# The assembly of active participation by parents of children subject to a multi-agency model of early intervention in child and family services

## ABSTRACT

The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) provides a model of early intervention, which is familiar in local authorities throughout England, and asserts a participatory framework of child and family engagement. This paper is based on a qualitative study of parents and children who were subject to a multi-agency process of early intervention in children’s social care in a local authority in the Midlands of England. I advance the concept of assemblage to consider the basis of an active service user participation as rather more a struggle to achieve than something which has been granted by practitioner agencies. Interview extracts are used to show the enrolment and assembly of participation as a process of service users developing their active human agency in a multi-agency setting. The article explores the assembling of skills in administration and management of meetings and plans, accessing knowledge and expertise through service user networks, and challenging professional expertise and institutional space while developing personal qualities of confidence and voice as a means of marshalling an effective participation in a multi-agency setting.

Keywords: child and family social work, multi-agency working, early intervention, partnership/empowerment, service users

## Introduction

The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) provides a model of early intervention, utilised in many local authorities throughout England, and is based on a participatory framework of child and family engagement. This paper reports on a qualitative study of parents and children working with this, practitioner initiated, multi-agency process of early intervention in children’s social care in a local authority in the Midlands of England. Seven young people were interviewed and their accounts were subject of a previous paper (Anonymous). In this article I discuss the 20 interviews undertaken with 15 parents and one grandmother. These interviews offered rich data around themes relating to the experiences of parents. The paper reveals and explores service users assembling, skills, knowledge and personal qualities of confidence and voice, as a means of achieving an active participation in a multi-agency setting. The paper uses the concept of ‘assemblage’ to explore the profound challenges faced by service users working in multi-agency teams facing professional expertise and institutional space.

##### Early Intervention as a democratic, consensual model of practice

The early intervention role of the CAF was set out in the Every Child Matters agenda of the New Labour government in 2003, as a key plank of the social investment approach, with children’s futures at the heart of the programme (H.M. Treasury 2003). CAF adds an early intervention framework additional to statutory local authority *child in need* assessment and intervention, or *significant harm* thresholds, where practitioners identify criteria set by the Children Act 1989 for safeguarding intervention. The intervention is aimed at those children and young people with *additional needs* not met by universal service provision but deemed not to reach thresholds requiring statutory intervention.

The CAF comprises: a holistic common assessment codified in a universal form; a multi-agency forum or team around the child (TAC), consisting of a child or young person, and their parents; a lead professional, who will coordinate the assessment and the process; and as many relevant agencies as child, parent and the lead professional believe are necessary to carry out an effective action plan. CAF proposes a consensual child centred process, and practitioners are encouraged to see the child and parent’s close participation in the TAC as a crucial aim of the process (CWDC 2009; DfES 2005). Early research, however, questioned the extent to which the process was being implemented in a child centred way (Gilligan & Manby 2008b; Pithouse 2006). A common thread of findings running through research into the multi-agency CAF process has been the challenge experienced by practitioners facilitating a close engagement with parents and young people in a participative working partnership (Adamson & Deverell 2009; Brandon et al. 2005; Gilligan & Manby 2008a; Pithouse 2006; Jones 2007; Nethercott 2017). Against this background, research that questions the understanding of family practices and family perspectives and gives primacy to service users’ views, is relatively scarce (Morris 2013; Munford & Sanders 2015) ,and the first and largest CAF study examining the implementation of the process in 12 pilot authorities recommended a more service user or family focussed study of the process (Brandon et al. 2005).

