Young people's experience of partcipation when exiting out of care

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Young People's Experience of Participation When Exiting out of Care

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to focus on young people's experiences of participation during the process of transition from placements in out-of-home care independent life. 65 young care leavers were interviewed, 14 boys and 51 girls between 18 and 26 years old. Results show that those who were invited to participate in the planning of their care leaving experienced a more positive and successful transition from care to adulthood. When administrative regulations guided the care leaving process, young people felt excluded and out of control, and their transition became a more negative experience.

Introduction

The issue of children's participation gets a lot of attention in the general discussion in Sweden and is an important question both in legislation and in practical social work. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) has been incorporated in the Swedish law since 1990. This convention states that children have the right to freedom of speech and to participation in decision-making processes which have an impact on their lives. In Sweden, the child's right to participate has also been implemented in the *Social Services Act* and should be part of the ordinary social work practice with all children and young people, also including care leavers. Nevertheless, we know from research that despite the strengthening of a Children's rights perspective, children and young people are often not heard, or have their opinions considered, in the ordinary procedures within social work practices (Hultman/Cederborg 2014). Similar findings are also reported in international studies (Vas et al. 2011; Pert et al. 2014).

When a young person is placed in out-of-home care, the local social service authority takes on a substantial responsibility. Such responsibility does not only include the time in care, but also making sure that young persons are prepared for adulthood when the time in care comes

to an end (Broad 1999; Courtney/Heuring 2005). Questions concerning how this preparation and planning is performed, and to what extent the young person can take an active part in the care leaving process, need further attention. At the early age of 18 or 19 years old, when the time in care comes to an end, the young person is on the threshold of entering a long and unsteady road towards adulthood. When leaving care, there are several important decisions to be made. How do I find housing and work? Can I continue to study? How do I build a supportive network? How these decisions are addressed is not only an individual matter, rather a processes of negotiations between young people, their social worker, staff at the residential homes/foster carers and also the family of origin.

In Sweden, there have so far been few studies where young people themselves have had the opportunity to express their own experiences of leaving placements in out-of-home care. Therefore we find it to be an important task to gather knowledge about what young people themselves find meaningful and helpful during the transition to adulthood. The aim of this paper is to focus on young people's experiences of participation during the process of exiting out of care. How do young care leavers portrait themselves in connection to the concept of participation? What impact has the level of participation on the care leaving process?

The Swedish context

On the 1st of November 2013, 22 700 Swedish children were placed in out-of-home care; 17 000 were placed in care on a voluntary basis (according to the Social Services Act, see Norström/Thunved 2010), 5 400 were in care on mandatory measures (according to the Care of Young People Act, Norström/Thunved 2012), and 200 were placed in emergency care (CYPA). Foster care is the most preferred type of out-of-home placement: 57 per cent of those placed on voluntary measures and 70 per cent of those placed in care on mandatory measures were placed in foster care.

A young person in Sweden normally leaves care when he/she reaches the age of 18, or when he/she finishes upper secondary school – this is usually at the age of 19. If the young person is placed on mandatory measures (Norström/Thunved 2010) the placement can last until the age of 21. In Sweden, unlike the situation in the other Nordic countries, there are no specialised programs or dedicated services for those young people who age out of care. The National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen) recommends that local social services extend their responsibility even after a young person placed in care turns 18, but there is no manda-

tory legislation concerning after-care services (Socialstyrelsen 2009). The general view, embraced by social services, is that young people leaving care should be treated like their peers, who have not been in care, and that they should have access to the support from the general welfare system in the first place. Thus, the access to support from social services in the care leaving process depends on the individual social worker's resources and commitment. Once the young people have left care, there is little knowledge of their whereabouts (Höjer/Sjöblom 2011).

Previous research

Swedish register studies, based on complete cohorts, show that young people who have been placed in out-of-home care have an elevated risk of early mortality (Vinnerljung et al. 2001), a higher incidence of mental health related problems, are more prone to committing suicide (Vinnerljung et al. 2005a).

