agreeing on values and principles) and what they put in practice with the families (generally, a rigid, unwelcoming and not very thoughtful behavior). Observations of their practice suggest that the dominating trend is based on welfare practices marked by asymmetrical relationships of power, without the empowerment or the participation of those directly concerned and far from the ambitious goals set out in government regulations that speak of aiding all members of the family in difficulty. There is ample evidence in the literature [59,60] of the sort of oppression which can be experienced by parents who are caught up in the child protection system: in terms of Mexican social work practices, the service users are not considered as partners in an aid project and, in a large number of cases, they are not even heard. The system's organization that weighs on the workers' shoulders seems to be determined by a logic that causes effects of disempowerment in which the families are left impotently looking from the outside at what is happening with their children, and the social workers are forced to question the aid relationship with the families, but also their relationship with the organization, to the point that they appear to act more defensive rather than reflective social workers. The representation that the professionals give of their work is one of executioners of an institutional mandate; however, the interviewed workers suggest that these procedures are not seen as a limit to their professional efficiency, but rather as a form of guidance and protection with regards to both the complexity of the situations and the responsibility for the workers' own actions towards the families and towards the organization itself. Little room seems to be left to the individual's initiative, to the valorization of professional creativity, to the independent search for improvement: the workers themselves claim to be looking for a work practice change, but from their narratives suggest a substantial difficulty in imagining a different system and the idea of change generates feelings of fear.

From the interviews with the social workers there emerged feelings of dissatisfaction, fatigue and frustration related to their work. The fear of not being a "good enough" social worker was identified as an issue by some participants, particularly the younger social workers, who suggested that they had little time for reflections on their approach and their own abilities.

During the focus groups on the issue of perceptions of working with families and children, various professionals strongly argued the need for change, referring in particular to three aspects. The first point they indicated covered the issue of responsibility. A social worker said:

"I have a question which I cannot answer...it's the question of responsibility for these children...how far does mine reach and how far does that of the parents? I mean, how much of what happens or of what doesn't happen to these children is my responsibility?" [61].

These words express the difficulties of practitioners to work in challenging situations without clarity about their boundaries of personal and professional responsibilities. They have lost their own frameworks for making sense of their practice. In absence of this awareness, with regards to their interventions, it's difficult to imagine efficient practices able to support the parents without weakening their abilities and responsibilities and reducing the dependency of families on state-provided services.

A second point to consider, raised by some workers, was related to working with the families:

“...we need to start working out the life plan of the child with the family as well...we cannot continue to do that by ourselves...it is difficult to talk about the life plan with the families, but I think it would be important to do so...it is important to know if they are okay with that...or if they want the child to return home...” [62].

This point raised by some social workers suggests the potential to encourage and support this idea of dialogue and cooperation with the families. According to Heino [49], listening to service users is part of social work both in a practical and theoretical sense. The more important intuition is that if the goal is the return of children to the family home, it's essential to “mend the gap” between practitioners and families, constructing together projects or plans. In the Mexican context this could represent a valuable change of perspective but requires support through adequate training.

A third point that emerged was related to the influence of problems related to organized crime on the practices, in particular with regards to the situation of a child whose family is involved with organized crime:

“These cases are increasing...The other day a father left a child outside the gate, saying that the child would've been killed if it were to stay with him...How can we work in such cases without putting in danger ourselves, the children and the family members themselves?” [63].

The social problems related to the conflict of the drug war affect social work practices and above all feelings and attitudes of the practitioners. This social problem directly affects the country increasing the level and the perception of insecurity, needs and complexity. The imagery of incidents occurring can intrude into the professional perspective. Practitioners' attitudes reflect the way that the system attempts to deal with the violence. In particular, the question raised by the workers required the development of new strategies, including the work of several actors engaged in facing this considerable problem.

With regard to these three topics, which emerged in the course of a focus group, there is a constant concern expressed by the workers regarded feelings of fear at the idea of change:

“I think I want to change something...sure...I believe it's necessary...the families call us Trampas...but if we want to change the way we work and we don't know what needs to be changed...we can't do it tomorrow...and how? This scares me a lot” [62].

