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CHILD PARTICIPATION IN PRACTICE
-A STUDY OF THE PLAN USED IN ASSESSMENTS AND
SOCIAL WORKERS ATTITUDE TOWARDS CHILD
PARTICIPATION IN MICHIGAN, USA

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Abstract

This is a study of how children in the US can participate in the assessment that is connected to them. My purpose was to study how children's voice and children's participation were considered in childcare assessments and how social workers thought about the best interest of the child. This is mostly studied through the plans used to assess the treatment for the child.

My questions at issue were; what is the meaning of the concepts best interest of the child, child participation and the voice of the child. What is the legal support surrounding the plan? What is the purpose with the plan? How is the plan constructed regarding child participation? How do workers acknowledge the voice of the child? How can children participate? How are the plan and the assessment connected with the best interest of the child? How does this plan support children's participation and the contribution to strengthen the position of the child?

My results indicated that that many social workers involved the children in the assessment although the participation wasn't well directed by law. This could lead to differences for different children depending on whom they meet. Some children may have had a big say about the plans and some may not have known that a plan for them existed.

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Thank You!

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Introduction

The convention on the rights of the child

In 1989 the United Nations accepted and assumed the Convention on the Rights of the Child-CRC. One of the purposes with the CRC was that all rights connected with children under 18 years of age were embraced in one document for all the countries that have signed it. Some important focuses in the convention are the principles of the best interest of the child (article 3) and the child's right to be heard (article 12). In article 3 it is pointed out that the child's best interest shall be a primary consideration in all cases. Article 12 prescribe that children have the right to express their opinion in every matter that concerns them. In court and when other authorities work with cases regarding children the children's voice should always be heard and the child's interest should be placed in focus throughout the case (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2002). According to the Swedish law and to the CRC children is every person under the age of 18 (ibid).

Problem at issue

In accordance with the CRC the issues of best interest of the child, child participation and the voice of the child in assessments and their involvement in different plans within child welfare is important. USA is one of the few countries in the world that hasn't ratified the CRC (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2002). Therefore my ambition with this paper is to investigate how social workers in the US work with children within child welfare and how they work regarding the best interest of the child, child's participation and possibility to be heard in matters concerning the child's own situation. How does the American system think about children having an active part in the work surrounding them? I want to know more about the social workers attitudes, strategies and methods in their daily work with children.

Exclusion

In this research I am not interested in doing a comparison between Sweden and USA. Although, the knowledge and point of departure I have about child welfare are based in a Swedish context and therefore I can't avoid some extent of comparison. I have used research that are mostly carried out in Sweden and England and haven't used American research in the area.

In the US it is much more common to adopt children through foster care, after that the parental rights have been terminated, than it is in Sweden. I am aware of that difference in

practice but in my paper I have chosen to focus on foster care. Therefore I have excluded the aspect of participation for children in adoption assessments.

The purpose of this paper

My purpose when I'm writing this paper is to study how the children's voice and children's participation are considered during child care assessments and how social workers think about the best interest of the child in the US. I have collected my empirical data in the state of Michigan and therefore my paper will have a focus on the structure of social work in that area of USA. I will study these phenomenons through the plan social workers use connected with the assessment, and I will look at it from several different perspectives.

Questions at issue

- What is the meaning of the concepts; best interest of the child, child participation and the voice of the child?
- What is the legal support surrounding the plan for social work with children in the US?
- What is the purpose with the plan?
- How is the plan constructed regarding child participation?
- How do social workers acknowledge the voice of the child?
- How can children participate in the planning of assessments?
- How are the plan and the assessment connected with the best interest of the child?
- How does this plan support children's participation and the contribution to strengthen the position of the child?

Perspectives

My main perspective will be from the social workers point of view. But since I knew so little about my subject in advance and I didn't want to focus only on that perspective, I therefore also interviewed some youth, a judge and a professor. This gave me a wider picture of my questionings and the responses will therefore have a big variation. I have decided to have these different perspectives because I and you as a reader will understand and get a better picture of social work with children in USA.

Background

In Sweden

Children's need in focus - BBIC

Sweden ratified the CRC in 1990, and as a consequence of the ratification of the CRC, the Swedish parliament brought in line some important laws in accordance with the CRC.

Changes in the Social Services Act (2001:453) made it compulsory for social workers to take the principles of the best interest of the child and the child's right to be heard into consideration in every single case (Norström & Thunved 2003).

Since 1999 the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen) has been piloting a project entitled "Children's Need in Focus" (BBIC). The aim of this development project is to develop a uniform system of assessing, planning and reviewing in social work with children. This project is inspired by the Integrated Children's System (ICS) in Great Britain. The British system has been adapted to Swedish conditions by Socialstyrelsen in collaboration with seven Swedish municipalities and municipal regions. Within the project a series of forms are tested that follow the entire case process, from the referral or self referral and investigation to review of arrangements. This documentation will support social workers in systematically gathering information and following up their work with individual children. BBIC could be seen as an attempt to realise the intention of the CRC within child welfare in Sweden.

Background to BBIC

BBIC comes from the English Integrated Children's System- ICS (Cleaver et al 2004) which has its background in two other models – *the Looking After Children System* – LACS (Parker et al 1991, Ward 1995) and *the Framework for Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* – AF (Department of Health 2000, Cleaver et al. 2004). It is based on knowledge, defined as theory, research findings, and practice experience. It takes an ecological approach for understanding of human growth and development, which says that an understanding of a child must be located within the context of the child's family (parent and caregivers and the wider family) and of the community and culture in which he or she is growing up (Rasmusson 2004). This approach is portrayed as a triangle made up of three domains representing children's developmental needs, parenting capacity to respond to those needs, and family and environmental factors (Department of Health 2000).

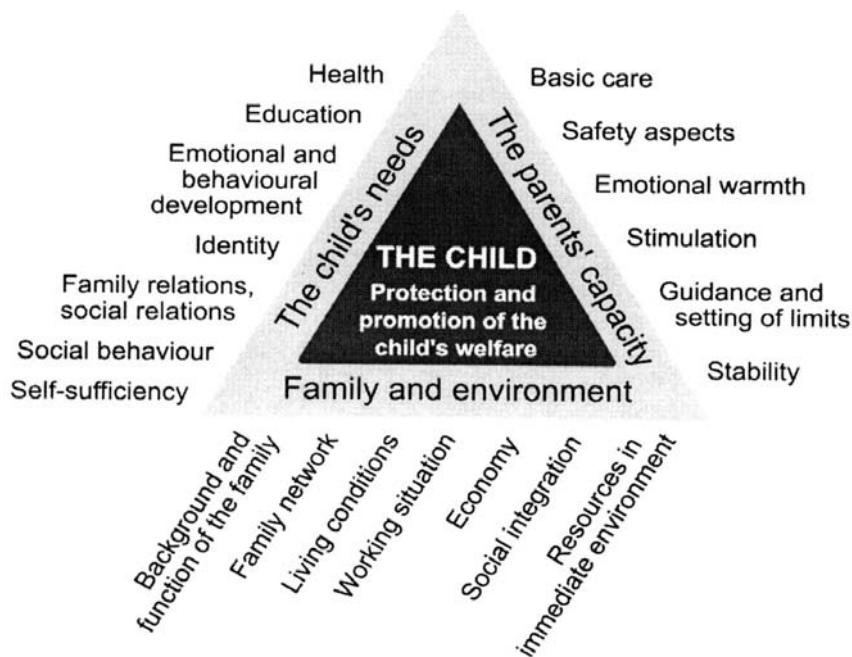


Figure 2. *The Integrated Children's System Framework*

Review meetings

Within BBIC a new method, so called Review Meetings, is tested for following up the arrangements for children in out-of-home care. In the Review Meetings, the child, the social worker and important people from the child's network meet together. The meeting is led by an independent chairperson. The basis of the meetings includes documentation prepared, using the forms for planning and reviewing that are being tested within the BBIC project. These forms include: care plans, placement information, treatment plans, review of arrangements, assessment and action records, consultation papers for children, parents and caregivers, record from the review meeting, school consultation documentation and physician's consultation documentation (Socialstyrelsen 2005). The goal is to build a team with the assignment to work together for the benefit of the child. Each member of the team contributes with his or her unique knowledge and experience (Walker 2001). These meetings are important for the children since they feel more involved, they understand more about what's being done and their feeling of participation gets stronger. In all the forms that are used in BBIC it is important to speak of the child as a subject and not an object. Continuously

both the child and the parents should be able to give their view on the documentation in the case and especially the child's view should be acknowledged and be a part of the documentation (Rasmusson et al 2004, Socialstyrelsen 2005).

