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Published online: 16 Jul 2022.

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Collective participation of children and young people in child welfare services – opportunities and challenges

Kollektiv medverknad for barn og unge i barnevernet – moglegheiter og utfordringar.

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ABSTRACT

This study explores opportunities and challenges for the participation of children and young people in Norwegian Child Welfare Services (CWS) through analysis from an action research project. The project aimed at collective participation in developing and improving child welfare services in a research circle in cooperation between young people, social workers from CWS and researchers. The researchers intended to involve the young people directly in the project, but the social workers opposed this. The project, therefore, proceeded with social workers and researchers in the research circle and parallel interviews and group conferences with young people with experience from CWS. The young people reported that they would have participated in the research circle if invited. This dichotomy between the social workers and the young people's opinions is the background for discussing opportunities and challenges for children and young people's collective participation in CWS. We conclude that a view of CYP and professional role characterised by protectionism and paternalism, together with a lack of knowledge and experience, hinder the collective participation of children and young people. We recommend that Child welfare services explore and develop working methods for collective participation in cooperation with children and young people.

SAMANDRAG

Denne studien uforskar moglegheiter og utfordringar knytt til barn og unge sin kollektive medverknad i barnevernet. Artikkelen byggjer på empiri frå aksjonsforskingsprosjektet *Forskingsirkel om barn sin medverknad i barnevernet*. Deltakarar i prosjektet var tre barnevernstenester og to forskarar frå Høgskulen på Vestlandet (HVL), og målet var å utvikle barnevernet sin praksis for barn og unge sin medverknad i barnevernet. Som initiativtakarar hadde forskarane som mål at unge med erfaring frå barnevernet skulle inviterast med som deltakarar. Dette lukkast ikkje, då deltakarane frå barnevernet ikkje ynskte å involvere unge i forskingssirkelen. Ungdomar vi intervjua parallelt med forskingsirkelen, ville gjerne ha deltatt om dei vart spurt. I artikkelen drøftar vi korleis vi kan forstå denne motsetnaden mellom dei unge og barnevernarbeidarane sitt syn på barn og unge som kollektivt deltakande i barnevernet.

Introduction

The view of children and young people (CYP) as mere objects in need of protection has gradually changed, and CYP are now seen as subjects with rights in society (Corsaro, 2015; James et al., 1998). This change is in keeping with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989, Article 12) 'States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'. Thus, we understand CYP as members of society with the right to influence 'in all matters affecting' their lives, including in CWS, in their local community, and society at large.

The article discusses opportunities and challenges for CYP's involvement in collective participation related to CWS. The aim or goal determines whether an act is an individual or collective (Seim & Slettebø, 2011). We use the term *individual participation* to describe participation aiming to influence CYP's case and *collective* participation to influence practices and policies to improve the collective or common good (Olson, 1995[1965]). In this case, we aimed to improve participation for everyone in need of help from CWS. Since most research focuses on individual participation, there is insufficient knowledge about collective participation in CWS (2014; Kennan et al., 2016; Seim & Slettebø, 2011; Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2012).

In Norway, the CWS context includes both risk-oriented and service-oriented social work and is an arena where children's participation is central (The Child Welfare Act, 1992; Berrick et al., 2015).

Norwegian and international research has shown that it is challenging to implement CYPs' participation in practice. More knowledge is needed to develop methods and pathways to ensure CYPs' rights to participation in CWS (Archard & Skivenes, 2009; Heimer et al., 2018; Paulsen, 2016; 2012; van Bijleveld et al., 2015).

CYPs' *collective participation* comprise various forms of involvement in research projects, national or local advisory forums, expert groups, voluntary organisations, local community development and political processes (Kennan et al., 2016; Larkins et al., 2014; Seim & Slettebø, 2011). In Norway, examples of collective participation are two participatory organisations for CYP; The Norwegian Organisation for Children in Care (LFB) (www.barnevernsbarna.no) and The Change Factory (www.Forandringsfabrikken.no). These organisations have contributed to changing child welfare legislation and practice through different forms of action, including projects in cooperation with local CWS, contact with politicians, public appearances and publications (e.g. Alexander et al., 2018; Follesø, 2004; Ministry of Children and Families, 2019).