With regards to the approaches that in the literature [58] are recognized as facilitating the relationship between users and professionals, such as not emphasizing one's status as an expert, carrying out home visits, and keeping in regular contact with the service users, it was established that, in an examined context, these practices are not implemented. Clearly there is a link between the system and the social work practices. The child protection context appears defensive, as, at least in part, are the narratives of social workers from this field of practice. Adopting a defensive attitude, social workers run the risk of omitting the parents' perception of the situation and any areas of resilience which may be positively developed through support. To act in a unilateral manner means that the subjective perceptions of people are irrelevant.

4.2.3. Las Encargadas

Inside the institution, the daily support workers for children and adolescents are “Las Encargadas”, roles that we could compare to professional caregivers in residential care, but that, in Mexico, lack a recognized degree. “Las Encargadas” take shifts in caring for the children. However, there is a lack of connection between them and the rest of the professional team; not recognized as professionally equal to the other workers, “Las Encargadas” do not take part in meetings and do not have direct contact with psychologists or social workers, unless authorized by their coordinator. During the interviews, “Las Encargadas” also reported that they are not supposed to meet the child’s family:

“...we never meet the families, we don’t know them because when taking care of the children, we shouldn’t be influenced by what their parents say or by what we think of them...for example, we could get angry with them for what they made the children go through...we take care of the children and that’s all...that’s our job” [64].

This indicates firmly the impossibility for the parents to participate in the children’s educational issues, because they are not supposed to know the people who take daily care of their children. In addition to the lack of opportunity for communication, participation and collaboration between workers and families, this practice also negatively influences the reasoning with which “Las Encargadas” perform their tasks, creating negative mental pictures of “bad” or “inadequate” parents, and pathologizing children’s situations of living in adverse family contexts [48]. It is interesting to note how some Encargadas undertake these care tasks with the desire to make a difference in the lives of the children they have worked with. This inspiration to produce positive changes emerged from social workers’ voices too, and is often what encourages practitioners to adopt a child-centered perspective characterized by asymmetric power relationships, lacking the empowerment and engagement of parents. For children and adolescents, these influences could moderate their possibility to express freely their feelings and wishes, and to feel fully accepted with their grievous family stories.

4.3. “It’s Like This, They Decide Everything”: The Voice of Relatives

The national law “*Ley de asistencia social*” invites the social services system to develop actions aimed at empowering the exercise of responsible parenthood so as to guarantee the protection of the rights of children and the fulfillment of their physical and mental needs. Article 12 of the law “*Ley para la protección de niñas, niños y adolescentes*”, issued in 2000, maintains the principle that, when children and parents do not live in the same place, this does not relieve the latter from their parental duties. In the same law, chapter seven, titled “*Del derecho a vivir en familia*”, explains that the lack of financial resources and situations of poverty cannot justify the separation of children from their parents and further declares that families are to be provided with support programs so that the lack of resources are not the direct cause of separation. The recourse to residential care for children should not therefore represent the typical solution to families in poverty or with complex needs. It should be an extreme solution and if necessary it should be for a limited time period. Furthermore, the recourse to residential care for children should not exclude the participation of parents in their children’s education. Notwithstanding this law, however, the trend of the Mexican child protection system appears not only

mainly focused on the recourse to institutionalization in response to child protection and to families with complex needs, but also characterized by the exclusion of parents or relatives.

Article 7.2.2 of the 2010 national law “Asistencia social. Prestación de servicios de asistencia social para niños, niñas y adolescentes en situación de riesgo y vulnerabilidad” encourages the promotion of parents’ participation in the support and protection process of children placed in permanent or temporary residential care. However, counter to this, the voices of parents and relatives surface feelings of rage, shame and impotence; what really happens during the interaction with families and parents seems to deviate from what is recommended by the law.