In USA:

Basic knowledge of system

In May I met with Dr. Jane Swanson, Grand Valley State University, during her visit in Lund, Sweden to discuss my paper and which subject I should choose. She then told me that in the USA the social workers use a special plan that is signed by all parts and followed up in court. This plan is called the behavioural treatment management plan. She also told me that in this plan the social workers have to consider the best interest of the child and that they should keep the child's needs in focus. My impression was that an investigation of these plans was well in line with my interest. I am interested in finding out how it works, the benefits and disadvantages it has and what social workers in Sweden can learn from it.

Termination of parental rights

After reading different legislations and talking to people connected with child protection and child welfare in USA I understand that it's common to adopt children after a careful inquiry and termination of parental rights (child abuse prevention and treatment act and adoption reform act of 1978, assessing the context of permanency and reunification in the foster care system 2001). This is very rare in Sweden; instead children can spend several years in foster care and then move back to their biological family when their problems have been solved.

After being in Michigan collecting my interviews I also understood that they have a different view on the issue of the connection between the biological parent and the child. During the assessment and placement of the child they work very hard so that the child and the parents have contact and continue a relationship so that the relationship is good when the child is able to move back home. If the parents don't work with their problems and make changes within a year; and the case manager comes to the conclusion that the child can't move back home, the parental rights for the biological family can be taken from them in court. It means that the parents no longer are parents in the eyes of the State. I understand this line of thinking as a direction towards changing within the parent and not so much in the child or the relationship between them. After that the child and the biological parent should not

have contact with each other before the child becomes eighteenth and by then the youth can decide whether to contact the biological parent or not. The purpose with this is that the child has the right to have a secure solid and permanent placement and surrounding and should not be torn between biological parent and foster/adoptive parent. I have not the answer to what is best for the child; I just want to ignite the different ways of thinking between Sweden and USA within child welfare.

Guardian ad litem

A guardian ad litem is a person that participates in every court hearing involving the child. The sole mission for that guardian ad litem is to protect the best interest of the child and to understand and communicate the wishes and feelings of the child. He or she also has to be independent of the local authorities. In situations where all the adults agree on the outcome that person should make sure that the child's view is sought out and acknowledged. In a court it is up to the guardian ad litem to see the issue from a wider perspective and advice the judge if the best interest of the child could be better met (Head 1998).

Family to family

Family to family is a program that works for certain changes in the child welfare. I was told about this program from a social worker that was coordinating this program. The goal with this program is to, as far as possible, keep the children in their biological homes. If that wouldn't be possible the main goal is to keep the children in their community, together with their siblings and for as short time as possible in out of home care. This is done through finding supportive foster families in the neighbourhood for the children. They also try to involve not just the social worker but also the foster parent, the biological family and the community. In addition they evaluate and analyses data about child and family outcomes and how to make changes in policy and practise. In these meetings the social worker sometimes involves youth and has them state their opinion about matters concerning them selves.

Jim Casey youth opportunities initiative

This is a program to support youth that are aging out of foster care in to cope with their independent living. There are different parts of the program, one of them is that the youth are set up with two bank accounts, one is for ordinary saving and the other one is for purchases that will help them managing on their own as for example buy a car. If a youth would buy a car, the program would go in and pay for half the car so the youth is match dollar for dollar in

their expenses. This is done up to 1000\$ per year. The account is started up with 100\$ and the youth have the opportunity to apply for stipends for youth meetings and events. Together with the account they are taught in financial planning and how to develop their savings. They also get door openers to the society and how to live independent. Examples of that are that they can get low cost housings, driver's education classes, haircuts and new clothing for a job interview. To be able to get into higher educations the youth are also interviewed to get an individual strategy to ongoing educations. In the program they also get to meet other foster youth and the possibility to learn and address issues to the county and the authorities on matters that they feel need to be changed in the system. They can also address needs for foster youth to be able to manage outside of the system when they have aged out. Youth I have talked to have been a part of this program and I have also met with coordinators for the program.

Methods

Approach

Since I have chosen to do my paper in an area where I have very little knowledge in advance I decided to start working with a background about Swedish conditions and what I know about the circumstances in the U.S. As my theoretical tools I have used a couple of concepts such as child participation, the voice of the child and the best interest of the child. When I came to Michigan I started to conduct interviews and I learned a lot both about my subject and their social work with children in a greater context. In addition I read some relevant American literature to describe the legislation and the social work with children in America.

I have used qualitative interviews which mean that you as an interviewer ask direct questions to that person that you are interviewing. He or she will then respond with answers that are descriptive. That means that the answers hopefully give more than the question asked (Trost 1997). I have done both individual and group interviews. During the group interview with some of the social workers I could hear who was talking while I was transcribing the interviews. The youth, I met during one of their Jim Casey meetings and since they were about twelve of them it wasn't possible to distinguish who have said what. Therefore I have transcribed all the voices as youths. An exclusion of that are the voices from the social workers who attended the meeting which I have transcribed as social worker. In my themes that I have structured my results in, all the interviews I have made are used but the interviews are not used in equal amounts. This is because of the facts, and the relevance of those facts to my paper, given in them.

I have organised my qualitative interviews into semi-constructed interviews with interview guides that help me focus on the area of my interest. This means that I have some basic themes that I ask questions about and I change my questions after what kind of answers I get. Those themes were the interviewee's connections with the plan, children's rights and especially children's participation, the voice of the child and purpose and structure of the plan. This makes the interview more flexible and gives the interviewed the opportunity to develop ideas from the questions (Denscombe 2000). My interview guides can be reviewed in the enclosure.

Timeline

My paper was started during the summer of 2005. In the late summer the same year my interviews were conducted. I processed my data during the fall and my paper was finished at the end of December 2005.

Selection procedure

My selection of the people I'm interviewing is partly a chosen group and partly random. I decided which kind of people I wanted to interview and after that my contact in Michigan set up interviews for me with different people who had the time and were willing to do this. Therefore I haven't had much influence on which persons I've interviewed. My decision was to interview approximately five or six people. My interviews were with several social workers in child welfare, one judge, one professor in the area of child welfare and social work and a group of youths who have been in contact with this plan. I have totally conducted nine interviews.

Ethical considerations

I have chosen not to publish any names of the people I've interviewed to the benefits of their privacy. Instead I have chosen to publish area of work or title and gender. The youth, as mentioned before, I have just referred to as youth. I am not interested in specific cases instead I'm interested in the work regarding the plan and have therefore not published or questioned anything about single cases. I have tried to avoid examples from single cases and any information regarding specific cases that have occurred during the interviews are treated confidential.

