

# CHILDREN AND YOUTHS' PARTICIPATION IN THE CHILD WELFARE SERVICE

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## Research questions and methodology

- To what extent do children and youth experience participation during their contact with the Child Welfare Services?
- Which factors influence the level of participation?
- Methodology
  - ▣ Interviews with 45 adolescents
  - ▣ Focusing on children's own perspectives

## The context of my study

- Norwegian context
- An extensive Child Welfare Service
  - ▣ Responsible for ensuring that children and youth, who live in conditions which may be detrimental to their health and development, receive the necessary assistance at the right time
- The Child Welfare Act
- The best interests of the child shall always be a fundamental principle in all decisions

## Article 12: The Right of the Child to be Heard

- Article 12 is both a substantive right and a general principle to inform the realisation of *all* other rights in the Convention
- The right to be heard and to be taken seriously is a fundamental value of the CRC
- An entitlement, not a privilege
- Concept of participation also runs through a number of other Articles that recognize the child as a social actor

Nigel Thomas, presentation Nuuk, 2014

## The right to be involved

*Participation is the right to be involved in the process of making those decisions and is fundamental to any basic recognition of children as people. The right is not qualified in any way. The right to participate therefore is not contingent on a judgement of the competence of the child. Nor is it restricted by adult perceptions of the best interests of the child (Lansdown 1997, p.29).*

## Previous research

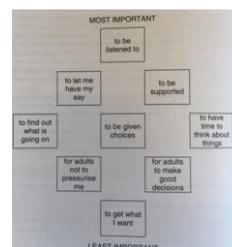
- Youth who experienced participation felt valued, included and recognized as human beings
- Participation leads to better decisions and positive changes in the children's lives
- Sharon Bessel points out:
  - First: participation has a value in and of itself
  - Second: it is of instrumental value
  - Third: it is central to promoting the human rights of children and young people
- Several studies show that children and youth are only involved and informed to a limited degree in their contact with the Child Welfare Service

## The complexity of participation

- Having access and having influence represents two different approaches to participation
- Consultative participation
  - ▣ Adults seek children's views in order to gain knowledge and understanding about the children
  - ▣ Does not involve sharing of power with the children themselves
- Collaborative participation
  - ▣ Allows the opportunity for shared decision making with adults
  - ▣ A process that involves information sharing and discussions that aim to balance children's views with those of others

## To what extent do children and youth experience participation?

- Little participation in contact with social workers in the Child Welfare Service
- The youth want the Child Welfare Service to listen more to them and they want their opinion to be taken into consideration
- Three practices have been identified:
  - ▣ Little or no participation/ invitations
  - ▣ Being present, but not participating
  - ▣ Participation



## Factors that influence on the level of participation

- Meeting points
  - ▣ Presence at conversations and meetings increases the child's opportunity to participate. Not being invited reduces the child's opportunity to participate
  - ▣ Being present at a meeting is not a guarantee for participation
  - ▣ Meeting points do not necessarily lead to participation, but attendance at several meetings *increases* chances for participation
- Age
  - ▣ The chance for children's *presence* at meetings and conversations is more frequent among the older children
  - ▣ The children attend more meetings the older they get, but this does not necessarily lead to a process of participation
- Relation
  - ▣ The relation between the youth and the social worker seems to have a crucial impact on youth's participation
  - ▣ A good relation makes it easier for children and youth to ask questions and express their opinions
  - ▣ The more caseworkers a child has had, the more difficult it seems to develop good relationship

## Conclusion

- There is still a challenge to ensure good participation-processes among children and youths in the Child Welfare Services
- Participation needs to be a process where the children and youth are invited in as natural collaborating partners
- Building a good relation is also crucial to get good participation-processes where children feel safe to ask questions and speak their mind.