The elements observed and the testimony of parents and families of children in care give the perception that parents seem to “wait on the outside” of the project, often with incomplete explanations or any possibility to effectively take part in action, not truly understanding what is happening to their child. Furthermore, while the child’s legal representation is guaranteed through a lawyer who acts in his or her interest within each professional team, the family does not obtain any trusted or public defense. The deficiency in the relationship between families and practitioners, and the existing distance between regulatory guidelines and practical abilities seem to be blamed on the system, on the individual professional perspective of the practitioners. Parents and families do not participate in the project for the children and are not considered as partners to better the situation and to improve the well-being of the family. Dumbrill [30] explained that there are three ways adopted by parents in responding to professional interventions: (1) “fighting” through openly challenging and opposing workers in court; (2) “playing the game” by feigning co-operation; and (3) working with services in what appears to be genuine and collaborative relationships. In the observed context there emerged another reaction: the Mexican families seem to respond to professional practices through a passive position rather than openly fighting, a fake co-operation or a genuine collaboration.

The interviewees had significant experience as service users and their children were in care for a minimum of two and a maximum of 8 years, with an average of 5 years. Among the interviewed people, some had spontaneously requested the residential care for children, while for others it had been forced upon them. The former group reported that they had done so mostly for economic issues (loss or lack of a job or a house) or to guarantee protection to the child in respect to an armed conflict; the latter group reported others problems, such as the demise of the partner or for the extreme aggressiveness and difficulty to manage the child. As it occurs in Western welfare contexts, the majority of the motivations that lead to a child placement in a residential service are therefore attributable to issues that do not have anything to do with the child, but are instead imputable to family relations and individual problems of the parents. The initial incentive given to the families I met was to share their experience in the child protection service; they expressed both positive and negative aspects. What they identified as positive was the concrete help activated by the service in favor of their children or grandchildren, showing confidence regarding the ways in which they are taking care of them daily, in some cases comparing the experience with the one in other institutes where children were mistreated.

“My two kids live here...they have food, they go to school and to the doctor...and I’ve asked to keep them here until the end of primary school...I think they’re doing good here...I’m fine because I know they are treated well...I’m alone and it’s fair that they help me...they’re helping my kids more than me...they’re growing up well...” [65].

Although they often expressed gratitude to the institution or to the state for its duty to help its citizens, according to the families, significant critical elements were also apparent. The main problems have been attributed to the lack of communication with practitioners, the partial understanding of the path in action, the difficulty in getting information about their child, not knowing what would happen in the next few months, and the slowness of projects in terms of time. Referring to this, even if they express a wish to meet with practitioners, parents described the project as something unrelated to them, rendering them powerless in relation to it. The picture they drew fits with the idea of the lack of involvement by families. Some parents described this powerlessness, through verbalized anger and dissatisfaction, while others seem to have adapted, assuming a passive waiting position. Parents seem to be limited in their “sense of agency”. The Mexican child protection system seems to underestimate the parents’ right to define what a good life is for themselves and their children.

“What I don’t like is not knowing for how long my daughter has to stay here...they think I’m toxic but what they didn’t like is that I’m in a relationship with a woman...one afternoon they took her away...she stayed three years at another institution...it was better for her there, because they gave her clothes...now she’s been here for four years...in these four years I only had two interviews with the social worker...the last one was a month ago...things got better just because I got close to the Church...they told me my daughter should come back home but I don’t know when and how...sometimes I think they want to keep children in here...sometimes they let them out only to give them to another family...” [66].

As was evidenced by this mother, parents reported that contacts with practitioners were unexpected and underline their passive and weak positions in the aid relationship. It was striking that some of them said that they had never had an encounter or interview in the last two years, others experienced one interview *per* year and others had interviews only at the beginning of the process or at the gate of the institution after visiting the child. For some parents the main questions they wanted to be answered were about how long the child was to stay in the institute, while for others this is a secondary concern related only to an exclusively contractual aspect, as emerged from the voice of this grandmother:

“I brought my grandchild here and I made a deal with them...we agreed three years, today we’ve extended to 5 years...” [67].

The lack of clarity regarding the care for child places the parents in subordinate roles and reduces the chance to adopt a reflexive and open approach to work in partnership with the professionals. Furthermore, making a decision about a long time period of institutionalization means that for the same parents and relatives it is not easy to imagine a positive change in their families and to have confidence in the future. Most of the parents did not have access to the residence where the children live and had never met the people (*las Encargadas*) who take care of them daily or the volunteers known as “*Padrinos afectivos*”².