Processing the materials

I decided to record my interviews so I could focus on the communication between me and the person I was interviewing. Therefore I have transcribed all my material and then summarised it into different themes. For this work I have used material from all my interviews but some much more frequently than others depending on the connection with my subject. The themes are the purpose of the plan, the structure of the plan, the legal support, the benefits with the plan, the obstacles with the plan, best interest of the child, child participation and the voice of

the child. True my theoretical concepts I analysed these themes and sought the answers to my questions at issue.

Discussion about method

When doing interviews in a country far from your own and with different ways of approaching issues there can be some cultural barriers. As for example my basic knowledge is on a different level as the Americans that I have interviewed. I look at everything they explain from a Swedish point of view and they answer my questions from an American point of view, even though the questions are based in my Swedish basic knowledge.

The reliability of the paper

As mentioned, I haven't had much affect on who I have interviewed. This could lead to that I only got information about the good parts of the American system but I don't feel that have been the case. All the people I have interviewed have been willing to share both good and bad things about these issues. Everybody has greeted me very well and they have been very willing to talk to me about this. Several of them were also very eager to read the paper when it's finished.

I also want to address the issue of writing this paper in a language that is not my native language. This can cause some translational faults both in my process of the interviews and in my description of the social work with children in the US. Although I think that these faults are small it is important to keep this in mind when reading this paper. My results can also be affected of that my basic knowledge is from another system then the American system and therefore another point of view.

Earlier research

Children in out of home care

If the birth home for the child is not adequate and the social services determine that the child can't stay in that family the child is taken in to care in the social services system. The child is then placed in either a foster home or in a residential setting. The majority in Sweden, about 80 %, are placed in foster homes. This is when the child lives together with a family in their home and is being taken care of by the foster parents. Residential settings are institutions that have a staff that work in shifts and alternate on a schedule. But even these homes can have a family-like setting with some professional parts (Lundström 1996).

According to a study made of Vinnerljung (1996) approximately 4-5 percent of the Swedish population has some time during their childhood been in foster care or in residential settings.

Children coming in to care

It is up to the social services to determine whether the biological home setting is adequate for the child to live in or not. It is not until the child becomes a teenager where its own behaviour is in focus whether or not to make a placement (Andersson 2001). In Sweden the children coming into care often have parents who are drug abusers, are psychological or mentally ill or that have abandoned or abused their child. It is also common that foster children have a single parent mother. It is rare that the children are placed in foster care because of their own behaviour (Vinnerljung 1996).

Foster care is supposed to be temporary and the goal is for the children to be reunited with their parents. To achieve that goal one way could be to have a good connection between the biological family and the foster family; it can also depend on the foster care workers attitude against the birth parents (ibid). In Britain and in the US the idea is that children are better off being adopted than living for a longer time in foster care, being separated from their parents, has grown stronger during the last decades. In Britain, the focus has been connected to the attachment theory for children in long term out of home care (Kelly 2002). Some key words that are connected with what the child may need from a care giver are openness, partnership and participation. Together with that is of course the belief in love for a family life (ibid). Research from America has shown that the results are better when a foster child is adopted

than when they are staying in a long-term foster care. This is partly due to that the risk of a breakdown in the placement gets much smaller (Vinnerljung 1996).

Children living in foster care

Besides from not living with their biological parents there are some other differences with living in foster care. Depending on how long the child has been in placement and the relationship to the biological family the child has the foster family or the biological family as the main connection. Some see both the families as a close connection. From a research that Andersson (2001) has done with ten to eleven year old children it seems like the routines for foster children are pretty much the same as for children living in their biological homes. The children in her research were aware of why they were in care and what to tell people who asked about it, they didn't want to tell the whole truth but most of them had someone they told everything and that they could trust in. When the children compared their situation living in foster families' with how other children lived they didn't see very big differences. Some felt that it was better living in the foster family than living at home; they felt more secure in their foster family. Several expressed a longing for mom or dad but they were satisfied with visiting them on weekends and calling them.

Even though the children had one or two social workers connected to them they weren't an important person in their day to day life. If they had a psychologist whom they met, it was natural to them and a routine they did every week (Andersson 2001).

Problems can occur if the foster parents for example get a divorce. The child can then be replaced because of the trauma the family is going through. There can also occur a grief for the foster child when being excluded from the weekends where the biological children go and stay with their divorced father (ibid).

Possibility to be heard in foster care assessments

If children are able to participate and make their voices heard in social work that are concerning them, there are many benefits with that. If their opinion is considered in plans and decisions these are much more likely to stick and be fulfilled (Gilligan 2002).

In several reports it is pointed out that Swedish social workers in the last twenty years didn't involve the children in the work and the children were described as "unseen". Since

then they have worked hard to change that attitude and structure and to have the social workers to understand the meaning of involving the child (Vinnerljung 1996).

Wahlström (2000) concludes in her study that even if the children have had participation and a social worker that are open to their individual interests, the personal conversations are excluded anyway. This can, according to her, have to do with that the social worker doesn't want to push the child and the child feels that and avoids the situation by leaving the room. There is a distance between the social worker and the child, mostly through uncertainty from both directions. The child doesn't fully understand the situation and the social worker put a lot of concern into determine the capacity of the child in age and maturity (ibid). In order to make the voice of the child more obvious in assessments there could be a movement towards separating the voice of the child and the aspects the social worker put in to it from his or her relation with the child. The social worker can then consider both the voice of the child, the needs and the connections in the network around the child (ibid).

The use of plans and documents

Evaluation and adjustments

From work with plans and documentation forms in England it has been lifted that social workers don't take care of the potential that a plan might give through following up services for individual children. A reason to this can be that the workers haven't understood the opportunities and the values the information can give. The forms can be constructed in a way so the social worker doesn't write down all the information in it. It is therefore important to evaluate and make adjustments to the plans and documents for a better implementation in practice (Rasmusson et al 2004).

Review meetings

According to English law there should be review meetings for every child that is placed in care within the social system. This has been the procedure for a couple of decades but in the beginning it was more like an administrative procedure to state the plans that was taken for the assessment. During the 1990's the demands for child's participation in these meeting grew stronger and research after that has also shown a broader participation for children. Children of all ages should have the right to participate and the older they get the more they are proceeding from a participant to an equal discussion partner (Rasmusson et al 2004). The most important in these reviews are to balance both the written and the verbal information as

well as identify the needs, plan the assessment, and build relationship between the social worker, the parent and the child. It is a balance to make space for the parents and the child as well as making sure that the legal and administrative demands are met (ibid). From a research made by Steve Walker (2001) children have made comments about not understanding these meetings. They didn't feel they got the support they needed to understand them or to prepare themselves for the meetings. If they got that support they also could respect the meetings and their possibility to raise their voice and their opinion got stronger (ibid).

Theoretical tools

As my theoretical tools I have chosen to use the concepts of *best interest of the child-*, *child participation-* and *the child's right to be heard-* in the work and assessment surrounding them. I will use these perspectives since they conclude some of the leading articles in the UN convention of the rights of the child-CRC. The importance of these perspectives therefore has a wide agreement around the world.

Convention on the rights of the child and its background

The basic articles in the CRC

The UN decided in 2002 that some principles in the CRC should lead the work with and for children. These principles were described in article two, three, six and twelve. Article two addresses that all children have the same value and number three points out the importance of the best interest of the child. Number six involves the child's right to develop and the last one, number twelve talks about the child's right to be heard and participate. I will focus on article three and twelve.

Article three - best interest of the child

In all matters concerning children, the best interest shall be a primary consideration. This concludes both public and private social services, courtrooms and other legal and administrative organs. The meaning of that is that the best interest of the child should always be in focus even if it doesn't determine the decision. During the construction of the convention people were obviously worried that the aspect of the child could get stuck in between when other issues in the society collided. How to solve this issue is a problem in every country (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2002).