The article reports on the research project *Research circle on developing knowledge and practice in child welfare services (CWS)*. A research circle combines scientific research methodology, fieldwork studies and practice. We have used *action research* (Reason & Bradbury, 2008) as a research approach. Dialogue, critical reflection, and participation are vital principles in a research circle, and practitioners and researchers combine theory and practical experience to develop new insight and knowledge and to carry out changes in practice (Andersson, 2007: Hyvönen & Alexandersson, 2014; Tunestveit, 2021, p. 0).

The project's main objectives were to develop knowledge and achieve changes concerning CYPs' individual participation in CWS and explore opportunities for collective participation by involving young people in the research circle and possibilities for collective arrangements in the local participating CWS.

The researchers intended to establish the research circle as a research partnership between employees from CWS, young people with experience from CWS and researchers. Unfortunately, the plan to include young people failed, as the social workers from CWS opposed inviting young people to participate directly in the research circle. Therefore, the context of the project includes a research circle with social workers from CWS. The works in the research circle focused on reflections on how to improve CYP`s participation in CWS in general. To include young people's voices in the project, we, the researchers, conducted parallel dialogue conferences and individual interviews with young people, which we conveyed to the research circle.

The overall research question for the article is: *What are the opportunities and challenges related to collective participation for CYP in the Child Welfare Services?* Our discussion takes the challenging dichotomy between the social workers' views and the young people's views as a point of departure.

Theories and concepts

In our analysis and discussion, we view CYP as subjects and actors, and as citizens, members of society with rights to participation. This view is in line with interdisciplinary childhood studies (formerly 'the new sociology of childhood'), where CYP are understood as actors in their own lives and capable agents who can take action (Corsaro, 2015; James et al., 1998; Uprichard, 2008; Qvortrup, 2010). Moreover, as users of CWS, CYP are affected by the services and have a particular stake in the services, which legitimises their right to be involved in collective participation to improve services (Hart, 1992; Seim & Slettebø, 2011; Shier, 2001).

As mentioned, according to (UNCRC, 1989, Article 12), the views of the child should be: 'given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'. To clarify children's right to participation in article 12, Hart (1992) designed a children's 'Ladder of Participation', with eight steps, building on Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation for adults. Hart (1992, p. 8) marks the three lowest steps as non-participation (manipulation, decoration and tokenism) and the following five steps degrees of participation (assigned but informed, consulted and informed, adult initiated shared decisions with children, child-initiated and directed, child-initiated, shared decisions with adults). Hart (1992) describes 'genuine' participation as shared decision-making between CYP and adults (1992, pp. 12–14). In revising Hart's ladder, Shier (2001, pp. 112–115) argues that legitimate levels of participation involve that CYP are involved in decision-making or share power and responsibility for decision-making. This understanding of participation corresponds with Lundy's (2007) model of children's participation. Lundy's model of participation includes *space* (opportunity of expressing their views), *voice* (to be facilitated to express their views), *audience* (to be listened to) and *influence* (that their views are acted upon, as appropriate) (p. 933).

Arnstein (1969), Hart (1992) and Shier (2001) describe the lower steps in their ladders with no influence or power as *tokenism*, not genuine participation. Lundy (2018), however, argues that the claim for participation to include decision-making has been challenging to attain. She maintains that for CYP to be heard and give advice, often labelled as tokenism, can be an empowering experience and thus be a pathway to participation.

In line with Hart (1992) and Shier (2001), and other writers on participation (Camino, 2000; Kennan et al., 2016; Mannion, 2007; Wong et al., 2010), we understand *good relations* between CYP and adults as essential in participation as a partnership between stakeholders. On the other hand, a partnership will confront the power inequalities in child–adult relationships (Eriksson & Pringle, 2019).

A widespread professional concern is that participation may conflict with the child's right to protection (UNCRC, 1989, articles 18-19) and with professionals' discretion based on 'the best interest of the child' (article 3). Studies have shown that social workers in CWS practice emphasise that CYP are vulnerable and need protection and that participation may inflict harm (Križ & Skivenes, 2017; Vis & Fossum, 2015; Vis et al., 2012). Nevertheless, excluding CYP from participation to protect them from harm may silence their voices (Kennan & Dolan, 2017). Arguing to exclude CYP because it is in their own best interest, without asking their opinion, represents a protectionist and paternalistic perspective of CYP restricting their opportunity to participate.