Human agency and assembling participation

In this paper I advance the study of service users agency not as a static attribute defined in a code of practice or practitioner handbook but an struggle to assemble specific and necessary personal resources. This approach engages the concept of human agency as an emergent function of complex networks (Prout 2005; Lee 2001; Mannion 2007). Human agency in any context assembles, social ‘actors,’ including objects and technologies, laws and institutions as well as the more common focus on the reified and isolated actions and motivations of individual human participants. (Manning 2002; Ballantyne 2015; Stanley 2010; Hanson et al. 2016; Høybye-Mortensen 2014). Hóybye-Mortensen (2014) for example, examines the role of plastic laminated hard copies of the assessment framework as an ‘artifact’ used by social workers to explain their practice to service users in Denmark and discusses what this may tell us about the establishment of the professional legitimacy of social workers. While Ballantyne (2015) examines the influence of Skype as a tool in supervised contact arrangements and how the technology alters relational dynamics. This approach may also challenge a simple power opposition between professionals and service users if we consider the limitations and opportunities for these actors to act in mutual support or opposition, alone, or in alliance with others.

In the context of citizenship participation in community development settings Newman and Clarke (2009) examine politically active citizen groups seeking change in their communities, and apply the assemblage as a form of analysis to analyse the unique assembling of citizenship in different settings from ‘multiple projects, discourses, acts and identities’ (2009:68). They find a complex set of interactions and active agencies from individuals and groups negotiating power, not a simple binary of domination and resistance.

Similarly, this paper reveals the intersection of a diverse set of actors in a study of service user participation. The power of discourses, including institutional spaces, and forms of expertise, are actors along with the knowledge, skills and attributes of individuals, assembling the specific constraints and opportunities of multi-agency processes.

The work of Hall *et al.* and others, looks at the context of practice and, employing a discourse analysis, explores the language they have found used between practitioners and service users revealing the active construction of service user identities and roles in different social work settings (Hall *et al.,* 2003; Urek 2005). These writers suggest that with the specificities of each practice setting, a different form of service userhood is constructed. So, the implication is that within different social work settings we may expect to find particular issues for service users in terms of the role expectations, limitations and processes of participation and opportunities and risks of active engagement.

It is then important in this context that we consider the contextual impact of different spaces and related moral discourses of authority and expertise in assessing partnership as a relationship of practice in multi-agency settings (Moss 2006; Moss & Petrie 2002; Gallagher 2006; White 2003). For example an earlier paper developed from this CAF study considers the central role of the schools in CAF and how prevailing educational models of childhood in schools may have a role in both excluding young people from a child centred participation and exercising a moral critique of parents in relation to children with additional needs (anonymous). This education centred model of early intervention practice gains some support from other recent CAF research engaging practitioners across four LA’s in England (Nethercott 2017).

Examining the experiences of human actors in a multi-agency process needs to extend the notion of agency and participants to consider parents engagement in the CAF process as an assembling of, personal attributes, knowledge, and skills in a particular institutional space. It includes the possibility of both opportunity and limitation, the building of alliances and the possibility of exclusion through a complex network of actors.

## The study

This study was undertaken as a PhD research project in one local authority in the Midlands of England, between 2011 and 2015. In this local authority there is a lower than average representation of black and ethnic minority people within the community and all the participants able to be recruited were white families with a local cultural heritage. Twelve families were recruited through family support teams coordinating CAF work in the area. Amongst five single parent families, two were headed by fathers, and the others comprised heterosexual white couples. In recognition of the vulnerability inherent in this service user group ethical considerations were prioritised at all stages of the research. The project adhered to Economic and Social Research Council guidelines for researching vulnerable groups and was subject to research governance at university and local authority level. Families were recruited through family support workers who knew families well enough to ask if they would agree to an approach from the researcher and in some cases the worker attended an introductory meeting. The research explored the agency and participation of parents and children as individual family members and this article focusses on findings in respect of the parents. Findings in respect of the young people has been explored in an earlier piece (anonymous). NVivo data management and analysis software was employed to analyse transcribed interviews and draw out themes across the data. Drawings and charts drawn by participants and the researcher during interviews were used as reference points and triangulation in understanding the complex multi-agency context.

The fifteen adult carers were interviewed over 2 separate interviews ranging between 60 and 120 minutes. Nine of the families had previous involvement with children’s social care. Three of the families had previous experience of attending child protection case conferences and having been subject of a child protection plan. Numbers of agencies engaged in the CAF at any one time ranged from 3 to 14.