Article twelve- hearing the voice of the child

Since the convention declared in article two that children should have the same value compared to each other and to all humans the next step was to make it possible for children to make their voices heard and affect their situation. The convention therefore states that any child that are capable to form an opinion have the right to do so and to express that opinion in matters concerning the child. The opinion of the child should then be considered through the aspect of the child's age and maturity (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2002). An example of that

from the Ministry of foreign affairs (2002) is that if a child should be separated from its parents all parts should have the opportunity to be heard, which also includes the child if it's capable of it. Even if the article may be a little fuzzy in the formulation the presence of it put the children in a much clearer position and it determines that children should participate and have influence in the work surrounding them. Unfortunately, so far, not many countries have come up with good strategies to make this a part of their work (ibid).

Best interest of the child

These words may mean different things for different people. It can also mean different things over time and depending on knowledge and the society you live in. The basic structures in living conditions can vary and therefore also the conditions for children. An example is that children nowadays more often have divorced parents which have led to the awareness of the importance of children being able to stay in touch with both parents. Children need to be secure in their identity, which means that they need connection with both parents and siblings (Andersson & Hollander 1996). During placements the social worker should be aware of both the security of the child and the identity. A foster home might be the only way to give a child security but a continued connection with important people from the past may secure the identity for a child in out of home care (ibid).

One of the most important issues for a social worker when looking to the best interest of the child is to see to the safety and comfort of the child. In accordance children shouldn't live with domestic violence or be sexual abused. When seeing to the best interest of the child it is important to also see both to the physical and psychological needs of the child.

In the best interest of the child also lies that the child should be properly raised with food, clothing, love, support and guidance. It is also important that the child feels accepted, respected and wanted in their family. This is all connected with the needs of the child at its different ages (ibid).

The need areas for children

When to structure the child's needs and thereafter see to the best interest of that child it is common to divide the needs in seven different areas. These are the same areas as described before in the BBIC triangle on page 8. The needs should be evaluated for each child concerning the age and the maturity. After finding the needs, it is possible to act from the best interest of the child to fulfil those needs (Ward 2001). In line with this, the assessment plan

must be age-related so that the social worker can assess the parents' capacity to care for the child in comparison with the age of the child (ibid).

Child participation

Several different researchers in the western world conclude that children don't get the participation in social work as they should have. In research studies in the area of social work, children are not used as information givers. Maybe the interests of a child and of an adult aren't that different but still there are differences in the way children and adults are looking at the world that would result in perspectives that have different meanings. These differences could also be the result of children coming from different societies, ages, races and genders (Andersson 2000).

What is participation?

Sinclair (2004) points out that the active engagement of participation can be graded on a ladder where the child is moving up on the ladder depending on how much it controls and understands the process around it. On the highest level the child even takes initiative in decision making together with adults. This can be at help seeing the different ways of empowering children. Sinclair has though remarked that different levels can be appropriate for different tasks in an activity, program or organisation (ibid). There can be different ways to participate for children. It can be in a one-time contact or either in an ongoing contact during the assessment. It can also be through some kind of advisory boards for young people or youth sitting in on community level and even youth leading organisations that are child related (ibid).

Participation can have different meanings to different people. For some participation concludes that the child should be listened to and have the possibility to state an opinion. This is a light form of participation and is considered as a passive participation. On the other hand if a child has an active participation it should have some possibility to affect the outcome and that the child feels that their involvement can and will make a difference. What's important to point out is that the participation from the children has to be by their choice and consent; adults also have to respect their right not to participate if that is their will (ibid).

How to participate

Andersson (2000) explains a research from Ian Butler and Howard Williamson about child participation in collaborations with social workers. They point out that social workers often have a big confidence in that they know much about children. This can lead to that the social worker make assumptions about what the child needs and why the child suffers instead of involving the child and try to see it from the perspective of the child. In their study they concluded that usually children desire different things than the social worker assumes (ibid).

The participation for children in the social work concerning them can vary a lot depending on the structure of the family and the culture they live in. It can also depend on the age of the child and their position in the family. These are things to consider for a social worker and to figure out how to involve different children in different ways (Shemmings & Shemmings 2001). Although as a social worker you also have to be aware of that a younger child or children with severe learning disabilities can have problems with meta cognitive thinking. This includes thinking about thinking, and especially understanding that other people are thinking but also being able to think about what they are thinking (ibid).

Why is it important?

So why is it so important for children to participate in the work concerning them? First of all it's their right to participate, children are citizens and are using a service in the national system and therefore they should have the same right to participate as any others. It also helps to improve the service, the decision-making and the democracy in the work. The services are changing depending on the input the children give and the needs they ignite which leads to more accurate decisions. Participation can also protect children by finding the relevant needs quickly. Participation also helps the children to learn how to communicate, negotiate, make decisions and most of all raises the self-esteem in the children (Sinclair 2004).

The voice of the child

Why the importance of hearing the voice of the child?

When talking to children in care they get the opportunity to talk about their issues and their experiences. By them having a say it also can ease the uncertainty that they can have and especially of why they are in care and what's going to happen further on (Gilligan 2002). It has been shown through studies that children often know what their needs are and are able to

communicate these if the social worker is willing and capable to listening to them. To accomplish this it is important to create the right atmosphere. To understand how children are affected by different events adults have to put aside their anxiety over talking to children about sensitive issues. It is important to consider the age and maturity of the child; some may want to talk through play, some through painting and some through discussions (Bannister 2001).

How to understand the language of the child

Even though it is important to hear the voice of the child it is also important to understand the development of the child and how they understand and see things. After models from Piaget, Aronsson (1996) describes thinking constructions of the child. One is cognitive egocentrism where the child doesn't see other perspectives than its own. Another is that they believe in magic and that adults have the answers to everything. This in collaboration has the effect that children think that adults know and understand the thoughts of the child. The last thing I want to point out is that they believe in finalism, that there always has to be an answer (ibid). In addition to this children often are eager to please the person that is asking questions. This can lead to that they give an answer that they think the person wants to hear even if they are not sure of their answer. This can of course shift in ages and younger children are more absolute in their thinking while older children can think more relatively but it can continue into adulthood especially when being tired or in danger (ibid).

Not all children use their language to communicate with; common is the use of body language and small children more often use their cry to communicate. Often siblings can translate what the child needs not through the words but through what they are showing. It is therefore important for social workers not just to take into consideration what the child is saying but also how the child is acting and sends out through body language (Bannister 2001).

Parental consideration

Having the parent or the caregiver present at the meeting when a social worker is talking with the child can both complicate and help the situation. The worker has to consider the participation of a parent if there is a suspicion of significant harm to the child from the parents and especially concerning sexual abuse and therefore the possibility for the child to speak freely. It can also cause problems if the parents want to have control over the child in words or action or if they want to interfere in the meeting and express their opinion of things too much (Bannister 2001).

Often, the social worker puts too much consideration to the reaction of the foster family. The system is in need of good foster homes and is therefore not willing to get in conflict with the homes if the issue of contact is not raised from them. Social workers might therefore be unwilling to have a personal contact with the child since it might be seen as mistrust against the foster parents (Aronsson 1996).

For the comfort of the child it can also be a point having the parents or the care giver present at least at the first meeting with the child. The child then can feel more secure with the situation and comfortable with being alone with the social worker. An effort in gaining trust between the child and the social worker is important (Bannister 2001).

Results

Summarising my interviews

To be able to overview the materials from my interviews I have structured the facts into themes that I have gathered from the answers. In my transcribed interviews I have highlighted the themes and there after summarised them below. In my results I have decided not to device the answers between the different social workers. When nothing else is pointed out the material comes from interviews with social workers. In other cases I have written the source as a professor, a judge or that the facts are from youth. I will divide my results in two parts. In one part I focus on the plan and in the other part I focus on the child in the social work. To analyse my results I will use my theoretical concepts and the earlier research.