To discuss opportunities and challenges for individual and collective participation in CWS, we understand participation as a partnership as a point of departure and apply the concepts *of partnership* and *tokenism* and perspectives of *protectionism* and *paternalism* as analytical tools.

Research on opportunities and challenges for CYP in collective participation

Opportunities for collective participation among CYP are related to different areas and services. For example, several studies on collective participation have found that the power to improve services is a precondition to the participation of CYP (Dias & Menezes, 2014; Fern, 2014; Houghton, 2015; Križ & Roundtree-Swain, 2017; Wright, 2017). In addition, Houghton (2015) found that a strong motivation for CYP to engage in research and collective participation is that their contribution may lead to a change in other young people's lives.

Thomas and Percy-Smith (2012, p. 495) argue that involving children collectively in decision-making in participatory practices where children can 'become empowered as citizens'. According to Tisdall (2017), *co-production*, where CYP cooperate directly with decision-makers, gives better possibilities for collective participation than other forms of participation where adults are intermediaries for the CYP's views. Thus, we understand participation as a partnership in line with the concept of co-production.

Collective participation entails cooperation between CYP and adults, and CYP need their involvement to be followed up and to be more than talk. If not, they leave arenas of collective participation (Crowley, 2015). Supportive and open-minded adults who have the power to facilitate and prioritise collective participation are an essential prerequisite for actual participation (Camino, 2005; Mannion, 2007; Wong et al., 2010). Otherwise, professional practitioners will easily overlook collective participation in the demanding schedule of everyday work in CWS (Mannion, 2007).

Studies have shown that collective participation may have therapeutic and empowering side effects for young people (Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2012; Warming, 2016); and that collective participation can support CYP to develop skills in verbal expression. For example, Križ and Roundtree-Swain (2017) found that children who attended a collective participation project within a foster home organisation experienced CWS listening more than they had experienced in earlier contact with CWS.

Historically, participatory practices in CWS have been limited (Alexander et al., 2018; Havlicek et al., 2018). Several studies mention that facilitators of collective participation need to be provided with training and guidelines to initiate and start a participatory collaboration with CYP (Eriksson & Pringle, 2019; Havlicek et al., 2016).

Involve CYP in research about understanding their right to protection and participation, as suggested by Collins et al. (2021), might also represent possibilities for increased knowledge and improved practices around collective participation in CWS.

Several studies point to *challenges* to CYP's collective participation, especially to their lack of power and their lack of influence on decision-making (e.g. Crowley, 2015; Dias & Menezes, 2014; Houghton, 2015; Wright, 2017; Eriksson & Näsman, 2008; Eriksson & Pringle, 2019; Križ & Roundtree-Swain, 2017). Other studies conclude that collective participation is more likely to change the participating child than the policy (Crowley, 2015; Havlicek et al., 2016, 2018; Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2012). The CYP in these studies found it empowering to participate but had little influence on policies and services, due to existing decision-making models, within structures where power was difficult to share. As a result, the authors question whether young people have any genuine influence over service development or whether their participation is simply tokenism, a tangible sign that the government prioritises children's voices and needs.

Studies of *individual participation,* which, as far as we can see, relevantly inform collective participation studies like ours, show that CWS struggle with a one-sided view of CYP as vulnerable and in need of protection, where participation is perceived to be a burden rather than an opportunity (Fylkesnes et al., 2018; Heimer et al., 2018; Križ & Skivenes, 2017; Vis et al., 2012). In other words, the CWS system emphasises protectionism over empowerment CYP (Vis et al., 2012). This protectionist and, to some extent, paternalistic attitude is maybe due to working models within the CWS system that do not promote children's participation (Eriksson & Näsman, 2008). In addition, heavy workloads and insufficient resources may lead to a procedure based CWS that does not prioritise CYP's participation (van van Bijleveld et al., 2015).