² This is a volunteer (man or woman) who is assigned a child or youth, becoming a reference point for them. The relationship involves regular visits to the child at the institution, taking an interest in the child’s life and interests, offering time and a listening ear. The arrangement is established and managed by the institution and parental consent is not required. It’s possible to translate “*Padrino afectivo*” to “godfather”.

“My three kids are here...they’ve been parted from their mother for four years, she had drug issues and we were separated...it didn’t end up well for her...she was killed...I don’t know how long the kids have to stay here...I made the drug test, they asked me to do but they don’t tell me anything about what they do with them...they could live with my mother...I don’t have a house or a job...they were living in another institute in Guadalupe...I went there one day, and they were not there anymore...they brought them here but I don’t know why...no one tells me anything...I ask to talk with them and they tell me to wait but no one comes...only the lawyer came to me and asked me to sign a paper so that the children could go to another family...I didn’t sign, I don’t know who they are...but I don’t even know why they can’t get out with me or my mother...it’s like this, they decide everything...” [68].

In these complex situations, the parents seem to be denied the chance to gain control, to heighten critical awareness and to stimulate a conscious involvement. Another important aspect that came to light from the stories told by the interviewees is regarding their feelings towards the professionals; even if they are grateful to the institution that takes care of their child and guarantees answers to material needs, stories of anger, shame and mistrust toward the professional have emerged. According to Schlink [69], the shame leads to deviant or defensive behaviors that are reticent, deceptive or damaging. Poor relations with social workers often risk increasing the sense of shame that people from the most vulnerable sections of society already have, as well as feelings of being ignored, misunderstood and unheard. Kaufman [70] observed that shame inhibits verbal communication. From the story of a grandmother, whose granddaughter is in an institution, it emerged that joining a group (“Escuela para padres”³) has permitted and simplified the communication with the social worker.

“I like going to the group...I thought it would be harder...I thought it would bother me the presence of the social worker but it’s not like this...at least we can talk, the group and the social worker consider my views” [71].

From these words emerged a lack of self-confidence in being at ease with others, being able to engage with them, or having something to offer to them. Dynamics and positive effects of this kind are well known in groups, and especially mutual-aid groups. In order to develop supportive interventions that are more democratic and based on the resources of the parents and families, professional actions could be designed so as to support families to interact. Another aspect that emerged from the voices of parents or relatives is the subject of the power. The relationships between practitioners and families seem to be characterized by asymmetric power. In the current child protection social work practices, the rights and the power of parents (meant as the chance to be in disagreement, to express opinions or wishes, to share decision making) appear excessively restricted. These restrictions impede dialogue, cooperation and positive outcomes for all. Social workers do not have a reputation for valuing family and the spirit of family life. From the voices of parents, the impression is that practitioners directly help the children and bypass the families.

³ The translation is “School for parents”. It’s a training group for parents and relatives.

4.4. *“Maybe My Family Is This Care Institution”: The Voice of Youth in Home Care Institution Fluctuating between Boredom and a Need for Protection*

Institutions support children of the State of Nuevo León in the duration of the period of residential care. For some institutions the period ranges from 1 to 3 years of stay, for others between 3 to 6 years, and for some the period of stay extends until adulthood. The boys and girls interviewed all told of long periods spent living in residential care, with durations varying between 4 and 16 years; some could not provide exact information because they were unable to remember the year of their entrance. For some, their home prior to alternative care had been with their own family unit or with relatives, while for others it had been another institution. Feelings of boredom and monotony were a common thread in the experiences of interviewees who mentioned the difficulty of living in the same place for a long period of time, simultaneously expressing a need for protection from the outside world, which is seen as frightening and dangerous.

“Sometimes I get bored and feel like a prisoner here. I’d like to walk through that gate more often, nothing new ever happens here...I always see the same people. It’s dangerous outside though, there are people carrying weapons so I think it’s safer for me to stay here...though sometimes I feel a bit worried in here, too...but outside, I feel extremely worried...like, 100% worried” [72].