The behavioral treatment management plan

The purpose of the plan

During my interviews I asked about the purpose of the plan and the meaning of it. Most of the answers were involving the term of permanency for the children and also that the plan was a tool to succeed in overcoming their problems. One social worker describes it as if the family is going to be able to make some changes the social worker and the family need to identify the areas that they need to work with and the plans really helps with that. She means that with the behavioral management plans you can easier see what the needs are for both the child and the parents and the worker can then provide the services for them in order to make those changes.

From the very first beginning when a case is being opened the goal is permanency for the child and the plan has the purpose to help the worker figure out if that permanency should be reunification with the biological family, long term foster care or to file a petition to terminate the parents rights and to put the child up for adoption.

To strengthen the family

Another purpose was that in the short term the plans help the families to have something real to focus on and to put their energy into. It is not uncommon that these families are hurt and angry and they feel lost so the plan helps them to take some control over things again and things can therefore happen quite quickly. In the long term it also means that the children and their families have something to look forward to and helps them to start thinking about things that they may never have thought about before, things like going to college. The social

workers job is therefore to help them with the short term goals and to introduce them to more long term goals by guiding them step by step and give them hope that things could be better. As one social worker said “the purpose is to make sure that the kids’ needs are being met”.

The structure of the plan

First when a case is opened the worker fills out a form that declares the legal status; why the child entered care and other information concerning court data. It also describes the situation for the family as for example if there has been assessments to prevent removal from the home and if there has been a history of social assessments. This form is only done once and is not updated after that. Both the parent, the judge and the department of human services gets a copy.

The next step is to list the child’s needs and strengths and the parents’ needs and strengths. Then the behavioral treatment management plan is put together on those bases with both goals and action steps on how to get there. The worker puts up a timeline and expected outcomes and with the plan the worker can also address progress and lack of progress. This works the same for both the child and the biological parent. One social worker describes this work as the hardest because “often they are hostile and you have to gain their trust” and also “what might seem like a need for me they may not think of as a need at all”.

Directives in the plan

Most of the people I have interviewed say that the directives in the plan are more like a guideline and that it needs to be flexible in order to make changes as the work goes along. Some pointed out though that it can be strict because of the law and what the court has decided on what needs to be done. Mostly the plan is put up for the parents to make changes to get their child back home, if the child is a teenager there can be goals related to him or her as well but for the most part it is for the parents to make changes.

This plan is set up and the work is started and every third month it is reviewed in court and the worker, the judge and the family can see the progress in the family. The plan might need to be changed as the work goes along but one social worker expressed it as “the youth has to know what it is about, they have to own the plan”. Basically the parents have about a year to make the changes in their life. If it isn’t done the social worker can file a petition to terminate the parents right and after a court trial where the rights have been determined the child is put up for adoption. The judge I interviewed explained that within a year after the case is started there has to be a permanency planning. It doesn’t matter if the permanency planning is

reunification with the biological family, independent living for the older teenagers or adoption.

When I talked to the social workers about what they thought the children thought about the plan most of them answered that it depended on the outcomes of the plan. If the child succeeded with some of the short term goals or was able to move back home they liked the plan but if that didn't happen they can be more negative and it is not necessary the plan itself but the outcomes of it.

The legal support

The professor addressed that concerning the plan there is not much legislation that directs what to do or what needs to be in it. There is no jurisdiction that says that the child has to sign it or that it must be done in a certain way. There are some things that are supported by law; the law says that a child over fourteen must consent to being adopted. The child also has the right to be heard in a courtroom and it has to be able to be involved in the planning and the works surround it. The law might not state so much on what to do but in Michigan they use a system where the agencies can get accredited. The agency is then reviewed to see if they work after certain standards. To get accreditation there is a lot of rules to follow and steps of action to take. The accreditation shows that in this agency you are meeting excellence in practice. This is not something that is obligated to all agencies but is a goal for many of them to get. Another thing that is supported buy law is that a child in court has a guardian ad litem which is described earlier at page 9 This person is "responsible for determining the child's interest and advising the court what is the best interest of the child and being the voice of the child".

The benefits with the plan

Through my interviews I got a lot of different responses to what are the benefits with using this plan. One is that the whole family gets the opportunity to learn new things that would help them in their family. They would learn new ways of handling their problems. Examples could be how to make relationships work, how to handle a budget or to get rid of a substance addiction. The big part the plan does in this is to identify the areas of need and structure them into something to work with. It also gives the parents a guideline what to do to get their child back home or for the child to be able to go back home.

It can also be more likely for the family to be successful in the assessment partly because it is easier to measure what's being done and understand the meaning of it, both for the social worker and for the family. The plan can empower both the parents and the child because this

is something they have wanted, they have set the goals and they have achieved them step by step and that is a very empowering feeling for them. It helps them know that they are making progress. In a way the social worker can hold the participants accountable because by choosing to accomplish something they can't say that they can't. The social worker can say "look, you did it, do you remember signing this with me? You did it!" They achieved addressed goals and should be acknowledged with that. All parts have seen that it is possible and that they can work through the obstacle step by step.

It also equals out a bit of the heavy responsibility the social worker can feel when to determine what's best for the youth. Since the youth can be a part of that decision he or she can be a part of that determination and also learn to take responsibility over the decisions they make and the outcomes of those decisions. It is important for the youth, through the participation in the plan, to learn another way of thinking and living separated from how they have lived when they grew up. This can help them not to be involved in the system further on in their life.

The obstacle with the plan

One thing that everybody think of as a problem with the plan is that there isn't enough money. A family may need a certain service to work with their problems but there may not be any money to pay for it. Therefore they need to come up with new ideas how to solve things but that is not always possible.

Another problem is that the plan has never been really evaluated and that the workers may need more training and understanding of it in order for it to be fully carried out in the system. Some social workers felt that the plan sometimes could be too technical for the parents and the child to understand so the social worker needs to be very careful and open to that and put the language in the plan on a level that everybody can understand. Otherwise there can be misunderstandings that is unnecessary and that can be avoided.

One social worker felt that one obstacle in the plan is that it is not very age specific. There is no question specific to certain ages and she felt that it was sometimes needed.

Focus on the Child

Best interest of the child

Most of the people I have been interviewing have said that the work they do is all connected with the best interest of the child. One said that "we always look at the best interest of the

child, that's our job" and that the foster care system and the legislations are all based on the best interest of the child. For example this can be done by trying to keep the child in the same school, and not moving the child too far away from its parents and siblings so it would be easy to visit. The placement should also always be as much as a normal family as possible. This means not having too many children staying in the same foster home and children having a secure place in the family. It can also be through other criteria's that is important in different cases such as finding a foster family with the same religion as the biological family.

As for the plan, they feel that it is connected with the best interest of the child through that it helps the child to empower itself and it can make it better for the child because it can learn new ways of handling thing, do better in school and solve some of the needs and problems for the child.

Best interest of the family

At one point the professor and I started to talk about what comes first, the best interest of the child or of the parents. The summary of that was that she felt that it shouldn't be separated; she felt that if you focused too much on either side you lost too much important work on the other side and that didn't help either in the long run. She therefore felt that it was important to talk about the best interest of the family as well. Although, because of some tragic cases where the child was returned home too quickly and then died in the home, the legislation was strengthened in the decision making and the responsibility for the parent to change in order to get the child back but it also opened the door for kinship care which is when a relative go in as a foster parent for the child.

Another social worker that worked more with adoptions meant that the best interest of the child is to have a permanent family and if their biological family can't provide that for them then an adoption helps them with that. Overall the word permanency was an important word for all the people I interviewed and they saw that as an important piece of the best interest of the child.