Methodology

We invited nine CWS to take part in the research circle project. The justification for selecting these CWS was geographical and practical. Four CWS offices agreed to take part in the project. The other five cited large workloads and staffing difficulties as reasons for declining to participate. One CWS withdrew after two meetings due to workload issues. A total of six persons represented the three participating CWS, five women and one man. Each CWS had two representatives, a service manager and a caseworker.

The research circle started in March 2016 and concluded in September 2017. We held nine meetings of five hours each and three two-day seminars. The start-up seminar introduced the *exploration phase* (five meetings), where we explored problem areas and reviewed current knowledge on CYP's participation. At the midway seminar, the participants established objectives and plans for activities in the *action phase* (four meetings): to establish a new interview room, an interview kit, clearer procedures for CYP's participation, and use of narrative letters as participatory practices. Finally, we evaluated the work in the last seminar.

To obtain CYP's views on participation in CWS at the start-up seminar, we invited young persons from the Norwegian Organisation for Children in Care to join the seminar. As a result, two 19-year-old representatives attended, female and male. They presented their experiences of participating in CWS and joined the discussion that followed.

As initiators, the researchers intended to involve young people as full members of the research circle. In keeping with the democratic ideal for this type of research, it was a given that the researchers and social workers *together* were to find out *how* CYP could join the project. We discussed whether they should participate as full members or establish local expert panels. Due to uncertainty and growing opposition from the social workers, the group decided not to invite CYP to participate directly in the research circle.

To indirectly include young people's views, we organised conferences for dialogue with young people in parallel with the research circle (Frimann & Bager, 2012).

The participants were invited through a regional foster home conference. Four young people, one male and three females aged 16-18, living in foster homes, attended the first conference. However, only two of them attended the second conference a year later. The other two cited work as the reason for not attending. The researchers conveyed material from these sessions and conducted 13 individual interviews to present the young people's voices in the research circle. The conveyed data mainly contained advice from the young people to the CWS about participation in CWS.'

The nine invited CWS recruited young people as informants for the individual interviews. The first author conducted the interviews. The informants were five males and eight females aged 16-22. In line with the young people's preferences, the author conducted interviews at the young people's homes, at the CWS office or at the university.

Data collection

We used qualitative methods in the data collection. The empirical material consists of.

1. audio recordings and written minutes from nine meetings and three seminars in the research circle;
2. eight qualitative interviews with participants from CWS about their experiences from the research circle project, conducted by the researchers at the end of the project;
3. 13 individual interviews with young people; and
4. Two conferences with young people living in foster homes.

In addition, the researchers conducted individual interviews and conferences with young people. The topics included the CYP's *experience with individual and collective participation in CWS*. The

individual interviews lasted 40-100 min, and the conferences lasted two and a half hours each. For the individual interviews, we used a semi-structured interview guide.

We recorded individual interviews and conferences with young people, interviews with participants in the research circle, one meeting (five hours) in the research circle, and the midway seminar (ten hours). The researchers transcribed audio recordings from the conferences and the interviews. The young informants were asked to give concrete advice to CWS, and we informed them that we would convey their advice to the participants in the research circle.

Ethical considerations

The research project was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) and complied with privacy and data protection instructions. The social workers and the young people signed a consent form before participating in the study. As they were all over 16 years old, there was no need for parental consent. We have anonymised all factors that might identify the informants. When recruiting participants for the individual interviews, the CWS obtained a signed consent form from the young people before forwarding their telephone numbers to interviewers to make appointments.

Analysis

The first analysis of minutes from meetings was performed jointly by the members of the research circle. The participating CWS employees shared the minutes with their colleagues and reported these discussions in the research circle. Thus, these processes also served a validation function (Slettebø, 2020).

After the conclusion of the research circle, the researchers performed a meta-analysis of the data from the total of the material mentioned above using systematic text condensation (Malterud, 2017). First, we compiled an overview; then, we systematised and coded the material. The theoretical concepts of participation (partnership and tokenism), protection and paternalism informed the repeated analysis of the material, and we condensed the content into two main categories *1. opportunities for CYP's people's collective participation* and 2. *challenges for children's collective participation*. The repeated analysis identified three sub-categories related to opportunities for participation and five categories for challenges to participation. We present the main categories and sub-categories in the table below (Table 1).