When young people leave a placement in out-of-home care, they may face numerous problems in their transition from care to adulthood (see Stein 2006, 2012). One reason for their difficulties may be that young care leavers often finds themselves without the support of parents or other significant adults, which can make it much harder for them than for their peers to establish themselves in areas of importance for independent life, such as housing, employment and education (Pinkerton/McCrea 1999; Mendes et al. 2011; Stein 2012; Munro/Lushey 2012). Findings from research depicts this group as having to make the transition to adulthood with less support and in a much shorter period of time than other young people without experiences from placements in care (Mendes et al. 2011; Stein 2012).

Additionally, evidence from research shows that those young people who did receive support even when they had left care after the age of 18 had a better chance of a positive transition from care to adulthood (Bakketeig/Backe-Hansen 2008; Clausen/Kristofersen 2008; Munro/Lushey 2012). However, the outcomes for this group were also dependent on the stability experienced in care, and to what extent the young care leavers were motivated and capable to accept and to utilise social support (Courtney et al. 2011).

Previous research on participation in decision-making in the child protection system gives us evidence of how difficult it is to fulfil the aim of participation according to the CRC, article 12. Results from research tell us that there are few children who participate in the decision-making in child protection. In a study from Norway, sufficient child partici-

pation in the child protection cases was found in about 30 per cent of the cases (Vis/Thomas 2009). In a similar British study 35 per cent of the children stated that they had been participating in the writing of their own care plans (Timms/Thoburn 2003). Research on social workers' attitude towards participation reveals that social workers had difficulties finding a balance between the principles of children's rights versus the principle of making decisions in the best interest of the child (Vis et al. 2011). The principle of children's participation seems to be too easily set aside when decisions are made in the child-protection system. An important message from research is that participation needs to be performed in a way that makes it possible for the child to understand the decision process; participation has to be performed in a "child friendly" way (Vis et al. 2011). Furthermore, it is vital to remember that participation should be looked upon as a process rather than a single event. Children's and young people's involvement in decision-making processes may have positive implications for their motivation, and also for what way they perceive different types of interventions and support (Vis et al. 2011).

A Child-perspective and the concept of participation

A Child-perspective is an ambiguous concept which can be understood in different ways (Halldén 2003). Skivenes and Strandbu (2006) suggest that it is important do differentiate the Child-perspective from the "child saver-" discourse and instead systematise three aspects of the concept on two different levels. The structural level concerns children's rights and their position in the society. How children's right to participate is carried out, is a crucial factor.

On an individual level it is important that children receive recognition from adults. Skivenes and Strandbu (2006) argue accordingly, using the sociological perspective of childhood, which states children's position in the present as *beings* rather than in a future perspective *as becomings*. The third aspect of a Child-perspective that Skivenes and Strandbu (2006) refer to is also on an individual level and imply "the context of different children's lived realities" (2006, p. 13). This is about respecting and recognizing the fact that children have needs, intentions and look upon life from another angle than adults do (Skivenes/Strandbu 2006; James/Prout 1990). In what way this outlined concept of a child perspective will be implemented so that children's position as participators will be reinforced remains with the intentions of the state and of adults (Skivenes/Strandbu 2006).

Harts (1992) "ladder of participation" is often used as a metaphor to describe children's participation, climbing up from the lowest position of tokenism and decoration to a position of an actor in complete participation. Shier (2001) has developed this metaphor of the ladder, and has introduced a model of five levels of participation. The first step is that children are listened to, the second that children are supported in expressing their views, the third step is that children's views are taken into account, the fourth step implies children being involved in the decision-making processes and the fifth step that children share the power and the responsibility of decision-making. In addition, Shier introduces three stages of commitment at each of the five steps that need to be taken into account; "openings", "opportunities" and "obligations" (ibid.).

Skivenes and Strandbu (2006, p. 16) emphasise some procedures that are crucial in order to improve participation among children and young people:

› They must have the opportunity to form their opinions when a decision is required.

› They must have the opportunity to express their viewpoints in a decision-making situation.

› Their viewpoints and arguments must be taken seriously. Any reason for excluding a child's viewpoint or wishes must be clearly explained.

› Children and young people must be informed after a decision has been made.