Child participation

Movements towards child participation

Both the professor and the social workers strongly believe in the importance of involving the youth in the planning of their lives, all people need to learn how to make decisions about their own lives and not to have someone else to do it for them.

The professor recalled that there is not any specific research in the area of child participation in the US. That subject is usually a part of a bigger topic. She also explained that in the last couple of years the movement towards child participation has grown stronger and now people talk in terms of “youth having a voice” and “ youth sitting at the table” and being able to have a say in the work concerning them. In the last decade the importance of program evaluation has been lifted and now there is a big commitment for child participation in the practice and it will be evaluated together with the whole picture it is a part of.

Participation today

Today children participate through for example talking to their social worker and sitting down in team decision-making meeting with a group of people that is involved in their lives. In the plan there is also a part where the worker should write down who was involved in making the plan. One social worker put it as “If the child has been a part of creating the plan its name should probably be written down there”. If the child is over fourteen he or she has to sign the plan if they agree to it. If the child hasn’t signed it there would be a discussion in court about that. It would be about if that means on that they didn’t agree to it and the importance of that for the plan.

The youth are also empowered to speak up at a community, state and national level and that sends out the signal that it is important to listen to these children national wide. By using the youth that are involved in the Jim Casey program to tell younger children about the importance of participating in the assessment and raising their voice, it could empower them to stand up for themselves and understand fully what it is they are doing, why the plan is there and how it works. There is also a program called “family to family” where all involved, the family, the extended family, worker, supervisor and maybe the foster family, sit down and discuss why the child is in care, relative placement and other things that need to be addressed. On these meetings the youth can participate but it is not an obligation.

In the work with the placement and when to look to the best interest of the child it is up to the adults to make the important decisions. The child doesn’t have very much to say about those decisions. One of the social workers pointed out that if a child after a couple of weeks repeatedly says that he or she doesn’t like it in the placement and that it doesn’t work with the foster parents they can make a change in the placement but they try not to since that is a very traumatic experience for the child.

How to meet with the children

It was very clear that the social workers always try to meet with the child alone. It can be that the worker picks up the child after school and go for a ride, go to the park or buy an ice cream. One social worker called that “car therapy”. If the worker comes to the foster home he or she can sit down with the family first and talk a little and then go and play and talk to the child or take it out and do something fun. They put much effort to do that since they feel that it is very important to establish a good relationship with the child and build up a trust between them. One social worker pointed out that she always talks about the goals the youth has so that they are announced and that the child is aware of them and what to do to achieve them.

In the court

In the court room the child can participate through a guardian ad litem. The older and more mature the child is the more weight is put into what the child has been saying. The judge I have talked to makes an effort not to over empower the child because it can be difficult for the children to talk about the situation in court and most of the time they love their parents regardless of what has happened and what they want may not be what would be in the best interest of the child in the long run. The judge feels that the children shall participate but that maybe in the courtroom it should be more goal-orientated, what they would like to see accomplished and what they would like to be better in their lives.

Age and maturity

The legal aspect concerning child participation is that a child fourteen and over needs to be a part of the development of the plan connected to them. This is also written down in the form where the worker is supposed to write down everybody that has negotiated in the development of the plan. Most of the workers that I have talked to are involving even younger children if they feel that they are mature for it. They try to talk to even small children about what’s wrong and maybe the worker can pick up from that what the child needs. The work is better invested if the children have been involved in the planning and a part of identifying the problems because they need to know what to work with and why.

Youth experiences

The youth I was talking to expressed different experiences about how involved they had been in their plan. Some felt that they really have had a say about what should happen to them and what to work with, others didn’t even recognize that they have had a plan to work after or

have had a say about it. The experience of a close contact with the case worker was also varying; some have had a close contact and were very pleased with the worker and some felt they weren't really addressed by their case worker and one said that "my case worker was never seen by me". They felt that the biggest reason to this was the big caseloads that the worker had, "it all comes down to the big caseloads". It was also depending on how many youth lived in the foster home and how much they acted out and therefore needed to be addressed.

What they all expressed though was the importance of having a social worker that believe in the youth and believe that he or she can make it. They also talked a lot about individualism and the importance of being seen as a person and not just another case to work through. They also addressed the issue of the worker being able to handle what the child have been through, being able to handle, understand and address those issues before making an assessment for the child. One youth said that "they might go over it and go oh my gosh! Okay let's move on. You need to address what the child has been through!"

They also wanted to make a remark on criteria's where they felt that the child should have input in what is going to happen. What came up then was having a say on where to go, being able to stay in the same school and the issue of religion in the foster family. They also felt that a foster youth should be able to keep a sense of individualism even in the foster family as far as clothing; piercing and similar things even though they also feel that there have to be some rules on that matter as well. All the youth I was talking to was also in the Jim Casey initiative program were the youth get support and help from the society even when they are aging out of foster care.

The voice of the child

Over fourteen any child has the right to speak in the courtroom on matters concerning the child. This gives them the opportunity to raise their voices and to address things that they feel should be discussed. Usually when the child is fourteen, fifteen, sixteen and up the goal is no longer to go back and live with their biological parents but to plan for an independent living and the child is often allowed input in those questions in court.

Historical movement and youth experience

During one of my interviews when we talked about child participation one person pointed out that in the last 30 to 40 years there has been a lot of movement towards having the voice of the child documented. But the problem for the social worker is that often he or she deals with

dilemmas focused on adult issues and parental problems so the child can't have so much input in that. Although, the idea of children having some input at some level of the planning has grown stronger and there has been a lot movement towards it.

One of the youth in my interview pointed out that she had never even seen her case plan and she didn't think she had any input because she had never been addressed. Others felt that they have had a lot to say in their plan and that they were really listened to.

Quotes or examples in the plan

According to most of the interviews, the child's voice is put into the plan through describing what the child has expressed. One social worker suggests that it will not be in the part where you put up the goals and the treatment steps. Although a description of what the child has been addressing is not uncommon in the part where the social worker describes the child and what is going on with the child. Most of the time this worker uses examples of what the child has been saying and does not use quotations. Because the social worker often meets with the child alone, the voice of the child is lifted and the worker can reflect to that and use that when to devise the plan for the child. The relationship the social worker builds with the child through these meetings make the child more visible in the plan and makes the social worker aware of the child's dilemmas. There is a difference in the plan I'm looking into and the adoption plan where the child's attitude towards the adoption must be printed in the plan. This is usually done with quotations but if the child isn't verbal the worker describes it for example "the child seeks out and comes to the adoption parents for comfort".

As the question about how to document the voice of the child came up in my interviews one social worker said that they had just finished a survey in the Jim Casey Program. In that survey one child specifically addressed that in the answer saying "why isn't our voice documented, why are we not quoted?" I got to read one of my reports and I and nowhere in it, what is that about?" Thinking about it he couldn't remember many times that he had seen a quote from a youth which he wasn't pleased with. To him the implementation of the child's own voice in the plans and reports are very important.

In all interviews it was pointed out that the child's participation and the voice of the child in the plan had to do with the maturity of the child and its capacity to comprehend. This was a judgment that the worker has to do in every case and it was not possible to use a guideline on which age was appropriate. "A five year old could have a lot of input to give and be very verbal but at the same time a twelve year old may not have the capacity to do so". The only guideline is the law that says that a fourteen year old should have a say in its plan.

Analysis - the meaning of concepts and how to work with them in the US

Best interest of the child

The meaning

In the convention of the rights of the child it is stated that the best interest of the child always should be a primary consideration in the work with children involved (Ministry of foreign affairs 2002). The meaning of that could have different purposes in different societies. One big topic is to look to the comfort and safety of the child but also to make sure that the child has contact with its family, both parents and siblings (Andersson & Hollander 1996). In the US the convention isn't ratified but even so, their work should all be based on the best interest of the child. In the assessment they try to keep the child in the same school as before and not too far away from parents and sibling, so they can visit each other. Social workers also mean that they through the plan work to "make sure that the kids' needs are being met" and that that is one of the ways to protect the best interest of the child. They also try to focus on the best interest of the family since it often can be hard to separate those two aspects.