The reasons for the early intervention work cited by practitioners during the recruitment process, tended to be congruent with those narratives offered by parents. Reasons ranged from one 17-year-old care leaver expecting a child; family support after child protection investigation into a six-year old’s allegation of physical abuse; young carer support; parental mental health; school non-attendance; autism, and challenging behavioural issues from young people at home and school. Generally, lead professionals and parents identified a range of child related and background family related troubles and concerns. Four of the young people had experienced non-attendance at school as a matter directly addressed by the CAF. All the CAF Meetings, aside from one where the young person had left school, were held in schools and there was commonly more than one member of school staff in attendance.

## The Findings

This section provides an analysis of parents’ experiences of CAF by identifying themes and outlining their appearance using interview extracts. The intention is to explore the range of responses and kinds of engagement with CAF that service users described and consider the implications for understanding and theorising service users’ agency within the context of the multi-agency model. First, I discuss data dealing with enrolment in the CAF before considering activity under themes of; administration, knowledge and experience; voice and learning to be assertive, and bad parents. The discussion section of the paper considers in greater depth the challenges of taking part and developing the role of the service user as an active participant in the multi-agency process.

Enrolling service users: A consensual process?

In most of the cases in this study respondents appeared relatively uninformed as to the detail of the CAF process practitioners were guided by.

I mean we didn’t know what a CAF meeting was. Didn’t know who these agency people were. It wasn’t explained to us. We were told, ‘CAF meeting, we’ll arrange this meeting for you to come in.’ We didn’t even know it was a CAF meeting for the first one. They said: ‘Got a meeting. We need to talk about her education.’ So we turned up. There’s a teacher there. The headmaster was there. The SENCO (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator) was there, and this other lady. We didn’t know who she was or anything. [We were given] very little information about what we were supposed to do and what our rights were, and what our rights weren’t, and who these various government agencies were that were going to come in. And we had to learn right from the start. And it was difficult. (Step-father, Grant)

In this example, Grant suggests that in entering into this process what they felt they needed but lacked, was information about process, knowledge about their rights, information about the agencies and roles, and finally, a recognition that they were engaged in a learning process where they were starting at a significant disadvantage.

There was a positive response from some families where the introduction of CAF was described in terms of an offer of help and support. In those cases, respondents showed that when there was clarity and understanding, trust could form relatively quickly, despite difficult circumstances. Mother, Sharon, who came to CAF after a child protection assessment by social workers, explained she had welcomed what she took as a genuine offer of support.

She said well what is it you want to do? So I says: ‘I want to improve on these.’ and we just worked it through together. Yeah, we just clicked straight away with her.

In this case there is an experience of partnership between Sharon and her keyworker, which facilitates Sharon’s sense of ownership of the CAF agenda.

One single parent mother, Liz, got off to a rocky start after a health practitioner and a nursery referred her to social services with a safeguarding query. The outcome of the referral was a visit from a family support worker, Helen.

She says, ‘we've got to stay in your life now, as a support worker, or it's social services’. I didn't have a choice about it, and it's like, if I didn't work with Helen, I would have been reported to social services, even though I had nothing to hide, and I've got nothing to hide, you know.

Liz demonstrates the leverage over consent that can be applied by practitioners where families are close to safeguarding thresholds bordering more statutory referral processes, and statutory social work safeguarding interventions may be feared.

The role and function of administration

All of the parents discussed the need for some basic administrative practice in keeping records of meetings and agreed plans, and keeping a diary for appointments. Pam relied on emailed records to keep track of actions and minutes from meetings. She kept track using her smart phone:

You see this is the format it comes in. That’s the action, cos she (family support worker) writes on there, and this is school updates, and Jo (family support worker) takes notes of what everyone said, ‘Tom made the decision the day before that he did not want to go to the TAC (CAF meeting).’ She writes little things like that. Now I’ve got go doctors get Tom an appointment and get him referred to CAMHS (child and adolescent mental health service) again, now, that’s to be done before the next meeting, yeah?