When it comes to vulnerable groups of children like care leavers, the question of their vulnerability in addition to the position of being a child/young person has not been adequately explored (Ericsson/Näsman 2012). In childhood research there is generally a difference between the principles of care and of participation. However, Ericsson & Näsman (2012) state that both these principles need to be combined in a social work practice.

Methods used in the study

In this paper, we use evidence from a study – Life After Care – in which the aim was to investigate procedures when young Swedish people leave placements in out-of-home care. The study included interviews with 111 social work managers engaged in child welfare social work, in 75 municipalities (49 in the region of West Sweden, and 26 in the Stockholm region). We also performed interviews with 65 young people (14 young men and 51 young women) between 18 and 26 years old, who had left care within three months

to three years. The study was financed by the Swedish Research Council for Working Life, Health and Welfare (FORTE).

In this paper we will use results from the interviews with the 65 young people, of which 22 had been placed in foster care, 25 in both foster care and residential care, and 18 solely in residential care, whereof one in a supported housing. A majority (53) was born in Sweden, four were born in another European country and eight were born in non-European countries.

We found some of our young interviewees with the help of social workers in the 75 local authorities, but as there are no formal records of the young people once they have left care (Höjer/Sjöblom 2011), we had to use additional methods to find our informants. Therefore, we also found our informants by asking staff working in residential homes, foster carers and also young care leavers themselves, using snowballing.

As we involved such a variety of methods to find our informants, our sample may include various biases. It is probable that those selected by the social workers were more successful care leavers, as they often were young people with whom the social workers had had a more personal relationship, and thus still kept in touch with. When we used snowballing there was a risk of reaching more active and successful care leavers. There is also a great gender unbalance in our sample, with a majority of female informants, which also may affect our results.

All 65 interviews were telephone interviews, lasting between 45 minutes to two hours. We used a combination of open and structured questions in the questionnaire. We were interested in the young people's experiences of relationships with biological family and with carers, of education, employment and earnings, physical and mental health, substance and alcohol abuse and delinquency, family formation and future plans. We also asked questions about access to support and to social capital, both from social services and other professionals, from foster carers, birth family, network and friends. Furthermore, the actual leaving care process was investigated: in what way it took place, the level of involvement and participation of the young person in that process and their possibility to have a say about the planning of their future. The study was approved of by the Ethical Review Board in West Sweden.

Results

Some descriptive data of the sample are presented in this first part of the results.

Table 1   **Age at interview**

Age at interview	Frequency	Percentage
18–19	9	14
20–22	37	57
23–26	19	29
Total	65	100

As shown in table 1, the majority of the interviewees were 20–22 years old. One was 25 and one was 26. Although older than the rest of the young people interviewed, they fall within the limits of the criteria for the sample.

Table 2   **Age when the young people left care**

Age at leaving care	Frequency	Percentage
15–17	12	19
18	18	29
19	17	28
20–22	15	24
Total	65	100

The majority left care when they were 18 or 19, but 15 (24 percent) left care when they were 20–22 years old.

Table 3   **Age at first placement**

Age at first placement	Frequency	Percentage
0–5	10	16
6–10	14	22
11–15	21	32
16–20	20	31
Total	65	100

Over half of the young people in the sample were first placed in care when they were eleven years or older. 20 (31 percent) were placed in care when they were 16 years or older.

Young people's participation in the care leaving process

When asking the young people about their experience of participation in the leaving care process, the majority reported that they had not participated at all, or to a low extent had been involved in planning for their care leaving. 21 young people reported a high or a rather high level of participation in planning for leaving care. Five young people did not answer this question.

Table 4	Level of participation in the care leaving process	
Level of participation in placement	Frequency	Percentage
High or rather high	21	35
Neither high nor low	7	12
Low or rather low	18	30
No participation	14	23
Total	60	100

When looking at the results in the table, it is important to understand the context in which the question was answered. The young people were asked to grade their level of participation, and it may be difficult to answer accurately using our suggested alternatives. However, the answers give an indication of the young people's experiences and are in concordance with the narratives in the interviews. In the following text we will account for the experiences of our young interviewees.