The young people’s feelings about their life in residential care demonstrates an acceptance of their surroundings, which they talk about unenthusiastically, lacking positivity, while at the same time acknowledging it as a better experience than earlier ones, partly due to the significant need for protection expressed. The need for protection has been linked to violent situations in the outside world, but the same sensation seems to be linked to their personal life experiences. These negative experiences could have structured a feeling of insecurity, danger and suspicion, only in part related to the actual social situation. They reported the satisfaction for the absence of danger and maltreatments rather than care and well-being.

“I feel safe here, dangerous things happen outside that are pretty scary...they’re difficult to explain...Nobody hurts you here, it’s never happened to me...no, no one has ever hurt me here...you feel safe, and that can be a good thing” [73].

This is in contrast to previous research [74] which has shown that children who have experienced domestic violence, once protected, begin to realize what they have lost, but without underestimating the value of feeling secure. In describing the positive aspects of their actual care, some young people have identified the possibility of access to material goods as beneficial, while others recounted experiences of an emotional nature.

“It’s not bad here...maybe it’s not good either, but better than when I was in another institution...I have more freedom here...oh, and another thing: I like the food here...yeah, the food is good and I have more friends...I like the other kids or I wouldn’t be here...I might even be given a stereo soon!” [75].

From the voice of this boy emerged the topic of freedom, frequently limited by the organizational set-up into the care institutions. His thoughts call attention to wishes for normality (for example having

friends or listening to music) and the words “I like the other kids or I wouldn’t be here” highlights possible supportive and mutual relationships between the adolescents. In these contexts, which can often lack close and personalized relationships, to have peer-to-peer understanding is clearly important for one’s well-being. Young people report using informal support by talking to their friends living in the institution. To maintain or create well-being it is necessary to preserve personhood: that means being in a relationship based on attention and reciprocity. For adolescents in care this is not a simple issue and is often underestimated by professionals, as evidenced in previous research [49]. The flaw is that what is best for any child or even children in general is often indeterminate and speculative: the opinions collected during the focus groups underlined that taking care of children requires a highly individualized choice between possible alternatives. The decisions for children seem to be based on rational reasoning more than subjective needs.

The topic of close relationships recurs in a discussion of negative aspects:

“One of the negative things is I feel lonely, there’s no one in here you can trust...the caregivers have favorites...they never listen to me, they’re unfair...sometimes I talk to myself” [76].

This girl suggested a lack of special, close relationships within the context of the care home, in particular in reference to care workers. Some girls seem to have lost trust in others or they fear that social workers will not be able to help them. They think that social workers have leeway in exercising discretion in giving weight to differing arguments and consideration when making decisions on their interest.

When encouraged to identify the negative aspects of their experiences in residential care, the adolescents also frequently referred to the monotony and limitations of an environment characterized by repetitive, standardized routine.

“I don’t have much space in here...we don’t get out much...I always see the same faces and the same things always happen...every day...no, Christmas is different...it’s my favorite day...but everything else is always the same in here” [77].

4.4.1. Looking to the Future

When encouraged to imagine a positive future, the dreams of the adolescents interviewed involved various aspects such as meeting their parents, creating their own family, receiving visits and/or presents, and seeing new places. When prompted, a few related these dreams to difficult moments experienced with their family of origin and the lack of contact with their relatives, although they were not directly encouraged to do so. For example:

“On Christmas Day my mum set fire to our house, that’s why I don’t want to see her anymore...I have lots of relatives but none of them have ever come here...but I hope to have a family of my own soon...yes, one of my goals is to have a boyfriend and later a family” [75].

“My wish is easy to guess, it’s what I think about every day...it’s to meet my parents, learn who I am...I don’t know anything about them, they told me my grandmother beat me and

it was too dangerous for me to live at home, but I don't know anything about my parents...it would be right for me to know, wouldn't it? I want to know!" [76].

Amongst the hopes expressed by the children, the theme of the absence of family visits consistently emerged. Children interviewed expressed feelings of resignation, while voicing in a hopeful tone the request to be assigned a "Padrino afectivo". Feelings of resignation could be linked to fears of the idea of being rejected by other adults. The young people displayed defensive behaviors, probably to protect themselves from other frustrations.