Findings

Challenges for collective participation

Social workers lacking knowledge and experience with participation

One challenge is that the social workers in the research circle had limited knowledge and experience with collective and individual participation. One of them stated: *We are not updated on all this news*

Table 1. Collective participation: main categories and sub-categories.

Main categories	Sub-categories
1. Challenges for collective participation	1.1 Social workers lacking knowledge and experience with participation
	1.2. Social workers' perspectives of CYP and professional role
	1.3. CYP: Participation must be genuine cooperation and result in action
2. Opportunities for collective participation	2.1. Social workers' knowledge and experience with participation
	2.2. CYP: Contribute to better services
	2.3. CYP Meeting others in the same situation.

about participation. The social workers had no experience involving local young people in collective participation and did not view collective participation as relevant for their local CWS.

The researchers presented advice from the young people in the research circle on two occasions. They wanted to be met as ordinary young people and said that CWS should not decide how their lives should be but be more flexible and meet them halfway. They also wanted to have more contact with their case officer and asserted that having the same case officer over an extended period is vital. The young people criticised CWS and advised on how they believed CWS should function. Their advice was a collective input aiming to change CWS.

On the first occasion, the social workers rejected most of the advice. On the second occasion, at the end of the project, the social workers reflected and discussed how to implement the young people's wishes. We interpret this because of having gained more knowledge about participation for CYP through exploring the theme of participation and implementing new practices in their local CWS throughout the research circle period.

The social workers' perspective of CYP and professional role.

The social workers gave *protection and care* to CYP as a reason for not wanting them to participate in the research circle. They wanted to protect them from the embarrassment of attending a meeting that revealed their contact with CWS. They also emphasized that it would be challenging to maintain the duty of confidentiality in a small municipality if CWS invited children and young people CYP to engage in collective participation.

The social workers expressed scepticism about whether youth would be interested in participating in a research circle, as one said: *Frankly, I don't think they would have come.*

Another said, 'The young people I've had contact with would not be very comfortable in such a forum. Furthermore, young people should not be sitting in meetings with us and helping to develop our practice. *Instead, they should go to school and hang out.*'

The social workers believed that they, as professionals had good insight into CYP's needs and that it was their task to develop child welfare practices based on their professional knowledge and discretion of what is best for CYP. They, therefore, meant that it was not necessary to include young people as members of the research circle.

CYP: Participation must be genuine cooperation and result in action

The young people mentioned a lack of results as a challenge for engaging in collective participation in CWS. For example, one informant said CWS had invited her and another informant to a local CWS advisory panel. However, after two meetings, the CWS dropped the advisory panel. The young people emphasised that CWS must follow up on their initiatives and prioritise cooperation to achieve anything.

> It's great, but I feel CWS must collaborate in return … . We had ideas about things, and we were very engaged. We were really geared up; we had designed a logo and made a real effort. We had searched online and found out all about it. At the start, we got a lot of acknowledgements. They said it was great if we could come up with ideas, so we did. However, they never got back with any results, so I didn't like that, and I felt that we weren't being heard. So, there were no more meetings, and nothing came of it. We were never given the opportunity.

The other informant who participated on the same panel said he still hoped something would come of it. He believed CWS invited people to participate on the panel only because the authorities expected it but did not follow up. He said: *I think it was more for show than an actual tool, to be honest.*

Opportunities for collective participation

Social workers' knowledge and experience with participation

Opportunities for participation were created as the social workers increased their knowledge and experience with children's participation during the project. They tried out new approaches to

participation and established new practices. This experience may have led to the changed attitudes to participation. As mentioned above, when we discussed the advice from young people at the end of the project, the social workers were significantly more interested in understanding the young people's point of view. We interpret this as a result of increased knowledge and experience about participation.

At the end of the project period, five of the six social workers had changed their opinions about including young people directly in the research circle. One said: *If they had participated, we would have found out whether our thoughts about their views were correct.* Another said: *Now, in hindsight, I think we should have involved young people throughout this project. I am not quite sure how we could have done it, but I miss their voice in this work. I really do.* The social workers' expressions underpin that they believed that young people's participation would have enriched the project.

CYP: Contribute to better services

The young people valued collective participation as an opportunity to contribute to better services. They emphasised that they were interested in collaborating with CWS to ensure that others would experience better services than they had.