Care leavers' negative experiences when exiting out of care

In this section we will introduce negative experiences of leaving care. Several of our interviewees stated that they had felt unhappy and frustrated during their care leaving process. The planning was in many cases hasty, compressed and unpredictable. The young people had not been involved in the decision-making and didn't participate in the exiting process. They described situations where they were not listened to, or had no say, and where professionals didn't trust them to make their own decisions. For many of the young people, this created feelings of frustration, solitude and insecurity. One theme mentioned by several of those with negative experiences from exiting care was how the entire exiting process was dependent on administrative regulations to which they had to submit.

When the time of exit depends on administrative rules

Several young people mentioned administrative rules, such as being over 18 and/or having finished upper secondary school, as the reason for social workers telling them that they had to leave their placement in care. These administrative rules are regulated in the Social Services Act (Norström/ Thunved 2010), but there are also local regulations in different municipalities. Such administrative rules were not always helpful for the young people's care leaving process. Some would have liked to stay longer with their foster carers, or at their residential homes, but were told this was not possible, due to the stipulated time for care leaving. In many cases the care leaving was performed very hastily, with little or no planning; the young person could be told that she/he had to leave within a couple of weeks. Even if social services helped them to find somewhere to live, leaving care at such short notice, and with scarce planning, was highly disapproved of by most young people. Many of our interviewees reported that relations to foster carers and residential staff often were interrupted, and not replaced with alternative access to other forms of support. This type of care leaving was described as an exit that wasn't negotiable – just a fact the young person had to submit to.

The care stopped because I turned 18 years old and it was time to move on. The social services did not want to pay for me any longer... But I really would have liked to stay longer in that foster home. Once again I had to move and I had preferred to stay there until I had finished my education at college. To be able to keep that security because I didn't feel ready to move out on my own. I knew as soon as I move out from the foster home the contact between them and me would end and I would stand all alone again... (Gunnar)

Yet another complication due to administrative rules is the fact that young people, when they reach 18, which is the age of majority in Sweden, often find that they will have to use the services of the "adult unit" and not the "child unit" at their local social service office. This means that young people, who may have belonged to the same "child unit" during their entire childhood, at 18 years had to shift to another unit with a different organisation, and with different requirements for eligibility. Some of the young people said they were told they had to have a specific problem, such as alcohol/drug abuse, to be eligible to support from social services. Just the need of someone to help you plan your everyday life was not enough to receive support.

Some of our interviewees found the rationale of the administrative rules of the social services hard to understand. Their narratives revealed that they never really understood why they had to leave care. It was just a fact they had to give in to. In Lena's case the social worker called two weeks before she moved and said *"now you have to get out because we can't pay for you any longer"*. The supported living that she stayed in helped her negotiate with the social worker so she could stay there a little bit longer. The hasty exit was due to the fact that Lena, when she turned 20, had aged out of the child protection system. Therefore her social worker wanted to end the placement because the "adult unit", to which she now belonged, would not pay for her stay at the supported living any longer. Lena perceived that the only way for her to be eligible for continued support was to have drug – or alcohol related problems. Since this was not the case for Lena, she had understood that there was no way for the social service office to pay for continued support for her.

They can just pay for you until you are 20 years old otherwise it must be drugs, that you are a drug addict or something like that. (Lena)

When being pushed out of care

Another reason for an unexpected exit out of care was when the foster home or the residential unit and the young person had developed an unresolved conflict. One of our interviewees described how she decided to leave care when she was not allowed to go to NA-meetings (Narcotics Anonymous).

I was 18 year old and it ended because I was not allowed to go to NA meetings. And that's when I decided to exit myself because I wanted to go to my NA meetings. I was homeless when I exited out of that placement. (Fredrika)

It could also be difficult for the young person to understand what went on while planning for leaving care. Suddenly things escalated and in Inez's case she was thrown out of her foster home. Her feeling was that her foster parents didn't care about her and that they just had her in the house for financial reasons. To perceive as a young person that you're not being cared for and loved is something several care leavers have described as difficult. In some cases it seems problematic to build a caring relationship between foster parents and the young person. It can either be described as in Inez case that she perceived her foster parents as only interested in earning money from having her in the house. In some cases the young care leavers

expressed that they felt that the foster parents made a difference between the foster children and their biological children. They did not feel that they had the same position in the family as the biological children. This could create a sense of being excluded, which influenced the young people negatively and pushed them to want to leave care.