Pam was positive about the working relationship she had with her family support worker who was the lead worker for her son’s CAF. The organisation and record keeping in the CAF was something she was appreciative of, giving her a record of what agencies said at the meeting and what the action plan was at any given time. Her appreciation of her family support worker includes how well her administrative practice offers clarity and accountability to the CAF process.

Other respondents were less happy with the record keeping in their CAF arrangement, and it was common for respondents to be vague or unaware as to whether anyone was keeping or circulating minutes or plans after meetings. Another set of parents, Maggie and Ged, referred to notebooks and ‘bits of paper’ as an emblem of both expertise and control of the agenda.

These people come in with their books and their ideas and their bits of paper about what they think you should be doing and have no idea what your life is really like.

Now, we go in with lists with a notebook and say, ‘no, this is what we want done, this is what we’ve done, this is what you were supposed to do last time, it’s still not been completed, why?’

Despite Grant and Audrey’s concern over the lack of minutes from CAF meetings chaired by their daughter’s school SENCO, they, like other parents, did not challenge the underlying assumption that the responsibility for minutes; their preparation and distribution, lay with the professionals. Control over records was an element of official control in all cases. The practitioners were the carriers of the CAF process, from CAF episode to CAF episode, from case to case.

We asked and asked and asked for the meeting minutes, and we never got a thing. And so did other people in the meetings ask: ‘I haven’t done my minutes yet. I haven’t done my minutes yet. Oh, haven’t yet.’ That’s all we got. (Audrey)

Gathering knowledge and valuing experience

Some respondents found they needed to more fully understand remits and protocols around the educational, health and social service agencies, and find the keys to unlock other services they felt may help them. The experiences of other service users were valued highest as a source of knowledge, and skills. Often the internet was used to network with other parents. Here they made new relationships and joined informal and formal support networks, when they could find them. Parents did often cite the support of friends and family, giving support in attending meetings or emotional support at home, but voluntary sector carer support groups were more frequently cited, offering a more specialised knowledge base, and a source of strategic and tactical advice.

It’s word of mouth and other people who’ve gone through the same thing, and them trying to help you. I mean, from that [carers network] one, that’s where we got in touch with the [Autism] Society. (Grant)

… it’s other mums who have been through it that’ll help you, ’have you tried this, the educational advisory service, have you tried [the parent advisory service]? They can help, they are based in [town]’. And its other mums that you get on and you get the help. (Maggie)

Some of the CAF study parents pursued knowledge around legislation, and independent support and advice. In such accounts, the business of the CAF appeared very demanding for parents, but this was also where they most clearly developed a sense of their own power and agency. In these cases, the assemblage of agencies and knowledge brought to bear became more elaborate and more formalized in terms of assessment protocols and legislative input, rights and responsibilities. At times, the relationships between service users and agencies began to fragment, and alliances became unstable. There was evidence in some narratives of disagreements between agencies, alliances between service users and particular agencies against others, frustration and open conflict. What made sense to agencies could be incomprehensible and frustrating for parents.

…they [the educational psychologist] couldn’t actually do a statement at the time, because Derek wasn’t at the school. So we were in a bit of a grey area, because he didn’t go, there was no evidence as to why he couldn’t cope with it or what his needs were, but that they would keep an eye on that and look into things. The SENCO at [School] should have contacted Autism [agency] and was told to, but didn’t. I went knocking on their door. I contacted Autism and required them at the meeting, from which I left before everybody else after, having a bit of a shout, because Autism had said, we, when Derek comes into school, we can see him, and that’s what we do, we come and help them in school. I said, but he’s not in school, he’s at home. Well, we don’t see children at home. So who’s going to see Derek? I had a go at the SENCO about something, I had a good old shout and just left, and I don’t think I went to the next meeting. (Debbie)

Debbie felt stuck because her son would not attend school and was becoming violent towards her at home. She gave up her job and approached her GP seeking help for her depression. All the agencies involved with educational assessment would only proceed through visits to young people in school as a general protocol. Only after extended pressure, and an alliance with an educational welfare officer, was Debbie successful in obtaining a home visit for a psychologist to assess her son. In a similar example, Grant and Audrey took advice from a carers’ group about legislated rights, and began to get more demanding:

So, if you don’t get this sorted out and getting the education she deserves, then, more or less her [mother Audrey] exact words, then we’re going to take you to court. Because Audrey literally said… well, I said to the school: ‘can you cope with her educational needs?’ And they said: ‘yes, we think so’. I said: ‘well, can you actually cope with her or not?’ So there was quite a lot of things said in that meeting, probably that we should have said years ago. Because, again, us being us, we don’t like arguing and shouting and, well, I certainly don’t. (Grant step-father)

Grant and Audrey discovered the possibility of an alliance with another agency, in challenging school authority and control. During a heated CAF Meeting the representative of the educational statementing team supported Grant and Audrey in demanding to see how the money allocated to the school, for meeting Heather’s assessed needs, had been used.

National guidance for the preparation of educational statements stipulates local authorities should provide parent advice agencies (DfES 2001). These practitioners were generally praised by respondents, for their advice regarding procedure and legislation, and for their attendance at CAF meetings to support parents.

They are kind of like a legal counsel would be if you were arrested and they work on your behalf. They just sit there quiet until they think something been said and they think that’s not right and they say you [practitioner] need to stop because you can’t say that. (Ged)

This service user activity was focussed on finding out how to get things done, how the system worked, and how to make things happen. These examples show how vital it could be to find that support and information, particularly regarding educational assessment and planning, where the field of responsible agencies is complex, and there are legislative provisions, which underpin financial and other arrangements for service provision.

###### Style and learning to be assertive- dealing with critique

Maggie: They sit at this side altogether, and you as parents sit here. It is very daunting.

Ged: Like the headmaster’s office.

Maggie: It is like being a child.

Some parents discussed the process of developing a more powerful voice. Audrey, describes how contact with other service users could be inspiring, and as she describes it, empowering:

And I went to this meeting, and they said, you and your husband are the only people in this world that can stick up for your child. You’re the only ones. Forget everybody else. What are they going to do? And I have said to Grant when I came back, I said, Grant, I said, I feel a bit empowered. She has, she only, has only got us. And we kept that in our head, didn’t we?

Some parents were not happy with the assessments of their children’s needs, or their parenting, made by the initial CAF agencies and sought out a network of other agencies and individuals who could help them develop their understanding of policies, procedures and legal matters, particularly in respect of Special Educational Needs (SEN) statements. However, in addition to acquiring knowledge, there was the theme of how to challenge professionals effectively in order to achieve parental objectives. This was the case with Grant and Audrey who provided a powerful account of despair, depression, loss of employment, and learning to ‘toughen up,’ as they tried to deal with their situation.

Audrey: And people kept telling us to toughen up.

Grant: Yes. But I was, I was pretty…

Audrey: Toughen up and tell them what you think.

Grant: Yes, I have always been of the idea that if you make waves things don’t always happen. I know, I know it’s probably a bit naïve. But I like… because I know the way things work in schools and… well, the way the [former place of work] worked, anyway. And I didn’t want to put anybody’s back up and make it worse for Heather. That’s what I was thinking about all the time.

There were four families where the narratives were dominated by this kind of struggle in meetings over autism assessment, needs and resources. Grant and Audrey’s daughter, Heather, was diagnosed as on the autism spectrum after 3 assessments, but for a long time, in her parents’ account, they felt that her refusal to attend school was placed at their door and they felt they were critiqued as being ‘soft’ and ineffectual as parents. For those parents dealing with issues around autism, the interviews often gave an account of a struggle to have their own assessment taken seriously, while poor or ineffective parenting was blamed for existing problems. Audrey reflects below on the school liaison worker, who came to discuss Heather’s refusal to attend school:

They just blamed us, because we were too nice. What are we supposed to do there? I said, ‘okay, we don’t hit our children’.