The young people said that confidentiality was not a problem because everyone in the small local community already knew about their contact with CWS. However, one of them said: *You must decide for yourself how personal you want to be when you say something.* They wanted to be like other young people and have the opportunity to choose whether they wanted to take part.

The youths said it would be exciting to share their experiences with CWS to improve the services and that they would have wanted to participate. One girl said of herself and her friend, '*CWS should go to the source, the people who've experienced how it functions. We have two individual stories we could have shared. So just think how much we could have contributed.*

CYP Meeting others in the same situation.

The young people expressed that meeting others in the same situation and sharing experiences would have been helpful for them. However, they were preoccupied with the difficulties they faced in CWS and experienced that it was easy to feel alone. One said:

> What I think is important is seeing that there are others. Because you feel so alone, it is difficult to be the one living in a different home. At worst, you can be a victim of bullying because they can ridicule you or talk bullshit about your parents or siblings.

They said that it would not be difficult to share experiences with others in the same situation; one said: I do not think others would be opposed to this either if they knew that we all had similar experiences. It's a bit scary, though − no doubt about that.

These statements show that the young people did not perceive meeting others in the same situation as harmful but as a bonus.

Discussion

Our research points to opportunities and challenges for collective participation in partnership between CYP and social workers. The dichotomy between the young people's interest in participating and the professional's resistance at the outset of the research circle represents a base to explore the research question: *What are the opportunities and challenges related to collective participation for CYP in Child Welfare Services?*

Challenges for collective participation

The young people in our project did not get the opportunity to engage in collective participation; they could not join in discussions or negotiations in the research circle or engage in decision-

making. Instead, the researchers conveyed the young people's advice from the conferences and individual interviews. We can therefore characterise the young people's involvement as tokenism and non-participation according to the theoretical concepts of participation described by Arnstein (1969), Hart (1992) and Shier (2001). Lundy's (2018) argument that tokenism can be a meaningful experience and a pathway to involvement in higher participation steps does not apply when CYP are not even involved.

The young informants who had been invited to collective participation by their local CWS mentioned challenges related to the social workers' lack of follow-up. Crowley (2015) made similar findings. The inequality of power between CYP and social workers in CWS represents a barrier to collective participation, as CYP are dependent on social workers' initiative and activity to participate collectively (Dias & Menezes, 2014; Houghton, 2015; Wright, 2017; Eriksson & Näsman, 2008; Eriksson & Pringle, 2019; Križ & Roundtree-Swain, 2017).

The social worker's resistance to including young people in the research circle represented a challenge for collective participation in our project. The professionals' main argument for not including young people was that participation would burden them. They cited protection as a reason for not involving them directly in the research circle, arguing that CWS's social mission safeguards CYP to avoid further injury and harm. A view of CYP, which exclusively perceives CYP as objects to be protected rather than as actors able to participate in partnership with adults, interpreted by other researchers as a protectionist view (Archard & Skivenes, 2009; Fylkesnes et al., 2018). When CYP do not have the opportunity to decide whether they want to participate or not, we, in line with other research, understand this position as an expression of paternalism, a one-sided view of what is best for others (Archard & Skivenes, 2009; Kennan et al., 2016; Vis & Fossum, 2015; Vis et al., 2012). A protectionist and paternalistic position toward CYPs` individual and collective participation in CWS conflicts with their rights to participate, and it does not benefit them, no matter how well-intentioned (Archard & Skivenes, 2009; Heimer et al., 2018). Therefore, we interpret that social workers' protectionist and paternalistic view of CYP represents a significant challenge to achieving collective participation in CWS.

The social workers' lack of knowledge and experience in collective participation represented another challenge in developing this practice. Collective forms of participation represent a break with traditions, ways of thinking and attitudes in CWS, which for the most part have been characterised by individual perspectives. Another challenge is that the social workers who participated in the project had limited experience with *individual* participation for CYP. That CWS still has problems with CYP's participation is in line with other studies (Archard & Skivenes, 2009; Paulsen, 2016; Pölkki et al., 2012; van Bijleveld et al., 2015). Lack of experience with *individual* participation may pose a barrier to *collective* participation for young people. On the other hand, increased experience and knowledge about individual participation can promote collective participation (Tunestveit, 2021).