They threw me out. (…), I don't know, they just wanted money and they didn't give a shit about me. They just put all my things on the steps and I could come and get it whenever I wanted. (Inez)

When pulling yourself out of care

Other young care leavers left care because they wanted to move on in life. Some had bad experiences from care and some just felt that it was the right time for them to take the final step out of care. In Fanny's case she decided herself to exit out of care. She had no legal restrictions that could keep her in care, and consequently she could make up her own mind if she wanted to stay or not. Fanny weighted the pros and cons of the placement and came to the conclusion that she wanted to leave care, she was not happy with the situation at the residential home, she didn't get enough help and had other plans for her life.

I left care because I had enough. They started to plan my care leaving far too late when I already had decided what to do with my life. All the residents and staff went to shop in a town nearby. It was me and three other girls left in the house, one of them had a phone, and called a taxi. We packed our things, hugged the two staff and said good-bye. That placement was nothing for me since they couldn't help me. I just wanted to come back home and start to live again. I didn't have to learn more about drugs. I needed to learn about what you can do with your life, jobs and school are important. It was a waste of time to stay there. (Fanny)

Josephine made up her mind to move out when she got a letter from social services telling her she had to start to pay for staying in the foster home when she became 19 years old. She found out that she had to pay more money if she stayed on in the foster home than if she was renting a flat. That was the reason that made her move out and exit care. The foster parents helped her to move to her flat but they didn't come up and look at the flat when she moved in and that was disappointing to her.

I wished they had taken more interest… Maybe they just wanted me to move as soon as possible… but they could at least be a little interested, and come and visit and look at my flat… I did invite them, but… (Josephine)

When the care leaver is the weak part in the negotiation process

Another important issue reported from interviews was the young care leaver's view of the exit process as an *act of negotiation.* This collaborative process took place between different actors who had different roles and different positions. The social worker, the care provider (foster home or residential home), the biological parents and the young care leaver all took part in this process. The negotiation process could start with an initiative from the social worker, the care provider or the young care leaver. In many cases the different actors had different ideas about how and when the care for the young person should end. We have reports from young care leavers who wanted to stay longer in care where the social workers wanted them to leave. Additionally, there were examples when the situation was the other way around – the young care leavers wanted to leave care and the social workers wanted them to stay longer.

In many cases social workers and care leavers ended up having contradictory views and timetables as to when the placement in care should end. This negotiation could escalate into full conflicts between social workers, or the care providers and the young care leavers, where issues of power came to the fore. There were times when the young care leavers actually needed an "advocate" in order to strengthen their position in this negotiation. In Hillevi's case, both the social worker and Hillevi wanted her to move out from the residential home where she stayed. However, the staff at the residential home did not agree with Hillevi's own judgement of her situation. They did not think the treatment was "finished" and they wanted her to stay on.

They even lowered the price for me so social welfare could be able to keep me there longer and continue to pay. The staff at the residential place was very concerned not to let me leave before I was ready for it. (Hillevi)

In another case one of our young interviewees really disliked the residential home where she stayed. However, her social worker did not want her to leave, and claimed that a continued stay at the residential home was a prerequisite for support; *"we can't help you if you don't stay on".* The young woman's mother helped her, negotiated with the social worker and the

staff from the residential home, and finally she could leave her placement. Although she was happy to leave care she was disappointed about how the exit had been handled, since she didn't get any follow-up meetings after she had left care. Furthermore, she had to solve her housing problem herself, with no support from social services or the residential home. This young woman would have wanted her care leaving process to be more sustained. Her own suggestion was to have a contact person who could have supported her through the leaving care process.

When the exit out of care is unclear

The young care leavers reported that it could be unclear how the exit from care would take place. In some cases there were no explicit plans made by social services concerning how to manage the exit process. This unclear and unstructured planning caused a lot of uncertainty for the care leavers. They could not be sure if promises made by the social workers would be kept, and as a consequence they did not know if they would have somewhere to live in the near future, and/or if they would have any financial help at all.