Age specific

Children in different ages have different needs in the aspect such as health, education, identity, relationships and emotional and behavioural development (Parker et al 2001). To this it is important to make sure that the child is secure with food, clothing, love, support and guidance (Andersson 1996). With the behavioural management plans, social workers in USA use, they are assessing the needs for children. By finding the areas of need they can but up goals to achieve, and plans on how to achieve them. Unfortunately there aren't very age specific questions to answer in the plan, therefore I draw the conclusion that the aspect of children needing different things at different ages are at risk of being left out.

Child participation

The meaning

In all studies of this area the result is that children don't get to participate in the work as much as they are supposed to (Andersson 2000). There are different levels of participation. A child can participate through just being asked what he or she thinks about and what he or she would like to see happen. The participation for children can also be through being a part and taking

initiatives to the decision-making in the assessment (Sinclair 2004). In USA children have a legal right to participate after the age of fourteen. All children over that age should be able to sign their plan if they agree to it. And if they haven't signed it, that matter would be raised in court and the social worker then needs to explain why. The social worker also has to note everybody who has been a part of the negotiation of the plan and a child who has been participating should be listed there. The youth that I have talked to have all been participating at different levels in their assessments. Some have been informed about their plan; some have had an active part in what kind of decisions to make. For children under fourteen there are no directives for how they should be a part of the work. An effect of that could lead to that they don't get to participate at all but the social workers I have talked to all try to involve even younger children. Taken into consideration, that the youth in several cases didn't feel involved at all in their plans, an interpretation could be that it could be a risk when it's up to the individual social worker to involve younger children.

Participation in practice

Most of the addressed social workers try to talk to, and involve even younger children because then they feel that their work is better invested. This is collaborated with what Gilligan (2002) points out when he says that it is much more likely that the plan will be fulfilled if the children's opinion is considered in the plan.

When talking to the youth that have been in foster care in the US they have different experiences about participation in their planning. They addressed that problem as one part being a financial issue where the workers had too many cases and the foster homes had too many foster children. This led to that their participation was neglected or wasn't prioritized. Wahlström (2000) says that the reason for that is that the personal contact between social worker and child can vary. Often it depends on an uncertainty from both the child and the worker. The worker puts so much effort into determining the maturity and capacity for the child to participate. It can also be that he or she doesn't want to push the child into talk about difficult things. The child can then feel that distance and therefore pull back. In some cases the child doesn't even understand the situation or why to participate (ibid). Some of these issues are also raised in my interviews by social workers and their need to determine the maturity in all cases. The purpose of this they explained as not involving children with things that they are not capable of handling. The Judge also used the term not to "over empower" the child and for example have them talk in court about their parents when they do love both of them.

Progress in participation

In the US my sources told me that they thought about having children participate in their assessment have come to grow much stronger during the last decades. It was also obvious that everybody now strongly believe in the importance of involving children in the planning of their lives. This is also seen in the Swedish work with child participation where they are evaluating and developing systems for making the children a more natural part in the assessments. As for example this is done through the review meetings held together with the social worker, the child and important people surrounding the child (Socialstyrelsen 2005).

The voice of the child

Meaning

Children should have their voices heard in the assessment in order to be able to influence what happens to them but also to ease the worries they can have about being in care. This is stated within both research and in the CRC (Gilligan 2002, Ministry of foreign affairs 2002). Even though it is important for the children to be able to raise their voice a social worker have to consider the age and the capacity of the child. This can effect how children are able to think and understand other people's thoughts (Aronsson 1996). In social work in the US they make an effort to try to talk to all the children and even with the small ones they might be able to pick up some needs by talking about what's wrong. Still they have to consider the maturity and capacity of every child they work with.

How to talk to the child

Not all children use their voice as the main language; they might use their body language instead. Some children don't like to talk to a social worker, instead they like to play or paint what they need to say (Bannister 2001). The workers in the US can sit down and play with the child and at the same time talk about what's going on without confronting the child in a discussion that he or she might not understand. This they do when they are visiting the child in the foster home and that gives the child a secure environment that they are comfortable in.

Having the parent or the caregiver present while the social worker is talking to the child can be both good and bad. It can help the child feel more secure but it can also harm the child if it has been molested by its parent or if the parent or care giver wants to have control and a say over everything (Bannister 2001). The social workers I have talked to always tries to talk to

the child alone. They could first meet together with the parents or the caregiver but then they might go to another room to play and talk to the child or the two of them would go out for an ice cream or to play in the park.

The youth addressed the importance of workers being able to address, with the child, also the difficult things that the child has been through. This is also pointed out by Bannister (2001). She says that in order to create the right atmosphere where children are relaxed and able to talk to the social worker the worker needs to put the anxiety aside over talking to the children about what they have been through.

The voice of the child in the plan

Article twelve in the convention of the rights of the child might be a bit unclear but still it states that children should have a clear position and influence over the work with their assessments (Ministry of foreign affairs 2002). A conclusion of this is to suggest that how to participate as a child should be shown in the materials that the social workers have to work with while doing assessments. It isn't stated in the plans surrounding assessments in the US that the voice of the child should be in quotations; this is mostly described in the part where the worker is describing the child and what is going on. Therefore it doesn't need to be stated what the child's thoughts and beliefs are about the needs. There were also youths who pointed out that they missed their words in the plans and wondered "what's that about" and that they felt put aside because of that. Especially one social worker pointed out that that needed to change and that the voice of the child on print in the plan was important. Again if the children are over fourteen they should sign the plan if they agree to it. Although to summarize that doesn't give answers to what the child actually thinks and feels.

Using plans

After evaluating how the social workers work with plans in England they found out that the social worker doesn't use the potential of the plans as much as they could. This could be because they don't understand the opportunities or values of the plan (Rasmusson et al 2004). In the US there isn't much legislation behind the plan which doesn't give the social worker many directions of what to work with in the plan. They are told that a child over fourteen should participate but not how. Social workers describe the plan as a good tool to find the needs for the child and the family. It can also empower the family in a way that they see what they need to do in action to get back together. What they miss is often more money. In many

situations the money stops the plans and then they need to find other ways to assessing the needs.

Evaluate and adjust

In the plan there might be construction faults that cause the lack of use or benefits from it. It is therefore very important to evaluate and make adjustments in the plan to make the work in practice better (Rasmusson et al 2004). There is not much guidance how to document and to take care of what the child has been saying. Since most of the workers try to meet with the child alone they have much direct information from the child but that is not documented as well as it could be. The plan doesn't have the structure of using the voice of the child, this takes away the opportunity to use the benefits the worker can have by having the child's word on print. By showing the child that what they have said actually are listened to and taken in to the plan can make the child feel important and able to make a change (Sinclair 2004).

I was told that the plan never has really been evaluated and therefore never been adjusted from faults or difficulties. Because of that the social workers might have to translate the plan to the parents and the children in order for them to understand it. This the social worker saw as a problem and something that could cause misunderstandings between the social worker and the family.

Review meetings

Review meetings are something that is used both in Sweden and in England to follow up the planning and make the assessment around the child. Children of all ages should have the right to participate; the participation would develop to more and more involvement the older the child gets (Rasmusson et al 2004). In the US there is a program called "family to family" that is a bit comparable to the review meetings. This is a meeting where not just the social worker are involved in findings solutions for the children but also the biological family, the foster families and the community. They try to find ways for the children to stay with the biological family and if that is not possible have them in the same community or neighbourhood. In these meetings children can participate in some issues that they may have an input about.