When they began to seek advice and attend service user support groups, they faced this critique again, but from ‘the other side’. Grant explains:

No, you’ve got to fight to make sure they do it. And that’s what everybody had told us, and what everybody told Audrey in this [support] group. She said, you’ve got to fight for it. You’ve got to fight for it. But until you actually realise that and see that you’ve got to, you don’t realise how much effort you’ve got to put in just to push people to do… it doesn’t come naturally to us to push against the system. But it’s a lesson I’ve learned, because I’ll never not do it again. I think, from now on, I’ll push.

For Grant and Audrey, this appeared to go against the grain. For Maggie, she felt her fiery temper was an issue. She discussed how attendance at a health centre ‘emotional wellbeing’ clinic highlighted for her some of the ways she needed to work on her self control and communication skills, in order to be more effective with professional Interactions:

Yeah, I did one to one counseling sessions and I did emotional wellbeing, that’s in [clinic] but you get help from them and it was like a back to basics course on how to stay calm in a situation … that’s worked a lot, that’s helped a lot because instead of picking up the phone and going blah blah blah down the phone I’m, ’and I’d like to arrange a meeting with whoever and I can go in say, ‘No, this is how it affects us’.

Maggie felt that emotional control was crucial, and being assertive meant getting to grips with her tendency to lose her temper and lose the argument. She found that developing a measured and controlled response was more effective.

## Discussion – assembling effective participation

David Prior (2009:23) describes the ‘contingency of practitioner-citizen encounters,’ where specific contextual elements and circumstances may constrain the formal course of events, but are in turn mediated by the agency of individuals. The findings above show service users resisting, subverting, and defending their identity as good parents while furthering their active role in the CAF. Engagement with CAF can present a considerable personal challenge for parents. Here a struggle towards empowerment was more than an act of giving or facilitating in professional practice, but was equally something needing to be actively appropriated by parents as service users under difficult circumstances.

Service users’ sense of themselves, as parents and carers, is bound up in the interactions they have with both practitioners and other service users or carer groups (Hall *et* *al.,* 2006; Urek, 2005). This underlines for Hall *et al.* (2006) that ‘clienthood’ is a relational form of self, and identity work is engaged by participation. It is often a raw experience, feeling deeply personal and accompanied by a sense of vulnerability where practitioners are perceived to occupy a powerful position in respect of, expertise, institutional authority and the safeguarding apparatus of the state.

The findings introduced above show that the multi-agency setting is a complex environment where participation demands a degree of what Hall et al (2006) name, ‘institutional literacy’. The study revealed that for some parents a strong relationship with a support worker or other professional allows a degree of proxy. Parents may trust a worker to represent their interests, make referrals and negotiate with other professionals and organisations on their behalf. The crucial and demanding role of the lead professional has been underlined in other research on early intervention CAF and TAC models of practice (Holmes & McDermid 2016). However, for those such as Grant and Audrey, or Maggie and Ged discussed above, in the absence of trust and a strong sense of partnership with professionals, their CAF experience, initiated a stressful process of personal challenge and change in acquiring skills in managing meetings, administrative work, gathering knowledge and experience to develop a voice and agency of their own.

The framing of the child and family difficulties tends to be achieved through an expert discourse, where there can often be an ‘either or’ choice between inadequate parenting and a psychiatric or psychological aetiology established through expert assessment (White 2003; Francis 2012). The parents in the CAF study experienced this as an acute dilemma at times, and the findings showed that seeking alternative expertise and assessment appeared as a context in which parents felt they were defending their status as ‘good’ or at least adequate parents. Some parents felt deeply that they were defending themselves against blame or guilt in respect of their child’s difficulties, whether in terms of behaviours at home, in the community or at school. Other studies, in the domain of educational statementing specifically, also confirm the levels of stress experienced by parents particularly where issues are contested (Duncan 2003; Pinney 2003; Lewis & Campbell 2007). This study underlined the significant role of a service user knowledge and experiential evidence based approach for service users deriving meaning from their experiences with multiple agencies and providing a positive caring user identity (Davies & Gray 2017; Glasby & Beresford 2006).