One young care leaver reported:

Everything was very unclear about me leaving care. I was promised a flat, but the decision was all the time postponed without any explanation. Finally, when I was really angry and shouted at them, I got a flat and I was OK. But it made me feel insecure and I would have liked it better if they had been more open about what was going on and how it was planned. (Orvokki)

Care leavers' positive experiences when exiting from care
When care leaving was well-planned and structured

The results accounted for in the previous text have shown negative experiences from leaving care. In the continued text we will account for examples of how the care leaving process could be influenced positively by a well-planned and prepared exit out of care. In many cases, positive experiences were connected to narratives of how our interviewees felt involved and invited to participate in the care leaving process. In such cases, the young people described a constructive dialogue between themselves, social workers and care providers. Additionally, the care leaving process included elements of clarity and transparency. This is how Olivia described her care leaving process:

They let me be involved and they listened to my ideas, they wanted me to finish my education. They trusted me to fulfil my goals. To be part of the planning was really something I find important. During my last placement I felt that they included me and didn't speak on behalf of me but they really listened to what I had to say and what I wanted. (Olivia)

When the young care leaver was in charge of the exit out of care

Some of our interviewees declared that they themselves had made important decisions in the care leaving process – for example decisions concerning when to leave care and what they wanted to happen after they had left care. Their narratives were focused on their desires and needs connected to leaving care, and they portrayed themselves as active and involved in that process. They didn't wait for the social workers to act for them, but went ahead and made their own decisions, and were active in trying to get what they wanted.

It was in December when the social workers are on holiday, so it was a lot of problems for me after my exit out of care. The first time I left care I didn't get any aftercare and the second time I decided to take my part in getting some support. I had a friend who had received really good aftercare, so I knew this program worked. So if you want a good aftercare program and a competent contact person you have to fix it on your own. (Erik)

When the care leaver had gotten a family for life

To have a foster family that you considered as a family for life was of great significance for some of the care leavers who had a positive and unproblematic experience of exiting care. In their narratives they made a difference between the formal and the informal way to leave care. In the formal manner exit out of care was performed the initiative of the social workers and it was an administrative process when the care formally ended, but the young care leavers who had developed a strong sense of belonging knew that exit of care didn't mean they had to leave their foster family. They regarded their foster family as their family, as a place for support and security that they described as long-lasting.

It was not like "now you are formally not our child any longer and not part of our family anymore". I am still there and I am their child. My foster parents are now my contact persons. So formally I am no longer in the system as a foster child, but we still say that I am their foster child. (Gina)

But we didn't plan so much because they had said that I was like a son in the house so I knew that I could come back home if I wanted to, so I had a permanent place in that family. (Kalle)

When participation was part of the exit process

To be part of a treatment plan at a residential home that empowered the care leavers to gain independence was also looked upon as a positive experience when leaving care. In those cases, the young people described that their exiting out of care was a goal in itself that they became aware of as soon as they entered the residential home. The main goal in the treatment was focused around learning to gain independence. An important factor in this process was that the young care leavers were involved, that they participated and were active in planning their care leaving. Some interviewees could report on experiences of this kind that had influenced them in a positive way. In Lotta's case the staff at the residential home, the social worker and Lotta had negotiations concerning the best time for her to move out. They decided to plan the care leaving step-by-step, and she moved out to a self-contained house close to the residential unit to learn to live independently. After the initial phase she moved to her own flat, but knew that she could return if anything went wrong.

It was very important for me to be able to fix things on my own, independently. This was also an important goal at the residential home. They challenged me in that direction, and they succeeded. As soon as I came to this residential home and they started to treat me as an adult, I started to develop in the right direction, moving forward. (Lotta)

The importance of getting out of the child protection system

Some care leavers described that they felt trapped within the child protection system. Although they had a nice foster family or liked the residential home they were placed in, they had a strong desire to get out of the child protection system. To leave their placement in care fulfilled that goal of independence, and they expressed that exit out of care had given them a positive feeling of freedom.