Another significant concern expressed related to a preoccupation with planning for the future. Article 12 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* outlines the rights of children to express their views in decisions affecting their lives. There are positive benefits for children who are afforded this right, as evidenced by several authors [42,43].

The overall impression emerging from the interviews is that the inclusion of children's views in projects and decision making is still partial. The child's perspective should be the basis for any decision about a child's best interests. Their opinions express a state of uncertainty about the future and a passive waiting position. Although the approach of the Mexican system affirms the intention to put the child in the center of the protection project, in practice there are clearly difficulties with the process of engaging with the child. The wishes of interviewed adolescents provide messages to support the development of engagement with children in their protection processes.

"A wish...What I want is a godfather or godmother...I'd prefer a godfather...yeah, better...we could play football...I wish Chui⁴ was my godfather, he's already godfather to a girl! I'm waiting for some other godfather, they have to look for someone, then we have to meet and get to know each other, and if it doesn't work out they'll look for someone else...in some cases it takes a long time...at first I didn't want a godfather because my brother was supposed to take me away from here, but they killed him in prison...so now they're looking for a godfather or a godmother for me...I'm sick of waiting" [75].

"I want to leave here with my mother, but she doesn't want me...I'm waiting for a godfather, someone I can talk to and come and pay me visits...someone who comes when he says he will, of course, my mother brought me here and told me I would only have to stay for a few days while she looked for a job, but I never saw her after that and she never came to visit me on Saturdays...a godmother would maybe come and later I could go live with her" [77].

From these voices emerged boredom: they have lost trust with their families and the wait for caregivers. Imagining these care persons, the adolescents interviewed spoke about common wishes (such as having some to play football with) but at the same time they focused on relational aspects, visualizing idealized figures unable to disregard their wants. This could represent a critical aspect in establishing restorative relationships or in developing positive experiences.

When answering this same question about the future, a number of adolescent girls expressed the desire to leave and see new parts of the world, or to continue pursuing their education:

⁴ He is a social worker in a child protection service.

“I know what my wish is, I’ve had it for three years now...I want to go to Paris with someone...it doesn’t matter who...I’d like to jump on a plane and go. I also have another wish: I’d like to become a beautician” [75].

Interviewees, made numerous references to painful, personal experiences.

“My brother...I want him to be alive...he was in a home care institution and then he disappeared. I haven’t seen him in three years, nobody knows anything but I can feel he’s alive. He’s 11 years old now I want to see him, but more importantly I want to know he’s alive” [76].

These words reflect the difficult situation in the Mexican child protection system, in particular with reference to the real problem of disappearance of children from residential care. This girl has been waiting for three years for information about her brother and from her story emerged an agonizing life experience. These complex situations could divert the practitioner’s focus from where it should be: on the children, their families and social network. The support mission could be to foster the development of positive actions to contrast the negative ones more than to shift blame on parents or relatives for past events. The pain and strain experienced by so many families should not be reduced to the visible damages. The system seems to be suffering a lack of mutual collaboration between various actors in the field and “victim/offender” logic could separate the possibility to work together, amplifying feelings of incompetence and closure. The complexity of families cannot be seen solely as a combination of catastrophe, but rather as a combination of negative events and an opportunity for a better family life.

4.4.2. The Dream of a Family

The mood and atmosphere generated during the focus groups with the teenage girls provided the opportunity for questioning regarding the girls’ idea of family. The responses to this stimulus brought out details of painful experiences and often linked to the topic of missed family visits.

“To me, it’s nothing good in mine, they beat me, they almost killed me...to me, family is the way you’re treated...if they treat you badly, they’re not family...I wasn’t happy” [77].

“Beautiful...without violence...the way you want it...my mother left home to look for her mother, and brought me here...I don’t know whether she’s still my mother, or whether she’s part of my family, she didn’t come visit me on Saturday, she only comes when she feels like it. I phone her and she doesn’t answer: it doesn’t hurt me anymore when she doesn’t come, I don’t know when she’ll be coming and when she won’t...but I don’t cut my arm when she doesn’t come, nor even a foot...I don’t even cry...well, I cry sometimes, but...I haven’t stopped studying because she doesn’t come, I don’t break a window because she doesn’t come...I’m not interested anymore...I stopped living with her when I was six months old...maybe this place is my family...” [78].