Conclusion of the results

My question at first was if child participation and the rights of the child is considered in the work with children in the US. I wanted to look at this from the perspective of the behavioural and treatment plan they use in assessments of child welfare cases. The CRC have some perspectives that are agreed upon around the world as important ways to protect children and I have therefore chosen some of those as my main theme in my paper.

Through my research I have found that, in a broader perspective, social workers in the US who work with children do try to involve the children. Most of them for example try to meet with the child alone, listen to what the child has to say and take that into consideration when assessing the needs. When I listened to the youth I understood that not all children were addressed or involved in their cases. This could depend on the lack of money in the system or on the individual social worker but should it be like that? After learning more about the plan I felt that the plan and the legislation could be more specific on why and how to involve children. I believe that the plan should give the social workers proper tools to use in order to make children at any age more involved in what is going to happen. If the involvement is mostly up to the social worker or agency there will be big differences in the way children are treated and therefore unfairness for the individual child. Even if the accreditations are one way of making sure that some standards are met not all agencies get accredited and are still working with children who are not getting the standards that other children are.

The plan has never been evaluated and therefore never changed after those considerations. If this is done and in a way of addressing how to involve children the plan can be a very good tool for both social workers, the families and the children. The plan could then show all parts what has been said and done and the addressed participation helps the children and their parents to feel connected and secure in what is going on and why.

The youth described a perfect social worker and what that person would do. The person who was described then was for example someone who should take the child for an individual person and not another case to work through. The worker should treat every child different in accordance with the issues of that child and its situation. They also pointed out the importance of being important to the social worker, they meant that a worker should return phone calls and be interested in if the child succeed in life or not. They also understood that most of the faults addressed were related to money and too many cases per worker. Even so these arguments could be a part of the evaluation of the plan and therefore I want to point out the importance of involving youth in the evaluation of the plan.

Personal discussion

What are the differences in social work with children around the world? I believe that all people who decide to work with childcare assessments are interested in working for the best interest of the child and therefore the base could be very much alike. The difference is the priorities of the countries government and how much the taxpayers are willing to put into making sure that the children are taken care in the best way possible. This is also connected with attitudes in the society on what is important and in which area to make an effect. Social worker should not have to take decisions that can hurt the child just because of lack of money.

One of the things that I have learned through this paper is that child participation is not something that could be neglected. Both from literature and from remarks from the people I have interviewed I have understood that the work is poorly invested if the children haven't been able to raise their voice and influence what's going to happen. Since everybody agree on this I feel that the obvious next step is to do more research in this area. Most of the research in the area today is just a part of something bigger and this area is never really put in focus. I feel that this sends out a signal that this is not an area that we have to focus on in the work. The issue of involving children and looking to the best interest of the child is the main issues of the CRC. All the countries signing it should ratify it and take these issues into their legislations. To make them real in practice I also think that they have to be an important part of the relevant research carried out in the country but also continuously discussed and improved in the day to day practice.

I feel that the voice of the child have an importance both for the assessment, treatment and for the social worker and the child to understand each other. As said before, the work would not be well invested if the child is not a part of it and why should a social worker decide to assess without doing a well done work. If the child haven't had a say about the treatment, as for example therapy, I think there will be much more aggression and hostility from the child towards the assessment. The child would not understand why he or she should go in therapy and the worker could make the conclusion that the child is unwilling to cooperate when it's actually a misunderstanding between the two of them. Also in this area the research is very poor. When doing my paper I was sure to find some books in the area of why it is important for children to participate in the work concerning them. I only found some chapters or parts of chapters and was surprise by that. So much in social work with children today are connected with involving the child but the research behind it is very random and that needs to change.

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Enclosure 1

Interview guides

My themes during my interviews are

- Your connection with the plan
- Children's rights, especially their right to participation
- Methods, how social workers are using the plan as a professional tool
- Outcomes, results

(Interview with social worker) Hope to be able to see a plan, if too much secretarial information, is it possible to decode it?

- Name, title, area of work and e-mail. For clarifications further on, only title, gender and area of work will be published in the paper.

- In what way are you familiar with this plan concerning child welfare assessments?

- How do you use the plan?

- What is the purpose with this plan for you?

- In what way can the child participate in assessment and planning?

- How do you document the child's thoughts and their will in the plan, as a subject or an object? Do you use quotations or references or just examples when you write what the child is saying?

- What matter/which meaning have the child's age concerning the work with the plan? How do you measure the child's capacity and their competence to be an active part in the assessment and speak for themselves?

- Do you meet with the child alone or only together with the parents?

- How common is it with differences regarding the child's and the parent's will and their different perspectives?

- How do you handle the tension between these different willings?

- What are the benefits using this plan?

- Can you see any lack of areas in the plan? Is there something you miss in the plan?

- In your opinion and experience, what do children think of the plan?

- In what way is the plan connected with the best interest of the child?

- What is the result of the plan according to you?

- How would you describe the plan? Is it easy or difficult to work with?

- How are the directives formulated in the plan, are they very strict or more of a guideline?
- What is the legislation around the plan?
- Does the legislation work as a support or as an obstacle in your work?
- Are you familiar with the Convention on the Rights of the Child?

Thank you for participating!

Emma Johansson

(Interviews with youth)

- Name, age, contact- only age and gender will be published in the paper.
- We have met here because I want to ask you a couple of questions about your experiences with the child welfare assessment plan, maybe you can start by telling me how you got in contact with the child welfare authorities? (This won't be any thing I will print in the paper it's just so I understand a little about your background.)
- How did you get introduced to the assessment plan?
- How would you describe the plan?
- Do you feel that the plan have helped you be a part of the assessment surrounding you?
- How often did you met with the social worker to work with or discuss the plan?
- What was the point with the different meetings? What were they about?
- Did you feel important during the assessment; did the social worker take in what you had to say?
- What was especially good with the plan?
- Was there something you didn't like about it?
- What are your thoughts surrounding the plan?
- If you could decide, how would the work surrounding you have been done?
- Do you think you have had an active part in the assessment?

Thank you for participating!

Emma Johansson

(Interview with judge)

- Name, title, area of work and email. For clarifications further on, only title, gender and area of work will be published in the paper.
- In what way are you familiar with this plan regarding child care assessments?

- What is the purpose with the plan according to you?
 - What is the jurisdictional background for the plan?

 - How do you use the plan in your line of work?
 - Do you think children get to be a part of the planning and assessment surrounding them?
 - How does the plan affect on the participation?
 - In your line of work how do you acknowledge the child's perspective and its right to participate?
 - In what way do you think children should get to participate and influence the assessment surrounding them?
 - Are you familiar with the convention of the rights of the child?
 - Do you think there are any special outcomes of not assigning the Convention concerning social work with children?
- Thank you for participating

Emma Johansson

(Interview with professor)

- Name, title, area of work and email. For clarifications further on, only title, gender and area of work will be published in the paper.
- In what way are you familiar with this plan concerning child welfare assessments?
- What is the purpose with the plan according to you?
- In what way can the child participate in assessment and planning?
- Is there any research behind the plan?
- What kind of research is carried out in the area of child participation in social work throughout the U.S.?
- What is the research status today in this area?
- In what way can the child participate in assessment and planning today?
- What are the benefits with using this plan in child welfare assessments?
- Can you see any lack of areas in the plan?
- In general, what comes first, the parents' right or the child's right?
- What is the background and result of that?
- What is the ethical discussion around that decision?
- Are you familiar with the convention of the rights of the child?

- Have the convention had any influence over the plan and over other social work with children?

- In what way do you think children should get to participate and influence the assessment surrounding them?

Thank you for participating!

Emma Johansson