To formally exit out of care was vital for Lovisa. She declared that it was very important for her to get out of the child protection system and not have to any court orders "hanging over her shoulders". She strongly disapproved of the feeling of being "monitored" and wanted the formal place-

ment to end as soon as possible. Nevertheless, after the placement in care was ended, she still had a positive contact with her foster family.

All I wanted was to get away from the actual placement. It's been such a long time... And one year before I moved out, I got the document where they formally stated that the mandatory placement had ended... and then I felt hat I could finally just get away. Not from the family, but from the situation. I still have my foster family close to my heart. (Lovisa)

Paula and Peter had similar experiences of leaving care. They were happy to get out of the child protection system, and expressed their feeling of happiness and freedom:

They had a big party for me, but I didn't really reflect so much on what was happening,I was just happy to get out of the place, even though it was positive to stay there, I was just happy to get out. (Paula)

I took it day by day and I started to feel free for the first time in my life. (Peter)

Discussion

The Swedish welfare system is perceived as a system where resources as well as needs are essential components in relation to children's welfare. This means that the participation of children (and young people) should be looked upon as an important aspect when fulfilling the resource principle in our welfare system (Fernqvist 2011). Nevertheless, as we have learned from research, adults are still looked upon as the exclusively most important informants concerning children's (and young people's) life-situations when it comes to decisions made in different welfare institutions, for example within the child protection system (Hultman/Cederborg 2014). Emphasising adults as messengers concerning children's lives can be looked upon as a discourse of "adultism" that diminishes the possibility for children and young people to be active participants in decision-making (Eriksson/Näsman 2008; Hultman/Cederborg 2014).

It is may be understandable that the issue of children's participation is questioned when it concerns young children. However, in our sample from the study, the young people leaving care are adolescents, on the threshold to adulthood. This makes the lack of participation for many of our interviewees hard to understand – in this case their young age cannot explain the fact that they remain excluded from participation in deci-

sions which are likely to have huge impacts on their life. Furthermore, it is also hard to explain the lack of participation of young care leavers with the rationale that they are not invited to participate to protect them from being involved in too difficult decisions. Instead, bringing them into the process of planning for their future and giving them influence over these important decisions will motivate and empower them, which will help them to make a more successful care leaving (Vis et al. 2011). We do not have any documentation in this study about the previous level of participation during the young care leavers earlier stay in care, therefore we cannot make any connections between the levels of involvement from social workers while being in care and when leaving care. Maybe the lack of participation for the young care lavers reflects the lack of attention to the general care leaving process in social work with young people? With no programs or leaving care interventions in the regular social work it becomes evident that it is difficult to get young people to participate in something that can be perceived as an underdeveloped and forgotten part of social work.

In the interviews, there was evidence of how social workers and other professionals laid down conditions for continued support and in that way tried to control the young care leavers. Many of our interviewees told us how they were told that if they didn't comply with decisions made by social workers (stay in care longer, agree to a certain treatment program etc.) they were denied further support or sometimes even denied any kind of commitment from social services. This seems to be an unsuccessful strategy – trying to manoeuvre young people with different types of laid down conditions connected to the negotiation about leaving care – and such a strategy does not include young people's participation or involvement.

Conclusion

The results in this study show that there are several prerequisites that either seem to escalate or diminish the conditions for a positive or negative outcome of negotiation processes between the young person and the adults around them. Being asked to participate, being recognised and being looked upon as a responsible and trustworthy person is important for a successful negotiation about leaving care. On the other hand, being looked upon as an object for administrative regulations, or even as an unwanted and superfluous cost in the budget of the local social services, creates a negotiation process that ultimately will fail.

Skivenes and Strandbu (2006) write that how, and if, children's position as participators will be reinforced remains within the intentions of

the state and of adults. This means that principles about the importance of participation for children on both structural and individual levels in society needs to be implemented in the actual everyday practice in social work with children and young people in general, as well as with young people in the process of leaving care.

From our study we can conclude that those of our interviewees who were invited to participate in the planning of their care leaving, who felt involved and listened to, also experienced a more positive and successful transition from care to adulthood.

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