We found that professional roles represented challenges for involving CYP in collective participation. For example, the social workers were concerned with their duty of confidentiality in discussions involving young people. They believed it would be awkward for young people in small communities if others learned that they were in contact with CWS. The duty of confidentiality is a cornerstone of social work, and inviting young people to participate in collective participation may be perceived to conflict with their professional duty. On the other hand, the young people responded that they could decide how they would like to participate.

When trying to understand why social workers oppose participation, one must consider structural conditions in CWS. High workload and insufficient resources may lead to resistance to initiating and implementing activities to generate collective participation of young people (van Bijleveld et al., 2015). To avoid situations where CWS cannot follow up, as two of our informants experienced, social workers may think it is better not to start anything if they do not have time to follow up.

Opportunities for collective participation

The finding that the social workers changed their opinions about CYP's collective participation during the research circle process presents an optimistic view of opportunities for collective participation in CWS. The social workers had gained more knowledge about participation may explain their changed attitudes toward CYP.

The young informants viewed collective participation in CWS as an opportunity to put forward their views on how CWS should function and experience support through meeting others in similar situations. They expressed that they would have liked to participate in collective participation if asked. Their wish to participate indicates that they viewed themselves as actors and agents in line with the view of CYP represented in UNCRC (1989) and the interdisciplinary childhood studies (Corsaro, 2015; James et al., 1998; Qvortrup, 2010; Uprichard, 2008).

Like young people in other studies, for example, in Houghton (2015), the young people in our study found it meaningful to help others experience good services, and they also appreciated the support of their peers. Feeling useful and valued through participating in improving one's surroundings can have a positive and empowering effect. Qvortrup (2010) argues in favour of including what he calls natural rights in work to promote children's legal protection, mentioning the right to *acknowledgement* and *respect* and the right to *gain one's own experience* and be *useful*. The study by Crowley (2015) shows that children felt acknowledged and valued when participating in changes in their local community. Acknowledgement and mastery heighten the person's ability to perceive him or herself as *valued*, *responsible,* and *useful*. These perceptions of oneself have implications for interaction and relationships and the development of social, emotional, and cognitive competence (Camino, 2000; Kennan et al., 2016; Mannion, 2007).

Children have the right to both protection and participation, and it may be challenging to find a balance between the protection oriented CWS and children's rights (UNCRC (1989), Article 12). Wright (2017) argues in favour of a move from risk-based thinking to capacity-building activities that allow CYP to participate. Safeguarding children's participatory rights, the professional role of administrator and protector needs to expand and encompass other roles such as spokesperson, facilitator, organiser, and partner.

Limitations

A limitation in the study is the researchers' influence on the decision concerning the involvement of young people in the research circle. Although we, the researchers, tried to argue and motivate to invite young people to take part in the research circle, we also accepted that the project proceeded without them. This acceptance may have contributed to the marginalisation of children's voices in the project. In hindsight, including young people's participation as a precondition for the project would have been consistent with our intentions when starting the research circle and in line with current views of CYP as participatory citizens in society.

Conclusion

We conclude that a view of CYP and professional role characterised by protectionism and paternalism, together with a lack of knowledge and experience, hinder the collective participation of children and young people. By not incorporating CYP's experiences, CWS misses essential knowledge when developing services. As a result, children and young people miss the chance to experience themselves as competent actors and the opportunity to share their experiences and understand their situations. They also miss the opportunity to get support and recognition from dialogue with adults.

Our finding that the young people wanted to cooperate in developing CWS represents an opportunity for collective participation. Therefore, CWS must explore and develop working methods for collective participation in cooperation with CYP. Cooperation requires a partnership between

adults and young people, where adults accept that CYP can influence service development. There-fore, it is essential to incorporate CYP's experiences to improve CWS. As other research has shown (e.g. Križ & Roundtree-Swain, 2017; Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2012; Warming, 2016), participation gives CYP opportunities to acquire experiences and skills that are useful here and now, as well as in their future as adult citizens.

Excluding young people from collective participation and partnership with CWS is not in line with CYP's rights to participation. It is about time to establish better opportunities for children and young people to be included collectively in the development of child welfare services.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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