“My mum died of cancer, I don’t know my dad...I don’t know what to think about family...my grandmother treated me badly, she beat me and I didn’t like living with her...I think of family as...family is like having a controller...” [79].

From their testimonies, it appears that their experiences of living in residential care reflect aspects of custody and protection, rather than of care and education. The institution may be the first home some children have ever known. References are made to an appreciation of the material side of being sheltered (for instance, they acknowledge having a home, a bed, food, and physical safety as positive), which reflects their previous exposure to circumstances of deprivation and abuse. In referring to their own families, the children expressed feelings of abandonment in which differing coping mechanisms can be discerned, ranging between anger, defensiveness and disillusionment. The expression “family is like having a controller” refers to the need for protection from negative events or the need to receive boundaries from responsible adults able to raise children to take responsibility for their actions, attitudes and emotions. An evident connection to family reunification processes rarely emerged, probably because this is not an explicit goal or, because they do not perceive a change in parenting attitude or capacity. Although the theme of returning home is not expressed directly, hopes and demands are conveyed in the direction of substitute care figures such as the godfathers. The opinions and the life experiences of these adolescents underlined the need for alternatives and positive family patterns (for example, in family foster care).

The point of view and opinions of the young people have been clearly expressed, and their messages lead us firmly to the necessity of rethinking social practices to favor the participation of children and their families. Current social work practices, particularly the lack of collaborations between professionals and the families, produce different negatives effects for children in care. The overall impression is that the actual system seems to leave unaddressed the possibility of restoring and repairing familial relations. For children and adolescents, residential care appears to be the only way to safeguard their rights and so they are exposed to long term institutionalization, amplified also by the absence of family foster care. The chance to reconstruct a positive relationship with parents or relatives influences the possibility to establish further restorative experiences. The child protection system that weighs on the workers’ shoulders seems powered by a logic that puts the children “under care” rather than “in care”, adopting an approach that is far from a culture of advocacy. These elements cause effects of malaise and disempowerment in the children waiting for answers or decisions communicated by the practitioners. This long and passive wait could increase their feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, dissatisfaction and boredom.

5. Conclusions

To conclude, the main concepts arising from the statements of the people observed and interviewed during the research will be summarized. Child protection in Mexico appears to differ from, and in some ways even to contradict, international norms, particularly with regards to social work practices relating to empowerment, reciprocity and participation of service users. The research shows that relations between families and social workers are tense, sometimes even nonexistent, and generally tainted with shame, fear and inadequacy on both sides. The evidence seems to indicate that these feelings of unease are shared not only by parents and practitioners but by everyone else involved, including children in care. Lack of empathy aroused in practitioners, far removed from the necessary levels of care and understanding, may be caused by multiple factors, including: lack of faith in current work practices and in the system; rigid working rules applied; lack of training; general defensive reactions and high

levels of frustration leading to feelings of impotence. From the interviewees' accounts, we can deduce that there exists a vicious cycle of dissatisfaction involving not only the children and their families but also the practitioners themselves [80].

The prevailing individual work approach appears insufficient to keep together the voices, needs, demands and resources of all stakeholders. The opinions garnered from the fieldwork suggest practical recommendations highlighting the need to rethink the child protection system in a new, global and participative perspective in which practitioners are enabled and qualified to manage risks in a more considered manner [81]. This would imply the services' adoption of more open, flexible working practices based on an appreciation of the resources of parents and families, and a more communicative support process [81], beginning from the assessment. The professionals could act differently in these complex situations following the idea to share risks, projects, worries and hopes with the family members. Following this approach, rather than trying to calculate the incalculable, social workers need to regain their former status as "experts in uncertainty" [82]. Child protection needs to be rethought and reprogrammed as a shared challenge and this possibility requires the commitment of policy, management and practices levels.