##### The courtroom or the headmaster’s study

Previously, in the findings above, Ged used a procedural court metaphor for CAF meetings, and Ged and Maggie also invoked the Headmaster’s study as an alternative analogy.

There are important differences between the two settings of ‘the court’ and the ‘headmaster’s study’. Resistance in both scenarios requires personal assertiveness and empowerment for service users. The headmasters study invokes the incompetent child and the disciplining expert. In the courtroom, at least, there can be recourse to professional representation, recourse to law, and formal records for accountability. Some of the parents had involved the parent advice group in their respective CAF meetings, and ascribed them a court room role. The courtroom allusion can, in the sense of these extracts, be taken as both a mode of persecution and of resistance. Hall, Slembrouck and Sarangi, (2006) and other researchers, have attributed it to a sense of powerlessness in the face of accusation (Hall *et al.*, 2006; Cleaver and Freeman, 1995; Urek, 2005). It can however also indicate a solution for service users feeling under pressure at meetings and where a strong advocate can invoke procedural and legal precedent and statutory duty.

In Cleaver and Freeman’s study of parental perspectives in cases of suspected child abuse, they state ‘effective belligerence is a professional skill professionally learned’ (Cleaver and Freeman 1995 p:85). They found that parents sometimes believed that to be aggressively assertive was a risky strategy, that may work against them. Passivity, on the other hand, was seen as expected, and a safer option. We saw above how pertinent this dilemma was for Grant and Audrey and how ultimately, they rejected it.

##### Administration

Urek (2005) writes that the power of the written record is performative. Parents have few such props to bring with them to CAF. Maggie and Ged regarded the notebooks of the practitioners as important, and started to bring their own notebooks and lists along to the meeting, to challenge practitioners. So, for some respondents there was a need to make the paper work for them too, and use it in accordance with the practice of professionals to prepare, to confirm, and hold to account.

The lead professional is the practitioner who would keep the record of the meetings, and fill in assessment forms and action plans with families. Respondents had little awareness of the significance of the CAF form. This document, in theory, could give an initial agreed joint assessment of children and young people’s needs and circumstances, including any issues in their care, and crucially, be centred on young people and their carers’ own perceptions and understandings of these elements (CWDC 2009). Even so, it hardly figured in parents’ talk, and when it did, it was as a consequence of the interviewer raising it. Nethercott (2017) and earlier researchers into practitioners and CAF have pointed to the difficulties practitioners often experience with the notion of a holistic or common assessment and engaging closely with families and particularly reluctant parents in conducting assessments (Brandon et al. 2006; Adamson & Deverell 2009).

Although it is clear that the importance of records and paperwork, for accountability and clarification within the CAF, was at times brought out in the parents’ talk, the potential for service users to become fully engaged here seems undermined. They were unprepared in contrast to trained professionals, and reported a lack of emphasis, in most cases at the very outset, on the methodical engagement of service users in the preparation of the CAF assessment document.

As street level bureaucrats in public services, practitioners have learned how to navigate and operationalise policy and process in their local sphere (Lipski 1980; Newman & Clarke 2009; Evans & Harris 2004). Indeed Nethercott (2017) found that practitioners often felt it was more efficacious not to explain what the CAF process was rather than seek to engage ‘difficult’ parents and young people in formal CAF assessment.

## The conclusion

The analysis of service users’ agency as an assemblage specific to the context of participation has offered insight into this model of service provision. I have explored, in the extracts above, how some parents, acted by augmenting knowledge and personal qualities of self-control, and other skills, to form alliances and make their participation more effective. The study revealed a diverse assemblage of agencies where service users worked hard to define a positive and active role for themselves. In this respect the role of schools as spaces for meetings needs re-considering. CAF is a forum where active participation in decision-making and assessment work could engender a more empowering partnership model, which extends to the participation of both adults and young people in decision-making and assessment activity in a more neutral multi-agency setting. Building strong service user roles in early intervention settings requires more than getting everyone round the table but requires at first base a recognition of what developing a confident partnership role asks of service users.

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