The perceptions of difficulty articulated by workers and families, together with the adolescents' requests, open the door to possible change, calling into question both models and practices considered culturally indisputable until only a short time ago. Positive signs are emerging in relation to the debate on overcoming the concept of the "traditional family" and the dichotomy on the care of children, which has until now been played out between the state and the parents. From the valuable feedback from interviewees, it would seem the question of child protection has until now been based on two conceptual and operational alternatives: there is either the family (including extended family) or there is the state offering residential care. In reference to the idea of "co-constructing social work" [12], it's possible to affirm that there is little attention to children as active subjects and owners of rights.

From the elements observed, it emerges that the absence of foster care, towards which steps are slowly being taken, is connected not only to a legislative gap, but also to a cultural dimension and attributions of meaning that become attached to the notion of providing help to children and families with complex needs. The experiences of the various protagonists met in the field have given us feedback which should not be ignored in this crucial time in which the topic of child protection in Mexico is attracting growing interest in practical, managerial, political and educational contexts. Adequately supporting professionals in the field will provide good opportunities for sustainable supportive practices through new approaches and/or redirecting key aspects of traditional child protection interventions. A participatory approach not only has the potential to shift the balance of power between the professional world and the client families, but also the potential to democratize decision making within families [24]. Balancing practices with the discourse of rights and participation of children and families in decision making is the biggest challenge in the Mexican context; however, it is not an easy task to undertake for practitioners. Revised official procedures and guidelines, and above all a change in child protection culture is necessary to develop greater co-operation between agencies and families. As recognized in the literature, a greater challenge is to become able to conceive in a unified way the protection of the children and the support of their parents and families. For an accurate analysis it is important to keep in mind that the organizational framework of child protection

is heavily influenced by societal problems such as inequalities, violence, corruption, and discrimination, as well as the conservative ethos.

Social work education and training also has the responsibility to pursue the improvement and the development of the Mexican child protection system to a participatory approach. Crucially, social work education at qualifying and post-qualifying levels must show interest in this topic, acknowledging the obstacles faced by practitioners. Education and training could play an important role in stimulating reflexive practices and encouraging professionals to challenge the bureaucratic and individualistic dominances that can potentially occlude more democratic approaches.

The main ideas emerging from this study can be summarized in the following suggestions for reform to practices and policies:

- The recourse to children's residential care should not represent the primary solution to families with complex needs. It should be an extreme solution and if necessary it should be for a limited time period. The issue is not just regarding whether the host institutions are effective or not, but rather if there are alternative forms of support which are better suited to the interests of children. In order to limit the time of children in residential care, it is important to develop alternative care (such as foster care), but first of all it is important to work with parents and relatives. The real power of the child protection system and residential care for children is in figuring out ways to create the some kinds of change in families, not only in children.
- To work efficiently and positively with the families, it is important to offer to the practitioners adequate training and support, and to develop guidelines for action and social work practices based on empowerment and advocacy. At the same time it is important to consider that change is required not just in methods or practices but in the child protection culture.
- Collaboration between practitioners must be enforced, including with the caregivers of children in residential care who are not currently involved in the complex plan of care of children and adolescents. Without real cooperation, the effectiveness of practices remains partial and the care for children fragmented. Children in care need to receive holistic care, without contempt for their family background.
- It is necessary to break the hierarchical structures inherent in the Mexican child protection system, including addressing relationships between policy, management and practice field, and between the practitioners, and families and children. It is unclear when the word "risk" entered child protection discourse, but it is relatively easy to understand how its use superficially solves some of the more intransigent problems of child protection practices [83].
- Voices from the field suggest that it is time to encourage cooperation so as to enter into dialogue with service users towards a relational and dialogical practice culture. If the professional expresses her/his worry instead of placing the problem with the service user, child or family, dialogue will emerge. According to Parton [84], social workers should construct a process whereby the theory of how to help the practitioners is generated mutually. In this sense there is an openness to the service users' experience and engagement in a process that enables them to communicate.
- The Mexican context presents serious social problems that afflict families with children, increasing the level of needs and complexity. There is hope on the horizon. Academics and social workers

believe that the child protection system crisis could represent a new beginning in which to re-think approaches to supporting families with complex needs. To face the main difficulties a starting point could be address the concerns through dialogue, respecting the individuality of others, listening to all the voices, thinking together, and inviting responses [81].

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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